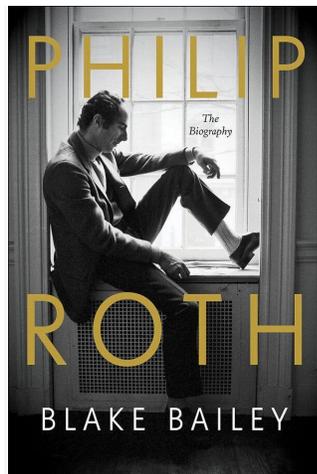


Sexual Assault Allegations Against Biographer Halt Shipping of His Roth Book

W.W. Norton, citing the accusations that the author, Blake Bailey, faces, said it would stop shipping and promoting his new best-selling book.



“Philip Roth: The Biography” went on sale earlier this month. Credit...W.W. Norton, via Associated Press

By [Alexandra Alter](#) and [Rachel Abrams](#)

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Earlier this month, the biographer [Blake Bailey](#) was approaching what seemed like the apex of his literary career. Reviews of his highly anticipated Philip Roth biography appeared before the book came out, with major stories in magazines and literary publications. It landed on the New York Times best-seller list this week.

Now, allegations against Mr. Bailey, 57, have emerged, including claims that he sexually assaulted two women, one as recently as 2015, and that he behaved inappropriately toward middle school students when he was a teacher in the 1990s.

His publisher, W.W. Norton, took swift and unusual action: It said on Wednesday that it had stopped shipments and promotion of his book. “These allegations are serious,” it said in a statement. “In light of them, we have decided to pause the shipping and promotion of ‘Philip Roth: The Biography’ pending any further information that may emerge.”

Norton, which initially printed 50,000 copies of the title, has stopped a 10,000-copy second printing that was scheduled to arrive in early May. It has also halted advertising and media outreach, and events that Norton arranged to promote the book are being

canceled. The pullback from the publisher came just days after Mr. Bailey's literary agency, The Story Factory, said it had dropped him as a client. In an email Wednesday night, Mr. Bailey denied the allegations, calling them "categorically false and libelous." A lawyer for Mr. Bailey, Billy Gibbens, said in an email that his client "disagrees with Norton's decision to stop promoting his book." Some of the allegations were reported earlier by [The Times-Picayune/New Orleans Advocate](#) and [The Los Angeles Times](#).



Image

Blake Bailey was handpicked by Philip Roth to write his biography. Norton said this week that it would stop shipping and promoting the book because of the allegations, which Mr. Bailey has denied.

An [acclaimed literary biographer](#) of masters like Richard Yates, John Cheever and Charles Jackson and the author of a memoir of his own, Mr. Bailey has received the Guggenheim Fellowship and was a Pulitzer finalist for his Cheever biography. Mr. Roth handpicked him to write the biography after meeting with him in 2012; he terminated an earlier agreement with another biographer in 2009.

While one [early review in The New Republic](#) was critical of both Mr. Bailey's and Mr. Roth's treatment of women in the biography, other reviews were more positive. In The New York Times Book Review, the novelist Cynthia Ozick [called it](#) "a narrative masterwork both of wholeness and particularity, of crises wedded to character, of character erupting into insight, insight into desire, and desire into destiny." The Washington Post [described it as](#) "a colorful, confident and uncompromising biographical triumph."

Several of the allegations against Mr. Bailey focus on his behavior when he was an 8th-grade English teacher at Lusher, a middle school in New Orleans, but a previously unreported allegation is from 2015.

That same year, Valentina Rice, a publishing executive, met Mr. Bailey at the home of Dwight Garner, a book critic for The Times, and his wife in Frenchtown, N.J. A frequent guest at their home, Ms. Rice, 47, planned to stay overnight, as did Mr. Bailey, she said.

After she went to bed, Mr. Bailey entered her room and raped her, she said. She said "no" and "stop" repeatedly, she said in an interview.

Mr. Garner, who had previously been an editor at The Times, said he had first interacted with Mr. Bailey when he had assigned him book reviews to write. Mr. Garner did not know Mr. Bailey well, he said, and this was the only time he had been invited to his house.

Mr. Garner was horrified to hear Ms. Rice's account, he said. He added that he and Mr. Bailey do not have a relationship.

A friend of Ms. Rice, Eliot Nolen, told The Times that she remembers Ms. Rice saying that she was assaulted by Mr. Bailey about a week after the party. Ms. Rice said she decided against reporting it to the police.

About three years later, prompted by the growing #MeToo movement and encouraged by friends, Ms. Rice, using an email account under a pseudonym, wrote to Julia A. Reidhead, the president of Norton, accusing Mr. Bailey of nonconsensual sex. She also emailed a New York Times reporter, who responded, but Ms. Rice decided not to pursue it further and did not reply.

"I have not felt able to report this to the police but feel I have to do something and tell someone in the interests of protecting other women," she wrote, adding: "I understand that you would need to confirm this allegation which I am prepared to do, if you can assure me of my anonymity even if it is likely Mr. Bailey will know exactly who I am."

