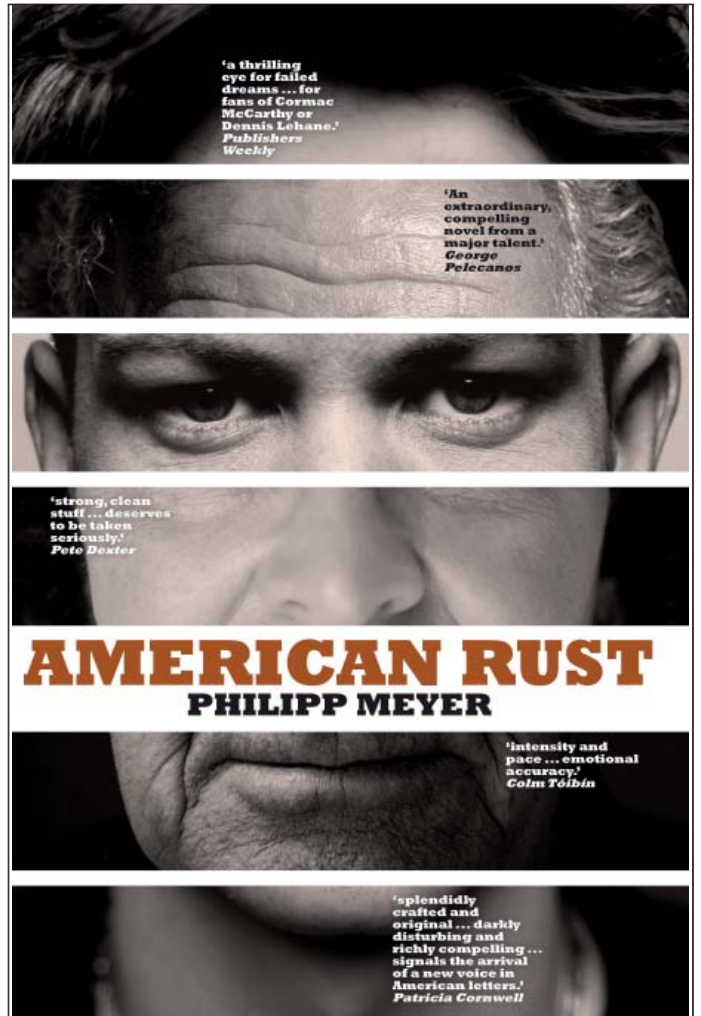


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the Book

'A grimly powerful hybrid: provocative literary fiction crossed with a propulsive thriller' Kirkus Review

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 is 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 ageing father after his mother commits suicide and his sister escapes to Yale, Isaac English longs for a life beyond his hometown. But when he finally sets out to leave for good, accompanied by his temperamental best friend and former high school football star Billy Poe, 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* takes us into the contemporary American heartland at a moment of profound unrest and uncertainty about the future. It is 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.

About the Author

Philipp Meyer has been a James Michener Fellow in Fiction and has had stories published in *McSweeney's*, *The Iowa Review* and *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best*, 2007. 'One Day This Will All Be Yours' was selected by Edward P. Jones for the anthology *Best American Short Stories: 2007* where it received an Honourable Mention.

Philipp Meyer on writing *American Rust*










When I started writing *American Rust* in late 2004/early 2005, there was an image in my head of two young men running from something. They were in a rural area that had once been industrial—a place both beautiful and neglected. Though technically men, in many ways they were still boys—naïve about much of the world. But they were both very intelligent. They knew they'd done something terrible, but they were not sure how to deal with it. This is what came to me out of my subconscious; this is what I had in mind when I began writing the book.


The act of writing, of telling a story, is always a mix of using both the conscious and subconscious mind. Most of the important stuff, maybe 90-95%, comes from the subconscious. Artists and writers in the old days used to call this The Muse, as if it were something outside of them. I just think of it as a much smarter, more observant, and more knowledgeable version of myself. It's also more animalistic. It comes from the same place my dreams come from. Much of my experience of learning to write fiction has been about learning how to trust and, to some extent, control this part. Actually, control might be an exaggeration. Guide is a better word.

In the case of *American Rust*, the story started out being about these two young men, but very quickly other characters began to appear and grow in importance. It became clear that each of these characters had their own separate moral dilemmas and then it became clear that the book would have to include all of their perspectives. I knew I was making things much harder on myself by doing this—I would have to get to know six people rather than two. But I also knew it was the only way to tell the story.

In the end I probably wrote between 9,000 and 10,000 pages, of which about 375 made it into the final version. At one point in my career I might have worried about the amount of work, the sheer number of pages, that ended up on the cutting room floor (as it were), but I now see that this is the only way to do it. Most of the writing you do is just to learn your characters well enough to properly tell their story. If your characters exist as real people in your mind, they will come to exist in the reader's mind as well.

Discussion Questions

-  In what ways does seeing the novel through the eyes of six different characters change the experience of the book? How would the book be different if seen from only one point of view? Which characters would be more or less likeable if the reader could see them omnisciently? Do you think Meyer was trying to make a broader point by writing this way?
-  Does your opinion of various characters change throughout the book? How and why?
-  Isaac, Poe, Lee, Grace, and Harris are all faced with important decisions that will affect not only their own lives, but also the lives of their loved ones. Whose choice was hardest to make?
-  Which characters behaved in the most unexpected ways?
-  Much of the book touches on the idea of consciously knowing versus knowing subconsciously. In which characters and subplots does this become an important distinction?
-  One of Isaac's obsessions is the question of what differentiates humans from other animals. What does he ultimately conclude, and why? Do you agree with him?
-  When the book begins, Poe, despite his athleticism, considers himself a coward. Do you agree with his assessment? Has it changed by the time the book ends?
-  Harris, by most conventional measures, is a "good" man at the book's beginning. Has he changed by the book's end? Is he still good? Would society agree with you?
-  Lee says in her own words at the beginning of the novel, that she abandoned her family to save herself. Do you agree with this self-assessment? Does your opinion of her change as the story unfolds? What would you do in her shoes?

 How much responsibility does Grace have for Harris's actions near the end of the book? Does she have moral responsibility? Are her actions more or less pure than Harris's? What would you have done in her or Harris's position? Is Grace still a good person?

Reviews

'...prying the lid off a rusted can of failed hope and small-town secrets... his taut, direct prose strikes the perfect tone for this kaleidoscope of fractured dreams... honest and unflinching storytelling.' Amazon, Book of the Month

'American Rust is both darkly disturbing and richly compelling... signals the arrival of a new voice in American letters.' Patricia Cornwell

'With its strong narrative engine and understated social insight, American Rust is reminiscent of the best of Robert Stone and Russell Banks. Author Philipp Meyer locates the heart of his working class characters without false sentiment or condescension, and their world is artfully described.' George Pelecanos

'... a brilliantly realised story that is a painful rendition of the reality being played out... American Rust presents the human effects of our industrial decline more powerfully than any newspaper editorial or TV special report. Philipp Meyer is a fine writer, and he has nailed a difficult story.' Robert Birnbaum, The Morning News

'An engrossing drama.' Marie Claire

Recommended Reading:

 The Road Cormac McCarthy

 Of Mice and Men John Steinbeck