

'A leader is one who or one that which leads'

Our Gang (Starring Tricky and His Friends.)

By Philip Roth.
Random House.
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Reviewed by
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Shortly before Vice President Agnew discovered the joys of alliteration as a powerful rhetorical device—is it possible he could be mistaken?—he began to show flashes of brilliance in the use of ambiguity. Reaching his peak in that form about two years ago, he actually said: "This nation was at an all-time low when it selected Richard Nixon as President," obviously meaning one thing, but apparently oblivious to the gaffe.

And with that parable, you have at once the key to why Philip Roth's latest novel will be judged in the long run as an entertainment rather than a major work—a summer's diversion for the nimble author, and an evening's giggle for a hip reader.

This is the result of—as you must know by now—Roth's selecting Richard Nixon and his court as the object of his sat-

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ire. As such, *Our Gang* is the all-too-probable tale of Trick E. Dixon, an improbable president of the United States who holds sway through a combination of pietistic and cliché-ridden press conferences and a feeling for language that would do justice to an Al Kelly.

To begin, Roth starts his work with a quotation from Nixon's famous San Clemente statement of last April—you know, the one in which the president came out against abortion but foursquare in support of "the sanctity of human life," a position that, he assured the nation, he had arrived through "personal and religious beliefs."

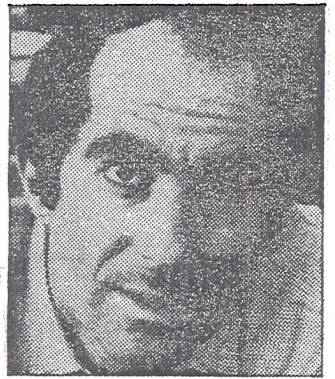
Cut to: Trick E. Dixon fielding questions in a press conference dealing with his promise to review the Calley case. The bone of contention is the nasty rumor that one of the civilian women slaughtered at My Lai may have been pregnant. If that were true, of course, it would mean that Calley was practicing an unsanctioned form of population control. The upshot is Dixon's feeling that he certainly can't fault Calley for popping off what was probably an applicant for "abortion on demand" in the first place. And in the second place, this nation is doing all it can "to get into the hamlets with American styles for the pregnant women to wear so as to make them more distinguishable to the troops

at the massacres."

Cut to: a later press conference in which Dixon deftly moves from his abiding concern for the unborn to giving them the vote. After Black Power and Women Power, Dixon offers Fetus Power:

You know, we all watch our TV and we see the demonstrators and we see the violence, because, unfortunately, that is the kind of thing that makes the news. But how many of us realize that throughout this great land of ours, there are millions upon millions of embryos going through the most complex and difficult changes in form and structure, and all this they accomplish without waving signs for the camera and disrupting traffic and throwing paint and using foul language and dressing in outlandish clothes.

Cut to: Dixon donning his old Prissier College football uniform and descending to a locker room under the White House. There he meets with his "advisors" (called coaches) to weather the latest in his six-hundred-odd crises—a revolution at the hands of the Boy Scouts of America, who are convinced that their moral code has been compromised by the tacit endorsement of effing contained in Dixon's promise to franchise the unborn. Neatly, the president and his councillors avoid having to gas the Boy Scouts, Cubs, and the Brownies (and in the process unavoidably poisoning a few innocent adults) by pinning the



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rap of "corrupting the youth" on Curt Flood, the man who rejected the hallowed game of baseball and skipped the country to live in Copenhagen among the filth peddlers.

And so it goes, with Dixon appearing on national TV announcing—with the aid of maps and a pointer—that American armed forces have undertaken a daring night-time raid deep into the heart of Denmark—in defiance of the pro-pornography government there—with the intention of capturing their fugitive.

Up to this point, Roth's material is fairly predictable; its episodic and topical nature will put you in mind of Art Buchwald at best, a slew of stand-up comics at worst. Fortunately, in the last three chapters Roth's higher aspirations take over and his well-contained rage breaks loose—Dixon is drowned by some Boy Scouts in a baggie of fetal fluid at Walter Reed Hospital, where

he has gone for an operation to remove the sweat glands from his upper lip. At the end, Dixon surfaces in hell where he immediately begins speechifying—in an edgy Miltonic parallel—to defeat Satan (by exposing him as an unwitting ally of God in “the famous Job case”) and set himself up as supreme devil:

Now since my arrival I have traveled to the very edges of the outer darkness. . . . I was fortunate enough to hear an awful lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth on my trip around Hell, and I think the strongest impression I came away with was. . . .

Unfortunately, all this will be called outrageously funny because that is a phrase that comes automatically to mind when the mass thinkers write about satire. The point is that even when you're writing an Orwellian novel, it's almost impossible to be wildly inventive about an administration either so inept or so corrupt that it has been forced to substitute amateur public relations for frank discussion. (Not for nothing has Roth chosen *Our Gang* as his title. It certainly appears that the White House has more in common with Spanky McFarland, short pants, and Hal Roach than it does with the Federalists.)

As such, *Our Gang* is an Orwellian tract; one that repeats his warning that people who begin to be lazy about the language that their leaders use can be told anything:—that a

little repression or a little murder will be good for them, or that peace is war. In this respect, the novel serves to remind us again of the milieu of Milhous madness that we are now in danger of accepting without so much as a blink.

Thus, in the novel

the overwhelming majority of the people of this country have taken the destruction of Copenhagen with the wonderful equanimity and solidarity we have come to expect of them in matters like this.

In real life, this translates—among other things—to no one's being particularly disturbed by Nixon's congratulatory telegram to Rockefeller in support of his forthright handling of the Attica revolt.

Mindful of this, Roth also drubs the media in general and television commentators in particular—the boys who give credence to official pronouncements by covering them with a salve of dignifying words. One Erect Severehead comes off like this:

A hushed-hush pervades the corridors of power. Great men whisper whispers while a stunned capital awaits. Even the cherry blossoms along the Potomac seem to sense the magnitude. And magnitude there is. Yet magnitude there has been before, and the nation has survived.

Three times Severehead is called upon to comment on the action. The second time, he refers to the “corridors of power” as well as the “halls of justice and closets of virtue and dumb-waiters of dignity and cellars of idealism.” By the time of his third appearance, he's really rolling along:

So the blah blah blah blah of state has been passed. Blah blah blah blah blah blah has ended and the republic that blah blah blah reason blah . . .

Similarly, in one of the greatest touches in the novel, Reverend Billy Cupcake delivers Dixon's eulogy, which takes as its text the dictionary definition of the word “leader”:

Now how does Noah Webster define “leader”?

Well, Noah writes, “A leader is one who or one that which leads.” One who or one that which leads. One *who* or *that* which leads.

Just the day before yesterday I read an article in a current magazine by one of the top philosophers of all time and he wrote, “Leaders are one of man's top necessities.” And in a recent Gallup Poll we've been reading where more than ninety-eight percent of the people of America believe in leadership.

It is probably no idle irony that Dixon and his troops—who make a killing out of using words to mean precisely what they don't—are subjected to this final semantic analysis. And another layer of meaningless words, words, words. □

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