

Nominations for the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, 1998.

"AMERICAN PASTORAL," by Philip Roth (Houghton Mifflin).

The comic genius from New Jersey has done something more defiant than ever: He has written a heartrending and yet merciless novel about the life of a good man. In its depiction of Swede Levov -- the highschool sports hero of Zuckerman's Newark -- "American Pastoral" delivers the promises and myths of a post-war America, then watches with helpless compassion as the dream discharges. That Roth has told this story of bucolic yearnings through the eyes of his ever-ironic narrator, Zuckerman, gives the novel a dual sensibility; it further allows us the edge of experiencing idealism's rosy hues within the uncaring chaos of history.

As triumphantly unselfconscious as anything Roth has written, "American Pastoral" feels almost deliberately idyllic, and has about it the blush of tragedy from its opening pages. The novel possesses moments of pure Rothian brilliance, whether the voice of aging Levov *pater* or a dinner party of Proustian proportion. Coming of age with all the mid-century hopes of a Jewish kid from Jersey, the Swede erects a life bearing most of America's covenants, only to see it disappear in the ruin of social upheaval and familial anguish. Roth's depiction of that fall from grace is his Camelot Unbound, where innocence seems as transient as it is doomed, where Learesque cruelties can (and do) happen to anybody.
