



Losers

Michael Lewis

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Michael Lewis is a master at dissecting the absurd: after skewering Wall Street in his national bestseller *Liar's Poker*, he packed his mighty pen and set out on the 1996 campaign trail. As he follows the men who aspire to the Oval Office, Lewis discovers an absurd mix of bravery and backpedaling, heroic possibility and mealy-mouthed sound bytes, and a process so ridiculous and unsavory that it leaves him wondering if everyone involved—from the journalists to the candidates to the people who voted—isn't ultimately a loser.

The contenders:

Pat Buchanan: becomes the first politician ever to choose a black hat over a white one.

Phil Gramm: spends twenty million dollars to convince voters of his fiscal responsibility.

John McCain: makes the fatal mistake of actually speaking his mind.

Alan Keyes: checks out of a New Hampshire hotel and tells the manager another candidate will be paying his bill.

Steve Forbes: refuses to answer questions about his father's motorcycles.

Bob Dole: marches through the campaign without ever seeming to care.

Losers is a wickedly funny, unflinching look at how America really goes about choosing a President.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Losers Details

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Author : Michael Lewis

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From Reader Review Losers for online ebook

Alan D Granger says

I read this book the first time three years or so ago. I was looking at Michael Lewis books on his website or some other site. In any case, I read an excerpt from it that spoke to me about this past presidential campaign. So I reread it. This time I could see the seeds of Trump being sown by the two political parties. He writes of the disengagement of the two major candidates. Morry Taylor and to some extent, Pat Buchanan's candidacies rolled into to one were forerunners of Trump, albeit without the insults, vulgarity, and lies. Sec. Clinton fulfilled the role of her husband's and Sen. Dole's candidacy.

Through the lens of this past campaign, the book was far more enlightening and entertaining. The first time I read it I only gave it 4 stars, now 5.

Ankur Maniar says

Anybody other than Michael Lewis and this book would have been a complete drag. Its Lewis's writing style combined with his extraordinary wit and knack of seeing through things which has made this book entertaining. Its essentially a diary, not a book with structured narrative. His travels, experiences and interviews with politicians during the 1996 presidential elections have been described in this book. Sure, for an American citizen and keen follower of American politics it would be a more useful book. For the uninitiated there are parts in the book which can get very boring and even make no sense at all. Still a nice read.

Joe says

It's not Fear and Loathing and the election it covers is among the most insignificant in our country's history, but Lewis is a great writer and there's a lot in here that I really enjoyed. It was kind of refreshing to read about our not-so-distant past where Pat Buchanan was the most marginal candidate that the Republicans considered nominating. The truly prescient part was where professional nut-case Alan Keyes, with a platform very similar to Michele Bachmann's, said that he wasn't running to win that election, but so a candidate 20 years from then could win. Made me shiver a little bit, but generally made me feel nostalgic for that era of politics; it was bad but the worst that could happen was a bogus impeachment as compared to today's threat of default.

Michael Dixon says

not the greatest Lewis, I have read, but a fascinating insight into politics as it is practiced at the Presidential level, and as a precursor to the 2016 race. Lewis notes that Buchanan whips up a fervent support base on economic fear, in the midst of a boom and wonders, what could happen if we had a downturn, or a war.

Well, we have seen it.

James says

Yeah, Michael Lewis is great.

So, this is Michael Lewis' look at the 1996 election via the Republican primaries, some of the minor candidates, and a little Clinton.

Lewis isn't a political writer, and this doesn't have a lot of political theory in it - more campaigning theory, and strikingly non-partisan.

I found out about this book by listening to old episodes of *This American Life*, and loving Lewis' *Moneyball*. This wasn't quite the pageturner that I found *Moneyball* to be, but for a book about a 12-year old un consequential election, it was astonishing the development of current political climates (this review being written on election day 2008 between Obama and McCain, and having finished the book in line to vote) from where things stood in '96.

I would recommend this to almost anyone.

