

American Family

Kirkus Discoveries

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Like his hero Holden Caulfield, 17-year-old Tom Gannon is a private-school student too intelligent and conscientious for his own good. His frustration is aimed at both those who care too little-his privileged classmates, indifferent to the social injustices that surround them-and those who care too much, especially his father Joe. A liberal lawyer who has spent years and his fortune fighting for urban renewal in Manhattan's blighted neighborhoods, Joe seems willing to strike a Faustian bargain by testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The day Joe leaves for Washington, however, he disappears under mysterious circumstances, leading Tom and his family to suspect a cover-up on the part of New York's political and real-estate elites. To his credit, Crooke, a former sportswriter and Long Island historian, manages to remain faithful to the complex and treacherous politics of the 1950s, and his characters' moral battles, even as the mystery heats up. There's not an unlikable or dull character among the lot-even Jackie Robinson and Paul Robeson make appearances. But after two family members die violently, and with scarcely a reaction on the part of the Gannons, the family's stoicism becomes bewildering. The comparisons Crooke makes between the Red Scare and the post-9/11 era are interesting and apt, but better attention to pacing would have helped this American Family.