



American Skin

Don De Grazia

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American Skin was first published in the United Kingdom to resounding acclaim after the author used his last seventy-five dollars to make an unsolicited submission to the publisher of the Scottish beats, whose work he admired. It is a timeless story about a young man's coming-of-age as well as a stunning portrait of the class and racial tensions that pervade our society.

Alex Verdi is on the lam, fleeing from the police who have arrested his parents on drug charges and want him for questioning. Traveling to Chicago, he joins a multiracial group of anti-Nazi skinheads and embarks on an odyssey that takes him from the city's embattled streets to an Army boot camp to Northwestern's plush campus, and finally lands him amid the horrors of maximum-security prison.

In this intense and gripping debut, Don De Grazia confirms his stature as a young writer of uncommon seriousness and consummate artistry.

American Skin Details

Date : Published April 6th 2000 by Touchstone (first published January 1st 1998)

ISBN : 9780684862224

Author : Don De Grazia

Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Music

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From Reader Review American Skin for online ebook

Lollipopwater Norton says

Because the book is named "American Skin" and features a skinhead on the cover, I really thought the story was going to have at least some interesting references to the philosophy and music of the skin scene, while perhaps following the tale of some of the kids. Silly me.

No. It is a book featuring cliched dialogue, unlikable douche-bag characters, and a ridiculous storyline complete with an incestuous subplot. Throw in some random Buddhism, Ayn Rand and some bomber jackets, and you have "American Skin".

Pato says

A must read for any Chicago native old enough (and enough in the know) to remember Medusas and Punkin Donuts. This was a lot of fun to read because of this kind of thing - there is a scene in this book that takes place in an apartment building I used to live in! Aside from that, the book is amazingly well told, filled with interesting insights and lively, strong, believable characters. Falls short of five stars because it feels like some of the content belongs in another book - the narrator goes from a sympathetic punk to a sympathetic asshole rather jarringly, which would work better if he didn't go back to being a sympathetic punk again by the last act of the book.

Sarah says

I am fairly easy to entertain. I can find something I like in the vast majority of books that I have read, even if I didn't completely enjoy them. This was not one of those books.

The protagonist (Alex) is a self-centred douchebag named eventually falls into a crowd of anti-racist Skinheads. The book sets up a group of Nazi Skinheads - or "Swazi" in the book - as antagonists early on, but doesn't do much with them. They basically serve as occasional props to show how Strong And Tough(TM) Alex and his friends are. The leader of the Swazis shows up towards the end of the book to create tension for our dumbass protagonist, though, but falls flat.

One of my problems with this book is that throughout the book, any black people in it (for the most part) are basically caricatures. Alex is friends with black people who are mixed race and they are always Not Like All The Other Black People. That was pretty damn annoying. And for someone who is supposed to be an anti-racist skinhead (who dated a mixed race black woman who later turned out to be his half-sister), this character sure gave the Nazi Skinheads a run for their money.

Another issue with this book is that Alex is pretty much a Gary Stu. He gets all the ladies. They all want to have sex with him and he can make them orgasm three times within minutes. ? The only woman he almost struck out with was his half-sister who he does sleep with in a scene that is described in a way that sounded

like rape.

Also, him and his friends win every fight they get into, with little consequences for their actions - unless the author has to use it to move the story forward. They got into a fight with the Nazi Skinheads that spilled onto a major Chicago street and blocked up traffic - but when the cops came Gary Stu and his crew were all told to leave and they arrested the head Nazi. I know this is based in Chicago in the '80s, but come on. Nope, our protagonist and one of his friends only end up getting into trouble when they get into a fight with an Italian guy who has some mob connections. (Alex was flirting with his wife unknowingly, and of course the guy sucker punched him!)

There was little character growth for the protagonist. Throughout the story he comes off like an entitled, selfish, asshole. He never seems to connect the dots into how he got into all the trouble he did and why some of his aspirations didn't initially happen for him. The author seems to attempt to remedy this in the short epilogue (that spans two years), but fails miserably. And this was supposed to be a guy who was telling his story down the road, only it was done with zero clarity or remorse.

Do not waste your time on this crap. It's only true redemption was that it was short and a pretty quick (though painful) read.

