

## FIGUREHEADS

### Overview

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**F**igureheads is a series that discusses some of the great political novels of our era.

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### Roscoe by William Kennedy

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Eight intrepid souls gathered to discuss the lovable con man Roscoe. Most people finished the book and about half actually liked it. We all loved Roscoe, who wouldn't? I began with a little more information about William Kennedy, with a plea to read and then watch Ironweed. This book dealing with the have nots is a counterbalance to the haves in Roscoe. I then talked at length about the big city bosses - their efforts on behalf of immigrants (in return for votes), cleaning up cities, etc. I focused more on Chicago, especially with Rahm Emmanuel entering the mayor's race. I hoped that this information would put the political aspect of the book into clearer perspective. We found the book funny, painful, and difficult to follow. But in the end we were glad to have read it and felt it was a good book for the series. This was our second book and I would not start with it. We talked about how the 24 hour news cycle affects politics today and how it would have affected Roscoe's politics. Is politics different today? Who does Alex represent (John F. Kennedy and his type of politics)? Politics and cock fighting - the same. What a great metaphor. The essential question is, as it was with Willie Stark, does the means justify the ends? Chicago was a better city in many ways under the Daleys. Roscoe's Albany was cleaner and there was less violence (just kill the Legs types off!). And Huey Long aka Willie Stark made Louisiana a better place. But then Mussolini made the trains run on time..... Politics is fascinating. We head to Texas next month. Barbara Gose

Nine readers and myself met at the Niobrara County Library for a discussion of Roscoe, the first text in the Figureheads series. As we are an honest and open group, several were not afraid to let me know they had not finished the book. Several reasons were given, including the complexity of characters and relationships and the font size. Regardless, and undaunted, we stumbled ahead to try to discuss the book in light of the title of the series, defining what areas we might be discussing. Topics ranged from politics and political situations (from Socrates and the Golden Age of Greece to present day), whether it is human nature to form complex organizations and relationships, basics of the New York political machine both as presented in the text and from audience knowledge, and basic plot structure and devices used by

Kennedy. This was our shortest discussion in all the years I have led book groups in Lusk, but it was fruitful and we are ready to move on to All the King's Men for October.

Wayne G. Deahl

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Dear Fellow Readers and Discussion Participants,

My first book group meeting was a delight--to be among passionate readers, who care about their experience and enjoy sharing ideas. Our first book was William Kennedy, Roscoe, a tale of crime, corruption, prostitution, prohibition--the foundation with our American political system. Regrettably, the reading experience for all of us women--despite our praise for Kennedy's magic use of language--was hard work, and often too obscure, even pointless. Perhaps Roscoe is a "man's book," rather than "a woman's book," if, indeed, gender can be prescribed here.

I teach from a position of Aristotle--the story must first delight and intrigue, and then teach important ethical and moral lessons. Consequently, the reader goes through a transformation from ignorance into enlightenment, from despair into hope, from hate into love, and finally, from darkness into the light. Unfortunately, our "hero" Roscoe--a bit like like in Greek or Shakespearean tragedy--wallows through the muddied, violent, obscene waters of human decadence. But in Roscoe's case, despite his brief moments of spiritual awareness and love, he quite enjoys the decadent mud, and he never really expects anything more.

This "male downer" did not appeal to us as Wyoming Women readers; we were struggling, grasping for "the point" to Roscoe. To help my group, I ended up explaining the 20th Century literary penchant for revelling in existential despair--the only meaning in life is that there is no meaning. Life is just one episode of "muddling through" after another--with brief, illusory glimmers of human connection, love, enlightenment, and redemption, along the way--but not really. We are all alone in the universe. Decadence and death happens, so we might as well get back to being "naughty." America and the American Democracy (to use popular vernacular) "sucks."

Needless to say, our reading evaluations went from 5 to 8. I gave the book the highest evaluation. However, we had a fine, vibrant discussion, and we look forward to the next political novel in the series.

Melanie O'Hara

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Thirteen ladies and one gentleman gathered on a hot August evening at the Pine Bluffs branch library of the Laramie County Library System for a discussion of **Roscoe by William Kennedy**. This is the first book in the **Figureheads** series. We started out by discussing the similarity between the events in the book and the events we were currently witnessing in congress regarding the

wrangling over the debt ceiling. We wondered how much wheeling and dealing was happening behind closed doors.

The group didn't feel that the book *Roscoe* was a difficult read although the way the action jumps around in time made it a bit of a challenge. Once you are clear that "now" is the weeks immediately following VJ day 1945 and Elisha's suicide. This just took a bit of getting used to. And of course there are the occasional surrealistic 'dying dream sequence' interludes where the dead speak and the Pope drops by on a bicycle just to liven things up a bit.

