

# THE DIXIE KIERKEGAARD

# WALKER PERCY

TRAINED AS A PSYCHIATRIST, WALKER PERCY CONCLUDED THAT SCIENCE WAS FAILING HIM AND FAILING SOCIETY. IT DISTANCED A PERSON FROM HIS OR HER SOUL AND COULDN'T EXPLAIN THE DESPAIR WE ALL EXPERIENCE. PERCY PUT ASIDE HIS MEDICAL DEGREE, CONVERTED TO CATHOLICISM, AND BEGAN WRITING.

HIS DEBUT NOVEL, *THE MOVIEGOER*, WON THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD.

BY JOHN FREDERICK MOORE

**"THE HUMAN CONDITION."** When attempting to define the meaning of their work, many writers simply claim that they are exploring the human condition. Ergo their novels must be brimming with insight! It's a phrase so sufficiently generic that readers can imbue the book with their own ideas and needs and imagine that the author will address them directly.

Walker Percy, on the other hand, had definite ideas about the human condition—that it is defined by despair. He was consumed by this phenomenon: why are men and women so unhappy at a time in human culture when, for many, it seems that life has never been easier? What is the cause of our collective malaise?

He first approached this question as a man of science. Percy earned a medical degree from Columbia University and was a trained psychiatrist. However, in 1942, he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis and convalesced for three years. During this time he turned to philosophy, studying Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Thomas Mann. Suddenly science felt empty—it didn't address the true difficulties of being human. Science exacerbated these difficulties. Percy then made

some dramatic changes in his life. He turned away from medicine, converted to Catholicism, and began his career as a novelist. His debut novel, *The Moviegoer*, won the National Book Award in 1962.

Percy wrote both fiction and non-fiction in order to explore the existential philosophies that captivated him. He sought to write novels based on ideas—if our despair was generated in our own mind, then his characters and situations illustrated this internal struggle. As Gail Godwin wrote in *The New York Times Book Review*, "Walker Percy has the rare gift of being able to dramatize metaphysics."

Percy returned to the same themes again and again. His characters were cast adrift in a modern world, having grown complacent from an unchallenging, inauthentic culture. They find themselves on a quest for meaning in an increasingly godless existence, where intellect and science have replaced spirituality. They find hope by reexamining their past or connecting with new people in a real, authentic way.

Percy's sense of urgency about our culture's problems increased over the course of his six novels. In *The Moviegoer*, the simple notion of getting up and getting through a mundane, purposeless day crippled most of

## WHERE TO START

Percy's fiction can be divided into two basic themes: man's quest to heal himself, and man's quest to heal mankind. His debut novel, *THE MOVIEGOER*, is the perfect introduction to the first theme. *LOVE IN THE RUINS*, perhaps Percy's most laugh-out-loud funny book, looks into the future of America, torn apart by, as he told Shelby Foote, "the rural knotholed right and the godless and alienated left."



his characters—dealing with the "everydayness" of life, as protagonist Binx Bolling puts it. As his career progressed, Percy's scope widened and his concerns grew. Binx was intent on saving himself, whereas in later works Percy's characters are bent on saving the world. There is an apocalyptic undertone to much of the author's later works (*Love in the Ruins*, for example, is subtitled *The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*). Man's predicament can be summed up by one character's rumination in *The Thanatos Syndrome*: "Here we are on the very brink of World War Three, on the brink of destruction, and nobody gives it a second thought." And so thought Percy—our culture is destroying itself and no one seems to care.

### SOUTHERN ROOTS

Percy was born in Birmingham, AL, in 1916. When Percy was a teen, his father committed suicide. This was followed three years later by the death of his mother in an automobile accident. He and his two brothers moved to Greenville, MS, to live with the writer William Alexander Percy, an older cousin who later adopted the children. A sense of physical and spiritual displacement, perhaps born from this time, runs through Percy's fiction.

Percy spent his adult life in Covington, LA. With the exception of *The Last Gentleman*, Percy's work is set exclusively in the South, particularly in the semi-fictional land of Feliciana Parish, LA. Percy is, if anything, more than a little cynical about the South in his work. As he wrote in *Lancelot*: "Do you want a portrait of the New Southerner? He is Billy Graham on Sunday and Richard Nixon during the rest of the week." Percy's affection for his Southern roots becomes evident, however, in the way he delights in describing landscape, in placing land and buildings in historical context, and in dissecting the uneasy relationship between Southern blacks and whites. Percy was captivated by the shortcomings of language and often explored how characters can say one thing and understand each other on a whole other level. This is particularly acute in the conversations he portrays between blacks and whites.

