

Jeff Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine: Two Centuries of White House Fictions on the Page, on the Stage, Onscreen and Online*

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8863>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Dr Nancy Mykoff, « Jeff Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine: Two Centuries of White House Fictions on the Page, on the Stage, Onscreen and Online* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2011-1, document 6, Online since 09 February 2011, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8863>

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REFERENCES

Madison. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. Pp. 400. ISBN 13: 978-0299231842 (pbk).

- 1 In this thesis-driven monograph, Jeff Smith argues that the American president embodies the nation and personifies its citizens. As a result, the president's changing profile, in fact and fiction, sheds light on the histories of the nation and its people. Claiming that works of fiction anticipate actual people and events, Jeff Smith focuses on *presidential fictions*, which he defines as "works in various media along with other acts of imagination, in which American presidents and the presidency figure importantly as characters, motifs, literary devices, or ways of making meaning" (11).
- 2 This focus addresses a gap in cultural studies scholarship. According to Smith, histories of character types and cultural icons, tend to study characters like 'the' Indian and icons like Jesus Christ.¹ These works overlook both the presidency itself and the character type 'president.' Jeff Smith's history of presidential fictions, from the Saintly George Washington to the virtual President Barbie, addresses the oversight.
- 3 Smith also refutes the claim that inspired his research. On Election Day 2000, a CNN report echoed a Presidential Historian's statement that, "outside of a handful of thrillers, presidents – even fictional presidents – seldom appear as characters in novels," because the role of the president does not lend itself to "imaginative embellishment (3)." The

author counters the contention by uncovering a plethora of biographies, satirical works, novels, plays, music, television series, Hollywood film and other cultural forms that feature ‘presidential fictions.’

- 4 The book begins with an eloquent and witty introduction that raises interest and expectations. In it, Smith claims that art and imagination are central to the ‘real’ world of politics and commerce. He illustrates the point by focusing on popular culture (or propaganda) and persuasion, within the context of war. Human beings fight wars in defence of causes and ideals like “freedom,” “the future,” and “our way of life.” Artistic expressions provide citizens and soldiers with the meaning of these ideas which they, in turn, defend with their lives.
- 5 Challenging Oscar Wilde’s notion that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life,” Jeff Smith claims that the study of presidential fictions reveals that, “fiction proceeds and helps to create reality” (9). Whereas Benedict Anderson argued that nations are first *Imagined Communities*, forged through cultural forms that unite diverse people, Smith argues that national leaders are first figments of the citizens’ collective imagination, and then real human beings that fit the preconceived mold.
- 6 Organized chronologically, chapter one, “Imagining a President: George Washington and His Fictional Predecessors,” locates the office of the President and the two-party system in English culture and institutions. Fictive notions of the “Patriot King,” embraced by Tory politicians and lampooned by Whig satirists, informed the political system imagined by the framers of the U.S. Constitution. While fiction helped to frame American politics, the actual First President was fictionalized to make him more accessible to the common citizen.
- 7 Chapter two “Seeing Double: Clowns, Carnival and Satire in the Antebellum Years,” suggests that literary fiction claiming the Union had failed, precluded Secession and Civil War. Satirical works that mockingly praised Andrew Jackson as the “leader of a motley crowd of clowns”(63), reveal the contemporary questioning of a leader who was both “king” of the people and a (very) ordinary man.
- 8 Chapter three “Deep Yet Transparent,” focuses on Abraham Lincoln’s “common man” character, and how the new notion of the American President as “one of us” regular citizens, “marks the point at which the presidency became a matter of psychohistory and psychobiography”(95). Because leaders ‘we’ imagine are not real people but reflections of ‘our’ imaginations with whom real people can identify, the nobility of Washington was (re)presented as common, and the humbleness of Lincoln was (re)visioned as grand.
- 9 Chapter four “A Simple, Honest Man,” follows the presidency into the turbulent 1930’s and 40’s, and spotlights the development of the ‘personal presidency,’ a term Smith defines as, “a president to whom citizens feel connected and who can promise to solve problems in their every day live” (159). This profile was projected on past and future presidents in productions like D.W. Griffith’s *Abraham Lincoln*, and with characters like Betty Boop, whom Smith credits with animating the presidency of Franklyn D. Roosevelt.
- 10 Chapter five, “The Human Element: Presidential Strength, Weakness and Difference in the 1960’s and 1970’s,” argues that the new “leader of the free world” burden, was too heavy for an average human being. This heaviness was seen in fictive and real presidential strength and weakness. In his fiction before fact vein, Smith argues that Superhero presidents, like the D.C. comic strip figure *Prez*, countered the actual fragile president. This fragility, in turn, was prefigured by cultural creations. Disneyland’s life-

size Abraham Lincoln robot, for instance, suffered the back spasms that would plague future American president John F. Kennedy.