Anne says

I read this in college. We actually met the author and he explained how he used movies to help inspire him to write action scenes. I think he said *Taxi Driver* was one of his influences and that he started the book in college as just short stories until he turned it into a book. It was interesting to learn his method.

The book was fine. It focuses on the character Alex. I do like how some action scenes are described such as chin hitting a pavement or an explosion. There is nice detail but I have to say that there are problems with how this story deals with race. As a person of color I found it offensive how the main lead sexualizes and exoticifies Black...mostly mixed raced women. Marie is a biracial female lead that is a stereotype. She is sassy and sexualized but is Buddhist. Since she is biracial she believes in "race mixing" (that is literally what they call interracial relationships. She becomes Alex's girlfriend right away without much explanation.

There are racial slurs like "mul*tto" used alot. It's kind of confusing since the story is told through an older Alex point of view yet he continues to use that racial slur. It is even more strange when you find out the twist ending that really doesn't go anywhere. There are Hispanics used for comic relief in one scene. The only Black friends and love interests of Alex are all half White. Not one dark skinned good Black person is in this book. The only way for Black people to be good apparently is if they are light and bright and half White. If they are dark "coal skinned" (yes he described a dark skinned Black person's complexion as coal) and Black they are enemies of our hero Alex.

I'll just say to young aspiring White writers don't use this book as a templet to how to write people of color. They all are stereotypes and there are mircoaggressions used to describe them along with the favoring of mixed raced people oppose to darker skinned Black people. This book had good moments in it if you are able to look past the fact that the author knows nothing about people of color. The only reason why this bothers me as much as it does is becasue this book is supposedly praised for how it tackles racial interactions. Alex idolizes Tim yet Tim says and does alot of racist things in this book. The story makes it clear that they are not the racist skinheads yet Tim's group act almost more racist than the proclaim racist

skinheads. Maybe that is the point? I don't know. The POC characters are still written as stereotypes.

Jay says

I first read this book when it came out back in 1999 and just reread it for the first time in years a couple weeks ago. At the time I was an undergrad at Columbia College and Don De Grazia was definitely my favorite prof. I remember there was talk about American Skin being made into a movie, but I guess that never happened. I went drinking with Don a few times after class at George's and the South Loop Club near the Columbia campus. He was a good man who could hold his liquor and a conversation at the same time, which unfortunately I can't say for everyone. I loved the book then & I love it now. Takes me back to the Chicago of my teenage years, hanging out at the punk rock Dunkin Doughnuts, drinking at the Gargoyle with a fake ID, going to the Alley with my girlfriend to buy Manic Panic so that we could go home and dye our hair purple and green etc. I was never hard core like Alex Verdi though, but ah, the memories of Chicago in the late 80s/early 90s! This is one of my favorite books of all time & I plan on reading it every 10 years for the rest of my life. I just ordered a copy of it for my library. Waiting for Don DeGrazia's next novel to be published.....

No says

I ordered this book on Amazon thinking it was about a White-Racist skinhead. If I remember correctly the summary said nothing about anti-Nazi skinheads. After reading a few pages it hooked me, and to my surprise was very well written and has good details and a good flow to the story. Although I differ highly from the main characters point of view and politics, this book is very entertaining, and is a page turner.

Lots of street fights, political and philosophical debates. Setting fires, dead dogs, police brutality, sex, tattoos, prison violence, and drinking. It also has the typical anti-racist associations like homosexuality, race mixing, hippies, drugs, liberalism, rap music and other disgusting attributes. A truly twisted story, but like watching a bus full of Christians get in a really bad car accident you just can't help but watch and enjoy the entertainment.

From an entertainment point I give this book 4 stars.

Notes:

Characters:

Alex Verdi - Anti-Racist Skinhead

Tim Penn - Anti-Racist Skinhead

Frank Pritzger - Lead Neo-Nazi Skin

Marie - Alex's GF (mulatto)

Zach Mustafa - Infantry (Boot Camp)

Abby Rivers - Alex's new college GF

"At dawn my dad would rise. He said the advent of electricity had thrown man off his natural rhythms."