Though he is often lumped together with other "Southern" writers, Percy's approach to storytelling owes more to the work of his favorite European writers. As Percy once quipped to *The New York Times Book Review*, "I lived a hundred miles from William Faulkner but he meant less to me than Albert Camus." He claimed to have read little fiction and had no interest in socializing with literary luminaries, even after his first novel won the National Book Award. He led an increasingly secluded life, though one outlet for him was the Maple Street Bookshop in New Orleans, LA (see *In Gratitude* sidebar).

Percy never gave up trying to right the wrongs he saw in society. When one reporter, Robyn Perry, called him for an interview, he replied, "If you knew anything about my work, you'd know I hate the twentieth century, the whole culture, and that I've had enough of interviews." When he eventually acquiesced and she visited him, she found him working on *Lost in the Cosmos*, a non-fiction work he hoped would provide further insight to the culture he loathed—to offer up a possible antidote to the terminal illness that is the human condition.

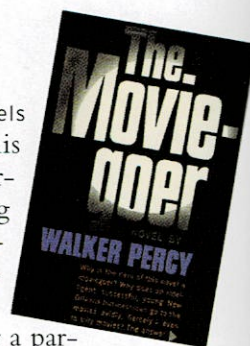
### MAJOR WORKS

#### The Moviegoer (1961)

- ◆ National Book Award
- ◆ #60, Modern Library's 100 Best Novels

Percy's first novel remains his widely acknowledged masterpiece. The book details a young man's search for the cure to the tedium of the "everydayness" of existence. Percy would never again achieve such unanimous acclaim for a particular book—*The Moviegoer* singlehandedly established his reputation as one of the most respected American authors of the late 20th century.

**THE STORY:** Binx Bolling, an educated, well-to-do manager of a brokerage firm with strong family ties, seems to have everything going for him—except happiness. Binx frequents the movies to escape the emptiness of his life, often modeling his behavior on the heroes he sees on-screen. A family tragedy and the problems



### THE MOVIEGOER'S PATHOLOGY

AN EXCERPT FROM WALKER PERCY'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD.

"... since it seems appropriate to say a word about *The Moviegoer*, it is perhaps not too farfetched to compare it in one respect with the science of pathology. Its posture is the posture of the pathologist with his suspicion that something is wrong. There is time for me to say only this: that the pathology in this case has to do with the loss of individuality and the loss of identity at the very time when words like the "dignity of the individual" and "self-realization" are being heard more frequently than ever. Yet the patient is not mortally ill. On the contrary, it speaks well for national health that pathologists of one sort or another are tolerated and even encouraged.

In short, the book attempts a modest restatement of the Judeo-Christian notion that man is more than an organism in an environment, more than an integrated personality, more even than a mature and creative individual, as the phrase goes. He is a wayfarer and a pilgrim." ■

facing his cousin Kate force Binx to reassess his life, to open himself to the world and accept reality. Although Binx Bolling's odyssey from alienation to self-awareness established Percy as a novelist of ideas, critics also admired his lucid, entertaining prose.

**"[Percy's] interest in psychiatry is evident in the way he probes at the mainsprings of his characters. Nothing is stated; everything is implied. The reader gets fragments of meaning and occasional glimpses of deep-rooted causes. Yet so expertly are these fragments fitted together and these glimpses sustained that Binx and Kate grow steadily in character throughout the book."**

The New York Times, May 28, 1961.

**"A finely etched, sensitive commentary on the rootlessness and fragmentation of contemporary life."**

Booklist, July 1, 1961.

**"Walker Percy... is able to satirize without cruelty and to mock without harshness. His story is often so shrewdly witty, even outright funny, that one forgets it is a novel about despair."**

New York Herald-Tribune Books, July 30, 1961.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A funny, insightful meditation on the journey of finding one's true self. *The Moviegoer* establishes the themes that Percy would explore in his subsequent novels.

