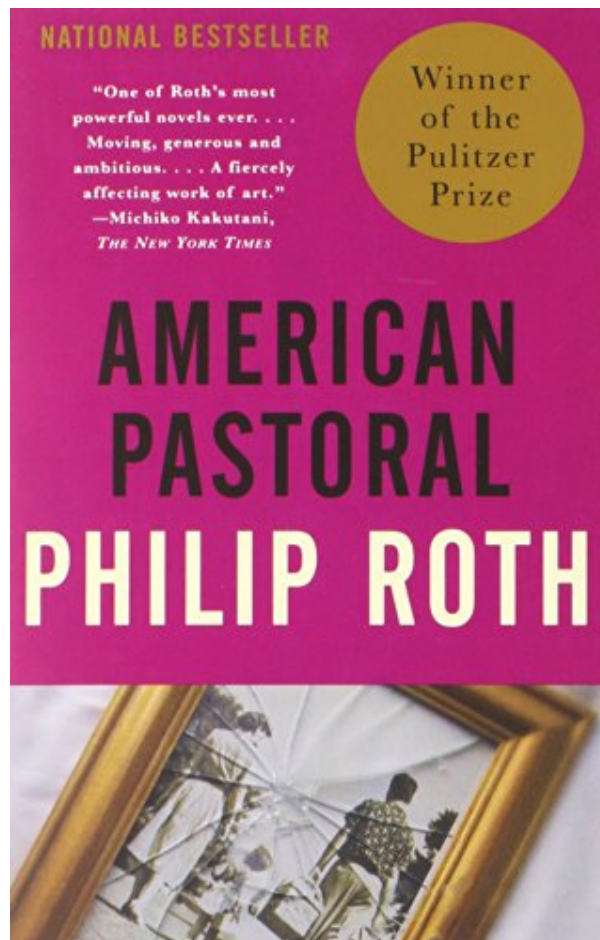


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Here is Philip Roth's masterpiece—an elegy for the American century's promises of prosperity, civic order, and domestic bliss. Roth's protagonist is Swede Levov, a legendary athlete at his Newark high school, who grows up in the booming postwar years 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 pastoral and into the indigenous American berserk. Compulsively readable, propelled by sorrow, rage, and a deep compassion for its characters, *American Pastoral* gives us Philip Roth at the height of his powers.

- Sales Rank: #5310 in Books
- Published on: 1998-02-03
- Released on: 1998-02-03
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.99" h x .90" w x 5.20" l, .75 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 423 pages

## Amazon.com Review

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1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Certainly Roth is too smart for his own good and seems to have a ...

By Leonard Bolton

Disappointing in several ways.

Certainly Roth is too smart for his own good and seems to have a strong desire to be weird and outre, rather than penetrating – so much so that there is a lot of drizzle here but not much rain. For a start if the writer were half as good at describing how people come about as he is at how gloves are made this would have been a great book, one that would actually deserve a Pulitzer. I think it got the latter because those who decide such things wanted to make sure everyone knew that they followed along with Pastoral. The book is full of slide-in agenda so maybe that was what they liked.

But no matter, I don't think Roth really gets the 60s and the seismic shift between the GIs and boomers, who although the same in terms of nationality, blood, location, etc., came from totally different circumstances and thus became totally different people. One raised in privation, depression, global hostility and where the next meal was coming from, hence had a survival-critical mindset, and one raised in provision, prosperity, peace and largesse, hence survival solved. One without choice, internally driven by external trouble, and one externally provided for, looking for trouble and finding it internally. We all have to have a game don't we, whether it's depression and Japanese or not a cloud in the sky – and circumstances make us decide which game it will be, whether it's about our own survival or, as in Merry's case, about someone else's. She could afford what the GIs couldn't – idealism, and is thereby driven by the old vision of to get an omelet you have to break the eggs, but as usual with Left-wing solutions you get no further than broken eggs. Roth's repetitive side-swipes against the political Right reveals that he has more in common with Merry than he would ever admit; he uses the pen, she uses bombs.

Roth is not out of his depth on writing but he is on cause and effect which is what the 60s chasm is really

about – a generation on one side, another on the other, but he's obviously as mystified as his hero on the issue. Is that the point of the book? I don't know, but he's big on effects, which are cited in the extreme here, but not on causes, where he's as shallow as the Swede in fact.

