Obama isn’t main character in ‘O: A Presidential Novel’

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Editor’s note: This is the first in a series of occasional book reviews written exclusively for the Florida Courier by Dr. Glenn Altschuler of Cornell University.

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SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

Published in 1996, "Primary Colors" became a runaway bestseller. A roman à clef (a work of fiction that uses real-life characters), written anonymously (until journalist Joe Klein ‘fessed up), the novel described the presidential campaign of a politician who behaved a lot like Bill Clinton.

Filled, not surprisingly, with "bimbo eruptions," "Primary Colors" was a piercing – and at times penetrating – portrait of the 42nd president of the United States.

"O: A Presidential Novel" aspires to be the "Primary Colors" for Barack Obama. Set during the presidential election of 2012, the novel is organized around three invented characters – Cal Regan, O’s campaign manager; Maddy Cohan, a journalist for a political website; and Walter LaFontaine, a young Chicago supporter, who idolizes O.

‘Small misadventure’

Running against Tom "Terrific" Morrison, a former general, CEO of a defense contractor, and one-term Republican governor, O is confident that, with a recovering economy, he will be returned to office. Until there’s "a small misadventure:" revelations, which could be damaging to the Morrison campaign, boomerang, and O’s comfortable lead begins to melt away.

When the novel reminds us of the pressures on the president, "O" can be funny. Desperate for a few hours to himself, O pleads with his staff to give him time to play golf, only to be reminded that if he plays a round or two, the press will take note, check "the genders and campaign contributions of his foursomes," and run stories "next to reports on that week’s casualties on Afghanistan."

On another occasion, he uses the "f-word." Soon after that he is caught on camera glancing at the backside of a young woman as she is speaking at a campaign rally, in what reporters begin referring to as "The Leer."

Remote figure

But, alas, good jokes, and, more importantly, insider insights, are in short supply in "O." Written, we’re told, by someone "who has been in the room with Barack Obama," "O" rarely tells us anything that regular readers of the news, let alone political junkies, don’t already know.

Barack Obama isn’t really the main character in the novel. In the novel, as in the headlines, he is a remote figure, as a person and as a politician. Anonymous rarely gives us a glimpse of Michelle and the girls – and never catches him puffing on a cigarette.

Virtually silent on the subject of race, "O" isn't all that interested in Obama’s legislative successes and failures; his compromises with Congress; his struggles with the Democratic left; and with the Tea Party, "birther," and "he’s a Muslim, not a Christian" trash-talking right.

Perhaps to endorse the view that Obama is passive, Anonymous does not make Obama the principal architect of his own campaign.

Predictable characters

Other characters based on real people are pat, flat, and predictable. A composite, perhaps, of Rahm Emanuel and David Axelrod, Avi Samuelson, the president’s closest adviser is, well, just there, smart and effective, to be sure, but scarcely memorable.
And "The Barracuda" (Sarah Palin) says exactly what we’d expect her to say. Approached by Morrison, who is looking for an endorsement, she twists her wedding ring around her finger, nods as she speaks, and advises him to open his heart to the American people who "wanna know you got their backs."

To the too-good-to-be-true Morrison, whose victory in the Republican primaries is not really explained, "it is nonsense, of course, and distasteful."

**A tin ear at times**

"O" recycles too many clichés about politics. Campaigns, Anonymous writes, test the stamina and self-control of candidates, who must endure 18-hour days and expressions of ersatz patriotism, eat bad food, fake conviviality with strangers who ask stupid questions, and jolly-along reporters who go for the jugular when poll numbers drop two points.

American presidents "work and live in a museum." They feel "little privacy and yet feel isolated."

On a few occasions, Anonymous exhibits a tin ear. Few critics, it seems to me, believe that while in office Obama has "over-relied on his gift for public speaking."

The Republican candidate in 2012, moreover, is far more likely to stress the president's ideology than, as Morrison does, his lack of competence. Nor would he (or she) risk alienating the conservative base by promising, if elected president, to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan.

**Too many goose eggs**

Absent a transformation of human nature, "O" reminds us, presidential campaigns will never be completely free "of the superficial and discreditable, of deliberate misrepresentations and exaggerated disagreements."

And the next election might just be decided by something like the dissemination of misinformation about a corruption investigation and the way the two candidates (and their families) handle the fallout from it.

But if you were hoping to get the "low-down" on Barack Obama served as a send up of American politics, which, God knows, is a suitable subject for satire, you may well be disappointed in this novel, which has too many goose eggs and not enough "ohs!"

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