



Worst. President. Ever.: James Buchanan, the POTUS Rating Game, and the Legacy of the Least of the Lesser Presidents

Robert Strauss

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Worst. President. Ever. flips the great presidential biography on its head, offering an enlightening and highly entertaining account of poor James Buchanan's presidency to prove once and for all that, well, few leaders could have done worse.

But author Robert Strauss does much more, leading readers out of Buchanan's terrible term in office meddling in the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision, exacerbating the Panic of 1857, helping foment the John Brown uprisings and Bloody Kansas, virtually inviting a half-dozen states to secede from the Union as a lame duck, and on and on to explore with insight and humor his own obsession with presidents, and ultimately the entire notion of ranking our presidents. He guides us through the POTUS rating game of historians and others who have made their own Mount Rushmores or Marianas Trenches of presidential achievement, showing why Buchanan easily loses to any of the others, but also offering insights into presidential history buffs like himself, the forgotten "lesser" presidential sites, sex and the presidency, the presidency itself, and how and why it can often take the best measures out of even the most dedicated men.

Worst. President. Ever.: James Buchanan, the POTUS Rating Game, and the Legacy of the Least of the Lesser Presidents Details

Date : Published October 1st 2016 by Lyons Press

ISBN : 9781493024834

Author : Robert Strauss

Format : Hardcover 304 pages

Genre : History, Biography, Nonfiction, Politics, Presidents, North American Hi..., American History



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From Reader Review Worst. President. Ever.: James Buchanan, the POTUS Rating Game, and the Legacy of the Least of the Lesser Presidents for online ebook

Margaret Sankey says

Strauss relies on the handful of scholars who work on Buchanan to retell the Presidency of a man who was inevitably on the wrong side of every question, passive as civil war approached, meddling when decisiveness was called for and possibly the only presidential candidate who never actively threw shade on an opponent. Where this book picks up is in the investigation of why we feel compelled to try an rank order presidents, and how sites of historical commemoration, like Buchanan's estate, Wheatlands, or Franklin & Marshall College, where he was a patron and trustee, deal with his legacy.

Nancy Breinholt says

I am hoping that reading a bunch of biographies of the worst presidents will make me feel better about the president-elect. This one did not work. I'm still horrified.

Stan Prager says

Review of: Worst. President. Ever.: James Buchanan, the POTUS Rating Game, and the Legacy of the Least of the Lesser Presidents, by Robert Strauss
by Stan Prager (3-8-17)

Worst. Biography. Ever.

Perhaps that seems overly harsh, but Worst. President. Ever.: James Buchanan, the POTUS Rating Game, and the Legacy of the Least of the Lesser Presidents, by Robert Strauss, is not only more poorly constructed than its awkwardly convoluted title, but it features some of the most abysmal writing that I have come across in years. I really hate to write bad reviews, but this is truly a very bad book, on so many levels. Even poor James Buchanan, worst president or not, deserves better than this.

Historians have been rating former presidents for some time. The top three are fairly consistent, with Washington and Lincoln typically jockeying for first place and FDR coming in third. The bottom three tends to vary from one list to another, but Buchanan is almost invariably ranked dead last, with sometimes strong competition from Warren G. Harding, Andrew Johnson, and more recently, George W. Bush. Buchanan, known in the parlance of the time as a “doughface” for his Southern sympathies, was an otherwise unexceptional career politician who waited his turn for the White House but had the bad fortune to win election as the country was coming apart over slavery. Unfortunately, he seemed to lack both the vision and the conviction to act constructively to mitigate the looming crisis, instead putting the weight of his office on the wrong side of explosive issues such as the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision, as well as the effort by pro-slavery partisans to foist the illegitimate Lecompton Constitution upon Kansas territory, where a bloody prequel to the Civil War was raging. A staunch Unionist but also a strict Constitutional constructionist, Buchanan seemed paralyzed by inaction as secession unfolded in the months between the election and inauguration of Abraham Lincoln, which then occurred in March rather than January. It was Buchanan’s

failure to act during that long interregnum that consigns him to last place by most historians who compile such rankings.