One of the first questions asked of the group was "Who is Gilby's father?" and "Why did Elisha kill himself?". These two questions are definitely related with most thinking that Elisha committed suicide to protect the identity of Gilby's father by leading everyone to believe it must be Elisha himself. Most of the group members believe as Roscoe apparently believed that Alex was Gilby's biological father. Then we talked about fathers and sons; Roscoe and Felix, Alex and Elisha, Gilby and Elisha, Gilby and Alex, Gilby and Roscoe and the definition of "father".

We talked a bit about the cockfight and the purpose and symbolism of this scene in the book. I suggested that it serves as a metaphor for Roscoe's life. It's a set-up, it's not fair, someone's pulled a switch, he doesn't end up with what he deserves, things are not as they seem, people will hurt you and cheat you, etc., etc.

We spent a good deal of time talking about Roscoe's character and the fact that although he is corrupt and does despicable things like fixing elections, lying, accepting bribes, falsifying an autopsy, etc. he is still likable. We talked about his principles and decided that he did have them. Although other characters in the book do commit murder, Roscoe draws the line at really hurting anyone. He's a good friend to Elisha, Veronica and Gilby and backs off from the relationship with Veronica (his true love) when Alex asks him to. He treats Veronica, Elisha and Gilby very well and the most charming parts of the book are his conversations with young Gilby.

One of the most compelling parts of the book is Roscoe's reminiscences of his injury by 'friendly fire' in WWI. One group member complained that Kennedy wrote this whole 3 page scene as one sentence (pages 76-79). So we discussed why Kennedy might have written it this way. I think it might have been to make it clear that this is an uncomfortable memory by making you a little uncomfortable while you read it. It is also a little exhausting to read, there are no easy places to stop, so the reader has to read the whole scene in one sitting. This brought up Roscoe's very different experience in WWI as compared to Alex's WWII experience. You assume Alex earned his hero status but you know that Roscoe falsified records to get his medals. WWI and WWII were very different wars according to the war historian (and only male) in our discussion group. Veterans of these wars felt very differently about their service and whether or not it was a just war and they were heroes. We discussed whether or not we thought that Alex's war experiences would make him a more honest politician or not.

We decided that Roscoe was not happy in the end of the novel. Although he accumulated a lot of wealth and power he had no personal connections to family and friends at his death. He had no wife, no children, no siblings or family left, no one to really miss him when he died. He is thus wounded several times in the heart, frequently metaphorically with the loss of Veronica and the betrayal of Pamela and at least twice literally (with his injuries in the war and in the car accident).

We concluded that there was actually quite a bit to discuss in this relatively short book.

Elaine Hayes

The first two books of this (Figureheads) series have drawn considerably smaller crowds than we usually have in Story. We had eight people to discuss Roscoe, and, as I recall nine(?) last month for All the King's Men. I do think that these two are the most demanding books in the series, but the discussions have been rich for those who prevailed.

After a bit of background on Kennedy and the Albany books, I began the discussion of Roscoe by merely going around the table and asking for responses to the book. Several acknowledged that they found it hard going, especially at first, because of the time shifts, the 'dream' sequences, and the difficulty identifying and keeping the characters straight. In our talking about Kennedy's style of writing, someone pointed out one sentence that went on for three pages (pp. 76-79)!

In spite of the difficulties, most said they were glad they read it though and found a lot in it to think about. Only one person said she really disliked the book, especially because she was offended by Kennedy's portrayal of the women. A very interesting observation by a man who really enjoyed the book was that he viewed it entirely as a farce....that all the characters were exaggerated and not believable but for an effect.

Some of the discussion evolved around the following questions:

-What about Roscoe? Why do we like him in spite of his dubious moral character? How is he a romantic, or is he?

-Are there any characters who are "good" or virtuous, any "paragons" by which to measure the other characters?

-Where are examples of humor and how can the humor be characterized? What is the effect of the humor?

-While the book is set in a very particular time and place, what are the broader themes?

-Is the political world Kennedy illustrates still pervasive today? (Lots of opinions and examples were cited here!)

-How does this book compare to All the King's Men?

In all, we had a good discussion and some great arguments over a book that I worried wouldn't inspire much talk. Whew!

Norleen Healy

## **All The King's Men** by Robert Penn Warren

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Nine souls found the time, in the midst of many other events, to gather at the Niobrara County Library for a discussion of All the King's Men, our second text in the series. While many had found Roscoe to be a difficult novel, with the many plot threads, the Warren text seemed to be more approachable. I had warned the group that Warren was a poet and critic, and that the novel would be dense in its metaphors and descriptions; however, the poetic writing proved to be no problem. Most expressed liking the book. The one concern was length, as a few had been unable to finish the novel in the allotted time. In part, this was a result of having the first discussion a week later because of conflicts and having one week less for the reading.

