

A Synopsis of the novel *The American Opus*

The American Opus is a true epic tale of the history-making adventures and paradigm-challenging love story between Russian idealist Celeste Revillon and industrialist Tom Winans, one of four American partners building Russia's first major railroad in the 1840s for the Romanoffs' Czar Nicholas I. The novel's theme—Emerson's maxim that either power or joy is achievable in life but not both—is affirmed through the lives of its primary characters. The story chronicles America's struggle through adolescence in the mid-19th century as industrial advancements regularly produce societal crossroads.

The Russian venture and Tom's astute financial empire-building, guided by the sons of investment banking pioneer Alexander Brown, quickly make him one of America's fifty wealthiest men. When society credits him with merely being the fortunate, pampered eldest son of the brilliant B&O Railroad inventor and locomotive builder Ross Winans, public respect and self-esteem become obsessions.

Ross is the most flamboyant personality in antebellum Baltimore, without whom the B&O Railroad would not have survived its infancy. Eccentric Tom is consumed with escaping the shadow of his globally acclaimed father. He strives for respect by building the nation's grandest estate and spearheading the family's competition with Vanderbilt, Brunel, Collins, and Cunard to construct the world's first financially viable fleet of steamship passenger-liners. Unfortunately, the public views his cigar-shaped, all-metal boat project—as it did the Russian railroad venture—as initiatives from Ross with Tom simply the beneficiary of primogenitor.

Tom's relentless, consuming quest for identity and glory, in the grand tradition of his hero Napoleon, includes finding a bride with the independent spirit of the upper-class St. Petersburg women he's met.

He disdains the subjugation-fashioned milquetoast personality of the typical Eastern United States housewife, a characterization which includes his mother and most other marital role models in his life.

With the help of the railroad partnership's leader, Major George Washington Whistler, he finds the love of his life and returns from Russia

with a bride named Celeste Revillon, a well-educated, Roman Catholic, French-born Russian citizen. It's a marriage approved by neither family. He seeks a new paradigm for eldest sons, she for women and the poor, and both for marriage.

The unlettered Tom and his father are work-driven Deists and his mother is Presbyterian while Celeste is a devoted Catholic with instincts to help the poor and promote women's rights, inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jenny Lind, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Despite polarizing interests, Tom and his wife Celeste adore each other. He builds her a grand Baltimore estate called Alexandroffsky and a Newport, Rhode Island summer retreat called Bleak House. Despite indulging Celeste materially, Tom lets their love atrophy due to his vainglorious pursuits.

After an acrimonious feud with the B&O, Ross retires from railroading. The Winans' subsequent maritime venture captures the world's imagination—including that of author Jules Verne—and is on the cusp of success when the Civil War fragments their shipbuilding into four countries and re-awakens Tom's nagging dream to be a cavalier.

That recurring dream is attributed by Tom to Russia's success at Balaclava, where its army slaughtered the British Light Brigade during the Crimean War. Tom is always leading the British charge in the dream. Ross always commands the Russians on the heights.

The obsession drives Tom to purchase a Baltimore country estate featuring a valley bearing an eerie resemblance to Balaclava's. He names the property Crimea and builds a cannon-equipped redoubt on the heights overlooking the valley, one of many eccentric actions which cloak the estate in a veil of sinister mystery in the eyes of surrounding mill-town residents.

Ross becomes an outspoken secessionist in a city largely Confederate in its sympathies and plays a key role in inciting Baltimore's Pratt Street riots, resulting in the first Union combat casualties of the Civil War. He's

subsequently elected to the Maryland legislature, builds an innovative steam-cannon for the Confederacy and is arrested twice. He's saved from hanging through the influence of Tom's country neighbor, the brilliant lawyer and U.S. Senator Reverdy Johnson, whom President Lincoln goes to great lengths to appease because he's an anti-secession Democrat in a secession-leaning state bordering Washington.

Genius, eccentricity, and passion make Ross a beloved civic icon from whom Tom seldom wrests the spotlight. He's vexed that his father achieved fame following an unscripted path while his own carefully crafted plans bring only frustration, bewilderment, and a perpetual supporting role.

While Tom and his father secretly manufacture and deliver armaments to the Confederacy with the aid of Confederate master spy Rose Greenhow and a country neighbor named Josh Zimmerman—owner of a Fells Point shipyard—Celeste opens America's first "Soup House" for the poor using a church Tom buys her for that purpose. At times it feeds 4,000 people a day.

Through the Soup House, she meets Charles Goodridge, one of the pre-eminent figures in York, Pennsylvania's Underground Railroad movement. York—the town that named the movement—is a critical link in the railroad because it's the last opportunity for slavecatchers west of the Susquehanna River crossing, the gateway to runaways' freedom in Philadelphia, Rochester, and ultimately Canada. One of John Brown's Harper's Ferry raiders and three members of the Christiana Resistance are among the hundreds Goodridge saves from slavery or death.