Strauss' book was released during the tumultuous 2016 election season, which made it seem all the more relevant. Buchanan, not a popular subject, has not had many biographers. While I know much about his tenure from other works on the antebellum period, I had never read his biography. But I have read more than two dozen biographies of American presidents, written for both scholarly and popular audiences. Some were masterful, some ponderous, some insightful, and still others unremarkable. I have read Flexner, Ellis, Meacham, McCullough, Donald, Remini, Dallek, Reeves, Caro and many more. The best products of this genre not only chronicle the life of its subject but adroitly explore the era when he walked the earth, revealing the complexity and nuance of people and events that a careful historian brings to a studied analysis. Unfortunately, all of that is conspicuous in its absence in Worst. President. Ever. This is especially regrettable because a quality, balanced treatment of Buchanan would be a welcome addition to the historiography.

Instead, the narrative is choppy and superficial, and offers almost no thoughtful analysis. Rife with clichés and clumsy metaphors, the author's voice utterly lacks authority. The entire book is delivered in an idiomatic, conversational tone, as if it was related by a random person sitting on the barstool next to you. While the style, if we can call it that, is suitable to a tavern milieu, it has absolutely no place in a serious work of history. And the writing is bad. Really bad. More than once I found myself flipping to the back flap of the dustjacket to confirm the author's résumé, which apparently includes reporting for the Washington Post and Sports Illustrated—and teaching a non-fiction writing class at the University of Pennsylvania! I rarely include multiple excerpts from a book in reviews, but I am going to make an exception here, for unless you read such excerpts you may judge me harshly for my harsh judgments! So here we go:

On the economic panic of 1857: "By midsummer no one could take a ride on the Reading, as Uncle Pennybags does in the Monopoly game, since it had shut down..." [p160]

Regarding Andrew Jackson's accession to the presidency: "He was a general and loved being in charge. Further, he was miffed about how the previous election had come out, with Adams and Clay back-door dealing, which he presumed meant they thought of him not smart enough to be the big boss." [p75]

On the nominating process for the election of 1852: "With Polk bowing out ... Buchanan again figured he was deserving of the nomination. His scheme was the usual ... say little controversial, and then proclaim: 'Aw, shucks, well, OK...'" [p110]

Strauss frequently makes broad, simplistic statements about critical historical events that simply made me wince. As in:

On the great issue of slavery: "Most Northerners let the issue ride. They might've been against slavery personally, but like a tic a neighbor might have that they shrugged their shoulders about, they tolerated slavery for the places where it already existed . . . [p115] And: "Still, much like the Southeastern Conference against the Big Ten in football today, whatever helps the 'team' got strong support from all concerned . . . So slavery became the chicken, not just the egg." [p133]

Clichés abound, and there are many more wild and weird analogies between Buchanan's time and ours, as well, such as:

On Buchanan's relationship with James K. Polk: "The office of secretary of state was different then than in the twentieth century and beyond. There was no jetting off to seventy-five countries a year and meeting with statesmen every week." [p107]

On Jesse Benton Fremont, wife of John C. Fremont: "Like Kris Kardashian, whose fame started when she began to burnish the reputation of her Olympian husband Bruce Jenner . . . Jesse Benton, knowing the way of politics from her father, saw that kind of legend in her husband . . . She was unafraid of what might seem like a dicey past." [p127] And on a campaign song that pays tribute to her: "It does not seem likely that calling, say, Michelle Obama or Laura Bush —or even Sarah Palin—'the flower of the land' would've made it in the feminist twenty-first century, but the song does show what a celebrity Jesse Fremont had become..." [p147] Sadly, there is much, much more of these painful passages, interspersed with occasional odd tangents about

the author's various field trips and what sparked his interest in history. Surprisingly, despite the book's subtitle, there is precious little analysis of what actually constitutes bad ratings for presidents and why Buchanan is at the bottom, although there are hints throughout, as in a discussion of the Dred Scott case that asserts: "... James Buchanan would find his way to intercede in it—and on that intercession, get quickly as he could on the road to becoming the Worst. President. Ever." [p149] There is finally a brief chapter that runs down the list of troubled presidencies and makes a poor attempt at appropriate evaluation, which can only be properly summarized by still another excerpt:

