

Corn Poll: A Novel of the Iowa Caucuses

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appendixes listing the governors of Iowa, the longest-serving governors in U.S. history, the Branstad family, and staff members of the Branstad administrations. The book also includes footnotes, a list of interview subjects, additional sources of information, and an index.

Chapman has written a readable biography that belongs in every library in Iowa. That having been said, it is only the first draft of the Branstad story. Yet to come, of course, will be more rigorous study of his leadership through challenging times. That future work will necessarily be based on Branstad's gubernatorial papers and records held by the State Historical Society of Iowa. Indeed, a future study also will include assessments by Branstad's critics as well as his staff and supporters.

Corn Poll: A Novel of the Iowa Caucuses, by Zachary Michael Jack. North Liberty, Iowa: Ice Cube Press, 2015. 496 pp. Discussion guide. \$21.95 paperback.

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Iowans have grown used to the quadrennial invasion of politicians seeking their votes, or at least their caucus-night commitment, to jump start their presidential campaigns. Those who have lived in Iowa long enough might even grow tired of the fresh-faced volunteers canvassing neighborhoods, robo-calls from uncharted political vectors, and the relentless drone of television ads and news merging into tasteless political mush. For Iowans who have gone so far as to become jaded by the caucus process, Zachary Michael Jack's *Corn Poll: A Novel of the Iowa Caucuses* would be a bracing tonic.

Corn Poll is a sweetly savage satire examining the all-too-familiar characters of the Iowa caucuses: cardboard cut-out politicians making feeble efforts to appear authentic in the retail politics of Iowa; worldly agents of the press corps deigning to spend a month in the Hawkeye state [in a state of high dudgeon], back-room politicians stage-managing events to make the "three out of Iowa" cut. Into this toxic mix, Jack introduces a hero, Jacob Preston, an Iowan ex-pat who recently lost his writing job at the *Rocky Mountain Partisan*. Preston wins the "Politics up Close" contest cosponsored by the Iowa GOP and the Republican National Committee. The political hacks hope to trade on Preston's access to further their own agendas for the 2012 election.

At loose ends, Preston packs up his Honda and motors east to Hereford, Iowa—home of the Fighting Plowmen, the Calvin Coolidge Café, and Herb Clarke, curmudgeonly editor of the local newspaper.

Hereford, it turns out, has become the de facto political center of Iowa (and the known universe) when candidate Milt Cloward moves his Iowa headquarters there. After Cloward's poll numbers rise 10 percentage points, other candidates join the exodus from Des Moines. Soon Paul Paule, Rochelle Boxman, Rick Santoro, and other GOP hopefuls move their headquarters to the authenticity of small-town Iowa. As you can see, Jack enjoys wordplay just enough to move out of the libel zone.

Put on the spot during his first press conference, Preston poses an awkward question: "If there were a trophy given to the Iowa Caucus winner, what should it be?" The flummoxed politicians flail about, struggling with a question they could not have anticipated, before eventually agreeing on the Silver Steer as the appropriate prize. Functioning as Greek chorus, Herb Clarke calls this an apt trophy because "the political process is a farce, a circus sold to the highest bidder while being pitched to the public as an exercise in participatory democracy."

Artifice though it may be, the Silver Steer becomes a political player during the 40 days and 40 nights of political machinations and hypocrisy that lead to caucus night. Voters see in the Silver Steer a way to express their frustration with a political system that seems rigged. As caucus night nears and the Silver Steer rises in the polls, cow-napping, covert political operatives, and assorted dirty tricks liven up small-town Iowa. Everyman Jacob Preston finds himself celebrated as the wise fool on the national talk shows; the nation turns its jaundiced eye to Iowa to see if an inanimate object can win one of the three tickets out of Iowa.

I won't spoil the story by revealing the ending, but know that I found *Corn Poll* to be an enjoyable romp. It is a pleasant diversion from the twisted political corn roast that is Iowa in January of election years. Clearly Zachary Michael Jack had fun with this take on the 2012 Republican caucus—drawing on candidates who are largely self-parodying and cooking up a plot line that keeps readers laughing. Including heroes grounded in the Iowa soil offers hope that the political process can be improved. If Jack had this much fun making hash of the 2012 Republicans, I wonder what he would do with the 2016 candidate pool.