- 11 Chapter six, “Who Am I? Presidents and their Issues in Fictions of the 1990’s,” follows the ‘me’ generation into the White House, with fictional scandals lifted from real-life dramas. Projected in films like *Primary Colors* and television series like *The West Wing*, American presidents were men, “to whom things happened or were done, not who made things happen” (210). Narratives featuring presidents that made things happen, like *Air Force One* or *Independence Day*, support the author’s argument that presidential fictions of the 1990’s centered the personal while slighting the political (216).
- 12 Chapter seven, “Fictitious Times: Imagining Presidents at the Turn of the Millennium,” examines the central role of fiction in the presidency of George W. Bush, “the first president to be accused not merely of relying on fictions, but of being one himself” (247). It also focuses on the World Wide Web, a medium for conspiracy theories, “political mockery,” and a (cyber)space where anyone can publish his or her presidential fiction.
- 13 The final chapter, “The Conclusion: Your Name Here for President,” looks at transmedia story telling, by describing the evolutions of the President Barbie doll. Campaigning with the slogan “You can be President,” President Barbie expresses the modern day belief that ‘we’ can imagine ourselves into the Oval Office. Although Barbie’s candidacy lends itself to a gender analysis, Smith plays scant attention to the topic, simply noting that her outfit changed with the role. To his credit, he does address the manliness of *The Man* in a section that studies cinematic representations of American presidents (181-188). Unfortunately, this marginal treatment does not examine presidential performances of masculinity, in fact as well as fiction, and over time. Questioning the gendered displays enriches understanding of contemporary notions of manhood that, in turn, were (and are) essential to American leadership. Why, for instance, did Theodore Roosevelt (T.R.), mentioned briefly in Smith’s text, recast his intellectual North Eastern identity into a “rough riding” masculine form? Why does the image continue to capture the American imagination? In the box office hit *Night at the Museum* (2006), not mentioned in Smith’s text, the ‘visionary’ president’s masculinity (and heterosexuality), evident in his love for a beautiful Indian woman, guides the hero through the night, and the audience through the film, with maxims like, “nothing is impossible if it can be imagined,” that resonate with both the film’s protagonist and its viewers, and support the author’s thesis that imagination presages reality.
- 14 That women seem to lack imagination also speaks to the author’s limited gender analysis. Although he mentions female intellects in the text and artists in the endnotes, women primarily appear in the imaginations of the male artists and storytellers that (re)present the president. Their characters, in turn, are stereotypes. Amongst them are the jealous socialite, lost lover, bickering and betraying socialite and lover, kissing admirers of Presidential alter egos like Black Hawk (Andrew Jackson’s sexier self), the village crank, the young widow; and the (much) younger wife. Perhaps the oversight of women as creative agents in presidential fictions, stems from the ‘we’ imagining the president. Rather than trouble the concept, first uttered by John Winthrop’s 1630 prophecy that “wee shall be as a citty upon a Hill,” and hotly debated since, Jeff Smith’s ‘we’ and the fictions crafted by ‘us,’ are drawn from white, male, adult, fantasies. Groups with less power imagined the American President too. How did their imaginings contest or confirm the fictional president of the dominant culture? A vast array of sources, including the ethnic press like the *Jewish Daily Forward*; posters and plays written and produced by

organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA); and literary and visual works crafted by critics of the government, tell different stories about American Presidents. Although all are on line, none are in the book. This is surprising because, in general, Jeff Smith's research is very (very) impressive. Of course, no work can be all inclusive. The problem, however, is that he treats obscure works alongside the popularly acclaimed. The critical reader wonders if materials were included in the text to support the preconceived thesis that fiction proceeds reality. The less critical enjoys the stories.

- 15 Throughout his work, Smith underscores the significance of stories and storytelling in presidential histories and American life. Like historian Ronald Takaki before him, Jeff Smith argues that 'facts' about the New World were drawn from works of fiction. Both use William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, first performed in London in 1611, to support the point. They differ, however, in their analysis of the imaginary and the real. Takaki convincingly argues that literary fiction was drawn from life experiences. According to him, the imagery and language of the play suggest that, "Shakespeare had lifted the material from contemporary documents about the New World" widely circulated throughout Europe and within England.² Jeff Smith reverses the relationship. In order to prove that fact follows fiction, he dismisses the cultural and historical significance of early exploration and representations of the New World to the Old, with the statement that, "America began appearing in European literature before more than a handful of Europeans had ever been there" (14). This dismissal renders the Viking expeditions in ca 1000AD, the explorations led by Christopher Columbus in the 1490s, and settlements like the one led by Captain John Smith in 1607, insignificant.
- 16 Finally, overwhelming detail tends to overwhelm. This includes the network of relationships between authors, directors, and actors, as well as summaries of theatrical productions, movies and acting careers. In addition to confounding the reader, details disrupt the flow of the narrative.
- 17 Limitations in approach and style, however, do not render Jeff Smith's work less significant. On the contrary, his survey, summaries, and central premise, provide excellent starting points for future research. Raising questions that merit attention like, can the Obama presidency be traced back to and through the staging of African-American presidents? Does popular culture provide a means to contest the presidency? Do marginal groups join and shape the cultural conversation? Do audiences (re)interpret presidential fictions? Does fiction create fact? The convinced and the curious will glimpse the president that 'we' will elect by examining *The Presidents We Imagine*.

NOTES

1. John E. O'Connor's, *The Hollywood Indian* (New Jersey; New Jersey State Museum, 1980); and Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2006) reflect the trend.

2. Ronald Takaki, "The Tempest in the Wilderness: The Racialization of Savagery," *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston; Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

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