



## **The American Trilogy: American Pastoral / I Married a Communist / The Human Stain**

*Philip Roth*

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## **The American Trilogy: American Pastoral / I Married a Communist / The Human Stain Details**

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## **From Reader Review The American Trilogy: American Pastoral / I Married a Communist / The Human Stain for online ebook**

### **Helene Coorsh says**

I forgot how beautifully Roth writes and creates a story. The whole time I'm reading it, however, I feel that I'm not clever enough or smart enough to get all of the meanings and themes that thread through this book. I would have to read it again to delve deeper. So much to think about. A good discussion book.

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### **Daniel Palevski says**

“All that we don’t know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes as knowing.”

Nothing was more appropriate leading into the Fourth of July as ‘American Pastoral.’ An apparent commentary on the Jeffersonian agrarian, democratic ideal, the story of ‘The Swede’ Levov proposes that the ideal - the shining beacon on the hill - is never as pristine as it seems.

“Why shouldn’t I be where I want to be? Why shouldn’t I be with who I want to be? Isn’t that what this country’s all about? I want to be where I want to be and I don’t want to be where I don’t want to be. That’s what being an American is - isn’t it? “

‘I Married a Communist’ is a story entrenched in what can be the best of America as well as the worst. A couple of rags-to-riches stories - Zelda and Lex - emerge out of the Great Depression, the earliest days of Hollywood and the glory of radio days, only to find themselves taken down in a stripping down of cultural facades, accumulated masks and fall victim to McCarthyism.

‘The Human Stain,’ finally, tells a story of what it is to live in this shining story of America. Like the first story, nothing is as seems, yet we are all unsurprisingly aware of this disconnect and we continue to live it, indulging ourselves both in the fantasies but also in the undercover truisms.

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### **Larry says**

These three books (American Pastoral, I Married a Communist, and The Human Stain) all deal with how the terrible burdens of lies and secrets destroy peoples lives. They evoked many seemingly contradictory emotions in me. I loved Roth's lyrical evocations of growing up in East Coast urban Jewish enclaves between the wars and his often very romantic depictions of the rugged rural landscapes of upstate New York. I thought his portraits of men (and sometimes women) struggling to find meaning in lives filled with contradictions and duplicity were compelling. On the other hand, his cardboard caricatures of feminists and the New Left infuriated me. He has real sympathy for the working class partisans of Old Left, even if he portrays them as wrong-headed, but little empathy for the privileged daughters (in particular) of the New Left who also fought for a better world. He also has zero empathy for poor blacks trapped in urban poverty. In fact, he blames them for the collapse of Newark. Roth is a good writer, but not a great novelist because he seems unable to empathically portray people with whom he fundamentally disagrees.

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### **Megan says**

Each book is a story separate from the others, though the narrator Nathan Zuckerman is a sort of pseudo-character walking through a dozen or so of Roth's books, not excluding these three. Roth's writing is as good as I've found, and his subjects are my subjects, American subjects: the Vietnam war, the Cold War, Judaism in America...

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### **Darby Dixon III says**

I blogged a bit here: <http://tdaoc.org/2018/01/14/2018-002-...>

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### **Alan says**

This handsome volume from the consistently high-quality Library of America series brings together three of Philip Roth's later Nathan Zuckerman novels—although Roth's fictional doppelgänger is much more self-effacing here than in *Zuckerman Unbound*. Older and wearier, Zuckerman here just plays observer, a sounding board for three intense character studies of three very different American men: Seymour "the Swede" Levov, in *American Pastoral*; Ira Ringold, in *I Married a Communist*; and Coleman Silk, in *The Human Stain*.

This edition has continuous pagination; page numbers for the quotations offered here therefore do not indicate the length of each individual work.

#### **American Pastoral** (read 7/18/2012)

*American Pastoral* is relentlessly elegaic... It is in outline (though by no means in specifics) a real American Beauty of a novel, as one could perhaps have guessed from the deceptively peaceful title. Roth uses beautiful prose on increasingly ugly things, dissected scientifically and with acute discernment—but also with world-weary sympathy. The recurring word "duteously" is—well, I don't think it's really a word, but at the same time it's the *only* word for the Swede, a character "who, like most other men, endeavors to secure for himself a life beyond the reach of history's sweep, bound to and by a business, a family, and the greater society's shared ideals." (from the Notes, p.1082). How the Swede fails at this endeavor is the plot of American Pastoral; *that* he fails, though, is the universal experience.

