



America America

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A stunning novel, set in a small town during the Nixon era and today, about America and family, politics and tragedy, and the impact of fate on a young man's life.

In the early 1970s, Corey Sifter, the son of working-class parents, becomes a yard boy on the grand estate of the powerful Metarey family. Soon, through the family's generosity, he is a student at a private boarding school and an aide to the great New York senator Henry Bonwiller, who is running for president of the United States. Before long, Corey finds himself involved with one of the Metarey daughters as well, and he begins to leave behind the world of his upbringing. As the Bonwiller campaign gains momentum, Corey finds himself caught up in a complex web of events in which loyalty, politics, sex, and gratitude conflict with morality, love, and the truth. America America is a beautiful novel about America as it was and is, a remarkable exploration of how vanity, greatness, and tragedy combine to change history and fate.

America America Details

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Author : Ethan Canin

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Nette says

Whew, thank goodness. I've started and tossed aside four or five books in the last two weeks, not sure whether they just sucked or whether I'd developed a brain disease that affected my concentration. But once I started this one, I was sucked in for two days. Thanks to Mr. Canin, I know I'm not suffering from early senility. What a great book! Class, family, politics, innocence, corruption, and one of the great dog characters in recent literature.

Lynn says

This book about family, politics and tragedy set in the 1970's is beautifully written, but that alone isn't enough to make me love it. Almost the entire novel is viewed through the POV of the main character Corey Sifter at various stages of his life. The narrative changes from one life stage to another within chapters, so at times you are figuring out which Corey is narrating now: the adult Corey, the teen Corey or the college Corey? I eventually got used to this but I never grew to like it, and it spoiled my enjoyment of the book. I also felt that the author kept the reader at an arms length away from his characters, never letting us get close to them. This is especially true about the Metarey sisters: Clara and Christian. Having finished the book, I have no idea what these girls were like, but they, especially one, play a crucial role in Corey's life. The reader is left to wonder why.

Three stars because it has beautiful prose and the basic idea is good. But it has major flaws IMHO.

Hillary says

Ethan Canin just keeps getting better and better. This beautifully crafted novel, set in the 1970s, tells the story of Corey Sifter, a poor, bright, earnest young man drawn into the privileged circle of a wealthy liberal family, the Metareys, and their world of wealth and political machination. The characters are wonderfully realized and the story, which revolves around the rise and scandalous fall of a great Senator who's running for President, is very compelling. Not to mention oh-so-relevant to what's going on today.

Abby says

I requested the book from the LT Early Reviewer program because I loved Canin's book of short stories ("The Palace Thief") and because the plot summary was irresistible: politics, scandal and small-town life in the Nixon era, with a working-class protagonist entangled with the rich and powerful – all the ingredients of a great read in the hands of a master of character development.

The result is a beautifully written book that perhaps reaches for more than it achieves. The story, told by decent, hard-working Corey Sifter, moves back and forth in time from the present to Corey's teen-age years when he was witness to events that brought down a senator and all but destroyed the Metareys, the benevolent family of landed gentry that employed most of the town and took Corey under its wing. But

despite the skill with which Canin tells the story, I found myself curiously uninvolved – skating along the surface rather than drawn in and caring deeply about the characters. In particular, the Metareys and Senator Bonwiller never came alive; their characters seemed to lack the depth that I admired in “The Palace Thief” and I was unmoved by their flaws and destructive behavior. On the other hand, Canin seemed more comfortable with Corey and his working-class family and neighbors, giving us meticulously observed descriptions of their lives, their work and their losses.

I admired this book but I didn’t love it. Canin is a fine writer but I thought the emotional wallop of his stories was missing here.

Kristy says

wow this was a great book. Ethan Canin is a talent beyond his years. His writing style is calm and fluid. One of the best aspects of the book is the reflections that the narrator makes on his own daughters. It isn't just a story about hard work, ambition and the great American way. Canin shows us that we are just paving the way for what we set for ourselves back when we were children. If we were digging holes when we were seven, take a look at what you are doing when you're thirty. If your making up plays when you are six, look at your life at forty. It's a great story.

