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## **WHAT'S WRONG WITH AMERICA**

By Scott Bradfield

St. Martin's Press. 208 pp. \$18.95.

When, almost three-quarters of a century ago, Leopold and Loeb were formally charged with premeditated murder, their venerable Chicago lawyer Clarence Darrow skillfully intimated that the aberrant teenagers stood trial as well for being young, arrogant and rich in a society that deeply resented that blend.

Literary fiction, devoted to the truth rather than the facts, gave the phenomenon of oblique communal outrage a different twist when Camus' Mersault, ostensibly on trial for the mindless murder of an Algerian, faced a courtroom far more horrified by Mersault's lack of demonstrative grief at his mother's funeral. Mersault shocked them to their boots when he dared further suggest that most of us have wished our parents dead.

A terrifying suggestion, yet one Freud also argued, and one our headlines bear out with chilling frequency.

And if we're capable of wishing the death of even those who gave us life, then wanting to eliminate those to whom we are merely married seems a breach of taboo that is comparatively mild.

Consider the case of 69 year-old Emma O'Hallahan in Scott Bradfield's darkly comic new satire. During 45 years of "servile misery," she has had to cook for a man who criticized every culinary effort, randomly fired his shotgun into their juniper trees, blasted All-Talk radio through the house, watched *Wheel of Fortune* every night, always wore plaid flannel shirts with grey chinos, loved Pat Buchanan, prepared for nuclear war and insisted that the way to improve the world was "free enterprise and the right to bear firearms." Minor irritations perhaps, but when the sun is setting in a marriage small peccadilloes will cast huge shadows. Emma looked into her future and couldn't stand it.

So, as she confesses on the novel's first page, she pointed Marvin's shotgun at the back of his head and blew him away. Then she buried him in the back yard so she could do in peace what she had always wanted: keep a journal, watch *Jeopardy* and dine on Kit-Kat bars and brandy.

In her journal, Emma doggedly revises a list Marvin had compiled of what's wrong with America, which contained only three items: "the Russians, the coloreds and the Jews."

Okay, so you wouldn't miss Marvin either. You won't have to. He continually reappears to Emma as a spectral vision urging her to be fair to him in her journal, to

remember he was "a three-dimensional human being with complex needs. I may not have been perfect, Emma—but then, who is?" Marvin does not stay lonely long, though, as Emma also eliminates her busybody next-door neighbor and buries her beside Marvin.

Nor will Emma remain isolate. She's frequently visited by a kindly policeman and expects an extended visit from her grandson. She also picks up a self-made widower at the local supermarket, with whom she enjoys sex for the first time since the 1960s when she would be driven to orgasm by viewing discussions of sexuality on Mike Douglas's afternoon t.v. show.

Emma's writing extends past the journal to an attempt at mail bonding with her "severely estranged" daughter, Cassandra, who, as some daughters will, blames a lifetime of misery on her mother. Specifically, writes Cassandra, her poor self-image (which she now rehabilitates with "Yoga, Zen, psychoanalytical feminism, TM and prana breathing exercises") stemmed from "watching my mother slave away in and be co-opted by the malign patriarchal hegemony [which] made me think I couldn't be happy unless I had a man telling me what to do all the time—no matter how ruthless, cruel or emotionally unsanitary that man might be." Emma hasn't seen Cassandra in decades.

Cassandra's problems may stem, however, from that last visit home, when the girl was 17 and her father paid a "55 year-old shaman" named Raoul Stevenson \$5000 to take her away. Raoul, now known as Col. Robert Robertson, may even have continued to receive financial tribute right up until Emma fired Marvin's shotgun.

But maybe not. Maybe, in fact, nothing in this surreal book will turn out as it first appears. From the start, while Emma proves hard to dislike, she seems easy to distrust. Her voice is euphorically glib, to a point that will irritate some readers while making others find her shotgun offense even more blood-curdling.

She alternates giddiness with a mock gravity that progresses into the very gravity it mocks, so that eventually she becomes less a flesh-and-blood character than the vehicle by which Bradfield plucks the mask from his actual thematic issues.

For example, asks Bradfield, is freedom as light a condition as Emma anticipated? If so, why does she realize, "You can't blame all your mistakes on Marvin like you used to, since ... being free of slavery means taking responsibilities for all your own actions." Emma also concedes that family living is maddening no matter who the spouse or children, that a group of self-interested people with easily bruised feelings all sharing the same beds, toilets and bathtubs creates "a pretty combustible combination." She voices similar insights on the nature of anger, self-esteem and the complexity of the moral world.

Even her decision to blast herself into widowhood may be simply the logical extension of America's love affair with transcendence, "the dream of better places to go ... wider horizons, bigger shopping malls, more sex, fatter steaks. ... What Americans

want is what they haven't already got." The American Dream as perpetual discontent. Maybe that's what's wrong with America.

Such musings make this a provocative and absorbing book, if not the mesmerizingly brilliant effort that was Bradfield's 1989 debut novel, *The History of Luminous Motion*. *What's Wrong with America* lacks the earlier novel's unity of vision and sense of complete commitment; Bradfield is less "in" this book, in the same sense that, say, Shakespeare was less "in" *Coriolanus* than his earlier tragedies. But it will cast entertaining light on what's wrong—and, by complementary reflection, what's right—with America.