

# *American Pastoral*: A film version of Philip Roth's novel

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*Directed by Ewan McGregor; screenplay by John Romano, based on the novel by Philip Roth*

"Is it not a rare merit to know how to take the measure of one's epoch?"—Balzac

*American Pastoral* is an adaptation of Philip Roth's 1997 novel of the same title. Australian director Philip Noyce (*Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Quiet American*) was long associated with efforts to get a film version of Roth's novel made. When Noyce finally dropped out (for unknown reasons), Scottish actor Ewan McGregor, who also plays the lead role, took over the directing responsibility. This is his first opportunity to direct a feature film.

*American Pastoral*, film and novel, follows the life and eventual terrible misfortune of Seymour "Swede" Levov (McGregor), the son of a glove manufacturer in Newark, in the 1960s and 1970s. The Swede obtained his nickname, in Roth's words, from his "anomalous face," The "insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blonde born into our [Jewish] tribe."

Both book and film employ a framing device. When he learns of the Swede's death from cancer in 1995 at 68, Nathan Zuckerman (David Straithairn in McGregor's film), a character who appears in numerous Roth novels and often serves as a sort of *alter ego* for the author, sets out to uncover Levov's tragic story. Zuckerman serves as our guide and narrator.

The Swede, we learn, fully embraced (and symbolized) the promise of postwar America. A star athlete and "golden boy" in high school, idolized by fellow students and apparently by everyone in his neighborhood, Levov seems destined to lead a charmed existence. He takes over the successful glove-making business from his father, Lou (Peter Riegert), and marries a former Miss New Jersey, an Irish Catholic beauty, Dawn Dwyer (Jennifer Connelly). They have a blonde-haired daughter, Meredith or "Merry" (played by three actresses, the final one being Dakota Fanning), and move into their dream home, a large stone house, in "tranquil, untrafficked" (Roth) Old Rimrock, New Jersey. Dawn even decides, as a hobby, to raise cattle.

Merry, however, proves a difficult child. For one thing, she stutters badly. A therapist suggests the girl is intimidated by her good-looking and successful parents, by her beautiful mother in particular. To win attention, to drive Dawn crazy, to manipulate her "perfectionist family," she stutters. When the Swede points out to the therapist that Merry is made miserable by her stammering, the doctor replies, "The benefits may outweigh the disadvantages."

All sorts of emotions are swirling around in the Levov family. In one disturbing scene, the 10- or 11-year-old Merry turns to her father and says, "Kiss me, daddy. Kiss me the way you k-k-k-kiss mother."

As she grows older, under conditions of the growing, homicidal US involvement in Vietnam, Merry's disharmony with her surroundings and family takes on a more pronounced political coloring. As a young girl, in 1963, she is traumatized by television images of a Buddhist monk in Saigon setting himself on fire in protest against the US-backed, South

Vietnamese government. "Doesn't anybody care?" she wonders out loud. A few years later, she screams at President Lyndon B. Johnson when he appears on the television screen, "Fucking liar!"

Meanwhile, Newark is disintegrating, economically and socially. Large-scale rioting erupts in 1967, and the Swede and one of his black employees do what they can to prevent the company's building from being torched. Merry, still only a teenager, is more and more restive (and abusive) at home. She begins making forays into New York City, where she evidently meets with "extremist" radicals of one stripe or another. Back in Old Rimrock, she rails against her parents for their wealth and self-satisfaction. Her mother says simply, "She hates me." Shockingly, in February 1968, Merry plants a bomb in the local post office that kills a man.

The girl goes into hiding from the police and FBI. The Swede looks everywhere for her, to no avail. The ensuing pressures damage both he and his wife. Dawn has a nervous breakdown, and, ultimately, an affair.

Five years later, the Swede finds Merry, now a follower of the ancient Indian religion, Jainism, which preaches non-violence, non-attachment to material possessions and suppression of all desire and will. She lives in filthy, dangerous conditions in an abandoned building in Newark's inner city. Her father tells Merry that "you have taken punishment into your own hands," and that the government would not have treated her so badly. He beseeches her to change her conditions, but she is prepared to accept with utter submissiveness whatever fate has in store for her. The perfect postwar existence envisioned by the Swede and his wife has become an unbearable nightmare.

John Romano's screenplay and McGregor's film use only a portion of Roth's expansive novel. They concentrate on the Swede's refusal, no matter what the circumstances and no matter how insane his daughter seems, to give up on Merry. McGregor and Fanning are moving in their final scenes.

This film version of *American Pastoral* does not delve deeply into American life and discontent in the 1960s. It tends to take events such as the Vietnam War, the Newark riots, the general crisis of the inner cities, the decline of American manufacturing, Weathermen-type terrorism and other momentous developments largely for granted. They are little more than the scaffolding on which the film attempts to hang its father-daughter love-tragedy.

