



## All the King's Men

*Robert Penn Warren*

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More than just a classic political novel, Warren's tale of power and corruption in the Depression-era South is a sustained meditation on the unforeseen consequences of every human act, the vexing connectedness of all people and the possibility—it's not much of one—of goodness in a sinful world. Willie Stark, Warren's lightly disguised version of Huey Long, the onetime Louisiana strongman/governor, begins as a genuine tribune of the people and ends as a murderous populist demagogue. Jack Burden is his press agent, who carries out the boss's orders, first without objection, then in the face of his own increasingly troubled conscience. And the politics? For Warren, that's simply the arena most likely to prove that man is a fallen creature. Which it does.

## All the King's Men Details

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Author : Robert Penn Warren

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## From Reader Review All the King's Men for online ebook

### Camie says

First off, I would nominate this book as one highly in need of a much improved cover design. That being said, it perfectly fits the old adage about judging a book by its ( mundane) cover. I love it when a book surprises me and the dread of reading it ( club choice) turns into excitement. The back-page blurb praises it as a Pulitzer Prize winner following the political career of Willie Stark, a fictional character loosely based on that of Huey "Kingfish" Long a post Depression Era Louisiana governor. Stark who starts out as a refreshingly idealistic man " of the people" ultimately ends up caught in a web of the corruption often associated with power. So yes, it's a precautionary tale, but perhaps even more about the life of Jack Burden, a sort of " every man" who works for Stark in a "holding it all together " capacity and learns a lot of life lessons the hard way. Though cited on the cover as THE definitive novel about American Politics ( NYTimes) I was happy to find it is written in a descriptive "old classic" format which makes it truly an enjoyable read. If you read it remember it was published in 1946, as it is very filled with characters who have stereotypical notions of the time ( meaning racist and very sexist) including our narrator who though interesting enough, is not always easy to like. Anyway to my total surprise , I'm giving this book a five star rating and thanking whomever it was who chose this as an April Selection for On The Southern Literary Trail. Great choice !!

Timely note: The 2006(audience rated 4 star) movie with Sean Penn, Jude Law, and Kate Winslet will be on Starz 4/25 and 4/26. I watched it on Amazon and quite enjoyed it since I liked the book. There is an earlier movie that is supposed to be very good ( thanks Diane B.) but that I cannot readily find.

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### Ted says

**The image I got in my head that day was the image of her face lying in the water, very smooth, with the eyes closed, under the dark greenish-purple sky, with the white gull passing over.**

This is probably the first fairly good review I ever wrote on Goodreads (or anywhere, of course). Seems hardly anyone has ever seen it. Ran across it tonight in an old Word doc and thought I'd repost it. The book is a classic.

I first read it about 40 years ago. Having just finished my second reading (I think only two), I think the book is a better novel than I remembered it as, though I've always felt it was a "five-star" book.

Of the two stories in the book (the story of Willie Stark, based loosely or perhaps not so loosely on the life of Huey Long, and the story of the narrator Jack Burden, based presumably on the imagination but perhaps also on some of the artistic and philosophical beliefs of the author), the former is more entertaining, and is easier to understand. However, having just a few days ago watched the Ken Burns 1985 PBS documentary on Huey Long, I am struck now that Warren's Willie Stark has nowhere near the extremes of "good" and "evil" that Long was perceived to have by his supporters and enemies. Willie Stark is a very tame Huey Long, and the real Huey Long was more politically interesting than the fictional Willie Stark is. The question that arises from Huey Long's career is, Can a good man (woman) effect great (and good) changes, and still be true to his good nature? Or does the real world in which the changes need be made ineluctably force them to be made

by resorting to force, the illegal (or extra-legal), and ultimately violence? These questions are not answered in *All the King's Men*, and I'm not sure that they are even posed. Willie Stark, it seems to me, is brought down not by an excessive desire to change the power structures of his state (though that plays a part), but much more by a confluence of unlikely and unlucky events.

The latter story I feel to be not quite as entertaining, but perhaps that's because it's a more difficult story to dig down through and unravel. I think it's also because much of this story, which one could think the author might have meant to illustrate some "truths" about life that the first story didn't touch on, requires that the reader ferret out what those truths are, whether he or she agrees that they are truths, and whether he or she finally judges that even if they are true, they are significant truths. Or perhaps it's best (and maybe more true to what Warren meant to do in the novel) to simply read Jack's story, and the conclusions he draws about life, as simply the tale of a fictional character and his search for personal truth, in which case we can judge *this* story by whether the character and his tale are both interesting and believable. On these criteria I would give the Jack Burden story an "A". (Even though, by the way, I wouldn't argue that Jack is a very likeable character. He has an awful lot of faults actually, but these are believable human faults.)

On a personal note, I found it interesting how much of the book I didn't remember from the first time. Essentially, other than the broad sweep of the story, I remembered very little. In particular, I remembered little of the last chapter, I remembered nothing of chapter 7 (Jack Burden's flight to California, and the story of his falling in love with Anne), and I had no recollection that I had ever felt the writing in chapter 4 to be so evocative (I think now) of Faulkner. Of course when this book was published in 1946, Robert Penn Warren surely had read most, if not all, of Faulkner's fiction, being as he (Warren) was among a group of Southern writers and poets who had been making waves for several years by then.

I'll end with a quote from chapter 3. This quote to me is extremely poignant, and expresses a psychological truth which I feel very strongly; it also reminded me of Proust. It comes in a section where Jack is reminiscing about growing up in Burden's Landing with Adam and Anne Stanton. The three of them swam in the Bay together often, and one time they were swimming in very calm waters under a darkening sky.

What happened was this: I got an image in my head that never got out. We see a great many things and can remember a great many things, but that is different. We get very few of the true images in our heads of the kind I am talking about, the kind which become more and more vivid for us as if the passage of the years did not obscure their reality but, year by year, drew off another veil to expose a meaning which we had only dimly surmised at first. Very probably the last veil will not be removed, for there are not enough years, but the brightness of the image increases and our conviction increases that the brightness is meaning, or the legend of meaning, and without the image our lives would be nothing except an old piece of film rolled on a spool and thrown into a desk drawer among the unanswered letters.