Regardless, we soldiered on. The Lusk group, as are many groups, is composed entirely of women. Thus, discussion of the women in the novel, their relationships to men and to each other, and the place of women was a lengthy one. The complicated relationship between Jack, Ann, Willie, and Adam proved interesting, as did Lucy, Tom, and the baby. Sadie was discussed at some length. We discovered some of the details of Huey Long which paralleled the Boss, which ultimately led to the question of doing "good," why and how it is done, and the morality involved. Some time was spent relating the politics of this work with our understanding of Wyoming politics. The prevalence of smoking and how that has changed was noted. And a late-comer wanted to know what The Big Twitch was. We concluded the discussion trying to reach an answer to that question, settling on an idea that life events provide stimuli to which we twitch, or jump, in reaction. That perhaps life is not always free choice, but that fate may play a large role in how events play out.

An enjoyable evening and it is on to The Gay Place.

Wayne Deahl

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Twelve readers gathered in our library community room to discuss Warren's novel. I had watched the Oscar winning film (with Broderick Crawford) of the book, while two people had seen the newer Shan Penn version. We agreed that we wanted to have a movie night where we could watch the film together (scheduled for next Monday). I hope to do this with Primary Colors as well. I was so pleased with the response to ATKM. People read the book, liked the book, and were happy to share their views of Stark and his men (and Sadie). Yes, it was a tough read - long and full of wonderful (but sometimes repetitious) passages. Warren was a poet, after all. But when one finishes the book the reason for Jack's digressions and descriptions becomes apparent. He is, in

retrospect, telling his story, which is also Willie's story woven in with his. We talked about the comparisons to Huey Long. From there we discussed whose story it was, why the Cass Mastern story was included and what it meant, the women in the novel, the concept of populism, how power can lead to dictatorship, can bad come from good, and on and on. I deliberately put this book first in our series, as I knew the length and the depth of it and wanted readers to have the time they needed. The reward was a long and detailed discussion, ending with the philosophical questions of whether the end justifies the means (Willie, who was actually made into who he was by his men) and what Jack needed in order to accept living in the world (moving beyond facts to truth or meaning, the message of Cass Mastern's story). This promises to be a wonderful and rewarding series.

Barbara Gose

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The Laramie book discussion group at the Eppson Senior Center is depleting in numbers: 6 on down to 2. Our first book, William Kennedy's Roscoe, and our second book Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men are too dark, anti-heroic, and confusing for this particular group of readers. The group honors the genius and skill of both writers, but a genuine empathy and reader connection to the characters is lacking.

Pamela Lopez, the Enrichment Director for the Eppson Center, and I have had engaging discussions about the essence of American politics, the American family, and also gender identity, especially for women, in these two novels. Is American politics as dark, self-seeking, and conniving as we are led to believe through these novels? Is the nurturing force of the American family in jeopardy in these novels? A loving, pro-active family is noticeably absent in both. With regard to the women, as with Roscoe, we see the women in All the King's Men as pawns in male political games, afterthoughts of male sexual needs, lacking gumption to break away from personal and political corruption. We looked for hints of honor, courage, nobility, even kindness, and found little to counterbalance the "gloom and doom" aura of the books.

Faith in God flits in and out of the story lines. In All the King's Men, faith is reduced to the "Great Twitch," a rather knee-jerk response to a sense of cosmic order and meaning, forever elusive. This overt realism, uncluttered, without the gloss of classical romantic heroes or heroines, forced both Pamela and me to define our own needs as readers. This self-evaluation is a good thing, and with that in mind, even though these novels are "downers," we have been stretched as readers to find sense and meaning from our own perspective.

Onward and Upward to Billy Lee Brammer's The Gay Place, inspired by Lyndon Johnson. Pamela and I are bracing ourselves for the dark shadows of American politics awaiting us.

Melanie O'Hara

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Eleven book club members met at the Pine Bluffs branch of the Laramie County Library System to discuss *All the Kings Men* by Robert Penn Warren in the *Figureheads* series. I had found some of Huey Long's speeches on YouTube before we started and we were struck by the magnetism displayed by Huey which is not at all coincidentally so similar to the character of Willie Stark in the book. Then we talked about the similarity to the speaking style of other mesmerizing speakers such as Hitler, FDR, Mayor Daly of Chicago and the fictional character Elmer Gantry. We discussed the author's assertion that Willie Stark is not Huey Long. We agreed that names and details had been changed "to protect the guilty" but that the background and plot of the novel owed a lot to Long's infamous political career. One of the book club members grew up in Louisiana and had studied Huey Long's career and thought that Willie Stark was completely Huey Long.

