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Autobiography & Memoir

The Making of An Ink-Stained Wretch: Half a Century Pounding the Political Beat
Jules Witcover
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Few journalists observed more closely the dark side of American politics than this author. He remembers first-hand Jacqueline Kennedy's grace following the murder of her husband; he was only a few feet away from Gerald Ford when an assassination attempt failed; and he was with Robert Kennedy when he was killed during the 1968 presidential campaign. Memories of RFK's death still haunt him, Witcover reveals.

A distinguished political journalist and a charter member of "the boys on the bus" crew of presidential campaign reporters, Witcover offers an insightful and entertaining memoir of his experiences as a chronicler of the political arena. His widely syndicated column has appeared since 1959 in such major papers as *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Baltimore Sun*, and his fifteen previous books include popular narratives about the presidential elections from 1980 through 1992, written with his longtime writing partner, Jack Germond.

Although this memoir relates stories about the author's life, it is mostly about the fierce presidential campaigns from John Kennedy to George W. Bush. Included are illuminating portrayals, such as that of Richard Nixon, whom the author disliked. Nixon is described as a fascinating but tormented politician, a vampire-like man "who managed to rise again and plague American politics with remembrance of his foul behavior."

Life on the political road for the "boys" (and they were almost exclusively males during Witcover's career) did have its lighter moments. The book is sprinkled with the author's doggerel verses aimed at deflating the pretensions of various politicians. Also included are amusing stories, like the explanation of the "Germond Rule," named in honor of its ample-size originator, Jack Germond. This decree required reporters who shared a meal to always "eat and drink defensively" because the bill would be divided equally. Another anecdote tells of President George Bush's beleaguered and unsuccessful campaign for re-election in 1992, which took him to liberal Wisconsin. The president, responding to a reporter's question about his

welcome to the Badger State, remarked that he had actually been treated better than expected: he "had only been mooned once."

Witcover shares his views on issues that his column readers will recognize. These include his contempt for the emergence of "gotcha journalism," in which less scrupulous members of the media will not let facts interfere with a good story, his opposition to the war in Iraq, and the power of cyberspace to transform the political landscape.

Although this memoir is crammed with details—at times too many—about the 1996—2004 presidential elections, the author's accounts of Robert Kennedy, Richard Nixon, George Wallace, and other politicians are engrossing, and his cautionary tales of the future of politics and journalism are enlightening.

Karl Helicher