

III. Fiction as Career Inspiration: Poly Sci

Previously, I have written about the biological/environmental sciences and the law as portrayed in fiction (both archived at <https://www.murrysvillelibrary.org>), as useful windows into professional careers. I am intending to do this kind of thing for teens and young adults periodically, as a sub-series within The Magic Library Card! broader series, something like what was the pattern for the Lewis & Clark Expedition, for example.

Undergraduate college students seem often enough to gravitate to Political Science & Government, or Poly Sci, as a major. I don't know how often that implies an intended career path in elected politics, or simply employment in a government-related position, or maybe just scholarly interest. Whatever is the case, the following are novels that speak to Poly Sci, and perhaps, just because they are novels and need riveting plots, especially to the dark side of politics.

This is an oft repeated Mark Twain quote: "Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself." Well, then it comes as no surprise that, in shadow to his much more often read novels, Twain also collaborated with Charles Dudley Warner to write "The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today" (1873). The Gilded Age is that period after the Civil War in America, in the latter 19th century, of obscene materialism and grift, and the politics to go with it, captured in Twain's quote. It is a novel to build a respectful cynicism into the mind of any Poly Sci student bound for a career in politics or government. I have read it twice.

One of H.G. Wells lesser-known novels is "The New Machiavelli" (1911). The original Machiavelli (1469-1527) was statesman and political philosopher; he is best known as the author of "The Prince," a timeless political treatise of universal relevance. Wells' own novel is at least partly autobiographical and deals with political aspirations and how they run afoul of amorous aspirations in the boiling pot of political hypocrisy. As with the Twain novel above, the author is better known for other "classics," science fiction novels such as "The Invisible Man" (1897) and "The Time Machine" (1895). But "Machiavelli" the title or the author is associated with Poly Sci as few other names are.

Other novelist have written not about the polity as we know it in America now, but of the polity as it might become in a dystopia or as it was in a Stalinist state. Margaret Atwood wrote "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985) about the imagined Republic of Gilead, a patriarchal and authoritarian state governed in privilege rather than by constitutional law. Gilead is a truly dystopian society that puts up a red flag to the worst of what governance by the privileged can become.

Ayn Rand in her bestselling novels "We the Living" (1936), "The Fountainhead" (1943), and "Atlas Shrugged" (1957) is that preeminent voice for individualism as the bulwark of good governance. She reviled the governance of communism, and, from a birth in Russia, knew well of burying individual initiative under communism.

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And finally, maybe it is the tongue-in-cheek warning title alone of Sinclair Lewis's novel "It Can't Happen Here" (1935) that sums up the fragility of good governance and freedom that is suggested in the other novels. Perhaps, taken all together it and the rest are the best Poly Sci course of all.

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