"Andrew Johnson was no prize as a president, but he did keep the country from buckling after the Civil War... Johnson was impeached because of his policies ... and survived being shown the door by just one Senate vote." [p167] And "...though he really blew it with Kansas-Nebraska, Pierce at least advocated that the Union was paramount ... Pierce was no prize but he kept the United States intact ..." Only then does Strauss pass judgment: "Buchanan, then, takes that prize. Though he had some positives, they were primarily social and short-lived. He was not an evil man personally and had a partying spirit when it came time for that, but even there, he could not bring himself to be even a mediocre administrator." [p174]

I am sure that this review will find critics among those who appreciate Strauss' chaotic, bantering style, but I am even more certain that few who would defend this work are serious students of American history. Was Buchanan really the worst president ever? Do not look to this book to find out.

The latest review: "Worst. President. Ever.: James Buchanan ..." by Robert Strauss is live on the Regarp Book Blog <https://regarp.com/2017/03/08/review-...>

Lilly says

I received this free copy for exchange of an honest review

I am not an American but I am very much interested in American history so this book compartmentalized and helped me understand a lot about James Buchanan. It's what I needed in order to comprehend James Buchanan presence as a US President in a short and clear way.

I hope more books like that will be published. As I am not someone who can judge it's content I am going to limit myself in saying that it has a great, interesting writing style, it is thorough and it's condensed enough for a good read.

Killian says

"What bet did you lose?"

This is the question Strauss was asked by a librarian during the course of his research into President James Buchanan's life. When Strauss later asked how often anyone asked to look at these Buchanan papers? The answer was "Not very". Which should give you an indication of how little regard Buchanan is given among the pantheon of former POTUS's.

Seriously, do you even know the time period when the guy was president?

Without looking it up on Wikipedia?

Yeah, me neither before this book. So I was extremely interested when I saw it on Netgalley, especially when I realized he was preceded by my boy, Franklin Pierce. This book is very well written, and clearly very well researched. The author talks about his love of presidential history, and it comes through in the details added throughout. This isn't just a biography, as the title suggests. It's also about the "POTUS Rating Game", and how historians have come to the general conclusion that James Buchanan may very well be the Worst. President. Ever. Strauss goes into quite a bit of detail on other presidents to explain why this is, and I really enjoyed reading that synopsis.

I will say that the writing meanders at places. Generally the chapters begin with the history of Buchanan and at some point they shift over into the authors experiences and opinions, or his thoughts on the POTUS ratings, etc. This resulted in several bits of repeated information that made me double take to make sure I hadn't accidentally flipped back a few pages. It was just a little annoying to me personally. I would have preferred to read all of the history together, then read all of the authors asides together.

I think it's obvious by now, but I really REALLY liked this book. I would highly recommend it to everyone, especially those who love US Presidential history. It was so interesting to read a POTUS biography that wasn't trying to paint its subject in glowing terms, but being very honest about their missteps and foibles.

I'll leave you with this list that displays a slice of the terribad things that happened during Buchanan's presidency, not all of which were his fault.

- The Dred Scott SCOTUS decision (The decision was handed down on the second day he was in office, and he was involved in this decision and thought it would halt the hostilities. I. Can't. Even.)
- Bleeding Kansas (Resulting from the Kansas-Nebraska act which was actually Pierce's baby, but the violence happened on Buchanan's watch)
- The Panic of 1857 (A recession. The year he came into office, no less)
- The Mormon Wars (aka the Utah War, but either way this was a colossal blunder of his)
- Fort Sumpter (I think we all know about this one)
- South Carolina Secession (Which happened just as Buchanan was leaving office and Lincoln was coming in.)

Copy courtesy of Rowman & Littlefield/Lyons Press, via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Dave Milbrandt says

I received a complimentary copy of *Worst. President. Ever.* from Rowman & Littlefield in an exchange for an honest evaluation of its merits. And, toward that end, I can say I loved this book. A bit of a presidential history nut myself (McCullough and Brands are my favorite writers in the genre), I must admit I've fallen in love with the narrative style of Robert Strauss. While people often talk about a writer's conversational style, this book actually reads like you two are spending an afternoon at a coffee house or a local watering hole chatting about the triumphs and (mostly) travails of James Buchanan. There is definitely a healthy dose of humor with the serious reflection, and his explanation about how challenging it was to gather information on Buchanan and what those who possessed these artifacts thought about him is fascinating as well. When I go to D.C. next time, I'll definitely want to see the Buchanan statue. I doubt it will be on the regular tour.

