

Robert Crooke Has Crafted A Compelling Summer Read

The Berkshire Eagle

By J. Peter Bergman

August 7, 2005

Novels set in the near past involving the political extremes we have lived through can be very intriguing. When the book is a bucolic that turns into a mystery, then into a thriller, then into a polemic and then back into a bucolic, scraping the family saga genre on the way, it's a lot to take in all at one reading. Difficult, that is, unless it's so well crafted that it simply drags you along from format to format until you can't keep from picking it back up to find out which book you're reading with the same gusto you put into following the storyline. Robert Crooke's "American Family" is such a book. It begins with a sweetly reminiscent sensibility and without too much warning begins to infiltrate a political agenda into its narrative. Tom Gannon, the book's protagonist and its narrative voice, is a high school student who lives in one of those quaint small towns along the eastern shore of the Hudson River, not far from West Point. His father, a lawyer, is a man who operates on principal and his beliefs in the rights of the human being to equality in all things affect the entire Gannon family. Tom is at the point in a young man's life when romance, sex, politics, morality and the rest of the adolescent mix begin to confuse the heretofore important issues of school and family. He finds himself with a girlfriend, the daughter of a wealthy and important man who, it turns out, is his father's enemy. Tom becomes a man long before he finishes his boyhood and that is the central thread of this novel. This loss of innocence is handled delicately and brilliantly through small conversions in Tom's belief system. What he witnesses and what he experiences help create the man he becomes. The end of the novel weaves together threads that have been loosely woven throughout the book, presenting an almost too perfect piece of cloth. The only reason this works, in this instance, is the quality of the prose that precedes the final chapter. Crooke leaves his flow, and summarizes with style and efficiency, even creating the extra tear in the eye of the reader. It's very well done.