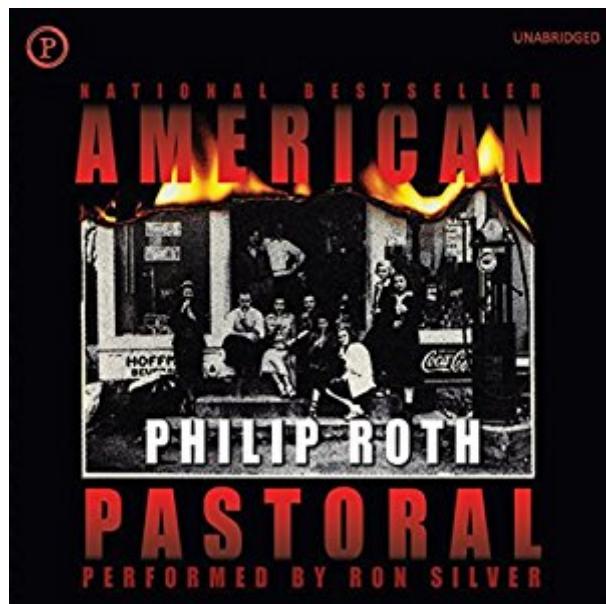


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American Pastoral



Synopsis

Soon to be a major motion picture! As the American century draws to an uneasy close, Philip Roth gives us a novel of unqualified greatness that is an elegy for all our century's promises of prosperity, civic order, and domestic bliss. Roth's protagonist is Swede Levov, a legendary athlete at his Newark high school, who grows up in the booming postwar years to marry a former Miss New Jersey, inherit his father's glove factory, and move into a stone house in the idyllic hamlet of Old Rimrock. And then one day in 1968, Swede's beautiful American luck deserts him. For Swede's adored daughter, Merry, has grown from a loving, quick-witted girl into a sullen, fanatical teenager—a teenager capable of an outlandishly savage act of political terrorism. And overnight Swede is wrenched out of the longed-for American pastoral and into the indigenous American berserk. Compulsively readable, propelled by sorrow, rage, and a deep compassion for its characters, this is Roth's masterpiece. --This text refers to the Preloaded Digital Audio Player edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

One of the knocks on this book, even from reviewers who have liked it, is that it trivializes the rebellious spirit of the 1960s through the screeching lunacy of Merry Levov. There were countless examples of logical, righteous, nonviolent protest, they argue, and by showing only the thoughtless Merry and her equally deranged companion, Rita Cohen, along with the destruction of the Newark race riots (carried out by blacks who, Swede Levov seems to think, are just being ungrateful), Philip Roth comes off as someone who missed the decade altogether, perhaps in seclusion doing

research for Portnoy's Complaint. I think, however, that Roth's one-maybe-two-dimensional portrayal of Merry and the other revolutionary forces of the '60s was precisely the point. This novel was not so much about the turbulent '60s as it was about the disintegration of the '50s. The story is narrated by Nathan Zuckerman and told through the (imagined) eyes of Swede Levov, both of whom graduated high school before 1950. Roth is not only concerned with the collapse of the Swede's American dream, but also with his assimilation into American society, his pursuit and eventual attainment of the American dream -- all typical characteristics of the '50s. The Swede had no concept of the attributes which we typically ascribe to the '60s. He was too busy worrying about how to make the perfect lady's dress glove. The reason Roth did so much research and wrote in such painstaking detail about the glove industry was to tell the reader precisely what Lou and Swede Levov's lives revolved around. Since the Swede is the only character whom we see others through, of course he isn't going to question himself for being concerned with such things as D rings and piece rates.

"American Pastoral" is a remarkable novel which can be read and enjoyed on a variety of "levels." ^M Stylistically, Philip Roth's prose glides effortlessly between passages of sheer lyricism and Hemmingway-like reality. The characters of Swede Levov, his wife, Dawn, and their daughter Merry, --as well as other characters in the novel--are sharply etched and observed. The dialogue each of the characters speak is right on target and delineates their character without the author imposing his own "voice" upon the words they speak.^M However, Roth's novel achieves the level of "art" in terms of social commentary and his view that America has somehow lost its soul and sense of direction. A decent, hardworking family--a family that has done its absolute best to raise their daughter to become the kind of person who reflects the best values our country represents--is totally destroyed when their daughter, Merry, becomes a terrorist and eventually lapses into madness. Roth's vision of the world is an extremely depressing if not a totally pessimistic one. Nothing that happens by way of historical or social events seems to make any sense. All is simply "chaos." What happens, simply "happens" and there is nothing one can do to stop the descent into a hell where nothing makes sense--where events totally overwhelm decent parents and their family's attempts to control them. ALL parents and families are not, of course, as Philip Roth describes them. But the trend away from traditional "values" and values which, apart from religion per se or political "correctness" have heretofore given our nation a sense of purpose and unity, are swiftly disappearing--as any, daily reading of contemporary headlines indicate.

I started this book with very high hopes - I'd only read one other Roth, the short and highly sarcastic

"The Breast," and I had heard that in recent years he'd turned more sober and objective. To me this meant Roth was coming of age, a voice expressing a fuller range of our hopes, fears, loves and angers. Much of "American Pastoral" satisfied this desire. Book one (of three) is a 100-or-so page, somewhat tedious prologue, where Roth's alter ego Nathan Zuckerman introduces the main character and creates a setting to present his secret story. With book two, it settles into a wonderful exploration of inner and outer lives. This central section, and most of book three, is beautifully written and reads effortlessly, making the first part feel worthwhile. By combining real world places (hint - it helps a lot to know New Jersey) and politics, with fictional characters whose lives embody the times and themes, Roth puts us directly into the drama of the story. This sounds like a cliché; but through lengthy description, we learn by stages about the conflicts inside the main character. Seymour "Swede" Levov, a handsome, Jewish industrialist and high school athletic hero who marries Dawn Dwyer, Miss New Jersey of 1949, and whose vigor and generosity of spirit bring him success in business and to a life in the affluent (and WASPish) Jersey countryside, suffers a tragic fall when his radical daughter Merry goes berserk with one murderous bombing, and then others. As she begins a life on the run, he and Dawn endure recrimination and only-partial recovery. We watch Swede in a journey through his past and his present, an apparently peaceful man who learns to accommodate the real world by devising his own reality.

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