The image I got in my head that day was the image of her face lying in the water, very smooth, with the eyes closed, under the dark greenish-purple sky, with the white gull passing over.

(Unbelievably, before I typed in this quote, I wanted to check the prefatory sentences I'd written, particularly whether the name of the town was Burden's Landing. So I Googled "Burden's Landing", and the third site was [burdenslanding.org](http://burdenslanding.org), which contains this very quote, except for the last sentence. So I didn't have to type the whole blamed thing, just cut and pasted most of it. Obviously others have been struck by it.)

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**Previous review:** To the Ends of the Earth *a Sea Trilogy*

**Next review:** Selected Tales *Henry James*

**More recent review:** The Poisonwood Bible

**Previous library review:** Poems *Wallace Stevens*

**Next library review:** The Age of Innocence

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## Gary says

Ok.....What did i think?? I wish I had read this book a loooooooooooooongggggg time ago..... but maybe it was time to read it now. I think every American , whether Democrat, Republican, Independent, or I don't give a shit party, should read it..... It's a very modern topical novel to read now about how corruption can ruin a person,because we have to be right about everything..... instead of trying to work together for the better welfare of

"everyone" in this country.

It's a book that makes you realize not one way of thinking is correct. That being closed minded is the wrong path to take, that being a politician is not easy, and it's not necessarily rewarding, and it changes you into a person that maybe you don't really want to be. So many people say and act a certain way because they are afraid of what others think, but may act differently when left to their own devices..... to me that's what this novel points out.....at times the details were tedious, but then those details played a major role in the plot later.....as the plot thickened.

I came away from this novel relieved it was finally over, but then again sad to see it end. I see myself reading it again someday.

I also found myself laughing outloud quite often at the humor, and the way southern people act..... cause this is a southern story, but it's sentiments hit all of us.....

That is why I consider this , up to this point in life, of what I have read thus far, the greatest American political novel that I've ever read.

Bravo, Robert! I wish you were still alive so I could attend your booksigning, and shake your hand....cause, dude....you rock!

Read it!

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## Kemper says

At first glance, Willie Stark seems like he would have been the perfect Tea Party candidate. He uses fiery rhetoric to stir up crowds by claiming to be just like them and that he's going to bust the heads of those evil ole politicians at the state house to force them the straighten up and do things the right way. But on the other hand, Willie actually knows something about government and uses his tactics to improve the lives of poor people by taxing the wealthy and using that money to do things like improve roads and provide free health care so maybe he wouldn't fit in with Sarah Palin after all.

This classic novel tells the story of Willie Stark through the eyes of Jack Burden. Jack came from a privileged background but eventually turned his back on that life and became a cynical political newspaper reporter in an unnamed corrupt southern state. When Jack first meets Stark, he thinks of him as 'Cousin Willie from the country.' because of his rube manner. Stark is a smart, hardworking and principled county commissioner, but he gets in over his head when he tries to award a government contract to the actual best bid and the corrupt politicians trash him for it.

Then Stark is tricked into running for governor by the state political machine to split the rural vote and make sure that the party favorite wins. Stark had been getting nowhere with his carefully planned speeches that patiently explained needed changes to the tax codes and other government business, but when he finds out he's been played for a fool, Stark finds his voice as an angry hick who is tired of being abused by the politicians. Using his new populist tactics of playing up his upbringing as a poor farm boy who taught himself law at nights and promises to kick the collective ass of the political good-ole-boy network, Stark eventually does win the governorship, and Jack joins him as his political hatchet man.

Stark no longer cares about doing things the right way. He becomes a political force in the state through a combination of bullying, cajoling or bribing anyone who gets in his way. To Willie's way of thinking, the state is full of sons-of-bitches that he either has to buy or break to get things done, and he is now fully convinced that the ends justify the means. He does actually follow through on his promises to try and help the common people of the state, but many consider him even more dangerous than the corrupt people he's fighting.

Jack has no problems with the way that Willie runs thing until the governor gets angry at the incorruptible Judge Irwin for backing a rival in an election. When Willie can't charm or bully the Judge into falling into line, he orders Jack to dig up some dirt on the man. However, Jack has known and admired the Judge since childhood so he has reservations about the assignment. Trying to find the Judge's dirty laundry brings back Jack's issues with his mother and father, and the girl he loved and lost, Anne Stanton. Things get even stickier when Willie decides that the only man to run his new pet project, a huge modern hospital, is Ann's brother and Jack's childhood friend, Adam.

I absolutely loved the way that Stark is portrayed in this book. It was inspired by Huey P. Long in Louisiana, a politician who accomplished a lot for the poor of his state but did so with highly questionable methods. Willie does indeed want to protect the common people from the 'sons-of-bitches' who have let the state wallow in poverty and neglect while lining their pockets, but this isn't a simple case of power corrupting either. Willie always had a lot of ambitions for his political career, and he tried to play it straight at first because he thought that's how it was done. Once he saw the ugliness of reality behind the scenes, Willie seemingly adopts the same tactics without a second thought. Power didn't change Willie, he changed to get and keep power, and he seems to relish his opportunities to take revenge on the types who screwed him over early in his career.

Warren's prose is elegant and lyrical. He brings an entire region alive with a cast that includes everyone from the high society to the poorest farmers. His descriptions are so good that you can almost feel the humidity and hear the insects at times. However, he did tend to go on a bit long for my taste when relaying Jack's personal history and insights. I would have liked more of Willie laying on the charm or ruthlessly taking down an opponent.

They say that watching government work is like watching sausage get made. Everyone wants the finished product, but no one wants to see how it's done. This story gives weight to this idea. It's something that will make any reader think about whether one can get anything done in a democracy without deals being cut or threats being made. Even if the goal is accomplished, is the whole thing tainted because of how it came about? And how can a person with even the best of intentions work in a system like this without becoming corrupted?

