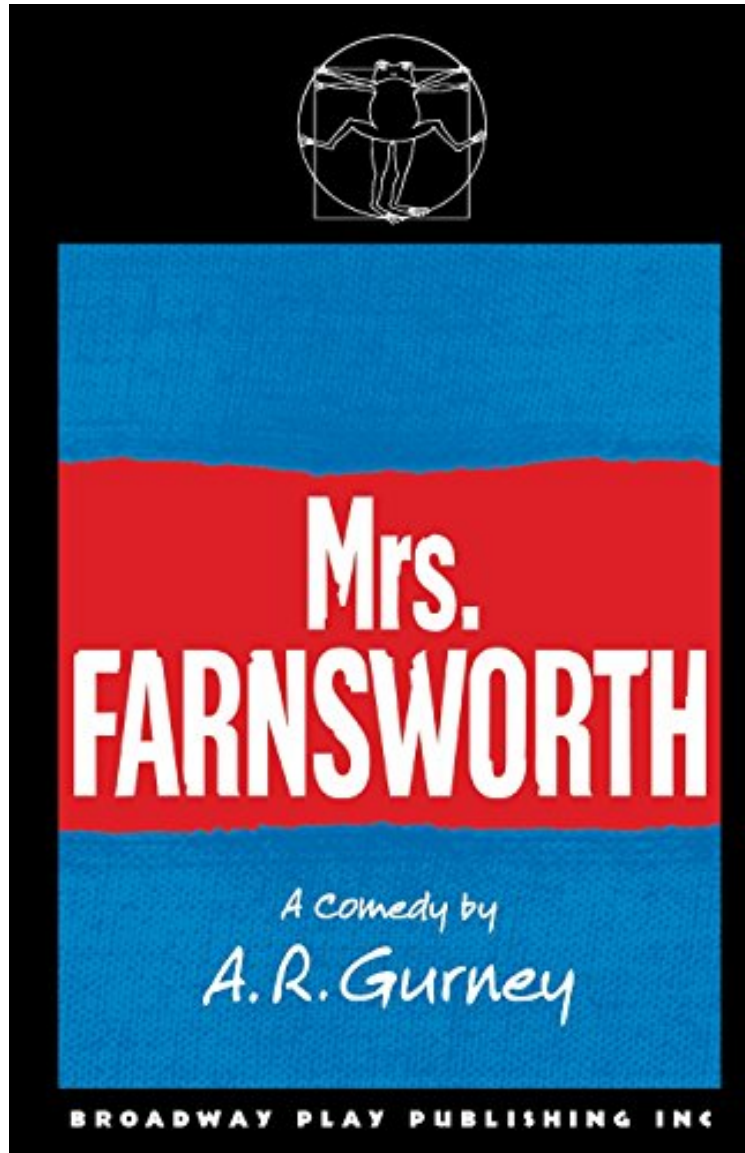


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Mrs Farnsworth

A R Gurney

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A R Gurney : Mrs Farnsworth before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mrs Farnsworth:

"Politicians poised to sling mud might take a pointer or two from A R Gurney: Good manners can be lethal weapons, and a glancing sideswipe may cause more damage than a punch in the nose. An expert demonstration of such tactics is

