

Adaptation of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* on HBO: If the US had gone fascist

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Two episodes of *The Plot Against America*, a television miniseries based on the 2004 novel of the same title by Philip Roth, have now aired on HBO. These initial hour-long installments reveal that the series, which raises a host of historical issues, is serious and valuable. Those who have access are encouraged to make the effort to watch it.

This version of Roth's novel has been created and written by David Simon and Ed Burns. Simon is a well-known journalist, producer and writer, responsible for *The Wire* (2002-08), *Generation Kill* (2008), *Treme* (2010-13) and *Deuce* (2017-19), among other efforts. Burns has been Simon's writing partner on a number of projects.

Roth, one of the leading novelists in the US in the postwar period, who died in May 2018, is listed as a co-executive producer of *The Plot Against America*. He met with Simon in October 2017 and discussed the proposed miniseries.

The novel and its television adaptation imagine an alternate history in which aviation hero and Hitler admirer Charles A. Lindbergh (1902-74) becomes the Republican Party's candidate for president in 1940 and, running on an anti-war platform and on the basis of his personal popularity, wins the general election against incumbent Democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The book's narrator is a character named Philip Roth, who, like the novelist, was 7 in 1940 and lived in the predominantly Jewish Weequahic neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey with his father, Herman, an insurance agent, and his mother, Bess.

Roth, being Roth, does not devote all his attention to world and national politics. The novel is also about growing up in a complex and traumatic era. The author peoples his book with a host of remarkable, colorful figures. His observations about men and women strike home with great regularity and often (even at times of extreme stress) very amusingly.

Speaking of his early friend Earl Axman, for example, the narrator explains, "And whenever we'd finished up in his kitchen with our stamps and he was momentarily done with his domineering, he'd giggle and say, Now let's do something awful," which was how I got to see his mother's underwear."

Of his brother Sandy's finer qualities, Philip observes that they "served only to magnify my awe of an older brother who everyone agreed was intended for great things, while most boys his age didn't look as though they were intended even to eat at a table with another human being."

In the HBO series, through the eyes and experiences of the Levins (at Roth's request, the family name has been changed from the original), we witness the process of America "going fascist" under a Lindbergh administration, with increasing persecution of the Jewish population in particular. *The Plot Against America* belongs to a tradition in American literature that portrays and warns against domestic dictatorship and mass repression, a tradition that prominently includes Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908) and Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935).

In the first episode, we meet Philip Levin (Azhy Robertson), an intense, earnest young boy, his brother Sandy (Caleb Malis), his mother Bess (Zoe

Kazan), father Herman (Morgan Spector), orphaned cousin Alvin (Anthony Boyle), who lives with the family, and his single aunt Evelyn (Winona Ryder).

As the series opens, the most immediate drama facing the Levins is whether Herman should accept a promotion offered by his insurance company and move the family to Union, New Jersey, where they would be able to own a larger home with a proper backyard. His wife is concerned, based on her early life, that their boys would be more isolated and vulnerable in a community with a much smaller or almost non-existent Jewish population.

In a drive through Union, the Levins come upon a beer garden patronized by a crowd of people who seem to be associated with the German-American Bund, a pro-Nazi outfit. Herman expresses contempt for the "fascist bastards," but he still stubbornly wants the house promised by the American dream. In the end, however, Bess holds sway and her husband declines the new post.

The family and Herman in particular follow world developments—including, above all, the state of the world war that broke out in September 1939—through radio broadcasts at home and newsreels at a local movie theater. Herman reacts with outrage to a speech given by Charles Lindbergh in Des Moines, Iowa (the address was actually delivered in September 1941) in which the flyer alleges that the "three most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war are the British, the Jewish and the Roosevelt administration."

Lindbergh goes on to say it is not difficult "to understand why Jewish people desire the overthrow of Nazi Germany. The persecution they suffered in Germany would be sufficient to make bitter enemies of any race." He adds, however, that "no person of honesty and vision can look on their pro-war policy here today without seeing the dangers involved in such a policy both for us and for them. ... A few far-sighted Jewish people realize this and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not."

Sandy, a budding artist, seems oddly taken with Lindbergh, as part of an almost inevitable adolescent rebellion against his strong-willed and opinionated father. Sandy refuses to tear up and, in fact, conceals sketches he has made of the aviator and carries on a mostly subterranean campaign in Lindbergh's defense.

Alvin Levin is presented as a combative young man with a significant chip on his shoulder. The first episode concludes after he and a pal, in retaliation for a Jewish friend's having taken a beating from anti-Semites, set on a couple of the Bundists.

In the second episode of *The Plot Against America*, a rabbi from Newark, Lionel Bengelsdorf (John Turturro), a haughty, pompous man, who has already showed an inclination to support Lindbergh, helps the Republican candidate by appearing at the party's national convention and lending his "America First" program legitimacy ("koshering" him for "the Christians," in Alvin's bitter phrase). Aunt Evelyn and Bengelsdorf become an item, much to the dismay of the other adult Levins.

Lindbergh obtains the Republican nomination in Roth's counter-factual (Wendell Wilkie was the actual, losing Republican candidate) and begins touring the country with a simple message: the choice is not between Lindbergh and Roosevelt, he asserts, but "between Lindbergh and war."