Ms. Reidhead did not respond, Ms. Rice said. But a week after she sent it, Ms. Rice received an email from Mr. Bailey, who said that his publisher had forwarded her note.

"I can assure you I have never had non-consensual sex of any kind, with anybody, ever, and if it comes to a point I shall vigorously defend my reputation and livelihood," he wrote in the email, which The Times reviewed. "Meanwhile, I appeal to your decency: I have a wife and young daughter who adore and depend on me, and such a rumor, even untrue, would destroy them."

"We took this allegation very seriously. We were aware that the allegation was also sent to two people at Mr. Bailey's former employer and to a reporter at The New York Times, a news organization that was well equipped to look into it," a Norton spokeswoman said. "We did take steps, including asking Mr. Bailey about the allegations, which he categorically denied, and we were mindful of the sender's request for a guarantee of anonymity."

Former students recall him as a charismatic role model who treated them as intellectual peers. But he also created an atmosphere of intimacy that could cross the line, like encouraging students to write about romantic relationships in journals that they submitted to him for comments. "There was an environment of dirty jokes and permissiveness," said Elizabeth Gross, a former student who now teaches at Tulane University. Some students said his remarks and behavior were attempts to "groom" them for sexual encounters years later.

Eve Peyton, 40, a former student who now works in publicity at a high school in New Orleans, said that Mr. Bailey raped her when she was a graduate student. When she was his student, he treated her as "one of his special girls," she said, attention that felt flattering and reaffirming at the time.

In June 2003, she was a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism and engaged to be married. She and Mr. Bailey both happened to be visiting New Orleans at the same time and met for drinks. Afterward, he invited her back to the place he was staying, where he kissed her, initiated oral sex, and when she squirmed away, he pinned her to the bed and forcibly had sex with her, she said. He finally stopped when she told him she wasn't using birth control, she recalled.

After he drove her to her father's house, where she was staying, Mr. Bailey said he had "wanted her" since the day they met, when she was 12, Ms. Peyton said.

She told two friends about the assault shortly after it happened but didn't go to the police, in part because she was overwhelmed and wanted to move on with her life, she said. She later began seeing a therapist with experience in sexual assault counseling.

One of her friends, Catherine Roach, who is now a professor of art history at Virginia Commonwealth University, remembers the call from Ms. Peyton that summer.

"She called me and told me that he raped her, that she told him no and he didn't stop," Ms. Roach said. "I remember that she told me that he held her down."

In an email reviewed by The Times, Mr. Bailey apologized to Ms. Peyton for his behavior days after the encounter, and asked her not to speak to others about it. She last heard from him in the summer of 2020, when Mr. Bailey wrote her again, in a message also reviewed by The Times, in which he alluded to "the awfulness on that night 17 years ago" and said he was suffering from mental illness at the time.

Today, even hearing his voice on the radio, promoting his book, is painful, Ms. Peyton said. "It seems inescapable."

Until the recent allegations emerged, Mr. Bailey led a charmed literary life. He lucked into biography when he convinced the daughter of another novelist, Richard Yates, to cooperate on an authorized biography. A book deal followed, which led to several other biographies. In 2012, Mr. Bailey approached Mr. Roth, after learning the novelist had cast off his earlier chosen biographer. Mr. Roth agreed and gave him unprecedented access to his archives and papers. On a panel, Mr. Bailey said he won Mr. Roth over by assuring the novelist that he would not take ["too prim or judgmental of a view of a man who had this florid love life."](#)

In halting the distribution of the book to retailers, Norton took a rare step to distance the company from the author. Publishers will occasionally pull or recall books over major factual inaccuracies or fabrications, but it's rare for revelations about an author's private behavior to result in a book's life cycle being cut short. Norton's response, which will impede the sales of a best-selling book, is a financial blow for the company, which paid Mr. Bailey a mid-six-figure advance, according to a person familiar with the deal.

The controversy that has engulfed Mr. Bailey erupted in part because of the publicity he has received for his Roth biography, which led some of the women accusing him of misconduct to come forward.

Some of them have noted that they were bothered not only by the praise lavished on Mr. Bailey, but by the way, in his Roth biography, that he seemed to excuse the writer's misogyny. Several literary critics seized on the fact that in the biography, Mr. Bailey brushed off Mr. Roth's mistreatment of women.

The discussions about Bailey's behavior toward his former students began to build in a private Facebook group and later spilled into public as several women left comments accusing Mr. Bailey of grooming his female middle school students on a site operated by the [blogger Ed Champion](#), which highlighted Mr. Roth's misogynistic views.

After reports of Mr. Bailey's misconduct came to light, some prominent authors and critics have distanced themselves. The writer Mary Karr, [in a tweet](#), remarked that she had just participated in an event with Mr. Bailey to discuss the Roth biography. "I wake to find Bailey credibly accused by three of his former eighth-grade students of grooming them for sex when they turned eighteen," she said. "I support any brave young woman speaking out."