

LETTER FROM NEWARK, N.J.

# Nostalgia Confronts Reality on Roth Tour

By Josh Nathan-Kazis

Philip Roth's boyhood house is ugly.

It's a three-story home in the Newark, N.J., neighborhood of Weequahic, just a couple of blocks from the local high school. The siding on the upper stories is a greenish yellow. Unlit Christmas lights are strung between the bars on the lower-story windows. A hefty iron gate covers the front door.

The gate may be there to keep out exactly the sort of crowd that trundled off three coach buses on the afternoon of March 19 to pose for photographs while fondling what was presumably once Roth's doorbell. The buses were carrying 100-odd Roth scholars and assorted fans on a startlingly long tour of Newark in celebration of Philip Roth's 80th birthday.

How did learning that the house in which Roth



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American Pastoral? A Philip Roth fan snaps a photo of the author's boyhood home in New

maps, and it still doesn't give you

# Philip Roth Fans Take Novel Pilgrimage to Hometown

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grew up is now ugly help the Roth readers understand his novels? Outside Roth's high school, Mike Witcombe (favorite Roth novel: "The Counterlife"), a doctoral candidate at the University of Southampton, sounded almost religious about it.

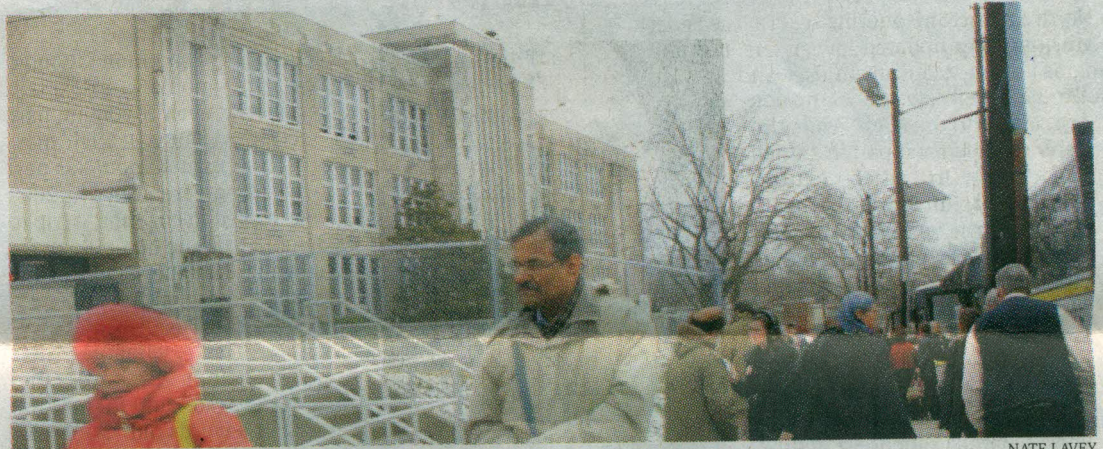
"It's strange to be here at last," he said. "I looked this up on Google maps, and it still doesn't give you the full impression."

On board our bus was the tour's ringleader, Elizabeth Del Tufo (favorite Roth novel: "The Plot Against America"), an energetic older lady in a pink turtleneck. Del Tufo loves Roth, but she loves Newark even more. And with such a large crowd on hand, she wasn't going to limit herself to a few stations of Roth's life. This, after all, was "maybe the first and maybe the last time" the trip-goers would visit the city, as she said at least three times.

So the Roth aficionados found themselves looking at the ducks in Weequahic Park as someone read passages from "The Plot Against America." Later, the group was sitting in the pews at Newark's Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart, when thunderous organ music broke out up above. Del Tufo insisted that the dramatic crescendo had not been planned.

Two police cars with flashing lights escorted the buses through the rain. Newark's reputation left room to wonder whether the cops were there just to help the Roth fans navigate midday traffic — or to watch the scholars' backs a bit, too. Newark Mayor Corey Booker probably wouldn't want three busloads of international guests getting jumped somewhere between Roth's old high school and his old house just as Booker is launching his campaign for the U.S. Senate.

The Roth fans on the buses



NATE LAVEY

**Roth Tour:** Fans of the novelist Philip Roth came from around the world to ride buses around Newark, N.J., Roth's hometown, to mark his 80th birthday. Above, a stop at Roth's former high school.

today conference celebrating Roth's birthday that drew scholars from around the world. There was Witcombe, who is working on a doctoral thesis about Roth and sex. "Kind of the obvious thing, in a way," he said. Felipe Franco Munhoz (favorite Roth novel: "Sabbath's Theater"), a young writer from Sao Paulo, was handing out copies of a translated excerpt of his Roth-inspired Portuguese novel. Gurumurthy Neelakantan (favorite Roth novels: several, including "Sabbath's Theater") had come all the way from the Indian city of Kanpur, where he teaches English at the Indian Institute of Technology.

Roth himself didn't attend the tour. In the back of the first bus, however, there was a man who could have passed for the author's alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman. Like Roth, he had wild black eyebrows and a shock of hair around the temples. The "Operation Shylock"-style doppelganger, Howard Singer (favorite Roth novel: "American Pastoral"), even went to the same high school as Roth, albeit nearly a decade before the novelist.

Singer was taking the tour with

Columbus"). As the buses rolled up to Weequahic High School, an art deco building in the middle of a crumbling neighborhood, the brothers noted that the fences around the front yard hadn't been there when they — and Roth — had attended.

That's not much of a change in five and a half decades. Inside, however, the school could hardly be more different. When Roth and the Singer brothers attended, Weequahic High was known for churning out students who went on to earn doctorates. In a 2009 documentary, the school's principal wore a bulletproof vest to patrol outside the building.

Other parts of Newark are similarly unrecognizable. Outside the Riviera Hotel, on Clinton Avenue, a passenger read a section of "The Plot Against America" in which the Roth character says that his parents spent their wedding night there. Down the block, Roth wrote, was a wealthy synagogue "built to serve the city's Jewish rich."

Today the Riviera Hotel is a budget extended stay hotel. Across the street is an auto parts shop and row houses missing their rows.

once the heart of Jewish Newark, where you can now find a boarded up synagogue and a vast, empty, overgrown lot.

Del Tufo, however, was indomitable in her enthusiasm. "There's a great new life on High Street," she said as the buses rolled past a sealed-up High Street apartment building that had apparently been purchased by a private developer.

The Roth tour of Newark is conducted only on special occasions. Roth himself took it once during a reunion of his high school class. "He loved it," Del Tufo said.

Del Tufo said her favorite Roth quote is from "Goodbye, Columbus." She read it over the loudspeaker while the bus was pulled over in downtown Newark near Washington Park, a small triangle near the city's lovely library. It's Roth's endorsement of Newark, but just barely.

"Sitting there in the park, I felt a deep knowledge of Newark, an attachment so rooted," Del Tufo read, "that it could not help but branch out into affection."

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