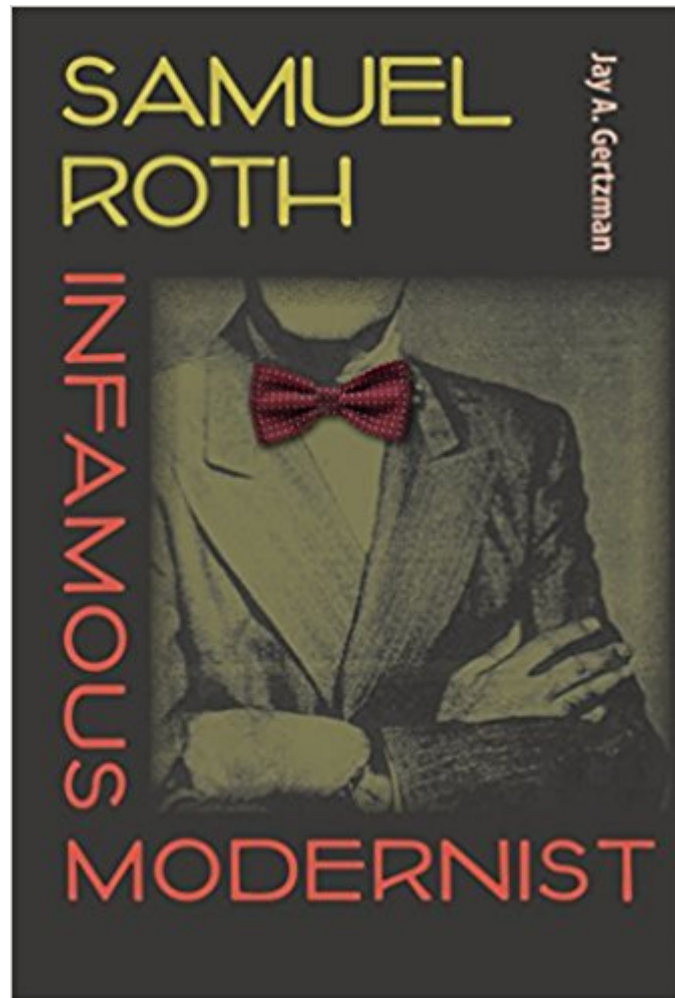




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# Samuel Roth, Infamous Modernist



## Synopsis

“The first deeply researched and sustained biographical treatment of a man who has become recognized as a significant figure in American publishing, transatlantic modernism, and the development of obscenity law. Gertzman’s wide-ranging knowledge of Roth and the startlingly diverse contexts in which he lived and worked makes this a penetrating and unsurpassed portrait not only of Roth but of the country he inhabited.”

•Robert Spoo, coeditor of *Ezra and Dorothy Pound: Letters in Captivity, 1945–1946*

“Gertzman is to be commended for braiding together so many underappreciated strands of twentieth-century literary, legal, and cultural history.”

•Paul K. Saint-Amour, editor of *Modernism and Copyright*

“Speaks very importantly and convincingly about American-Jewish identity, censorship, modern publishing, and twentieth-century literature. But equally important is the story the book tells about an enigma—the puzzling, contradictory, and often appealing figure of Samuel Roth, whose torturous and fascinating trail Gertzman chronicles with wit and insight.”

•Mary Dearborn, author of *The Happiest Man Alive: A Biography of Henry Miller*

Samuel Roth was notorious for being a poet, a pornographer, and a pirate. While his own writing reflected the experience of immigrant Jews and he frequently went to prison on obscenity charges, he was mostly known as a bold literary “pirate” for issuing unauthorized editions of modernist sensations, including *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. In the absence of an international copyright agreement and because works deemed obscene could not be copyrighted, what he did was not illegal. But it did violate the protocols of mutual fair dealing between publishers and authors. Those publications provoked an unprecedented international protest of writers, publishers, and intellectuals who eventually vilified Roth on two continents. Roth was a man with an uncanny ability to recognize good contemporary writing and make it accessible to popular audiences. Ultimately, his dedication to the publication of “indecent” works broke down many of the censorship laws of the time, though he suffered greatly for his efforts. His story portrays a man who struggled with the moral quandaries of literary censorship in the mid-twentieth century, while trying to reconcile the lucrative act of disseminating provocative works and his own Judaism.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 416 pages

Publisher: University Press of Florida (April 23, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0813044170

ISBN-13: 978-0813044170

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 11 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #858,752 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #99 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Movements & Periods > Modernism](#) #161 in [Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Publishing & Books > Book Industry](#) #1751 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > European > British & Irish](#)

## Customer Reviews

“Samuel Roth: Infamous Modernist makes a very valuable contribution to the history of censorship in twentieth-century America, to the publishing history of modernism and indeed to book history more generally.”  
•Literature & History  
“A fascinating and highly detailed biography of one of the strangest characters in American literary history.”  
•Journal of American Culture  
“A fascinating look at the Jewish experience, censorship, government repression and conflicts between Christianity, Jewish religion and the American dream.”  
•Huffington Post  
“Jay Gertzman is to be congratulated for writing a lively biography of a kind of life so often neglected.”  
•Jewish Daily Forward