Christina says

I really love his short stories, but I find his novels to be lacking something. In this case, it just felt long & overly drawn out. The characters were good & I love his writing, but the plot didn't sustain a book of this length. Try "The Palace Thief" or "Emperor of the Air" instead.

Ron Charles says

America America is Ethan Canin's best novel, but its timing is unnerving. His ruminative story begins with a funeral for the country's greatest liberal senator, whose presidential ambitions were smashed years earlier by the death of a young campaign aide in a drunk-driving accident. The novel really isn't about Sen. Ted Kennedy, but the resemblance is impossible to ignore, and Kennedy's recent announcement that he has a malignant brain tumor has already started, for many of us, the process of reflection that America America records in such sensitive detail.

The middle-aged narrator, Corey Sifter, was an eager, observant teenager during Sen. Bonwiller's campaign for the presidential nomination in 1972. Now publisher of a small newspaper, Corey looks back on the events of that time, amazed by the shady, private way power brokers and journalists once conducted the nation's politics. He was 16, living in a town near Buffalo, N.Y., "that was almost entirely built and owned by a single family, the Metareys." Despite their vast wealth and influence, the Metareys had, over several generations, become modest and beneficent lords. They drove ordinary cars, shopped in the same stores as their employees and sent their children to the public schools. Corey tells us that the patriarch, Liam Metarey, "was a generous, civic-minded, and altruistic patron of the whole community," with a strong interest in shaping government from behind the scenes. He got Henry Bonwiller elected to the Senate and tried with all his might and money to get him elected president. That disastrous effort becomes the backdrop of this

complex novel.

Canin carefully splices his fictional characters into the news of the 1960s and '70s -- a masterful feat of literary Photoshop. The Vietnam War is tearing the country apart and wearing down President Nixon; Sen. Edward Muskie hasn't cried yet in the New Hampshire snowstorm, but Bonwiller's people already believe their man can beat him for the Democratic nomination. Liam Metarey's house serves as the Bonwiller headquarters, and we see the campaign from a highly impressionistic and limited point of view. After all, Corey, the son of solid working-class parents, is just a high school sophomore during this heady political time. He gets a job as a groundskeeper on the Metarey estate, which gives him a venue, he notes, to observe "everything that was happening so openly, and yet so mysteriously, in front of me."

While the nation's eyes are on Sen. Bonwiller, we focus on Liam Metarey, an introspective kingmaker more comfortable fixing his tractor than counseling legislators. Wearing his noblesse oblige like an old flannel shirt, he takes a fatherly interest in the boy, and before long he's treating him as a son and sometimes even a confidant. "I'd lost track of where I'd come from," Corey admits. "And because of the Metareys' generosity -- I call it that, though I could as easily call it their peculiarity, or, as my wife used to say, their nasty sport-- because of how the Metareys let me into their existence, I think I first took it inside myself, at the age of sixteen, that such an existence might someday be mine." His ambitious feelings are further complicated by his attraction to one of the beautiful Metarey daughters, an attraction her father seems to encourage despite the yawning distance between their two families.

Canin, who teaches at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, has written before about the seductive and transformative power of people with extraordinary wealth, but never with such sensitivity. His overly lush *For Kings and Planets* (1998) described a wide-eyed boy from Missouri who goes to New York and befriends a dazzling, affluent student at Columbia University. *Maybe America America* presents a more intricate and mature exploration of this theme because the author no longer seems so spellbound by money. That emotional distance allows Canin to draw the rich and poor as vastly more interesting and multivalent characters.

America America isn't hawking any particular partisan agenda, but like other great political novels, it's a story in which the audacity of hope confronts the tenacity of power -- and loses. As Corey looks back on his teenage self and the men who plotted to take the White House that year, the novel becomes a reflection on a young man's maturity and the moral calculus of democratic government. "I've never known another politician, and have never again in my life come so close to a man of history like Senator Bonwiller," Corey says. "I took every incident as a fable, every milestone as a fortuitous lesson on how to act in this new and public world. . . . I didn't like him much, even then, but I suppose in those days there was nothing I wouldn't do for him."

