



American Rust

Philipp Meyer

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Set in a beautiful but economically devastated Pennsylvania steel town, *American Rust* is a novel of the lost American dream and the desperation--as well as the acts of friendship, loyalty, and love--that arises from its loss. From local bars to train yards to prison, it's the story of two young men, bound to the town by family, responsibility, inertia, and the beauty around them, who dream of a future beyond the factories and abandoned homes.

Left alone to care for his aging father after his mother commits suicide and his sister escapes to Yale, Isaac English longs for a life beyond his hometown. When he finally sets out to leave for good, accompanied by his temperamental best friend, they are caught up in a terrible act of violence that changes their lives forever.

Evoking John Steinbeck's novels of restless lives during the Great Depression, *American Rust* delves into the contemporary American heartland at a moment of profound unrest and uncertainty about the future. It's a dark but lucid vision, a moving novel about the bleak realities that battle our desire for transcendence and the power of love and friendship to redeem us.

American Rust Details

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From Reader Review American Rust for online ebook

Maria João Fernandes says

"Quantas promessas pode uma pessoa quebrar antes de deixares de a perdoar?"

"Ferrugem Americana" é o primeiro romance de Philipp Meyer e a sua história tem lugar numa pequena cidade da Pensilvânia. Outrora o coração da indústria do aço, Buell tornou-se numa cidade em ruínas. Antigamente fervilhava de vida, mas hoje só tem para oferecer desemprego e pobreza aos seus habitantes. A atmosfera sufocante aliada ao desespero há muito enraizado nas personagens torna o ambiente sombrio e a tensão é palpável.

Philipp Meyer conta-nos a sua história intercalando os diferentes pontos de vista das personagens. Desta forma, não só cria uma narrativa poderosa com múltiplas perspectivas, como também proporciona ao leitor um conhecimento aprofundado dos pensamentos e sentimentos de quem está a narrar. A fluidez impressionante da narrativa é fruto das diferentes vozes que lhe dão vida. Estas variam de um tom intenso e ponderado, a um ritmo acelerado preenchido por inúmeros pensamentos, a divagações e reflexões carregadas de desilusão ou uma coragem contagiante.

Esta é uma história sobre pessoas. É uma história sobre a vida que nos mostra como personalidades, mentalidades e estilos de vida tão diferentes podem estar ligadas. As personagens de Meyer são essencialmente e, acima de tudo, humanas. Os defeitos são destacados acima das virtudes e os seus problemas e questões existenciais têm um carácter assustadoramente real. O escritor americano escreve uma forma clara e objectiva, sem embelezar a realidade obscura que rodeia o seu enredo.

A amizade e a lealdade, o amor e a traição, a família e as obrigações, o sonho e a desilusão, a incompreensão e o isolamento, o medo, o desejo e a coragem. Acima de tudo "Ferrugem Americana" retrata o coração e a mente humana. Afinal de contas, todos procuramos o mesmo.

Durante a leitura vi um pouco de mim própria em cada uma das personagens. Não concordo com todas as suas crenças, não compreendo todos os seus comportamentos, não acredito em todos os seus sentimentos, não aprovo todas as suas atitudes. E isto é o que as torna tão próximas de mim como qualquer outra pessoa do mundo onde vivo.

Os sentimentos e pensamentos das personagens são acompanhados pelo ambiente que os envolve. O tempo que se faz no período narrado age em sintonia com as suas personagens. A sintonia entre o Homem e a natureza é surpreendente.

"Ferrugem Americana" mostra-nos a insensatez provocada pela inexperiência da juventude, a incapacidade de adaptação daqueles que se destacam dos restantes, as escolhas feitas a pensar nos outros em vez de nós próprios, a justiça feita pela mão do Homem e não do sistema em que vive, o amor incondicional e complexo, o que diferencia uma mãe, de uma esposa e de uma mulher independente, a complexidade do amor, os laços da amizade pura e, acima de tudo isto, o controlo que cada um possui sobre a sua vida. Apesar de todos serem vítimas das circunstâncias, ninguém é livre de culpa.

Uma mente dotada de um intelecto sem igual e uma capacidade física invejável são promessas de um futuro brilhante. Duas promessas quebradas num país que age com indiferença.

O leitor vê-se nas estradas que o levam para fora de Buell, num parque de caravanas, numa prisão de segurança máxima e numa esquadra da policia. Conhece o interior de fábricas e observa as paisagens dominadas pelos destroços de uma cidade que já nada tem para oferecer, mas cujos cidadãos teimam em não abandonar

Philipp Meyer é um autor que conjuga a personalidade, as circunstâncias e o cenário numa tragédia caracterizada pela acções humanas.

D. Pow says

Philipp Meyer's *American Rust* is one of the finest first novels I've read in the last several years, and a novel that many writers (regardless of their experience) would give their eye teeth or left nut to have written.

The novel follows the odd couple of Billy Poe and Isaac English from an act of brutal if needful violence to the furies of internal and external justice have exacted their balancing pound of flesh. Poe, is a behemoth, a former football star, a bit of a dunderhead with a short fuse. Isaac is a small, frail kid with Ivy League ambitions and the SAT scores to get him there. Both of them are firmly mired in a rut as the novel begins. Poe is a few years past his football glories and past the point where recruiters will probably return his calls anymore. Isaac's dreams might not be as close to the expiration date but he is stuck with a chronically ill dad, in the rust belt, in the rotting carcass town of Buell, PA; he's turning desperate, like a rat in a maze and Meyer makes that horrid feeling of good dreams turned sour as bile heavy, palpable and real.

The violence that plays out through the novel is nasty and true. Meyer gets how a life trajectory can change in the blink of an eye, with one hasty if needful action. You can work your ass off all your life and still end up in the shitter, in a dead-end relationship that is all loins and no love, in an occupation that kills the soul with its monotony but keeps a roof over your head and bread (maybe crusts only) in your kid's mouth.

