

Synopsis: *American Suite*

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This novel comprises the diaries of three women from an affluent, liberal Protestant family. Each writes in a distinctive voice. **Arisa's** tone is flighty; **Sophie's** is pragmatic; **Rosalyn's** strident. Their perspectives often clash; their diary entries frequently contradict one another, leaving us to contend with three unreliable narrators. For the purposes of our synopsis, we will consider each of the stories sequentially, although in the novel they appear as interwoven threads.

The central plot of *American Suite* is Arisa's story. She is single, in her mid-thirties, and excited about beginning her new life as a writer in the Flatlands. But in leaving Manhattan, she has jettisoned a career, repressed painful memories, ended her relationship with her longtime partner, **Ben**, and severed ties to her widowed mother and married sister on the East Coast.

Because Arisa is at the mercy of her romantic passions, she meets and falls in love with **Odur**, the first male Flatlander she encounters, only days after arriving in the Midwest. But the relationship ends after she learns he has a wife and two children. At Thanksgiving, Ben flies out for a visit, but their time together serves as a requiem, not a renaissance. Devastated by these two losses, Arisa seeks therapy. But her visit to New York over the Christmas holiday brings only more pain: problems with family, the realization that Ben has found someone else to love, and an anxiety attack that ensues when she travels downtown to the former site of the World Trade Towers. Arisa returns to the Flatlands before fleeing to Schlectenberg where she meets and falls in love with **Goth**, a screenwriter and Hollywood director.

Love is bliss for twenty-six days before devolving into sadomasochism. Later, with the help of a young man with whom she sleeps, Arisa discovers that Goth has filmed their debauched relationship in order to provide material for his new movie, *Legs Wide Open*. Arisa destroys the videos and the cameras before absconding with **Günther**, Goth's Doberman. After a cathartic retreat to a Trappist monastery, she returns to the Flatlands determined to tell her version of the affair in her memoir, *Shrill Quills & Broken Lenses: This Muse Bares All*. Truth is relative in her quest for vengeance.

Until Schlectenberg, the reader might regard *American Suite* as a realistic novel. But at this juncture, it should begin to be apparent that this story has a fabulist tint. After returning home, Arisa gets a job as a barmaid, but is later fired because of singing a passage from Vivaldi's "Gloria" on karaoke night. Like all virtuous Flatlanders, she turns to gardening. In her quest to rout out vermin, she becomes a skilled markswoman and revels in the carnage. In her writer's group, Flatland Prose, Arisa joins forces with the **Crime Guys**. She begins teaching a course in writing at a medium-security prison and discovers her métier. She finishes her memoir, gets an agent, and lands a book and movie deal. Arisa falls in love with an ex-felon, **Roy**. When the **Perv**, a Peeping Tom, starts to stalk her, Roy trains Günther to protect Arisa. Through therapy, Arisa discovers that she was pregnant with Ben's child, but miscarried in the aftermath of the World Trade Towers debacle. Despite this troubling revelation, Arisa is relieved to know the truth. Now she can truly begin her new life. Her memoir is about to be published. Notoriety and financial success appear imminent. While basking in the glow, she agrees to meet with a postmodernist from the Center for Ethical, Sexual, Racial, and Bi-Polar Justice. As they sit chatting in the backyard, the Perv trespasses onto her property. Günther growls and takes off after him. He tackles the Perv. The Perv cries out in pain—the kind of piercing cry of a man about to die. The Professor and Arisa rush to the scene. Wedged between Günther's jaws are the Perv's genitals. Blood is everywhere. Reluctantly, Arisa dials 911. An ambulance is dispatched. Arisa waits for the rescue crew while praying for the Perv to die.

Two subplots, Sophie's and Rosalyn's stories, are interwoven with Arisa's tale. We discover from Sophie's diary that she is a mother, a wife, and a professional accountant, someone who bears the weight of the world on her shoulders. When her youngest son is diagnosed with dyslexia, Sophie becomes distraught. She finds a tutor, **Sean**, for her son and a therapist for herself. She struggles with her lustful feelings toward Sean. Meanwhile, her sons begin embracing different religious faiths (Judaism, Hinduism, and Christianity) and with these competing doctrines ensues a holy war. Then her husband, **John**, loses his job and struggles to find a new one. The family, having taken up sailing for the sake of unity, damages the boat during a race. Nevertheless, Sophie & Clan survive this and more. A multicultural holiday (Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and "American" Diwali, which they elect to observe in December) is celebrated in New York with Rosalyn, Arisa, and Roy. It is a fiasco, but one that glitters all the same. The diary ends with Sophie embarking on her own "memoir," *Sophie's Seven Simple Steps to the Perfect Life*.

Finally, there is Rosalyn's story. We learn from her diary that she is a Jewish mother whom God has challenged by making her Christian. We share her pain in losing a husband of forty-four years. We experience her joy in finding a new partner, **Saul**, the love of her life. We feel her anger in being discarded by her children and witness her devastation when Saul is diagnosed with cancer. Each day, Rosalyn is there for him. Each day, his illness delivers yet another crushing blow. Each day, she gives more. When Saul dies, Rosalyn's rage knows no bounds. Even **Doktor Levin**, her Freudian psychiatrist, fails to provide solace. Rosalyn claws her way through the sorrow, the anger, and the remorse. She defies it to crush her. Rosalyn's diary concludes with her decision to convert to Judaism and, like her daughters, write her own memoir, *The Hadassah Chronicles*.

The epilogue to *American Suite* jumpstarts the novel. The Perv breaks into Arisa's house and begins smashing her dining room furniture with a crowbar. Then, he repeatedly tosses the table against the wall until it is nothing but splintered rubble. Intent on further destruction, the Perv heads toward the refrigerator. He notices newspaper columns taped to the white enamel surface. He begins to read. He swears. He insists the articles are nothing but lies.

As the reader has discovered, *American Suite* then segues into a diary novel. However, the final paragraph is a televised news brief of a breaking story that actually concludes the epilogue that jumpstarted the novel. Arisa's house had been vandalized. According to eye-witness reports, she returned home late Christmas Eve when a scuffle ensued. Several gunshots were fired. A Smith & Wesson five-shot .50-caliber Magnum revolver has just been recovered from the crime scene. Only one bullet remains in its chamber. The Perv is being questioned. The medical conditions of Arisa and the Perv are not disclosed. Viewers are urged to stay tuned for further updates.

Thus, we discover that the reality show starring Arisa Selby, the dog she owned (or stole), the man who lost his scrotum to the dog and got it back again, and the Hollywood director whose tawdry affair with the woman in question—which might be seen as the inciting event behind it all—refuses to fade to black.