"Even a monster has to be from somewhere—even a monster needs parents. But parents don't need monsters."

—Jerry to Swede, p.262

Zuckerman—Roth—knows better than to be distant, and his analyses often struck chords directly from my

own heart. For example,

As a brother:

[...]it's no wonder that the shards of reality one person will cherish as a biography can seem to someone else who, say, happened to have eaten some ten thousand dinners at the very same kitchen table, to be a willful excursion into mythomania.

—p.54

And as a father:

Memories particularly of when they weren't being what parents are nine-tenths of the time—the taskmasters, the examples, the moral authorities, the nags of pick-that-up and you're-going-to-be-late, keepers of the diary of her duties and routines—memories, rather, of when they found one another afresh, beyond the tensions between parental mastery and inept childish uncertainty, of those moments of respite in a family's life when they could reach one another in calm.

—p.189

American Pastoral ends with an ending like life itself—and that's no ending at all, really, just a caesura, a final moment of drama, a piece of the seamless whole.

### **I Married a Communist** (read 7/23/2012)

More complex than one might think from its inflammatory title, *I Married a Communist* digs deeply into the darkest parts of the American dream, the Red scare of the mid-Twentieth Century... but that's not all. Never doctrinaire (though many of its characters are), this book examines all sides of America's flirtation with Communism—and its eventual subjugation by capitalists instead—through the perspective of decades later and the objectivity of narrator Nathan Zuckerman's old teacher Murray Ringold, who muses:

To lose your job and have the newspapers calling you a traitor—these are very unpleasant things. But it's still not the situation that is total, which is totalitarianism. I wasn't put in jail and I wasn't tortured. My child wasn't denied anything. My livelihood was taken away from me and some people stopped talking to me, but other people admired me. My wife admired me. My daughter admired me. Many of my ex-students admired me. Openly said so. And I could put up a legal fight. I had free movement, I could give interviews, raise money, hire a lawyer, make courtroom challenges. Which I did. Of course you can become so depressed and miserable that you give yourself a heart attack. But you can find alternatives, which I also did.

—pp.412-413

Murray Ringold's view of his persecution by anti-Communists is much more mellow than his brother Ira's. Ira has more reason to be angry, though—his glamorous wife Eve has published a tell-all book called, oddly enough, *I Married a Communist*, a book which, while not especially accurate, contains enough of the truth to be damaging. Ira is "the revolutionary spirit undone by maddening incursion into his historical struggle of marital and household mayhem" (from Notes, p.1082), in contrast to the Swede of American Pastoral, for

whom marriage and home are the struggle into which other elements intrude.

I Married a Communist gives us the clearest fictional critique I've seen yet, not just of how Communism failed in the U.S., but also of why it would have appealed in the first place.

### **The Human Stain** (read 7/23/2012)

Don't ask; don't tell. It's a policy much, much older than the recently-rescinded U.S. military's version, and much, much more widespread in application. Coleman Silk, Roth's protagonist for this third volume in the American Trilogy, is in hiding—has been all his adult life—and his success depends on precisely this reluctance on most people's parts to peek below the surfaces we choose to present. As is foreshadowed very early in, however, the end of Silk's concealment is pretty much inevitable.

Neither as bourgeois as Seymour Levov, nor as radical and uncompromising as Ira Ringold, Coleman Silk is yet a third type of man. He is a tenured professor and long-time administrator at Athena College in Massachusetts... at least until he lets slip a word that could be construed as a racial epithet while calling roll one day. Deans make enemies, and soon Silk is trying to defend his choice of words in a forum where he has already been convicted and sentenced. His wife dies, and Silk resigns from the college. Which seems to be for the best—after all, Silk is a dinosaur, a classicist in a postmodern age whose teaching methods are old-fashioned and uncompromising. Students today, and their diction, get savagely imitated:

"They know, like, *nothing*."

—Coleman Silk, mid-rant on p.882

Silk had already had one run-in with postmodernist professor Delphine Roux; Silk's second gaffe, however unintentional, is a golden opportunity to oust the old guard—an old guard who did, by the way, hire Roux herself.

The Human Stain contains, for me at least, the most emotionally powerful moment in the entire trilogy; on p.941, forty-one empty chairs... one for each of the soldiers Pittsfield, Massachusetts lost to Vietnam. This image appears just before—is instrumental in precipitating, even—the climax.

