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Political Imagination and the Campaign Narrative



by Zachary Jack

The first and most obvious question any non-Iowan is likely to ask about *Corn Poll* is this: why would anyone ever write a novel about the Iowa Caucuses? Or put another way, what could possibly be novel-worthy about a political primary in a so-called pork state?

Practically, my novel *Corn Poll* arose both from my credential as a seventh-generation Iowan and as a consequence of covering the Iowa Caucuses in

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2012 as a journalist and scholar, attending dozens of campaign events and meeting each of the major candidates in person on multiple occasions. Of course this is the lucky political lot of an Iowan—citizenship's Charlie Bucket and Golden Ticket rolled into one. It's true what they say: in the realm of retail politics and ground campaigns, Iowa won the lottery.

Thinking more deeply, though, I realize that my penning of an Iowa Caucus novel also has something fundamentally to do with inherited agrarianism—a brand of localism, patriotism, and sometimes loving criticism nearest to Grant Wood's own, I suppose, among the best-known Regionalists. The truth is, our "Iowa Nice" often gets in our way where the Caucuses are concerned. Citizens of a state known far and wide for its hospitality, we're so eager to make everyone feel at home that we're prone to giving away the farm, as the saying goes. Iowans have been neglecting to tell their own story, in their own way, from their own pens, for so long now no one quite remembers what it sounds like when a truly native set of voices raises their barbaric yelp of a chorus. We ourselves have been content to let writers like Jane Smiley (a Californian) and W.P. Kinsella (a Canadian) craft the definitive contemporary narratives of our home state. The same model of immaculate hosting finds the world-famous Iowa Writers' Workshop nurturing, feeding, mentoring, and sheltering an elite group of imported writers, very few of whom hail from the home state, and ditto their professors. So Iowans telling our own story, the story of our collective political desires and fates, is an idea much too long in coming.

Secondly, what novelist could resist such a gee-whiz plot? Imagine it—an underpopulated, once agrarian commonwealth of roughly 3 million people has, since 1972, been selecting the presumptive frontrunner in the contest to be the next leader of the Free World. On its face it's a premise not even the most whimsical filmmaker would dare imagine—akin to cooking up a plot whereby Lithuania would be granted the first and all-important say in selecting the next leader of the United Nations, for example. And of course it's also rife with internal conflict, as Iowa long ago ceased to be representative of an increasingly diverse, non-white, urban nation.

No wonder, then, that our very own Iowa Caucuses threaten to explode, either literally or figuratively, each and every four years now, with states threatening both to leapfrog our first-in-the-nation status, and protest groups threatening to disrupt the vote as they did in the last Caucus cycle. In many ways Caucus night has taken on the drama and suspense inherent in *Carnival*, and along with it comes the potential for mishap and misadventure; it's a drama the RNC learned to fear in 2012, when election officials wrongly declared Mitt Romney the winner. Reversals like these, while politically damning for the GOP, are ripe for the writer of political narratives.

Dramatic reversals make for a convenient segue into the third element of the campaign narrative that makes the Caucuses such fine fodder for the imaginative writer—irony—and perhaps the biggest irony of all is this: Presidential candidates that increasingly do not hail from small Middle American hamlets and villages, as they did in Herbert Hoover's day, arrive from the cities of the monied coasts, feeling the pressing need to present themselves as experts in agricultural policy, or at least pretend to. This in turn lends an aspect of grotesquerie and sometimes buffoonery to the process, as men and women who have neither reaped nor sown attempt to ingratiate themselves with what they presume to be the salt-of-the-earth yeomen and yeowomen attending their rallies. In fact, the stats say that would-be voters at any campaign meet-and-greet in our Hawkeye State are more likely to work in finance, real estate, or insurance than in agriculture, if one merely compares the

GDP of those respective industries, and are seven or eight times more likely, according to the raw employment data, to be working in government or manufacturing than they are plowing a furrow.

The fourth narrative-friendly aspect of the Caucuses is intimacy. In a state that's flipped from rural to urban in the last half century (Iowans are now nearly 65 percent urban), many of our small towns have turned into de facto bedroom communities where residents do their essential shopping in the nearest factory or university town rather than on Main Street. As a result, the surprising assemblage of Caucus-goers who ultimately gather on election night amount to an unveiling well-nigh as dramatic as an Agatha Christie mystery, wherein the suspects arrive one by one to some dusty parlor or mothballed drawing-room to reveal once-closeted identities. Every four years, we small-town Iowans, who once routinely encountered one another at our local grocery, bank, or city hall, now caucus with at least some neighbors we've never even seen before nor even realized were living in our midst. As in a Western, or more accurately a Middle Western, one never knows with 100 percent certainly who's going to walk in the swinging doors of the local community center or fire hall to cast their lot. Whoever they are, though, it's a good bet they'll be welcomed at the ballot box. During the most recent caucus in my little Iowa town of 400 souls, precinct officials popped popcorn on the old firehouse stove while we out in the hall briefly discussed and debated our intended votes.

The final element of the campaign narrative unique to our Iowa Caucuses is unpredictability. The Caucus season is sufficiently long, at six or seven months from State Fair in August to Ground Hog Day in early February, that it lends itself naturally and nicely to the rising action the novelist seeks, replete with plot twists as the fancies of a beleaguered and fickle electorate move from this candidate to that and back again in the advent to the election. Perhaps as a consequence, Iowa's role in the presidential nomination process has gone from reliable, salt-of-the-earth presidential predictor to apple-cart upsetter and advancer of underdog or insurgent candidates—from Rick Santorum's come-from-behind win in 2012 to Obama's somewhat surprising drubbing of Hillary in the Hawkeye

State in 2008 to Trump's strong polling numbers in the lead-up to the Caucuses of 2016.

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unique and strangely enduring American folkway but also a fragile and vulnerable political tradition needing saving. And because the respective national party bosses decide who stands at the front of the line, Iowa's future position as first-in the-nation is

very much in jeopardy, one suspects, especially after the vote-counting gaffs of 2012 overturned the results of our little corn poll. In a political world where digitally powered populism increasingly stands at odds with Party king-making and electoral control, Iowa's days as presidential bellwether and harbinger could well be numbered, for, bye and bye, we have begun to think more independently, and for ourselves, meaning that we have become what many Party bosses are given to fear: a highly literate, well-educated, semi-rural demos with few external barriers to participation—a citizenry with the time, inclination, ability, and mobility to hear the candidates in person and then decide for ourselves.

When—not if—the existence of our stand-alone, first-in-the nation Iowa Caucuses is threatened, redemptive acts of voter-centered imagining and re-imagining, coupled with articulate arguments for why such a cultural extinction should matter to the rest of the nation, may yet win the day.