

Politics and reality in fiction

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Roscoe by William Kennedy, New York: Penguin, 2002, 294 pp.

Roscoe is William Kennedy's seventh novel about the people of Albany, New York State's capital. It recounts the life of a Democratic Party boss in the period immediately after the Second World War. Most of its characters are based on real historical figures, the leaders of Albany's infamous O'Connell political machine.

An attempt to treat the human material of the Democratic Party is a step in the right direction, given the general level of dissimulation that goes on about official politics in America. It has become artistically necessary to write convincing fiction about the political elite. An honest and insightful novel (or painting or film) can, among other things, subvert the routine of government and media lying. This is the "social call" to the artist, as the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky termed it once.

Roscoe is not Kennedy's first reaction to a compelling issue in American life. His Pulitzer-Prize winning *Ironweed*, about a homeless alcoholic named Francis Phelan living in Albany in the post-war years, was published in 1983. It showed the reality of transient people without sentimentality or apology. *Ironweed* was somehow able to find the struggle for brotherhood and happiness found in Friedrich Schiller's poem "Ode to Joy" in lives crushed by the ignominy of owning nothing and being nothing.

The book touched a nerve in the US at a time when homelessness was becoming a mass social phenomenon. *Ironweed* was a truthful and accomplished book, and one of the finest efforts in American novel writing toward the end of the twentieth century.

Kennedy also seems suited to write about the political caste. In the past, he has chosen to document Albany's underworld life in *Legs*—about the gangster Legs Diamond—and in *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game*—about a smalltime gambler, the son of *Ironweed's* Francis. He knows something about the lives of criminals and is able to write sympathetically and realistically about them. As a former newspaper writer, he is acquainted with the O'Connell outfit that ruled Albany for over fifty years, and he has written several essays on some of its leading figures, collected in *O, Albany!* [1].

Roscoe begins on Victory over Japan Day in 1945. Roscoe is Roscoe Connolly, second-in-command of the Democratic Party in Albany, whose chief is Patsy McCall. Roscoe is in love with his best friend Elisha's wife. Elisha, also a leader of the party, owns a steel mill and is a former state lieutenant governor. Elisha commits suicide and the possibility of taking up with his widow, Veronica, is open to Roscoe.

The plot involves Roscoe's wooing of Veronica and the custody case over Veronica's adopted son; the social environment is the police/politician/criminal nexus of the city. The novel flashes back to earlier points in the history of the Albany "Democracy." Any number of sad and disturbed people appears on the novel's pages. Policemen kill each other. Prostitutes are tortured and avenged. For the Albany

gang "the squeeze is on" from Republican Governor Thomas Dewey's crew. There is a credible and interesting cockfighting scene. The section headings in the novel play at the mock-epic: "Roscoe and the Pope," "Prelude to a Whore," "Roscoe Muses on Politics and Death while Having his Heart Cut Out."

Roscoe loses Veronica in the end. Elisha's son, Alex, the mayor of Albany and a returning veteran, opposes the union. Roscoe, he intimates, is too swinish and corrupt to be his mother's spouse. We see a newer, slicker Democratic Party, perhaps more in the John Kennedy mold, emerging in the person of Alex.

Has *Roscoe* then risen to the artistic needs of the day? Has it depicted the "personal" side of the Democratic Party in a revealing historical light? After reading the book, do we see politicians more clearly? Are we more aware of our own thoughts and feelings about them?

No, unfortunately. *Roscoe* is a confused and unsatisfying work that does not take us far into the heart and mind of an American politician. The characters' development lacks an internal logic. The novel obscures essential social tensions in society, and it lacks a critical attitude toward the material.

These are not simply aesthetic problems; Kennedy is a talented writer. The problems lie deeper, in the general approach of American authors to political and historical phenomena. In the case of *Roscoe*, there is an absence of an analysis of the historical tensions within the American ruling elite, particularly at the local level.

A little history. The Democrats swept to office in Albany in 1921 for the first time since 1891 after revelations of widespread Republican corruption. The 1921 transit strike (vividly described in *Ironweed*) was the central event of the year in the city. It was a part of a general post-war radicalization of the international working class.

Dan O'Connell, who had been elected to a minor city post in 1919, moved quickly to establish a Democratic stranglehold on power. He was enormously successful in that undertaking: he ruled the city until he died in 1977, and his organization outlasted him, led by his figurehead mayor Erastus Corning.

The O'Connell organization was a relatively late development of the big-city American machine, and that may be part of its significance. Many of the socio-psychological traits of machine leaders were displayed in Albany in their final and purest form.

After the Civil War, the governance of American cities changed. The dominance of industrial capitalism nurtured an urban proletariat, in large measure drawn from the mass immigration from southern and eastern Europe.

By the turn of the century, both parties, but especially the Democrats, had learned to create disciplined local organizations steeped in voter fraud and graft and financed in part by a de facto tax on illegal nightlife. The machine was usually dominated by a single party leader who behaved in many respects like a mafia don.

The party machine fattened bigger capitalists on city contracts, and supported the national programs of its party. It drew off a part of the public income into the pockets of a layer of full-time operatives, the precinct captains and ward bosses, who frequented the kitchens of working people and got them out to vote for the party. Party bosses handed out jobs, loans, and favors to constituents in a period when there was no social safety net. The bosses expected votes and loyalty in return. This sort of organization dominated political life in many American cities through the Depression years.