I thought it was interesting that every one of these novels features at least one rebellious daughter—Merry in American Pastoral; Sylphid in I Married a Communist; both Delphine and Faunia in The Human Stain. In that last, though, Roth does give the greatest wisdom to an *unrebellious* daughter, at least, and I will give her the last quote for this review. Ernestine Silk says (on p.1008), "...the danger with hatred is, once you start in on it, you get a hundred times more than you bargained for. Once you start, you can't stop. I don't know anything harder to control than hating. Easier to kick drinking than to master hate. And that is saying something."

I read The Human Stain in one sitting—literally, as I was bound to Seat 12B for the duration of a transcontinental flight. These Library of America editions, by the way, make excellent traveling companions for anyone who has not already abandoned the book as physical object. Compact and sturdy, with large crisp type on high-contrast paper, they pack a lot of words into a convenient package without compromising readability.

And the words *on* these pages? They, too, are carefully chosen for lasting strength and appeal. The American Trilogy is perhaps not as exuberant and hopeful as Roth's earlier Zuckerman novels, but it is worthwhile,

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insightful, literature in the truest and most positive sense.

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### **Ryan Young says**

Phillip Roth deserves his place as one of the best American writers of all time. This collection of mid-later work is far less playful but more polished than Portnoy's Complaint or The Breast, both of which are outstanding. The Human Stain is my favorite of the three. I have rarely read a scene more humorous, dramatic, and insightful than that of Delphine Roux's ill fated attempt to compose a personal ad. This is Roth at his finest.

One habit irks me though. I really don't care for the device of the first person authorial narrator. I have not read the Zuckerman novels, so perhaps that would lend a greater appreciation. As of now though, it just seems a little weak.

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### **Ellen says**

These books are so wise and compassionate. I understood my own life's journey and choices better by reading "I Married a Communist" and "American Pastoral." Philip Roth's understanding of the American Century is profound. He is a giant.

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### **Luciano Zorzetto says**

This trilogy was a lot to digest.

Roth's writing demands the attention of the reader: it glides historically, through 20th century United States of America, no less; it hops without warning into the skin and point of view of another character and back to the narrator; and jumps through style hoops. I'm a sucker for the first and the last point, so it got me.

American Pastoral was my first contact with the author and his alter-ego narrator Nathan Zuckerman. I plodded through the initial old-age musings of Mr Zuckerman, wondering what I had got myself into, when all of a sudden I found myself decades earlier in a Newark seen through the eyes of the irresistible, hard-working, morally sound and yet doomed to failure 'Swede' Levov.

Time is very fluid in Roth: we already know what will happen, who's dead and who was bad, but it doesn't matter. What matters is the journey of history through people and witnessing the ineluctable downfall of the heroic, if only too perfect, Levovs.

I Married a Communist was dropped around halfway. Despite the occasional gem of an image, it didn't move at all in my eyes. Iron Rinn and his struggle did not click with me. Too much political jargon, maybe, such as the Fourties and Fifties were.

Because of this disappointment, I began The Human Stain with mixed feelings and I am happy to report that I loved it even more than American Pastoral. It is easier to connect with this third book: first of all, it is closer to the flesh and base humanity. There were a few very carnal scenes that almost felt like non sequitur in A.P., whereas sex is important here. Some characters are sensual through and through: that drives them and puts them in stark contrast with the puritan wave of outrage around the Clinton/Lewinsky affair. The second reason for an easier connection is that there is less history than in A.P., or rather that the young Coleman Silk rides it and heroically twists out of it, whereas the Levovs went with the flow, trying to do the

right thing. We can't but cheer for Coleman and then Prof. Silk since he does his own thing, but he ends up punished for his hybris: it can't be a coincidence that he teaches Classic Literature.

Coleman Silk would make a hell of a 'hero' as he is, but once we discover the secret he hides in his past, all his actions and his conduct acquire even more depth. Once more, like in A.P., Roth casually dropped into the story a glimpse of the end pages before this, so here we are, halfway through the book, we've just known the big secret and yet we must go on to understand why it ended the way it did.

On top of this there's the meta-story of Zuckerman/Roth writing the very book we are reading. His point of view steps forward every now and then to remind us that we are reading a truth pieced together by the patient, thorough and a tinge dull character/author. Trippy.

What a journey this was.

