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## Book Reviews: Fools for Scandal

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## BOOK REVIEWS

FOOLS for SCANDAL

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Joe "Anonymous" Klein, *Primary Colors*

James Stewart, *Bloodsport*

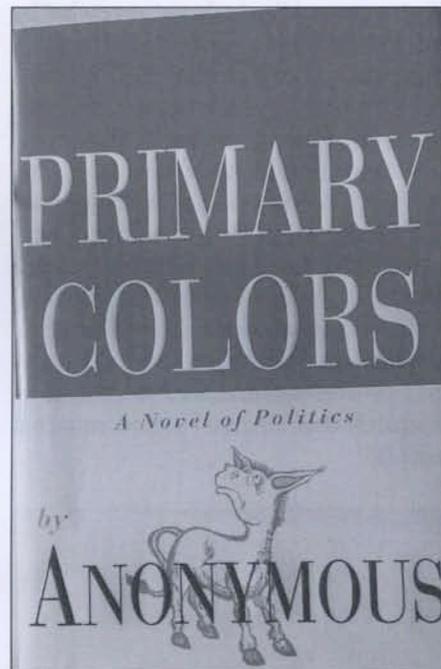
Bob Woodward, *The Choice*

Those happy few American voters who took the time to vote this past November 5 have re-elected William Jefferson Clinton the 42nd President of the United States, the first Democrat, the commentators never tire of reminding us, elected to a lame duck term since FDR. Newly elected, and perhaps hoping to escape the comparison to his New Deal predecessor, the President wasted no time leaving for Australia to golf with Greg Norman and joke about outplaying him, which, he commented, if anyone believed, he had some Arkansas land to sell them. That Arkansas land, the blessed plot of Dogpatch called Whitewater, may very well, again according to the pundits and commentators, have Mr. Clinton facing depositions, subpoenas, and indictments upon his return to Washington.

This year's low voter turnout may indeed owe something to deep voter weariness at having heard so much so incessantly about Mr. Clinton's bedroom and boardroom difficulties. Whitewater, Paula Corbin Jones, the White House travel office, the White House FBI files have made the executive mansion look like a dung hill covered o'er with snow. Certainly the books up for review here, and numerous others like them, have contributed to this

exhaustion, even enervation, at the alleged ethical lapses. Despite the prodigious efforts to separate fiction from fact and reveal to us the inner workings of politics, they have rendered scandal and skullduggery dull, dull, dull, dull, or as my students would say BOOORRING. No longer the age of the last hurrah, we have entered the era of the last harrumph.

*Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics* offers a perfect case in point. Published anonymously last spring by "Machiavelliana, Inc." this Roman a clef

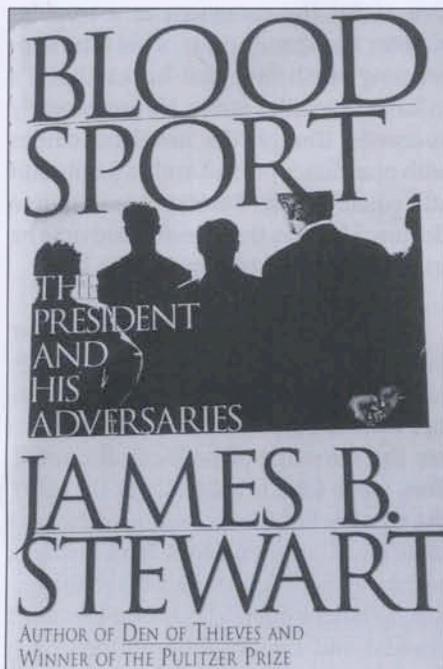


became an instant best-seller and subject of unending speculation about its author's identity. The novel's characters, readily associated with their real-life counterparts, posed no problem, but not until late summer did *Newsweek's* Joe Klein, after considerable lying and deception, own up to authorship, thereby, perhaps unintentionally, illustrating that life does imitate art. Having read the novel, I can pretty well understand what motivated Klein's anonymity, my students omitting names from their essays so as to sidestep responsibility, but since Klein's reported earnings from *Primary Colors* approached six million dollars, I suspect he can bear up un-

der any criticism I might make of his prose style. *Primary Colors* follows the primary campaign of a small, southern state governor, Jack Stanton, with a prodigious appetite for doughnuts, dames, and destiny. Sound familiar? Henry Burton, the narrator and a young, black political operative, joins the campaign as a trouble-shooter and spends most of his time suppressing brush fires that his candidate's inflamed appetites ignite. He pretty nearly succeeds, though the novel concludes with presidency pursuit and paternity suit still equally likely. Stanton even seduces Burton: "He was truly needy. And now he truly needed me" to remain with him.

