

**BEN'S NOTES**

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**ALL THE  
KING'S  
MEN**

**BY ROBERT PENN WARREN**



**Ben  
Shapiro's**  
**Book Club**

# **ROBERT PENN WARREN'S *ALL THE KING'S MEN***

Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*<sup>1</sup> (1946) is the finest American political novel ever written. Its clear-eyed view of the brutality of politics, its hard-boiled characters, and its deep cynicism make it a rip-roaring read – but it's the deeper view of human nature, flawed but hopeful, that allows for the possibility that a republic might, after all is said and done, succeed. Willie Stark is one of the great characters in American literature – an honest but ambitious country lawyer who learns the game of power politics, then is seduced by it – but it is the characters who orbit around Willie who help define him: Jack Burden, the narrator, an apathetic journalist-turned-henchman dragged out of his apathy by his own corruption and that of everyone surrounding him; Anne Stanton, the virginal love interest who falls for Willie; Sadie Burke, the political Svengali who ushers Willie into power only to be destroyed by her vulnerability to him; Lucy Stark, the long-suffering wife who merely hopes to remind Willie of the virtue he has abandoned; and Judge Irwin, the upstanding man of decency with a shady history he can never escape. These characters bring us to the final revelation of *All the King's Men*: that we are all imperfect and that such imperfection must never be allowed to excuse our own failures – that, in the end, the universe is not a pitilessly deterministic place, but one in which our actions matter.

## **ROBERT PENN WARREN: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY**

Robert Penn Warren was born in 1905 in Kentucky, the oldest of three children. He was literarily oriented from early on – by the age of 16, he published his first poem – but his ambitions toward a military career were stifled by the loss of his left eye in an accident playing with his younger brother. Thanks to that injury, he lost his appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy and instead attended Vanderbilt University. He moved on to graduate work at the University of California, then Yale University, and finally, in 1928, became a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. His teaching career was lengthy and spanned a multiplicity of institutions of higher learning. Warren won the Pulitzer Prize for *All the King's Men* and two more for his poetry, and he became America's first poet laureate in 1986. He died in 1989.<sup>2</sup>

As a born-and-bred Southerner, Warren was a vocal advocate on behalf of segregationism in his early years, but he recanted those views by the mid-1950s and became a vocal proponent of racial integration; in 1965, he published a collection of interviews with civil rights figures including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. He became friends with Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*. But he also remained a supporter of Southern agrarianism, which defended the South's legacy of agriculture and religiosity. Warren said that he had "the deepest awareness of [religion's] importance" and stated that thinkers who had impacted the writing of *All the King's Men* included Dante, Machiavelli, and William James.<sup>3</sup> All of those influences can certainly be felt in *All the King's Men*.

*All the King's Men* focuses on Willie Stark, who is clearly modeled on Louisiana politician and demagogue Huey P. Long. Nicknamed "Kingfish," Long was governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 and then a senator from 1932 until he was assassinated in 1935. A radical Democrat, he called for more governmental control of industry, more government spending, and more authoritarian control. Long, like Willie Stark, was the product of a poverty-stricken background; he began as a country lawyer, then won election to the Louisiana Public Service Commission, where he ended up arguing before the Supreme Court. He ran for governor once – unsuccessfully – but then began to engage in serious class warfare rhetoric, getting himself elected governor. He was impeached in 1929 for abuse of power, but the impeachment collapsed; he set up the law enforcement of the state so that it was answerable to him personally. After defeating his impeachment, Long said, "I used to try to get things done by saying 'please.' Now ... I dynamite 'em out of my path."<sup>4</sup> Long served as both governor and senator-elect, using any power at his disposal to maintain his own authority. Long rewarded his political cronies and punished his political enemies. His "Share Our Wealth" program was so popular that Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) essentially hijacked major elements of it in order to forestall a Long 1936 presidential campaign. Political sources speculated that Long wanted to split the vote with FDR – ending in the election of a Republican – and then run again four years later, taking the presidency.

On September 8, 1935, Long was assassinated by the son-in-law of one of his political opponents after Long redistricted away Pavy's seat. The shooter was one Dr. Carl Weiss; later speculation suggested that perhaps Weiss had not in fact shot Long, but that Long was caught in the crossfire when his bodyguards fired back at Weiss.

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