We talked about the title and its relationship to the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme and to Long's populist motto of "every man a king" and his nickname of "The Kingfish of Louisiana". We agreed that although the book was inspired by a politician the main character of the novel is Jack Burden and his struggles with responsibility and right and wrong and is not really "about" Willie Stark. We also talked a great deal about Jack's modes of living or philosophies of life in "the great sleep", "the big twitch" and his "spider web theory". One group member remarked that she liked this book because it reminded her of discussing philosophical issues in college.

The group agreed that the back room deals and dirty tricks shown in this novel still happen and that all politicians are probably guilty of it. If they start out honest they find they won't get re-elected unless they succumb to these dirty tricks. The group did not agree with Willie Stark that the ends justify the means. Because of the assassination in this novel we discussed the political assassinations that we've experienced in our lifetimes and how these events affected American culture, politics and history. Several group members found the book hard to finish because of the length and complexity of the book but wanted to finish it after our discussion.

Elaine Jones Hayes

We had a smaller than usual group, nine readers, for this, our first discussion in the *Figureheads* series. Of those a few hadn't finished the book, but left at the end of the discussion saying they were motivated and determined to finish it.

I began the discussion with some background on Robert Penn Warren and on Huey Long. We decided that even though Warren insists that the book is neither political nor about Huey Long, it is, to some extent, both. We also agreed by the end of the discussion that Warren wants us to think of the story in broader terms and it clearly lends itself to that end.

Of course we spent a great deal of time analyzing the two characters, Jack and Willy, especially in terms of the

contradictions. We talked about how they are alike and how they are different, and why Jack is so intrigued with Willy Stark. We looked at how they both change through out the story. We considered what Adam and Ann Stanton represented to Jack (and to Willy). We looked at the other women in the novel and discussed their place...is the novel "sexist" as some suggest or merely a reflection of the time and place. The group really "got" the Cass Masters story and its place in the story. In our discussion of the "Great Twitch" we talked about how and why the general disillusionment of the period is reflected in much literature and art.

Some of the themes from the novel we agreed on in the end:

-All actions have consequences

-We can't live through other people and nor can we totally detach

-Nobody is pure and unblemished

-Redemption involves forgiveness of others and of ourselves

-All we can do in the end is "tend our own garden"

The whole "end justifies the means" invites discussion of current affairs and politics in general. There was a lot of that. One person astutely noted that the novel asks lots of questions and leaves the answers up to us. I thought that was a perfect way to conclude our discussion.

I'm pleased to be doing this series, even though some of the novels are more demanding. It is rich with implications for broad discussion of humanities issues.

Norleen Healy

## **The Gay Place** **By Billy Lee Brammer**

Eight participants (myself included) met at the Niobrara County Library to discuss *The Gay Place*. This number is smaller than usual for Lusk, and it appears that the decreasing numbers have much to do with the series. One participant suggested that "the dog books were more enjoyable." As is often the case with texts which have graphic events or appear to have gratuitous sexual content, some reading audiences have difficulties with doing or finishing the reading and often cannot see the literary quality of the overall content. That was the case last night. I suggested several different directions for the discussion: ends vs. means, the morality of doing right things for wrong reasons, the morality of politics and power, relationships (between males, females, and the combination thereof), and others. However, the group went several directions and there was little coherence to the discussion. I am sure much of this was my lack of

directing the discussion, but the brief comments made involved the change in media and its relationship with politicians (protection vs. exposure—sometimes aggressive), lying, ego involvement, and image. A longer discussion concerned the place of power and that “it all comes back to that.”

As I suggested, the group did not care much for this work. Most had not finished it, and at least one who did remembered little of it. My final concern is that this series leads very easily to opportunity to present very narrow and focused political opinions. As WCH has a mission of free and open discussion free from any directed political agenda, this became troubling to me. Are there others who have suggestions for keeping discussion at least less-biased than promoting a specific political stance? I find the series fascinating, but apparently am not able to bring that enthusiasm to this group. We will conclude with *Primary Colors* next month. Perhaps it will be a better discussion.