### The Last Gentleman (1966)

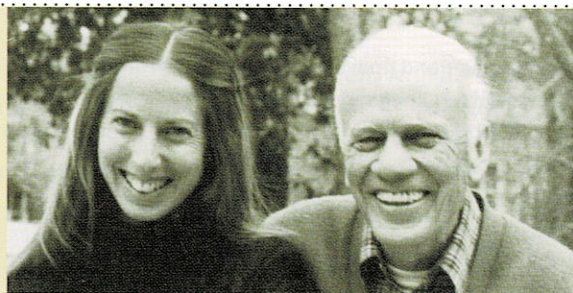
♦ National Book Award Nomination

**A** transitional novel as Percy takes the themes from *The Moviegoer* and paints them on a broader canvas.

**THE STORY:** Will Barrett, a 25-year-old engineer from Mississippi, drifts through life in New York while struggling through occasional fugue-like episodes of déjà vu and amnesia. After spotting Kitty Vaughn, a pretty 21-year-old with problems of her own, through his telescope lens in Central Park, Barrett quickly becomes entangled in the affairs of the entire Vaughn family. During a journey that takes him to Santa Fe by way of Mississippi, Barrett—like Binx Bolling before him—snaps out of his fog in the face of real human tragedy.

**"... a beautifully textured novel, immediately enjoyable on a narrative level and richly rewarding on a level of implication that runs through it like some powerful subterranean stream... This novel succeeds brilliantly in dramatizing the contradictory nature of reality through characters who are at once typical of our condition yet saltily individual."**

The New York Times Book Review, June 26, 1966.



Rhoda Faust and Walker Percy

## IN GRATITUDE

Walker Percy was especially kind to the Maple Street Book Shop. Years ago, when he was teaching a course at Loyola, he started dropping by to sign books for us. He also let us give several autograph parties for him, even though, as we discovered later, they were a source of intense discomfort to him, as he hated forgetting people's names and perhaps hurting their feelings.

When he couldn't handle signing parties anymore, he was agreeable to our sending out flyers announcing the publication of a new book. We would drive over to Covington with a car full of boxes of his new book for him to sign and inscribe.

Customer response invariably yielded great piles of sometimes weird and intricate requests for special inscriptions. He would always try to accommodate and would only sometimes pass judgment in the form of a sad smile when confronted with instructions on a form to inscribe something like, "To a budding fellow writer who treads the same path and makes the same search . . ." or "To a bourbon-lover extraordinaire - You love not wisely but too well . . . don't blow your cool." Once in a while, he'd look up with a slight grimace and say, "Do I know this guy?"

He also helped Maple Street Book Shop's publishing arm, Faust Publishing Company, to come into existence by offering a speech of his, "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," to be its first publication, and later, two other pieces of his work.

After Walker Percy's death, many of our customers expressed their sympathy for our loss. We really appreciated that, and we want to thank them. Many also voiced their own great sorrow. Some of the people who were most saddened did not even know him personally, but they had read his books and felt, and we understand why, that he knew them.

As a writer, his greatest gift was getting right to the heart of the matter, putting his finger right on the crucial spot. The dry humor with which he did this made his books startlingly funny, while at the same time, breathtakingly important. With regard to his faith in God and Catholicism, it was his intelligent soft-handedness that won him respect from non-believers as well as believers.

We have lost a great friend, and we remember him gratefully. ■

by Rhoda Faust, owner of the Maple Street Book Shop in New Orleans, LA.



**"Page-for-page and line-for-line this is certainly one of the best-written books in recent memory."** Critic, Oct., 1966.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** No sophomore slump here, though the novel is overshadowed by *The Moviegoer*.

### Love in the Ruins (1971)

◆ National Catholic Book Award

**A** significant moment in Percy's development—he begins to shift from strictly personal matters to more worldly concerns.

**THE STORY:** Dr. Tom More, psychiatrist, failed Catholic, and alcoholic, sets out to save America from itself. Set in the South in 1983, the country is being torn apart by political, racial, and religious divides. The quest of Percy's hero moves from the personal to the universal, as More invents a device intended to cure mankind's psyche. Meanwhile, a sinister character named Art Immelman is bent on thwarting More's plan to save the country from total breakdown.

