

Roman à clef

Ask if students have ever heard the term "roman à clef." If no one has, begin by literally translating the phrase: "novel with a key." Do students have any guesses about what it might mean?

Explain the term—a roman à clef fictionalizes a real historical occurrence, most frequently one related to politics. If one knows the political history behind the novel, one has the "key" to figure it out. The class has already done some research on Huey Long, so they understand how Willie Stark might represent him. Bring up the example of *Primary Colors*, another famous roman à clef about a politician (in that case, former President Bill Clinton), which was originally published anonymously, though it was later revealed to have been written by Joe Klein. Why do students think that people might write romans à clef? What could the writers gain? What could the public gain?

Divide students into pairs or small groups (no more than 4). Each group will work over the course of this unit to create their own miniature roman à clef—a short story, no fewer than 15 pages, written collaboratively, that tells the fictionalized story of a significant political event. This event could be at the local level—it might involve a school board election in your town, for instance—up to the national or international level, but it must fictionalize the event and select a perspective character that is not the central political figure. Students should use at least four distinct research sources, at least one of which must be a book rather than an article, to support the development of their work. They may divide up the roles in their group as they see fit, but they will need to turn in multiple drafts, and the final piece should include a bibliography and an accounting of shared tasks.