



AMERICAN YOUTH

A NOVEL
PHIL LaMARCHE



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—LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Praise for *American Youth*

"One of the most savagely beautiful, emotionally devastating and accurate readings of what it means to grow up in our soul-starved homeland . . . LaMarche does not simply show us this jagged world, he makes us feel what it's like to live there. This, in the end, is what makes *American Youth* nothing less than a masterpiece."

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Riveting . . . a bold new author capable of tapping into the pulsing vein of the American psyche . . . a firecracker of a novel that places teenage angst, economical strife, and gun control under a microscope . . . [a] frighteningly realistic depiction of what could happen when society looks the other way."

—*Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star*

"Built of spare, solid materials—dead-on dialogue everywhere and emotional depth charges strategically placed—[*American Youth*] has a timeless, inevitable feel. LaMarche observes boys undergoing the rites of adolescence . . . with an unflinching but sympathetic eye, sometimes amused, sometimes ashamed, always astonished."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"A book that demands to be devoured: a short tale full of suspense . . . [It] traces the trajectory of [a] boy's life in the aftermath of [an] accident: a human, erratic trajectory of denial and belated courage. . . . [an] important novel."

—*The New York Observer*

“Crisp and propulsive . . . Imagine Cormac McCarthy writing *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*.”

—Minneapolis *Star Tribune*

“Roiling . . . portentous . . . viscerally capturing the profound confusion of adolescence . . . Ted LeClare becomes a heroic portrait of blind (and mute) resilience. . . . Powerful.”

—*Bookforum*

“LaMarche’s finely crafted first novel, *American Youth*, is a tense, elegaic portrait of a teenage boy in trouble and a rural New England town in transition.” —*The Boston Globe*

“Engaging and powerful . . . Ted is a sensitively drawn protagonist, whose reaction to the situation he finds himself in is achingly real.” —*The Dallas Morning News*

“Intense . . . so savage it hurts. Still it’s a quiet savagery as *American Youth* cuts through what it means to be young and so trapped as almost to be buried alive.”

—*New York Daily News*

“In telling the story of New England ninth grader Ted LeClare, LaMarche takes Mitch Albom-like sincerity, holds it arm’s length from George Saunders-like deadpan satire, and transports the lot to a gun-crazy America that he refuses to judge. . . . LaMarche deftly allows his debut to be at once a parable and a dead-on rendering of its time and place.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Surgically clean prose . . . As a portrait of young people trapped in the ruptures of our society, this short novel has great power."

—Booklist

"Men have never written about becoming a man as Phil LaMarche does in this page-turning debut. He's the new Cormac McCarthy-in-waiting, wielding firearms with a muscular prose also evocative of Hemingway. After a dreadful accident, a boy is forced to betray the truth because the safety of his fractured family depends on it. The story runs hot as a pistol all the way through, with characters you can't bear to leave. At a time when so much fiction is chilly, ironic babble, cobbled around ideology, or written to wow a reader with the writer's pyrotechnic mastery of data, LaMarche's book is a heartfelt offering to the world."

—MARY KARR

"*American Youth* is written with great psychological precision and insight. It is a portrait of a society in crisis and decay, but, more important, it is a gripping dramatization of the relationship between a vulnerable and interesting protagonist and the hard world around him. He is someone on whom nothing is lost; in language both spare and truthful his plight is rendered fascinating and deeply convincing and memorable."

—COLM TÓIBÍN

"The most compelling and exciting debut novel in years. LaMarche is a young master—of compression, of the essential American problems, of the heartfelt realist narrative. What an amazing, gratifying book—we are lucky to have it. *American Youth* proves that the novel is still our most vital way of communicating essential information, and LaMarche proves that there are still young geniuses among us, wringing new life from the old form."

—GEORGE SAUNDERS

"*American Youth* is a novel that demonstrates that the best writing is sometimes the simplest. A story of the individual, a story of America, it is one of those (all too) rare books that has stayed with me long after reading the last page."

—KATE ATKINSON

"In crystalline, taut prose, LaMarche offers a boy who is left rudderless after the simplest of accidents leaves him teetering on the edge of the human circle. Whether he'll fall painfully out or fall mercifully back in is the heart of this honest and uncompromising look at the darker side of growing up."

—BRIAN EVENSON

AMERICAN YOUTH

**For William Hanson,
1977-2005**

Scars have the strange power to remind
us that our past is real.

—CORMAC MCCARTHY,

All the Pretty Horses

AMERICAN YOUTH

The two boys walked the high ridge at the center of the wood road, avoiding the muddy ruts along the sides. Loggers had powered their hulking machines along the makeshift pathways—the huge skidder tires clawing deep cuts into the soft earth. The men had taken the timber of any value and only the undesirable trees remained: the young, the mangled and twisted, the rotten and sick. The boys made their way through the difficult clutter of leftover branches that now thatched the forest floor. The sun broke the sparse canopy and beat on their sweating necks.

Terry caught a toe on the cut end of an exposed root and stumbled into several lurching steps. His backpack rattled.