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### **Barbara says**

Meaning to do good, Willie Stark rises from self-educated lawyer to political bigwig and eventually governor. Along the way he loses his moral compass and develops a taste for power, resorting to bullying, bribery, blackmail - whatever it takes - to get what he wants.

Willie does manage to help some of his constituents, taxing the wealthy to provide schools and hospitals for the poor. But he also betrays his wife; raises a selfish, self-absorbed son; corrupts good people; and eventually reaps the consequences of his actions.

Willie's story is told by Jack Burden, a journalist who signs on to be Willie's right hand man. Thinking of himself as essentially a good guy Jack believes he's 'only doing his job' when he betrays some of his closest friends at Willie's behest.

I gave the book 4 stars (rather than 5) because the philosophical rantings of some characters was tedious and incomprehensible (to me). Overall, this is a superbly written book with fascinating characters and the trajectory of a Greek tragedy. Though published in the 1940s the book seems just as relevant today in its depiction of political machinations. Highly recommended.

You can follow my reviews at <https://reviewsbybarsaffer.blogspot....>

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### **Perry says**

#### **King of Pain**

*Storytelling and copulation are the two chief forms of amusement in the South. They're inexpensive and easy to procure.*

Robert Penn Warren

Robert Penn Warren had been teaching at LSU for about a year prior to the 1935 assassination of U.S. Sen. Huey P. Long (La.), nicknamed "Kingfish," the populist and crooked 42-yr-old senator and former Louisiana

governor, on whom his novel is loosely based. The title comes from Long's motto, "Every Man a King," and a "Humpty Dumpty" verse.

The story follows the political rise and fall of the fictional Willie Stark, who came from modest roots as a small town lawyer and made it into office as a populist before the Depression, to be elected twice as governor of a Southern state. Warren left references to location intentionally vague, even throwing in red herrings about coming in from the "beach" at a close-by vacation home (Louisiana has lakes, but no beaches; it's oceanfront: the wetlands leading into the Gulf of Mexico).

Jack Burden, the novel's narrator, was a former newspaper columnist and history student before becoming Governor Stark's right hand man. He is exceedingly dispassionate as a bystander and participant in the ongoing tragedy, and remains so despite watching the tragedy unfold and suffering two epic betrayals. Maybe Penn Warren was going for the shock or sense of bewilderment a reader may feel about the narrator seemingly not being affected by occurrences that would likely devastate any normal person.

This is not simply a political novel as I thought; I was surprised to learn that Warren said he didn't intend it to be one.

The book is much more about:

all actions having consequences, intended or not;

accepting responsibility for one's actions;

issues of identity, such as how a boy can be affected even as a man in his 30s upon learning the true identity of his father; and,

maybe most substantially, the variety and grades of betrayal and the impact of each on the betrayed *and* the betrayer.

As I think about it, I'm certain *All the King's Men* covers all 7 deadly sins, particularly the Big Five: Pride, Greed, Lust, Envy and Wrath.

A quote from the novel I found most poignant as I was reading it, but not quite as much so today:

"...the air so still it aches like ... your heart in the bosom when you stand on the street corner waiting for the light to change and happen to recollect how things once were and how they might have been yet if what happened had not happened."

I must admit I tuned out a couple of times when the author/narrator trailed off into 2 to 3 page abstruse ramblings on the meaning of life in relation to space and time. I don't like lectures.

All in all, I enjoyed the book immensely for its political nature, its place and time and its exploration of these various themes.

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### **Mike Hart says**

Read this passage:

A woman only laughs that way a few times in her life. A woman only laughs that way when something has touched her way down in the very quick of her being and the happiness just wells out as natural as breath and the first jonquils and mountain brooks. When a woman laughs that way it always does something to you. It does not matter what kind of a face she has got either. You hear that laugh and feel that you have grasped a clean and beautiful truth. You feel that way because that laugh is a revelation. It is a great impersonal sincerity. It is a spray of dewy blossom from the great central stalk of All Being, and the woman's name and address hasn't got a damn thing to do with it. Therefore, that laugh cannot be faked. If a woman could learn to fake it she would make Nell Gwyn and Pompadour look like a couple of Campfire Girls wearing bifocals and ground-gripper shoes and with bands on their teeth. She could set all society by the ears. For all any man really wants is to hear a woman laugh like that.

Does the novel read that well in its entirety? Of course not. But the undulations of prose make sections like this so much more powerful. We read for entertainment. We read for escape. We read to better understand ourselves. And, sometimes, we read a book, and it changes us. People will comment heavily on the political nature of All the King's Men. It is, after all, a book about politics. But it is also a book about love, about loss, and about being a man. It is a book that made me realize how much I miss hearing that laugh. And now it's time to go and find that laugh once more.

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### Weinz says

I finished this book on a plane. I was on a plane coming home from somewhere that I didn't belong and as we coasted onto the tarmac I felt a little like Jack Burden. He was never really comfortable in the shoes that he wore but was constantly striving to find the truth in things. He was looking for the truth while consistently doing the right even when it was hardest. Not to say that I am this all knowing altruistic seeker of truth in all things, quite the opposite, but coming from somewhere I didn't fit and into where I did I felt a connection with this narrator. I came to know and love Jack for his weaknesses and his strengths. Penn Warren created the single most honest, true and beautiful characters complete with faults and stupidity; I loved him. Unlike Burden, my own trip west was not to distance myself from what I couldn't bear but rather face my own "great twitch" head on and I felt the cleansing that his flight out west must have felt like.

There is good and evil and I am aware some people think there is no good and evil but Penn Warren's contrast between Stark and Adam Stanton is a beautiful example of such. It seemed like so many of the characters had their own opposite. Each character had its own alter ego, good/evil twin within another character as well as a little original sin thrown in there for shits and giggles.