"Fuck 'Deal With It', Zach snapped. 'That's such typical American shit - 'Deal With It.' Do what you're told."

Toe the line... right face, halt. It's the American way."

"Ayn Rand was very big on personal responsibility. Basically, she argued that if everybody spent enough time worrying about their own goddamn selves, no one would have to worry about anyone else."

Summary:

Alex's dad and mom was arrested on drug charges over weed, and his sister taken by the state. Alex assumes the cops are after him to, so he burns down the family barn and house which was going to be auctioned. Alex runs away and finds a job in Chicago. He meets some anti-racist skinheads on a train. After getting fired from his job he goes to meet up with the sharps at a club called the Gorgon, where outside they get into it with Nazi skinheads. Alex meets Marie, a mulatto who he ends up falling in love with and introduces him to Buddhism, and joins the sharps. Tim is the sharp that Alex looks up to the most, and the guy who runs things at the Gorgon, which is owned by a queer and basically a flop house for everyone that works there.

Marie beats up a Nazi skin Byrd and then they become friends and she moves into the flop house. The main Nazi skinhead has her severely beaten where in retaliation the sharps beat him up, when the cops come and everyone ends up in jail. Tim and Alex go to boot camp instead of prison. Alex meets Zach who he refers to as 'human morphine' who has different views and refers him to ayn rands books. After boot camp Alex leaves the sharp scene and goes with Zach to Virginia where he gets a job and tries to get into NU college. He meets Abby who then becomes his new girlfriend.

Marie gets pregnant by Tim and Tim gets arrested for narcotics and is in prison doing 3-5. Waiting at the train tracks, a guy tries to rob Alex with a box cutter, and they both get into a bloody fight. Arrested for killing the mugger, laying in the hospital he is reunited with his mom and little sister. Then convicted of manslaughter and to do 5-7. In prison his cell mate is Tim who has joined the Aryan Brotherhood. Alex joins the brotherhood and gets his anarchy tattoo covered with a swastika. Tim is visited by his mother and Marie and the new mixed baby, after begging and pleading from his mom Tim holds the baby and cries. The brotherhood stabs Tim for racial treason in his cell and tosses his dead body off the tier.

Out of prison and now working as a launderers bagman for a mafia related friend of his dads. The queer bar owner died of AIDS. Alex is together with Marie and taking care of tims halfbreed baby. Alex gets his tattoos lasered off and wears suits working for the mafia. Frank is out of prison.

Anja says

Ich muss das erstmal sacken lassen... Dann Rezi, extra für meinen Bruder ^^

Jessica says

This novel was better than I expected it would turn out. It is a contemporary coming-of-age book which follows a life lead by character Alex Verdi. Alex struggles to find a group that he can connect with after his parents are sent to jail and his little sister to a foster home. He wants to become a good man to impress his father, but finds himself resorting to violence and eventually getting into trouble. His journey takes him through many phases: being an anti-Nazi skinhead, fourth months in the Army, a night manager of a

restaurant near Northwestern where he hoped to get into school, then finally, to prison. He is not a refined person, but his love for Ayn Rand's philosophy as well as Buddhism help him to finally climb his way out of the hole he created himself by turning to violence.

I wish I could give this book 3 1/2 stars, but Goodreads doesn't allow half-stars.

Yosh Waters says

I first read this in high school, back in probably 2002 or 2003. I was semi-obsessed with it for a little while, I can safely say. This is a great story for vicariously living a dangerous and exciting modern life that you're just too lucky to get stuck in. You know how you can sometimes imagine being a bum or something, and you think "hey, I could do whatever I want. The whole world would be my oyster, I don't have to just sit around panhandling!" and then you remember that actually, you would probably do just that, sit down and panhandle? Because you don't have the balls? This is the kind of story where the hero didn't sit down to panhandle. Plus not a lot of other books involve big punk clubs called The Gorgon and old school multiracial skinheads that kick the shit out of neonazis.

