

Reading Guide for *Draining the Swamp* by Ed Gibney

About the Book (Spoiler Alert!)

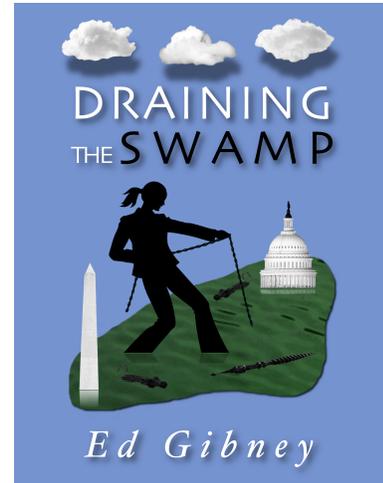
Isn't it time someone changed Washington DC? That's the premise for this bureaucratic fable where Justine Swensen—a young idealist from Minnesota—comes to the city to work for a senator she's just helped get elected. Unlike so many other Washington stories though, this one doesn't stick to the well-known surface of politicians and the media. *Draining the Swamp* follows Justine on her 30-year career through many of the branches, departments, agencies, and NGO's that grind beneath the surface and really make DC run. Or rather, not run.

As a talented and unrelenting optimist, our heroine manages to find an Achilles heel in each of her jobs that stops her progress, but each one of them leads to another opportunity for her to move on to in the hopes of satisfying her ultimate quest. Unfortunately for her, she winds her way in a complete circle starting as a staffer for a senator and ending as a senator seeking ideas from new staffers after her own failed presidential candidacy. In between, she passes through a Senate Appropriations Committee, the Government Accountability Office, the Secret Service, the Department of Homeland Security, the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Personnel Management, a management consulting firm, a non-profit, a think tank, a newspaper, and a lobbying firm, before running for the House, Senate, and Presidency herself. Along the way she meets all sorts of funny, sad, inspiring, and infuriating bureaucrats who are usually trapped in their own catch-22.

Fortunately for us, there's a moral to the end of her story that may just help change things after all. It's a moral taken from the latest findings in the fields of change management and political philosophy, and it's one that can at the very least educate other idealists in the 4 million+ U.S. government workforce, if it doesn't also inspire them to stick to their quests and recruit others to the cause. To change DC, you have to know DC, and *Draining the Swamp* can impart some of that knowledge to readers while they cheer on its heroine through each and every turn of her career.

Discussion Guide (Spoiler Alert!)

1. Fable Tone: On page one, the author attempts to establish that this is a fable, and throughout the rest of the novel, the author used “our heroine” phrases to remind you of this fact. Why? Is the heroine too perfect for reality but just perfect enough to take her path? What does this do to the believability of all the facts in the novel? Was the narrator reliable as you read the book? What about after the “moral of the story” at the ending?



2. Structure: The novel is constructed as a long circular path. Because of this, the author is forced to move from place to place and character to character at the end of each chapter. In return, the story touches all of DC, and has the opportunity to make a larger point about the entire landscape. Is this structure effective? Are the tradeoffs imposed by using such a structure worth it?

3. Setting: The book is seemingly set in a perpetual modern day Washington even though it spanned a timeline of over 30 years. Is this possible? Did you notice? Is the author making a point that the culture of the city never really changes? Is this effective or just unreal?

4. Characters: The novel uses Justine's career path to introduce us to a variety of characters. Who were your favorites: "evil" ones like Clara Ivy, Rick Wrightpoint, and Debbie Demeroff; or "good" ones like Bill Monet, Pat Heron, and Buddy Overton? Were all the characters just "alligators in the swamp" doing what they had to do to survive?

5. Characters: The character names were obviously symbolic. Bill Monet wrote legislative bills doling out money. Pat Heron was a patriotic hero in the Secret Service. Buddy Overton worked at OMB, which oversees tons of budgets. Yvonne Towers was an academic type stuck in the ivory tower of her think tank. Did these names make the characters more or less vivid to you? Were they more or less representative? Did it help or hurt that this was pointed out explicitly with the mention of the sociological research that backed up why Clara Ivy was a climber?

