

# Books

## No place to hide: Roth on the tsunami that was '60s America

By MATTHEW BUDMAN  
Special to The Times

**A**merican Pastoral is Philip Roth's boldest attempt to create The Great American Novel since, well, since *The Great American Novel*, back in 1973. And if the book doesn't encompass the whole of human experience, or even the whole of American experience, it certainly crams more into its 432 pages than would have seemed possible.

Roth is our greatest novelist, consistently daring, aiming squarely at the submerged discomforts of middle America, of well-meaning, right-thinking people who are trying their best to do the right thing. He digs deeper under the skin than anyone, and even his failures — like 1995's skin-crawler *Sabbath's Theater* — are interesting. *American Pastoral* is one of his successes, a major novel about one of America's crucial turning points, depicted through the disintegration of a country, a city, a family, and a man, all torn apart from the inside.

Never content with convention, Roth sets up *American Pastoral* by bringing back alter ego Nathan Zuckerman, famous novelist and hero of several previous Roth books. Minus prostate, Zuckerman revisits his youth by attending his 45th high school reunion where "the supreme delight of the afternoon" is "simply finding that you haven't yet made it onto the 'In Memoriam' page."

And he finds himself intrigued by the memory of one-time high school sports star Seymour "Swede" Levov, who had embodied the all-American aspirations of Newark's Jews "during the patriotic war years," but whose life has turned sour on a grand scale.

IN THE SPACE of a few sentences — "I am thinking of the Swede's great fall and of how he must have imagined that it was founded on some failure of his own responsibility. There is where it must begin. . . ." — Zuckerman decides to write a novel about Levov, and all of a sudden we're in the middle of it, in 1973. Interest-

### AMERICAN PASTORAL

By Philip Roth  
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ingly, and in typical Roth fashion, Zuckerman never returns to wrap up his story.

Grown into "a large, smooth, optimistic American," successfully running his father's glove factory, the Swede ruminates on his fortune and his country: "Got to marry a beautiful girl named Dwyer. Got to run a business my father built, a man whose own father couldn't speak English. Got to live in the prettiest spot in the world. . . . Why, he lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin. All the pleasures of his younger years were American pleasures, all that success and happiness had been American. . . Everything he loved was here."

But he and the beautiful girl named Dwyer (indeed, beautiful enough to have been a Miss New Jersey), produced a tangible reminder of their failures: a frustrated, stuttering daughter named Merry, whom the Swede's brother Jerry calls "the angriest kid in America."

Merry comes of age during a time of American dissolution, the 1960s, and the Levovs suffer the same breakdown as the country they love. Merry channels her teenage angst and rage by rejecting her parents' lives and embracing radical activism; in 1968, at 16, she rigs a bomb which blows up the local post office, killing a man. She goes underground.

The Swede is doomed to spend the rest of his life speculating on how he had triggered the catastrophe: "Once the inexplicable had begun, the torment of self-examination never ended."

AT ZUCKERMAN'S reunion, classmate Jerry ruminates: "There was no way back for my brother from



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that bomb. That bomb detonated his life. His perfect life was over. That's why they had it in for him, the daughter and her friends. He was so in love with his own good luck, and they hated him for it. . . . It was him they were really out to get. And they did it. They got him. The bomb might as well have gone off in their living room. The violence done to his life was awful. . . . The struggle of his life was to bury this thing. But could he? How? How could a big, sweet, agreeable putz like my brother be expected to deal with this bomb? One day life started laughing at him and it never let up."

This type of monologue, common to Roth's writing, serves his cut-to-the-core characters well: More than virtually any other author, Roth hands the reins to the people he creates and lets them run unchecked. They hold forth at length and are granted page after page of unrestrained dissertation. The effect is almost theatrical, with soliloquies broken only by brief questions and interjections from other characters. Most are riveting, though extended rants and passages on glovemaking and the early history of Morris County, N.J., will frus-

trate some readers, and a few long set pieces — like the Swede's father's inquisition of his Irish-Catholic fiancée — feel appended, as though there were no truly appropriate place for them.

*American Pastoral* isn't nearly as grim as its subject matter might suggest. As always, Roth's prose is stylistically accomplished and distinctive, thick with irony and humor beginning with the book's title, a reference to an archaic type of literature that contrasted the simple country life with corrupt city life.

The novel's conclusion will leave you breathless, enervated, unsatisfied, unresolved. The sheer breadth of what Roth has undertaken — Jews, beauty pageants, race, Watergate, infidelity — defies a tidy wrap. Perhaps the loose ends are intentional, symbolic of America's vain, persistent efforts to find closure after the divisiveness of Vietnam. (Indeed, the Heaven's Gate massacre is an uncomfortable reminder that every generation produces dotting, well-off parents whose kids inexplicably go bad.)

THE NOVEL'S final section, "Paradise Lost" (the first two, "Paradise Remembered" and "The Fall," also borrow playfully from Milton), sees the Swede contemplating the ruins of his perfect life after finding Merry, five years after the bombing, living in riot-ravaged Newark, an emaciated member of an ascetic cult, "a travestied mock-up of a human being."

The death blow to his attempts to preserve a semblance of his former existence comes when he goes home to suffer through the ultimate stilted, middle-class formality: the dinner party. "[H]e returned from the savagery of where he'd been to the solid and orderly ludicrousness of a dinner party," Roth writes. "That's what was left to hold him together — a dinner party. All there was for him to cling to as the entire enterprise of his life continued careering toward destruction — a dinner party."

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