Machine politics arose in part as a response to the threat posed to the established order by the arrival of the American working class on the historical scene. The mass strikes in the 1870s and the development of unions, often under the leadership of socialists and other left wingers, obliged the two major bourgeois parties to devise strategies aimed at deflecting any effort at independent political struggle by working people. Overall, the purpose of the party machine was to contain social tensions by promoting parochial and ethnic loyalties to smother the class identity of workers, as well as encouraging pragmatic relations with and reliance on the favors of this or that local section of the ruling elite.

But not much of this animates *Roscoe*. A novel about politicians, if it is to be penetrating, depends on an historical-aesthetic grasp of their history and purpose as a caste, framed by the larger social issues of the day. The needs that well up in them and the conflicts that break out between them in the end reflect the great social contradictions.

An example of how the novel fails to live up to its possibilities: the idea is floated, appealingly, in the first pages of the novel, that Roscoe is disenchanted with political life. A man would surely have good reasons for wanting to leave a position of power and prestige, even if they were strictly personal.

There is a conversation between Roscoe (his “condition had become so confounding”) and Patsy McCall, the party boss, about this issue. But all that Roscoe can say is that he is “sick of carrying time around on my back like a bundle of rocks.” This is not very revealing.

A politician like Roscoe may be disgusted with himself: he has had people beaten and shot. But the psychological impact of this sort of life on the central character is neither deep going nor adequately developed. While there is an emotional poverty to his life, especially at the beginning of the novel, Kennedy does not seriously explore Roscoe’s initial decision to leave politics, and his general spiritual malaise is never worked out. What are the driving forces behind his feelings? Instead, conflict in the novel is made external and focuses on the custody battle.

More revealing perhaps is that the author is not capable of creating an intellectual distance between himself and these corrupt souls.

It is difficult, for example, to distinguish Roscoe’s voice from Kennedy’s. Roscoe is sardonic and cynical, as one might expect him to be, but at times it is not clear whether the sentiments are the protagonist’s or the author’s.

This flows from Kennedy’s largely uncritical view of real political machines. His essays about the O’Connell crowd in *O Albany!* are undiscerning and even chummy. Neither hatred nor even disapproval of its anti-democratic, criminal nature makes itself felt.

In *Roscoe* no one expresses serious unease about the grossness and corruption of the Democratic Party rule. The writer’s distinct perspective might manifest itself in a hundred ways ... but here it does not. Instead, crime, corruption and cynicism simply exist. But it is artistically and intellectually risky to let subject matter “speak for itself.” In fact, it never does. A critical distance has always been

necessary to write successful fiction about complex political phenomena. Is this following “eureka truth” Kennedy’s or Roscoe’s?

“[I]t’s the cause of all wars, of every argument for and against the Empire, the Nazis, the Fascists, the Japs, the reason to convert the infidels and save the pagans, the reason we subdue the aborigines, the barbarians, the Republicans; it’s why kings have that divine right and why absolutely we must win the Ninth Ward; it’s at the heart of Manifest Destiny and the lemming society, of the mad oligarchs, the killer hordes, the holy despots, and also Dracula, who certainly knows how to preserve his soul. How? You get the money.”

This ahistorical amalgam of political forms, slightly facetious in tone, is meant to be Roscoe’s, and that is not a surprise. A worldview like this might be appropriate for a machine politician, but what should someone writing (or reading) fiction in the twenty-first century make of it? Kennedy shows that Roscoe’s thinking or dreaming have a world-historical bent. But the author is too close to his subject matter to understand what he sees. Some distance is necessary here to truly grasp Roscoe’s crude thoughts about history. A little perspective, please!

Finally, there is not much sense of a particular era in the book. Roscoe and his friends do not seem particularly moved by the end of the war. People can certainly be myopic when reality changes right before their eyes. Surely, though, fifty-seven years later an author should look for some impact of the beginning of a new set of social compromises that would affect life from top to bottom in the United States.

It is possible to write an effective novel about the ruling strata, even in the US. Robert Penn Warren’s classic of American political life, *All the King’s Men* (1948), is suffused with class tensions: the snobbery and hypocrisy of an entrenched elite toward a lower-class upstart (the fictitious Louisiana governor Willie Stark, a farmer’s son and a country lawyer), and the manner in which an individual (Stark’s journalistic lackey, Jack Burden) betrays his gentry background for a parvenu. Warren’s novel has a precise insight into the appeal of Willie Stark to the poor in the Louisiana countryside.

As is the case in *All the Kings Men*, it seems likely—given the place and time—that social tensions in post-war Albany might find expression most obviously in conflicts within the ruling group itself. But Kennedy has not, on the whole, located or brought to life these tensions or conflicts, and Roscoe’s life does not teach us or move us. Perhaps the novelist has reacted to the political crisis in the United States, but he has not really responded to it.

Notes:

[1] Kennedy’s essays in *O Albany!* (New York: Penguin, 1983) about the Albany Democratic party notables are: “The Democrats Convene, or, One Man’s Family” pp. 43-53; “They Bury the Boss: Dan Ex-Machina,” pp. 271-303; “Erastus: The Million-Dollar Smile,” pp. 325-360, and “The Last Word,” pp. 361-371.



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