Though *American Rust* primary duo are fully realized, wonderful characters, Meyer illustrates these hard truths of working class life in early 21st Century America best through Poe's mom, Grace. She is the most amazing creation in the book. Butting up against middle-age, she is still a fine looking woman with twice the backbone of the males in her life, working long hours as a seamstress and soul-sick with worry for her wayward son. Life has turned Grace a realist, but still she dreams of escape, through a return to college, through a good man, through a better fate for her son, Poe. When Poe's life goes off the track, and Grace feels obligated to renew a relationship with the local sheriff, it's a wonderfully primal yet sophisticated mother-love on display, true and harrowing and touching. And Meyer is skilled enough to have the relationship between Grace and the sheriff not rooted only in pragmatism and the instinct towards survival of a family, but also in tenderness and true sensual companionship. Meyer gets that humans are complicated beasts and we never undertake any action purely through one motivation, so the breadth of the span between saving your soul and throwing your life utterly away is a fine one indeed.

And Meyer's work is full of that, small bits of folk wisdom brushing up against crime thriller conventions. Rust belt noir as tough as the steel workers that once graced Buell, but full of legitimate emotion that gets you blinking back the tears as you follow the characters through the novel. *American Rust* is a fine edition to the small canon of recent American fiction that gets to the kernel of violence in the American Soul and the almost limitless compassion that brushes up right against it.

Joe says

Tedious

American Rust is a very bleak tale that takes place in current-day Western Pennsylvania. The plot is set early on in the book - two of the protagonists find themselves in a situation beyond their control - and the aftermath and repercussions of their actions are what drive the very minimal story-line. The narration bounces back and forth between a connected set of characters, each with their own set of dreams and problems as they try to escape - figuratively and actually - the dire circumstances they find themselves in. This book received much praise when published; I didn't think American Rust lived up to its billing.

Consciously or not, I felt the writing was an attempt to emulate the novels of Cormac McCarthy - dark and brooding. Unfortunately where McCarthy's books are terse and concise, American Rust is verbose, rambling and repetitive. The combined narration of each of the story-tellers becomes a collective self-flagellation. Their inability to make decisions - and the few circumstantial ones they do make - becomes paralyzing and the story becomes dismally predictable, i.e. one bad outcome after another. Understanding that such phenomena do mirror real-life, they are not all encompassing; there is no balance here. By the end of the book I had lost both empathy for the characters and interest in the - I repeat myself - minimal story.

Dark stories are one thing but pitiful is another. Pass on this one - extremely tedious reading.

Linda says

I found this to be an engrossing first novel. Meyer has a different writing style than most authors. He captures the thoughts of the characters, it can change mid stream with no punctuation. I had no problem with this and thought it worked well for the story.

The setting is an economically devastated Pennsylvania community in which the steel industry has collapsed. Times are tough, we get a good look at the socioeconomic and political pressures of the characters. We are introduced to two young men, Isaac English and Billy Poe. Isaac is a small guy with a very high IQ, an introvert. Billy is a big guy, the high school football star. They both had difficult childhoods and have dreams of escaping for a better future.

I thought the author did a good job of capturing the actions of how people, regardless of whether on the right or wrong side of law struggle morally with doing the right thing. I found some of the actions of Sheriff Bud Harris to be a bit unbelievable.

Well done Mr. Meyers! I'm kicking myself for not getting his second novel The Son when it was 2.99, I am looking forward to reading it!

Howard says

In "American Rust," Philipp Meyer's debut novel, the steel mill in the fictional town of Buell, Pennsylvania closed in 1987 and was partially dismantled ten years later. Now the mill stands like an ancient ruin that is being taken over by vines and other vegetation. The only visitors are coyotes and deer and an occasional human squatter. Buell was "a place that had recently been well-off, its downtown full of historic stone buildings, mostly boarded now." What is true of Buell is also true of other steel mill towns located in the Mon Valley.

"For a hundred years the Valley had been the center of steel production in the country, in the entire world, technically," but globalization and automation, along with outsourcing and offshoring, have taken its toll and in the last two decades the area has lost 150,000 jobs and "most of the towns could no longer afford basic services; many no longer had any police."

One character, a former police chief and current justice of the peace, says that "it wasn't just that we lost all those jobs, it was because people didn't have anything to be good at anymore....We're trending backwards as a nation, probably for the first time in our history, and it's not the kids with the green hair and the bones through their noses. Personally I don't care for it, but those things are inevitable. The real problem is the average citizen does not have a job he can be good at. You lose that, you lose the country."

Now the Valley is primarily the home of retirees who have no choice but to stay and the young who haven't acquired the courage to leave. Two of the young people are odd-couple friends, Isaac English and Billy Poe.

"Isaac English and his older sister were the two smartest kids in town, the whole Valley, probably; the sister had gone to Yale. A rising tide, Isaac had hoped, that might lift him as well." But at age twenty, and two years out of high school, and despite an IQ of 167, Isaac still lives in Buell. He is one who wants to leave but remains to care for his father, who is an invalid as the result of a steel mill accident.

The whole town thought Billy would go to college to keep playing [foot]ball...[but] two years later here he was living in his mother's trailer," a double-wide that "sat at the top of a dirt road...on a large tract of woodland." Billy turned down a scholarship to Colgate because, unlike Isaac, he can't understand why anyone would ever want to leave Buell. He thinks this despite the fact that he is unemployed after recently being laid-off from a minimum wage job.

The world spins out of control for the two friends when, in the early stages of Isaac's attempt to finally break away and head West to attend college, he and Billy become involved in a killing (Is it murder or self-defense?). The tragic event and its repercussions overwhelm the two young men and devastate them and their families.

Philipp Meyer's second novel, "The Son," which has received almost universal acclaim from critics, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The critics also liked "American Rust," but readers have been decidedly mixed in their reaction to it. A lot of them like it and a lot of them hate it.