The female characters were a little to easily categorized though. All the archetypes were present. The devoted wife, the seductress, the angel, the smart ass. They were well developed but just in need of a little more reality.

Brilliant, poetic, fatalistic, riveting and to top of my favorites.

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### Andrew says

All the King's Men is often promoted as a novel about politics, occasionally even the quintessential novel of American politics. While I did enjoy the portrait of Willie Stark as an archetype political boss, more

interesting, to me, is the struggle of the narrator, Jack Burden, to overcome his nihilistic doubts in the face of a world governed by power. Jack claims to overcome his nihilism (“the Great Twitch”) by coming to an understanding of the morality of his own life (the personal and inter-personal) in relation to the ethical valuations of history (on the stage of the world).

So I read the larger narrative of the book in the light of Jack’s search for meaning, rather than seeing Jack as merely a narrator to the story of Willie Stark. From this perspective I think *All the King’s Men* tells a compelling story of Stark as a politician who, despite by all outward appearances of being driven merely by a quest for power, can in fact believe in the righteousness of his actions. He accomplishes this through an elaborate scheme of means-end reasoning and a vision of purpose that captivates or even short-circuits his own moral calculus. Willie Stark constructs a narrative of meaning through his campaign for a hospital that will serve all people, regardless of income, and is not mired in the exigencies of political reality that becomes for him a trump card in any consideration of the morality of his actions.

The ethically pious and occasionally self-righteous Doctor Adam Stanton serves as a foil to Stark, with their lives ultimately meeting in a tragic end as though destined by their inability to grasp the ethical possibilities of their world that the narrator, Jack Burden, eventually realizes. Adam’s attempt to live ethically through nonparticipation with evil and political power is sacrificed with the realization of his father’s ethical shortcomings; he then steps into the world of power by agreeing to oversee the construction of Willie Stark’s hospital (creating odd parallel between the two in that the hospital serves for both of them as the symbolic touchstone for an ethical life). Yet this critical step, away from a sanctified idealism into the practical world of compromise leads eventually to his tragic confrontation with Willie Stark. In the end, his defining action is not aimed at any practical end but is rather either an emotionally-driven strike against the objectification of his own (and his sister’s) moral compromise. The reader is left to ponder whether this outcome is this simply the natural result of his step away from a “kingdom of ends” in agreeing to join Stark’s hospital or a product of his inability to cope with the fallen nature of humanity.

That’s what I got out of it anyway. For a more critical view highlighting literary shortcomings and racial and gender issues, read “All the King’s Men—A Case of Misreading?” by Joyce Carol Oats in the *New York Times Book Review*.

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### **Matt says**

*All the King’s Men* is one of my favorite books, and I find it hard to write about my favorite books. When you are swept away by something – a book, a movie, a girl – all objectivity tends to disappear. Instead of pointed analysis, cold-eyed criticism, and thoughtful chin-stroking, there is gushing and platitudes and hyperbole.

In fact, instead of writing a review, I prefer to strip naked and run around the block screaming Robert Penn Warren’s many virtues.

Okay, I’m back.

There are a lot of great books, and movies, and sandwiches floating about the world. I’ve read plenty of great books, seen plenty of great movies, and eaten plenty of awesome sandwiches, but only a few – ten, to be exact – make the personal top-ten lists I carry around in my head. It’s all a question of context, as seen by the

following equation: Quality Work of Art + Context in Which You Experience Said Art = All Time Favorite Work of Art.

It's hard to be objective about art that touches us deeply and profoundly, and not just because it is great art, but because we found it – or it found us – at a particular moment in time when we were most receptive to it, or when we needed it most. I suppose it's the way parents feel about their children, or I feel about my Chia Pet. Total, unconditional, critic-proof adoration.

I was reading *All the King's Men* the weekend I got engaged to be married. I finished it in that warm afterglow following the engagement, when all the world was roses and possibility. Truth be told, I could have read an Arby's receipt and been enraptured. That is to say, it's quite possible I'd feel differently about *All the King's Men* if I read it today, now that I've been married for awhile and have discovered that a marriage is a long struggle for the remote control that is fought with passive-aggressiveness and fake headaches (just kidding, dear!)

Now, I'm not suggesting you got out and get engaged, just to enjoy this novel (but if you do, please tell me, so I can be sure to make fun of you), I'm merely warning you that I'm powerless to stop myself from overselling this book.

If I try to view *All the King's Men* from the vantage point of a bitter English teacher or a bitter English student, I can see the potential criticism. You'll hear the critics say it's over-plotted, melodramatic, and filled with purple prose. They'll tell you they can see the plot points coming down a dusty road a mile away. They'll grouse that narrator Jack Burden's story tends to overwhelm that of the putative main character, a Southern politician named Willie Stark.

These are fair points, but even taking them into account, *All the King's Men* remains at the top of my must-read list. I guarantee you will like this. And if I'm wrong, I'll deny we ever had this conversation.

Unfortunately, *All the King's Men* has been described as a "political novel", perhaps the American political novel, a roman a clef about Louisiana's one-time governor, Huey "The Kingfish" Long. It's much more than that, and such a description is far too reductive. There is politics, of course, with backroom deals, garden-variety chicanery, and bombastic speeches, but there is also the wide sweep of human emotion and behavior, and the wages thereof: greed and corruption, hope and redemption, secrets and lies, the dreams of youth and the realities of age, vendettas and murder, and love.

Warren's novel centers on Willie Stark; when the story begins, he is a small-time politician in an unnamed southern state (it's Louisiana) who is tapped by the local Democratic bosses to run for governor. Unbeknownst to Willie, he has been asked to run in order to split the "rube vote" (you see, us rubes usually vote together). When Willie finds out he's been duped, he gets angry, and sets out to campaign as a populist with nothing to lose (he's a bit like a Tea Party candidate, being mad as hell, and all, except that every one of his positions would be the exact opposite of an actual Tea Party candidate).

