

**an introduction to**  
*The King of Kings County*

Like a lot of people who grew up in the fifties and sixties, Jack Acheson, the narrator of *The King of Kings County*, remembers a youth of lunches with his dad, picnics with the family, and hard-fought high-school football games. In Jack's case, however, these memories are devoid of sentimental nostalgia. When Jack's father took him to a restaurant, it was only to make the other patrons believe that he could afford to dine there; father and son often slipped out the door without ever having eaten. The picnics, too, were a sham — staged so that Jack's father, a struggling and thoroughly unscrupulous real estate speculator, could survey the land on which he was trespassing. As for the football games, Jack played on the worst team in a four-squad intramural league, whose coaches stack the rosters in order to bilk money out of new, unsuspecting teachers in a faculty betting pool. But all these unsavory recollections pale in comparison to the most searing, haunting memory of his adolescence: a drunken party at an abandoned quarry that became the site of a terrible tragedy.

For all its eloquent depiction of Jack's guilt and alienation, *The King of Kings County*, the second novel by rapidly rising author Whitney Terrell, is much more than a bittersweet memoir of a difficult childhood. It is also the powerful story of how Terrell's hometown of Kansas City gradually falls victim to a cadre of ruthless land developers who use every tool at their disposal — including the public's fear of racial integration — to line their pockets while despoiling and dividing a great city. In these pages, we meet such memorable characters as Prudential Bowen, a grizzled, white-haired real estate mogul who enjoys electrocuting squirrels as much as adding new properties to his empire; Lonnie Garaciello, a small-time mobster's son whose lonely struggle for acceptance at an exclusive private school is tinged with tragedy; and Geanie Bowen, Prudential's mysteriously appealing granddaughter, who is torn between the comfort of her family's millions and her thirst for rebellion and adventure.

Dominating much of the novel, however, is its most unforgettable character, Jack's father, Alton Acheson. His brash, vulgar presence always announced by his outlandish yellow suit, the elder Acheson worships the memory of unscrupulous robber barons and strives constantly to chip away his own corner of the Bowen megabusiness — even if he has to shoot golf balls into Mr. Bowen's pool to do it. Acheson moves blithely from outrage to outrage, all under the observing, astonished eyes of Jack, who is both

scandalized by his father's brazenness and awed by his relentless drive to succeed. Running beneath Jack's narrative of greed and gain is a persistent question: Will Jack finally reject his father's corrupting example, or will he descend to a level of cynicism that Alton Acheson has never reached?

Funny, philosophical, and, in the end, majestically elegaic, *The King of Kings County* is not only a lament for a fallen, exploited city. It is also a tale of patchwork dreams, shattered fortunes, and twisted family destinies. It speaks to everyone who has ever tried, and very possibly failed, to love a father.

### **a conversation with whitney terrell**

*1. Novels dealing with business in America almost inevitably turn out to be stories of disillusionment. In The King of Kings County, Jack Acheson both experiences and partly gets over the loss of faith in his father, his community, and, finally, himself. What relation do you perceive between the world of commerce and the loss of innocence?*

Maybe it would be worth examining the terms here. The implication is that disillusionment, loss of faith and loss of innocence are bad things. I disagree. I'm a big fan of all three. These are beautiful, necessary rites of passage that any skeptical, intelligent western society -- American society in particular -- ought to hold in high regard. Not to mention the fact that rock and roll would be screwed without them.

It used to be that the last thing an American wanted to be was a sucker. We were debunkers. We hated cant, bogus ceremony. We didn't like taking anybody's word for something -- we wanted to see for ourselves. And in our literature -- consider Twain or Raymond Chandler -- only suckers insisted on believing that American commerce was an innocent system.

People who believe differently simply haven't been reading American history. Jack's disillusionment is a natural, normal process. What's painful is realizing that the society around him has become so infantilized that it no longer wants to know the truth about itself. By comparison, the relatively open greed of businessmen like Andrew Carnegie or

Tom Durant-- or to a lesser extent, Alton Acheson -- is almost refreshing. Naturally, this is not so much the case when they are buying up your family farm.

