

ABSOLUTE POWER

By David Baldacci

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REVIEWED BY

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David Baldacci's first novel, "Absolute Power," is a well-crafted suspense thriller featuring a superb plot, secondary characters that come alive and a protagonist who is both real and likeable. Hidden within its pages is a sound moral lesson.

As with most good novelists, Baldacci writes a strong beginning. Elderly burglar Luther Whitney, while engaged in his criminal occupation, is caught in the web of a powerful spider as he sets out to burglarize a home but becomes a reluctant witness to a brutal murder in which Alan Richmond, President of the United States is involved. Too late, the reader will realize he is hooked, and there is no way out for him but to read on to the end.

Protagonist Jack Graham, a young, hard-working lawyer and former lover of Luther Whitney's beautiful daughter, Kate, is inexorably drawn into this web by his desire to help them, and if possible, rekindle the relationship he once enjoyed with Kate.

Seth Frank, chief homicide detective for the rural Virginia county near Washington in which the crime occurs, is propelled by his sense of duty as he attempts to piece together clues that will unravel the mystery and reveal what really happened to the wife of Walter Sullivan, wealthy friend of the President.

But it is through the characters of President Richmond and those around him that we are shown what this novel is really about. Richmond and his staff are moral relativists. They do not believe in any objective standards, nor do they believe that truth exists. This is a dangerous combination in anyone, but particularly so when present in politicians and others in positions of power and authority; it can easily lead to a belief that one is above the law.

Richmond is a man corrupted by the power of his office, who mistakenly feels that the most important person in the world is himself. He thinks that moral standards are for the bourgeoisie, not him, that he is above the law, and therefore, can do anything he pleases. Attributes such as these, combined with a ruthless pragmatism, lead him to the ultimate vices; betrayal of his best friend, and worse.

Gloria Russell, Richmond's top assistant, driven by lust for Richmond and an unbridled quest for shared power, attempts to orchestrate a cover-up to protect Richmond. She tries to conceal his wrongdoing and help him retain power, using a piece of commandeered evidence to accomplish that and to obtain her personal goal.

Secret Service Agent Bill Burton, victim of a misdirected sense of loyalty, does the expedient thing again and again in the service of his boss, until finally he understands that he has destroyed his own integrity and self-respect, and a life without these is a life not worth living.

Lord Acton is often quoted as saying "Power tends to corrupt. Absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely." It's from this famous quote that Baldacci's title is drawn. But what Acton may not have understood was that power, no matter how absolute, will only corrupt if its possessor is devoid of sound moral values. Freed from the healthy restraining influence of high moral standards, a person can and often will exercise power badly. The result is usually the creation of strife and turmoil in his own life and in the lives of those around him.

This is an adult novel for adult readers. It's more than just a "good read." It's an intense, fascinating, absorbing novel. I heartily recommend it.