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### **Darwin8u says**

*"Writing turns you into somebody who's always wrong. The illusion that you may get it right someday is the perversity that draws you on."*

? Philip Roth, American Pastoral

Volume 7: The American Trilogy 1997–2000 or Library of America's N° 220 is perhaps the most perfect book in the Complete Philip Roth Collection (nine volumes). It contains the following three novels:

1. American Pastoral (read Jun 3, 2011)
2. I Married a Communist (read Apr 7, 2011)
3. The Human Stain (read May 6, 2013)

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### **Rob Tapper says**

Completed the last 2 in the trilogy -

- "I Married a Communist"--- this became heavy going, repetitive, perhaps too much of a social documentary or maybe too much an author's personal history.
- "The Human Stain"---- excellent to finish this trilogy with this one -- loved the simplicity of life and living the author depicts in the final chapters.

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### **Maurice J says**

Based on my 5-star regard for the first two of the three, I give the trilogy five stars. Human Stain is not up there with the other two, but ...Communist and ...Pastoral were so great that the trilogy gets the five-stars. See my reviews of the three books.

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## **Clarke Owens says**

I have nothing but praise for all three of these novels. Reading the ending to *The Human Stain*, after everything that went before it, was a powerful emotional and poetic experience such as you only have when you are reading the very best literature. The scope of Roth's concerns, his detail, his language, are utterly compelling, magnificent.

In all three novels, Roth presents a topical or recent-historical theme as a backdrop for his stories that, for me, adds to the interest. He has his customary interest in Jewish life and in Newark, NJ and environs, but he connects them to a larger American idea by means of these backdrops. So, here we have fifties McCarthyism, the rebellious 60s, and the late 90s, with the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, as the backdrops. *The Human Stain* (90s backdrop) is still quite relevant today, including, as it does, not only high-profile sexual scandal, but ideas of racism and of political correctness raised to the level of defamatory weapon.

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## **John says**

*American Pastoral* is a wonderful description of a great guy, who is cursed with the kid from hell. It also does a great job of describing the 1960s and the cultural revolution of the time.

*I Married a Communist* is another one of those Roth novels where he has a younger character who looks up to an older relative. In this case, the older character is an uncle, who is noble and yet is blinded by his politics. This also has a young woman, a step daughter, from hell.

*The Human Stain* creates two wonderful characters -- the professor with a secret who runs afoul of PC attitudes -- and the blue collar gal who he falls in love or lust with.

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## **Ben says**

They were on their way to lunch, passing within sight of North Hall, the ivied, beautifully weathered colonial brick building where, for over a decade, Coleman Silk, as faculty dean, had occupied the office across from the president's suite. The college's architectural marker, the six-sided clock tower of North Hall, topped by the spire that was topped by the flag -- and that, from down in Athena proper, could be seen the way the massive European cathedrals are discerned from the approaching roadways by those repairing for the cathedral town -- was tolling noon as he sat on a bench shadowed by the quadrangle's most famously age-gnarled oak, sat and calmly tried to consider the coercions of propriety. The *tyranny* of propriety. It was hard, halfway through 1998, for even him to believe in American propriety's enduring power, and he was the one who considered himself tyrannized: the bridle it still is on public rhetoric, the inspiration it provides for personal posturing, the persistence just about everywhere of this devirilizing pulpit virtue-mongering that H.L. Mencken identified with boobism, that Philip Wylie thought of as Momism, that the Europeans unhistorically call American puritanism, that the likes of a Ronald Reagan call America's core values, and that maintains widespread jurisdiction by masquerading itself as something else -- as *everything* else. As a force, propriety is protean, a dominatrix in a thousand disguises, infiltrating, if need be, a civic responsibility, WASP dignity, women's rights, black pride, ethnic allegiance, or emotion-laden Jewish ethical sensitivity. It's not as though Marx or Freud or Darwin or Stalin or Hitler or Mao had never happened -- it's as though Sinclair Lewis had not happened. It's, he thought, as though *Babbitt* had never been written. It's as though not even the most basic level of imaginative thought had been admitted into consciousness to cause the slightest disturbance. A century of destruction unlike any other in its extremity befalls and blights the human race --

scores of millions of ordinary people condemned to suffer deprivation upon deprivation, atrocity upon atrocity, evil upon evil, half the world or more subjected to pathological sadism as social policy, whole societies organized and fettered by the fear of violent persecution, the degradation of individual life engineered on a scale unknown throughout history, nations broken and enslaved by ideological criminals who rob them of everything, entire populations so demoralized as to be unable to get out of bed in the morning with the minutest desire to face the day. . . all the terrible touchstones presented by this century, and here they are up in arms about Faunia Farley. Here in America either it's Faunia Farley or it's Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk! *This*, in 1998, is the wickedness they have to put up with. *This*, in 1998, is their torture, their torment, and their spiritual death. Their source of greatest moral despair...

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