**"A great deal happens [in this novel] and, though it's no laughing matter, Walker Percy makes it seem extraordinarily funny.... Mr. Percy, the least malicious of satirists, devises a lively, complex, and strangely heartening end to his story."** Saturday Review, May 15, 1971.

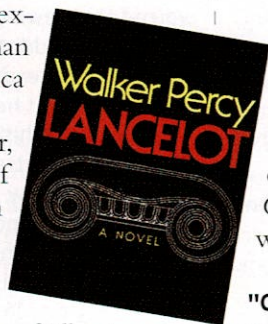
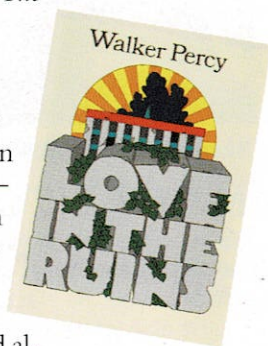
**"At first Percy's style seems as beautifully controlled as ever, musical and poetic and delicately nuanced; but the whimsical content ultimately overwhelms the writing, which inevitably falls apart."** Library Journal, May 15, 1971.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** A satire of America's soul. The expanded scope of this work allows Percy's sardonic humor to shine.

### Lancelot (1977)

**A** drastic shift in narrative tone from Percy's earlier work—a dark exploration into the soul of a man fighting against the emptiness of America in the 1970's.

**THE STORY:** Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, a disenchanted liberal lawyer, tells of how he came to be institutionalized in a prison mental hospital. His audience is Percival, an old college friend and now a psychiatrist/priest. Constructed as a confessional narrative in the manner of Albert Camus's *The Fall*, the book details Lancelot's quest for the "unholy Grail." Amid what he sees as America's decadence all around him, Lancelot discloses his plans for a Third Revolution that will establish a new cul-



ture based on old values. Think of Lancelot as a Travis Bickle of the New South.

**"[Percy] knowingly fingers what he perceives as the rotting fabric of Southern aristocratic life, and describes it with vividness and a kind of affection, even as he starts to shred it.... Philosophical digressions and painstaking analyses are the author's price for doled-out flashbacks, which provide the book's only action. But such is Mr. Percy's talent - and his evident moral concern - that the daring method mainly works."** Christian Sci. Monitor, March 2, 1977.

**"In Lancelot, Percy is again confronting the forces which make it so difficult for us to make moral choices and live by them.... This novel is Percy's strongest counterattack against those forces, which I suspect are still shrieking at his door."** Harper's, May 1977.

**"Percy has acquired the reputation of being a "philosophical thinker," but I have never really found in his fiction much evidence to support this view.... [This] is one of the most disappointing novels I have read in recent years."**

The New Republic, Feb. 5, 1977.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Though it features Percy's typically acerbic lament against modern society's breakdown, not all the critics were enamored by the author's bleakest, most unforgiving novel.

### The Second Coming (1980)

- ◆ Los Angeles Times Book Prize
- ◆ PEN/Faulkner Award Nomination
- ◆ American Book Award Nomination

**W**ill Barrett returns from *The Last Gentleman*, a little worse for the wear.

**THE STORY:** Much has changed for Will Barrett: he's now 49, a wealthy retired lawyer, and a widow. But Barrett's despair persists. Still haunted by his father's suicide when Barrett was 12,

Barrett decides to spend the rest of his days in a cave until he receives a sign from God. While making an emergency retreat from his hole, Barrett literally falls into the life of Allie Huger, a young escapee of a mental institution who speaks in her own coded language. As in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, Percy's damaged men and women find ways to shore each other up.

**"Out of the chance meeting of two implausible characters, Percy manages to create a superb novel.... *The Second Coming* treats two characters who are suffering because of their age's impoverished view of the possibilities of human life, and it sees them through to a full recovery."** Christian Science Monitor, Aug. 20, 1980.



"... his best book since *The Moviegoer* and among the most admirable American novels of the past few years."

The New Republic, July 5, 1980.

"A book as bad as this, from a writer as intelligent and sympathetic as Walker Percy, makes one heartsick.... He is a beguiling, uniquely gifted novelist who deserves to be read in order and in full. His worst novel, this one, is still more interesting than most writers' best shot."

