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Book Review: 'American Romantic' by Ward Just

Embassy visits, Sunday lunches, forbidden trysts during the golden age of American power.

By Edward Kosner
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SAVE PRINT TEXT

If Ward Just were a painter, he might be a figurative artist like Stone Roberts, whose Old Masterly polish gives his contemporary images a spooky resonance. "American Romantic," Mr. Just's 18th novel over four decades, is an excursion into the near past—this time, the early days of the war in Vietnam—that leads to wise and elegiac recognition of the fading of American confidence and competence in ordering an unruly world.

AMERICAN ROMANTIC

By Ward Just
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 265 pages, $26

The book is the story of Harry Sanders Jr., a Connecticut Yankee diplomat, and the two women in his life: his wife, May, uneasy companion on his later postings; and Sieglinde, the seductive German girl he falls in love with in his first days in Saigon and despairs of ever seeing again. But with its echoes of Conrad, Hemingway dialogue and Cheeverish casual adultery, "American Romantic" is actually a sly parable of loss.

It begins with a misbegotten secret mission for Sanders, just 30 and a very junior Foreign Service officer. With a gold compass as a good-luck charm, he is dispatched to the South Vietnamese jungle to meet the enemy and explore a wispy hint of peace talks. Instead, an obdurate Vietnamese captain harangues him until he realizes that "the war would not end until the Americans got out of the way" and then abandons him in a clearing. Barefoot and racked with fever, Sanders struggles back from this heart of darkness on a hellish trek during which he kills a raggedy guerrilla who confronts him in the jungle.

Sanders is nearly undone by his ordeal, his "moment of consequence," as the ambassador calls it. For the rest of his life, he is nearly crippled by his scarred feet, and he can never erase the image of the Vietnamese boy he killed. The episode sidetracks his career. Over the next decades, he rises in the diplomatic corps, ultimately serving as an ambassador, but always in posts on the periphery of significance—Paraguay, West Africa, Norway, a Balkan capital. Sieglinde wanders the world as well, out of touch with the man she fled in Saigon but always wondering about lost love. She is crippled by her childhood in the final throes of Nazi Germany, as May is by the stillbirth of her daughter while serving with Harry in Africa.

Mr. Just evokes the burnished golden age of American power in flashbacks. Harry is almost obsessed with Sunday lunches among the squirearchy at his father's house in the Connecticut hills, where bankers, World War II brigadiers and a congresswoman reminisced selectively. The glamour of Washington at its zenith comes to life through May's eyes as she attends her first big diplomatic reception, where the British chancellor of the exchequer—"his silver hair was combed in little wings over his ears and his blue eyes sparkled"—flirts with her.

Yet that early promise is never fulfilled. Over time, as he shuttles between embassy posts and desk jobs at State, Harry comes to realize that he has become a "connoisseur of the counterfeit and the inexplicable." Long afterward, in his final posting in the Balkans, he is asked over brandy by the French ambassador what he has learned in his career. The answer, it turns out, came from the conversations at his father's Sunday table. "Failure," he says, "was more instructive, more revealing, than success."

That conversation with the French ambassador takes place a few days after May dies when her car swerves off the road and crashes down an embankment. Harry asks the embassy's CIA station chief to investigate, and he turns up shreds of evidence that Harry's wife may have had a shadow life he never suspected.

Harry retires early and moves to a villa in the south of France, where he ventures out to play dominoes with the locals and occasionally settle a dispute over the sequence of battles in World War I or other historic trivia. The novel closes in our time, with Harry dozing in his chair in the twilit garden and with a nod to a bittersweet ending—but one too late in the game to alter its melancholic trajectory.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me," about his career as editor of Newsweek, New York,
Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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