Since Strauss is dealing with one of the lesser presidents who has been dead for decades, he is under no obligation to gild the lily, as it were. Therefore, his sober analysis gives us insight into the mistakes presidents make and how that impacts their legacy and the nation. While it is easy to market a glowing tribute or a scathing critique, if more presidential biographies were written like Strauss' piece on Buchanan, I think we would be much better served.

Carin says

I read this book in the wake of the election. It hopefully is getting a bit of a boost from that. After all, reading about the worst president ever (up until now), is a good way to try to look and see what might lie ahead.

Buchanan was the first president who wasn't either a Founding Father or a war hero. He was rather, a professional politician (a lawyer when he was between political gigs) and he did have spectacularly bad timing. Few people would have been able to do much with the mess of those years. However, considering that Lincoln did so spectacularly well with the only years that were worse, shows it certainly could be done. The worst thing that he did, over and over again, was nothing. He wouldn't make decisions. He wouldn't make a tough call. He'd try to wait out a tricky situation. But you can't do that when states are threatening to secede from the union. That's not the time to sit on your hands and hope time heals all wounds.

Interestingly he was also at the time our oldest president, and the only one a bachelor (his niece happily stepped in to perform all the First Lady tasks) and possibly also our first gay president, although we'll never really know the truth there. Being back-to-back with Lincoln does nothing to burnish his reputation, although the reverse is also true as his predecessor is also one of the 5 worst so he could have looked good in comparison. What I found the most intriguing was that at this time, in the early to mid 1800s, We had a real string of forgettable and inconsequential presidents, and yet we had a lot of non-president statesmen who were impressive and spectacular (like Henry Clay and James Seward.) So why were we electing these yahoos? The nominating system worked less well then and of course our bizarre electoral college has never helped. More than once in these years, the candidates running were hoping no one would get a plurality of votes and the Congress would have to decide the president. That strikes one as an odd tactic in today's world.

Interspersed through this biography, Strauss gives us a rundown of the other presidents vying for the sobriquet of Worst. The good thing (so far) is that all of our bad presidents have been impressively ineffectual and they just don't do anything. It's possible that in four years we'll not only revise the list, but that we'll finally have someone who stands out as actually accomplishing negative things, but we can always hope for another Know Nothing campaign and a Do-Nothing Congress to mitigate.

I also realized upon reading this that I have only read one other straightforward presidential biography (not including Lincoln's Melancholy which is pretty narrowly-focused) so I ought to probably read another one. It's sad that of the only two I've read, one was of the worst president. (The other was John Adams by David McCullough so that compensates in a lot of ways.)

Regardless of whether you fear the next four years, this was an entertaining and amusing biography, and we ought to learn from our mistakes so we don't repeat them, which means we should study the worst president alongside studying the best.

Kusaimamekirai says

Can you really say you enjoyed a book about James Buchanan?

Well now you can!

Honestly, unless you're a civil war nerd (I was talking with a friend about Andrew Johnson recently and realized my friend had no idea who he was) you have little reason to know who he was.

By most accounts, a decent enough guy, not outstanding in anything. Fittingly the oldest man at the time to assume the presidency, Buchanan, when he acted at all, did things extremely slowly.

Besides visiting murder friends in jail, sending overwhelming military force to bully Paraguay(!), prejudicing Supreme Court rulings, and letting the civil war happen, all in 4 years, he was pretty mediocre.

The story from this book that sums up an indecisive and invariably wrong footed Buchanan comes from his former Secretary of State Lewis Cass who describes him as daily either sobbing inconsolably or praying.

We may have some dark days on the horizon in America. But at least we can say our president isn't James Buchanan.

Christie Bane says

This book is a delightful departure from the long stretch of dull, shallow presidential biographies I've been reading. I mean, look at the title, how could it not be a great book!

