



“Miss America turns bomber. Do you still blame the parents?”

A review of American Pastoral

American Pastoral is another masterpiece produced by Philip Roth. We open in familiar Roth territory: Newark, New Jersey; and an age of post-war hopefulness, a time when New York was still a city of old-world craftsmen and new-world chancers. In Newark's High School the centre of all that optimism, all that energy is represented by Seymour 'Swede' Levov: a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jew, effortless star of every sport he plays. It seems that the Swede could gain access to the nation's dreams by conventional means. So, he inherits and expands his father's glove-making business, marries Dawn Dwyer, Miss New Jersey 1949, buys a charming old house with some land around, and prepares for the simple successes to which he appears born. But, as usual in Roth's novels, nothing appears that simple.

The story is told in the voice of Roth's alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, who cherishes schoolboy memories of the Swede. When Nathan meets the Swede's brother, both of them middle-aged by now, he is informed how the Swede died in despair, and understands that there was something terrible under the surface of the Swede's perfect life. Actually, at the beginning it really seems the American pastoral dream: the Swede needs nothing more in his life than his own 100 acres, his beautiful wife, his beloved daughter Merry, and the glove factory. The only little flaw is the speech impediment – stammering – his daughter suffers from, which, according to her therapist, is an expression of her inadequacy beside her 'perfect' parents.

The pastoral dream is completely dismantled when, at the age of 16, Merry puts a bomb at the village store as a protest against the Vietnam war. The bomb kills a family friend, Merry im-

Philip Roth





mediately disappears, and hell breaks loose for the Swede. From that moment the Swede is studied in his avoidance of conflict, with the strategies by which he tries to continue to make sense of the world. His love and protection towards his wife, who in the end betrays him both with another man and by selling their house, is narrated in details through several episodes. The Swede's comfort zone of kid leather and calfskin is stripped away for him, left alone to face places of unimagined filth (this reaches its apotheosis when, overcome by the stench of the unwashed daughter he has come to rescue, he vomits in her face). As the Swede's brother later yells: "You wanted Miss America? Well, you've got her, with a vengeance she's your daughter!". Despite its insistence on the more extreme degradations of modern America, however, American Pastoral is no simple satire on the delusions of the suburban middle class; a significant part of its anger is in fact directed against the freedoms of the permissive society. Roth in his novel is able to measure what America has become against what it once seemed capable of. As a result the novel ends impossibly unresolved, ends in fact with the question 400 pages have been spent exploring: 'And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?'

(Adapted from www.theguardian.com)

ACTIVITIES

1 Read the first part of the article (up to 'perfect parents') and decide whether the following statements are true or false.

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|---|-----|---|-----|
| 1 The novel is set in California. | Ⓓ Ⓔ | 6 He inherits his father's hat factory. | Ⓓ Ⓔ |
| 2 The post-war period is marked by pessimism. | Ⓓ Ⓔ | 7 The novel is narrated by the protagonist himself. | Ⓓ Ⓔ |
| 3. The protagonist is a good-looking Jewish boy. | Ⓓ Ⓔ | 8 When the Swede died, he was completely satisfied with his life. | Ⓓ Ⓔ |
| 4 The Swede is good at sports. | Ⓓ Ⓔ | 9 The Swede is married to a beautiful woman. | Ⓓ Ⓔ |
| 5 The Swede is an unconventional young man, who wants to break the rules. | Ⓓ Ⓔ | 10 Their daughter has a speech problem . | Ⓓ Ⓔ |

2 Read the second part of the article and answer the following questions.

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|---|---|
| 1 What episode marks the end of Levov's American dream? | 5 What do you think the Swede's brother meant by saying "You wanted Miss America? Well, you've got her, with a vengeance she's your daughter!"? |
| 2 What happens to the Swede's daughter? | 6 According to the reviewer, what does the author criticize with his novel? |
| 3 How does the relationship between the Swede and his wife go on after the episode? | 7 How does the novel end? |
| 4 What happens when the Swede meets his daughter? | |