Here are three primary complaints about the book: 1) there are six alternating narrators; 2) they engage in stream-of-consciousness thought and; 3) there is an open-ended conclusion that leaves many of the novel's conflicts unresolved and its questions unanswered.

I thought Meyer was able to juggle his narrators effectively, so I didn't find that to be a distraction. I can't

speak for others, but I rarely think in paragraphs, or even complete sentences. In fact, there isn't a lot of punctuation in my thoughts. Therefore, I thought his usage of stream-of-consciousness helped me better understand his characters and their motivations. And let's face it, if life is anything, it is open-ended and many conflicts do remain unresolved and many questions are never answered.

"American Rust" is a social protest novel that harkens back to the '30's and writers such as John Steinbeck and others who championed working people and protested the economic dislocation of the day. Meyer's depiction of the economic decline that has devastated the Pennsylvania steel industry reminds me of what Richard Russo has written about similar decline in his area of upstate New York. And if one took Meyer's characters and placed them in Mississippi, they would be very similar to characters created by the late Larry Brown.

Critics have compared Meyer to Cormac McCarthy, Ernest Hemingway, and Dennis Lehane. I even saw a headline which asked "Is Philipp Meyer the next William Faulkner?" And that was before "The Son." But the answer is no, of course not, there will only be one Faulkner. But that's certainly high praise for a debut novel and could have been the kiss of death. However, Meyer did not fall prey to the sophomore jinx. "The Son" has been even better received than "American Rust."

Sara says

ARC received through the First Reads giveaway program.

I found *American Rust* to be very satisfying. It reminded me of Faulkner's writing, except for the part where Faulkner drives me crazy! I was also reminded a bit of *Empire Falls*, as both take place in towns that have fallen on rough times.

There is definitely a plot, and it does move forward, but at a slower pace than expected for a story revolving around a murder. Meyer takes his time and explores the minds of the characters, which I think was a fantastic choice. I think if I was going through what these characters experience, I would be spending a good deal of time in my head. Not much time elapses during the course of the novel, which makes sense as thoughts take up most of the pages.

American Rust is a slice of life in the truest sense--you get some feel for the place, but the inner lives of the people involved are what's really important. They may not spend much time really noticing their surroundings, as you take a place for granted when you live in it. The ending, too, does not resolve all loose ends. This is appropriate. Life does not always deliver in a neat package.

Trish says

A really magnificent first novel. From the opening scenes Meyer created a world where lives hover on a knife's edge of disaster. Poor choices and bad decisions land his characters in nasty situations any of us would have difficulty confronting. Readers have a sense of the big picture only because the author tells his story from many points of view. But he doesn't tell us the future before he is ready and it is with a sense of impending doom that we watch the story unfold to what we fully expect will be its dreadful conclusion.

This novel did not get nearly the attention it deserved when it was published in February this year. If I have any complaints at all it is merely that it contained more words than it needed. The characters are drawn with sensitivity and depth and the scenes have added details that crank the reader's sense of foreboding to high. I hope his publisher puts this work up front for promotion.

It is said that men don't really read novels. If all novels were as good as this one, I think we'd see a lot more men among the converted. *Black Flies* (Shannon Burke, 2008) and *The Dog Fighter: A Novel* (Marc Bojanowski, 2005) are other examples of books I consider from a man's point of view.

Cosimo says

Le migliori occasioni

In una Pennsylvania dove l'acciaio ha una potenza primitiva, nell'ora del declino crepuscolare di una civiltà industriale ormai morente, Philipp Meyer ambienta una narrazione coinvolgente e realistica, che si sviluppa in una malinconica e tragica storia di riscatto e di evoluzione. Le avventurose relazioni tra i personaggi sono intessute di un amore disperato, in un luogo fuori del tempo dove l'unica via d'uscita è perdere vincendo, ossia sacrificando qualcosa o qualcuno. Non c'è giudizio morale né compiacimento esistenziale in queste pagine; si dispiega invece in uno stile genuino e originale una sequenza di eventi che ha la forma della rovina, dello scheletro e del relitto. Isaac e William Poe sono due amici antitetici (insicura intelligenza e sfiducia volenterosa), si pensano complementari e sono connessi intimamente, l'uno salva la vita dell'altro: dal ghiaccio, dalla lama di un pugnale, dalla gioventù, da un destino di sconfitta. Da quel momento l'agire e l'essere per questi due personaggi sono dimensioni plurali e molteplici, che affrontano il mondo con coraggio e concretezza, ma insieme con una sorta di poetica rassegnazione. Infatti, il passato li perseguita, con la sua eredità di catastrofi, la sfortuna e la disgrazia che li incatenano a un presente ripetitivo e omologato; il suicidio, la malattia e la scomparsa divengono un'orizzonte che regola il possibile, che lo confina in una angosciata attesa, in un fallimento previsto. Quale caratteristica della sciagura e del disagio è così attraente per questi personaggi, perché faticano così tanto a liberarsene? Solo cercando in se stessi un'immagine sconosciuta e temuta, solo producendo uno strappo e un danno permanente, riescono a ottenere una ricompensa, a fuggire dai propri demoni interiori; in ultimo, a riconoscere un limite e a dialogare con le periferie solitarie dell'animo. Sono le drammatiche e antiretoriche peripezie di due spostati, finiti ai margini di un mondo già inadatto, e dei congiunti che li amano, discendenti di Twain, antagonisti sfavorevoli nella Monongahela Valley di Pittsburgh, la *working class* che cerca la terra promessa. Nel racconto c'è azione e c'è immedesimazione, è un discorso di desolazione e destino, lotta tra desiderio e dovere, tra colpa e scelta, responsabilità e speranza. Non c'è epica in questo romanzo, semplicemente buona narrativa, un'opera di valore che non specchiandosi in se stessa offre al lettore la possibilità di un'esperienza di lettura significativa. Del resto, tutti sono sopravvissuti, esseri solitari esiliati in un luogo ambiguo, remoto e illusorio, come una contraddittoria regione archeologica e spirituale. Decide di non mentire Meyer, non c'è salvezza né redenzione al di là dell'oscurità, del dolore e della violenza che determinano lo scioglimento, che legano i destini della comunità più di ogni altro nobile valore, più forti ed intensi del triste e inevitabile arrugginirsi del tempo. Insomma, in *Ruggine americana* sembra che siamo nati per vivere solo due volte.