One of Willie's missions is exposing the graft and corruption of contractors who build public works, such as schools. Later, the collapse of a school - due to the aforementioned graft and corruption - lifts Willie to the governorship. This is but one of many contrivances that fuel the plot. As governor, Willie does a lot of good things. He builds roads and schools and hospitals. He's the man of the people. However, he's also a man, and *All the King's Men* follows Willie on this path from good intentions to rot. This theme is encapsulated in the book's most famous line, spoken by Willie:

"Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the diddy to the stench of the shroud."

The narrator of *All the King's Men* is the aforementioned Jack Burden. Jack is a former history student who begins the novel as a journalist and later joins Willie's campaign. He's something of a narcissist, and insists that Willie's story is also his own.

Jack tells the story in the first person (making him a cynical, somewhat unreliable narrator), though he often slips into the second person to directly address the reader. I liked how Warren did this; it gives the novel a certain immediateness. Also, like Jack, I'm something of a narcissist, and enjoy when a book's narrator speaks directly to me.

Robert Penn Warren employs a distinctive style. He was a poet by trade, and his writing takes on certain cadences, like poetry, that had an effect on me that I felt but cannot describe. An element that is easy to point out are his long, detail-packed sentences, filled with rhythm and repetition, sentences that start one way, seem to veer off, then loop back to their origin. For instance, at the start of the novel:

"[T:]his is the country where the age of the internal combustion engine has come into its own. Where every boy is Barney Oldfield, and the girls wear organdy and batiste and eyelet embroidery and no panties on account of the climate and have smooth little faces to break your heart and when the wind of the car's speed lifts up their hair at the temples you see the sweet little beads of perspiration nestling there, and they sit low in the seat with their little spines crooked and their bent knees high toward the dashboard and not too close together for the cool, if you call it that, from the hood ventilator."

*All the King's Men* is about Willie Stark in the same way that *Moby Dick* was about Ahab. Stark, like Ahab, is the center of gravity, but not necessarily the focus. The guy we spend the most time with is the lifetime grad student in history, Jack Burden. The drama may flow from and to Willie Stark, but the perceptions and the voice is that of Jack Burden.

Usually, at least in my experience, a first-person narrator doesn't work as a character. When you're inside someone's head, you're only looking outward. Any interior life you get is self-fulfilling and biased. You actually need another's perception to make a character whole. Call this the Dickens Effect, wherein a blank first-person narrator is surrounded by people far more interesting and rounded. However, I came to really like the character of Jack Burden. Not because he's a great guy, but because he's an interesting, complex person. He's also a cynic who likes history, and that's a man I can vote for:

"'So you work for me because you love me,' the Boss said.  
'I don't know why I work for you, but it's not because I love you. And not for money.'  
'No,' he said, standing there in the dark, 'you don't know why you work for me. But I know...'  
'Why?' I asked.  
'Boy,' he said, 'you work for me because I'm the way I am and you're the way you are. It is an arrangement founded on the nature of things.'"

Ultimately, whether you love (as I did) or hate (like Hitler did) this book will be determined by how you feel about Warren's decision to move away from Willie in the novel's latter stages and to focus on Jack Burden.

In an extended flashback, Jack takes us back to his childhood, and his experience falling in love with a girl named Anne Stanton during one shared summer. Throughout the novel, Jack has been probing his past – his history – with the kind of moralistic, intellectual rigor one expects from a history grad student (history grad students having nothing better to do than probe the past with moralistic, intellectual rigor). Suddenly, at the end, Willie's story is concluded, and there is a total shift to Jack putting the fragmented memories of his life into some sort of coherent whole. At one point, Warren, through Jack, delivers what I find to be one of the great passages encapsulating the ineffability of love:

"So maybe she was up in the room trying to discover what her new self was, for when you get in love you are made all over again. The person who loves you has picked you out of the great mass of uncreated clay which is humanity to make something out of, and the poor lumpish clay which is you wants to find out what it has been made into. But at the same time, you, in the act of loving somebody, become real, cease to be part of the continuum of the uncreated clay and get the breath of life in you and rise up. So you create yourself by creating another person, who, however, has also created you, picked up the you-chunk of clay out of the mass. So there are two you's, the one you yourself create by loving and the one the beloved creates by loving you. The farther these two you's are apart the more the world grinds and grudges on its axis. But if you loved and were loved perfectly then there wouldn't be any difference between the two you's or any distance between them. They would coincide perfectly, there would be perfect focus, as when a stereoscope gets the twin images on the card into perfect alignment."

See what I mean about context? When I read this, it was at a time when I most clearly understood what Jack Burden was trying to say. It's an understanding I've kept through the years since I first read *All the King's Men*. It's there as a reminder that even though life is often mundane, or tedious, or fraught, there are moments of transcendence. Great works of art capture that transcendence, and become a sort of time capsule of the moment you and that work of art first met, and realized it was meant to be.

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### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

This was a wonderful book. I listened to it on Audible, but it was so well-written that I have ordered hard-copy as well. The story of Willie Stark and Jack Burden (which are the same story as the narrator says) is both poignant and realistic. Seen through the cynical and poetic eyes of Burden, the Southern cronyism of Huey Long is parodied here (and honestly reminds me of recent and current American political history). The writing is absolutely spectacular - Penn Warren is the only person ever to win Pulitzers for both Fiction and Poetry and even his prose here is chock-full of vivid images and analogies. I loved all the characters: Sugarboy, Ann and Adam Stanton, the Judge, Jack's mother, Sadie...each one is perfectly crafted even when they are somewhat one-dimensional, there is still humanity in each of them. The one negative is the use of the n-word, but I suppose that Jack would have spoken this way and that back in '46 when it was written, attitudes were definitely different. That being said, Jack does seem to take some offense at how blacks are treated (he is less obliging about women in my view), despite his nihilism towards everyone and everything else. The side story of Cass was excellent as well. There is almost nothing to fault in this book and it

deserves a place up with the greatest American 20th century fiction. Five stars hands-down.

