



Robert Penn Warren | Notebook

All the King's Men

Can't remember when I last read it, but in honor of autocrats, I re-read Willie Stark's / Huey Long's story and try not to think of Donald Trump. A [Blue Ridge Saloon](#) selection for May/June of 2024. [Wikipedia](#): "In studying this fragment of [Civil War](#)-era history, Jack begins to suspect (but cannot yet bring himself to accept) the idea that every event has unforeseen and unknowable implications, and that all actions and all persons are connected to other actions and other persons."

Started 032624. Completed 040524.

Notes for Saloon discussion

There's this book, play, and even attempts by RPW to create an epic-level verse narrative.

T. Harry Williams' biography

Randy Newman's ambitious album Good Old Boys; even more in Faust, also by Randy Newman

Willie, Willy, Talos, Stark

Willie as Satan from Paradise Lost: "The positive portrayal of Satan is an intentional decision on the part of Milton; Satan must be attractive — he has to be able to tempt and seduce, or he is powerless. Sin must be presented attractively for humanity to entertain it as an option." "Satan's sin is his willful refusal to recognize his position in God's creation." — from ["Sympathy for the Devil? The Role of Satan in John Milton's Paradise Lost."](#) "Satan was unjustly punished ... remained steadfast and loyal to his cause despite his extreme banishment, and he becomes a ... symbol of hope for those desiring freedom from the restraints of living under an authoritative God." ([Source](#))

I read the book as an example of transformative power in character and action. One of the most powerful moments is Willie's transformation, presented in his speech beginning on p 113.

What is Jack's transformation?

Is there anyone who doesn't change?

040724: I've transcribed my reading notes — all below.

My chief takeaways:

1. Jack Burden goes from being a soldier following orders to, pessimistic about ways of God and man, to one who can believe in something — even in Willie Stark — yet hoping to get away from the good/bad/bad/good dichotomy to follow and help Hugh Miller, a good man who did not want the stink on his hands. Transformation (see above)
2. Jack's marriage to Anne and their taking in the Scholarly Attorney to live with them is another example of his new leaf.
3. Lucy Stark's adopting the baby — that may have been Tom's child — proves her consistency in faith. For her believing is existential.
4. They're all broken, every character, some many times, others only once. What they do to try to put themselves back together again are the stories this book tells.

RPW in 1981 introduction:

| [Huey Long] lived in terms of power, and for him ends seemed to justify means. He was, you might say, the ultimate believer in the "realistic view of law," in the "sociological view," in the idea that law does not come down to us as from Mount Sinai or from utterances of wise men, but grows out of

as as from mount Sinai or from utterances of wise men, but grows out of the changing needs of a changing society. In other words, he was an

unrestrained example of a view that appears in, say, Justice Holmes — and that many held to be exemplified, on certain questions, by FDR. (xv)

Ellis Burden and [Judge] Monty Irwin
Sadie Burke, Tiny Duffy, Willie Stark
Lucy, Willie, Tom Stark
Anne Stanton, Adam Stanton, Governor Stanton

Willie's political career began as County Treasurer of Mason County ... bond issue for schoolhouse. (17)

| You can build an awful lot of habits in six years, and you can fill an awful lot of little black books in that time and put them in a safety-deposit box when they get full because they aren't something to leave around and because they would be worth their weight in gold to some parties to get their hands on. Not that they ever got their hands on them. I never needed money that bad. But I had the habit of saving them. A man's got to carry something besides a corroded liver with him out of that dark backwood and abysm of time, and it might as well be the little black books. The little black books lie up there in the safety-deposit box, and there are your works of days and hands all cozy in the dark in the little box and the world's great axis grinds. (26)

Jack says he's an idealist: "I had got hold of the principle out of a book when I was in college, and I had hung on to it for grim death. I owed my success in life to that principle. It had put me where I was. What you don't know don't hurt you, for it ain't real. They called that Idealism in my book I had when I was in college, and after I got hold of that principle I became an Idealist. I was a brassbound Idealist in those days. If you are an Idealist it does not matter what you do or what goes on around you because it's not real anyway." (38)

Is this Jack's justification for the way Willie governed? "See no evil ..."?

Ch 1 ends with Willie and Jack confronting Judge Irwin over his endorsement for Callahan.