*1. Your novel has prompted comparisons with Twain, Frank Norris, and J. D. Salinger. And yet, of course, The King of Kings County is nothing if not original. How does an author handle the task of reinventing and responding to classical models without simply repeating them?*

I don't think you can respond to great writers. But you can use them as a lens that helps give you a clearer view of your own society and material.

*1. Your depiction of Kansas City and how it has suffered at the hands of people like the Bowens and Alton Acheson has ruffled some feathers in your hometown. Although The King of Kings County is an angry novel, one senses in it a battered but still-vibrant affection for some of the places you describe. At the risk of asking an impossible question, just what does Kansas City currently mean to you?*

To borrow a phrase from William Gass, who lives in nearby St. Louis, this is the heart of the heart of the country. I used to get terribly, personally upset about local politics -- and in particular about the way the city had been developed. Now I feel very differently. The city is what it is. In his work, at least, a writer shouldn't be interested in trying to change the way a city looks, or to make everything turn out fair -- to do so is to act like the people I've criticized in the first question. It's a naive position to take.

*The King of Kings County* may have started as an angry novel, but to me it ended up as a comic one. I am deeply appreciative of the outrageous material that real estate developers have given me. All that I could ask for is more, really: more deals, more craziness, more family squabbles. My goal is partly just to describe what's there -- all of it, every form of chicanery and venality and nobility and absurdity that falls under the category of human behavior. Often, if you study something long enough, you end up caring for or, at the very least, finding a way to laugh at the things that anger and repel you. It's also possible that angry novels and comic novels are the same thing.

Personally, I owe a lot to Kansas City. The people here buy my books, they talk about them, they seem to care what they say -- probably because in their hearts they, too, have an ongoing, imaginative relationship with the city. I am surrounded by terrific colleagues at the writing program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, great young writing students, family, friends -- no author could ask for better or for more.

*1. The self-deceptions that you reveal in The King of Kings County are virtually unending. If you were to identify one central delusion that shapes the lives of your characters, what would it be?*

As I mentioned earlier, the desire to *be* deluded -- as Jack puts it, “the desire *not* to know” -- that’s the most dangerous and powerful thing.

We’re at a period where this desire is actively encouraged. When you hear a politician or a radio host describing their political opponents as “anti-American,” pay attention. That’s usually the beginning of the lullaby -- *Just believe. Have faith. Don’t ask questions. America’s the greatest country on earth. You’re innocent. Everything will be just fine if you leave it up to the experts. Those people who are trying to tell you differently actually hate America.*

The people who make such arguments are sandmen. They offer the narcotic of deep, untroubled sleep. People will give up a lot for that.

*1. One of Jack Acheson’s most crucial struggles is to establish a self that can stand independently from his father. This theme evidently matters a great deal to you. Why? [I’m going to skip this question. Can we cut it?]*

*1. Jack writes toward the end of the novel that no one should “ever, ever” be allowed to say “They’re the ones in the wrong” about people one has loved or tried to love. Yet if this is true, how does one ever achieve the separation and independence that Jack requires? If one is to be free, isn’t it sometimes necessary to reject and even curse the limiting, corrupting influences of one’s past?*

Since nobody is immaculately conceived, I think a person begins to achieve independence -- integrity would be another way to put it -- only when they begin to educate themselves on their past. Investigate it wide-eyed. Get rid of the filters -- politics, religion, Hollywood -- that try to tell you how the past is supposed to look. Figure out what’s really there. You may disagree with what you find, you may be shocked and horrified, you may choose a different route. But to simply curse the past, very frequently, is a good way to end up repeating it.