James Buchanan is considered the worst president ever by almost everyone that rates presidents. There are lots of reasons why. He was a lifelong politician, but always a mediocre one. To be elected in his time, you almost had to be mediocre, because anyone with strong opinions was defeated. He waffled on everything, contradicted himself regularly, and did not like to commit to anything. He did more to contribute to the start of the Civil War than any other president (including backing the terrible Dred Scott Supreme Court decision, allowing South Carolina to secede, and supporting the Kansas-Nebraska Act) and did absolutely nothing to stop it. Even in his retirement, he refused to accept any blame for the Civil War, instead choosing to blame it on Northern abolitionist radicals who inflamed the South and forced them to secede. His biggest failing to me seems to be the fact that he could look at the state of the Union and think that it would somehow work itself out. (Like, seriously... how?)

This book was better than most because it was not only about Buchanan; it also provided a thorough discussion of how presidents are rated and why we find it so irresistible to rate them. What makes Buchanan so much worse than the other bad presidents? This author can tell you.

Side note: Buchanan was the only president who never married, and although some "historians" have tried to point to indications that he may have been gay, that evidence is pretty sketchy in my book. It's way easier to believe that Eleanor Roosevelt had a girlfriend than that James Buchanan had a boyfriend.

Paul Gibson says

Worst. Book. Ever.

I've read many of the most recent history books over the past few years. They have been a great way to read history as an adult. This book isn't one of them. I didn't think it was humorous; I didn't find it well written or enlightening. And although some of my reviews say as much about me as they do the book, this book

itself says more about the author than the the subject. And since I can't say anything good about this book, I'll not say anymore.

Jean says

James Buchanan (1791-1868) the 15th President was a Pennsylvanian and a Southern Democrat. According to author, Robert Strauss, he was the worst president ever. Strauss states he meddled in the Supreme Court decision in the matter of a runaway slave Dred Scott. Strauss states Buchanan managed to trash almost everything he touched most of all setting the Civil War into motion.

Strauss states Buchanan was arrogant, misaligned, indecisive, misread current events and was a self-styled strict constructionist. Apparently, he also refused to listen to or seek good counsel. Strauss states his two closes rivals for the worst president are Warren G. Harding and Franklin Pierce.

The writing is average but the book is well researched. The book is written in an entertaining and humorous fashion. This is not a scholarly academic book. The author has overstated and simplified situations to make his point. The factors leading to the Civil War were years in the making and far more complex than indicated by the author. But the book was fun to read and highlighted a lesser known president.

Tom Perkins did a good job narrating the book. Perkins is an award-winning audiobook narrator.

James (JD) Dittes says

Strauss has written a very good book about a very, very bad president--James Buchanan.

Buchanan's presidency is (for good reasons) largely forgotten. This is, in part, because he was incompetent, but he also preceded the Greatest. President. Ever, whose vision for the United States fulfilled the destiny set out in the Declaration of Independence and affirmed in that president's own "Gettysburg Address."

Lincoln-centered readers of American history fail to recognize that South Carolina--then Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas--seceded from the United States in the five months between Lincoln's election and the beginning of his term. In other words, Buchanan had his hand on the tiller of the ship of state during these crucial months when it foundered! His convoluted reason for doing nothing--that states did not have the right to secede but the president was constitutionally powerless to stop them--is well explained by Strauss.

Other forgotten missteps of the Buchanan presidency are also explained--an aborted Pig War with Britain over a dinky island in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, efforts to purchase Cuba to add to the slave states, and a panic in 1857 do Buchanan few favors. Ultimately the bachelor president's lasting contribution to Washington was the energy of his "first lady," his niece, Harriet Lane, who was a player in the DC and Baltimore social scene for the rest of the century.

Strauss writes in an engaging manner. A native Pennsylvanian, he slips in personal anecdotes about ties between the Keystone State and the characters in his book (we learn, for example, that William Henry

Harrison is the only president to have attended UPenn, even if it was for a few weeks of medical school). Strauss's style makes his discussion of Buchanan's accomplishments, political enemies (Andrew Jackson, Stephen Douglas) and prevarications very readable.

Strauss also discusses other contenders for Worst. President. Ever, making a case that Harding, Pierce, Hoover and Bush were nowhere near the bottom established by Buchanan. He also explores rumors about the homosexuality of the 15th President, but he doesn't seem to put much stock in them.

