

Review of Philip Roth's
American Pastoral
– published 1997

“Quaint Old Rimrock is in for a big surprise.” So says the sixteen year old at her high school the day before the apocalyptic explosion in the quintessential countryside that rocked her parents’ world in 1968. That’s the only evidence linking Merry Levov to the horrific turbulent 60’s. That’s it. That and the fact she disappeared and couldn’t be found for the next five years. Some families didn’t lose their kids to the war *in* Vietnam, but instead to the violence created at home. This novel epitomizes *their* story.

The meager long to be mighty in Roth’s Pulitzer Prize winning saga published in the 90’s to satisfy a longing to set the 60’s, a powerful decade in his own life, straight in his mind. Merry’s father, Swede – Seymour Irving Levov--, retells his version of the prosperity of white, privileged middle-class, much of it Jewish America and the turbulence of those bringing the war in Vietnam to America. Readers are pummeled with his precious teenage daughter Meredith’s angst that bred ruthless vulgarity and destruction.

Once again, Nathan Zuckerman, narrates as he has done in four previous Roth novels. Zuckerman idolizes Swede from afar at Weequahic High School thinking he’s going unnoticed while he’s a friend of Swede’s younger brother Jerry. Swede first calls him by his nickname Skip at a football practice and the bromance of the century almost erupted in the pants of a pre-teen. In awe of his idol Zuckerman thought the successes sports heroes and the handsome are privy to are never tainted by life’s trials and desolations. He was wrong! Very wrong. Seymour Irving Levov got his nickname in the neighborhood to separate him from other Seymours. He was a hulking blond blue-eyed tall specimen of an All-American Viking. According to Zuckerman, he was “the natural physical refinement of a star,” a star who didn’t reveal his Jewish qualities like the other Seymours, Solomons, Shawns or Stephens. More like a Swede.

Anticipating graduation in 1945 Swede joined the Marines to do combat for his country. Instead, when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima he ended up staying after boot camp on Parris Island, SC running calisthenics drills for his battalion and returned home in 1947 to go to Upsala College - after which he joined his father’s business and got rich. Bourgeois rich. Swede’s grandfather started working in a tannery after immigrating to Newark, New Jersey from the old country in 1890’s and diligently learned the complex glove making process. His son, Lou, eventually owned a glove factory and there was never a doubt his son Swede would be the third generation owner. Granddaughter Merry would have been the fourth had she taken an interest and not destroyed herself.

When Swede Levov marries an Irish Catholic beauty queen, Mary Dawn Dwyer, against his Jewish father’s better judgment their bantering and intense scrutiny of how holiday celebrations will be observed enlightens those of us interested in Jewish customs and traditions. Roth appears to intentionally insert much of his heritage into the story in ways that this curious reader appreciates. Dawn professes to have entered the local Miss Union County pageant to help her family with funding brother Danny’s college after their father has a heart attack; not for the egotistical reason of being

noticed. That title led to becoming Miss New Jersey in May 1949 at age 22 and on to the Miss America pageant which she lost to Miss Texas. We find entertaining, accurate historical details in Roth's writings. One such reference is an opportunity for the entrants to drive a Nash Rambler convertible during the contest because American Motors was a sponsor and was soon to become the company to be formed out of one of largest corporate mergers in U.S. history up until 1954.

The beautiful couple moved to Old Rimrock looking for a piece of heaven on earth to avoid being judged by their Jewish and Irish Catholic heritages; to avoid anti-Semite prejudices. Instead they got a daughter destined to ruin their bucolic existence as faux pastoral people. Unlike agrarians who raise livestock and remain nomads, Swede's Miss New Jersey of 1949 wanted to prove she wasn't just a pretty face and chose to settle down to raise beef cattle, which seems an odd, yet defiant occupation for a former beauty queen. Nonetheless, the rustic history of Old Rimrock appealed to them. "American history, the stuff you read about in books and study in school, had made its way out to tranquil, untrafficked Old Rimrock, New Jersey, to countryside where it [history] had not put in an appearance that was notable since Washington's army twice wintered in the highlands adjacent to Morristown." Out in the sticks, according to Swede's father Lou, where a hundred-and-seventy year old house on a hilly country road covered with snow would make travel to civilization difficult. A place where "fresh" history would stage a helter-skelter finale.

Quite coincidentally, an upcoming filming of scenes from this novel in a directorial debut by Ewan McGregor will be hosted by my suburbal community of Harmony, Pennsylvania where documented travel in a scouting expedition brought George Washington through in 1753, twenty years earlier than his New Jersey encampment, when he was just 21. Harmony will impersonate Old Rimrock, a town where Swede owns a hundred acre farm, "30 miles west of Newark, out past the suburbs on a back road in the sparsely habitated hills beyond Morristown, in wealthy, rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey." Harmony grew from a small sect's exodus from Germany to seek religious freedom which resulted in The Society of Harmonists' religious communal society. One industry that supported their efforts to thrive in the new frontier was a tannery. Certainly, those are two similar features that correlate with the Jewish Levov family story that Roth invents.

