



Crooke, Robert
AMERICAN FAMILY
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A teenage boy fights to save his progressive New York family from a McCarthy-era political conspiracy, only to learn the limits of idealism in this sincere yet awkwardly genre-ambivalent novel.

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 justices that surround them—and those who care too much, especially his father Joe. A liberal lawyer who has spent decades and his fortune fighting for urban renewal in Manhattan’s blighted neighborhoods, Joe seems willing to strike a Faustian bargain with his persecutors by testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The day he leaves for Washington, however, he disappears under mysterious circumstances, leading Joe 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 ’50s, and his character’s 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 of Joe’s family members die violently, and with scarcely a reaction on the part of any 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 grow awkwardly polemical by the end of the novel.

Better attention to pacing would have rescued this *American Family*; instead it rests uneasily between a rushed mystery and a literary historical novel populated by morally infallible characters.

—*Kirkus Discoveries*