Mickaurec says

'American Skin,' Don DeGrazia: Pretty good. Ulysses / Homer Iliad / Odyssey-type structure for coming of age story in unique setting of Chicago skinheads world. Their world and the action is located mainly in the runyonesque vortex within a couple blocks radially from the axis from Dunkin' Donuts (Belmont Clark) to the old Medusa juice bar / club (School-Sheffield -- dubbed 'Gorgon' in the novel -- see that?). Moves fast, interesting arc, with plenty of philosophical flights, including not least some feel-good Buddhism and old-fashioned Ayn Rand anti-communism, anti-collectivism in the guise of "Objectivism." A lengthy junket on the Northwestern U campus / Evanston, Ill., has the narrator (Verdi) posing as a NU student for the purpose of courting a savory patrician female student (though not herself attending NU), which recalls the cyclist's story in Steve Tesich's screenplay of 'Breaking Away' (1979), and has an intriguing outcome. I've met De Grazia in passing, he's well known in the Columbia College and Chicago fiction writing world, can't but wonder how much of 'American Skin' is memoir / documentary. But that's just me -- I never had the sense that the author was merged with Verdi in a way that derailed the narrative; the mystery enhances the experience of the work. A terrific read.

Lindsey says

I probably never would have read this book had a customer not left it opened on the bar at a restaurant I worked at, tempting me to read a page.

I went out and bought it and I must say I was impressed. It was incredibly well written and offered a glimpse into the life of Skinheads in America... not only that but I learned at not all skin heads are racist, Jew-hating Nazis. Prior to reading this I must admit I hated any skinhead thinking they stood for everything I was so morally against, however after reading this I realized that the history of the Skinhead culture is not in fact anti-semitic, even if it has since turned that way.

I went into this thinking it would be an entertaining read, I came out of it with not only a new insight into a culture I know nothing about, but also with an idea about how easy it is for people (including myself) to

stereotype without knowing the whole story.

Ed Wagemann says

I went to grad school, had classes with and was tutored by Don De Grazia at Columbia College in the early 1990s. His talent was immediately recognizable and his spirit was a true inspiration. I bought his book and read it quickly. It is a page turner, dealing with skin heads and others and set mostly in late 1980s Chicago, it was fun to read about locations that I had been to and characters I seemed to have known. After reading this book I became interested in reading more books set in Chicago and for about a year that was what I mostly read.

In general I don't read much fiction, so I don't recommend much. And although I thought the very ending of *American Skin* was a bit contrived, overall this novel is a total joy. No one that I have ever recommended it to has NOT liked it.

Janelle Corr says

I feel like I just read an after school special from the 80s.

Justin says

American Skin traces the young adulthood of Alex Verdi, as his path takes him from the son of "hippie" parents living in the woods, to runaway, to factory worker, to skinhead, to bootcamp, to a blown shot at redemption, then to prison and finally to what we are left to believe is a somewhat reformed life.

The story is a page-turner, no doubt, but the protagonist - through his various incarnations - did not seem genuine. The book also felt a little too familiar, as if I've read/seen elements of the story many times over. I'm pretty surprised at the high ratings other readers are giving *American Skin*. It was a good book - worth reading, but certainly not great.

NOTE - Over a month after reading this (and having read several books in the meantime), I kept finding myself thinking about this book. My impression of it has grown after some distance from it, so I upgraded it to 4 stars from 3.

Nick Simmons says

An amazing book, not only because of the story contained within, but for the rare example of a story transcending its' own inherent limitations by pure effort. The beginning reads like a crude teenage daydream - you chuckle and pass it by, hoping for something more. And you find it. Alex Verdi's story is both artless in its' bonehead aimlessness and seeming disregard for the future, and propelled by a ruthless narrative engine. The dust-jacket comparisons to Homer ring true, but the more salient reminder, to me, is of Dickens. As in Dickens, we follow a disadvantaged but not absolutely proletarian protagonist through the stomachs of the cow, then observe his partial salvation thanks to his own background.

Also to be mentioned: There is clunky writing (most of it is endearing and brief) but there are also scenes which stick in my everyday memory. The prison tattooist, serenaded with Hank Williams by another inmate to distract the subject from the pain; the chance meeting with Pritzger and his new apprentice, whom Alex realizes is destined from prison, where 'they would be staining his skin with Nazi ink and pissing in his mouth' (not an exact quote, I don't have the book in front of me).