Alvin, meanwhile, has become a driver and errand boy for Abe Steinheim, the owner of a multimillion-dollar construction company. In the novel, around this time, Alvin and Herman would "converse heatedly about politics, about capitalism particularly, a system that, ever since my father had gotten him to take an interest in reading the paper and talking about the news, Alvin deplored but that my father defended ... He'd warn Alvin, 'You don't have to tell Mr. Steinheim about Karl Marx. Because the man won't hesitate—you'll be out on your keister.'"

Alvin cannot bear Steinheim and denounces him (again, in the book) in no uncertain terms—"he's a fake, he's a bully, he's a cheapskate, he's a screamer, he's a shouter, he's a swindler, he's a man without a friend in the world, people cannot stand to be anywhere near him." He sums up his view of Steinheim: "The man to me is one thing only—a walking advertisement for the overthrow of capitalism."

(Roth has a lovely line later on in the novel, when he describes two categories of "strong men," one includes people like Abe Steinheim, "remorseless about their making money, and those like my father, ruthlessly obedient to their idea of fair play.")

Election night 1940 produces a stunning result, a Lindbergh victory over Roosevelt. Herman and the rest of the Levins are horrified. Alvin quits his job with a flourish and catches a train to Montreal, where he plans to enlist in the Canadian armed forces, already at war with Germany.

The Plot Against America on HBO is well done, intelligently done. Although they rearrange events and add details of their own, Simon and Burns are clearly committed to faithfully presenting the thrust of Roth's cautionary tale. That an insidious version of initially smiling and "friendly" fascism, which wraps itself in homilies and "Americanism," can and will arise, given the right circumstances, is a truth, and a *reality*, that millions need to understand.

Roth wrote the book in the early 2000s. He apparently denied it was meant as an allegorical commentary on the Bush-Cheney administration and its "war on terror," but, assuming he was telling the truth about his conscious intentions, the novel is clearly marked by definite social processes and events, including the general, global emergence of neo-fascist trends and movements.

In developing an adaptation of Roth's book in the present day, Simon makes no bones about the fact that he has Donald Trump and his administration in mind when dramatizing the dangers of authoritarianism and xenophobia.

Simon told an interviewer from *Collider* that the "verdict is in on Lindbergh" and that there was no point in "re-arguing that." The reason to do the book, the writer-creator went on, "is that we're in the same moment now, but the vulnerable cohorts are people of black and brown skin and Muslims. They are being used as the feared other to drive a nationalism and a latent racism and anti-Semitism. In our current moment, Jewish Americans are not the most vulnerable cohort, although anti-Semitism is on the rise because it always is when intolerance has its day. That train is never late. But the people who are genuinely vulnerable to human rights abuses are people who are black and brown and Muslim. You're seeing it from the Southern border and you saw it in the airports, immediately after the inauguration, you see it in the demonization of this current culture of immigration. ... So, what you're seeing is the same thing that Roth depicted, brought forward. Once you read the book, a mini-series seems inevitable."

These concerns are entirely legitimate and they provide the series its considerable dramatic impetus and intellectual strength.

There are also ways in which the book and the series are much weaker. We plan to write more about those issues when the series is completed,

but a few points can be made here.

Roth was very strong on family and personal dynamics, in all their potential dysfunction and madness; no American novelist of his generation was stronger. And, what's more, he had an intuitive antipathy for fakery and hypocrisy in public life. No one who reads it is likely to forget his scathing reference, in one of his fictions, to the appearance of "Doctor [Henry] Kissinger" at Richard Nixon's funeral: "high-minded, profound, speaking in his most puffed-up unegoistical mode—and with all the cold authority of that voice dipped in sludge."

However, although one of the angriest and most perceptive writers of his day, Roth, a product of the postwar, Cold War period, remained, in his general social conceptions, within the framework of angry, perceptive liberalism. His presentation of Alvin's views indicate that, again intuitively, he knew there was something beyond that, that there was much to despise in the existing system and that fervent opposition could be fully justified. Roth's description of individual socialists and communists can be quite sympathetic, but when he turns to his overall picture, he is always drawn back toward fairly conventional tributes to hard work, practicality, family, American democracy and so on. The era and its problems, including the state religion of anti-communism, took their toll.

Simon, who describes himself as a "social democrat," apparently holds many of the same general views.

These ideas color *The Plot Against America* and its attitude toward Roosevelt, the Democratic Party, the American working class and the political character of the era in question. To a certain extent, the novel has the character of a nightmare, from which the reader abruptly and somewhat inexplicably wakes up. Roth doesn't pretend to resolve all the political issues he brings to our attention. We are left hanging, more than we should be, on a number of different scores.

The novelist never addresses certain questions that were incumbent on him to tackle in some manner: under what social, economic and political conditions does fascism arise as a serious and threatening force? Is it "merely" a matter of latent anti-Semitism (or racism), always present in the population, being brought to the surface? How was it possible for Lindbergh to appear (and disappear) so rapidly, as though from and back into the clouds? What was the general mood of the American population in 1940? What is it today? Was "white racism" responsible for the victory of Trump?

In regard to these matters of *social* dynamics, the book and series falter.

In any event, when *The Plot Against America*, which we highly recommend our readers to view, finishes in a month's time, we will return to this discussion. Readers are encouraged to weigh in.



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