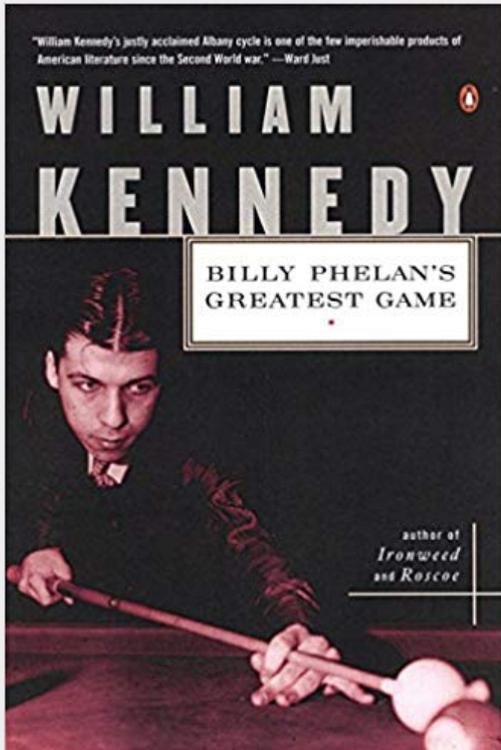


## Billy Phelan's Greatest Game by William Kennedy



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**Author:** William Kennedy

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The second novel in William Kennedy's much-loved Albany cycle depicts Billy Phelan, a slightly tarnished poker player, pool hustler, and small-time bookie. A resourceful man full of Irish pluck, Billy works the fringes of the Albany sporting life with his own particular style and private code of honor, until he finds himself in the dangerous position of potential go-between in the kidnapping of a political boss's son.



## Reviews of the **Billy Phelan's Greatest Game** by William Kennedy

### 1. Impala Frozen

For a good reason. I cannot root against an honorable man, even if, especially if, he is playing around the fringes of right and wrong. Billy

Phelan is an honorable man. A fascinating character. A winner that loses, but like a cat, lands on his feet.

Mr. Kennedy, thank you very much for Billy Phelan's Greatest Game. A great book that I didn't want to end. If you like historically based fiction, I cannot recommend William Kennedy's Albany books, and especially Billy Phelan highly enough.

## 2. Zepavitta

I got this book for my husband. He enjoys the author, and loved the book.

## 3. Samugul

Kennedy's Albany cycle includes a treasure of books on politics and crime in New York's capital city, circa the Depression era. What a find, I thought - a whole series to look forward to! But Billy Phelan left me flat. Despite all the prizes Kennedy has won, and the rave reviews his books seem to have garnered, I simply found this one depressing and not very interesting. I'm certainly into American history, and the Depression offers myriad opportunities for intriguing stories, but I couldn't get into this one.

One drawback is no doubt my fault. So many characters were introduced that I had to keep referring back to set up relationships and actions. This got tiring after a while, so I just gave up, and never finished the book. Beyond that, I didn't think any of the characters, including Billy, were developed sufficiently to give me much insight into their personalities, psychological deficiencies, and motives - or an incentive to continue.

The Depression-era underworld is fascinating, but where is Elliott Ness when we need him?

#### 4. Trash Obsession

This is a tough call. The more I read, the less I liked this book -- a phenomenon that rarely happens. Because it is a short book and has a dynamic plot, I was happy to read to its conclusion, but I found myself liking the characters and the book less and less as I turned the page.

Also, I found it to be less and less believable as I moved more deeply into it. Again, this is not what I expected, given that it's a gritty, true-to-life type of book that, theoretically, would draw you into its town, its time and its characters.

The book follows the intersecting lives of a bunch of low-level hoodlums, losers and political fixers in Albany, NY, after World War II. Apparently, Albany had a string of crappy bars and houses of prostitution that were flourishing in those years, surely building off servicing the politicians and the business leaders who flocked to the capital to "buy" politicians. One of the remarkable things to me was that there could be literally four or five neighborhoods each with a half-dozen or more closely located bars that were serving the same clientele: men who spent their time on horses, the numbers, pool, drinking and trying to find a woman for an hour's pleasure. I guess it's possible that all of these areas existed at the time, but it's surprising to me that so much vice could exist so openly in a relatively small town. And how did the guys have the money, since they were really picking up \$10 here or there to get through the day?

So it's a seamy and depressing life. It has its charm in a sense, as in you're not on the clock of an office or factory, and you can test your manhood in bar fights and other types of one-up-manship on a regular basis. That's what Billy Phelan, the person followed most closely in the book, does. He's a natural at everything, but one of those guys who just doesn't seem to care about anything. The book opens with him bowling a 299, that is, 11 strikes in a row and then a 9 on his last ball. In doing so, he wins a bet against an obnoxious other bowler, and Billy gets off a memorable line that I won't quote here so as not to ruin the surprise. Incidentally, this game takes place at like 2 am in a smoke-filled alley with everyone drinking and betting on the outcome. That's the atmosphere for the entire book.

It turns out that Billy is a great pool hustler, and the book describes him either beating some people outright or hustling them with a fake loss so that he can reel them in at a later date. Often, he's backed in betting by Morris, who seems to have Jewish mob connections.