*Primary Colors* is the classic insider novel of who's in, who's out, who's up, who's down, who's hot, who's not. Gossip, rumor, innuendo, lies, and evasions are the currency of political discourse. This, we're told, is politics, not the art of the possible but the technique of the permissible. Commentators have made a commonplace of the observation that politics no longer offers issues and ideas but scandal and celebrity. Conditions have become such that the scandal need not even be interesting. Where's Fannie Fox cavorting with a drunken Wilbur Mills in the Tidal Basin? Where's Marilyn Monroe singing Happy Birthday to JFK in a voice that left no doubt? *Quo vadis* scandal? Though we profess to tolerate almost every manifestation of private behavior, we cry foul the instant a public person inches across the never precisely delineated line separating private from public. Klein, by implying that most private political behavior is scurrilous--every candidate in his novel seems to possess a dark secret--doesn't advance our understanding of the problem. He, somewhat arrogantly I think, tries to locate *Primary Colors* within the tradition of American political fiction originated by Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. Klein's narrator Henry Burton echoes Warren's Jack Burden; Klein's candidate Jack Stanton recalls Warren's Judge Stanton, revealed as Jack Burden's father. No one ever doubted that Warren fathered *All the King's Men*, though he consistently denied any iden-

tification between his Willie Stark and the Kingfish Huey Long. Klein denied authorship but highlighted the political identifications. Like children, novels prosper knowing their parentage. Klein has delivered us a bastard.



James Stewart's *Bloodsport: The President and his Adversaries* purports to offer an even-handed and detailed examination of Vincent Foster's death, the Whitewater land deal, the White House travel office affair, and the Administration's efforts to control and contain the press frenzy. Stewart claims that Hillary Clinton's friend Susan Thomases first approached him about compiling a book--with White House cooperation--that would present an impartial account of the Clintons' by then tangled affairs. Ultimately, the Clintons backed off, but Stewart went forward regardless. One's a bit uncertain about what motivated Stewart's 'this is a story that's gotta be told' enthusiasm; suffice it to say that the reader undertaking his labyrinthine book ought to retain services of a CPA to help

with the savings and loan, real estate wheeling and dealing. With no such assistance I concluded from reading *Bloodsport* that Bill Clinton (and America) would be better off today if he'd never met James McDougal: that Susan McDougal would definitely be better off if she had never met, let alone married, James McDougal; that Bill and Hillary Clinton, not the first, certainly not the last, made a bad real-estate investment; that Hillary Clinton proved her intelligence by pulling out of the feed-lot commodities trading which earned her \$100K over a year's time; that Hillary Clinton proved I'm truly not sure what by failing to close out the couple's Whitewater holdings; that the President and First Lady, for some reason, thought they retained some small measure of personal privacy and ignored David Gergen's good advice to release all the Whitewater documents to the press, and then when the media circus started, ignored Bernard Nussbaum's advice to avoid a special prosecutor; that too many Arkansans in the national administration invite comparisons by over-sophisticated journalists to Dogpatch; that Vincent Foster committed suicide.



Foster, feeling personally responsible for failing the Clintons in the travel office disaster, wrote in his diary that the Washington press corps made a sport of ruining people's reputations. Stewart's final chapter, "Shrouding the Truth," portrays the press as a wolfpack so starved for news that it could and would turn any scrap, substantial or otherwise--too often otherwise--into a story. In the case, for instance, of Paula Corbin Jones, the press may have truly made something out of nothing, though many passionately--more passionately than ever Clinton could have been with Jones--argue otherwise. Foster, trapped among people who couldn't distinguish a mistake from malfeasance, took his life. That sad fact may be buried with him.

Bob Woodward brought down a president twenty-five years ago with *Deep Throat* and *All the President's Men*. He's been going strong ever since and has written *The Choice* to show the insides and out of the 1994-96 primary campaigns. The reader enters the candidates' smoke-filled rooms and heads. "Ego, therefore I run" would appear the motto for most politicians caught in the Woodward headlights. The sub-text of *The Choice*, an all too obvious one, tells us there's really no choice at all. I personally don't agree and think that the recently concluded election offered voters a candidate, Bill Clinton, who understood the public's disenchantment with big visions and presented a scaled down array of programs that might just be achievable in a (dare we hope?) bipartisan congress. Who knows? Clinton will soon return home from Asia to face the questions, the accusations, the intimations that he doesn't really stand for anything. He surely can be forgiven for thinking "re-election is the best revenge." □

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