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Political Scandal

Jessica Berger

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REVIEW

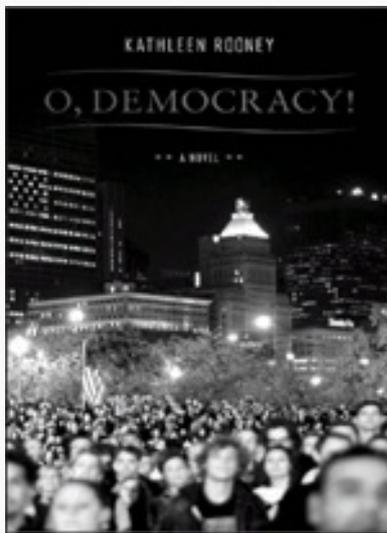
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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Political Scandal

Jessica Berger (bio)

O, DEMOCRACY! Kathleen Rooney Fifth Star Press www.fifthstarpress.org 397
Pages; Print, \$24.00



It's no secret on the Chicago literary scene that Kathleen Rooney's resume boasts the charred remains of a minor political scandal. In addition to several books of poetry and essays, Rooney served her time in Illinois senator Dick Durbin's office for four years prior to her controversial 2010 dismissal. Basically, when word that her book of essays *For You, for You I Am Trilling These Songs* contained pieces of political intrigue and round-the-office gossip got back to D.C., the content was a bit too thinly veiled for someone's liking. The result? Rooney was dropped and the press probed deeper, revealing—heaven forbid—that while working she also spent time taking notes for her own creative endeavors “on the taxpayers' dime.”

Four years later, the experience has been mangled and reworked into Rooney's debut novel, *O, Democracy!*, a fiction, certainly, but one struggling at the surface with the process of its own fictionalization. Where once there was Kathleen Rooney balancing her written life with her office job now there is Colleen Dugan, a young woman working for a nameless Democratic senator as she continues with her photography, snapping pictures at campaign appearances, small town parades, and charity gatherings to the mounting chagrin of her superiors. Colleen's story opens in the spring of '08, just months before a rather major presidential election and, of course, at an instant when it seemed the entire country was caught somewhere between “hope” and total disenchantment. Rooney plays off the recent memory, placing Colleen just stage right of the major action (it's of course, the other Illinois senator who had the nation's attention) in a space where the interplay of her waning political idealism and personal disappointments cause them to seem as one.

Colleen's character is at the center of the action here, and it's through her that we're given access to the mundane ins and outs of life on a sure-thing reelection campaign. There's little chance that Colleen's horse will

lose, and as a result, chances for political intrigue enter the book almost as stockshreds of setting. What would become cause for fast-talking action in the dramatic hour—arc of an Aaron Sorkin show—is here just a nagging ethical question, believably just another part of just another job in just another Chicago office. Though Rooney writes Colleen the burden of uncovering their opponent's worst-kept secret, or places her in a position where she teeters at the brink of an affair—the politics of scandal don't win here. Instead, Colleen's is a study of the day to day. Much of her time in the novel seems devoted to managing optimistic interns, keeping on top of headlines, attending repetitive events, and chronicling but not acting upon the merciless flirting of the "Chief of Staff." She oscillates between a shared enthusiasm for the cause and succumbing to and feeling trapped; stuck in an office when she could be putting her time to a more fulfilling use.

Colleen's is a different type of campaign story than what we've grown used to. Its politics are personal and grounded. While genuinely refreshing, its nature makes some of Rooney's minor stylistic choices seem jagged. Much of the novel feels as though it's engaged in a process, if not of redaction, than of a very purposeful distancing. Major characters like the senator and the Chief of Staff go unnamed though, of course, the locating and naming of Chicago itself is made key to the plot. There's an unevenness in what's allowed proper distinction here, and one that often seems at odds with itself. The refusal to point directly to something, a particular person or event reads, at times, as a familiar type of obstruction. "Names have been changed to protect the innocent and to dodge a lawsuit." Oddly, Rooney chooses to extend the obfuscation of proper names beyond the obvious, and there's a frequent pointing but not pointing, saying but not...

O, DEMOCRACY!

Kathleen Rooney

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www.fifthstarpress.org
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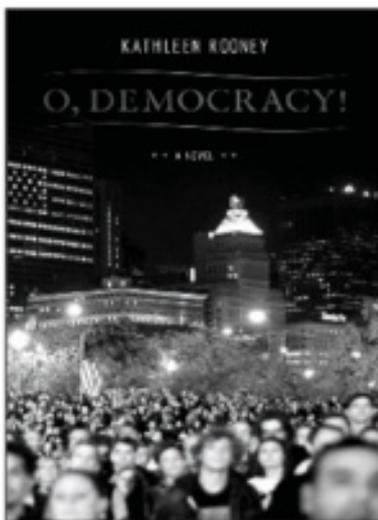
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Time” things start to get a bit distracting.

The stumbling descriptions can be explained away as an extension of Colleen's entrenchment in campaign vagaries, but there's something about the reaching use of language that further contrasts with the novel's most strikingly poetic passages: cut-ins written in the collective voice of the Founding Fathers. They arrive to comment on Colleen's action and mine on modern politics, calling our heroine an “unnatural specimen” and noting that they're “heartened” by the way she maintains her own passions, her own pursuits of happiness. As a chorus, they echo and amplify the novel's themes, though often feel decorative. In telling Colleen's story, Rooney is already perfectly clear. She captures something of our recessed frustration sharply, shows us how Colleen's ambitions are helped and hindered. We don't need the Founding Fathers to speak to the state of her union, she's coming in loud and clear.

Jessica Berger is an editor with The Account as well as a fiction writer. Her work has appeared in Punk, The & Now Awards: The Best Innovative Writing, Metazen, and elsewhere.





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