

PHILIP  
ROTH  
*Our Gang*

**'The uncontested master  
of comic irony'**

*Time*

VINTAGE

**VINTAGE**

★ ★ ★

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# Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Philip Roth

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

- 1. Tricky Comforts a Troubled Citizen*
- 2. Tricky Holds a Press Conference*
- 3. Tricky Has Another Crisis; or, The Skull Session*
- 4. Tricky Addresses the Nation (The Famous "Something Is Rotten in the State of Denmark" Speech)*
- 5. The Assassination of Tricky*
- 6. On the Comeback Trail; or Tricky in Hell*

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

**A ferocious political satire in the great tradition of Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain.**

*Our Gang* is Philip Roth's brilliantly acerbic response to the phenomenon of Richard M. Nixon.

In the character of Trick E. Dixon, Roth portrays an American president who outdoes the severest cynic; a peace-loving Quaker and believer in the sanctity of human life who doesn't have a problem with killing unarmed women and children. A master politician with an honest sneer, he finds himself battling the Boy Scouts, declaring war on pro-pornography Denmark, all the time trusting in the basic indifference of the voting public.

Tricky is the unprincipled self-seeker who hides his heartlessness behind the anaesthetising clichés of high office, whose public language is a merciless parody of that 'candid' Presidential prose which is merely double-talk, or as Orwell put it, 'pure wind'.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 1997 Philip Roth won the Pulitzer Prize for *American Pastoral*. In 1998 he received the National Medal of Arts at the White House, and in 2002 the highest award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Gold Medal in Fiction, previously awarded to John Dos Passos, William Faulkner and Saul Bellow, among others. He has twice won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has won the PEN/Faulkner Award three times. In 2005 *The Plot Against America* received the Society of American Historians' Prize for 'the outstanding historical novel on an American theme for 2003-2004'.

Recently Roth received PEN's two most prestigious prizes: in 2006 the PEN/Nabokov Award 'for a body of work ... of enduring originality and consummate craftsmanship' and in 2007 the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, given to a writer whose 'scale of achievement over a sustained career ... places him or her in the highest rank of American literature'. In 2011 Roth won the International Man Booker Prize.

Roth is the only living American writer to have his work published in a comprehensive, definitive edition by the Library of America.

ALSO BY PHILIP ROTH

Zuckerman Books

*The Ghost Writer*  
*Zuckerman Unbound*  
*The Anatomy Lesson*  
*The Prague Orgy*

*The Counterlife*

*American Pastoral*  
*I Married a Communist*  
*The Human Stain*

*Exit Ghost*

Roth Books

*The Facts*  
*Deception*  
*Patrimony*  
*Operation Shylock*  
*The Plot Against America*

Kepesh Books

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*The Professor of Desire*  
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Nemeses: Short Novels

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*Indignation*  
*The Humbling*

*Nemesis*

Miscellany

*Reading Myself and Others*  
*Shop Talk*

Other Books

*Goodbye, Columbus*

*Letting Go*

*When She Was Good*

*Portnoy's Complaint*

*The Great American Novel*

*My Life as a Man*

*Sabbath's Theater*

To MILDRED MARTIN of Bucknell University, ROBERT MAURER  
now of Antioch College, and NAPIER WILT of the University of  
Chicago—three teachers to whom I remain particularly  
grateful for the instruction and encouragement they gave  
me



Philip Roth

**OUR GANG**

(Starring Tricky  
and His Friends)

VINTAGE

... And I remember frequent Discourses with my Master concerning the Nature of Manhood, in other Parts of the World; having Occasion to talk of *Lying*, and *false Representation*, it was with much Difficulty that he comprehended what I meant; although he had otherwise a most acute Judgment. For he argued thus; That the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts; now if anyone *said the Thing which was not*, these Ends were defeated; because I cannot properly be said to understand him; and I am so far from receiving Information, that he leaves me worse than in Ignorance; for I am led to believe a Thing *Black* when it is *White*, and *Short* when it is *Long*. And these were all the Notions he had concerning that Faculty of Lying, so perfectly well understood, and so universally practised among human Creatures.

