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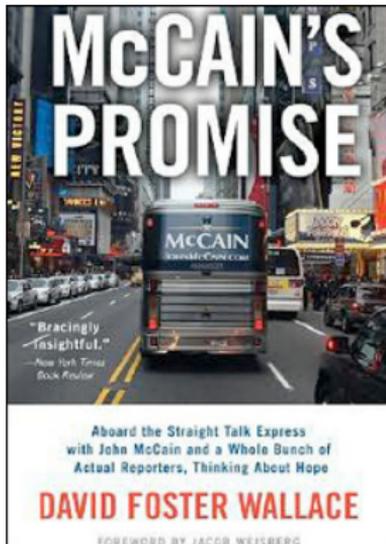
< BACK TO RADAR REVIEWS

← BACK NEXT →

BOOK REVIEW

MCCAIN'S PROMISE - DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

Welcome back to the stage, if you will, **David Foster Wallace's** *McCain's Promise* (Back Bay, June 1). For those keeping score, this is the work's *fourth* incarnation in just eight years. In early 2000, *Rolling Stone* sent Wallace to cover **John McCain's** GOP candidacy, and the resulting article featured less than half the text he turned in. Hence, a "director's cut" version, as Wallace refers to it, was released as a download-only e-book later that year. Next, the piece appeared in Wallace's essay compilation *Consider the Lobster* in 2005. And now, finally, it is here again, this time in bound book form. (Actually, more like a booklet. It's a lean 124 pages featuring a very geriatric-friendly font size.) Can podcast and Kindle versions be far behind?!



FOURTH TIME'S THE CHARM Wallace's latest

The thing is, I would probably get those versions as well (if my iPod hadn't died or I owned a Kindle). As a work of reportage, *McCain's Promise* continues to offer readers something worthwhile even eight years—and a different campaign—later. As a historical document, *Promise* provides a fine juxtaposition with McCain's dual personalities: the man seen as repping the Establishment versus **Barack Obama**, you'll remember, was once the Maverick competing against **George Bush**. Also, Wallace is a superb reporter. As Slate editor **Jacob Weisberg** notes in his foreword, Wallace has an "ethnographer's take on an alien culture."

This outsider status gives Wallace a fresh perspective on the weirdness—the rituals, groupthink, "in crowd" elite reporters—of a presidential campaign that standard media outlets ignore. When is the last time a reporter made note of the "dweeb" MSM journalists in matching navy blazers and pleated chinos riding in the front of the bus? It's also hard to find a page, or even a line, that isn't funny, sharp, and true. Opening to any random passage will yield results similar to this description of McCain's missus at a rally: "Mrs. Cindy McCain is up there too, brittlely composed and smiling at the air in front of her and thinking about God knows what."

There is one, albeit central, element within *McCain's Promise* that is not compelling, however. Wallace is intrigued by McCain's famous stint as a brave POW in 'Nam, and whether that experience in some way lends credibility to McCain beyond what the other pols offer. Perhaps I'm too cynical, but to me, a person's moment of valor from many years ago is not a particularly worthy indicator of who he is today. We all, even the schlubs, have it in us to act valiantly, or horribly (see "bystander effect" made famous from the Kitty Genovese murder), under certain conditions. The point is, they're outlying behaviors. Wallace is, of course, not so naïve as to be convinced of McCain's authenticity because of his imprisonment, but he pays far too much attention to it, even if he means only to explore larger issues of politicians' credibility.

Nevertheless, it's a testament to Wallace's skills as a writer that this grievance remains a minor distraction. If you haven't read versions one, two, or three, and don't want to wait for the graphic novelization due out in '09, pick up *McCain's Promise*, 4.0.

By David Zweig 05/27/08 3:00 PM

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