In Ch 2 Jack goes to Mason City as a reporter to learn what's going on with the schoolhouse. "J.H. Moore built the schoolhouse, which began to need repairs before the paint was dry. Willie was out of a job." (77)

| It is possible that fellows like Willie Stark are born outside of luck, good or bad, and luck, which is what about makes you and me what we are, doesn't have anything to do with them, for they are what they are from the time they first kick in the womb until the end. And if that is the case, then their life history is a process of discovering what they really are, and not, as for you and me, sons of luck, a process of becoming what luck makes us. (79)

Sadie calls Willie a sap, and Willie changes his style. (99 ff.) "She made her way in the world up from the shack in the mud flats by always finding out what you knew and never letting you know what she knew." Willie goes on a bender. Delivers his first charismatic speech. (113)

Ch 3: "It was always the same way when I came home and saw my mother.... I would come home with the firm conviction that she didn't really care a thing about me, that I was just another man whom she wanted to have around because she was the kind of woman who had to have men around and had to make them dance to her tune." (139)

| "Hugh," the Boss said, and grinned, **"the trouble with you is you are a lawyer. You are a damned fine lawyer."** Second greatest line about lawyers in English literature.
"You're a lawyer," Hugh Miller said.

"No," the Boss corrected, "I'm not a lawyer. I know some law. In fact, I know a lot of law. And I made me some money out of law. That's why I can see what the law is like. It's like a single-bed blanket on a double bed and three folks in the bed and a cold night. There ain't ever enough blanket to cover the case, no matter how much pulling and hauling, and somebody is always going to nigh catch pneumonia. **Hell, the law is like the pants you bought last year for a growing boy, but it is always this year and the seams are popped and the shinbone's to the breeze. The law is always too short and too tight for humankind.** The best you can do is do something and then make up some law to fit and by the time that law gets on the books you would have done something different. Do you think half the things I've done were clear, distinct, and simple in the constitution of the state?" (170)

Hugh Miller resigns as Attorney General over the Byram White impeachment. He's a straight arrow, and Willie tells him he knows that Miller liked getting the bad guys. (170 ff)

Sadie goes crazy over Willie's philandering. My quote: "Don't mess around on your mess around." (175)

Chapter 4 is Jack's Cass (and brother Gilbert) Mastern project, ending in another of Jack's "Great Sleep" episodes. Mastern "died in 1864 at a military hospital in Atlanta ..." (201) Annabelle Trice. Cass goes looking for Phebe, the slave she sold.

| So Cass, who had a plantation with no one to work it, went to Jackson, the capital of the state, and applied himself to the law. (229)

| Cass Mastern lived for a few years and in that time he learned that the world is all of one piece. He learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle and is drowsy no more but springs out to fling the gossamer coils about you ... (234)

In Ch 5 we move on to the "Case of the Upright Judge." Willie says **"there is always something"**: "Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud." (239)

| All I was doing was trying to prove Judge Irwin innocent. I would be able, sooner or later, to go to the Boss and say, "No sale, Boss. He is washed in the Blood."

"The son-of-a-bitch is washed in whitewash." (268)

The Littlepaugh letter: 282

Ch 6 is "historical research about Judge Irwin." **Why do we have Mastern's story?** Does it lead — by thread or context — to Irwin? "Your need is my justice." (326)

| "Yes, I am a student of history, don't you remember? And what we students of history always learn is that the human being is a very complicated contraption and that they are not good or bad but are good and bad and the good comes out of the bad and the bad out of good, and the devil tike the hindmost." (310) Willie says the same to Adam Stanton. (320)

| Now I had a new question to ask [Willie]: If he believed that you had to make the good out of the bad because there wasn't anything else to make it out of, why did he stir up such a fuss about keeping Tiny's hands off the Willie Stark Hospital?" (327)

..."she was gone for good, too, and everything from now on out was bone and gristle and the hag face like a rusty brush hook, and green scum on the shrunk pool around which the exposed earth cracks and scales like a gray scab." (334)

When Jack Burden learns — from Sadie — that Stark and Anne Stanton

are in a relationship — that she's "another slut" and "he's two-timing me again" — his world goes dark, a "world which seemed bigger than it had ever seemed before." (333)

I think this is book's climax. By now Adam Stanton has agreed to take the director position, convinced to go dark based on the knowledge Jack unearthed about Judge Irwin and Gov Stanton.

Ch 7 is Jack's long drive west as he recalls his relationship with Anne Stanton, marriage to Lois, and ends with his thinking of Anne as just another woman. An unconsummated relationship, his having been interrupted by his mother's early return home one evening.