on ... in Mr Gurney's disarming new play, *MRS FARNSWORTH* ... Though it deals with revelations that are the stuff of smear campaigns, *MRS FARNSWORTH* is as polite and sweetly subversive a political attack as you're likely ever to come across. ...Mr Gurney's latest offering feels as if it's spoken out of the side of the mouth, sotto voce through a firmly locked jaw. Well, jaws would be locked, as this is Gurney country, land of the endangered species called WASP ... fine specimens of this breed: wealthy, inhibited folk who wear their sense of entitlement with sheepishness and smugness. They're people you might run across at a Bush fund-raiser. Mr Bush, however, would be woefully mistaken to perceive them as allies ... *MRS FARNSWORTH* is set in a creative-writing class in Manhattan, run by a sardonic, harried teacher named Gordon. Class is under way when a resplendently well-groomed student makes a late and incongruous entrance, like a rara avis in an urban pigeon coop. That's the pastel-clad Marjorie Farnsworth, fresh from the Connecticut suburbs and fluttering with apologies. It seems she wants to learn to write because she has a story that urgently needs to be told. It's the tale of a Vassar girl who becomes pregnant by a hard-partying Yale boy, who then pays her (by proxy) to have an abortion. Mrs Farnsworth's narrative starts to sound like a memoir in which only the names have been changed. Could be the boy in question be the young George W Bush? The left-leaning Gordon is atremble with excitement. Despite surface evidence, Mrs Farnsworth is a registered Democrat, deeply concerned about the state of the nation and keen on making her tale public. There is, however, one serious problem, she says: her disapproving husband. Enter Mr Farnsworth, with the contained apprehension and curiosity of a Victorian explorer in darkest Africa. It wouldn't be cricket, as the Farnsworths might put it, to divulge more. Though *MRS FARNSWORTH* is essentially a debate play, there is nothing dry about it and little that's predictable. This despite Mr and Mrs Farnsworth's being utterly true to their high WASP form, with all the expected geographical references (Fisher's Island, Greenwich) and locutions ('Pardon my French'). As one of Mr Gurney's playwriting antecedents, Philip Barry, said in *THE PHILADELPHIA STORY*, there are no rules for human beings, including pure-bred, thin-blooded WASPs. As Mr and Mrs Farnsworth present their respective cases to Gordon and his students, they reveal unexpected facets. Neither emerges as someone entirely to be trusted, but both come off as people of good faith. That is more than can be said of the focus of their argument, Mr Bush, who by the play's end has been effectively cut open and found empty ... Mr and Mrs Farnsworth may be prisoners of their class and its superficial trappings. But like the central figures in Mr Gurney's *COCKTAIL HOUR* and *LATER LIFE*, they harbor doubts and conflict beneath their decorous surfaces. While breeding usually trumps their more rebellious instincts, it's not before a human heart is glimpsed within the cartoonish outlines ... Mrs Farnsworth is obviously longing to escape her identity and doomed to fail. It's the longing that makes you like her so much ... 'Political writing and political discussions are simple-minded and reductive,' Mr Farnsworth says. That's the opposite, he continues, of good writing, 'which should be subtle, complicated and ambiguous.' Even standing on a soapbox, Mr Gurney happily heeds Mr Farnsworth's admonition." - Ben Brantley, *The New York Times*

Politicians poised to sling mud might take a pointer or two from A R Gurney: Good manners can be lethal weapons, and a glancing sideswipe may cause more damage than a punch in the nose. An expert demonstration of such tactics is on...in Mr Gurney's disarming new play, *MRS FARNSWORTH*.... Though it deals with revelations that are the stuff of smear campaigns, *MRS FARNSWORTH* is as polite and sweetly subversive a political attack as you're likely ever to come across. Like Tim Robbins's *EMBEDDED* currently at the Public Theater, *MRS FARNSWORTH* takes aim at the sitting president of the United States. But whereas Mr Robbins's series of satiric sketches registers as a loud and angry scream, Mr Gurney's latest offering feels as if it's spoken out of the side of the mouth, sotto voce through a firmly locked jaw. Well, jaws would be locked, as this is Gurney country, land of the endangered species called WASP. ...fine specimens of this breed: wealthy, inhibited folk who wear their sense of entitlement with sheepishness and smugness. They're people you might run across at a Bush fund-raiser. Mr Bush, however, would be woefully mistaken to perceive them as allies. ...*MRS FARNSWORTH* is set in a creative-writing class in Manhattan, run by a sardonic, harried teacher named Gordon. Class is under way when a resplendently well-groomed student makes a late and incongruous entrance, like a rara avis in an urban pigeon coop. That's the pastel-clad Marjorie Farnsworth, fresh from the Connecticut suburbs and fluttering with apologies. It seems she wants to learn to write because she has a story that urgently needs to be told. It's the tale of a Vassar girl who becomes pregnant by a hard-partying Yale boy, who then pays her (by proxy) to have an abortion. Mrs Farnsworth's narrative starts to sound like a memoir in which only the names have been changed. Could be the boy in question be the young George W Bush? The left-leaning Gordon is atremble with excitement. Despite surface evidence, Mrs Farnsworth is a registered Democrat, deeply concerned about the state of the nation and keen on making her tale public. There is, however, one serious problem, she says: her disapproving husband. Enter Mr Farnsworth, with the contained apprehension and curiosity of a Victorian explorer in darkest Africa. It wouldn't be cricket, as the Farnsworths might put it, to divulge more. Though *MRS FARNSWORTH* is essentially a debate play, there is nothing dry about it and little that's predictable. This despite Mr and Mrs Farnsworth's being utterly true to their high WASP form, with all the expected geographical references (Fisher's Island, Greenwich) and locutions ('Pardon my French'). As one of Mr Gurney's playwriting antecedents, Philip Barry, said in *THE PHILADELPHIA STORY*, there are no rules for human beings, including pure-

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About the Author A.R. Gurney's plays include The Dining Room, The Middle Ages, The Golden Age, Love Letters, and Silvia. He has received awards from the Drama Desk, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He lives in Connecticut and New York City.