

# David R. Roth

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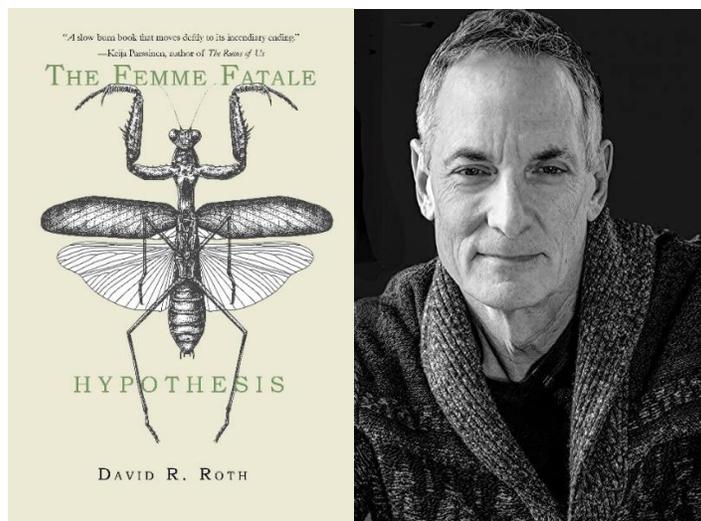
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### Author Finally Follows Son's Advice Publishes Debut Novel at 67



**THE FEMME FATALE HYPOTHESIS**  
By David R. Roth  
(Regal House Publishing, November 19, 2021)

“Roth deftly crafts.... a novel about love, suburban life, and who has the right to make the choices between life and death... realistic and character-driven...check this one out.” —Booklist

David Roth spent 35 years in business communications before heeding his son's advice. "From the very beginning of his career, my son Asher has put out songs about pursuing your dreams. It took a while, but I finally came to understand that a life marked by dream deferral and compromise is the epitome of a failed life." Finally heeding his son's advice, he quit his job in 2014 to focus on his lifelong dream of becoming a writer of fiction.

Roth received his undergraduate degree from Stanford University. He began his MA studies at New York University but put his aspirations on hold to focus on making a living and raising three kids. That pause lasted thirty-five years. After finally leaving the business world, he reignited his dream by spending a summer month in a writing workshop at The American University of Paris. Back home he intensified his training in a series of workshops at Drexel University's Storylab under the tutelage of novelist Nomi Eve. In 2015 he gained admission to Cedar Crest College's Pan-European MFA program, which included residencies in Vienna, Dublin and Barcelona.

Three months after completing his degree he placed second in the inaugural Bucks County Short Fiction Contest judged by Janet Benton (*Lilli de Jong*). Of the award-winning story, Benton noted "the precision of the observations throughout" and called it "elegantly written with a touch of humor." Shortly thereafter, *Passager Journal* became the first to publish one of his short stories. The Northwest literary journal *Moss* was soon the second. Driftwood Press has twice made him a quarter-finalist in their Adrift Short Story Contest.

In 2019, Roth backed away from short fiction to concentrate on completing his first novel. He spent the year revising and expanding his MFA thesis before submitting it for publication. In early 2020, Regal House Publishing picked up *The Femme Fatale Hypothesis* for publication in November of 2021.

Roth lives in Bucks County, Pennsylvania with his partner of over 40 years, Beth McConnell. His stories are set in or shaped by life in the small Delaware River town in which they have lived for over three decades.

To paraphrase George Saunders from *Thank you, Esther Forbes*, Roth believes immersion in language will enrich and bring purpose to his life. When he returns to stardust, his hope is that he will leave something behind that a stranger will read and they will laugh, or maybe weep, or simply nod with knowing, and if he is extraordinarily lucky, they will feel that their life was enriched for having read it.

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**BOOK SYNOPSIS**

A gripping story about a woman with a ferocious desire to defy death, her husband's increasingly futile attempt to deny death, and their widowed neighbor, who tries to help as a way to distract from her own loss and sense of isolation. As Rose Geddes's late-stage lung cancer progresses and her husband Kelsey's ability to care for her diminishes, their neighbor, June Danhill, stumbles into the middle of this couple's intersecting crises. June's only son has recently moved his family to California. So, she embraces the opportunity to distract herself from her loneliness by helping to care for the Geddeses. But it isn't long before June realizes that Rose wants more from her than she is willing to give.

Love and loss, family secrets, a long-forgotten keepsake, and the sexual cannibalism of the false garden mantid all fuel this dark drama that tests the thin line between mercy and murder.

**ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *THE FEMME FATALE HYPOTHESIS*:**

- “Roth deftly crafts.... a novel about love, suburban life, and who has the right to make the choices between life and death... realistic and character-driven...check this one out.”  
—Booklist
- “Roth's captivating novel involves a curious friendship between Kelsey and Rose Geddes and their next-door neighbor, June.... With emotion, intellect, and sinuous finesse, *The Femme Fatale Hypothesis* leads to an unnerving yet fulfilling conclusion.”  
—Meg Nola, Forward Reviews
- “In his elegantly crafted and touching debut novel, David R. Roth uses three points of view to walk us through the lives of a long-married couple facing death and their younger neighbor, who is drawn into their heavily weighted world as a bug is drawn into a spider's web. Roth effectively plumbs both the intimacy of a long marriage and its sinister potential, moving us gently toward his startling conclusion.”  
—Janet Benton, author of *Lilli De Jong*

- “For me, reading this novel brings the feeling you sometimes get in the theatre: That you’re not sure you should be watching these people – but that you can't look away. And that a sure-handed storyteller offers you a way forward.”  
—Bill Irwin, Tony Award-winning actor/playwright/director
- “If you love reading, and especially if you’ve been yearning to remember why you love reading, don’t miss *The Femme Fatale Hypothesis*. Here we’re given, finally, a contemporary debut novel free of sanctimony, bravely alive with humanizing complexity, aswirl with genuine feeling rather than sentimentalism, indelible in its themes and images, and generously engrossing in its plot.”  
—M. Allen Cunningham, author of *Q&A & Perpetua’s Kin*
- “A luminously written and impeccably well-crafted novel that explores the deepest human mysteries: love and death. The interplay of ordinary chores and extraordinary insights, science and religion, morality and mortality, is rendered with exquisite sensitivity and startling humor. *The Femme Fatale Hypothesis* has a profound resonance in this time when we are all contemplating life’s ultimate questions.”  
—Jake Lamar, author of *Bourgeois Blues* and *Rendezvous Eighteenth*
- “*The Femme Fatale Hypothesis* is a slow-burn book that moves deftly to its incendiary ending. Roth is a careful craftsman and a bold provocateur.”  
—Keija Parssinen, author of *The Ruins of Us* and *The Unraveling of Mercy Louis*
- “David Roth brings a scientist’s sensibility and toolbox to his storytelling, and his are rare instruments. There are so many sentences in this book to be dissected, admired and marveled at.”  
—Nomi Eve, author of *Henna House* and *The Family Orchard*, a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection
- “The thoughtful interplay between husband, wife, and neighbor hides secret inner worlds. The tension between what people say and what they keep private builds into a heartbreaking and wonderful drama. David Roth reminds us the minutiae of everyday life is never inconsequential.”  
—Terese Brasen, author of *Kama*
- “Roth is masterful at weaving science, philosophy, and literature throughout to raise life’s essential questions in this thoroughly gripping novel.”  
—Jeffrey Greene, author of *French Spirits*

- “Here is writing informed by an archeology as human as it is humane. Add to that a dose of humor that is playful, witty, occasionally life-saving. The scientific turn is multi-dexterous.”  
—Robert Antoni, author of *As Flies to Whatless Boys*, recognized with a Guggenheim Fellowship, and *Cut Guavas*
- “A moving contemplation of the storms and passions of aging, often overlooked by a culture that worships youth. Roth crafts a tale of Shakespearean depth and drama while delving into the mysteries of free will and the limits of love.”  
—Rebecca Baum, author of *Lifelike Creatures*
- “Involving and thought-provoking—a poignant and truthful meditation on dying, love, and grief.”  
—Ian Lewis, author of *The Ballad of Billy Bean*
- “Roth’s radiant debut novel explores love and loss in this thoughtful meditation on what it means to be alive—and to die.”  
—Alison Wellford, author of *Indolence*
- “The ink of a poet in the pen of a novelist. It is a small book in size, but the author is a big talent.”  
—Steven Mayfield, author of *Treasure of the Blue Whale* and the upcoming *Delphic Oracle U.S.A.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David R. Roth** has an undergraduate degree from Stanford University and an MFA from Cedar Crest College’s Pan-European program. He has studied writing at New York University, The American University in Paris, and Drexel University’s Storylab. His short stories have appeared in *Passager Journal*, *Moss*, and *Every Writer*. His work focuses on fictional lives lived in fictional river towns in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, his real home for four decades. *The Femme Fatale Hypothesis* is his debut novel.

## Sample Q&A

Q: What inspired you to return to your dream of being a writer after 35 years?

As she lay dying, my 90-year-old mother and I discussed death and its aftermath. An avowed Atomist, she believed we are born of and return to dust. She recommended I read Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*, a nonfiction paean to the Epicurean philosophical poet Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*. It is the story of the man who rediscovered Lucretius' poem centuries after all copies were thought to have been destroyed. Its protagonist, Poggio Bracciolini, chose to live his dream—the austere life of a book hunter—rather than pursue more lucrative options available to him. The sentence summarizing his reasoning rose from the page like a taunt. “The pattern of dreaming, deferral and compromise is an altogether familiar one; it is the epitome of a failed life.” I realized I was living just such a life and it was time to do something about that.

Q: Why did you choose to begin with a story so focused on end-of-life issues?

I'm of the Joan Didion school of writing: I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking. Being a person of a certain age, I have had a great deal of direct experience with death over the last decade. I buried a sister, my mother, my mother-in-law, my father-in-law, a close friend and a beloved dog. There were some good and some very bad deaths. It struck me just how different death is when the dying lose agency and their deaths are outsourced to our institutions – medical, legal, political. I wanted to think about the reality of death in the context of some imaginary lives that interested me and explore what I think about it.

