



The Professor of Desire

Philip Roth

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Philip Roth's *The Professor of Desire* is the story of an adventurous man of intelligence and feeling trying to make his way to both pleasure *and* dignity through a world of sensual possibilities. Temptation comes to him in both ordinary and spectacular forms, and the novel charts the history of his desire from the early years, when he accedes to it totally, to the time when he attempts to domesticate his passions (and his wife's) and finally to that most surprising moment when desire ebbs and, frighteningly, seems on the brink of disappearance. The book explores, in all its painful ramifications, the pursuit and loss of erotic happiness.

Among the variety of places that comprise this world of sensual possibilities are the mountaintop resort hotel where David Kepesh spends his boyhood, the college in upstate New York where he begins life as a passionate man by describing himself to coeds he hopes to seduce with Lord Byron's dictum, "studious by day, dissolute by night"; a basement flat in London, where he lives with two Swedish girls, one of whom he even thinks fleetingly of turning into a prostitute. Drawing back from all that he comes to recognize as dangerous in himself, he takes up a serious, responsible vocation--as a professor of literature--but then, later, in California, takes up with Helen Baird, a young woman in flight from her own adventurous years in the Far East, which culminated in a narrowly aborted murder plot against her lover's wife. David marries this woman whom he thinks of as a "heroine," courageous in her sensual abandon as well as in her renunciations. The marriage, always at cross purposes, ends in disaster. Back now in New York City, Kepesh falls into a state of spiritual despair and physical impotence over the unhappiness he has caused himself and others. In his small sublet apartment he entertains his aging parents, who are puzzled by the course their only son's personal life has taken. While a persistent homosexual stranger conducts a ridiculous siege outside the door, and a champion womanizer attempts to reconvert him to satyrism, David himself wonders about his future as a lover of anyone. Then he meets Claire Ovington, a loving and orderly young teacher, "the most extraordinary ordinary person I've ever met." While in Europe on a romantic holiday, they travel to Kafka's grave in Prague, and afterwards, asleep in his mistress's arms, David dreams of a bizarre encounter with "Kafka's whore."

Finally, in a rented Catskill house not far from the resort hotel where he was raised, David and Claire spend an idyllic summer, seemingly blessed by permanence and love. Kepesh's widowed father arrives for Labor Day weekend, with his friend, a concentration-camp survivor who has become old Mr. Kepesh's dearest companion. Their presence reinforces David's growing sense of the fragility of all existence, and in the last third of this novel--in a long conclusion that may be as moving as anything in contemporary fiction--Roth brings together all the strands of Kepesh's story in final scenes that are distinguished by an incomparably elegiac tone.

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