Wayne G. Deahl

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Ten readers gathered to discuss this classic of Texas politics circa 1950s. Now upfront I have to say that I'm from Texas, graduated from U.T. and love Austin. And I taught political science at Central Wyoming College. I love this book! BUT, your readers may have trouble with it. I also read Nadine Eckhardt's memoir, *Duchess of Palms*. She is Ouida in book one, Billy Lee's first wife. I plan to give the book to our Riverton library and anyone can interlibrary loan it. There is also an excellent article about *The Gay Place* in a 2001 issue of *Texas Monthly*. We talked about the following subjects in regard to this book: the impact of politics on wives and children, how women fared during this period compared to the Hillary Clinton/Sarah Palin phenomena of today, citizen legislatures (we have one, so does Texas), poll taxes, lobbyists, pr folks, Austin as a character in the book, and LBJ, of course. Then we branched out into how the media has changed, how the U.S. Congress has changed, and the general topic of lack of civility in politics today and why this is so. The group loves this series. Our numbers are not as high as with previous series, but as one of the readers pointed out, this is an important subject and those who are interested are passionate in their desire to read and discuss. We are trying to figure out how to continue after our last book, *Primary Colors*. We will watch the film the week following the book discussion and then possibly continue with *The Making of the President, 1960*, a classic. One suggestion - discussion leaders may want to encourage their group to read one of the three novels in *The Gay Place*. I'm eager to hear how the novel is received by other groups.

Barbara Gose

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Laramie's Eppson Senior Center Reading Group met to discuss our third book in our series, Billy Lee Brammer's *The Gay Place*. Our group is down to three readers. The books have been difficult for seniors to stay focused. However, those of us who remain found Brammer's book

full of snapshots of political wheeling and dealing in Texas during the 1960s. The main character, Arthur Fenstermaker, is loosely based on Lyndon Johnson.

We found a myriad of political issues--education, desegregation, poverty and the rise of human rights and opportunities for the working class. Brammer explores these topics amidst many social vignettes, usually before, during, and after parties, celebrating those close to the Governor. Political speculation, dealing with media forces, and the connection of people through tobacco, alcohol, and diverse sexual exploits creates an uneasy brew for us as readers. Dialogue intermixed with internal monologues of the main male characters also challenged us to stay focused on the plot of each of the three novels of the book.

The role of money and bribery in politics, wooing the media, and testing the moral fibre of all created a complex web of the reality of getting votes versus ethical values. Brammer definitely tackles the theme of what it means to be an American male in the 1960s. Is American masculinity, "being a real man," in jeopardy? Most of his male characters struggle with this. Traditional gender roles are breaking down. The women in the Brammer's lens are also often bewildered by their purpose and their future.

The lingering question by the end of the book "Where was beauty, grace, ease?" (p. 489). Indeed, this questions could well be applied to all of the novels we have read in this series.

Hope for the future, nobility of ideals, and American romantic innocence has been dashed. The final sentence of the novel, describing the dead body of the Governor, could also be describing the tarnished American Dream we witness in Brammer's *The Gay Place*: "some great grave private joke." All is not well in Brammer's America. He hits his readers hard with a wake-up call.

Melanie O'Hara

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Six ladies met at the Pine Bluffs library to discuss *The Gay Place* by Billy Lee Brammer. This is about half the number that is usually drawn to our discussions. This was our third book in the Figureheads series. One of the ladies started off the discussion by saying "I hated this book", so I asked her to tell me why. She thought there was no plot and that the characters were not likeable. And she thought the entire book seemed to be an endless discussion of drinking and fooling around. The rest of the class tended to agree. She did not finish the book and at least three of the other ladies also either declined to finish or were unable to finish. This made me wonder if the content and dislike of the book had something to do with the slim attendance. I then brought up several parts of the book that I did like. For example, I thought the first story, *The Flea Circus*, got a bit more interesting when the main character went down to the statehouse to try to get some legislation passed. I also appreciated the scenes where Governor Fenstermaker (the character based on Lyndon Johnson) appeared. Unfortunately, Fenstermaker is a minor character in all three stories (especially the first

two). I also appreciated that parts of the book that were quite funny such as the scene in the last story (*Country Pleasures*) where Fenstermaker and three staffers are all trying out the vibrating bed at the same time, or the scene in where the group gets drunk and the Governor signs a joking agreement to give Texas back to the Mexicans. We noticed that it seemed that the book would get a little more into the politics and thus a little more interesting and then it would back off, not fulfill the promise of a meaty book about politics and the characters would be getting drunk and/or fooling around again. We thought that the main character in the second story, junior U.S. Senator Neil Christiansen in *Room Enough to Caper*, was the least corrupt character but even he becomes more corrupt by the end of the story. We felt very sad for Jay and his little ignored daughter Victoria Ann in the last story *Country Pleasures*. I thought Billy Lee Brammer was at his most touching when writing about the children in the book.