"We wrote every day, but the letters began to seem like checks drawn on the summer's capital." (371)

They never consummated their relationship.

| I had not understood then what I think I have now come to understand: that we can keep the past only by having the future, for they are forever tied together.

The Great Sleep and the Great Twitch.

Ch 8 is the end of Judge Irwin.

Lucy learns about Tom's baby. "It's just a baby," she almost whispered. "It's just a little baby. It's a little baby in the dark. It's not even born yet, and it doesn't know about what's happened. About money and politics and somebody wanting to be a senator...." (417)

From reading the documents from Jack, Judge Irwin learned "something new ... I learned that my old friend Governor Stanton impaired his horn to protect me." (432)

| My new father, however, had not been good. He had cuckolded a friend, betrayed a wife, taken a bribe, driven a man, though unwittingly, to death. But he had done good. He had been a just judge. And he had carried his head high. That last afternoon of his life he had done that. He hadn't said, "Look here, Jack, you can't do it — you can't — you see, you see — I am your father." (439)

| Most people lose one father, but I was peculiarly situated, I had lost two at the same instant. I had dug up the truth and the truth always kills the father, the good and weak one or the bad and strong one, and you are left alone with yourself and the truth, and can never ask Dad, who didn't know anyway and who is deadlier than mackerel. (440)

"... reality is not a function of the event as event, but of the relationship of that event to past, and future, events."

Willie calls off the deal with Gummy Larson and tells Tiny to tell him. Then ... "he continued to look at me and seemed about to say something, but the question faded off his face. Then he said, 'You got to start somewhere.'" (482)

Ch 9 brings Adam Stanton to assassinate the Boss, then turn the gun on himself. (492)

Ch 10

At the end, Tom's dead too. He lasted 3 days after the football accident.

Lucy to Jack:

| "He was a great man," she affirmed again, in a voice nearly a whisper. Then she looked again at me, calmly. "You see, Jack," she said, "I have to believe that."

Yes, Lucy, you have to believe that. You have to believe that to live.... For see,

Lucy, I must believe that too. I must believe that Willie Stark was a great man. What happened to his greatness is not the question.... Perhaps he could not tell his greatness from ungreatness and so mixed them together that what was adulterated was lost. (531)

| So I went back down and stood in the garden among the black magnolia trees and the myrtles, and thought how by killing my father I had saved my mother's soul. Then I thought how maybe I had saved my father's soul, too. Both of them had found out what they needed to know to be saved. Then I thought how **all knowledge that is worth anything is maybe paid for by blood. Maybe that is the only way you can tell that a certain piece of knowledge is worth anything: it has cost some blood.** (534)

"If you want to preserve your personal immunity to the hard problems, it's better Neve to really understand those problems." (Michael Lewis, *The Fifth Risk*, p77)

| I had given my mother a present, which was a lie. But in return she had given me a present, too, which was a truth. She gave me a new picture of herself, and that meant, in the end, a new picture of the world. Or rather, that new picture of herself filled in the blank space which was perhaps the center of the new picture of the world which had been given to me by many people.... And that meant that my mother gave me back the past. I could now accept the past which I had before felt was tainted and horrible. I could accept the past now because I could accept her and be at peace with her and with myself. (538)

| **I tried to tell her [Anne Stanton] how if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other, and how if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future.** (541)

| He had seen Lucy Stark and Sugar-Boy and the Scholarly Attorney and Sadie Burke and Anne Stanton live and the ways of their living had nothing to do with the Great Twitch. He had seen his father die. He had seen his friend Adam Stanton die. He had seen his friend Willie Stark die, and had heard him say with his last breath, "It might have been all different, Jack. You got to believe that." (542)

| As a student of history, Jack Burden could see that Adam Stanton, whom he came to call the man of idea, and Willie Stark, whom he came to call the man of fact, were doomed to destroy each other, just as each was doomed to try to use the other and to yearn toward and try to become the other, because each was incomplete with the terrible division of their age. (543)

| But I still had the money, and so I am spending it to live on while I write the book I began years ago, the life of Cass Mastern, whom once I could not understand but whom, perhaps, I now may come to understand. I suppose there is some humor in the fact that while I write about Cass Mastern I live in the house of Judge Irwin and eat bread bought with his money. For Judge Irwin and Cass Mastern do not resemble each other very closely. (If Judge Irwin resembles any Mastern it is Gilbert, the granite-headed brother of Cass.) (545)