Determined to shake all responsibility resulting in his stuttering child's sheltered life Swede tries to comprehend how Meredith, whose nickname ironically was Merry, was transformed into a monster filled with enough hate to blow up the small town post office killing a beloved town doctor. She had grown to be an idealistic revolutionary who hated honkey America. Who influenced her? What events shaped her? Merry claims Lyndon Johnson made her do it when Swede confronted her five years after the bombing in a putrid hovel where she was in hiding. "Did you do bomb the post office?" "Yes," Merry replied. He could not believe she acted on her own and continued to beg answers to the question: Who brainwashed her? By re-tracing her past from infancy to youth he comes up with a time in 1963 when she was eleven and sat with him and Dawn watching television as a Buddhist monk self-immolated. Despite this disturbing spectacle it didn't seem possible she was affected in any psychological way to warrant becoming a bomber. Further excavating history to determine how his precocious baby girl had become a vigilante bent on destroying her family's paradise, he recalls finding an edition of *The Communist Manifesto* and writings by Angela Davis among her belongings. At one point, blurred with

anger, he was so deep into his mind games he conjured an apparition of Angela in his kitchen. She praised Merry and told how his daughter became part of the anti-imperialist movement and referred to her as a “Joan of Arc” of the movement at age 16. Swede realizes that by 1968 she had fostered a deep hatred of capitalism and as a result, also came to hate her parents who emulate the upper class that people embracing the “profit principle” could only dream about.

In moving to Old Rimrock, amongst the Protestants and gentiles, Swede was making a bold exodus from his city roots to create a life of harmony. Hoping people were willing to put aside any historical social conflicts. A place where he could revel in the American pastoral of the free, in the wide open spaces like a frontiersman. It would seem instead the desire to be perfect is replaced by a maddening echo in his head, like a verse from the song by the band Talking Heads. “*You may tell yourself, this is not my beautiful house and you may tell yourself, this is not my beautiful life.*” The story is one of immigrants’ American dreams that bring Roth to reveal his Jewishness to extreme. He leads those of us who came of age in the 60’s to revisit our attitudes about political alliances to antiwar activists. Unfortunately, at age 10, my rural roots in Western Pennsylvania obscured the misery others entrapped by the war suffered when the U.S. began sustained bombing of North Vietnam in 1965. I wish I’d been more tuned in then. It was an era of revolt in many families, colleges and communities which Roth thoroughly depicts. Swede’s daughter embraced the “plague America,” not the America he and previous generations of Levov’s had dreamed of, the American pastoral they longed for; Instead one of fury and violence, a counter pastoral, staged by his daughter. Zuckerman ponders his shattered idol’s life by asking, “Who is set up for tragedy and the incomprehensibility of suffering? Nobody. The tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy—that is every man’s tragedy.” I tend to agree with Zuckerman. We should all be taught to anticipate the worst and take pleasure in our good luck to avoid it.

As America’s heroic man of letters Philip Roth has produced a prolific library of opinions and fiction condensed into 31, possibly 32 (at the time of this writing) novels or novellas. His brilliant literary thought process recorded in volumes has drawn admirers and critics alike. Many more of the former I assume since he has quite an illustrious wealth of recognition from the likes of Pulitzer, from whom this title won acclaim in 1998- <http://www.pulitzer.org/works/1998-Fiction>, the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Patrimony* in 1991, a National Book Award for *Sabbath’s Theater* in 1995, the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1993 for *Operation Shylock*, and in 1998, *I Married a Communist* received the Ambassador Book Award of the English-Speaking Union, and in 2002 the American Academy of Arts and Letters highest award-the Gold Medal in Fiction and the list goes on. Perhaps most prestigious is the National Medal of Arts received at the White House in 1998. The elusive one he still yearns to receive is the Nobel Prize in Literature, which could come along in October 2015 if competition is not too fierce.

Roth himself has referred to *American Pastoral* as his best-written along with *Sabbath’s Theater*, perhaps due to their dissimilar subject matter and an opportunity to explore his extreme wealth of cultural reference. He has acquired decades of admirers in the literary culture class with the likes of Stephen King just recently commenting in an article about prolific novelists in a New York Times article of his interest in *American Pastoral* as, “a much finer novel than either Ms. Tartt’s “*The Goldfinch*” or Mr. Franzen’s “*Freedom*.””