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Do You Still Read Fiction?

Posted: 07/ 1/11 03:16 PM ET
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Philip Roth has written two dozen novels, yet fiction has lost its appeal for him personally.

In a recent interview [he said](#), "I've stopped reading fiction. I don't read it at all. I read other things: history, biography. I don't have the same interest in fiction that I once did."

When asked why, he said he didn't know, and only offered a smart-aleck response: "I wised up."

Whatever you think of Roth -- and the [outrage at his Booker Prize](#) was pretty high here on the Huffington Post a while back -- he raised a point I've been discussing with writer friends for a long time. I don't read nearly as much fiction of any kind as I used to. That's a big switch because I started out as a short story writer before branching into novels and mysteries. Fiction was always the center of my reading universe.

And then I became a reviewer. I wrote a column for the *Detroit Free Press* for about a decade and read or sampled what seemed like thousands of mysteries and thrillers. I also reviewed for half a dozen other newspapers and magazines on an NPR station. Over time, I found my interest in fiction of all kinds waning, and like Roth, became more interested in history and biography.

One novelist friend said the same thing about her tastes and explained it this way, "We're middle-aged, we're contemplating the sweep of our own history, our own biographies." Another colleague argued, "When you've read so much fiction, you can see who they're indebted to, who they're echoing, and it's not as much fun as it used to be." A third writer who also teaches writing echoed that response: "Within a few pages, I think, 'I've read this before. It's not new.'"

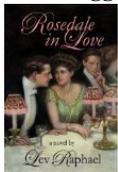
I think there's a somewhat different reason for me, aside from burn-out. When I set out to be an author, I wanted to read as many other fiction writers as possible to learn what they did, how they saw. The majority of my library from college and graduate school and into my early 30s is American, English, French, Russian, German, South American and Israeli fiction. As a young man, I wanted to experience all those different lives.

But now I've lived my own lives, have traveled extensively, and feel more settled and centered. I haven't "wised up" as Roth says. I just feel the need for a *bigger* story, and history and biography seem to offer that more than contemporary fiction. I'm grateful that we live in a golden age of biographers and historians like Amanda Foreman, Lynn Olson, Antony Beevor, David McCullough, Joan DeJean, Stacy Schiff, Edmund Morris, Tom Reiss, Peter Ackroyd.

When I do read fiction now, I'm more likely to be taken by historical novels like Barry Unsworth's [Land of Marvels](#) and David Benioff's [City of Thieves](#). And that's the genre I've moved into with my latest book [Rosedale in Love](#), set in The Gilded Age.

As for Philip Roth? I admire his work, but I haven't enjoyed one of his novels in 11 years.

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