A long drizzle here but, as is usually the case with drizzle, not much to see.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

beautiful and moving (but not sentimental!) elegy for america's unfulfilled promise

By Eichendorff

I'm an American-German dual national about to return to my native Germany after 21 years in the United States. During my last couple of months in the U.S., I wanted to read a novel that somehow captured the essence of America and was truly "about" America. So, naturally, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Roth novel called "American Pastoral" came to mind. And I was not disappointed--this novel felt incredibly authentic, and it expressed with poetic intensity and narrative drama something very real and palpable about what this nation is and what became of it between 1945 and 1975 (endpoint of the main narrative) and 1997 (narrative present from which the main narrative is told).

What made the novel particularly moving for me was the rich realism: so many details resonated with me. E.g., one of the forlorn streets of 1970s Newark, where two lonely London plane-trees have survived from the days when these typical old-fashioned shade trees were cared for and treasured, when they sheltered pedestrians from the sun in an age when people would still walk the streets of their town. This image of the lone surviving plane-trees captures the death of pedestrian culture as well as the death of the kind of caring, stewardship, and craftsmanship that once pervaded every aspect of American life. I was reminded of the streets of Saint Louis, Missouri, where the sight of a few towering old plane-trees on an otherwise blighted block would sometimes speak to me eloquently of a beauty that has been lost.

Or there's the high school athletics and the culture of school pride and the dime novels about baseball heroes, the chicken cacciatore, the Polish, Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrant families with their different traditions and cuisines, the Old World Catholicism gradually watering down from one generation to the next, the sterility of a faux-rural atmosphere in an exurban area increasingly dominated by all-American car and television culture, a "countryside" where the old genuine folkways are lost forever, the culture of beauty pageants, the obsessive consumption of news, the noise and din and workings of a traditional factory in pre-Rust Belt America, the devastating pressures of globalization, and more. All of it deeply familiar to me, from the tales my American grandparents would tell me about their own factory days, or even from my own experience, and from my wanderings through the old declining cities of the Midwest, which I so love (and which, in some ways, have a lot in common with the declining New Jersey towns depicted in this novel).

I was hoping this novel would not wallow in clichés about the supposedly brainlessly conformist 1940s and '50s, and it didn't--the era is not represented as particularly repressed, and its optimism, cultural coherence and relative "innocence" are explored with complex subtlety and with an awareness that the seismic shifts of change were already under way even then. The novel is a frank, honest, sincere, unsentimental elegy for the loss of American hopes and dreams, for an emerging American culture that disintegrated before it fully came into its own, and for all of those formerly proud industrial cities and formerly quaint rural towns that lost their souls and character in the course of the 20th century.

The language is poetic and ravishing and carries you along with its vibrant rhythm, sweep and intensity. It is less lavish than, e.g. the poetic language of Updike, but that is not a defect--in fact, Roth feels more grounded, more precise, in some ways. And he never appears to ramble--despite its length of over 400 pages, the novel feels tightly and purposefully constructed, unlike the self-indulgently rambling Updike novel "Rabbit is Rich," for example.



The 1960s are seen very critically--and, quite frankly, it is refreshing to see the revolutionary spirit of the era not being idealized. And yet, the novel does not come across as reactionary--in some ways, the novel does not let the preceding era off the hook for causing the explosiveness of the 1960s...

Incredible novel! One of the truly memorable ones of the late 20th century, I would say. If time chooses wisely, this novel will be among the surviving texts we still read in 150 years...

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

An important book.

By Roadhouse

A very difficult book to comment on. The literary force of the language and dialogue, not to mention the social issues, are undeniable. The book chronicles life as an compromising misery, a dirge. Everyone and everything is embodies futility, frustration and fecklessness. The only character who exhibits any form of constancy is the "Swede"s" father; he rarely wavers from the certainty that he is right about everything and his duty to express his sadness about that in serial lamentations. In the end, he gets nothing but a fork in the face for his troubles.

Many reviewers have expressed disappointment in the ending which proffers no resolution of any of the book's deep cutting conflicts. I, too, was let down. I felt entitled to an "ending" because I had stayed the course and read through all the pain and suffering of these characters. I thought there would be some relief from the book's unremitting pessimism. Not a glimmer of it. Perhaps, Mr. Roth is asserting that pessimism is the only sensible viewpoint and that nothing gets resolved. Things only decay, like Newark, like these people.

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