Sen. Bonwiller is celebrated as the man who did "more for the causes of civil rights and labor than anyone in congressional history." But what troubled Corey then and continues to haunt him as an adult is the contrast between "public idealism and such personal ruthlessness," between the character needed to win an election and the character needed to lead a nation. Once the office has been attained, Corey notes, "then a politician must make a transformation that he may have no more ability to make than he has to grow wings and fly. He must change his personal ambition into ambition for his country."

One has to accept -- even enjoy -- a fair amount of such wisdom in *America America*. In addition to his role as a teacher in the country's most prestigious writing school, Canin is a physician, and perhaps those two offices of supreme authority are responsible for a narrator who tends to lecture. That's fine with me, so long as the lecturer is this insightful and moving. We've waited a long time for a worthy successor to Robert Penn

Warren's *All the King's Men*, and it couldn't have arrived at a more auspicious moment than this season of potentially epochal political change.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...>

Bruno Bouchet says

Oh no! I ended up putting this book aside. I'm a sucker for the old ingenue sucked in the wealthy family and getting involved in a scandal plot, but this seemed to add nothing new. I'd read it all before and the pace seemed to move really slowly. I didn't enjoy the present-time story and felt when a third timeline was introduced I gave up. Although the past-time line was set in the 70's, it didn't feel like the seventies, it felt very 30-50's. I found it hard to believe in the 1970s a father and son would laboriously dig a ditch by hand, parting tree branches when employed to mend a drain. The old cars, the old fashioned senator, the wealthy paternalistic family looking after the local town, it didn't really fit with the Nixon era to me. The writing style was good. It was certainly readable and I began by charging through the pages but I found myself waiting and waiting for it to get going. I stopped caring about the characters, and then I stopped reading.

Lars Guthrie says

Geoffrey Wolff's review in the New York Times brands the narrator of "America America" as "diffident and reliably gullible and unsmiling." While I would disagree with the last adjective--Corey Sifter surely has a sense of humor--I must admit my affection for Sifter's story is due in part to my own diffidence and gullibility. I keep being drawn to elements of our culture that show my pop naivete--Leona Lewis's "Bleeding Love" truly moves me, for one example. Anyway, "America America" spoke to me. I read it at the same time as Bill Ayers published his corrective to the Palinesque script of SDS/Weatherman history (also in The NY Times), Neil Young's "Sugar Mountain-Live at Canterbury House 1968" was released, and I was remembering my participation in the Pentagon levitation of 1967 and my subsequent stint in Vietnam. "America America" connected me to all of that and beyond. Highly recommended.

Book Club Mom says

In 1971, Henry Bonwiller is near the front of the race to become the next Democratic nominee for president of the United States, and a young Corey Sifter is there to witness his rise and ultimate fall, as an aide to the money and power behind the campaign, Liam Metarey. *America America* is a coming-of-age story set inside a political drama in which Corey, the hard working teenage son of a tradesman in the upstate New York town of Saline, is taken under Metarey's wing. Saline is a fictional town in which the Metarey family has built, controlled and nourished for generations – its fortune built from the family's business in mining, lumber, oil, transportation and banking. But the Metareys have also taken good care Saline's people and the feeling of security of having a town benefactor is built into the lives of everyone who lives in there.

The story spans thirty years, with a great deal of jumping back and forth between story lines. The book's main story revolves around Corey, who becomes an errand boy, driver and helper during Bonwiller's campaign. Corey is thrilled to be around the excitement of a presidential campaign. He sees and hears a great deal and, as a scandal emerges, Corey realizes he has played a part in the cover-up. Did he choose to look the

other way or was Liam Metarey protecting him?

Secondary stories focus on Corey's present-day life as a newspaper man with grown daughters and his questions about and feelings of regret over how he was involved in a scandal that changed many lives. An additional section presents Corey as a college student, just a little bit removed from the events that alter him.

Canin details Bonwiller's campaign strategy as he makes his way through the primaries, going up against Muskie, McGovern, Wallace and the rest, with a longer-term view of how Bonwiller will campaign against Richard Nixon. Corey loves the excitement of press conferences, speeches and campaigning events which are headquartered at Metarey's mansion in Saline. He's a great observer and keeps his mouth shut, earning Metarey's trust.

