Covering the 1988 presidential primaries, the writer Joan Didion described Governor Michael Dukakis tossing a baseball (provided by his press secretary) back and forth with his daughter on the San Diego airport tarmac ; a moment of levity caught on film.

Didion was later told by a CNN producer that the same family game of catch had occurred during an earlier campaign stop at a bowling alley but, “When the campaign realized that only one camera had it, they restaged it.”

“The narrative,” Didion explained, “is made up of many such understandings, tacit agreements, small and large, to overlook the observable in the interests of obtaining a dramatic story line.”

Politics is rivalry, as is fiction. There is no Hamlet without Claudius, no Frodo without Sauron, no Josef K without obstructive, cruel administrators. And characters in fiction and politics emerge by giving their audience reasons to side with or against them. (One obvious difference, however, is that while politicians legislate our lives, fictional characters tend not to.)

Despite, or perhaps because of, the seriousness of government, we are compelled to make sense of it by being entertained. A voter’s exposure to the people who run the country is delivered via one-way broadcast, and this mode of dissemination and consumption rewards archetypes.

2016’s most efficient use of characterisation has been Donald Trump’s foisting of derisive nicknames upon his opponents: Little Marco, Lyin’ Ted, and then Crooked Hillary and Crazy Bernie. These are picture book names, vicious in their clarity and, for the victims, inescapable. The characterisation becomes the story .

The most striking local instance of this ruthless caricaturing was Peta Credlin inaugurating the 2016 election campaign by labelling the Prime Minister Mr Harbourside Mansion , a sobriquet that stuck.

Tony Abbott paved his path to the Prime Ministership by defining Julia Gillard (a synecdoche for her government) as untrustworthy. Those who remember Labor's brief, hopeless foray into re-pitching Gillard as the “real” Julia will recognise that this was mocked not because of the move's ironically blatant superficiality, but because the new character was unconvincing.

In opposition and government Abbott showed extraordinary skill at articulating his own clear character, which is why jarring incidents like his biting into a raw onion and slyly winking at Jon Faine achieved such notoriety. These surreal scenes, endlessly replayed, offered glimpses of what might lie beneath the three word slogans.

On the other hand, Shorten spent the months leading up to this election campaign casting about for a distinct persona, undergoing a quiet transformation that apparently included dropping 15 kilos. His oddly human moments on the campaign trail – such as being aggressively kissed in Adelaide and participating in a multi-step handshake with a Western Sydney youth – are memorable because they contrast so startlingly with his otherwise flavourless identity.

Politicians will occasionally purport to abandon the facade; Scott Morrison attempting a rebrand by appearing on Annabel Crabb's ferociously genial Kitchen Cabinet comes to mind. But this simply swaps one mask for another. The audience might discover something new, but is unlikely to be any closer to knowing what is real.

For Didion, Ronald Reagan was the American politician to most wholeheartedly embrace his own fictionality. Reagan fabricated stories in which he played the starring role, including telling the Prime Minister of Israel that he "filmed Nazi death camps for the Signal Corps," when, in fact, he had spent the war in Culver City. Didion credits this to "his tendency to see the presidency as a script waiting to be solved."

Literature professor John Frow has suggested that a character’s believability is dependent on "the fragile 'let's pretend' moment that precedes all narration." So when we

believe in politics what are we pretending?

Media coverage of an election cycle relies on the pretence that we understand the link between political performance and politician, that we can be shown the character and know the person.

To some degree, every social relationship involves this tenuous leap of faith (we can never be certain of what anyone will do next) but in politics the leap is amplified. This means that the campaign trail consists of politicians, in symbiosis with cameras and commentators, trying for a kind of distorted intimacy with the electorate.

Most media coverage presumes voters will consider the pros and cons of, say, Turnbull as they might, in book club, discuss Elizabeth Bennet or Edward Casaubon. Do we like the character? Do we like what the author has done with him?

The media judges game-playing: how adeptly and consistently a distant fictional character inhabits another slightly less distant fictional character. How does the new Turnbull compare to the old ? How will this Trump character " pivot " to target the general election?

Trump was, in fact, recently outed by former campaign staffer Stephanie Cegielski as " a work of fiction ," and it has become increasingly clear that the success of his narrative of false nostalgia for a once-great America depends on the country’s existential fear .

Fictional does not necessarily mean trivial or misleading. It often means the opposite. Fiction offers some of the best ways of thinking through how we know the world; it shows how to use metaphor, how to imagine what others might think of us, how to reorient what we think of others. Characters are compensated for an elegant narrative or dazzling performance with audience love and attention.

But the sort of fiction election coverage yields is rarely nuanced, complex or empathetic. It is constructed to entertain, quick to judge and quick to forget. It is bad pulp.

In a recent interview with The New York Times, Barack Obama, when asked about the nature of his legacy, said,

It's very hard for me to engage that […] there's me, and then there's this character named 'Barack Obama' who is slightly different on Fox News than he is on MSNBC. I wouldn't vote for the Barack Obama on Fox News probably.

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Read more http://theconversation.com/why-politicians-and-fictional-characters-have-a-lot-in-common-51312