



Young Americans

Peter S. Rush

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Young Americans is a visceral novel about treachery, filled with colorful period details.

In Peter S. Rush's *Young Americans*, a hard-boiled crime novel set in the 1970s, an ambitious marijuana dealer is betrayed after he tries international drug smuggling.

A New Yorker based in Tampa, Tommy is an impatient, overconfident hustler who hopes to make an easy million. His girlfriend, Sandy, is a college dropout with a "country club smile" that's at odds with her choice to join in his criminal lifestyle. She introduces him to Harry, a flashy, Atlanta conman who deals in diamonds and cocaine. Harry tries to maneuver Tommy into an apprentice role. In Tommy's initial meetings with Harry, he's full of bravado, but also trusts his own gut.

Background details are filled in through slow interludes, including gritty motel room drug deals, chapters from Sandy's view, and interactions with Tommy's Tampa partners, who hinder him by making too many mistakes. Tommy's initial trip to Bogotá is filled with the tension of dangerous deals, though the trip back is weighed down in the minutiae of how he offloads cocaine for cash.

Tommy's second trip to Bogotá results in a long overdue reckoning, complete with depictions of armed Colombian forces who are a combination of cinematic tropes and realistic ruthlessness. This leads to a trial back home: Harry set Tommy up, landing Tommy in the notorious La Modelo prison, where he saves himself through cunning.

Harry's slippery nature is laid out in sumptuous detail, from his jewels to his gluttony and showy talk. The novel's women are described according to their physical traits and are eroticized in voyeuristic scenes, though. When Sandy is brutalized, it underscores the corrupt underworld she's caught up in. Still, as a counterpart to Tommy, she's underdeveloped.

It's Tommy's psyche that carries the book through its shocks and thrills. He's an antisocial man in his twenties who's determined to keep the upper hand, and what's under this shell is murkier. The novel includes intermittent references to Tommy being raped by a priest in his childhood, suggesting reasons for his behavior, but it's a distracting addition.

From the murder of a pedophile in a side plot, to intricate depictions of drug preparation and its lingo, the novel is thorough about describing life at the fringes. Its darkness is tempered by characters' occasional acts of loyalty, including Sandy being willing to stick with Tommy, no matter the risks to herself. The book ties up its loose ends in a rapid conclusion.

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KAREN RIGBY (July 1, 2020)

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