He convinces Celeste to secretly establish a much-needed Baltimore station on the Winans' mystery-shrouded, walled-in Alexandroffsky estate, and the Winans' general construction contractor—harboring romantic designs on Celeste—builds an ante-chamber off the secret tunnel leading from the mansion to the stables. The ante-chamber exits in the sealed basement of her Soup House across the street, and Tom is kept unaware of its existence.

Throughout life Celeste seeks counsel from her sister Tilly and her confessor Archbishop Kenrick, while Tom's confidant and mentor is the brilliant Winans' friend and patent attorney John H. B. Latrobe, son of Thomas Jefferson's Capitol architect Benjamin Latrobe, and, like Tom, a

first-born.

In contrast to Tom, early in life Latrobe eschews power and attains a joyful life and status as Baltimore's Renaissance man. At the sudden death of his father, John H. B.—ranking first in his senior class at West Point—demonstrates devotion to his mother and siblings by withdrawing from school to support them, working as an apprentice attorney in Baltimore. It's the type of risky, life-altering action borne of conviction and principle that Tom can never summon the courage to undertake.

At the death of Lincoln's hero Henry Clay, Latrobe succeeds him as the leader of America's colonization movement to relocate blacks to Liberia. He incurs personal respect but philosophical contempt for the movement from America's first civil rights leader, Frederick Douglass.

The presidency of the B&O is offered to Latrobe, but he declines the honor to preserve time for his family life and the intellectual, cultural, scientific, business, social, and civic interests that bring him acclamation and make him a beloved local icon. In contrast, Tom's ostensibly similar life path finds him widely scorned as a dilettante.

Celeste's sudden death during childbirth engenders an unprecedented outpouring of adulation for a woman from the city's whites, blacks, and newspapers. Her obit is the first *The Sun* has ever printed for a woman. Part of that adulation is attributed to her role as an Underground Railroad station conductor—a shocking revelation for Tom. A secret that's not revealed is the existence of her lover, who hangs himself following the funeral.

The aftermath of Celeste's death thrusts Tom down a path ending at the brink of suicide as grief consumes him along with the realization that even his wife—in addition to Ross and confidant Latrobe—has achieved high stature in the community while his vast wealth and power reap only contempt.

Shipbuilder Josh Zimmerman is Tom's friend, horse broker, and Crimea's adjoining property owner. He hopelessly pursues romance with

Confederate spy Rose Greenhow while she becomes enraptured by Tom's good looks, personal charm, and, ironically, the very accomplishments Tom deems inadequate to engender happiness. Fifteen months after Celeste's death, Rose and Tom watch the Battle of Manassas together, a victory which Confederate leaders credit to Rose's spy-network.

Their deepening romance alienates a jealous Zimmerman and visits tragic irony on Tom as the cancer stunting his personal growth creates a dilemma, leaving suicide as the most attractive solution. Rose must abrogate their romance in deference to her cause, mirroring Tom's earlier neglect of Celeste in the pursuit of empire-building. Once again, an intimate figure in Tom's life is achieving glory while he assumes a reluctant secondary role.

Widespread uncertainty about the length of the war contributes to Tom's indecisiveness over his life's path. A long war will enhance chances for fame as a cavalier, while the presumption of a brief conflict dictates that he live in exile in Europe, overseeing the cigar-boat project and re-uniting with his children, already living in England with their Uncle Bill.

Tragedy, romance, and intrigue inexorably sweep Tom to the edge of an emotional abyss until the Civil War reaches a crescendo of violence that clearly will not be short-lived, forcing him to make a climactic decision about which path to take in life. By June, 1862, all doubt about Maryland's secession has been removed, and a military draft looms in Baltimore.

Self-respect and honor will not allow him to purchase a draft exemption. He must leave his beloved Alexandroffsky. Early on June 5th, his father and John H. B. Latrobe wait at Camden Station, the starting point for Tom's trip south to the Richmond Peninsula to join the Confederate cavalry regiment he secretly recruited and trained in Baltimore. This is a choice Rose blesses. At the President Street station, Celeste's sister Tilly and Tom's butler Old Neal wait to see him off to New York, a steamer to Europe, and reunion with his children—a choice Celeste would bless.

As he drives his troika toward the storied Thomas Viaduct and suicide, a simple gesture from a free black man begging in the street for funds to buy his wife's freedom catalytically derails Tom from his lifelong power addiction, thrusting him onto the long-beckoning path to joy and the first

significant personal growth in his life. The troika turns. Its three black Russian Orlov stallions sense Tom's urgency. Never has he felt more seminally exhilarated yet simultaneously serene, sitting at the vortex of a galloping whirlwind careening through Baltimore—toward President Street.