



February 10, 2025

### All the King's Men

At the end of the year, I enjoy reading the lists of the Best Books, Best Movies, Most Tiresome Words, etc. Obviously, I'm not the only person drawn to lists: Choose any day and examine your computer's newsfeed, and you'll see countless lists: best and worst hotels, fast food chains, dog foods, coffee brands, schools, states for retirees—the list of lists is endless! Some of these lists are just “click-bait,” but when they touch upon our individual interests, we can't help finding out more.

I'm always interested in candidates suggested among Greatest American Novels of the Twentieth Century (or some similar category), and I'm heartened when Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) appears on the list, as it did in an *Atlantic* piece last year. The novel is a personal favorite of mine, and my object here is not so much to recommend its appearance on a list as it is to suggest that if you've never read the book, or if you read it long ago, or if you only “saw the movie,” you might really appreciate taking another look. It's witty and tragic, timely and timeless, historical and philosophical, and ultimately a recognition of how much *faith matters*.

If you know anything about *All the King's Men*, you know that the character Willie Stark is probably modeled after Huey Long, “The Kingfish,” 1930s populist governor and then U.S. Senator of Louisiana, who was assassinated in the Capitol building in Baton Rouge in 1935. Huey Long was the classic demagogue—one who achieved power by appealing to people's emotions and prejudices. Huey Long appealed to Depression-era people of Louisiana and beyond by declaring “Every man a King,” by building roads and other public works, and by going after the wealthy and the oil interests, as well as FDR and the New Deal. He defended his “Share Our Wealth” program as the will of God, and he often quoted or read from the Bible. He also used unethical and extra-legal methods to assert his power over his perceived enemies.

Robert Penn Warren was impatient with the inevitable comparisons of his character Willie Stark and the actual Huey Long. Willie Stark's state is clearly Southern, but it is not necessarily Louisiana. (Warren himself grew up on the Kentucky/Tennessee border, earned his undergraduate degree at Vanderbilt in Nashville, and had been a

professor at Louisiana State University.) Like the actual Huey Long, the fictional Willie Stark became governor, and he hoped to be a U.S. Senator. He was determined to improve roads, and he hoped a great new hospital would be his legacy. He sought the “dirt” on his enemies and kept unscrupulous, unqualified assistants among his close associates if they could be useful to him. He was wholly self-interested and liked keeping undated resignation letters that he could use at will. He had no regard for the state Constitution. Although Willie Stark sometimes referred to God in his speeches, he had a wholly negative view of human nature: “Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud” (286). Since there’s always “dirt,” there’s nothing to make good out of except the dirt.

What makes *All the King’s Men* a Great American Novel, though, is not Willie Stark, but rather one of the “King’s Men,” Jack Burden, the first-person narrator of the novel. Jack Burden is the true central character, and he is also what takes the novel well beyond implied comparisons to the career of Huey Long. Jack Burden comes from a patrician background (Burden’s Landing), and after a directionless adolescence, he tries and hates law school and then pursues a Ph.D in history. He studies philosophy, as shown by his cynical view of philosophic idealism: “If I didn’t look around it would not be true that somebody had opened the gate with the creaky hinges, and that is a wonderful principle for a man to get hold of. I had got hold of the principle out of a book when I was in college...What you don’t know don’t hurt you because it ain’t real...I was a brass-bound Idealist in those days” (45). Later, he cynically switches from idealism (only ideas are real) to materialism (only the material world is real), and he espouses his “Great Twitch” philosophy of life. Jack Burden understands Willie Stark but is willing to be the “king’s man” who finds the dirt on other public figures. He understands Willie’s failings, but he has also been disappointed by his parents and their patrician neighbors in the state’s ruling class, including Judge Irwin (Jack’s early role model), former Governor Stanton, and the man he knew as his father, Ellis Burden, “the Scholarly Attorney,” who in Jack’s view had given up everything to work in a mission, hand out religious leaflets to passersby, and lavish attention on “unfortunates” in the city.

I am purposely omitting references to a dramatic and intricate plot (and great love story!), but Jack Burden is the central character of the novel because he is the character who changes, and he changes most clearly in relationship to the Scholarly Attorney, Ellis Burden, and to that man’s religious faith. When Jack Burden is asked by Willie Stark to find the “dirt” on Judge Irwin, he consults Irwin’s old friend, Ellis Burden. This Scholarly Attorney regards Jack’s assignment as “foulness,” and Jack admits, “I don’t reckon Governor Stark—if that is what all this foulness stuff is about—takes it to the Lord in prayer” (303), but Jack maintains that Willie Stark gets something done, unlike Ellis Burden’s “church-going, Horace-quoting” friends of the past. Jack grants that “politics...is not exactly like Easter Week in a nunnery” but offers a neat-sounding syllogism to arrive at the conclusion that “God is nothing.”

Later, however, Jack Burden cares for the aging and feeble Ellis Burden, and he becomes more tolerant of the man’s religious faith. This “Scholarly Attorney” lacks the sustained concentration necessary to write, but he dictates occasional thoughts to Jack Burden:

*The creation of man whom God in His foreknowledge knew doomed to sin was the awful index of God’s omnipotence. For it would have been a thing of trifling and contemptible ease for Perfection to create more perfection. To do so would, to speak truth, be not creation but extension. Separateness is identity and the only way for God to create, truly create, man was to make him separate from God Himself, and to be separate from God is to be sinful. The creation of evil is therefore the index of God’s glory and His power. That had to be so that the creation of good might be the index of*

man's glory and power. But by God's help. By His help and in His wisdom. (659)

So, the Scholarly Attorney is still capable of flashes of philosophical depth and offers his explanation for evil in the world—but also his understanding of the nature of goodness. He doesn't share Willie Stark's view that goodness simply must be made out of badness; rather, he thinks that human goodness is a matter of human *striving* for God's perfection, and he importantly adds that God *helps* humans in that striving. At first, Jack Burden only nods, but later, he says, "I was not certain but that in my own way I did believe what he had said" (659). This is quite a statement from the wise-guy, cynical Jack Burden!

Warren's *All the King's Men* offers unmistakable political lessons for our time, and the author portrays in Willie Stark the classic "strong man," the demagogue who cultivates his own power by appealing to the worst instincts of the people. Beyond that, though, the novel encourages a contemplation of the nature of good and evil and suggests the interconnectedness of all humanity, as well as the close attention of a loving God. Even Jack Burden moves tentatively closer to an assurance that God *guides* us humans in our imperfect striving toward God's perfection.

~Written by Maurine Slaughter

---

**Works Cited:**

"The Great American Novels." *The Atlantic*, 14 Mar. 2024.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2024/03/best-books-american-fiction/677479/>. Accessed 1 Feb. 2025.

Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King's Men*. Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1946, 1974.

---

**Click [HERE](#) to read previous "Faith Matters" articles**



8190 Lincoln Rd. Beulah, MI 49617  
231.882.4241  
[www.benziestandrews.com](http://www.benziestandrews.com)



Benzie St. Andrews | 8190 Lincoln Rd | Beulah, MI 49617 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)



Try email marketing for free today!