

Sunset Park

Paul Auster

Henry Holt (\$25)

320 pages

review by Joshua Willey

What is noir exactly, and what does it do? The obvious answers all seem significantly dated. Noir is Raymond Chandler and Jules Dassin, Dashiell Hammett and Carol Reed. Noir shows us a darkness, a mystery, and in the process of our trying to find a light, a solution, we realize that the darkness and mystery contain a sort of magic which is its own light, its own solution. Characters live or die, love blooms or withers, but in the last scene we pan out and remember, there is always another mystery, as the famous line goes, "There are eight million stories in the Naked City." Paul Auster's new novel is one of them. The Brooklyn mainstay has managed to transpose that singular noir magic into contexts not traditionally associated with the genre. Richard Widmark doesn't show up, in fact there are hardly any cops and robbers, but *Sunset Park* offers a very contemporary and very literary take on noir (without the mysticism of Murakami, the abstraction of Pynchon, or the violence of Bolaño), a genre which, though never out of style, is due for another resurgence. Here we have writers, scholars, publishers, intellectuals all who, because of their bookish, artistic callings are drawn into a sort of netherworld of the mind (the premises are ultimately not far removed from Auster's famed New York Trilogy, but here he has far less focus, covering a broader scope of themes and forms that perhaps ever before).

In classic noir, even in recent throwbacks like James Ellroy (whose *LA Quartet* is a good west coast companion to Auster's work), mystery is circumstantial, a product of narrative structure, of the plot. In *Sunset Park* mystery is existential. Auster basks in a postmodern aporia, the crisis of meaning has rendered most any subject good fodder for noir writing because the instability of signification, of communication in general, imbues everything with ambiguity. If Pynchon were sane, didn't like music, didn't do drugs, he might write *Sunset Park*, which for all its characteristic Auster austerity and minimalism has more in common with *Inherent Vice* than *The Big Sleep*. Those who've long been looking for the sweet or soft side of Paul Auster will be pleased (is his friend Don Dellilo rubbing off on him?), because there is more than distance and disconnection here, there are tears, there is love, tenderness. One character is writing a dissertation on gender relations in William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* and Auster's project seems in some ways to parallel his character's. It would be good to watch the film before cracking *Sunset Park*, as the way the student investigates each scene provides a profound insight into how the novelist might approach his subject.

Why pick up another NYC novel by Paul Auster (or any contemporary fiction for that matter) when it means yet another classic goes unread, or more realistically, it means you miss the kids on *Glee* doing Justin Bieber,

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a visit to your grandmother's, or your Pilates class? Sunset Park gives you something special: removal from the speed and saturation of contemporary American life. But while moving away from The Social Network society in one sense, Auster also articulates what it means to live in the shadow of modernity, in an age where everything not only has been said and done, but is being said and done, perpetually. His main character has to give everything away, cast everything aside, before he can determine what he really needs. Auster is right in guessing he's not the only one.