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TASTE

Lying for a Living

By Daniel Akst

When William F. Weld announced recently that he will leave his investment banking job to seek the Republican nomination for New York's gubernatorial race in 2006, there were lots of newsy angles for the press to focus on. Mr. Weld is the colorful former governor of Massachusetts, for example, so there was the carpetbagger angle. And then there was the question of whether Mr. Weld can hope to defeat state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, the Democratic gubernatorial hopeful who is a similarly smart, tough lawyer with prosecutorial experience.

Overlooked in all the commotion about Mr. Weld, however, was a serious character flaw. The problem isn't drugs or alcohol or greed but a compulsion much more dangerous and difficult to suppress. The sad fact is that William Weld is a novelist, which of course calls into question his judgment if not his sanity. Recognizing the explosive nature of this charge, I was careful to confirm it at the public library, where I readily obtained all three of Mr. Weld's fictional works. Two of them, "Mackerel by Moonlight" (1998) and "Big Ugly" (1999), are political novels, while the third, "Stillwater" (2002), is a coming-of-age story.

The candidate's dark literary past immediately casts a shadow on his motivations. Everyone knows that novelists will do almost anything to sell a few books; I'm thinking of running for president to move a few of my own. Is it really so far-fetched to imagine that Mr. Weld would launch a gubernatorial campaign to gain better placement at Barnes & Noble? What novelist wouldn't? If the gambit succeeds, I wouldn't be surprised to see writers emerging like termites from the literary woodwork, driven to run for offices all over the country just to escape midlist hell.

If that happens, it won't be the first time that novelists have sought public office. Mario Vargas Llosa, Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal, among others, have been political candidates in the past. Upton Sinclair even sought to become governor of California. But the political winds typically blow in the other direction: For some reason, a good many prominent politicians have eventually written novels, including Jimmy Carter, Ed Koch, Gary Hart, Newt Gingrich, William Cohen, Barbara Mikulski, Raymond Flynn, and even Winston Churchill. If tyrants count as politicians, we can add Saddam Hussein to the list, although it's nice to report that probably the most famous and accomplished politician-novelist, Benjamin Disraeli, was duly and democratically elected.

The fact is that politicians and novelists have a lot in common, even beyond the irresistibly cynical observation that they both lie for a living. Members of both camps seem to believe that they have a lot to say, after all, and both feel compelled to say it at great length. Anyone who has been on a book tour can tell you that it feels a little like a political campaign, if a losing one. Contrary to the image of the lonely artist forging his works in the smithy of his soul, the working novelist must be adept at marshaling the support of agents, editors, booksellers and any number of former and current spouses. And these days so many novelists need to teach writing to supplement their income that an aptitude for academic politics is almost part of the job description.

Both politics and fiction-writing depend heavily on public approval, which is why both are such essentially narcissistic lines of work. Members of these two egotistical tribes must also find the right balance between following their principles and giving the public what it wants. Each seeks prizes available only to a select few. And in both camps there is considerable fretting about money.

It is noteworthy that, if elected, Mr. Weld would not be the first literary governor of New York. Theodore Roosevelt, always a prolific writer, was already a published author when the Empire State's voters sent him off to Albany in 1898, and he brought out the first installment of his book "The Rough Riders" the following year. (Roosevelt was not himself a novelist, although the story of his extraordinary life reads like one.)

Mr. Weld differs from many of his fellow politician-novelists in two important ways. First, he didn't wait until his political career was over to start publishing fiction, which is daring in itself. Some passages in his books are racy enough that at one time they might have been banned in his beloved Boston -- like the bathtub scene in "Big Ugly" involving the hero and his wife -- and it's hard to imagine that there is not at least a little of Mr. Weld in the flawed prosecutor and politician Terry Mullally, who stands at the center of his two political novels.

The second way that Mr. Weld differs from many other politician-novelists is that he has some talent. Although slightly out of his element with "Stillwater," with its more conventional literary aspirations, Mr. Weld gave a good effort in his first novel, "Mackerel," and then hit his stride with "Big Ugly," a remarkably adept and entertaining work that paints a convincing portrait of politics as blood sport.

Mr. Weld wisely leaves overt philosophizing and dimestore psychoanalysis to others, instead using his broad knowledge of the wider world -- of hunting, for example, or criminal procedure, or Northeastern class distinctions -- to fill his fictional landscape with unexpected richness. In both political novels, the author manages to be hard-boiled without crossing over into self-parody, and witty as well. Upon entering a sumptuously appointed room filled with beautiful women, for example, Mullally reports: "They were caryatids, holding up a world I wanted to inhabit."

What is perhaps most interesting about this particular politician's fictional world is the sheer savagery of it. In "Big Ugly," for instance, Washington is vividly portrayed as a snakepit of cynicism, greed and lubricity in which Terry, as a U.S. senator, learns to survive and thrive the hard way. This is not an idealistic book; on the contrary, Terry's world is morally ambiguous. But so is Terry, which is precisely what makes it possible for him to negotiate the legal and ethical minefield of the nation's capital -- and ultimately do some good.

Mr. Weld's dark vision of politics may stand him in good stead if he ever does find himself presiding over New York's vast state government. Its legislative process, for instance, was named the nation's most dysfunctional last year by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University. Even if Mr. Weld wins, in other words, he may yet rue his decision to run instead of contenting himself with the comparatively rational world of banking. On the other hand, think of all the material he'll have if he decides that it's time for Terry Mullally to leave Washington for the governor's mansion.

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