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### **Lewis Weinstein says**

ATKM's "dead on" characterizations of political behavior are as relevant today as they were when it won a Pulitzer in 1947. Often described as the story of Willie Stark, a thinly disguised fictional stand-in for fabled Louisiana Governor Huey Long, it is really much more that of Jack Burden, Stark's aide and friend, from whose first person POV the story is told.

Alternately attracted and repulsed by the tangy smells of commitment and corruption, Jack engages our sympathy and intellect as he personalizes the complex, unintended, and sometimes tragic consequences of his leader's political decisions. How frustratingly difficult it is to achieve even admirable goals in the real world of a voter-driven governmental system. Sound familiar?

Complementing the intriguing story line is Warren's magnificent writing which reflects the skills and emotions of the poet he indeed was.

An example ... "You meet someone at the seashore on a vacation and have a wonderful time together ... you talk with a stranger whose mind seems to whet and sharpen your own ... afterward you are sure that when you meet again, the gay companion will give you the old gaiety, the brilliant stranger will stir your mind from its torpor, the sympathetic friend will solace you with the old communion of spirit. But something happens, or almost always happens, to the gaiety, the brilliance, the communion. You remember the individual words from the old language you spoke together, but you have forgotten the grammar. You remember the steps of the dance, but the music isn't playing anymore. So there you are."

In this political season of 2012, ATKM provides an extended opportunity for reasoned reflection on what is and is not possible, in government and in our own lives.

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### **Lawyer says**

#### **All the King's Men: Robert Penn Warren's Spider Web**

*This Novel was chosen as a group read by members of On the Southern Literary Trail for July 2012 and again in October, 2014.*

*"It all began, as I have said, when the Boss, sitting in the black Cadillac which sped through the night, said to me (to Me who was what Jack Burden, the student of history, had grown up to be) "There is always something."*

*And I said, "Maybe not on the Judge."*

*And he said, "Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something."*

*There is always something, even on the Judge. Broderick Crawford as Willie Stark, John Ireland as Jack Burden, and Adam Greenleaf as Judge Stanton from the 1949 film. The film changed the identity of Judge Irwin to Judge Stanton. A slight problem with the object of Jack's romance.>*

*First Edition, Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, 1946*

If you're expecting a fictional recounting that serves as a short cut to T. Harry William's masterful biography of Huey Long this isn't it.

But Williams does have something to say that pointedly echoes the themes Robert Penn Warren wove into a masterpiece of American politics.

*"I believe that some men, men of power, can influence the course of history. They appear in response to conditions, but they may alter the conditions, may give a new direction to history. In the process they may do great good or evil or both, but whatever the case they leave a different kind of world behind them.", p.ix, Preface, T. Harry Williams, Huey Long, Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.*

That Willie Stark is a stand in for Huey Long, Robert Penn Warren frankly admits. I was fortunate to find the Thirty-Fifth Edition of the novel, published in 1981. It contained a new, and very informative introduction by Warren.

Warren did not originally envision this work as a novel, but as a tragic drama entitled "Proud Flesh." Warren ended up putting that manuscript away. He realized that he had focused on a man of power rather than those few people who are always surrounding that man of power, and in writing All the King's Men, Warren focused on the "Greek" chorus to whom he had not given proper voice in his originally conceived work.

So, there we have the title, "All the King's Men," the chorus that relates the rise and fall of Willie Stark. For all great men have an inner circle, some of whom are as vague as phantoms, performing the will of the King and they will perform that will whether it be good or evil. But all the King's Men cannot put Humpty Dumpty together again should the King fall.

Warren proposes the question of whether those minions are mere pawns or whether they recognize the consequences of their actions and accept responsibility for them, and if so, can they find redemption for the evil they do, even when it is couched in terms of doing good. Willie Stark, the Boss, is a practical man. So, politics is a dirty business. He tells us,

*"Dirt's a funny thing, come to think of it, there ain't a thing but dirt on this green God's globe except what's under water, and that's dirt too. It's dirt makes the grass grow. A diamond ain't a thing in the world but a piece of dirt that got awful hot. And God-a-Mighty picked up a handful of dirt and blew on it and made you and me and George Washington and mankind blessed in faculty and apprehension. It all depends on what you do with the dirt.">*

Jack Burden is a one man Greek Chorus that tells us the story of Willie Stark. And it is Jack Burden who provides the moral center of the novel. In one long narrative voice, Jack, a child of privilege, intrigues us relating the present and the past, not only Willie's but his own. Willie's rise is rather straight forward. As Williams tells us in Long's biography, Willie appears on the Louisiana scene in response to conditions of the Great Depression, which seemingly provided the fuel for Populism common to that era.

Jack comes from a level of society that comprised the previous leaders of Louisiana, a class who would forever be opposed to a man of Willie Stark's origin and philosophy. He is the friend of Adam and Anne Stanton, the children of the governor preceding Stark. His mentor is Judge Irwin who advised and influenced Jack from his youth. His father, Ellis Burden, the "scholarly lawyer" is a good friend of the Judge. His mother is beautiful, poised, and confident.

So, why would Ellis Burden walk out of his law office one day to become a street evangelist? But Jack's mother has no problem keeping a stream of husbands in her bed. It's enough to make a fellow a little cynical. Rebellious, too. Rebellious enough to go to State University and study history.

Jack has a future. He's working on his doctorate, studying the papers of an ancestor named Cass Mastern. The papers of Mastern serve as a mirror of Jack's life. But Mastern, who betrayed a friend by having a love affair with his friend's wife, lives the rest of his life with the knowledge of that betrayal. It is Cass who writes in his journal,

*The world is all of one piece. He learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle and is drowsy no more but springs out to fling the gossamer coils about you who have touched the web and then inject the black, numbing poison under your hide. It does not matter whether or not you meant to brush the web of things. Your happy foot or your gay wing may have brushed it ever so lightly, but what happens always happens and there is the spider, bearded black and with his great faceted eyes glittering like mirrors in the sun, or like God's eye, and the fangs dripping."*

The long and the short of it is that our actions have consequences and we owe a responsibility for the consequences of our actions. This is a premise that Jack would rather reject.