We had some good discussion about what we remembered about Lyndon Johnson and what we'd later learned about him. We talked about Lyndon Johnson as the vice president and the fact that he didn't get along very well with Kennedy. We compared Johnson to Fenstermaker, both were obviously talented southern politicians, and both could be very intimidating. At 6' 4" Johnson towered over almost everyone and took advantage of his height to intimidate people with "The Johnson Treatment", which was getting right up very close (in their face) to whoever he was talking to and leaning in and over them. There are many pictures of this on the Internet that demonstrate how uncomfortable and intimidating this was. We talked about Johnson's colorful language and masterful use of four letter words. We discussed rumors of Johnson's extra-marital affairs and conspiracy theories of his alleged involvement with Kennedy's assassination. We also compared Fenstermaker's wife, Sweet Mama, with Lady Bird Johnson. Both were the traditional politician's wife who tried to stay above the fray of dirty politics.

This was not our favorite book but we could see how it would be interesting to those interested in Texas politics. It's too bad there isn't a book in the series about a Wyoming politician or about Wyoming politics. We are looking forward to reading and discussing *Primary Colors* next month.

Elaine Hayes

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Since attendance for this series has been lower than usual, I was pleased that 11 people came to the discussion. I expected this to be the most difficult of the four books to get people to read; however the participants had almost all read the book. Most didn't like it, so I let them vent awhile before really getting into the discussion. Asking them to specify what about the book they objected to actually opened the door to delve into many of the points I had planned to cover.

The plan I had (and only partially carried out) was to talk about Brammer and the culture of writers and politicians

that he comes from, and then briefly take each of the novellas separately to look at the characters and central themes before taking a broader view of the book as a whole. We found it difficult to separate the three parts of the book and kept merging them, which was fine. Even more than usual, people had marked certain passages to point out in our discussion of characters and themes, which was even better.

The broader questions we discussed were loosely based on the following:

-How or what does this book reveal about the period in the US in the late 50's?

-What (if any) generalizations can be made about the treatment of women in the novel?

-Which (if any) characters are sympathetic and why?

-What prevailing themes emerge through-out?

-How does this book compare to the previous ones we've read in this series (*All the King's Men* and *Roscoe*)?

After quite a lengthy discussion, we ended by agreeing, even taking into account some of the complaints about the content of the novel, we appreciated the writing. One person had marked several wonderful "zingers" (his word) where Brammer's writing stood out especially for humor and irony as well as general description.

By the time we finished, some in the group reluctantly acknowledged that maybe the book wasn't as bad as they thought. Of course, this is an exceptional group of readers and I realize that.

Norleen Healy

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## Primary Colors

### by Anonymous

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Anticipating a very small group, as several people had prior obligations, did not like the series, or had not finished the book, I was pleasantly surprised when we eventually had ten and myself seated at the table to discuss Primary Colors. Generally, there was agreement that this series led to circular discussion—that is, that the themes seem to be much the same for all the books. Names and settings are different, but dirty politics, huge egos, power and behaviors associated with that power, and the question of morality (do the ends justify the means being a prominent point) dominated our discussions of all four books in this series. Some interesting points considered beyond that were a suggestion that this book actually had a hero (Libby), whereas the other texts featured anti-heroes or were at least ambivalent about the expected morality of the heroic figure, that image seems to be more important than substance, and the often bumpy road to social change. The question of authorship and Klein's hiding behind anonymity were considered.

Joining us in the middle of our discussion were a couple new to the group. As the talk wound down toward a conclusion, we discovered that the two new participants were actually Canadian tourists on their way back to Saskatchewan. They were spending the night in Lusk, and it is their habit to visit libraries for entertainment. They saw our discussion group, had seen the movie which had been made from the book, and decided to join in. As they began to talk about a Canadian perspective on American politics, a new dimension and perspective were added. It was a fine addition to the group and provided a nice conclusion to discover that the politics of ego and power are similar, but that the current polarity in America is in opposition to Canada, where politicians all try to be centrists.

Finally, most were relieved to be done with the series, although one participant said she enjoyed "the bird walks," by which she meant the wide range of topics and general discussion which occurred.

Wayne G. Deahl

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Eight readers gathered to discuss this last novel in the political series. I began by asking whether it mattered that the book was written anonymously and that Klein lied about his authorship. We decided it did not - except to those journalists that believed it would and should ruin his career. It did not ruin it, of course, but made him a millionaire! We used the novel as a springboard to talk about presidential elections and the politics of campaigning. We discussed how the volume of data drives politics today. A candidate wouldn't make a move without knowing numbers - who is being polled, on what, and how will the data be used. Who runs for president? What is required of the candidate? Can the public discern whether the candidate wants to do something for the good of the nation or simply win at any cost? Who surrounds the candidate and what is the role of each? How are they used? How were campaigns conducted previously? How have they changed since the Clinton candidacy? With primary campaign getting longer and longer is there an every increasing danger of overexposure and a fatal mistake? How will journalists do their job in the 2012 campaign? utube? Facebook? What will be the role of women now that they have come into their own in the 2008 presidential campaign? We thoroughly enjoyed this series. We meet next Monday to watch *Primary Colors* together and discuss. And we've agreed to meet twice more over the winter when we will read and discuss *THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1960* and *BIG GIRLS DON'T CRY* (new book on women in the 2008 campaign). We would encourage other groups to read this challenging series. Our numbers were some lower, but those who participated were unanimous that this was an important and worthwhile series.