Q: Speaking of death, dementia in one of its many forms is a fact of life for many older people. Your character Kelsey is in a progressed but seemingly manageable stage of decline. Why does Rose see him as also facing an end-of-life crisis?

You're right that dementia kills slowly and that barring any other acute disease Kelsey's body could survive for many years before the destruction of brain cells leads to the shutting down of his organs. But this gets to the point about agency that I made earlier. Once we lose agency, we lose the ability to choose how and when we die. Granted, agency can be snatched from us at any moment—by a drunk driver, by a heart attack, by a lightning bolt—or it can be stolen bit by bit. As a freelance writer, I wrote about Alzheimer's disease research for fifteen years. The first year an esteemed scientist in the field told me we were five years from developing a treatment if not a cure. That was over twenty-five years ago and scientists are still stumped by the pathology of AD and other neurological diseases. Researchers may yet come up with a meaningful treatment, but for right now the question for one afflicted with pathological dementia is do you want to own your death or do you want to slowly lose yourself and your freedom to choose? If you choose to lean into your final exit, it is paramount that you not wait too long. Therein lies the rub. How long does one wait?

Q: June, the middle-aged widow of your story, struggles with the changes she is experiencing in the small town she has lived in for decades. Where did that theme come from?

My wife and I have lived in two houses over the last 35 years. Those houses are two blocks apart. I've noticed that when you live in one place for a long time, you are likely to experience one of two phenomena: great change or persistent sameness. Change might come in the form of gentrification, or a mass exodus as a result of a plant closing or, as in the case of my fictional town, a slow, inexorable decline. From June's perspective, Marrsville has experienced a steady diminution over the years, much like that being experienced by her neighbor, Rose. I think when people feel trapped in a downward cycle, those who have the inner strength to climb out of that trap tend to look for little things they can do to disrupt the cycle. Alone and feeling powerless to save her town, June thinks maybe she can be of use to others, like the Memorial Park boys she hires to do odd jobs and maybe her neighbors, too.

Q: The title of the book and its cover conjure a sinister, noir mood. Was that always the title, always the mood you were going for?

When I began shaping the story, my working title was *The Good Neighbor*. It was based on my assumption that this was going to be about a single woman being drawn into the tribulations of her elderly neighbors, all very loosely inspired by a story I'd heard about a couple carefully planning their double suicide and secretively arranging for their kids to discover their bodies. When I got to know my characters better, I found that Kelsey was an entomologist. I started looking into his field of study and stumbled upon Dr. Kate Barry's work with the false garden mantid down in Australia, in particular her demonstration of the *Femme Fatale* hypothesis. The idea of a real-life femme fatale—a literal maneater—intrigued me and, as it turned out, Kelsey, too. I liked the provocative mood set by the title and the overriding question it introduces to the story; that is, who is feeding off of whom?

Q: The book is written from three different perspectives. How did you settle on that choice?

Narrative point of view is something that fascinates me. One of the big questions writers face when crafting a story is whose story is it? Whose "truth" filter is going to determine what is told, what is noticed and what language will be used. That single choice determines so much about a story. You have to be constantly asking yourself if this character could know this bit of information, and if so, how, and if not, how does the information get to the reader...et cetera. From the outset, I wanted this story to have three distinct perspectives represented. In fact, early drafts were written in first person, present tense limiting my characters and readers to what is going on in the moment. I determined that the first-person construct was too limiting. It didn't allow for the interiority I felt the story needed. Thus, the move to a close third-person narrative in three voices.

Q: A notable stylistic choice in the book is Rose's em-dashed speech. Talk about that choice.

It's pretty obvious that Rose is very ill from the outset. And that her condition affects her speech. I didn't want readers to lose track of that fact and didn't want to have to keep reminding them with tedious phrases describing how labored her speech is. We writers use lots of visual cues in the form of punctuation to help our readers navigate the page. I decided to punctuate Rose's speech in a way that, I hope, slows the reader's eyes down just a bit and helps simulate the experience of what it is like to be in the room with her.

Q: So, what's next? What are you working on now?

I'm just putting the finishing touches on the first draft of my second Marrsville novel. I have a few Marrsville novels in the works, like Strout's Crosby, Maine without her focus on a single character. So maybe more like Erdrich's Little No Horse Reservation without her expansive cast of characters. My second novel is different from the first. It's what I hope will be seen as a literary crime novel. I originally thought I'd try my hand at knocking out a crime "cozy" just for fun. Figured it would take me 3-6 months. But as I read more literary crime novels, like John Banville's *Snow*, Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution*, Tana French's *In The Woods* and even Louise Erdrich's Justice Trilogy, I was reminded that crime—a shorthand for humankind's capacity for inhumanity—is not the purview of genre fiction. Criminal acts are at the heart of so much terrific literature. My story deals with criminal abuses of human remains driven by the money to be made trading in human tissue and body parts. My protagonists are a retired PI and his journalist niece. It's been fun. I'm 18 months in to the first readable draft and likely have a couple more to go.