This book is full of Corey's reflections, who has a bit of a self-important attitude, a characteristic that takes away from the book's appeal. It's also a long book, 458 pages, and full of these musings. But the story is very readable, despite its length. Some details hang, some are tied up. Some characters disappear completely, particularly Corey's college girlfriend. Other sections are a little bit boring, especially near the end, as Corey's elderly father takes up reading, with frequent references to philosophers and great works. In addition, the heavy liberal message is hard to miss.

On a personal note, I had to laugh at his mention of Colgate University, in Hamilton, NY, where Corey's college-age daughter is a student. On a visit to town, he describes the "main avenue of businesses, where the cafés and clothing stores and antiques shops were doing a brisk commerce and students and families and groups of businessmen in suits with cellphones out were filling up most of the narrow sidewalk." Anyone who's walked the streets of this small rural town knows how silly this description sounds! But that's the writer's choice to add color, I suppose.

All in all, despite being a little slow at times, a good summer read. Details about what really happened are not completely revealed until the end, giving the book momentum, and reader motivation.

Gravity says

A great American novel. I find it unusual to read a novel that neither tries to create an overly romantic view of American life, nor a snarky nod to its shattered idealism. Having just come out of a decade where the word "values" had been manipulated into being synonymous with political will and the so-called righteous American stance, the essence of "America America" is about exploring a more fundamental and richer meaning of the word. What happened to "values" meaning hard work and class identity and the good old Democratic ticket?

Philosophically, it's a well-timed novel. Those writers and thinkers who clue the rest of us into the true zeitgeist of our time, are saying that we've reached the end of a thirty-year age of political conservatism. The novel, which mostly takes place in the early 70's, documents the last time there was a significant sea change in the country's political will.

Let's raise a glass of champagne to the next thirty years.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

It took some patience, and yes, I'd even say "work", for me to get through this. It doesn't start to get interesting until about 60 pages in, and there are places throughout the book that drag a bit. But I'm glad I stayed with it. The story delves into a lot of murky areas with regard to politicians, class consciousness, family dynamics, and the price each individual pays for keeping secrets.

There is an especially pointed exploration of how the privileged classes view themselves and the lengths to which they will go to maintain illusions. Canin puts this so perfectly when the narrator says, "...and it struck me again...how diligently privilege had to work to remain oblivious to its cost."

For me that was the truest, most resonant line in the entire book.

I'm always hesitant to compare authors, but there are some similarities here with a Richard Russo novel. Russo is more entertaining and easier to follow. But the nature and scope of Canin's story is somewhat comparable to Russo's family sagas. Not a "read-alike", but maybe a "feel-alike". :-)

If you have a particularly ambitious book group, this one would be an excellent choice. The issues addressed are timeless and so quintessentially American.

Melissa LaSalle says

In the style of the Great American Novels, this delicious sink-your-teeth-into-it read is a rare blend of a coming-of-age story and a political thriller. The themes are plentiful and ambitious, beautifully summed up by the narrator himself in the final pages: "What have I learned? The old verities, mostly: that love for our children is what sustains us; that people are not what they seem; that those we hate bear some wound equal to our own; that power is desperation's salve, and that this fact as much as any is what dooms and dooms us. That we never learn the truth." The last sentence is perhaps most intriguing to me, especially for a novel that masterfully and continuously weaves together snippets from different time periods in order to give us clues about the events and characters at hand. We think we finally have a clear picture, only to realize it hinges on an assumption or a hypothetical. History is subjectivity. I also have to add that this is one of the most heartfelt and honest portrayals of an adolescent boy that I've ever read, and his relationship to the two "father" figures in his life makes for supreme writing.

Michael says

Corey Sifer is the son of high class parents, is an ambitious young and intelligent man. He attends a prestigious school, because of the grace of his parents. He works on a yard, but soon he is called to work as an assistant for the Senator Henry Bonwiller, who is running for president in New York. The love his mom has for him is overwhelming and she is hesitant to send him away, but he obliged because he knows that this is a great opportunity for him. The Metaries are a family that has a bad reputation in politics but Corey finds himself interested in a girl from that family. As he leaves his school to travel to another school, on behalf of

Henry, he discovers the true meaning of politics, friendships and morality. I had high expectations after reading the rave reviews, but it was just mediocre to me.

