Connecticut College American Studies Senior Seminar
“The Globalization of American Culture” Book Review

Author: Thomas Mallon
Title: “Watergate”
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Reviewed by: Anne Fierberg

Reimagining Watergate

If I had never heard of the Watergate scandal, I would have sworn, after reading Thomas Mallon’s latest novel, the event was a creation of his imagination. Mallon’s Watergate is the ultimate work of historical fiction. A page-turning thriller, Mallon takes the real characters involved in the 1972 scandal and cover-up and creates a new narrative, filling in the pieces history has left blank. Mallon infuses the tale with a spark of humor and a striking sympathetic undertone that allows him to develop his characters in a truly believable light. Instead of focusing intensely on the details of Watergate’s aftermath, Mallon plays out the affects of the scandal in and on the lives of both its notorious players, and also from key players caught in the shadows of history. “Watergate” is magnetic because the reader finds himself/herself lost between the fictitious events of the novel and the reality of history.

As a work of historical fiction, “Watergate” brings together the analytical world of history and the fictitious world of literature. This multi-disciplinary approach towards the events and aftermath of Watergate makes Thomas Mallon’s novel a work in the America Studies field. Taking real people and real events into a fictitious world allows for a new understanding of the historical moments to be created that reaches beyond strict facts. Through reading Mallon’s novel, his audience comes to understand a second dimension to the criminal characters involved in the scandal. Although imagined, the world within the pages of “Watergate” is real in a sense, or perhaps it is that the details in Mallon’s novel could have been true. This sense of truth that
pervades the chapters of “Watergate” is due in large part to Mallon’s choice of characters and subsequent ability to make these characters believable.

In an email exchange interview with “The New York Times,” Thomas Mallon explained his reasons for including and excluding certain players in the history of Watergate: “Well, they’ve really told their own story, one that’s familiar to the public.” (NYT, Williams) The “they” Mallon refers to are historically recognized figures like Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Mallon chooses to surpass these players for the likes of Fred LaRue, an advisor to President Nixon before and after Watergate, who turns out to be a sort of moral conscious for the novel. Although LaRue’s character is lost in the chapters of history books, his part could not be more vital to the propelling of Mallon’s novel and the scandal within the pages. The audience follows LaRue from his apartment at Watergate West, through his responsibility as the director of “pay-off” money, and into his affair with Democratic staff-member Clarine Lander. Mallon allows his audience to glimpse into the personal lives of the Watergate criminals and see the panic and true fear that engulfed them in the aftermath of the robbery. Exploring different motives from simple poor planning to self-sabotage, Mallon makes his readers care about the characters and reminds them that we are all only human.

A focus on female characters Rose Mary Woods, the President’s personal secretary also adds dimensions to the Watergate scandal that have not been widely discussed in history books. Mallon even presents another dimension of President Nixon that forces the audience to sympathize with the Old Man. Looks into personal moments and memories, a glimpse at the potential success of his presidency in foreign policy, and a fear of letting people down, although fabricated in Mallon’s novel, are not unbelievable characteristics of the President. Mallon’s ability to seamlessly blend the worlds of truth and fiction concerning Watergate and its players
contributes to the novel’s success and perhaps the mistaken belief that the book is a work of nonfiction.

At the bind between the fictitious world of “Watergate” and the historical past of Watergate lies the maintenance of the common themes that have carried on through history. The mystery and confusion that surrounded the scandal in the 1970s is extremely well represented in Mallon’s novel. The events that built the Watergate scandal have had questions surrounding them for years and Mallon masters the ability of letting this uncertainty penetrate all of his pages. The event within the novel remains true to its historical past and understanding. Mallon simply adds new dimensions and promotes new understandings of its actions and consequences in the novel’s 1970s imagined world.

Reading “Watergate” I found myself questioning whether the book had been labeled wrong and it truly was a work of non-fiction. Within the pages lie truth and fiction. As the novel moves along, pages will turn faster as readers attempt to decipher where Mallon has left the reality of Watergate and traveled into the story of “Watergate.” Mallon’s novel offers something for both the history buff and the literary enthusiast. As a work in the field of American Studies, Mallon’s novel will draw the eye and mind of the individual who sees the American culture within the expressive arts as well as the political minded. Through “Watergate,” we understand not only the culture of the 1970s but the how our generation, through Mallon, has come to understand and reimagine the events of our past.
