

Stalking the Washington Novel

The question we should be asking isn't who wrote D.C.'s latest It novel, but whether it's worth reading.

Every so often, a journalist or a critic or even a novelist will lament the fact that we don't have a truly great Washington novel. Instead, we settle for variety: the historical prototype (Henry Adams's *Democracy*), the chronicle of the "other" Washington (George Pelecanos's D.C. Quartet), the partial qualifier (Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*), and the lowbrow media sensation (Joe Klein's *Primary Colors*).

The biggest reason Klein's novel became a sensation, of course, was that he published it anonymously. This Tuesday will see the release of a new anonymous novel, *O: A Presidential Novel*, and, like *Primary Colors*, which centered on a lightly fictionalized version of Bill Clinton's universe, *O* promises to be inspired by true events—this time, Barack Obama's. And yet the media has already spent most of this month obsessing over the identity of *O*'s author, with just about every D.C. journalist having denied that he or she wrote the book. It's a good example of the insularity and superficiality that define the Washington media. It's also an opportunity to reflect on why anyone would bother writing or reading a novel in the first place.

Of course, the same metamedia slobbering that's greeting *O* also welcomed *Primary Colors* when it first appeared, 15 years ago. In fact, it'd be difficult to overstate how much hype there was in early 1996—or how ugly and self-important it eventually became.

After Klein submitted his novel as *Untitled Novel by Anonymous Author*, his publisher decided to keep things secret since it might stir up some attention. It was a smart strategy. (And an old one: Adams published his Washington novel anonymously, assuring its publisher that "the riddle is more amusing . . . than the solution would be.") People began buzzing about *Primary Colors* and its author—Don Imus on the radio, Larry King on TV, every major newspaper and magazine. Clinton quipped that the novel's authorship was "the only secret I've seen kept in Washington." *New York* magazine even hired a Shakespeare scholar to perform a computer analysis of the prose of 35 leading suspects.

The strategy worked better than anyone could have hoped. Klein had received a decent advance and an initial print run of 60,000. By the end of February, though, *Primary Colors* was on its 17th printing and had more than one million copies in circulation. The novel ended up spending 25 weeks on the *New York Times*' bestseller list, and journalists kept after its author's identity the whole time. Finally, in July, the *Washington Post* found a manuscript of *Primary Colors* that included 10 words of Klein's handwriting. The newspaper (allegedly) stole one of Klein's notebooks and hired a handwriting expert to compare the samples, then ran a front-page story outing him as the novel's author.

That afternoon, Klein confessed at a packed press conference. And this launched the next chapter in the *Primary Colors* affair—an impromptu seminar in media ethics, where everyone tried to out-censure each other. Kurt Anderson, who, as editor of *New York*, had scored a publicity coup with his Shakespeare stunt, worried that *Primary Colors* would make “people think they can’t trust journalists.” Klein had to hire local police to protect his wife and kids from reporters. The media was outdone only by the politicians. Dee Dee Myers, Clinton’s former press secretary, complained, apparently with a straight face, that Klein “looked his friends in the eye and he lied—for money.”

Clearly, the history of *Primary Colors* doesn’t come with many heroes. But the media did do one thing right: they opened a window, however briefly, where the novel and its ideas got some airtime. Because *Primary Colors* was (and is) a genuinely good novel. First, it got the details and absurdities of political life right—so right, in fact, that Clinton aides accused each other of having written it.

But it also provided a more complex portrait of politics than any piece of campaign journalism could. Like any good novel, *Primary Colors* includes its characters’ emotions, rationalizations, doubts, triumphs—all the stuff you can’t get past a fact-checker. Reviewers kept promising that the novel would change your view of Clinton. And there’s a good chance that it, along with the movie version, which came out during the Lewinsky scandal, did. *Primary Colors* offered a new (or at least an enhanced) perspective on Clinton—the president as a classically tragic figure whose charms lined up with his flaws. It also showed how that figure found his ideal home inside the modern political process.

All this to say that, for the first few weeks, at least, the quality of *Primary Colors* proved crucial to its success. Nobody would have cared who “Anonymous” was if “Anonymous” hadn’t written a decent book. If this seems like a stupidly obvious point, though, let’s return to the uproar over *O*. During most of its month-long build up, people had no idea whether this new novel was any good. And the early reviews suggest it wasn’t worth the fuss.

But now that there’s a precedent—a media narrative—*O*’s quality seems beside the point. And so does its novel-ness. Washington knows only one way to talk about books, whether fiction or non-, Bob Woodward’s or George W. Bush’s—and that’s the rummaging for details, the breaking of embargoes, the questing for something, anything new. It works well when you’re lining up a novel’s possible authors, but not when you’re trying to draw a lesson—much less pleasure—from it.

As it happens, *Primary Colors* also makes some incisive points about media narcissism. Indeed, the only real names that appear in Klein’s novel are those of journalists, who make up Washington’s most durable brands. On this count, though, *Primary Colors*’ best moral came from its reception—from how quickly everyone moved from talking about a book to talking about its buzz. Maybe one reason Washington’s never had a great novel is that it wouldn’t even know what to do with one.