Barbara says

Norman Rockwell meets 1970s politics? This book just did not work for me. I never got the sense that the author understood anything at all about growing up in the 70s. It felt like it was set in the 1950s instead. I also don't think that the author understood anything at all about his own protagonist, Corey Sifter. It would have been nice if we got a better portrayal of the conflicting emotions Corey must have felt for his mentor - on the one hand admiration and genuine affection, on the other hand abhorrence for the crime he believed his mentor to have committed. Instead, the author just had Corey come to the conclusion that he was clueless. Well that's neither helpful or particularly interesting. Or maybe it would have been good to explore the relationship he had with his wife, the daughter of said mentor. But her character and Corey's relationship with her weren't adequately developed. Corey told his story as if he had never talked about it with his wife, who was another witness, with a different perspective, to the same events that Corey related. Overall, the book just didn't feel very authentic. I finished it feeling slightly annoyed.

Sara says

This book has a few characteristics that classically appeal to me: wealthy characters, family, a tiny slice of boarding school, and a Northeastern setting. The narration can be a little ponderous at times, but the splicing of the different narratives works really well, even in places propelling me along much faster than the voice itself (wanting to go back to the next piece of the story, but never sure which strand Canin will take up next). Parts of the story were very moving, and, true to its title, the book does seem to resonate on a greater level than just these characters, set as it is during a time that many claim was when the nation lost its innocence.

Sidenote: The author is going to be at Politics and Prose on Monday if anyone wants to go (the 14th)!

Stacey says

This is the first book of Ethan Canin's I've read, but it certainly won't be the last...

"America, America" is a readable saga that's especially relevant as it explores the nature of politics, family, class, and idealism at the height of the Vietnam War. In this coming-of-age story we follow the life of Corey Sifter, a working class boy that is both smart and ambitious-if not a bit naïve. Young Corey goes to work for the Metarey's, the most prominent and influential family in his small New England town, and is quickly swept away in a climate of wealth and privilege he can't help but want to be a part of. When Corey's boss, Liam Metarey, goes to work for the Presidential Campaign of Henry Bonwiller, a Ted Kennedy-esque scandal begins to unfold and Corey's world is turned up-side down... This thought-provoking novel is insightful, smart and engaging. If you've been looking for your next great summer read, you need not look any further than this fantastic book.

Chad Sayban says

This story, while beautifully written, is difficult to classify. Is it a historical fiction piece? Is it a murder mystery? A coming-of-age story? A political diatribe? A rags-to-riches yarn? Actually, a title as broad as *America, America* is fitting because it takes on all of these things at once. The shocking part is that it actually works. It doesn't feel like a reach. In fact, it works quite well by employing something rarely used anymore – the art of subtlety.

The characters - beginning with the first-person protagonist, Corey Sifter - are exceptionally well done. You really do feel that you know them so well - feeling what they feel and sensing what they sense. It is a remarkable art of character development that Canin successfully uses to pull the reader in. In addition to that, he employs a master's touch of laying out the atmosphere of Western New York - from its culture to the look of the trees and the heaviness of the air. The book is as much art as it is story. As someone who grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania, I can tell you that Canin's portrayal of that part of the country is spot on. While some reviewers had a problem with Canin jumping back and forth in time throughout the story, I think he did a great job of leading the reader through it without needing to resort to labeling each change with a date. In fact, the layered structure makes the story more powerful and interesting than if it had been laid out chronologically.