Barbara Gose

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In January, the Cokeville reading group was supposed to discuss *Primary Colors*. Although I spent hours personally reading this book, taking notes, and marking over 60

passages with Post-its to use in a discussion, no one here checked out a book and few attended the meeting, even briefly. For those present, I reviewed the essence of the plotline and attempted to discuss a few of the political implications. It might have been a good show if someone came.

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The Laramie Eppson Senior Center group met for the last time, discussion group count 2, for our investigation of *Primary Colors* by "Anonymous," loosely based on the Clinton campaign for the Presidency.

Happily, the characters in this novel--especially those from minorities (women, African American, and gay and/or lesbian) were full team players in the drama, as well as the political machinations.

First, the women--Susan, Daisy, and Libby--all reflected harding-hitting, politically savvy women, ready to take on the "good old boys" for all they are worth, and beat them at their own game. The women in this novel can smoke, drink, swear, and enjoy "campaign sex" just as men have done traditionally, compared to the previous novels we have read where the women are merely decorative or sexual side-lines of the plot. So Pamela Lopez, the Enrichment Director of the Eppson Center, and I found that a plus, as women readers.

Henry, the African American narrator, was also refreshing. He tells us the white man's tale through black eyes, which, indeed, shows an enormous leap forward in race perceptions in modern American literature. Daisy, the campaign's "Girl Friday," and Narrator Henry's lover, provides a counter-balance to Henry's involvement, confusion, and shock as he gets deeper into the campaign mechanism. Libby, the overweight, loud-mouthed lesbian, Jack Stanton's "dust buster," wins the prize for the most

endearing and heroic of the characters. Libby calls a halt and holds the Stanton (Clinton) campaign to their own sense of fair play by the end of the novel. Stanton's promise that mud-slinging never works, whereas high political ideals always work is put to the test, and Stanton rejects his own moral code, much to Libby's shock. Her loyalty to the Stantons is shattered, and her tenuous mental well-being cracks under the realization of the Stanton's hypocrisy. Libby's demise can be seen as a true tragic hero--wanting so much for moral authority to rule supreme by a political couple that she has worked so hard for, over so many years. "Anonymou" speaks volumes about the author's own dissolutionment through Libby.

Jack Stanton's sexual indiscretions advance much of the plot. His wife Susan's, shock, reaction, and ability to move on after each jolt, provides an in-depth study of the choices politicians wives must make: Do I stand by my man, or do I cry "foul play" and get out? Susan's decisions to stand by her man, like Hillary Clinton, force the reader to evaluate Susan's moral integrity. The author does not. As readers, we can only conclude that "Anonymous" regards this as standard American politics--like it or not.

The novel ends abruptly, without a sense of traditional ending, with no defined sense of closure to the plot. Does Jack deserve Henry's loyalty to the end of the campaign, once Jack and Susan have lost Henry's respect and loyalty after Libby's tragic suicide? Does Jack go on without Henry to win the presidential nomination and election from shere guts, chaisma, and luck? We found this open-ended conclusion unsatisfactory.

As seniors and female, we found the raw language in the novel extremely difficult to get passed, but the we did engage in the story more directly than in the previous three novels. I, for one, am glad that I read these four political novels, which are so far from my usual choice of reading. Despite the abrasive, negative analysis of American politics, and pessimistic overtone of human nature throughout the four novels, I can now go on to other novels that enrich me as per Aristotle's precept maintains: Does the story delight and instruct? We began our discussion back in January with this primary measure stick for each novel. Although the books did not delight us, and we lost many readers because of that, we did get a lesson in perceived reality of American politics by our four authors. Pamela and I decided that our own idealism as American women may not be as accurate as what we have read in this series. Pollyanna's though we would like to be, these four books teach us that the game is hard, vicious, and somewhat Darwinian: Only the hard-nosed, savvy and ruthless can survive and win the prize of election.

So can we still say, "God bless America?" Yes, we can. Perhaps we need more blessings from a higher force than we originally thought.

