



ROGER EDHOLM The Written and the Unwritten World of Philip Roth



Doctoral Dissertation

The Written and the Unwritten World of Philip Roth
Fiction, Nonfiction, and Borderline Aesthetics in the Roth Books

ROGER EDHOLM
Comparative Literature

ROGER EDHOLM The Written and the Unwritten World of Philip Roth

ROGER EDHOLM (b. 1984) studied comparative literature at Mid Sweden University before becoming a PhD student at Örebro University. This is his doctoral thesis.

The American author Philip Roth (b. 1933) is known among his readers for being preoccupied in his work with the relation between “the written and the unwritten world.” In his literary fiction, as well as in his nonfictional essays on writing and reading, the author has grappled with the question of what it means for writers to transform their own lives and the lives of others into written texts of different kinds. This tendency becomes particularly conspicuous in the series of books commonly referred to as the “Roth Books”: *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography* (1988), *Deception* (1990), *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991), *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993), and *The Plot Against America* (2004). These books constitute a category within the author’s body of work that is held together by his proper name and to some extent by his personal history.

To some critics the appearance of the Roth Books testified further to the opinion that “Philip Roth is always writing about Philip Roth,” as Robert Alter once noted. In the majority of academic writing on the Roth Books, however, these works represent a kind of postmodernist project in which the author intentionally blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction. As such they constitute “literary hybrids,” that is, texts which are neither exclusively fictional nor exclusively nonfictional, but rather a mixture of the two categories.

In *The Written and the Unwritten World of Philip Roth*, Roger Edholm discusses the five Roth Books in relation to the question of how to distinguish narrative fiction from narrative nonfiction. Combining a theoretical discussion on fiction versus nonfiction in the field of narrative theory with concrete elucidations of the particular works of the Roth Books category, Edholm opposes the idea that the author blurs the line between literary fiction and factual writing. Instead, he demonstrates the necessity of differentiating between those texts of the series where Roth intends to give a factual account of his life and those where the author uses his life as material for his fiction, giving elements of his biography literary functions.