

Billy Bowater

E. C. Hanes

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Somewhat of an exposé, this lighthearted novel follows one everyman sorting through the messy world of politics.

Billy Bowater loves the sport of politics. He loves the fight, “the chase, the strategizing, and even the greed.” And as he explains at the start of this intriguing and credible novel about power and character, “in the greed business there [are] no rules, only conventions.”

The novel’s title character is the chief administrative assistant to a fictional senator of North Carolina, Wiley Grace Hoots, who is dubbed “the darling of the far right.” While presenting the work firmly as fiction, author E. C. Hanes makes no secret of his own North Carolina roots, his association with the National Endowment for the Arts, or his personal contact with then-Senator Jesse Helms on a controversial issue pitting conservative Christianity against the NEA in events that parallel those of the book. While the novel focuses earnestly on its title character’s moral coming-of-age, it’s hard not to read it as an insider’s look at the character and mind-set of the late Senator Helms. It’s also hard not to read it as something of an exposé. Which isn’t all bad, though fans of Helms’s positions on public decency and the arts might think it is.

To be sure, this novel is not sympathetic toward the fictional Senator Hoots, not even when Bowater is happy to avoid taking a stand against his boss’s more extreme actions or rhetoric. As effective as Bowater is at running interference for Hoots—and some of the novel’s best scenes are those power-play phone calls or late-night meetings with the major players of the campaign—he never really admires the senator. He’s not a supporter so much as a guy just looking to get into the game. And he’s been allowed to do it all: to eat the steaks on the lobbyist’s dime, to stand in front of the reporters taking questions, and to negotiate terms on the Senator’s shady deals. Bowater has done so by not looking too closely at his own principles, by filing everything under the real-world-trumps-all header known as compromise. The novel’s crisis comes not when Bowater is confronted with the truth, but when he’s simply asked to take sides.

Billy Bowater is a warmhearted and accessible novel that delves into the messy world of politics but stays anchored to the plight of one man and arrives at a tidy end.

JENNIFER WILLIAMS (Fall 2014)

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