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Book Reviews

The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate *by Robert A. Caro. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. 1,170 pp. $35.00.*

One doesn't simply read a Robert Caro book; one indulges in it. Caro has spent three decades researching the life of Lyndon Johnson, and he refines his prose with the care of an epic novelist. The result is utterly engrossing as historical literature, if not always satisfying as a judgment of Johnson's deeds.

In *Master of the Senate*, the hefty third volume of Caro's unfinished biography, one listens in on hundreds of conversations LBJ had with his aides and fellow senators about how to advance or block a specific bill and impress or bully a particular lawmaker. One also learns all the details of his daily life—his love affairs, his arguments with and reliance on his wife Lady Bird, his drinking and sleeping habits, and his daily menus. (We already knew about his fondness for holding meetings while on the toilet.) When Caro narrates a major battle over a nomination or piece of legislation, one can almost hear LBJ burning the phone wires and prowling the corridors of the Capitol to find the votes he needs. No one uses oral history to more precise or more dramatic effect.

But does Caro tell us anything of importance that we don't already know about Johnson's twelve-year-long Senate career from 1949 to 1961? Previous biographers, most notably Robert Dallek, have analyzed LBJ's swift rise to majority leader and how he used that post to steer masterfully between conflicting pressures from Dixiecrats, liberals, the Eisenhower administration, and his own ambition to become president. Moreover, the Johnson "treatment" of his fellow senators has achieved almost mythical status; all Caro adds to the legend is a plethora of additional, if juicy, quotes and anecdotes.

The most fully realized segment of the book is Caro's account of the leading role LBJ took in formulating and passing the 1957 Civil Rights Act. To have any chance of gaining the White House, Johnson had to persuade the liberal wing of his party that he had broken decisively with Jim Crow tradition and with the powerful bloc of southerners generaled by his close friend and sometime mentor, Richard Russell. In almost 200 pages of thickly plotted narrative, Caro describes how LBJ juggled his convictions, his hunger for power, and a keen sense of the historical significance of the issue. Rarely, if ever, has an historian captured so fully the minute, essential actions one man took to secure the

passage of a major bill. LBJ was famously aware of every lawmaker's public needs and private desires, and Caro shows brilliantly how he manipulated them, with the help of certain labor unions, to bring about a result that enhanced his chances for the 1960 nomination.

Yet, characteristically, Caro is better at describing how it occurred than explaining why it mattered. He waits until the very end of his story to argue that the 1957 Act decisively advanced the cause of racial equality. His reticence is understandable: LBJ was only able to push the bill through the Senate by dropping a title on public accommodations and inserting a provision guaranteeing a local jury trial to southern election officials accused of denying black citizens the right to vote. The latter basically nullified any aid the act might have given to the disenfranchised.

Caro claims that the symbolism of putting the first civil rights bill since Reconstruction on the books overshadowed the fact that it helped hardly anyone gain their civil rights. Perhaps a shrewder analyst of public opinion and social movements could have made such an argument persuasive. Caro, however, simply states it with a romantic flourish and moves on.

No one who views American politics as a gritty saga of personalities and power-wielding can fail to appreciate this book. Academics who scoff at Caro's focus ought to reflect why no one outside a tiny circle of initiates reads their own efforts to make sense of the same and related topics. But there's no reason why a crafter of dramatic prose should omit a sound, capacious interpretation of the past. Those who are able to marry the two produce the most compelling political history of all.

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Citizen McCain *by Elizabeth Drew. New York, Simon & Schuster, 2002. 180 pp. $23.00.*

Elizabeth Drew is one of the most respected senior journalists in Washington. For many years, she covered Congress for *The New Yorker* and is now an occasional commentator on radio and television public affairs programs. She can usually be spotted in the press galleries of the House and Senate doing what few other congressional correspondents do—observing the action on the floor below even when there is nothing of earthshaking importance transpiring. She is serious and knowledgeable, but every so often she becomes smitten with a member of Congress, usually a senator, and writes a book about him (always him). Thirty years ago, it was Iowa Democrat John C. Culver in *Senator.* In 2002, it is Arizona Republican John C. McCain.

This is an account of a major legislative battle as seen through McCain's eyes, but the general rule that constrains the writers of biographies—that they must at least admire the biographee—imposes its iron will on her account of McCain's role in the successful struggle for campaign finance reform in 2001–2002.