"The first deeply researched and sustained biographical treatment of a man who has become recognized as a significant figure in American publishing, transatlantic modernism, and the development of obscenity law. Gertzman's wide-ranging knowledge of Roth and the startlingly diverse contexts in which he lived and worked makes this a penetrating and unsurpassed portrait not only of Roth but of the country he inhabited."--Robert Spoo, coeditor of "Ezra and Dorothy Pound: Letters in Captivity, 1945-1946" "Gertzman is to be commended for braiding together so many underappreciated strands of twentieth-century literary, legal, and cultural history."--Paul K. Saint-Amour, editor of "Modernism and Copyright" "Speaks very importantly and convincingly about American-Jewish identity, censorship, modern publishing, and twentieth-century literature. But equally important is the story the book tells about an enigma--the puzzling, contradictory, and often appealing figure of Samuel Roth, whose torturous and fascinating trail Gertzman chronicles with wit

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Gertzman, having already established himself as a major scholar in the history of the smut industry and its regulators in the great Bookleggers and Smuthounds, returns to the most fascinating character from that earlier book here, expanding his narrative, research, and analysis to offer a landmark biography of a major--if disreputable--cultural figure who has existed primarily in the shadows for far too long. As depicted by Gertzman, Roth is a complex character, sometimes sympathetic, other times sleazy and self-serving, often both at once. Gertzman writes with commendable clarity on Roth's conflicted identity, and the book possesses a narrative momentum that makes for engaging reading; at the same time, as an historian, he delivers a bravura performance here, having dug through Roth's personal papers, endless court records, censorship documents, and literary sources too. Samuel Roth, Infamous Modernist deserves a wide readership, among those interested in pornography/obscenity/censorship, literary and cultural history, Jewish and ethnic studies, and the history of sexuality. Highly recommended!

Professor Jay Gertzman has managed to write one of those rare books, a definitive scholastic study of a seminal figure within literature and also one who occupies a position between publishing and the leading boundaries of accepted taste. Gertzman has accomplished a comprehensive work of

outstanding scholarship that stands unrivalled as an analysis of both the moral prejudices that inform publishing and the cultural background to them. Roth is a key figure who opposed censorship and rescued many works now accepted as great novels, among them *Ulysses*. This is a modern classic that is highly readable, fully researched, and a seminal historical excavation of the legalities that oppose and attempt to repress literature, and one which expertly exposes the hypocrisies of terms such as indecent, leading them back to the body of vacuous moral rhetoric they inhabit.

This book shows that human beings are complicated. My opinion of Roth after reading was that he was as smart a man as he was a wildly selfish one. That is not unique among human beings. Gertzman shows in great detail what Samuel Roth thought and did as a American, starting in poverty and finding riches, both in money and wisdom. He thought it was ok to trick his own brother into doing stuff that landed him in jail. Yet he had the courage to face prison himself, as a supporter of freedom to read. He he was a fore-runner of everything that happened in the 60s that allowed writers of erotica, and four-letter English, to get read. To me the most interesting part was the discussion of sexual images--how looking at them, not just in porno but mainstream movies, and in ads for cars, clothing, and cigarettes, becomes a substitute for love and mutuality. Roth must have read Freud on this subject, as the author explains. Famous writers like Philip Roth and directors like Fritz Lang said it better, because they were better artists than Roth. But you have to give Roth credit for criticizing his own method for making a living: sexy advertisements and not-so-sexy mail order books. His awareness meant insecurity, but he certainly thought a lot about who he was and what he was doing to grab his American Dream.

Jay Gertzman's "Samuel Roth, Infamous Modernist" is an absolutely terrific biography of an important figure who bridged the gap between high-, low-, and middle-brow literature. It is also a penetrating -- and even touching -- character study of a complex and emblematic self-made Jewish American. Samuel Roth's long career is a parable of artistic and entrepreneurial ambition, reflecting both the great possibilities afforded by America's democratic vistas and their limits. Anyone interested in the emergence of modernism, the dynamics of American literary culture in the twentieth century, and the history of publishing will find a wealth of treasures in this engaging and impeccably researched book.

Jay Gertzman has written a deeply researched and engrossing study of Samuel Roth, one of the most important (and most reviled) publishers of the twentieth century. Roth's challenges to the

forces of sexual repression went to the Supreme Court and he spent five years behind bars on pornography charges. Among his many notable publications Samuel Roth in 1932 published 'A Scarlet Pansy,' a frank, funny classic novel of American gay life in the early twentieth century which has gone on to have a life of its own, reprinted in many editions as recently as the 1990s. Roth, as portrayed by Gertzman, is a difficult but principled man, and we all owe a great debt to Roth for his service to freedom of speech and to Gertzman for this illuminating portrait.

Jay Gertzman is a scholar of the highest order, and I can't wait to read this book! Censorship under any guise is abhorrent, and Gertzman has made it his duty to bring numerous examples to our attention. If this is half as good as his last book, it is essential to understanding how the fear of sex has caused the written word, literary or not, to be kept from our eyes by hypocritical censors. Yes, it has happened here. Roth was but one example. Jim Linderman Vintage Sleaze the Blog.

Jay Gertzman has written a memorable biography of a fascinating and controversial man. This is a book worthy of any scholar's attention. It is carefully researched and shows the man (Roth)warts and all. I met Samuel Roth late in his life when he was nearing the end of his publishing career and from what I remember of the man the book is spot on about him. Roth's importance in the field of literature and censorship cannot be underestimated and this book is a must for anyone wanting to know the history of both subjects. Kudos to Jay Gertzman for sharing this life with all of us.

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