

POLITICS & IDEOLOGY

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PRACTICAL UTOPIA

Ralph Nader, 77, never tires of preaching to the choir

MADISON — For citizens hungry for passion, energy and anti-establishment fervor, Madison's R.J. Julia Book-sellers was the place to be last month.

We're citizens, not people, at least in consumer activist and political gadfly Ralph Nader's lexicon. And with the possible exception of the 100-odd hardy citizens that came out to the Main Street bookstore of the tony suburb, we're not fulfilling our responsibilities.

According to the stately, animated 77-year-old, who spoke extemporaneously for well over an hour, we're so consumed with adding the newest apps to our iPhones, with answering our latest text message and updating our Facebook profiles; so narcotized by mass entertainment and by the propaganda spewed out by a "corporatist government" in which both major parties are dialing for the same dollars; and so fearful of growing angry at this state of affairs and, thus, imitating the Tea Party, that we've become complacent. "We have to produce a pulse," the Winsted native said. The first step: self-respect.

"People do not have enough estimation of their own significance," said Nader to nodding heads. "They pretty much say, 'I follow the rules, I'm a good parent, I'm a good worker, why aren't we treated better by them?'"

"They," that impersonal pronoun, is the enemy. To fight "them," we need to break our routines, to connect with each other face-to-face, to hold ourselves collectively to a higher standard.

"America is a place full of problems we don't deserve and full of solutions we don't apply," the consumer safety pioneer said to wild applause. "Where's the fire in our bellies? Where's our fight?" Only by mobilizing ourselves can we hope to effect "substantive change."

That's where *Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us*, Nader's 2009 novel comes in. Except that it's not so much a blueprint as a "practical utopia," as he put it, to which citizens can aspire.

The super-rich saving us? Was this the populist icon who

in 1992 burst onto the political scene in order to afford citizens an alternative to the corporate-controlled majority parties? It was.

In *Only the Super-Rich*, America's foremost champion of the public good has shifted his hopes to an unlikely demographic: a fictional cadre of 17 very wealthy individuals who, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, join forces to concentrate on instituting, among other initiatives, clean air and clean elections, a living wage, universal health insurance and tax reform.

About the characters, who range from Warren Buffett to Bill Cosby to Yoko Ono, Nader writes, "They were alike in only three ways: They were old, very rich and very unrepresentative of humanity, which they intended to save from itself." All are over 70, because by that age, the author said, "they have a different perspective of life, they're very worried about their country." All have shown glimpses of enlightened views in their working lives.

In the end, in spite of Nader's enduring crusade to protect and invigorate the populus, his "practical utopia" is, well, utopian. Worse, it implies that the very citizens he seeks to empower can't do it on the engine of their own zeal.

Of course, the crowd didn't seem all that concerned. In a way, it was like an activist's version of a revival meeting. You simply came to listen to the fire and brimstone and to leave more convinced of what you already believed. —Lisa Reisman