



American Rust: A Novel

By Philipp Meyer

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The debut novel from the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Son*, which is now an AMC original TV series

BONUS: This edition contains a reader's guide.

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 arise from its loss. From local bars to trainyards 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 aging 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, 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.

Newsweek's list of "Best. Books. Ever"
A Washington Post Top Ten Book of 2009
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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best of the Month, February 2009: Buell, Pennsylvania lies in ruins, a dying--if not already dead--steel town, where even the lush surrounding country seethes with concealed industrial toxins. When Isaac English and Billy Poe--a pair of high-school friends straight out of Steinbeck--embark on a starry-eyed cross-country escape to California, a violent encounter with a trio of transients leaves one dead, prying the lid off a rusted can of failed hope and small-town secrets. *American Rust* is Philipp Meyer's first novel, and his taut, direct prose strikes the perfect tone for this kaleidoscope of fractured dreams, elevating a book that otherwise might be relentlessly dour to the level of honest and unflinching storytelling. (Interestingly, Meyer has a fan in Patricia Cornwell, who name-checked *American Rust* in her latest novel, *Scarpetta*, even though Meyer's book hadn't been released yet.) --*Jon Foro*

Amazon Exclusive: Philipp Meyer on *American Rust*



In the late seventies, when I was five, my parents moved us to a blue-collar neighborhood in Baltimore. As was the case with most of the old cities of the northeast, Baltimore was in the throes of a serious social collapse. Any industry you could name was falling apart--steel, ship-building, textiles--not to mention the docks and the port. The middle class was evaporating. Even among the neighborhood kids, there was a sense that things were getting worse, not better.

That neighborhood was called Hampden, a place since immortalized in many of John Waters's films. Back then, even in Baltimore's often shoddy public schools, Hampden was not a place you wanted to admit you were from--my brother and I often lied when asked where we lived. There were police cars and ambulances on our street with some frequency, men passed out on the sidewalk. My father, a graduate student, once went outside with his pistol to check on a man whom he thought had been murdered near our house.

Even so, there was a strong community and the people who were able did their best to watch out for each other. These were good people, working people, but in the end that didn't matter--their jobs had disappeared and they tumbled from the middle class into the ranks of what we now call the "working poor." It was an early lesson into the way life worked for certain segments of our society.

Many years later, after a long and roundabout route to get into and eventually graduate from college, I ended up taking a job on Wall Street. I was proud of my new job, proud I'd gone from high school dropout to Cornell University graduate to Wall Street trader. Naturally, complications soon arose.

One surprising thing was that while in most of the country the closing of a factory was seen as tragic, on Wall Street it was nearly a cause for celebration. Whatever the company in question, closing an American factory caused their stock price to go up. The more jobs were outsourced, the more the company executives made on their stock options, the more investment bankers racked up multi-million dollar bonuses. Meanwhile, a short distance away, thousands of families were being devastated.

While I still have many close friends on Wall Street, after a few years there I knew it was the wrong path. I cared about people, I cared about their stories, I'd stopped caring about money. After leaving the bank I spent my time writing and working jobs in construction and as an EMT; I moved back in with my parents and lived in their basement. In 2005, I lucked into a writing scholarship at the Michener Center for Writers in Austin, Texas, where I wrote the majority of *American Rust*.

There are thousands of communities in which this book could have taken place, but Pittsburgh and the Monongahela Valley area, where I have many friends and family, seemed like the most natural setting. After thriving for a hundred years, helping to win our wars and build our great cities, the Mon Valley now offers a striking combination of rural beauty and industrial decay. Once the epitome of the American Dream--full of hard-working towns where you could make a name for yourself--the Valley today has the feel of a forgotten place.

This was the backdrop of the story I wanted to tell in *American Rust*--how events beyond our control can change the way we define our humanity. I think Americans are a tough people, but often our best doesn't come out until we're pushed our hardest. This is what I set out to do in the book. I wanted to examine the old American themes of the individual versus society, freedom versus determinism. I wanted to investigate what really makes us human.

From Publishers Weekly

In his unrelentingly downbeat debut, Meyer offers up a character-driven near-noir set in Buell, a dying Pennsylvania steel town, where aimless friends Billy Poe and Isaac English are trapped by economic and personal circumstance. Just before their halfhearted escape to California, Isaac accidentally kills a transient who tries to rob Poe. The boys return to the crime scene the next day with plans to cover up the crime, setting the plot in motion. Poe is soon under suspicion, and Isaac, distraught after discovering Poe has been carrying on a relationship with Isaac's sister, Lee, sets off for California alone. Meanwhile, Poe's mother, Grace, mourns her own lost opportunities, broods over her son and pines for her on-again-off-again love, the local sheriff. A fully realized tragic heroine, Grace is the poignant thrust of the novel, embodying enough rural tragedy to nearly atone for the novel's weakness: a sense that some of the plot mechanics are arbitrary. Still, Meyer has a thrilling eye for failed dreams and writes uncommonly tense scenes of violence, and in the character of Grace creates a woeful heroine. Fans of Cormac McCarthy or Dennis Lehane will find in Meyer an author worth watching. (Feb.)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Set in a moribund Pennsylvania steel town, this bleak but skillful debut novel is both affecting and timely. Isaac English was a child of promise whose dreams of a bright future beyond his troubled environs were thwarted early on by economic circumstance. His mother dead, his father disabled, a college education no more than a fantasy, he resolves to flee town but is implicated in a violent act that abruptly changes the lives of everyone around him. Meyer occasionally stumbles, especially when he is dealing with the realities of criminal law, but his rigorously sculpted psychologies and assured sense of place are compelling.

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