Nikos79 says

That was a good contemporary piece of American literature which usually disappoints me. Debut novel by Philipp Meyer and what a promising beginning for a new writer! Set in an province of Pensylvania USA at late 90's the book focuses around the consequences of the economic collapse of local industry on people's life, of middle and low class in a small town. Such as misery, poverty, crisis of personality, despair, things that many times leading to violence and absolutely wrong decisions. So are the characters of the book, most of them tragic figures, trying to survive in difficult situations and hope for a better living, but with almost wrong motivations.

Meyer does not afraid to present in his book the dark side of American dream using a language with dry realism and uncomfortable but convincing scenes, lot of violence but holding the interest of the reader undiminished till the end. I enjoyed a lot the multiple voices he uses telling the whole story and he succeeds it very well giving the appropriate color in his text. I liked a lot the ending as well, it is very cinematic and intense, and although I was expecting it to be different, I enjoyed it. I read that he has influences by Cormac McCarthy, a writer that I admire so much, and this is quite obvious. I hope and wish even better books by him in future, I believe he has enough talent to show us, and I 'm gonna get his other book, "The Son" for sure. Well done Philipp Meyer.

karen says

awwww poor boook. i am only feeling three stars here but i am giving it four because the other reviews are so unfair. (not the one that says there has been no good fiction published this century - that one is so much laughable curmudgeonly elitist bullshit i can't even acknowledge it) but it's not a bad book. as far as the "confusing narration" "who is speeeeaking??" hint: the chapter names are the names of the narrators. so - no great mystery there. the run-ons and lack of punctuation?? it's mostly internal thoughts of characters with varying degrees of intellect/insight, so there's bound to be some diversion from textbook grammar. frankly, i didn't even notice, and usually that sort of thing stands right out to me. guess i was enjoying the plot too much to nitpick the punctuation. it's good; it is shades of russell banks and richard russo and all the "frustration about being trapped in a dying town" that makes steinbeck so charmingly bleak and the "solo man on a hopeless quest" theme that brightens cormac mccarthy's pages. and if tom "i don't read books written by people under forty" fuller liked it, who the hell can say anything else?? tom fuller, kids, smartest man i know.

Matt says

Phillip Meyer's *The Son* is one of the best books I've ever read. It's a multi-generational epic about the undulating fortunes of a Texas oil family that beautifully explores the dimensions and consequences of America's westward expansion. It manages to operate as both a pointed deconstruction of historical mythmaking while also being devastatingly entertaining.

It has taken me awhile, but I have finally circled back to *American Rust*, Meyer's debut novel. *American Rust* takes place in contemporary, post-Great Recession Pennsylvania. Yet, like *The Son*, it uses a familiar narrative trope – in this case, the timeless “a man goes on a journey” – to critique American exceptionalism. *American Rust* is a forensically-detailed journey through the detritus of the American Dream.

The two main characters are Isaac English and Billy Poe. Isaac is a brilliant underachiever who is caught in the rural town of Buell, Pennsylvania (a fictional place, modeled after Any Post-Industrial City, USA). His sister, Lee, has gone off to Yale and married a rich husband, leaving Isaac to care for his ailing, widower father, Henry. Living in a financial hell-scape, Isaac determines to follow the route of any good Steinbeckian character: he sets off on foot for California. Before leaving, he gets his friend Billy to tag along for part of the trip. Billy is a former big-man-on-campus, a high school football star and lady's man who never took the next step. He is held back by his own limited vision, and a history of violence.

Isaac and Billy don't get far before an event takes place. That's all I can say. Something happens and the story spins out from there.

Meyer's tells this story from the third-person limited perspective. He uses alternating viewpoint chapters that capture the perspectives of a half-dozen characters, including Isaac, Billy, and Lee; Billy's long-suffering mother, Grace; police chief Bud Harris, who is involved with Grace and looks out for Billy; and Henry English, a former factory worker reduced to a wheelchair. Fans of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* will recognize this storytelling style. (Fans of George R.R. Martin might not recognize how an author is able to start a story, and then finish it).

Each of the chapters are written in a kind of stream-of-conscious style that captures the varied dimensions of each person. It's a literary conceit, to be sure, but Meyer's keeps it readable. This isn't the kind of book where you need to unpack every sentence to figure out what just happened. Meyer's has a very particular knack for capturing the distinct personalities of each of his creations. You know you've captured a fictional person when you – the reader – can both root for a character, dislike a character, and change your mind about a character several times, all in the span of 367 pages.

The plot – of which I will not speak in detail – is engaging and fast moving. It is, in fact, so engaging and fast moving that you probably won't stop to think too deeply about some nagging plot holes and questionable logic. I was reading so fast at the end that I didn't have time to do anything except turn the page. To be sure, *American Rust* is not a perfect novel. It is flawed. Overall, however, it achieves all its ends. It is executed with such supreme skill that minor hiccups are easily ignored.

(As a personal note, I read two-thirds of *American Rust* while attending a seminar so boring that I'd fall asleep if I tried explaining it to you. Everyone I was with thought it was terrible. I thought it was great! Didn't hear a damn word of it. My only complaint was that it didn't last quite long enough for me to finish the book.)

Plot and character aside, the great achievement of *American Rust* is in its setting. Meyer's Pennsylvania is an economically-devastated wasteland of dying towns and shuttered factories. All the jobs have gone overseas and the once-thriving middle-class has disappeared. Drugs have replaced wages. Vagrants ride the rails like in Depression-days of yore. The woods and back-roads are populated by the dispersed and desperate. A stranger walking into town gets the cross-eye from law enforcement. Meyer's is incredibly effective at creating an atmosphere. His capitalist moonscape reminded me of nothing less than Cormac McCarthy's apocalyptic vision in *The Road*.