—Jonathan Swift, *A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms*, 1726

... one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. ... Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

—George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” 1946

FROM PERSONAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS I CONSIDER ABORTIONS AN UNACCEPTABLE FORM OF POPULATION CONTROL. FURTHERMORE, UNRESTRICTED ABORTION POLICIES, OR ABORTION ON DEMAND, I CANNOT SQUARE WITH MY PERSONAL BELIEF IN THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE—INCLUDING THE LIFE OF THE YET UNBORN. FOR, SURELY, THE UNBORN HAVE RIGHTS ALSO, RECOGNIZED IN LAW, RECOGNIZED EVEN IN PRINCIPLES EXPOUNDED BY THE UNITED NATIONS.

RICHARD NIXON,  
SAN CLEMENTE, APRIL 3, 1971

## Tricky Comforts a Troubled Citizen

CITIZEN: Sir, I want to congratulate you for coming out on April 3 for the sanctity of human life, including the life of the yet unborn. That required a lot of courage, especially in light of the November election results.

TRICKY: Well, thank you. I know I could have done the popular thing, of course, and come out *against* the sanctity of human life. But frankly I'd rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than be a two-term President by taking an easy position like that. After all, I have got my conscience to deal with, as well as the electorate.

CITIZEN: Your conscience, sir, is a marvel to us all.

TRICKY: Thank you.

CITIZEN: I wonder if I may ask you a question having to do with Lieutenant Calley and his conviction for killing twenty-two Vietnamese civilians at My Lai.

TRICKY: Certainly. I suppose you are bringing that up as another example of my refusal to do the popular thing.

CITIZEN: How's that, sir?

TRICKY: Well, in the wake of the public outcry against that conviction, the popular thing—the most popular thing by far—would have been for me, as Commander-in-Chief, to have convicted the twenty-two unarmed civilians of conspiracy to murder Lieutenant Calley. But if you read your papers, you'll see I refused to do that, and chose only

to review the question of his guilt, and not theirs. As I said, I'd rather be a one-term President. And may I make one thing more perfectly clear, while we're on the subject of Vietnam? I am not going to interfere in the internal affairs of another country. If President Thieu has sufficient evidence and wishes to try those twenty-two My Lai villagers posthumously, according to some Vietnamese law having to do with ancestor worship, that is his business. But I assure you, I in no way intend to interfere with the workings of the Vietnamese system of justice. I think President Thieu, and the duly elected Saigon officials, can "hack" it alone in the law and order department.

CITIZEN: Sir, the question that's been troubling me is this. Inasmuch as I share your belief in the sanctity of human life—

TRICKY: Good for you. I'll bet you're quite a football fan, too.

CITIZEN: I am, sir. Thank you, sir ... But inasmuch as I feel as you do about the unborn, I am seriously troubled by the possibility that Lieutenant Calley may have committed an abortion. I hate to say this, Mr. President, but I am seriously troubled when I think that one of those twenty-two Vietnamese civilians Lieutenant Calley killed may have been a pregnant woman.

TRICKY: Now just one minute. We have a tradition in the courts of this land that a man is innocent until he is proven guilty. There were babies in that ditch at My Lai, and we know there were women of all *ages* but I have not seen a single document that suggests the ditch at My Lai contained a *pregnant* woman.

CITIZEN: But what *if*, sir—what *if* one of the twenty-two was a pregnant woman? Suppose that were to come to light in your judicial review of the lieutenant's conviction. In that you personally believe in the sanctity of human life, including the life of the yet unborn, couldn't such a fact seriously prejudice you against Lieutenant Calley's appeal?

I have to admit that as an opponent of abortion, it would have a profound effect upon me.

TRICKY: Well, it's very honest of you to admit it. But as a trained lawyer, I think I might be able to go at the matter in a somewhat less emotional manner. First off, I would have to ask whether Lieutenant Calley was *aware* of the fact that the woman in question was pregnant *before* he killed her. Clearly, if she was not yet "showing," I think you would in all fairness have to conclude that the lieutenant could have had no knowledge of her pregnancy, and thus, in no sense of the word, would he have committed an abortion.

CITIZEN: What if she *told* him she was pregnant?

