

ANALYSIS

American Pastoral (1997)

Philip Roth

(1933-)

“Sometimes even familiar writers can surprise you. Who would have predicted that Truman Capote, by then a quasi-comic presence on TV talk shows, would deliver such a poised and controlled masterpiece as *In Cold Blood*? Who would have believed that Ken Kesey would take a long enough break from hallucinogenic drugs and Merry Prankster-dom to write *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*? Who would have guessed that J. D. Salinger would live to the ripe age of 90, but stop publishing for the last 45 of those years?

And then there is the case of Philip Roth... Most people sizing up Mr. Roth’s oeuvre at the time of his 40th birthday (back in 1973) would probably have pigeonholed him as a literary representative of the sexual revolution or perhaps as a connoisseur of taboo and quasi-neurotic strains in American life. Mr. Roth had just published *The Breast*, sort of a genitalia-ized alternative to Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis,’ in which his protagonist turns into a large mammary gland. And his best known and biggest-selling book, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, did for onanism what Mario Puzo (author of the second best selling novel of 1969 behind Roth’s work) did for gangster stories. *Portnoy’s Complaint* was banned in Australia and morphed into a punchline for jokes. When Dick Cavett quipped that one of his male guests needed to cancel his appearance on his show because ‘he was suffering from Portnoy’s complaint,’ the network censors cut the witticism from the broadcast. In a memorable bon mot, Jacqueline Susanne noted her interest in meeting Roth, but added: ‘I wouldn’t want to shake his hand.’

Yet by the time we get to *American Pastoral* (1997), a different side of Roth has apparently emerged. His protagonist here is the exact opposite of what we have come to expect in our Roth heroes. Seymour ‘Swede’ Levov is a high school sports legend who has grown up to embody almost every aspect of the American dream. He is married to a former Miss New Jersey, operates a successful business, and comes across as a bastion of propriety and stability—almost a poster boy for happy and uncomplicated Jewish assimilation into the mainstream of American life. The book is narrated by Roth’s most famous character outside of Alexander Portnoy, Nathan Zuckerman, a writer and fictional alter ego for Philip Roth. Levov was a boyhood hero of Zuckerman’s, a role model due to his smooth navigation through almost every arena for male competitiveness, from the sports field to the business world. Zuckerman is intensely curious about Levov, and wants to find out what this type of triumphant pastoral life is really like.

Zuckerman is given only a few firsthand glimpses behind Levov’s smooth façade—and these encounters tell him little. It is not until he runs into the Swede’s younger brother at a 45th year high school reunion that Zuckerman begins to understand the story behind the story. He comes to learn how the man who apparently ‘had it all’ became a tragic victim of circumstances beyond his control, facing challenges that no amount of on-court footwork or off-court self-discipline would overcome.

Much of the unsettling quality of this book derives from the mismatch between Zuckerman’s entrenched image of the Swede, and the realities of Levov’s life. ‘I was wrong,’ Zuckerman announces at one point. ‘Never more mistaken about anyone in my life.’ Few novels are more acute in revealing our propensity for seeing what we want to see, and how reluctantly we recalibrate our vision in the face of new learnings. In this regard, *American Pastoral* joins those exquisite fictions of the past—*Emma*, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* and *The Golden Bowl* come to mind—that force us into painful examination of our stubborn insistence on deceiving ourselves.

Seymour (the Swede) Masin, the prototype for Swede Levov in *American Pastoral*, was still alive when Roth’s novel was published (although he subsequently died in 2005). Masin, who attended Weequahic High School almost a decade before Roth, was New Jersey shot put champion, captain of his college soccer

team, and selected as the best basketball player in the state. Masin himself noted both the uncharacteristic aspect of this Roth protagonist, as well as its vivid realism: ‘Roth portrayed me as a decent, good guy, which I think is unusual for him to do.’ Masin’s life evolved differently than Levov, but the real-world Swede adds: ‘It’s amazing, but almost everything in the book I would have done if I’d been in those situations.’

The fictional Swede Levov, as it turns out, will find his pastoral enjoyment of the American dream rudely interrupted by both political and personal events. Roth adroitly mixes historical events into his story, and though he has often found a way to infuse his narratives with the resonance of period news items, he outdoes himself in this instance. Levov watches on hopelessly as his daughter Merry moves from a philosophical opposition to the Vietnam War into more and more volatile reactions. In time, she embraces violence as a means of countering violence. She is linked to a bombing at a post office that kills an innocent bystander, and goes underground to avoid arrest.

Levov’s attempts to find his daughter leave him exposed to manipulation and exploitation. This once confident man, a walking and talking exponent of the American Dream, is now enmeshed in the worst aspects of the American nightmare of the turbulent 1960s. But Roth tightens his noose even more. Levov needs to deal with an unfaithful wife, his precarious health, race riots that impact his glove factory, and—most horrifically—a reunion with his daughter that only serves to plunge him more deeply into panic and confusion.

This is a brilliant novel on a grand scale. You can marvel here at the most delicate effects—Levov’s visitor tour of his glove factory could almost serve as a case study in how a great novelist handles the smallest details with loving precision—but it is the big picture vision that you will remember long after you have finished this panoramic book. Other novelists may celebrate the American dream or dismiss it a ruse, but Roth avoids both extremes in a nuanced work that deconstructs our ideals and exposes their vulnerabilities, while still keeping them intact. And if this doesn’t add up to *The Great American Novel* (which is coincidentally is the name of the book Roth wrote the year he turned forty), it gets pretty darn close.”

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