The Great Recession was a moment of historical impact. Millions of jobs were lost that will never be recovered. The very roadmap of American life was torn up, thrown in a metal can, and lit on fire. It is a big deal. It is a *seismic* thing.

And yet the world just keeps spinning without any real accounting. The rich stay rich; it's no one's fault; and

let's move on. (And just over the horizon? Robots). This is one of the few articles of popular culture that engages the subject head-on.

(One of the most interesting things about the mega-popular thriller *Gone Girl* is how it tried to tackle the consequences of the Great Recession, with powerful scenes set in an abandoned mall and a deserted subdivision. Yet all anyone cared about was that halftime twist. So much for dealing with our issues).

American Rust isn't just critiquing our self-conceptions, it is dramatizing a new reality. Something has gone terribly wrong here, and for some reason, only a New York City developer and a self-described socialist from Vermont have tapped into a pulsing vein of resentment that has existed for awhile but been studiously ignored. You don't have to buy into political demagoguery to acknowledge that a huge swath of people who had been dutifully following "the Way" are getting left behind. Have, in fact, already been left in the rearview.

No one in *American Rust* is real. Yet it feels like Meyer is speaking for actual people whose voices have gone long unheard. He is the Chorus for a vanishing species: the blue-collar American Middle Class.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"There was something particularly American about it--blaming yourself for bad luck--that resistance to seeing your life as affected by social forces, a tendency to attribute larger problems to individual behavior. The ugly reverse of the American Dream."

The other side of that coin is that Americans tend to look at people who have a streak of bad luck as having brought that adversity upon themselves. Maybe they didn't pray hard enough, or they kicked their dog too many times, or they slept around on their wife, or it could be the trickle down effect of having been born to the wrong parents. We get mad at the forces that are aligned against us, but we don't always land the blame where it needs to be placed.

This story is set in Pennsylvania, in the mill towns. The once vibrant communities where people could make \$30 to \$40 an hour, but then the mills closed and were moved to places that most people couldn't find on a map. People lost these good jobs that allowed them to buy nice houses, new cars, and send their kids to college. The only jobs they had to replace them with were \$5 to \$7 an hour jobs, so they moved away chasing new dreams, new work elsewhere, poverty among strangers. The ones that stayed: *"half the people went on welfare and the other half went back to hunting and gathering."* Fine homes, repossessed, with no one to buy them were stripped of what could be sold and left to slowly fall apart.

Capitalism at it's finest, right? It isn't about profit. It is about astronomical profit. Besides Americans love cheap goods even if they aren't made as well. It just means they won't last as long so they can buy and buy again.

When did we become more proud of money than building something.

"The work was all in the Midwest now, taking down the auto plants in Michigan and Indiana. And one day even that work would end, and there would be no record, nothing left standing, to show that anything had ever been built in America. It was going to cause big problems, he didn't know how but he felt it. You could

not have a country, not this big, that didn't make things for itself. There would be ramifications eventually."

Well at least their kids went to school and learned about computers. Thank goodness they will be able to find work that their parents can't.

Except...

those jobs...

as quickly as they are created are also moved overseas.

Son-of-a-....

Lee English got out though. She had an SAT score off the charts. She got into Yale and married an ultra rich guy. Did she love him? hmmm... well... she liked him. Probably wouldn't be too wise to see how his parents or his grandparents accumulated all this wealth. Her mother who probably married her blue collar father to irritate her wealthy parents is an intelligent, trapped, beautiful woman who inexplicably, soon after Lee leaves, weighs herself down with 11 pounds of rocks and drowns herself.

Drowns herself...claps her son in her vacated cage.

Isaac English is by far the smartest person to ever go through this Pennsylvania school district and that includes his sister, but here he is 20 years old still stuck there caring for his father Henry. A father who doesn't even like him that much. Isaac is undersized, couldn't play sports, and has interests in just about everything except the things that interest Henry.

Now Isaac doesn't have any friends, well he has one friend, and one thing I've learned about life is that you only need one really good friend. Billy Poe is a good friend. He was football star with offers to play ball in college about anywhere he wanted to go. It may seem like an odd pairing, but they were two people absolutely the most talented in the school at what they did best.

So when one gets in trouble it is no great surprise to find the other in trouble too.

Was it just bad luck being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Maybe corrupted genes, wrong temperament, or people just born to fail? Or maybe when opportunity knocked they didn't answer the door.

There are bad men and then there are bored good men that do bad things.

Interesting thing though, Billy Poe makes Lee English go all gooey inside. When she comes back for a visit...did someone say something about a husband?

So Isaac takes off, for a variety of reason, not least that the police might be interested in talking to him. He plans to hitchhike across country and apply to Berkeley. Good plan, terrible execution.

The narration flips back and forth between characters with each new chapter. I've noticed in some reviews that readers were confused about who was narrating at different points throughout the novel. Philipp Meyer begins each chapter labelled with Lee, Henry, Poe, Isaac, Grace, and Harris to cue the reader as to who will be narrating that chapter. I did not experience any confusion. As the novel progresses I was so caught up in the events that the chapter cues were no longer needed. I knew who was explaining and I was looking for

answers.

Grace is Poe's momma. She married the wrong guy, but sometimes we can't help who we fall in love with. She was attracted to Virgil like lightening to Ben Franklin. She has booted Virgil out several times, and generally, immediately, picked up with some other guy, sometimes that other guy was Sheriff Harris. *"The spare tire comes out. The spare tire is you."* I don't know if I've ever been the spare tire, but I don't have to be the spare tire to know I don't want to ever be the spare tire. Sheriff Harris is most assuredly the spare tire or as one of my friends likes to crudely call it...the dick in the jar.