Thanks to NetGalley for letting me preview this book. It deserves a broad audience. It brings to life a key period in American history--the interregnum between Jackson and Lincoln--that many history books leave out.

Al Young says

With its title, cover and premise, I couldn't not pick up this book. Strauss suggests that there are plenty of books written about the guys on Rushmore, but not one writes about the least great Presidents. He also suggest we can learn from that.

Indeed, he says there have only four attempts at a Buchanan biography, and the most recent was part of a complete Presidential set, so he had to be written about.

As much as the book talks about Buchanan, it also discusses how we rate Presidents, and who is truly worst-with nods to Harding, Pierce, Hoover, Nixon, Carter, Dubya and all the others.

Buchanan does have a pretty solid resume in this regard. He had a career of being indecisive- but when he made decisions as President he seemed to make the wrong ones. This included possibly influencing the Dred Scott Decision, making the financial Panic of 1857 even worse, being ineffectual against John Brown and in "Bleeding Kansas" and starting pointless international incidents with Paraguay (!) and Canada (I had completely forgot about the Pig War, which was an I Can Read book by Betty Baker which was available in my grade school.)as well as against the Mormons in Utah.

There is a bit of a nod to 2016 with Buchanan being one of the most President-ready candidates. He had been Secretary of State, a Congressman, an ambassador to Russia and Britain. He had been a surefire candidate for at least three election cycles, though his bumbling made it that he did not get to run as the young firebrand, but instead as a much elder statesman.

Strauss makes an interesting point about the string of Presidents from Jackson to Lincoln, which contains some of our lowest points. Yet, also an era that gave us some of our greatest minds or at least were leaders of men- Henry Clay, John C Calhoun, Daniel Webster, William Seward, Thomas Hart Benson, Stephen Douglas, Jefferson Davis.

It's an interesting point that he makes that people like Clay didn't win (though Clay, Calhoun and Webster all ran), likely because they took bold stands, and spent their careers making bold stands in Congress.

Whereas the country nominated and elected those that might be considered moderate. Buchanan was obsessed with the Presidency from the start. He often took no stand or both stands on an issue. He grew up in a heavy Federalist district and became a Democrat when the Federalists folded.

Andrew Jackson hated his ambition and sent him to Russia, where Buchanan had a major deal signed with the Czar. As a cabinet member and ambassador, he did not have his stances tied to votes, and won the nomination by being a bit of a waffler.

Buchanan's main reason for success was he could throw great parties. The book does talk about the rumor Buchanan was gay, but the author does not seem to find much evidence there.

The main case against Buchanan was that he did not believe the country should stop succession, or any case did little to stop it. Also, the country was probably going down a path where conflict might be inevitable, but Buchanan instead of taking marked steps like the Compromise of 1850, seemed to think the whole slavery issue would go away. Franklin Pierce was guilty of many of the same things Buchanan was, but he was in favor of keeping the union above all else.

This book was right down my alley. It did get repetitive, and at times was a bit clunky. The book tries to do two things- rank the worst Presidents (or advise against doing that), and Strauss also really wants to write a respectable Buchanan biography. He tries to make it a fun read as evidenced by the title, but he has done his research on Buchanan and wants to make sure he is presenting that as well.

It's hard not to agree with the conclusion. Buchanan was one of the most qualified candidates for the job, but he also was fed by ambition and took stands for personal gain instead of principle. There were some bad Presidents, but his refusal to do much of anything about succession, puts him on top.

Tracey says

Was James Buchanan the worst president ever? (I'm sorry – I refuse to copy the title's punctuation.) Maybe he was. Maybe not. I'm not sure this author is persuasive enough to make me agree with him.

Part of it is that he takes large chunks of a not-very-long book into discussion of topics that have nothing whatever to do with Buchanan or his fitness, such as a long chunk about a quarter of the way in about how he became interested in presidents in general and Buchanan in particular. Because Strauss loved sports statistics, you see, his father gave him a book about presidential trivia. Wait, what - ? (Also, if I were his daughter Sylvia, I am not sure I'd speak to him for quite a while after reading this. Sylvia does not come off as a very appealing person. Who knows – maybe Strauss used the same gimmick as William Goldman did in *The Princess Bride* and the daughter was fictional.) The beginning of the presidency in question doesn't come until the sixty percent mark; the first 60% of the book is spent on the history of slavery and the country and the previous fourteen presidents. Oh, and the first sixty-odd years of Buchanan's life. It seems to be a symptom of the fact that there just isn't that much info about the man; in order to flesh out an entire book it had to cover him from birth, however irrelevant his childhood might be to how good or bad his presidency was.) There's a lot of what really feels like padding; without much effort, this book could have been trimmed of 100 pages. Or cut in half.