Canin also does a wonderful job weaving the fictional Senator Henry Bonwiller into the actual Presidential campaign of 1972. He was able to insert his candidate in among the real-life history without tearing it all apart – an admirable accomplishment in itself. It felt organic rather than shoehorned. Anyone interested in writing historical fiction should pay particular attention to how this story does it so well. However, nobody reading this book is going to have any trouble figuring out which side of the political aisle Ethan Canin falls on. I'm an independent thinker and I like it when writers provoke me to reassess my own beliefs, but it is certainly not lost on me that the book was released in the middle of a Presidential election season. I don't mind authors inserting issues they find important into their fiction, but frankly, Canin gets a bit carried away and beats the reader over the head with it, especially near the end. It is the one flaw of the book that it feels like a bit of a rant and sticks out from everything else. I don't mind the message, but a bit of a softer touch might have blended better with the rest of the story.

The political pandering of the book notwithstanding, I really don't have anything bad to say about the story. It's not a thriller or a murder mystery. While elements of both are in the story, they are really just another form of scenery. And while there is little real action or dramatic tension, I never felt like the story dragged. That says something for the writing, because that is no easy feat. The real story is the ascent of Corey Sifter and how he grows to understand all of the people involved in his life, although sometimes painfully late. *America, America* does a beautiful job of showing just how the coming-of-age of a young man might look within the womb of a struggle for national power. His ultimate lesson is that he has to learn how to learn - and it is a neverending struggle. This is certainly a book worth reading, if for no other reason than to enjoy the rich characters and lush scenery. There is a lot to experience in this book – you almost need to read it more than once to take it all in. It certainly has its place on the shelves of any reader looking for an artful, character-centered book filled with beautiful prose.

Miriam says

Especially interesting in the election year, this is a novel about politics, ambition and family secrets. It kind of plods along and yet is suspenseful at the same time. I've been savoring it over the past few weeks (it is SO OVERDUE at the library) and enjoying dipping in and out of it. Interesting narrative technique and lovely writing, coupled with suspense makes it the kind of book I love. Definitely check this one out.

Sarah Gregg says

I had to force myself to finish this book and believe me, was it painful! None of the characters were remotely interesting, let alone likeable. I had to wonder if the author understands ANYTHING about politics, class ambition, or human frailty, or just thought it was time for another fictional regurgitation of Chappaquiddick (see Joyce Carol Oates' "Black Water" for a very well-done fictional regurgitation of Chappaquiddick).

Corey's character is completely flat and unappealing...the author could have done so much more with his class aspirations and how he reconciled where he came from and where he ended up. Then his weird relationship/obsession with the Metarey family...I came away feeling that Corey was not very intelligent or even remotely critical of his surroundings, even for a small-town sixteen year-old in the early 1970s. And the author's decision to have him be attracted to one sister (Christian) in adolescence only to (shock!) marry the other one (Clara) in adulthood didn't change that feeling for me...it actually left me wondering for several pages if the editor had missed a typo? And the author's failure to never probe the reasons why Clara 1) set fire to her father's outbuilding, 2) purposely "fell" into Lake Erie, or 3) had been in some kind of residential treatment only to never demonstrate any inklings of emotional instability in adulthood made me think Corey was even duller than I had suspected. And we're supposed to believe that the obviously uncaring and alcoholic mother is an accomplished aviatrix in her free time? Please, give the reader a break!

And Trieste...my goodness!! What a caricature: a talented and gifted (not to mention androgynous) young woman whose genius father has decided to drop out of society (where he was making bombs or something along those lines for the government) and live on a commune, thereby forcing his family into a poverty that is insulting to people who truly live in poverty. There was nothing organic about Trieste, right down to her name...I wondered if the author considered the more obvious let's-forgo-modern-conveniences-and-live-in-a-blueberry-marsh-names like "Sunshine" or "Rainbow" to make sure that the reader didn't miss just how intellectual her parents are, but it was just so heavy-handed that everything the character did rang false. Not to mention how her repeated use of "Sir" in regard to Corey (who wouldn't inspire such respect in anyone) put me in mind of Marcie and Peppermint Patty of Peanuts fame...which I'm sure is not the connection the author hoped for.

I can't imagine what the other reviewers are raving about...if you want to read about working class people so full of yearning to belong to landed class that they sell themselves in ways they could never have imagined, leaving the lessons of their childhoods at the door, check out Dominick Dunne...he actually knew what he was talking about, and turned out some fantastic stories. He is sorely missed.