When Poe gets jammed up, Grace loves Harris up like he is Elvis Presley born again. He takes a trip to Graceland.

Meyer writes with such assurance, with such stark realism that within a few chapters you feel like you've known these people your whole life. The scenes he writes about prison are absolutely terrifying. If anyone ever thinks that they can handle prison they need to read about what it will really entail in some of the later Poe chapters. He is worried about the future of America and what we have lost drips from these pages like melted ice cream. Our future has lost all cohesion. *"The real problem is the average citizen does not have a job he can be good at. You lose that, you lose the country."*

Those who are born rich, or were smart enough, lucky enough to be one of the privileged few don't seem to be proud to be Americans anymore. They aren't interested in lifting up their brothers or sisters. They aren't interested in building anything anymore with American labor and American ingenuity. They are interested only in piling up as much money as they possibly can. They are proud to be rich.

Is there anything more boring than a pile of money?

We used to build things, make things. Now those things are made in China or Taiwan or Indonesia not in small towns in Pennsylvania, Nebraska or Alabama. We used to build grand monuments to the world. Now those things are being built in places like Dubai or Zhoushan not in New York, or Chicago, or Detroit, or Los Angeles.

I'm lucky that I grew up in an America where it still felt like anything was possible. We still look like that America on the surface, but Meyer is going to show you that the underpinnings have been cut, and the brass wiring has been robbed, and the concrete is crumbling to dust. We became a superpower by building things and we will have to return to building things if we ever expect to have a viable future. We need to borrow the ideas of the past and bring them into the present. We need to be worried **NOW**. Highly recommended!! A novel with a compelling plot and burnished overtones of beautiful indignation.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Ned says

This style of prose worked for me: A flowing of the consciousness of six people dealing with the aftermath of an early, explosive plot bomb. These people exist against a backdrop of the declining steel industry with its attendant pathos and hopelessness. The human toil of corporate decisions, and loss of labor power, contributes to the tragedy that shrouds the otherwise breathtakingly beautiful Pennsylvania. Two young men,

very different yet shoring up after high school and coping in different ways, commit something close to murder. Their families are shattered, Isaac's mother's suicide and his father's debilitation from injury and Poe's mother who tries everything to save him, alone from a deadbeat father. In part this is a travel story, as Isaac wanders to escape something he can't quite name, yet is a feast of dangerous solitude. Poe, the more athletic, endures at home, subsisting like a Larry Brown character among the detritus of unemployment of small town America. Probably I most appreciated the sheriff, in love with Poe's mother and conflicted about his own motives. These are characters of strong bent, doing the right thing (most of the time) with self-doubting courage.

Meyer is an outstanding storyteller and his characters are some of the deepest and most interesting I've encountered in fiction. His philosophizing, as well as the keen knowledge of manufacturing, physics and literature are all on display, but delivered authentically through the six protagonists. The plot is riveting and drives and there's hardly a word wasted in this tight novel. It is a friendship story, it is about love, it is about fear, it is about courage, it is about hopelessness and renewal.

I'm conflicted about my rating, since this is one of the finest novels I've read and the style and substance fits me to a tee. My inclination is to give it four stars, as a first novel and not perfect, but I'm just going to have to do the right thing, like its characters, and assign the higher number. I'll be reading Meyer's other books, all of them, an indication of how good I think this writer is.

From Harris, the sheriff (p. 212), from his slightly debauched mentor who has retired and giving him a dose of philosophy along with his warning: "You should have been here for the seventies, Bud. The department was buying new cruisers with Corvette engines maybe every three years. And then came the eighties, and then it wasn't just that we lost all those jobs, it was that people didn't have anything to be good at anymore'. He shrugged. 'There's only so good you can be about pushing a mop or emptying a bedpan. We're trending backwards as a nation, probably for the first time in history, and it's not the kids with the green hair and the bones through their noses. Personally I don't care for it, but those things are inevitable. The real problem is the average citizen does not have a job he can be good at. You lost that, you lose the country.'"

And finally, toward the end of Isaac's journey, contemplating ending it all and yet finally understanding his feelings about his own father (p. 315). "Now he is alone, knowing what he did to her, that you don't forgive him. Alone, his daughter forgave him so she could leave. No I forgive him for that it's the act he puts on. Because he has to. What his insides must look like. Same as what you did to the Swede, part of you will die so as not to understand it. Cold, white hollow at your center. Kept warm by others or it leaks out into the world. What makes a man: love honor morals. Someone to protect. Man alone the rational animal. A man alone is a rational animal. Strip away what's decent. Hang on to your knife. Keep on until you're stopped... You keep going like this or you can lean here, lean a little farther, hurt for a half second and then nothing. I am not afraid of that, he thought. It is the unfinished business. Leaving plenty of it. It is only Poe. Only Poe that is not what you thought when he pulled you out of the water... I am lucky he thought I am lucky they cannot see me like this. Walk then. Start walking. Alright. I will get off this bridge. I will get off this bridge I will choose something."

Dem says

3.5 stars

American Rust by Philipp Meyer is set in the fictional town of Buell amid the decaying industrial landscape of Mon Valley Pennsylvania.

Isaac English and Billy Poe are best friends both still hanging around the decaying town of Buell and wanting out, Isaac is caring for his sick father while his sister Lee has moved away. Billy Poe has missed his chance to become a football star and finds himself attracting the attentions of the law on several occasions. Isaac plans his escape and on the day of his leaving town something happens that changes the two friends fates and test the loyalties of their friendship and those of families and loved ones.

I really enjoyed this slow paced novel and thought the writing was really good. The story is written from the alternating view of the novel's characters and this I really enjoyed as I found the story came through very clearly. The characters are totally believable and I found a wonderful sense of time and place in the novel. The town's demise after the a downturn in the steel Industry is very relevant to this story and we clearly see how people who once had purpose have lost their livelihoods and their self esteem and at times the novel could border on depressing.