Also padding-like is the relentless repetition. Treating chronology with blithe disregard, the author loops back around and around to the Dred Scott Decision, or the death of Ann Coleman (the beloved of the young Buchanan), or the death of Pierce's son, or that revenue cutter named after Harriet Lane, or Harper's Ferry...

Another problem I had with the book is that he leans, very heavily, on the few previous biographers there are out there, quoting from them liberally. It's to be expected, I suppose, given how little there is about Buchanan

out there, but it happens often enough that it begins to feel like simple regurgitation. It's pretty funny when he disparages one biographer's ability to "present an engaging story".

And really, I don't think the popularity of a president's first name is exactly relevant when trying to determine the best or worst. It's not like "Abraham" has been one of the top hundred baby names over the past hundred years (I checked).

The writing ... This might sound hypocritical, given that I have a decent vocabulary and like to use it when I perhaps don't really need to, but I think I know when to stop. I truly, sincerely hope I've never been guilty of a pompous sentence like "My contrarian antennae had been raised to their acme." Things like "Litchfield, a town nearby Yale" are not only awkward but inaccurate; New Haven is over an hour from Litchfield. The Masons are referred to as "a somewhat secretive organization", which is like saying *Pulp Fiction* is somewhat profane. I've never understood "horse riders". And it seemed like a whole lot of sentences featured a minimum of three or four commas. (I'm sorry, I have to use one more quote, which is both a great example of this and also of yet another thing that was reiterated over and over: "When it became clear, though, that eventually, with all the westward expansion, the South would turn from an equal section to a minority one, abolitionists, who had just been a nuisance, started really bothering Southerners." Seven commas.) Sometimes there are dashes. I'm not supposed to use quotes from the advance copy, so I'll stop there, but I've gotten in the habit of putting one note on particularly odd or off passages when I highlight them on the Kindle: "wut?" There were a lot of "wuts" in this book.

One more thing that left me a bit gobsmacked was a quote from a former university history professor that "They certainly didn't have the word 'gay' back then" ... Um. They kinda did. It had a different primary definition "back then". The author ponders how, although there is conjecture that Buchanan was homosexual, he was never rumored in his own time to be dating another man. How surprising.

He compares Thomas Hart Benton's daughter to Kris Kardashian. I ... *sigh*

The usual disclaimer: I received this book via Netgalley for review.

Barry says

I enjoyed Mr. Strauss's book on Buchanan and on rating the worst presidencies. This confirmed my understanding that Buchanan was elected largely because he was noncontroversial and "available" and had been out of the country as Ambassador to Great Britain in 1853-56. Mr. Strauss writes of Buchanan as a timid politician who essentially froze in place in the period between Abraham Lincoln's election in November 1860 and his inauguration in March 1861. My own evolving sense was previously to rate Andrew Johnson one notch lower than Buchanan since Johnson was very deliberate in thwarting hopes for a humane two-sided reconstruction that protected African Americans, whereas Buchanan was an inept politician albeit with pro-Union intentions - no statesman or problem-solver - who continued the slide of the Pierce-Buchanan Doughface tag team toward a Civil War that might have been inevitable by 1860 given Deep South attitudes. But Mr. Strauss does tout some facts pulling for Buchanan as worst ever. E.g., I was not aware that Buchanan had intervened, even before his inauguration, to swing votes for the Dred Scott decision and therefore to enable a broader decision. Mr. Strauss also points out that Buchanan could have handled the John Brown trial much differently. The country could certainly have used a good powerful statesman at this point.

I also thought that Mr. Strauss's writing style, while informal as other readers have commented, was very charming. I felt like I could have enjoyed a beer with Mr. Strauss and gotten into some excited conversations!