Jesse says

THIS is why I'm a Michael Lewis fan. The book follows the 1996 presidential campaign trail from an unusual slant; although assigned to cover the campaign, Lewis constantly finds that there's nothing interesting going on with the frontrunners, so he spends time getting to know the candidates who have no chance of winning. I left more highlights and notes in this book than in any other that I've read on the Kindle. *Losers* blends top-notch writing, a strange slant on political insight, and . . . All along, Lewis can't help but befriend each candidate, so the book moves you into their worlds in unexpected ways. The catch, of course, that as soon as a political writer becomes sympathetic to a politician, his views on the politician are no longer relevant. It's this cycle that pushes Lewis from candidate to candidate over the course of the campaign. Fun and insightful stuff about politicians, campaigns, and political writing.

Reading this book fourteen years after it was published adds to it as well; the John McCain of the 1996 campaign trail seems a politician cast from a different mold. Fast forward to the John McCain seen through the lens of the 2008 presidential campaign and you see the observations of *Losers* in full force. Mix enough desire to win the presidency into any campaign, and the politician moves to the bland, predictable, and in McCain's case a blurring or disavowal of his own convictions (as in Dole's 1996 muddying of his own work on the NAFTA treaty).

Jon Green says

I found this book enthralling in a way I didn't expect from the start. I was expecting a book that focused on the nitty gritty minutiae of the 1996 Presidential campaign. While there is a bit of a week-by-week narrative about who went where and how the race unfolded Michael Lewis makes it clear from the onset of the book

that he ultimately viewed the race with disdain in large part because the politicians who ended up in the general election (Clinton and Dole) couldn't compare to the eccentric candidates who competed in the primaries without much success.

Lewis is drawn towards candidates like Morry Taylor, Alan Keyes, and Ralph Nader. They make up a much larger portion of the book than they did votes in the election but the stories he is able to tell are much more compelling and it's understandable why he wanted to spend more time with them instead of the front runners.

Also in that category and a real interesting figure in light of the current administration is Pat Buchanan. The passages in the book about Buchanan are hard not to read with Donald Trump in mind and many times you could just change the name and not realize you are reading about events 20 years ago. In retrospect a better knowledge of who Buchanan was and the base he had 20 years ago would have helped me understand the Trump phenomenon over the last couple years.

Ultimately the politician who comes off the best in the book is John McCain. Clearly showcasing the maverick persona that still rings true today (the July 2017 health care vote) McCain is the one politician in the book that rises above the fray and recognizes that neither side deserves scorn for merely having political views you disagree with.

Jesse says

A great 50-page article that goes on for another 250, unfortunately. Great stuff about Steve Forbes robotically making his way through a buffet and the chaotic early days. Then distraction after distraction. Some businessman nobody has ever thought of since 1996 (Morry Taylor) runs a quixotic populist campaign that actually doesn't sound much like what we're suffering through now--he's basically a libertarian, but actually one who lives up to the ideology at its fullest. He thinks women have the right to their own bodies and gay people do too, even if he basically wants government to wither. Lewis gets WAY too distracted by him and starts boasting about how his New Republic editors think he's spending too much time with Taylor, but he just can't help it. So the middle of the book basically bulges out of shape before he remembers he's supposed to be covering the election and not hero-worshipping this one guy, who of course, in prime Lewis vision, is the lone genius who gets the thing that all the crowd-thinkers miss. I could buy that narrative structure in, to choose a few, Moneyball, The Blind Side, The Big Short, and the high-frequency-trading book. I can even see the argument for studying him here. But it's a pretty unsatisfactory book on the actual election. Re-reading The Boys on the Bus to see it done better, and I have What It Takes lined up.

Stefan Fergus says

3.5* - not as fluid as the other books of his that I've read (understandable, though, given its genesis). Some great moments, but also some moments that dragged just a little. In that respect, though, it represents the moments of mind numbing dullness that can occur on the campaign trail. Still recommended reading, though.