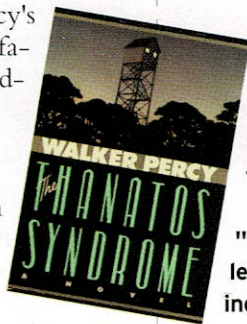
Newsweek, July 7, 1980.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Though Percy's usual obsessions—language, signs and symbolism, and religion—are pushed out farther in the foreground, this book represents his most unabashed love story. Percy's fairy tale-like romance garnered mostly favorable reviews, though some critics considered this book a misstep.

### The Thanatos Syndrome (1987)

**W**ith a title of which Robert Ludlum would have been proud, this is Percy's most thriller-like novel. Percy's message once again: humanity is severely flawed, but science isn't necessarily the answer.

**THE STORY:** As he did in *Love in the Ruins*, Dr. Tom



More investigates the strange behavior he sees around him. Recently released from a two-year stint in federal prison, More investigates the strange behavior he's noticed among citizens of his hometown. Along the way, he uncovers a social-engineering plot to make people docile by contaminating the water supply, as well as a child molestation ring in a prestigious private school.

"Though *The Thanatos Syndrome* reads like a good thriller, it plays for bigger stakes.... Nobody presently writing has so keen an eye for the surreal quality of our cultural topography."

The New Republic, April 13, 1987.

"There is ample evidence of Percy's brilliance in *The Thanatos Syndrome*...But the book is seriously marred by the byzantine melodrama of its plot, which begins to seem like a movie made for the prime-time television Percy so frequently refers to."

The Atlantic Monthly, April 1987.

"Even by the high standards that Percy has already led us to expect of him, this is still a very good book indeed."

National Review, May 22, 1987.

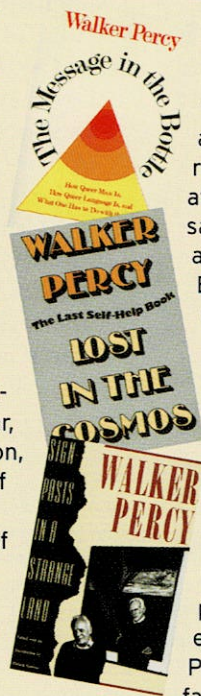
**THE BOTTOM LINE:** One of Percy's darkest novels, and certainly his most heavily plotted. The layers of unfolding mysteries keep readers turning the pages. ■

## PERCY'S NON-FICTION

Along with his novels, Walker Percy also gained notoriety for a body of provocative non-fiction work. In these books, Percy delves into the same obsessions that fuel his novels—existential crises, language, and the possibility of the end of the world.

Well before he garnered acclaim as a novelist, Percy had been writing essays on language and existence for several small literary and psychiatric journals. **THE MESSAGE IN THE BOTTLE** (1975) is a collection of this work from 1954 through 1975. With titles such as "Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning" and "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism," Percy is working here as a serious theoretician; general readers will find his essays on language, in particular, tend towards the esoteric. Fans of Percy's fiction, however, will be interested in his explorations of existential angst. "The Man on the Train," a study of alienation as seen through the prism of literature and film, anticipates the themes he would later explore in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, while "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World" suggests he was thinking ahead to *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

If Tony Robbins were an existentialist with a wry sense of humor, he might come up with something like



**LOST IN THE COSMOS: THE LAST SELF-HELP BOOK** (1983).

Written at a time when the self-help craze had taken off—everything from books to televangelists—Percy skewers the genre while providing thought-provoking commentary. Here Percy tackles the nature of selfhood by examining 20 aspects of self (The Fearful Self, The Depressed Self); each section includes a multiple-choice questionnaire and a "thought experiment," through which the reader is encouraged to actively engage the issue at hand. (Sample question: "What does the saleslady mean when she fits a customer with an article of clothing and says: 'It's you?'" ) As Jack Beatty wrote in *The New Republic*, "Read it to find out why you can't look anyone in the eye, why Johnny Carson can't think of anything to say at a party, and why John Cheever was right when he said that 'the main emotion of the adult North Eastern American who has had all the advantages of wealth, education, and culture is disappointment.'"

There is also **SIGNPOSTS IN A STRANGE LAND**, a posthumous collection of magazine pieces dating back to 1935. Though there are some of philosophical ruminations here about language, existence, and Catholicism, the collection shows Percy's lighter side with essays on drinking (with a family recipe for mint juleps) and life in the South. ■