But I think also the quote above needs to be taken in context. Jack is talking about how he used to berate Geanie for remaining loyal to her father. Henry Bowen may very well be in the wrong and, though it may be important for Jack to recognize this personally, it’s cruel for him to lord this fact over Geanie. She has to make her own reckoning. It’s hypocritical, too, since he loves his own father, despite Alton’s faults.

*1. You do a fine job of evoking Jack's adolescent alienation, especially when you write about his experiences as a Trojan in the rigged football games at Pemberton Academy. What enabled you to write so sensitively about Jack's feelings of inferiority and exclusion?*

I would like to take this opportunity to say that I was never slow; never had a collection of green, fifth-place ribbons from field day; nor had the nickname Turtle. Nor did I ever worry about my complexion or feel certain that everybody noticed the unspeakably embarrassing things that my parents were always saying to me in public. Like, "How was field day practice today?"

*1. In some ways Alton Acheson can be considered the protagonist of the novel. However, a strong claim can also be made that the book is really about Jack. Which character do you see as the novel's center of gravity, and why?*

I see Alton as the centerpiece. But the novel wouldn't work without somebody to watch him, a stand-in for the audience's own feelings and reactions to his behavior. Gravity isn't a measurable force until it has something to act on -- and that's Jack.

Alton is also a rebuke. He's the guy who thumbs his nose at all of us who feel so contented with our morality and goodness.

*1. One of the many unsettling aspects of your novel is the extent to which Jack's sexual motivations resemble his father's lust for money. Do you think that the pursuits of love and money have more in common than most of us are willing to admit?*

My Freud is rusty . . . wow, all you have to do is mention him and everything has a double entendre. OK, how about this: I have to admit this parallel wasn't operating in my conscious mind when I wrote the book. But this doesn't mean that I might not have been thinking about it, even if my Freud *was* rusty.

But in a larger sense, this question answers itself. The point is valid and yes, of course, human beings have been conflating money and sex for as long as we've had either. I do think that today, we are more likely to smile at and congratulate someone who crosses the barriers of sexual propriety -- Larry Flynt, say, or Jenna Jameson. Oddly enough we seem more shocked at the financial transgressors, those who are transparent about their greed, like Ken Lay or Dick Grasso. Both types are breaking rules that secretly we'd all like to break. But I think it's telling that we find the financial types more threatening.

*1. For Jack Acheson, writing is obviously an avenue toward self-knowledge. Has writing been a means of self-discovery for you as well?*

It has calmed me down, I can say that.

*1. Alton Acheson achieves his ends by manipulating the racist fears of those around him. For a white writer (and, really, for any writer), race can be a very touchy subject. As you worked through the racial subtext of *The King of Kings County*, what goals and effects did you wish to achieve, and what, if anything, were you taking care to avoid?*

The race story in the novel is important historically -- developers really did use racial covenants to divide cities into racial ghettos, all in the name of progress. I wanted to get that out in the open. But I also wanted to show what the complications might be -- the dangers that lay down the road -- for African-Americans who, in the 50s and 60s, were agitating for full admittance to American society.

This goes back to the question you asked earlier about innocence and commerce. In the 1950s, African-Americans were about the only group in the country that could actually claim to be innocent of -- that is, not implicated in -- the way business worked in America. They simply weren't admitted into the system.

Of course, this was a terrific injustice and the African-American community has fought, and continues to fight, a long, brilliant struggle to be admitted. But entering into the American system means, by definition, trading in that innocence. The American Dream includes Martin Luther King's dream of equality, but it also includes the dreams of Rockefeller and Ford and Lindbergh. In the 1950s, it would soon include the dreams of Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara. Today, it includes the dreams of Halliburton and Guantanamo. That, to me, is the realization that Elmore Haywood faces in the novel.

