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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

American Pastoral
by
Philip Roth
(New York: Vintage Books, 1997)

Author:

In 1997 Philip Roth won the Pulitzer Prize for *American Pastoral*. In 1998 he received the National Medal of Arts at the White House and in 2002 the highest award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Gold Medal in Fiction, previously awarded to John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and Saul Bellow, among others. He has twice won the National Book Award and the National Books Critics Circle Award. He has won the PEN/Faulkner Award three times. In 1005 *The Plot Against America* received the Society of American Historians' prize for "the outstanding historical novel on an American theme for 2003-200." In 2006 Roth received PEN's most prestigious prize, the PEN/Nabokov Award for a "body of work...of enduring originality and consummate craftsmanship." Roth is the only living American writer to have his work published in a comprehensive, definitive edition by the Library of America. The last of the eight volumes is scheduled for publication in 2013. [From the book jacket]

Summary:

As the American century draws to an uneasy close, Philip Roth gives us a novel on 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 past and into the indigenous American berserk. Compulsively readable, propelled by sorrow, rage, and a deep compassion for its characters, this is Roth's masterpiece. [From the book jacket]

Questions:

1. What is the effect of being told the story through Zuckerman? Are we led to believe aspects of the story are a projection of Zuckerman's fantasies about a character who caught his imagination?

2. Zuckerman sees the Swede's life as an illustration of the Jewish "desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals" [p. 85]. How does Roth illustrate this thought? The Swede tries very hard to form himself as this ideal person. Does the story imply that such a life, such a reinvention of the self, is ultimately impossible?
3. There could hardly be two more different personality types than the Swede and his brother, Jerry. What do Jerry's positive traits tell us about the Swede's negative ones? Why have the two of them chosen such different paths?
4. Does Lou Levov appear to be a benign or a negative influence on his sons' lives? How, if at all, has he contributed in making the Swede what he is?
5. The passionate kiss that the Swede gave Merry when she was eleven was a once-in-a-lifetime transgression. "Never in his entire life, not as a son, a husband, a father, even as an employer, had he given way to anything so alien to the emotional rules by which he was governed" [p. 91]. Later the Swede fears that this moment precipitated the infinite anger of her teenage years. Is this conclusion erroneous? What does it reveal?
6. The Swede believes that the political radicalism professed by Merry and Rita Cohen is nothing but "angry, infantile egoism thinly disguised as identification with the oppressed" [p. 134]. Is the answer as simple as that? How genuine is Merry's identification with the oppressed? Are her political arguments convincing?
7. What effect did the experience of watching, as a child, the self-immolation of the Buddhist monks have upon Merry? Does her reaction seem unusual to you? Did it affect what happened to her later?
8. What effect do all the details about the glove trade have upon the narrative? How do they illuminate the story?
9. Do you believe Merry when she says that she doesn't know Rita Cohen? If she is telling the truth, who might Rita Cohen be? What is her function within the story?
10. The Swede planned his life to be picture perfect, and he lived that life until it turned dark and violent. Was his life the essential American Dream, or was it a nightmare rather than a pastoral? What comment does the novel's title make upon the story it tells?
11. What are Merry's feelings for America? What are her feelings for her parents? How are the two connected?

12. Merry's stuttering began to disappear when she worked with dynamite. What emotional purpose did Merry's stuttering serve, and why was she able to leave the handicap behind her when she left home?
13. When the Swede calls Jerry to ask for his advice, he is treated to a diatribe. "What's the matter with you?" Jerry asks. "You're acceding to her the way you acceded to your father, the way you have acceded to everything in your life" [p. 273]. Is Jerry right? Should the Swede force Merry to come home? Why does the Swede refuse Jerry's offer to come get Merry himself?
14. Why does Merry, when she becomes a Jain, choose to settle in the neighborhood of her father's factory in Newark?
15. Does Dawn, in reinventing herself after Merry's disappearance, seem ruthless to you, or do you sympathize with her struggle for personal survival? When she tells Bill Orcutt that she always hated the Old Rimrock house, is she telling the truth? And is she telling the truth when she claims she is glad that she didn't become Miss America?
16. Describing his brother, Jerry says, "In one way he could be conceived as completely banal and conventional. An absence of negative values and nothing more. Bred to be dumb, built for convention, and so on" [p. 65]. Is this how you see Swede Levov by the end of the novel? Does he depart from banality and convention?
17. "His great looks, his larger-than-lifeness, his glory, our sense of his having been exempted from all self-doubt by his heroic role--that all these manly properties had precipitated a political murder made me think of the compelling story...of Kennedy" [p. 83]. In what ways do *American Pastoral's* political metaphors reflect the story of mid-century America? Why might they be presented through a Kennedy-like figure?
18. The Swede "had learned the worst lesson that life can teach--that it makes no sense." What leads him to this conclusion? Did his life in fact make no sense?

[From Random House, Inc.]

Further Reading:

Ice Haven. Daniel Clowes. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005.

Humboldt's Gift. Saul Bellow. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

Middle Passage. Charles Johnson. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

The Great American Novel. Philip Roth. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973.