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Last Chapter of a Storybook Campaign

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By Eugene Robinson
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In a week and a half, it'll be over. What will we do to fill the void in our lives?

Opinion surveys, voter registration totals and cable television ratings indicate that Americans have been engrossed by the marathon presidential campaign. That's no surprise, given the first-in-history nature of the candidacies, the host of crucial problems we face and the sense that the outcome may determine the course -- and the prospects -- of our nation for many years to come.

But there's a fine line between being engrossed and being obsessed, and many of us have crossed it.

Last week in Los Angeles, I met a lawyer who said her husband has had to set strict limits on the amount of time she spends each day watching cable news and checking the latest tracking polls on the Internet. She said she welcomed the intervention. She has a 16-month-old son, and every day she takes a break from the exhausting task of chasing a toddler around the house. But instead of using that personal time to put her feet up or take a nap, she found herself sitting at the computer comparing Gallup's daily tracking poll with Rasmussen's.

In Indiana, I met a college professor whose detailed familiarity with every nook and cranny of the [Pollster.com](#) Web site was a little frightening. In the course of our conversation, I mentioned another site that aggregates poll data -- [RealClearPolitics.com](#) -- and when I saw her make a mental note I immediately regretted the indiscretion. I had inadvertently sentenced her to even more hours of obsessive behavior.

People who strike up conversations with me in airports or on the street almost always go much deeper than the general question of whether [Barack Obama](#) or [John McCain](#) will -- or should -- prevail on Nov. 4. They ask whether Virginia has now gone "solid" for Obama or is still just "leaning" that way, whether Missouri's status as a bellwether is a significant fact or a statistical accident, whether the so-called Bradley effect is real, and whether the trend toward early voting is likely to favor Democrats or Republicans.

I get paid to obsess about the election, but these are civilians I'm talking about. Sometimes I think I'm hearing a cry for help.

It feels as if we've been making our way through some great epic novel, by Tolstoy, perhaps, or Thomas Pynchon -- a book peopled by indelible characters who act against the backdrop of sweeping events. Just think back to where we started. On New Year's Day, the conventional wisdom was that the general election would be an [Empire State contest](#) between [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Rudy Giuliani](#).

So much for the conventionally wise. The Iowa caucuses were the equivalent of the famous opening line of "[Gravity's Rainbow](#)," Pynchon's masterpiece: "A screaming comes across the sky."

In the course of the long narrative, some characters emerged from nowhere -- [Joe the Plumber](#), for example -- had a dramatic impact, and then disappeared -- [Jeremiah Wright](#), for example. Others went away but returned unexpectedly, such as Giuliani, who came back to lead [Republican convention](#) delegates in the unforgettable chant "Drill, baby, drill." Or John Edwards, who dropped out of the race but later resurfaced at a Beverly Hills hotel, hiding from [National Enquirer](#) reporters chasing a tip that he was visiting his mistress.

As for plot twists, I can think of few in literature that compare with the sudden emergence of [Sarah Palin](#). If you look closely at the [video clip](#) of her appearance on "[Saturday Night Live](#)," when she's in the hallway talking to [Alec Baldwin](#) and SNL honcho [Lorne Michaels](#), a man dressed like [Abraham Lincoln](#) is in the background with what appears to be a llama. That's the kind of year it's been.

We're now at a bittersweet point that's analogous to reaching the middle of the final chapter. We want to race ahead and find out what happens. We want to know if our hero -- Obama or McCain -- is victorious. But we also know that when we finally get the answer, we'll have to exit the alternative reality of narrative, atmosphere and emotion that we've inhabited for months. We'll be bereft.

We'll have something to savor, though. After Election Day has come and gone, we -- at least those of us who bother to vote -- will know that the time we spent obsessing about the campaign was worth it. That's because we'll be the ones who decided how the story ended.

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