

## **BEHIND THE BOOK - AMERICAN SAVIOR**

My father was a Revere, Massachusetts, city councilor, and, later, a staff member of and close friends with two Massachusetts governors - Christian Herter and John Volpe - and he passed his interest in politics (if not his Republican loyalty) on to me.

When I was very young he'd sometimes take me to the school at the top of our street where we'd watch the votes being counted after the polls had closed. He was a delegate and brought me along to a Republican State Convention when I was a teenager, infecting me with his passion. To this day I follow the campaigns, watch the debates, and never fail to cast my vote.

In 1996, Mike Leary, a fine and creative editor at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and a supporter of my writing in the early years, gave me the task of putting together a twenty-part series for the Op-Ed page on the primary campaigns and presidential election of that year. What a great assignment! I followed Pat Buchanan and Steve Forbes and Lamar Alexander through the small towns in New Hampshire, attended Perot's convention in Pennsylvania and the highly politicized St. Patrick's Day parades in Chicago, and drove the back roads from Bob Dole's hometown (Russell, Kansas) to Ross Perot's hometown (Texarkana, Texas) to Bill Clinton's hometown (Hope, Arkansas), asking people along the way what word came to mind when I said "Dole", "Perot", and "Clinton".

That was an education.

I'm interested in religion, too, as most of you know, and so it has always been intriguing to listen to the way Americans bring religion into political campaigns. After a while, though, I grew tired of the so-called "Christians" who used politics for what seemed to me their own narrow-minded religious agenda, so I decided I would strike a blow for open-mindedness (at least my idea of open-mindedness) and write a novel in which Jesus comes to earth and runs for President of the United States.

Of course, I knew from the start that it would be a provocative book. Politics and religion are two areas where many of us hold particularly strong opinions, two areas that can disturb otherwise pleasant family gatherings, break up friendships and golf foursomes, and add tension to marriages.

But for me it's important, in my books, not to shy away from difficult subjects while at the same time not provoking readers just for the fun of it. That can be a tricky balancing act, but I think if you hew to the truth as you see it, and try to incorporate a respect for different points of view, it can be managed.

I tried to make the book funny, because I like to laugh, and because I think humor can soften some of the harsh edges of argumentative subjects. At the same time, there were some serious things I wanted to say, points I wanted to make, ideas I wanted to try out, and I found that creating an imaginary Jesus on an imaginary campaign trail allowed me to explore the intersection of religion and politics in a way that felt satisfying.

We all have our imaginary Jesus. Whether we are Christian or not, believers or not, we've heard enough about Jesus Christ to form an image of him in our minds, and it's fascinating to me how different those images can be from one mind to another.

In places in this novel I was probably a bit harsher and more sarcastic than in most of my other books. Open as I tried to be to the ideas on both sides of the American political spectrum (Jesus was neither Republican nor Democrat), I do have strong feelings about the haters and the judgmental, narrow-minded, so-called "Christians", about talk-show hosts who foment anger and divisiveness, and about some of the subjects that divide this country. Since its publication, I've had one or two fairly ugly letters, a few angry reviews, but also a lot of notes telling me *American Savior* is a favorite read.

I had wanted the title to be *Jesus and the Journalist* (since a skeptical journalist named Russ Thomas narrates the story), but the marketing people convinced me that having "Jesus" in the title would hurt sales. They suggested *American Savior* as a title [Editor's note: it appears that the Brazilian publisher had no such hesitation.] and I agreed to that, but I've regretted it every day since the book came out. For reasons that puzzle and disturb me, despite my track record of success with other books they published (*Breakfast with Buddha*, *Dinner with Buddha*, *Golfing with God*) Algonquin has still not issued *American Savior* in paperback. Maybe it's a decision based on political correctness. Maybe they're afraid of having it too widely read and the controversy that might generate. I don't know. I've tried more than once to get them to revert the rights to me so that Peter Sarno's house, PFP Publishing, could issue a paperback version. No sale.

Though I cringe a bit at the title and the cover, I'm proud of the novel and glad that I had the courage to put those ideas into a story. I wish, of course, that the Jesus of my imagination could lead this country, but, truly, I think it would be a disaster. The ideas he promoted - kindness, forgiveness, love, generosity, a dedication to contemplation and good works, a preference for compassion over rules - are the kinds of things that, to evildoers, look like an invitation to mayhem. I don't see a lot of examples of loving spiritual devotion and political triumph coexisting and, of late, like most of us, I see very little in the actions of our elected representatives that point in any direction that should have the word "Christ" in it.

Still, believers and non-believers, Christians, Jews, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists and others - most of us try to do the right thing as we envision it. At least most of the time. What that "right thing" is we can argue about until we cease to breathe, and that argument, it seems to me, is the heart and soul of what we call 'politics'. I had fun exploring that idea, anyway, and I'm glad the book has brought some enjoyment into the world, ruffled a few feathers, and given me reason to remember my father, who introduced me to so much that is good on this earth.