

Review: *Sunset Park* by Paul Auster

By JOSEPH PESCHEL

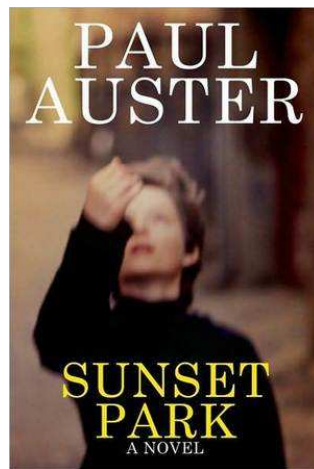
Special to The Star

In “Sunset Park,” Paul Auster abandons the metafictional play of his last novel, “Invisible,” for the realistic portrayal of a son estranged from his family and the depiction of people so battered and broken by circumstances and the terrible economy that they’re forced to live in an abandoned house.

That familiar theme of dystopia permeates many of Auster’s novels. And this, too, is a story of failure, despair, blighted hope and eventual death, in which the main character, Miles, is compared to a returning soldier, old and shut down by the time he comes home.

Miles always blamed himself for his stepbrother’s death and, after he overheard his father and stepmother arguing about him, he had a falling-out with them. So, at 21, he

dropped out of Brown University in his junior year, left home and bummed around the country.



It’s 2008 now. Miles is 28, intelligent but still lacking ambition. He’s working a miserable job in Florida, clearing out foreclosed houses. The only good thing in his life is his 17-year-old girlfriend, Pilar. But one of Pilar’s older three sisters blackmails Miles: Steal from the houses, she says, or she’ll rat Miles out to the cops about the high-school girl’s age.

Soon, though, Miles hears from his longtime friend Bing, who

inadvertently rescues him. Bing is “the militant debunker of contemporary life who dreams of forging a new reality from the ruins of a failed world.”

He runs a business called the Hospital for Broken Things that fixes manual typewriters, vacuum-tube radios and gumball machines and, metaphorically, broken souls.

Bing invites Miles to join him and two others who live in an abandoned house in the Sunset Park area of Brooklyn. It’s Miles’ chance to escape his current predicament and send for Pilar when she finishes school and turns of age. Still, Miles perceives the time he’ll spend in New York away from Pilar as time spent in prison.

The other two squatters are women. Ellen, who can’t make it as a real estate agent, wants to paint and draw. Alice works a part-time job at a literary organization

and is writing her doctoral dissertation.

The house is “a forlorn piece of architectural stupidity that would not fit in anywhere.” It sits across from a cemetery, a symbol of the invisible graveyard in front of all of them.

The house is in New York, though, and that’s where Miles’ father, Morris, and stepmother, Willa, live. Morris owns a struggling book publishing company and his marriage is in trouble. But Mary-Lee, Miles’ actress mother, will be on stage in New York, and so Miles has the opportunity to meet again with his blood-mother.

Auster sets up a possible reconciliation between Miles and family and a

similar reunion of the other three with society.



But it’s Miles who we care about most, and Auster teases us by leaving his fate ambiguous, in keeping with the rhythms of Auster’s own pessimism.

To add to the novel’s overall bleakness, characters often refer to the film “The Best Years of Our Lives.”

That allows Auster to draw some insightful parallels between Miles and the beaten-down soldiers returning from World War II in “Best

Years,” but the soldier analogy strains when applied to the other squatters — they just aren’t as broken.

Still, the motifs — failure, despair and a search for identity — are classic Auster. It’s Miles’ father who neatly ties the author’s mournful themes together when he writes in his book of observations: “We do not grow stronger as the years advance. The accumulation of sufferings and sorrows weakens our capacity to endure more sufferings and sorrows.”

“Sunset Park” is not Auster’s masterpiece, but it is as good as any novel he has written since “Follies.”

Sunset Park, by Paul Auster (320 pages; Henry Holt; \$25)

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