Oh, and Billy was a great baseball player as a kid, just like his dad, who

was professional caliber but who left town when he killed a man, which ruined his chance at a baseball career. The dad came back to town, had a family, and then left them due to a tragedy that is told midway through the book (and later) when his broken dad, a drunk bum, stumbles back into Billy's life for the first time in more than 20 years. That reunion goes about as well as can be expected.

Anyway, the plot is moved ahead because one of the guys at that 299-bowling game is the adult son of the local political boss. He's actually on the losing side of the bet. Returning home after the game, he's kidnapped at 4 am. The plot from then forward is how his father and his father's associates negotiate to get him back and enlist all of the low-lives like Billy, Morris, and others to be go-betweens with the kidnapers and also to figure out if maybe they were in on the crime. This leads Billy to have a direct meeting with the boss, Patsy McCall, which he's wisely avoided because it's never good to have to meet with Patsy. And of course Billy insults Patsy and gets the worst penalty that a grifter can get: refused access to all the dive bars in Albany, which Patsy controls.

I should mention that in the few days from the bowling to the resolution of the kidnapping, Billy hustles pool, exposes a cheat at poker and nearly gets shot, gets beat up and does some beating, sleeps with a couple of women and bums several hundred dollars off people to repay a big horse race parlay bet that the town's leading newspaper columnist and reporter placed with him on a hunch. That columnist-reporter is sort of the omniscience voice in the book, and actually, the reporter is the person who becomes the ultimate contact with the kidnapers, after Billy refuses to help (on the grounds that he's not a snitch).

As these events unfold, I found it hard to believe that they could happen to a single person in the course of a week, and that the person could remain standing, nor that the person hadn't been killed in similar circumstances if that's what a typical week was like for him. Also, I found a few of the details getting more and more preposterous as the book unfolded. The most egregious was the timely return for a one-week theatrical engagement of the ex-girlfriend of the columnist-reporter's father. The reporter's dad was a successful playwright and novelist whose star faded until there was a revival of a play he wrote about his affair with a beautiful young girl. That girl played herself in a silent movie version of the play that made the novelist famous for life, though he basically abandoned his family when he got a modicum of fame and fortune. In the revival on-stage, the woman, now 49, plays the wife who was cheated on (that is, the reporter's mother), and to rave reviews on Broadway.

But here's the twist. A few years earlier, the reporter had a 3-day fling with that woman -- remember, it's his father's lover -- and it's an unrequited lust on both sides. It was on the weekend of his 40th birthday,

which he spent with the actress rather than his wife and young son. So, inevitably, he meets up with her and they have crazy sex multiple times, though the guy is married. And that whole scenario is ridiculous. Why this movie star wants the son of her lover is beyond me. The idea that they had sex for 3 days straight, except for a couple of meals, is preposterous. The idea that she would come back to town and literally open her gown to him in about 30 seconds and with, uh, special shaving, is ridiculous, too. So that's when the book moves to farce, I guess, even though it's not a farce, and not really even a black comedy. These scenes aren't looking good in the "#MeToo" era.

Overall, the book does a great job of setting an atmosphere and revealing a way of life. It's not a life I want to lead -- I'd be bored out of my mind in bars night after night, and I'd be physically sick from the drinking and crappy food. But it's a life that has its rouge-ish charm. And I think it is true to what Albany was like in its post-WWII heyday, even if the actions are compressed into a hard-to-believe short time line in order to make it a short novel.

## 5. Mezilabar

This is book #2 of the so-called Albany cycle of books, preceded by *Legs* and followed by *Ironweed*. Wm Kennedy is a heck of a writer. Yes, it is a story set in Albany, NY (Kennedy's hometown), but it is much more than a book about the Depression era city. It is a well written story about Irish-Catholics, political power, friends and family, father-son relationships and much more. The story revolves primarily around 1930s "hipster" Billy Phelan and a newspaperman named Martin Daugherty. An alleged kidnapping takes place and both Daugherty and Phelan (very reluctantly) become involved. Phelan makes his way in the world and lives by a strict personal code. He lives in the world and is a part of the world as a street hustler. He runs a numbers operation and makes money bowling and playing cards and billiards. Great chapters on a bowling match, a card game, and a billiards match. Billy is smooth. Everyone is always having a drink or a woman. Billy bails his father out of jail, a man he has not seen in more than 20 years. This is our introduction to Francis Phelan, a down and outer, who had been arrested for registering to vote more than 20 times. Daugherty struggles with the past and relationships with his father, his son, and his father's paramour. Daugherty's young son wants to become a priest and the father wants his son to live. Lot of stuff going, a lot of interesting characters. An insightful story about the workings of

political power, in this case the Irish-Catholic democrats in Albany. There is a blown-up photo (on the wall of a bar) of a summer group picture of the bar's regular patrons. When one dies a star is placed on the deceased person. At the end of the story Billy laments that three have recently died. Such is life. Time and life's events take place but life marches on. I think you will find this book an enjoyable read, earthy and grounded, but with people you will like. Billy's greatest game is "getting by" in life and living his life by his own code of conduct. Not always easy. Real people with all their flaws. Well done, Mr Kennedy.

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