Rather, Jack grasps on to the theory of the "Great Twitch," a world in which the actions of people are no more controllable than the muscles of a frog's leg twitching in response to an electrical impulse. However it is Cass Mastern who was correct. In rejecting his ancestor's journal, Jack becomes the cynical, wisecracking news reporter assigned to cover Willie Stark's first gubernatorial election. It is Jack Burden, along with savvy political advisor Sadie Burke who tell Stark he's been duped into running to split the vote of the opposing candidate to bring about the win by yet another politician.

### ***Jack Burden and Sadie Burke telling Willie he's been had.***

It is that campaign that transforms not only Willie Stark into a Kingfish lookalike, but transforms Jack into Stark's most trusted fix it man. "Maybe not the Judge." Oh, yes, even the Judge. And so it is that a chain of consequences begins to be unveiled, each the result of a deliberate, undeniable action.

Even the death of Willie Stark is a consequence of one of the Boss's improvident decisions. As Warren wrote,

*"The end of man is knowledge but there's one thing he can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him. He will be killed, all right, but he can't know whether he is killed because of the knowledge which he has got or because of the knowledge which he hasn't got and which if he had it would save him."*

### ***Do the ends justify the means? Can Willie Stark find redemption?***

Willie's death comes about, not from an assassin who believes him to be a dictator, but for a very personal reason. Nor will I even resort to a spoiler alert. I'm simply not going to tell you, because I want you to read this book.

And what of Jack? I will share the final sentence, and I remind you that Jack is the narrator.

*"Go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time."*

Perhaps Jack Burden has come to terms with his ancestor, Cass Mastern.

To say this is a masterpiece about American politics is true. But it goes much further than that. It is a reminder that the past is the father of the future. They are inevitably inseparable.

### **EXTRAS! EXTRAS!**

#### **Huey Long: The Man Behind Willie Stark**

Huey Long's "Share the Wealth Speech"

Huey Long on the Difference between Democrats and Republicans

The Assassination of Huey Long

A Biographical Documentary of Robert Penn Warren

Robert Penn Warren, All the King's Men, and Huey Long WARNING CONTAINS SPOILERS

### **Soundtrack**

Louisana 1927 by Randy Newman

Kingfish by Randy Newman

Every Man a King, written and sung by Huey Long.

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## **Jeffrey Keeten says**

**"Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud."**

## **Robert Penn Warren**

Robert Penn Warren is the only person to win the Pulitzer prize for fiction as well as poetry. He won the prize for fiction in 1946 for this very book. If you are lucky enough to have a great aunt who reads, and bought a lot of books in the 1940s, you might take a gander at her books some time and see if she has a first edition, first printing of this book in her library.

## **First edition, First printing of the 1946 edition**

Depending on the condition of the dust jacket a true first will bring anywhere from \$2,000 to \$7,000. It will be up to you; if you decide to "liberate" the book, tucking it under your shirt, and sneaking it out with the paper bag of home made oatmeal cookies she always sends you home with. If you are not a natural felon you might just say "hey auntie couldn't you tuck this in a safety deposit box and put my name on it".

The last time I was in New Orleans they were shooting the new movie version of *All the King's Men*. We sat in a little cafe across from where they were setting up a shoot hoping for a glimpse of one of the marquee actors involved in the production. No luck, just film crew people bustling around trying to build a street scene. We were anxious to explore the little bookshops and artist galleries in the French Quarter, so we left before seeing anything truly interesting. I have not seen the 1949 or 2006 film versions. From the reviews I skimmed, both movies seem to struggle to capture the true essence of the book. I'm not surprised, even if they put the book through a small holed strainer, they would still have way more material than what a standard length movie can handle.

## **1949 Movie Poster**

## **2006 Movie Poster**

Jack Burden, newspaper reporter, finds himself following around an ambitious, well meaning, but naive candidate named Willie Stark. A man hand picked to split the vote in the primary and insure the nomination of the customary corrupt, crony, politician that Louisiana is famous for. Stark is the only person who is unaware that the fix is on. He is stumping and receiving discouraging indifference from his crowds as he tries to tell them the **truth**. As he finds himself on the ropes more than he is in the ring, he starts to understand that to be successful he will have to give the crowds what they want. He replaces substance with hyperbole, and Burden observes the emergence of a candidate and the corruption of an honest man. Warren

based Stark on the dynamic personage of Louisiana governor Huey P. Long.

### **Huey P. Long**

Burden soon finds himself unemployed, but Stark always liked him and gave him a prominent position on his staff. Stark, though soundly defeated, uses the time between elections to become a polished orator and electable candidate. Burden studied for a history degree in college and believes from his studies that truth will always win out. As he becomes more ensnared in the shady activities of Governor Stark's administration he starts to stumble over his own high ideas of the worthiness of truth. He tries to convince himself that he just does what the boss wants him to do. What the boss does with the information he brings him has nothing to do with him, but the longer he is involved, and the more people he knows who become victims of Stark's ambition the less distance he can claim.

*"I didn't mean to cause any ruckus. I didn't think--" And all the while that cold, unloving part of the mind-- that maiden aunt, that washroom mirror the drunk stares into, that still small voice, that maggot in the chess of your self-esteem, that commentator on the ether nightmare, that death's-head of lipless rationality at your every feast--all that while that part of the mind was saying: You're making it worse, your lying is just making it worse, can't you shut up, you blabbermouth!"*

Burden is in love with Anne Stanton, his childhood friend and the daughter of a previous governor. Briefly they are an item and then they drift apart. Burden marries Lois, the woman who has the *"peach bloom of cheeks, the pearly ripe but vigorous bosom, the supple midriff, the brooding, black, velvety-liquid eyes, the bee-stung lips, the luxurious thighs."* Despite these attributes they have different goals and different ambitions and the elephant in the room is the fact that Jack is still in love with Anne. He becomes close friends with Anne again. He can't help but make allusions to the fact that his marriage proposal is still on the table. Even though she is 35 and never been married she continues to dance around the issue. Burden can't ever see her as just a friend.

