The Kingfish in Fiction: Huey P. Long and the Modern American Novel. By Keith Perry. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2004. 243 pp. $39.95 cloth.

Modern American writers have by and large steered clear of writing about politicians and the gritty world of professional politics; and when they have written about political figures, they have often focused, in Jamesian fashion, less on the politicians than on those observing them. Historical figures from the political sphere have generated even less interest in American writers, though occasionally, as with the case of Huey P. Long, the flamboyant Governor of and U.S. Senator from Louisiana, a particularly controversial politician may spark the imaginations of some. But even Long, whose life was nothing if not dramatic, a wild ride into state and national politics that was always careening into the extremes of comedy and tragedy, in the end drew only a handful of writers (other than historians and journalists) to tell his story or, at least, to tell a story that originated in his life.

Keith Perry's *The Kingfish in Fiction: Huey P. Long and the Modern American Novel* explores this handful of writers drawn to Long, looking closely at the Huey Long novels of Sinclair Lewis, Hamilton Basso, John Dos Passos, Adria Locke Langley, and Robert Penn Warren. Perry's goal, as he states it, is to compare the factual life of Long to the fictional lives of the Long characters (the Hueys-who-aren't-Hueys) in order to determine the more substantial aesthetic significance of the convergences and divergences between them—in other words, the different ways that the five writers manipulate the same ur-story and what these manipulations reveal about their political perspectives and artistic intentions. As Perry's analyses of the novels show, the five writers went very different ways with the Long story. Sinclair Lewis, fearing a fascist takeover in the United States, wrote *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) to cripple Long's political career, looking forward to his anticipated 1936 run for the Presidency. Hamilton Basso found Long's story, as he expressed in *Cinnamon Seed* (1934) and *Sun in Capricorn* (1942), emblematic of the demise of the traditional South, its aristocratic structure trampled by the demagogue and his poor white constituency. John Dos Passos, taking a larger focus, used the Long story in *Number One* (1943) to illustrate the temptation facing all politicians—that is, to use power for their own ends rather than for the public's—and the responsibility of the electorate to hold public officials accountable. Adria Locke Langley, the only woman of the group, focused in *A Lion Is in the Streets* (1945) less on public politics than on family dynamics, with the suffering spouse of the Long figure taking center stage. Finally, Robert Penn Warren, one of America's few philosophical novelists, employed aspects of Long's story in *All the King's Men* (1946) to investigate the ethical issues embedded in his politician's rise and fall, particularly as those issues affected one of the politician's inside men, who narrates the novel.

Perry is at his best in his introduction, where he presents an overview of Long's life and the various ways that contemporary commentators understood and represented Long. He's also quite good at locating the novels under discussion within the careers of their authors, providing solid discussions of the individual writers shaping concerns and imaginative interests. He's not as effective, however, in placing the novels in the larger cultural context of 1930s and 1940s America. Perhaps because his study is primarily built on contrasts, Perry locates each novel within its own limited context, downplaying any connection that these novels might have with each other within the larger cultural debates of the era, particularly those regarding democracy, fascism, and demagoguery. Certainly, these debates had different degrees of influence on the five writers, but clearly the novels of all five were actively engaged with them and should be read in light of them. And so while in his chapter on Lewis Perry insightfully discusses the crisis facing American democracy in the 1930s—a crisis that shook Americans' confidence in democratic government, particularly in the face of the rise of European fascism—that crisis and its significance all but disappear in the following chapters, as if the four other writers somehow weren't also enmeshed in or paying attention to the same cultural debates, even though they eventually chose to write about an American demagogue whose career was central to those very debates.

That some of the Long novels were written in the 1940s only underscores the need to carry forward the analysis of cultural context, as clearly the onset of World War II, with its tide of patriotic fervor, impacted fictional representations of Long. Its not insignificant, for instance, that Robert Penn Warren began writing his initial version of the Long story (his play *Proud Flesh*) while in Fascist Italy and that before he fled the country (he barely got out before Europe erupted into total war) he watched Mussolini deliver a speech electrifying a crowd of supporters. While Warren in *All the King's Men* may not have been exploring the fascist threat in America as openly and immediately as Lewis had done eleven years earlier, nonetheless the two novels, whatever their differences, are integrally bound together in their interrogation of power politics in America under the shadow of fascism. It's this lack of cultural and chronological context and connection that most plagues Perry's work. Without this context, which would serve as an interpretative grid for understanding the novels both apart and together, we're left pretty much with five discrete discussions, discussions that spend way too much time recapitulating plot and pointing out specific discrepancies between Long's factual story and its fictional manifestations.

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