After reading this book I would be wary of recommending it to friends as as its one of those books that is not going to be everybody's cup of tea but I enjoyed the read and will look out for other books by Philipp Meyer.

Bill says

So I guess this is what is known as grit-lit. It's my first foray into this kind of book, but judging by this one, it won't be my last.

It's actually a very simple story, of one young man trying to get out of a very depressed town in Pennsylvania. He is accompanied for part of the way by a friend, and along the way, a death ensues. And basically the whole rest of the book is dealing with the ramifications of that encounter.

The chapters alternate from the points of view of the various main characters, so the book is very easy to follow. Both the setting of the story and the plot itself are extremely bleak. But don't let that put you off. The writing is uniformly excellent and I personally found the story to be very compelling, so I was hard pressed to put the book down. In fact, I just bought the author's second book The Son. tonight at the bookstore in the mall.

Rayroy says

I have been living in Pittsburgh for over seven years and in that time I have often visited the Mon River Valley south of the city of champions. Towns such as Monessen, Donora, New Eagle, Brownsville, Bell Vernon and others make up the Mon River Valley, They are towns nestled between the muddy brown Monongahela River and inspiring hillsides, each town has its own unique charm and the region is the setting of Philip Meyer's American Rust. Meyer's describes the valley strikingly well, I got a thrill recognizing towns ,landmarks and the layout of the land, it's a wonder why more books don't take place in Southwestern Pennsylvania, Michael Carbon's Wonder Boys takes place in Pittsburgh and surrounding area, I got the same holy crap I have been there feeling in both books.

As for the story of American Rust, let's see it's got a thriller's pacing, is told through multiple perspectives that are more like getting in the characters' heads, you feel their moral dilemmas and how they make sense of the world around them. While American Rust is about broken dreams, in towns with once glorious times their inhabitants getting by on hard times, the center is about friendship and its power in horrible situations. Two best friends, Isaac and Poe, get mixed up in an act of violence in which their friendship is tested. American Rust is haunting, a realistic modern American drama that seems fresh and feels right for the current post 2008 recession we live in.

I have to get this off my chest, a lot of reviews say American Rust is unreadable at times, I didn't find it unreadable at all, am I crazy or something? I have a theory but don't feel like getting in to it, we all are different kinds of readers.

piperitapitta says

Acciaio.

Sono tutte collegate fra loro le figure di questo romanzo, e l'incedere della storia avanza lentamente in linea retta, passando dalla voce di una a quella dell'altra.

Sembra quasi che la linea narrativa di Meyer corrisponda alla fuga di Isaac che fugge da Buell avendo per meta la California.

Isaac e il suo amico Billy Poe.

Isaac e suo padre, e sua sorella Lee.

Poe e sua madre Grace, e il poliziotto Harris, che cerca di proteggerlo dal guaio in cui si è cacciato insieme a Isaac.

Siamo a *Buell, Contea di Fayette, Pennsylvania. Fayette-nam, la chiamavano spesso.*

E già queste parole ci danno la misura dello scenario che si apre davanti ai nostri occhi: desolazione, abbandono, ruggine che corrode non solo gli scheletri degli stabilimenti delle acciaierie ormai in disuso da lungo tempo, ma anche gli animi di chi, come gli abitanti di Buell, ha visto la sua vita e il suo futuro sgretolarsi nel nulla, nell'assenza di lavoro e prospettive.

Vite stanche, senza meta per giovani e anziani, per genitori e figli, vite che vengono aggrovigliate irrimediabilmente l'una all'altra dal drammatico episodio che coinvolge Isaac English e Billy Poe la notte in cui Isaac decide di andare via.

Ognuno di loro, ognuna delle sei vite di cui Meyer decide di ascoltare i pensieri inconfessati, è un pezzetto di anima di Buell, un pezzetto di anima di quel grande angolo degli Stati Uniti, sfruttato e prosciugato, che è stato poi lasciato arrugginire al sole, alla neve, al vento.

Meyer lo fa usando uno stile narrativo particolare, in cui mischia al racconto il parlare fra sé dei protagonisti - la voce interiore stanca e vinta di Grace, quella spaventata e rassegnata di Poe, quella che si incita ad andare avanti di Isaac, che arriva all'orecchio del lettore come uno strano miscuglio di pensieri ad alta voce e di una voce fuori campo che si rivolge a *il ragazzo* quasi prendendose gioco - e al quale alterna splendide descrizioni della natura di Buell e dei luoghi incontrati da Isaac nel suo camminare, la descrizione degli scheletri di cemento che sono disseminati tutt'intorno, paesaggi urbani desertificati e paesaggi intraurbani sovrappopolati come il carcere di Uniontown, paesaggi interiori come quello di Harris e della sua scelta estrema.

È un diesel questo romanzo, procede con un andamento lento per quasi tre quarti senza grandi brividi, forse anche annoiando un po' per l'assenza di un centro che dia profondità alla storia, ma è proprio nel momento in cui quell'andamento lento in linea retta inizia ad avvitarci su se stesso fino a formare una spirale concentrica,

che riprende quota, fino a farti capire, solo alla fine, che quel diesel era un turbo diesel.
Un po' come la vita di Isaac English, quoziente intellettivo 167.

Gran bella scrittura quella di Meyer, anche se ho preferito sicuramente *Il Figlio*, e grande passione, la sua, per i romanzi corali, anche se forse si sente la necessità, per il futuro (chissà, vedremo il prossimo romanzo), di una figura centrale in grado di catalizzare l'attenzione del lettore, di una storia capace di essere forte per tutte le oltre quattrocento pagine dei suoi romanzi.

Lisaruss says

Why can't the crop of young American writers learn to write properly constructed literature? Fyodor Dostoevsky's take on the subject, for God's sake. When the sum total of someone's experiential modus operandi has involved cell phones, laptops, iPods, electronic devices, 24/7 cable TV, football half-time shows, virtual carnal knowledge, scanners, bar codes, reality TV, et al., to ad infinitum, then what can one really expect from such a cultural meltdown?

