

AMERICAN PASTORAL – Film at CONCA VERDE on 13.02.17

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THE FILM

American Pastoral is a 2016 crime-drama film based on the 1997 novel by Philip Roth, who was an American novelist. **American Pastoral** is considered by many to be one of Philip Roth's greatest works. He received the Pulitzer Prize for the novel in 1998.

The story is a narration by novelist Nathan Zuckerman of the life of Seymour "the Swede" Levov. Nathan Zuckerman idolized the Swede as a child growing up in a Jewish neighbourhood in Newark, New Jersey. He had always been fascinated by the tall, muscular high school sports star and local god. When he returns to the neighbourhood after many years, he expects to hear stories about the glory that Swede went on to achieve, but instead he is confronted by a very different reality: Swede is dead, and his life was not exactly wonderful. Through flashbacks, Zuckerman recounts how Steve Levov and his beauty queen wife watch their seemingly perfect life fall apart, as their nemesis manifests itself in the form of their daughter who turns into a violent activist and joins the turmoil of '60s America.

American Pastoral is directed by actor Ewan McGregor who makes his directional debut with this film. The film stars Ewan McGregor as Swede Levov, the main protagonist, Jennifer Connelly as Dawn Levov, his wife, and Dakota Fanning as Merry Levov, their daughter. Other cast members include Rupert Evans as Jerry Levov, Swede Levov's younger brother, Peter Reigert as Lou Levov, Swede Levov's father, and Valerie Curry as Rita Cohen, the woman who hires Merry Levov to commit the terrorist acts.

Filming began in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in September 2015 and premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2016, after which it was released in the United States on 21 October 2016 by Lionsgate.

THE PLOT

There are 3 sections to the Plot: "Paradise Remembered", "The Fall" and "Paradise Lost".

"Paradise Remembered" begins with the 40-year reunion of the graduating class of Weequahic High School in Newark, New Jersey where author Nathan Zuckerman meets one of his old friends, Jerry Levov. They talk about Jerry's brother, former college star athlete Seymour "Swede" Levov, who recently died after a long illness.

In a flashback, Swede persuades his father, glove-making magnate Lou Levov, to let him marry his high school sweetheart, beauty queen Dawn Dwyer. Lou is skeptical because Dawn is a devout Roman Catholic, but eventually agrees. They have a daughter, Meredith, or "Merry," and settle in the town of Old Rimrock, where they acquire a large farm.

For much of her life, Merry struggles with a stuttering problem, but her parents are unable to treat the problem. By the time Merry reaches high school, she has become increasingly radicalized as the Vietnam War rages, and frequently goes to New York City to take part in antiwar protests. Fearing for her safety, Swede urges Merry to channel her energy into protesting against the war at home.

In the Section of "The Fall", the local post office and gas station in Old Rimrock are blown up by a massive bomb, killing the gas station's owner. Merry disappears soon afterward, and is the prime suspect in the bombing. She isn't even heard from again until Rita Cohen, a student at the Wharton School, comes ostensibly to do a study on the glove-making industry, and tells Swede that she knows about Merry's whereabouts. Swede meets Rita in a hotel, but resists her attempts to seduce him. The strain of Merry's disappearance briefly sends Dawn into a mental hospital. She gets a facelift soon afterward, and tries to get Swede to forget about Merry.

In the Section "Paradise Lost", we are brought forward many years. When leaving a viewing in a gallery, Swede sees Rita on the street. Rita takes him to a **skid-row area** of Newark where Merry now lives. Here, Swede asks and Merry confesses to having made and planted 3 bombs, killing 4 people. She also tells of how after escaping capture, she moved into the underground, where she was raped repeatedly. Merry wants to withdraw from society, as a penance for her crimes. She converts to **Jainism** and vows a life of non-violence.

She has no desire to return home even when Swede tries to trigger her childhood memories at a subsequent visit. We then see him in a series of shots through the years, growing older, outside the abandoned house where he found Merry, waiting and holding to his promise to never abandon her. Swede never sees Merry again.

Back in the present, Nathan and Jerry attend Swede's funeral. As the guests are about to leave, Merry arrives, having not since seen her father, and lays her hand on the casket.

THE REVIEWS

On **Rotten Tomatoes**, the film has an approval rating of 23% based on 101 reviews, with an average rating of 4.8/10. The site's critical consensus reads, "American Pastoral finds debuting director Ewan McGregor's reach exceeding its grasp with a well-intentioned Philip Roth adaptation that retains the form, but little of the function, of its source material."

Indiewire gives Ewan McGregor more credit than Rotten Tomatoes. It says that an adaptation of the novel would have been difficult even for a veteran film director. According to the review board, "Roth's writing is notoriously difficult to capture on camera, even for filmmakers with years of experience".

The New York Times goes on to say that amounts to not much more than a dutiful checklist of scenes from the novel. And its elegiac tone omits Mr Roth's bitterly sarcastic humour. However, it does say that the screenplay is at least true to the book in telling the story of Swede Levov.

JAINISM

Jainism is an ancient Indian religion belonging to the **śramaṇa** tradition. The central tenet is non-violence and respect towards all living beings. Notably, Mahatma Gandhi was greatly influenced by Jainism and adopted many Jain principles in his life.

The everyday implementation of the principle of non-violence is more comprehensive in **Jainism** than in other religions and is the hallmark for Jain identity. Jains believe in avoiding harm to others through thoughts, speech and actions. Violence or war in self-defense may be justified, but this must only be used as a last resort after peaceful measures have been thoroughly exhausted. Practices center around vegetarianism, fasting, prayers and meditation.

The novel alludes extensively to the social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It refers to incidents such as the Watergate scandal also alludes to the rhetoric of revolutionary violence of the radical fringe and the bombings carried out between 1969 and 1973 by other radicals opposing the US military intervention in Vietnam.

It is within this climate that Merry Levov was growing up, and which spurred her to becoming a violent activist. It is thus interesting and definitely a cause for reflection that she would turn to a religion that preaches the entire opposite.

SKID-ROW

"Skidding" refers to the method of moving logs/timbers by dragging them along the ground. Before the age of trucks and the internal combustion engine, Skidding was done by teams of horses/mules/oxen driven by burly men of a rather low station in life. A skid road led from the outlying area where timber cutting was done to the sawmill usually near a city or source of power. "Skid Row" referred to the row of low cost wooden shacks which sprang up along the skid road. People living in these shacks usually represented the lowest station in the social life of a town or village. Skid row was often populated with prostitutes, homeless, paupers, drunkards, etc.

Once again, just as we see Merry Levov's transition from violent activism to peaceful non-violence, so too is there a transformation in her life from pampered and privileged beginnings at the start of the story, to the end of the story where she lives with the less fortunate in society.

From one extreme to the other.

THE SPONSORS

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THE FILM SHOW

American Pastoral is the **5th film** in English this year. The next film will also be in English – INFERNO - the latest in Dan Brown's the *Da Vinci Code* series directed by Academy Award winner Ron Howard. This will be followed by another film in English SNOWDEN - about the leakage of NSA's illegal surveillance techniques to the public by one of its employees. There are 15 more films till the summer break in June – 13 in English, 1 in German and 1 in Spanish.

Enjoy the film!