Jackie Harrison-jewell says

Michael Lewis is currently making a big name for himself writing books about money. Moneyball, The Big Short and, most recently, Boomerang. All good stuff. REALLY good stuff. This book, Trail Fever, is about the 1996 presidential campaign, and I was absolutely captivated by it. His campaign trail anecdotes had me laughing out loud at times, and his depiction of the raft of Republican candidates for the position which would eventually go to Bob Dole as the Republican challenger to Clinton's second term of office, made me think a lot about the very similar situation we have today. It was enlightening and cynical and just a great read.

Nick Black says

I'd likely have enjoyed this a good bit more if (a) I didn't think Michael Lewis was so freakishly awesome and (b) I hadn't read DFW's truly outstanding essay, "Up, Simba" (from Consider the Lobster). Comes off kind of mean-spirited, supercilious and unsure of itself.

NB: This was authored before Lewis married MTV VJ (and fantasy of my adolescence, well one anyway) Tabitha Soren, at least going by the omitted shout-out in the ACKs, but he does mention friend "Tabitha Sornberger", who "read and improved the author without unnerving his manuscript", which I think can be plausibly read as "Tabitha Soren" and "fucked the author proper." Well-played, Mr. Lewis!

Greg Brown says

Wow, I remembered this book being far better than it actually was. Theoretically a hilarious look at the losing candidates in the 1996 presidential election, it ends up being just a basket of anecdotes and quick character sketches. No arcs, but an anti-arc carving out the whitespace around Clinton's march to re-election.

I originally read it during the '08 presidential election, and I think my enjoyment then was at discovering that Keyes was just as ridiculous in 1996 as he was in 2004 and 2008. But there's also an uncanny quality at times that rescues it from being a total loss: getting to see many future political actors before they became notable, stunned by the incongruity or predictability of their later feats. Ted Haggard, J.D. Hayworth, and others make brief cameos through the book as we get an unexpected glimpse at the GOP farm league.

Unless you really love Michael Lewis and/or political shenanigans, I wouldn't recommend it.

Mike says

Disclaimer: I'm writing this review a good nine months after I finished reading the book, because of procrastination and general laziness...

I almost considered putting this on the "humour" shelf, because it's an examination of the eccentric, the absurd, and the normal people (who are also crazy, just for the record), when it comes to the 1996 election campaign. This book is what happens when you send a reporter to follow a campaign, but then let him

wander wherever he wants, rather than following the front runners. Lewis' journey starts conventionally enough, with him following the leaders in the Republican primaries, but it rapidly goes off track as he realizes that the winners are usually stage managed, boring, and disingenuous. It's the losers who are more interesting, and this realization quickly leads him deep into the weeds. Much of the book follows the campaigns of these characters, with occasional forays to try and understand their backgrounds or supporters.

It is well written throughout, and fascinating by times, as one would expect from Michael Lewis. But that's really the problem, because it's also rather longer than it probably should have been, as one would expect from Michael Lewis. I really enjoyed a lot of his random tangents, but the book (by design) lacks an direction or focus, and at times it ventures a bit too far into the weeds (or at least into weeds that I'm less interested in...). There are also passages where he rather strongly shows his own biases against the Republican party and against religion. Which is fine -- he's allowed to have his opinions -- but in particular I didn't really appreciate his at times dismissive and derogatory comments on religion and religious people.

I've put this book at three stars. The book has very interesting insights into how the political machine works, in particular the stage managed risk aversion of front runners, and the strangeness of how our political sausages are made. I found this book particularly interesting in light of Trump's rise to power, which was ongoing as I was reading this. Trump is the fringe candidate who refuses to play by the rules, the very kind of candidate who Lewis was most interested by, but who this time was not the loser. Lewis by no means predicted Trump, but he certainly noted that the mainstream candidates failed to connect with real people, and Trump is the logical conclusion of forces at work even then. That being said, it's a long book and you need to endure some dry spells between the interesting anecdotes. Add that to the fact that I found some of his comments and characterizations to be offensive, and I put it down to a three star.

James says

The book is good because its enjoyable to read Michael Lewis' writing.

Its an absurd experience, however, to read this book in 2017 and wish for the bland politics that Lewis appears to dislike so much.

Nikki Golden says

Interesting look inside modern-day politics.
