

Innocence betrayed

by [Mark Krupnik](#) in the [January 6, 1999](#) issue

By Philip Roth, *I Married a Communist*. (Houghton Mifflin, 323 pp.)

The title of Philip Roth's new novel, with its allusion to the popular '50s TV show *I Led Three Lives*, seems intended to prepare us for a parody or spoof. And there is indeed a lot of parody in the novel. The most vicious anticommunist in the book is the rich, pretentious Katrina Van Tassel Grant, a novelist who has conquered America with her popularized love stories, like *Eloise and Abelard*, from which Roth quotes a sample. More generally, Roth's novel is a send-up of the popular-front style of the late '40s, when Henry Wallace was the presidential nominee of the Progressive Party, organized as a challenge to the Democratic Party. The "progressives" were often communists and fellow travelers who offered their program as a kind of sentimental American populism, exploiting Thomas Paine, Walt Whitman and Abraham Lincoln.

But despite its rich vein of parody and satire, Roth's novel is presented as a tragedy. It is the story of Ira Ringold, a Jewish boy growing up tough in an Italian section of Newark, who turns himself into a popular media figure. As "Iron Rinn," he plays Abraham Lincoln on stage and other all-American heroes on his weekly radio show. Ringold lacks a well-developed instinct for self-preservation, as he shows by marrying the actress Eve Frame. She brings to their union a daughter, Sylphid, a concert harpist whose real art is subjecting her mother to unending emotional blackmail. After Ringold splits with Eve, Katrina Grant goads her into publishing a tell-all memoir exposing his communist affiliations. After that it's all downhill for Ringold, who is blacklisted and dies a broken man ten years after the publication of Eve's memoir--which has the same title as this novel.

Some critics have complained that Roth doesn't offer a new understanding of the Joseph McCarthy years. That may be true, but he has never aspired to be a political or historical novelist. Roth was formed in the postradical climate of the '50s and, like that of his contemporaries, his art has been mainly concerned with personal identity and interpersonal relations. If he makes use of a dramatic historical situation, it is as an occasion for the study of an individual destiny, not to propose a philosophy of

history.

Ringold is destroyed because he has been too naïve, too quick to believe in the essential decency and reasonableness of humankind. But others also contribute to his downfall. Indeed, nearly every important relationship in this novel ends in betrayal, and Roth breaks up the action with some provocative riffs on the moral psychology of the informer. Although this is a theme full of dramatic possibilities, Roth does not quite bring it off. That's not because the novel isn't sufficiently politically minded but because its central figure remains sketchy--only an idea in the author's, and hence the reader's, mind.

Roth did better in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), a typically uneven performance which, however, achieves moments of greatness. In that novel, Roth pours into Micky Sabbath much of his own antic disposition, fiercely skeptical intelligence and wild imagination. By comparison Ringold seems simple and humorless, and we experience little woe or wonder in his fall.