Melanie O'Hara

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Steve Beck

Seven ladies met at the Pine Bluffs branch of the Laramie County Library after waiting two weeks from our originally scheduled book group date due to snowy weather. This is our last meeting and our numbers have decreased by half since we've begun. This group has enjoyed many of the *Reading Wyoming* series in the past but they haven't really enjoyed this one, although many of our discussions were interesting from my point of view. One of the first comments was that the books were too similar and led to very similar discussions. This led to political book fatigue and two of the ladies couldn't bring themselves to finish more than a chapter or two of *Primary Colors*. One woman also said "I want to know who picked these books, they must have been Republican", referring to the fact that all four of the corrupt politicians in the books were Democrats. So we went ahead and discussed all four books in the series and I asked what books they would suggest could be substituted into the series in place of their least favorite book *The Gay Place*. Their favorite books in the series were clearly *All the Kings Men* or *Primary Colors*. For substitutions they suggested biographies of politicians or non-fiction books about political campaigns such as *The Making of the President 1960*. Another person suggested reading books like Orwell's *1984*.

We then focused back on *Primary Colors*. We talked about the anonymous status of author Joe Klein and why he would have chosen to publish his novel as Anonymous and to repeatedly deny his creation before finally admitting it when his original manuscript was found. There is an essay on the subject by Joe Klein at the end of the edition we were reading. I lean towards thinking that it was a very savvy marketing ploy because I remember the buzz about the book when it came out years ago and don't think a work of fiction by Joe Klein would have sold as well as a book by an "Anonymous" which was suspected to be a Clinton insider. Others suspected that Klein was afraid of backlash from the Clintons.

We talked at length about all the characters and the speculation about who the real person was behind the fictional characters. Of course the Stantons are a pretty close match to the Clintons, Cashmere McCloud is Gennifer Flowers, Henry Burton is a black George Stephanopoulos, etc. The events were changed but the personalities were very close. Everyone thought Libby (Betsey Wright and/or Vince Foster maybe in real life) was entertaining and were surprised when she became so disillusioned that she committed suicide. This led to a discussion of the real suicide of Clinton campaign chief and friend Vince Foster. We talked about the character Richard Jemmons (who along with Libby had most of the funny lines) who is obviously James Carville. We briefly discussed Carville's marriage to Mary Matalin, a Republican pundit and George H.W. Bush staffer. We wondered how they can get along despite huge differences in politics that would usually drive people apart.

We talked a bit about the presidential primary process and how the negative campaigning and picking into the candidates past indiscretions is happening now in the Republican primaries and how no candidate can get away from the cameras now when everyone has a movie camera in their cell phone. Nearly every person a candidate meets could be a reporter in that they can post the interaction immediately on Facebook, Twitter and blogs. In the past FDR could hide his Polio and JFK his affairs but everything it seems is in the open now. This series was tough going and I am impressed with those who stuck with it to the end. Everyone seemed relieved that the series was over but many said that their opinions about the books changed after we discussed them and they were glad they persisted.

Elaine Hayes

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We began the discussion with some background on the author and the fall-out over his refusal for so long to admit to writing the book. Most in the group felt it was a clever publicity ploy to initially publish the book as "Anonymous" and one which contributed to the best-seller status the book quickly received. Also, no one agreed with those who considered Klein's initial denying as a breach of journalistic ethics, maybe because of a contemporary tendency to be cynical about the whole concept of ethics where the media is concerned

As would be expected, when we began discussing the novel, the group began to draw the obvious parallels to the early Clinton campaigns and the people involved. While discussion of the major characters in the novel is worthwhile and interesting, I didn't want to get stuck on this because I did find the novel to have some really significant themes particularly relevant right now as we endure the media coverage of the Republican primaries. We were right in the middle of the Herman Cain debacle the night we met. We talked about the effect of television on the candidates and what personal qualities television emphasizes, good or bad. We talked about what personal qualities it takes for a person to be willing to go ahead and run for office and endure the media scrutiny that occurs now. I asked them to consider what it is about people like Jack Stanton in the novel that helps them survive that process.

Since this was our last meeting in the Figureheads series, we looked at common themes. In each of the four novels we've discussed in this series, we saw a candidate who has to in some regard "sell his soul" in order to accomplish any good politically. All the novels make us look at the cost and limits of political power. Political morality issues are also prevalent.

We agreed that we saw major cultural shifts from the early novels such as Roscoe and All the King's Men to the *Primary Colors*. Finally, in the latter, we had some strong women for one thing! Most in the group said they didn't come away from the series with any new insights; they were cynical about the political world going in and that attitude was reinforced with the readings. This wasn't a hugely popular series and attendance was down, but the discussions had a breadth to them that made it quite significant for those of us who participated.

Norleen Healy

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