*"It was Anne Stanton herself, who stood there in the cool room of the looking glass, above the bar barricade of bright bottles and siphons across some distance of blue carpet, a girl--well, not exactly a girl any more, a young woman about five-feet-four with the trimmest pair of nervous ankles and smallish hips which, however, looked as round as though they had been turned on a lathe, and a waist just the width to make you wonder if you could span it with your hand, and all of this done up in a swatch of gray flannel which pretended to a severe mannish cut but actually did nothing but scream for attention to some very unmannish arrangements within."*

Stark still sees himself as one of the good guys despite the number of men he has felt compelled to destroyed. He came to the conclusion that it was better to destroy them than to bribe them. If he bribes them he still has to keep those untrustworthy associates in his organization. If he destroys them they can no longer thwart his ambitious aims. He is on a self-imposed mission to use the corrupt system, but use it for good.

*"Goodness. Yeah, just plain, simple goodness. Well you can't inherit that from anybody. You got to make it. If you want it. And you got to make it out of badness. Badness. And you know why? Because there isn't anything else to make it out of."*

When Burden experiences the ultimate betrayal it hit me like a left hook coming out of the smokey darkness of an Oklahoma bar. I never saw it coming and I had to stagger away from the book for a while. Jack took 8 days and ran away to California. I took thirty minutes to go stand out on my deck and let some fresh air sort

my scattered thoughts.

There is a whole marvelous section on Cass Mastern, Jack's relative, who provides a colorful history for Jack to research for his PHD. I almost need a separate review to handle the intricate betrayals explored by Warren in that section. I notice that the departure from the main story line bothered other reviewers. I just thought I'd been handed another thick seam of gold to be mined. I like history and I especially like family history, so I didn't mind the story in the story at all.

Political cynicism wrapped in lyrical prose makes this one of the more fascinating books I've read in many, many years. It is an honest book, exposing all the worst elements of human behavior. We are so good at fooling ourselves into thinking that when we do wrong for the greater good we are still on the side of the angels. Highly recommended!!

If anyone has any political novels that they love, and feel I should read, please send me your recommendations.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>  
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

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### **Heather says**

Compelling, overstuffed, overplotted, sexist, labyrinthine, poetic, atmospheric. To me this book's status as The Great American Political Novel seems like a terrific bitter joke, because the author's vision of "politics" is comprised entirely of blackmail, physical intimidation, pork-barreling, rabble-rousing, nepotism, bribery, rigged elections, and hilariously contrived "family values" photo shoots. (I love the scene where a photographer and two aides attempt to wrestle a comatose, foul-smelling dog into position for a shot of the dog leaping up to greet its beloved master, the Governor!)

I would place this novel in the Philosophical Potboiler genre (together with "East of Eden" and "Sophie's Choice"). There are lengthy meditations on the Human Condition, the nature of History, the problem of Free Will, the Original Sin of slavery as a hereditary taint corrupting the southern upper class, etc... woven among scenes featuring such archetypes as the Angelic Woman (Anne Stanton), the Demonic Woman (Sadie Burke, and Cass Mastern's mistress), the Saintly Aesthete and Crypto-Homosexual (Adam Stanton), the Seductive Mother, the "Colonel Sanders" With a Secret (Judge Irwin), and What's Bred in the Bone Coming Out in the Flesh (Tom Stark, the embodiment of his father's egoism and brutality). In the ranks of minor characters we find the Long-Suffering Wife in the Country (Mrs. Stark), and Flannery O'Connor-style Mad Missionary (Jack's father). What an array!

There are a number of rather heavy-handed themes, of which I thought the most interesting was the contrast between Jack the self-identified "student of history" and product of History, and Willie the man without a history... no family, no formal education, no tradition, nothing to explain his ambition, charisma, ruthlessness, and power over others. There seems to be a trade-off between History and Act. Jack is Burdened by the past at every level -- his parents' broken marriage, his half-mad father, his unfinished dissertation, the end of the plantation class's reign in Southern politics, the guilt of slavery. He lives in a fog of depression, cynicism, sophistication, and rationalization. He is fascinated by Willie at their first meeting because Willie is his opposite: an earnest rube who seems unaware of his own dorkiness and believes the political game could and should be played fair.

But Willie isn't just a naif. He's also a kind of monster. Even at that early stage there's a monstrous ego and ambition germinating inside him... ambition not for political goals but for personal power and domination. Where does his ambition come from? What sets Willie apart from any other impoverished child of dirt farmers in any other wretched little town like Mason City? And which side is the true Willie Stark -- the idealist who fights on behalf of poor farmers and families, the builder of new roads and schools and hospitals, or the bully who fights for the sadistic joy of humiliating and dominating others?

These mysteries haunt the novel, and Penn Warren never offers a solution. Willie remains an enigma from start to finish. In fact I felt that Penn Warren wrote himself into a corner - he COULDN'T solve the enigma of Willie Stark's origins and essential nature, so he shifted focus to the more solvable mysteries in Jack Burden's past.

I don't think the Jack Burden plot has aged particularly well. It has the kind of heavy-handed Freudianism you see in 1950s movies... the seductive mother, the discovery of the True Father; the taboo of virginity; the sorting of women into angels and whores, spirits and bodies. Almost every character has at least one light or dark "double" (Willie/Jack, Willie/Adam, Jack/Adam, Sadie/Ann, Burden/Irwin, Lois/Ann, etc), which is very schematic. The happy ending is only achieved by the death/disappearance of everyone but Jack and Ann... they don't so much overcome or escape the Burden of history as have history conveniently relax its grip on them.

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