

American Family

The Country and Abroad

By Shelly Frome

May 2005

Early on in Robert Crooke's novel *American Family*, Tom Gannon, the first person narrator looks back to the 1950s and tells the reader that he's someone who rejected the activist ideal that the world can be "changed, not merely endured." To Tom, it once "seemed crazy to think that way." And so it would seem at the outset that what we have here is a cautionary tale from the viewpoint of an ultra-conservative. Or perhaps a fictional justification for a life lived as one of the "silent majority" as those who spent their formative years during the Eisenhower administration were called. After all, this was a period when you could get into trouble for speaking out of turn. If you openly challenged any of the precepts of your teachers, it could go down on your permanent record and your chances of climbing the "ladder of success" would greatly diminish. If you also challenged any prevalent government policies or had leftist leanings as Tom's father Joe did, and supported "Negro" enterprises in New York that might compromise the economic or political machinations of the day, you found yourself out of favor. In this case, you lost clients right and left (Joe Gannon was a lawyer closely associated with a "Negro" entrepreneur) and ran the risk of running up against Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist-hunting machine. In writing this novel, perhaps Mr. Crooke's greatest achievement is to incite the reader's hunger for immediacy, conflict, and a narrative thrust, looking forward to the point where Tom's sins of omission will come back to haunt him. Reading portents of the price of loyalty and the threat of betrayal, we root for Tom to take action, even if it guarantees that the Gannons will never become a normal American family. In sum, what Mr. Crooke offers us here is not an ultra-conservative morality tale after all. Rather, it's one in which engagement, no matter what the cost—even for a lost cause—may be far better than objectively sitting on the fence, being cool, playing it safe and keeping out of trouble. The latter may be tantamount to a great moral failing and a life not worth living.