My suggestion to the potential readers of this book is to select books written by authors who wrote in other centuries if you desire to read quality fiction.

American Rust needs to yellow and tatter and slowly disintegrate on the shelf. Trees sacrificed so that someone without much talent can make a lot of money.

Teresa Proença says

Alguma vez vos aconteceu...?

Ouvirem falar de alguém de quem todos gostam. Alguém, cujo encanto nos absorve e apaixona e ao qual ficamos irremediavelmente presos.

De tal forma, que somos tomados de uma vontade irresistível de conhecer essa pessoa e com ela desfrutar das prometidas maravilhas.

Quando, finalmente, a encontramos e ela nos fala, nos conta os seus segredos, as suas histórias, somos tomados pelo desespero. Porque não entendemos, nem nos interessamos pelo que nos conta e porque nos aborrecemos com o modo como o faz.

Mas continuamos a ouvir, duvidando do nosso discernimento... Pois se todos gostam!

E lá vamos insistindo e aguentando, na esperança de que em algum ponto surja a magia que a tantos encantou.

Quando, finalmente, termina o encontro, pouco nos fica além do amargo pensamento: " Que se passa comigo? Porque não pude amar este ser tão querido por todos?"

A mim já me aconteceu...!

Warwick says

When I worked in France I covered a lot of industrial disputes, as you can imagine. Renault would try and close a factory, and suddenly the whole country was out on strike: I found it incredible when I first arrived. 'Surely,' I said to colleagues, 'someone running a company has the right to decide whether or not to keep one of their factories open.' They looked at me like I was insane. They didn't see the issue in those terms at all: for them, it was about a world with a colossal wealth gap where businessmen who make millions a day can put hundreds of people out of work just to increase their margins.

For American colleagues (who on top of all that were also getting their heads around European healthcare), it was sometimes quite a paradigm shift. And whatever happened to unionism in the States, anyway? I guess the decline in manufacturing put an end to a lot of it, but it's hard to avoid the feeling that there's something on the level of the national psyche going on, too. The steel-working towns in southwestern Pennsylvania that form the subject and the setting for *American Rust* are a case in point: thousands of people laid off in a very short space of time, an entire region sent into acute decline – the kind of mass shutdown that you'd expect would generate a near-revolution, at least within local communities.

But there had never been any revolution, not anything close, a hundred and fifty thousand people lost their jobs but they had all gone quietly. It was obvious there were people responsible, there were living breathing men who'd made those decisions to put the entire Valley out of work, they had vacation homes in Aspen, they sent their kids to Yale, their portfolios went up when the mills shut down. [...] There was something particularly American about it—blaming yourself for bad luck—that resistance to seeing your life as affected by social forces, a tendency to attribute larger problems to individual behavior. The ugly reverse of the American Dream. In France, she thought, they would have shut down the country.

They would, too. The landscape of American industrial decline is described with awesome power in this book, and its effects on people's choices and decisions are explored relentlessly and without sentimentality. It must have seemed especially timely when it was released in 2009; even now, it feels like an important way of putting some flesh on the bones of all the newspaper stories about economic uncertainty. Most impressive – particularly for a first novel – is that the characters are not dropped into this environment cold, but rather seem to have grown out of it organically: the school football star now vegetating in a doublewide, the smart kid forced to stay because his father was injured in an industrial accident, the girl who escaped guiltily to Yale in an attempt to avoid the fate of all her small-town friends:

'Do a boy once in school, know it's a mistake but five years later there's no one else and the bar is closing so you do it again. Ten years later you're married to him.'

In Trish's fine review, she mentions that this is the sort of book that should get more men reading novels, and I can see something in that – it does feel like quite a male book. Not the laddishness of a Nick Hornby, or the horny-intellectual stance of a Philip Roth, but rather a kind of blue-collar gruffness, conveyed through an admirably curt and colloquial prose style. Some critics have complained about this prose, rather prissily I feel, objecting to the many comma splices and other run-ons – and occasionally, it must be said, the effect becomes a little staccato and intrusive:

Poe was asleep, the warm air blowing on them, the faint light from the dashboard, she ran her hands across his legs, her fingers through the hair between them, then she touched the car window, the cold glass, outside it was very cold.

But on the whole I thought it worked extremely well. Meyer is able to compress a huge amount of information and personality into some very brief internal dialogues, like a kind of stream-of-consciousness Cormac McCarthy – straight away when I began the book I found myself admiring this little sketch in the opening paragraph:

Late morning and he walked quickly through the woods toward town—a small thin figure with a backpack, trying hard to keep out of sight. He'd taken four thousand dollars from the old man's desk; *Stolen*, he corrected himself. The nuthouse prison-break. Anyone sees you and it's Silas get the dogs.

That's just lovely. In general this is a book that feels well-edited, well-refined – although I still suspect it would be better if it were a little shorter. And it's certainly not problem-free. I found the characters' motivations hard to believe a lot of the time, and the opening dramatic confrontation, on which the remainder of the novel rests, never quite rang true to me. But the book still works, because the characters and the environment feel absolutely real, even in their more technical passages. (The descriptions of prison are the most gritty and naturalistic I can remember reading.)

Although you can feel the whole thing building to a nasty climax, the tragedy is not rooted in narrative melodrama but in economic reality.

'...it wasn't just that we lost all those jobs, it was that people didn't have anything to be good at anymore. [...] There's only so good you can be about pushing a mop or emptying a bedpan. We're trending backwards as a nation, probably for the first time in history, and it's not the kids with the green hair and the bones through their noses. [...] The real problem is that the average citizen does not have a job he can be good at. You lose that, you lose the country.'

The French are getting their placards ready – they know exactly what's coming. And to those prominent voices in the US who still believe that success depends only on working hard and saying your prayers, this novel is likely to do more to illustrate the counterargument than a hundred news reports ever will.