6. Metaphors of Space: The author uses gravitational pulls in early descriptions of DC, the novel is circular (or elliptical), and Justine starts to feel a pull to return to DC during the final scene. Does this running thread help or hurt the climactic dawning on the heroine that she is a comet sailing through the system instead of a meteorite impacting a planet? Did you feel pulled into her orbit? Or did the metaphor hit you over the head too much?

7. Repetition of Ayn Rand: Rand's novels are widely influential in some segments of US politics and they are mentioned at the beginning and end of *Draining the Swamp*. Rand's novels are known for their heroic individualism with characters like John Gault and Howard Roark moving the world with their intellect and persistence, but Justine is a heroic individual who cannot change the system she is in. Are these wider criticisms of Ayn Rand and the ineffectiveness of most individuals in a modern economy merited? Does the structure of the novel illustrate an economy characterized by the extreme division of labor? Or does it show the failure of those not able to "stick to it"?

8. Political Philosophy: In her speech at the presidential debate, Justine said, "*Government is created to regulate the markets for all goods and services in order to ensure the fundamental evolutionary principles of cooperation and competition are acting for the maximum benefit of all life.*" In an earlier chapter, she listed out some of the requirements of regulation that would be necessary to move the political economy towards a state of "perfect competition," which would be most beneficial for the population in general. Together, these make up a pretty radical difference from our current purpose of government to "provide for the common defense,

promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty.” What do you think of this purpose for government articulated in *Draining the Swamp*? Would you define it any differently?

9. Politics: Justine’s bid for the presidency ultimately failed due to predictable responses from the entrenched interests in government. Do you agree her candidacy would be so easy to strike down? Would you vote for her, or a real life candidate that ran on a platform of government efficiency? Would it matter what side of the aisle that candidate came from? Did you agree with her definition of what the chief role of the head of the executive branch actually is? Or do you think the job of the president is better characterized in a different way?

10. Moral of the Story: In the last chapter, Justine learns from her brother that big change in big organizations requires cross-functional, top-level leadership that is aligned behind a shared vision and has a detailed plan that maintains short-term motivation while the long-term goals are marched towards. How would you take these lessons from change management into your own work? Do you think it can ever be done across something as big as the federal government or the United States? Who would have to be involved in something like that?

11. Ending: In the last line of the novel, Justine’s brother Jack suggests she write a book. Does this imply to you that she was the author all along? What does this mean for the veracity of the facts? Would such a career, if it actually happened this way, be too much to believe? Was this ending a surprise?

12. Art: In an otherwise glowing review, *Kirkus Reviews* said *Draining the Swamp* “can be a bit didactic.” Do you agree with that assessment? And do you consider that a good or a bad thing for a work of art?

Author Bio

Ed Gibney started a Special Advisor program at the US Secret Service to assist the Director and his leadership team with projects that make the organization run more efficiently. He worked in similar programs at the FBI and Department of Homeland Security after volunteering for two years in Ukraine with the Peace Corps to help former communists transitioning to capitalism. He has lived, worked, or traveled in 50 states and 50 countries looking for ways to change the world, but now lives quietly beside the English seaside writing fiction and philosophy while his wife tries to change the next generation of university students.

Critical Praise

"This novel doubles as a sort of American civics textbook, explaining the functions of each agency while adding the spice of insider knowledge. ... It's bookended with references to Ayn Rand's brand of libertarianism, which provides philosophical power to the concluding moral. ... [I]ts crisp dialogue...and deep knowledge of Washington's inner

workings make it an edifying read. ... A philosophically charged critique of government, couched in the form of a novel." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"A skillful and talented writer, Ed Gibney's "Draining The Swamp" belongs to a muckraker tradition as exemplified by such American authors as Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" (the meatpacking industry) or Sinclair Lewis' "Elmer Gantry" (organized religion). In a more contemporary meaning, this fictional portrayal of the federal government falls into the category of a 'docudrama'. A deftly written and riveting read from beginning to end, "Draining The Swamp" is highly recommended for personal reading lists and community library Contemporary Fiction collections." —*Midwest Book Review*

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by Ed Gibney

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