The other boy sidestepped the splintered butt of wood and quickly tiptoed around a small birch stump. Terry stood a head taller than the boy and he was half again as broad, but he wore his body like an oversize suit. The boy was still small and nimble, but he wasn't happy about it. He looked at Terry's body and he wanted one of his own. Terry's neck and arms were thick like a man's. The backpack looked like a child's toy, dangling between his broad shoulders.

Terry tripped again. "Cocksucker," he said. He hopped the rut at the side of the path and took a seat on a broad stump. The cut wood was still pale and creamy. White sawdust clung to the dead leaves on the ground like early snow. Terry bent over his knees and clutched the laces of his work boot. He wore them untied and loose, as was the fashion in their school for boots and high-tops. Now he straightened his leg and leaned back, pulling the boot tight. He bow-tied the laces and set to his other foot.

The boy eyed Terry's hands and forearms as he pulled. They were covered in coarse red hair that matched the color of his closely shorn scalp. The boy's arms were undefined. What hair he had on his body was blond and thin.

Terry grunted when he stood. He hopped back on the trail. The boy was six months his senior, but Terry's size earned him the lead through the maze of skid roads. When Terry wondered which way to proceed, the boy pointed knowingly from behind. He'd grown up hunting the Darling land with his father and uncle. But several years back, Mr. Darling had died and his children had sold the property to a developer. Within weeks, NO TRESPASSING signs surrounded the four hundred acres. Within months, the land had been subdivided and the

town's zoning board confronted with plans for a handful of upscale housing developments.

In effect, the boys were trespassing, but there was no one around to catch them. When the economy had gone bad and stayed bad, the development stopped. The groaning cement trucks quit their runs in and out of the new neighborhoods. The swarms of subcontractors disappeared and the developer's Mercedes no longer made its rounds about town. It was rumored that the money from the recent logging contract was all he had left to fend off foreclosure.

The boys walked out into the clearing of Woodbury Heights, the last of the developer's projects. He'd pushed the road into the woods, paved it, and even managed to cut several of the prospective house lots before the recession settled in. Piles of soil and unearthed boulders now cluttered the landscape. Leafless trees lay prone, their roots reaching elliptically into the air. The deep black of the new pavement stood out from the mess of the rest of the scene.

The boys made their way to the culvert at the end of the road. The August sun hung heavily on the two and came back at them from the hot blacktop.

"You sure?" the boy said.

Terry nodded. He slid his arms out of the backpack and pulled out three glass bottles.

"How you know?"

"My brother," Terry told him. "Two parts gas, one part oil." He took out three socks and tied knots in them. He soaked the socks with the mixture in the bottles and stuffed a knot through each open bottleneck. Then he went to the side of the road and wiped his hands on the tall grass.

When he returned, he took up one of the bottles, held a lighter to the sock, and heaved the cocktail. It crashed and set a good portion of pavement afire.

"See," Terry said. "Told you."

The boy smiled. "No shit," he said.

They watched the fire slowly subside.

Terry lit and tossed a second. Again the pavement burned.

"Let me," the boy said.

Terry handed him the last of the three bottles and the boy held it, his arm cocked and ready. Terry thumbed the lighter and touched it to the sock. The boy waited for the flame to catch, crow-hopped a quick three steps, and overhanded the bottle. It reminded him of some second-rate firework, the trajectory neither high nor fast. When it crashed down, the flames spilled across the tarmac and waved in the air. The boy stared at the fire, a dumb smile on his soft face.

A jab in the ribs brought him around quickly. Terry pointed a thumb down the road. His head was cocked, an ear in the direction of his hand. His eyes looked at the sky. The boy heard it too, an engine in low gear, climbing the hill. Terry turned and sprinted. The boy chased after him but couldn't keep up. With the sound of the engine growing closer, Terry didn't try to make it to the trail they'd come on. Instead he bolted over the shoulder of the road, through the underbrush, and into the woods. The boy followed.

With the broad hardwoods gone, the hiding wasn't good. Terry sprawled behind a fir sapling and the boy crouched behind a good-size stump. He panted, catching his breath. When he saw the police cruiser, his chest froze and he could hardly get more than a quick gasp. He looked back at Terry.

"Think it's burning?" the boy said.

Terry shrugged. "Come on," he said, once the cruiser had passed. He jumped to his feet and waved for the boy to follow.

"I don't think we should move."

"No way," Terry said, as he turned and lumbered into the woods. The boy looked back at the road. He heard Terry crashing through the brush and dead leaves behind him. He turned and ran after his friend. He didn't want to be alone.

Though Terry was a more powerful sprinter, his size worked against him over a longer distance and the boy overtook him.

"Where you going?" said the boy.

Terry pointed in the direction he was running.

The boy shook his head and motioned off to his right.

Terry nodded and followed.

When the two could run no farther, they stopped and rested, their torsos bent, hands heavy on their knees.

"Duncan?" the boy said.

Terry shrugged.

"I hope it was Duncan."

"Me too."

"Don't tell."

"Don't tell me not to tell. Christ," Terry said.

The boy looked down and then away.

"Besides," Terry told him, "I'm the one reeks of gas." He reached down and wiped his hands on the leaves of a small tree.

They walked until they reached Sandy Creek, the first development to go up on the Darling property. Prior to the building and