TRICKY: Good question. She might indeed have tried to tell him. But in that Lieutenant Calley is an American who speaks only English, and the My Lai villager is a Vietnamese who speaks only Vietnamese, there could have been no possible means of verbal communication. And as for sign language, I don't believe we can hang a man for failing to understand what must surely have been the gestures of a hysterical, if not deranged, woman.

CITIZEN: No, that wouldn't be fair, would it.

TRICKY: In short then, if the woman was not "showing," Lieutenant Calley could *not* be said to have engaged in an unacceptable form of population control, and it would be possible for me to square what he did with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life, including the life of the yet unborn.

CITIZEN: But, sir, what if she *was* "showing"?

TRICKY: Well then, as good lawyers we would have to ask another question. Namely: did Lieutenant Calley believe the woman to be pregnant, or did he, mistakenly, in the heat of the moment, assume that she was just stout? It's all well and good for us to be Monday Morning My Lai Quarterbacks, you know, but there's a war going on out there, and you cannot always expect an officer rounding up unarmed civilians to be able to distinguish between an

ordinary fat Vietnamese woman and one who is in the middle, or even the late, stages of pregnancy. Now if the pregnant ones would wear maternity clothes, of course, that would be a great help to our boys. But in that they don't, in that all of them seem to go around all day in their pajamas, it is almost impossible to tell the men from the women, let alone the pregnant from the nonpregnant. Inevitably then—and this is just one of those unfortunate things about a war of this kind—there is going to be confusion on this whole score of who is who out there. I understand that we are doing all we can to get into the hamlets with American-style maternity clothes for the pregnant women to wear so as to make them more distinguishable to the troops at the massacres, but, as you know, these people have their own ways and will not always consent to do even what is clearly in their own interest. And, of course, we have no intention of forcing them. That, after all, is why we are in Vietnam in the first place—to give these people the right to choose their own way of life, in accordance with *their* own beliefs and customs.

CITIZEN: In other words, sir, if Lieutenant Calley assumed the woman was simply fat, and killed her under that assumption, that would still square with your personal belief in the sanctity of human life, including the life of the yet unborn.

TRICKY: Absolutely. If I find that he assumed she was simply overweight, I give you my utmost assurance, I will in no way be prejudiced against his appeal.

CITIZEN: But, sir, suppose, just *suppose*, that he *did* know she was pregnant.

TRICKY: Well, we are down to the heart of the matter now, aren't we?

CITIZEN: I'm afraid so, sir.

TRICKY: Yes, we are down to this issue of "abortion on demand," which, admittedly, is totally unacceptable to me, on the basis of my personal and religious beliefs.

CITIZEN: Abortion on *demand*?

TRICKY: If this Vietnamese woman presented herself to Lieutenant Calley for abortion ... let's assume, for the sake of argument, she was one of those girls who goes out and has a good time and then won't own up to the consequences; unfortunately, we have them here just as they have them over there—the misfits, the bums, the tramps, the few who give the many a bad name ... but if this woman presented herself to Lieutenant Calley for abortion, with some kind of note, say, that somebody had written for her in English, and Lieutenant Calley, let's say, in the heat and pressure of the moment, performed the abortion, during the course of which the woman died ...

CITIZEN: Yes. I think I follow you so far.

TRICKY: Well, I just have to wonder if the woman isn't herself equally as guilty as the lieutenant—if she is not more so. I just have to wonder if this isn't a case for the Saigon courts, after all. Let's be perfectly frank: you cannot die of an abortion, if you don't go looking for the abortion to begin with. If you have not gotten yourself in an abortion *predicament* to begin with. Surely that's perfectly clear.

CITIZEN: It is, sir.

TRICKY: Consequently, even if Lieutenant Calley did participate in a case of "abortion on demand," it would seem to me, speaking strictly as a lawyer, mind you, that there are numerous extenuating factors to consider, not the least of which is the attempt to perform a surgical operation under battlefield conditions. I would think that more than one medic has been cited for doing less.

CITIZEN: Cited for what?

TRICKY: Bravery, of course.

CITIZEN: But ... but, Mr. President, what if it wasn't "abortion on demand"? What if Lieutenant Calley gave her an abortion without her demanding one, or even asking for one—or even wanting one?

TRICKY: As an outright form of population control, you mean?