*1. Some readers are likely to view Alton Acheson as a kind of monster, but he is capable of becoming what he is only because quite a few other people are willing to buy what he has to sell them. Do you think of your novel as being more about individual pathology or social malaise?*

It's not about either. In many ways, I think you could argue that Alton Acheson is the healthiest character in the book. He's honest about what he does. By this I don't mean that he's an honest businessman. I mean he's honest with himself about his own dishonesty. He wants to be a successful developer and he has a perfectly reasonable,

historical explanation for why dishonesty is a characteristic to be prized in that business and he's not afraid to explain this to the people who most matter to him, like his wife and son. Traditionally in films and books, businessmen are made out to be hypocrites. They claim to believe in honesty and fairness and then secretly screw their neighbors. But Alton is no hypocrite. The one exception would be the Thanksgiving dinner when it is revealed that he's been dishonest with Elmore Haywood, a person whom he does care about. At that moment, I think he is very ashamed. Perhaps ruinously so.

Very often, social propriety demands that we call such people monsters. But privately, we are attracted to them because we recognize that they have a freedom we lack. Who did you want to be friends with in school? The kid polishing the teacher's apple? Or the kid out back smoking cigarettes and giving the principal the finger?

### **questions for discussion**

1. Jack Acheson cringes when his father calls him by the nickname "Nugget," and he often mentions his father's trademark yellow suit. What are the symbolic meanings of these details?
1. Elmore Haywood, Alton Acheson's black business associate, sometimes affects an exaggerated Cockney accent. Conversely, Lonnie Garaciello, an Italian American teenager, self-consciously uses ghetto dialect. Why does each character adopt the speech patterns of a different ethnic group?
1. What is the precise nature of Geanie Bowen's frustration with her position within her family and society? Is she really as idealistic and rebellious as Jack thinks she is?
1. Jack writes that he is no fan of his father's theory that a person can "suddenly arrive at a new understanding of the world and decide to change his life overnight." Nevertheless, Jack does undergo more inner change than anyone else in the novel. What are the processes by which Jack changes, and what, if any, are the critical moments in his metamorphosis?

1. How do the football games at Pemberton academy add to or reinforce Terrell's commentary on competition within society?
1. Consider the friendship between Jack and Lonnie. What are the uncomfortable aspects of their relationship? In what ways does Jack share in the responsibility for what happens to Lonnie? Does he ever truly confront this responsibility?
1. Jack, like his father, has an enormous capacity for self-deception, perhaps most powerfully in his relationship with Geanie Bowen. How do his subjective thoughts about this relationship differ from the objective truth? [I would just note that, in my opinion, Jack's capacity for self-deception very different than his father. See my response on final question above. That doesn't mean you can't ask this question.]
1. Why, after having launched a successful career in New York, does Jack return to Kansas City? Are the reasons he gives for returning credible, or are there unacknowledged forces that lure him back?
1. *The King of Kings County* speculates about destiny as a function of heredity and upbringing. A number of characters in the story struggle to escape the legacies of a prior generation, yet they tend to fall victim to the same foibles that dogged their forebears. What is Terrell saying about the imprisonments of family heritage? Do you agree with him?
1. Elmore Haywood is manipulated by Alton Acheson into thinking that he is helping himself and other black families by taking part in Acheson's real estate schemes. Later, he becomes an ever more knowing and willing accomplice in Acheson's scams. What motivates Haywood to act as he does, and how does he metamorphose from a victim to a victimizer in the course of the novel?
1. Toward the end of the novel, Jack attempts a reconciliation with his father. Do they ever really come to understand each other? Do you find their rapprochement more satisfying or disturbing? Why?
1. *The King of Kings County* raises troubling questions about the place of ethics in business dealings. Based on your impressions of the novel and on your experience, do you think the free market encourages amoral behavior? Is Alton Acheson an aberration, or is he a predictable product of the failings of America?



1. Imagine that, at the end of the novel, you are Geanie's daughter, reading Jack's narrative. What are your emotions? How do you choose to respond to the "business . . . appeal" that Jack makes in the next-to-last paragraph of the novel? What are your reasons for accepting or rejecting his offer?