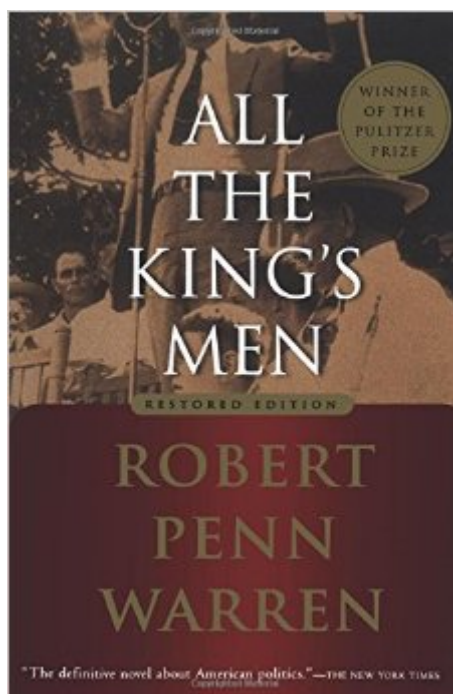


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All The King's Men



Synopsis

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, this classic book is generally regarded as the finest novel ever written on American politics. It describes the career of Willie Stark, a back-country lawyer whose idealism is overcome by his lust for power. New Foreword by Joseph Blotner for this fiftieth anniversary edition.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars See all reviews (440 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Yes, this is a great novel, though I personally think the last three pages were a big mistake. But this review is about the "new, corrected edition" by Mr. Polk, which, I'm afraid, is a literary and scholarly travesty. Readers will be well advised to stick with the original 1946 text; the fact that it has been a force in American life for over 50 years, and that in the 43 years before his death Warren never gave any indication he was dissatisfied with it, should be reason enough. (A cynic would argue that the only reason for the new edition was to extend the copyright.) Polk went back to Warren's original typescript draft to restore many of the passages, phrases, and stylistic features that were changed or deleted in the editorial process before publication (and approved by Warren); and he claims that his editorial decisions have created a superior novel. The first problem is that, except for a very sketchy 10-page essay, Polk gives the reader no help in judging for himself. A respectable scholarly edition would at the least indicate, at the bottom of each page or the back of the book, each instance in which the first edition text has been changed and where the change came from (the draft was edited by several hands, including Warren's). A reader who wants to assess Polk's work will have to have both editions in hand and scan page by page, and even then will not know whose decisions Polk has overruled. Thus Polk puts himself beyond criticism. Polk's essay tries to justify his decisions, but his illustrations are merely anecdotal and offer no consistent editorial principles or

methodology. I haven't the space here to go through a critique point by point; suffice it to say, I'm not convinced by any of his examples, including the reversion from Willie Stark to Willie Talos.

Born in Kentucky, Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) had a long and prestigious literary career, his huge body of work including poetry, essays, textbooks, history and novels. "All the King's Men", written in 1946, won a Pulitzer Prize and I can well understand why. First of all there are the words, lots of them, words that flow and caress and make liberal use of just the right tiny details to get to the essence the people he describes. Never have I seen such artful characterization and I found I was re-reading some of these descriptions just for the pure beauty of the way he used his words. And yet those words never got in the way of the story; they enhanced it. It is also a piece of history as the author brings alive the South of 1920s and 1930s. The story is about Willie Stark, man of humble origin who rose to power as a governor of an unnamed Southern state and is supposedly loosely based on the life of Huey Long, the Governor of Louisiana. But the main character is really Jack Burden, the narrator of the story. He's a reporter when he meets Willie Stark early in his career and is there as witness his political rise. Later, he works directly for Willie and becomes a key player in the blackmailing and political intrigue that surrounds the Governor. We come to know Jack through the people in his life as well as his own internal introspections and watch the swirl of events that grow in depth and complexity. Nothing is quite what it seems at first, and there are multiple sub-stories that unfold as the basic action of the book moves along. And then, just when I think I understand it all, there is yet another and another layer of depth and meaning. Everything has an effect on everything else.

It is extremely hard to sit down and write a review for any piece of classic literature for there is very little a reviewer can say that is new. Of course, for a book to be considered a classic most of its reviewers have to have had a favorable opinion of the work and all a new reviewer can do is concur or disagree. In this case, I couldn't possibly agree more with previous reviewers who have written rave reviews of this book. This is not so much the story of Willie Stark, who was Willie Talos in the original manuscript, as it the story of Jack Burden, the man telling the story. It really seems to be the story of a young man and his road to maturity. That young man is Jack Burden and Stark seems to be just a convenient focal point around which Warren weaves his story. The plot is very well laid out and flows very well from beginning to end, which is quite an accomplishment when one considers all of the subplots to be found in this book. As Burden tells his story he often wanders down memory lane, recalling events which his story has recalled. Each subplot builds to it's own climax while also

building toward the climax of the main story and the reader is swept along like a barrel on the Niagara River. Just as the reader feels as if he can put the book aside for a while, another subplot begins to ascend through the story and the reader is again swept along unable to pause. I got so caught up in one of the subplots that I was late for a very important appointment. I just couldn't stop until I found out what happened. Stark is obviously supposed to resemble Louisiana Governor Huey Long and he very much does so. If one also reads T. Harry Williams biography of Long they will see just how strong the resemblance is.

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