



Richard North Patterson's *Protect and Defend* recommended by Katherine McNamara

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, Katherine McNamara, poet, critic, and author of *Narrow Road to the Deep North: A Journey into the Interior of Alaska*, recommends *Protect and Defend* by Richard North Patterson.

Even a bad book can be worth reading, as I think *Protect and Defend* is. Richard North Patterson writes big, popular novels—not my sort of thing, until I heard a long conversation between the author and Nina Totenburg on NPR about this political thriller set in the near future. The Democratic liberal president, Kerry Kilcannon, at the urging of his female Vice-President, nominates the distinguished judge Caroline Clark Masters, a woman with a secret, as the new Chief. Similarly, (the divorced) Kilcannon shares a secret with his fiancée, and the principal Senators who must advise and consent have their own dark shadows.

The bitter fight over the nomination becomes intricately entwined with abortion and fertility politics, specifically the medical, legal, and moral issues of late-term abortion for minors and parental consent laws. It is played out both in the courts and by the special rules of the Senate, while "out there" the media expose private conduct to destroy public careers, and the enormous power of special-interest money unbalances the process.

On the radio, Totenburg was impressed by (she said) Patterson's generally accurate grasp of the arcane and brutal political process by which the Senate must confirm or deny a nominee—and taken aback by the number of callers in more interested in the momentous debate on abortion which forms the substance of the book. Justice isn't the same as moral debate isn't the same as virtue, argues Patterson the civic story-

teller, and moral passion can blind a man to justice. He also pointed out—though this is not part of the book—that *Roe v. Wade* is still under assault.

His plot-line is melodramatic; but so, perhaps, is (what remains of) our public life. This is no small matter, when our civic argumentation seems to have been replaced by ideological intransigence. So his Republican hero, a senator resembling John McCain, says bitterly, "No more can we claim that our politics is simply about ideas, or values, or the clash of competing interests. All too often it is about money—the elegant system of quasi-bribery in which those who finance our campaigns become our stockholders, and demand results."

Patterson is a trained lawyer whose virtue is not lovely prose, or fluid dialog, or even the well-turned literary plot—though at times he's almost as good as the writers of "West Wing"—but, notably, a strong belief in the importance of reasoned, considered argument for the sound functioning of our democracy. His strength as a novelist of the public good is that he values sound arguments mixed with compassion (not pity)—even when he disagrees with the principle. In laying out the great public fight of the book, he knows where the faultlines are politically, constitutionally, and logically. Bad or weak logic offends him nearly as much as zealotry. On the radio with Totenburg, he argued strongly the distinction between private rectitude and public character, and his characters—

sometimes formulaically—illustrate his point. Yet, his president, though a quick and ruthless political operator, needs a larger cause than power: “The Supreme Court Kerry meant to leave behind would know that law without compassion was a shortcut to injustice.”

Protect and Defend, not easily summarized, is a summer book I would recommend to intelligent, educated readers disturbed by the nature of our public discourse. At his best, Patterson has skillfully marshaled a range of complex subjects and arguments, if in rather wooden characters and a schematic, though suspense-filled plot.

It would be a good volume for book groups, I’d think: if the members found themselves all taking the same side, the novel would no doubt serve as ammunition. Even better if they disagreed on the merits: it would make a fine occasion for the re-establishment of true civic argument.

Perhaps, though, I’m being optimistic. After the long, dreadful fight is over, one of the central characters says: “We’ll never reconcile our worldviews. So let’s not try.” Patterson may have given us, here, an awfully clear look at ourselves.

Virginia Festival of the Book

145 Ednam Drive • Charlottesville, VA • 22903-462
434.924.3296 • vabook@virginia.edu • <http://www.vabook.org>