Since the dramatic social events are hollowed out for the most part, drained of their greatest significance, it is not surprising that the results on screen are limited, generally humdrum and often unpersuasive. It does not help matters that McGregor is a talented but somewhat passive actor, and that he has brought that passivity to his directing. *American Pastoral* is oddly flat and uninvolved for the most part, despite the convulsions it represents.

The performers do their best. Connelly is fine as the well-meaning, beleaguered wife and mother. She has become a much better actress. Peter Riegert is amusing as businessman Lou Levov, "one impossible bastard,"

as his other son, Jerry (Rupert Evans), describes him in the novel. Fanning is very good in those sequences that make sense. McGregor is weaker than usual, but one can imagine that directing his first film must have made serious demands on him. He never strikes one as a Jewish manufacturer from Newark, Nordic-looking or otherwise, nor does the film as a whole smack much of the city or the era.

But *American Pastoral* is not generally successful because of another, more elemental problem, the novel itself and the fact that it does not genuinely hold together.

For the most part, *American Pastoral* is a wonderfully written, rich, funny and deeply sad work. Roth is at the top of his game here. A host of characters make their appearance, and most of them receive humane and understanding treatment, even tenderness, when that is possible. He writes persuasively about relations between the sexes, between the generations, between Jews and Catholics, between blacks and whites. He writes about love and friendship.

Roth writes about many things, including amusingly/painfully about the difficulty of ever getting *other people* right: “You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance, as untanklike as you can be, sans cannon and machine guns and steel plating half a foot thick; you come at them unmenacingly on your own ten toes instead of tearing up the turf with your caterpillar treads, take them on with an open mind, as equals, man to man, as we used to say, and yet you never fail to get them wrong. You might as well have the brain of a tank. ... And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of *other people*, which gets bled of the significance we think it has and takes on instead a significance that is ludicrous, so ill-equipped are we all to envision one another’s interior workings and invisible aims? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you.”

One might argue that Roth’s novel is a profound book about nearly everything except its central subject, postwar American life.

The book simply doesn’t add up. Merry as a character doesn’t add up. It’s not good enough to make her “the monster daughter,” “the angry, rebarbative spitting-out daughter.” The Swede complacently imagines that he can pick up and leave Newark and live in the semi-countryside, with his beauty queen wife, and raise a perfect child, and that everything will go on like that forever. Instead, according to Roth, “the daughter and the decade [the 1960s]” end up “blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking.” The daughter “transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counter pastoral—into the indigenous American berserk.”

The Swede is “our Kennedy,” a man “whose discontents were barely known to himself,” a man awakened “in middle age to the horror of self-reflection. All that normalcy interrupted by murder.” However, it is never entirely clear whether the Swede, in some sense, “deserves” his fate, because he is so deluded and misguided about life, or whether he has simply been unfortunate enough to spawn a psychopath.

In any event, what is this “indigenous American berserk”? Roth won’t agree of course, but what seem to him entirely mad acts of individual violence are nothing more, in the end, than particular expressions of the savagery of social relations as a whole in America. The “most democratic

republic” has always generated the most ruthless class struggle, and features a ruling elite that is essentially criminal from head to toe. It is official, everyday, state-sponsored and state-organized violence that powerfully communicates itself and sways the most vulnerable members of American society.

The novel passes lightly over the bloody Newark riot of July 1967, which lasted for six days and brought the National Guard onto the city’s streets. The upheaval is largely seen from the standpoint of the small businessman who fears his windows will be smashed. Roth has the right to adopt whatever point of view he likes, but can he see no connection between the ferocity of the riot, whether he “approves” of it or not, and the general state of American society? (Or was this simply more of the “American berserk”?) Was the turmoil an aberration, a “race riot”—or an expression, occurring in one of the most economically devastated industrial cities, of the real state of things in the country? And social inequality is far deeper and economic decline far more advanced today than in 1967.

Roth waxes indignant at Merry “the murderer.” His attitude toward her is extreme, almost violent. Her actions in the novel are certainly indefensible. But the Weather Underground and similar organizations, disoriented and politically bankrupt, managed to kill a handful of people (including several of their own members) over half a dozen years. The US government and military, on the other hand, murdered 3 million to 4 million Vietnamese and wounded or maimed millions more; destroyed countless villages and communities in massacres such as the one in My Lai; dropped 8 million tons of bombs (more than twice the amount dropped on Europe and Asia in World War II); used 20 million gallons of herbicide, including Agent Orange; shot napalm, which generates temperatures of 1,500°F to 2,200°F, from flame-throwers ...

Roth, born in 1933, was shaped by the Cold War, anti-communism, illusions in American democracy and economic might more than he may realize. He did not permit himself in writing *American Pastoral* to come nearly close enough to the anger and shame that masses of young people in particular felt about the unspeakable crimes committed in their names—and, yes, some did nearly go mad over it.

Sadly, Roth took the easy way out in his often remarkable novel and turned Merry into a one-dimensional madwoman. This was Roth’s “bit of the [liberal-]phalistine’s tail.”



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