

# WILLIAM FAULKNER

**THE PARIS REVIEW:** SOME PEOPLE SAY THEY CAN'T UNDERSTAND YOUR WRITING, EVEN AFTER THEY READ IT TWO OR THREE TIMES. WHAT APPROACH WOULD YOU SUGGEST FOR THEM?

**FAULKNER:** READ IT FOUR TIMES. (SPRING 1956)

BY LEANNE MILWAY

"ART IS NO PART OF SOUTHERN LIFE," argued William Faulkner in a 1933 introduction to his seminal work, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). So, he created an art to fill this void. In 20 novels and more than 100 short stories written from the perspectives of poor farmers, drifters, pregnant teenagers, and once-prominent Southern patriarchs, he captured Southern life during the Depression, a tumultuous time that reflected the aftermath of the Civil War and foreshadowed the contested Civil Rights era. By memorializing the oft-overlooked corner of the world where he was born and bred, the Mississippi native gave voice to the South's tortured personality and dark history, transforming its denizens' guilt, fear, and pride into literary art.

During the 1920s and 30s, Faulkner's innovative and poetic novels brought a modern style to American shores. Following in the style of British writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and contrasting with better known American contemporaries Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, he employed the time-shifting, stream-of-consciousness narrative found in *The Sound and the Fury*. On this emerging style Faulkner imposed a uniquely American and Southern voice, one that critic Lyle Saxon called "as merciless as anything that I know which has come out of Russia." To compare this writer from Mississippi with James Joyce or Marcel Proust or Chekov or Dostoevsky gets

nowhere, for Faulkner is definitely American" (*New York Herald Tribune*, 10/13/1929).

William Cuthbert Falkner (he added the "u" later in life), the oldest of four sons, was born on September 25, 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi. A few years later his family relocated to the quaint university town of Oxford, Mississippi. From an early age, Faulkner wrote poetry. He also worked as a painter, Boy Scout leader, book salesman, and university postmaster, as well as served as a cadet in the Canadian Royal Air Force. He attended the University of Mississippi for a few years before moving to New Orleans in 1925.

Faulkner's friendship with novelist Sherwood Anderson inspired him to turn to writing. Anderson gave Faulkner his most important lesson—the idea that his best work would derive from the land and people he knew best. Anderson also promised to find a publisher for Faulkner's first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, in return for not having to read the manuscript. The novel, which was published in 1926, received middling reviews.

In his third novel, *Sartoris* (1929), Faulkner introduced Yoknapatawpha County, 2,400 square miles of pure invention inspired by the northern Mississippi region where he lived. He realized that this "little postage stamp of native soil" housed limitless stories, so many, in fact, that he "would never live long enough to exhaust it" (*The Paris Review*, Spring 1956). Over his 36-year career, Faulkner set 15 novels and many short stories

## Where to Start

**THE PORTABLE FAULKNER** transformed the author into a literary celebrity, and it is an ideal introduction to his style, characters, and invented Mississippi county. **LIGHT IN AUGUST** is his Southern masterpiece, and an ultimately hopeful work. For the true Faulkner experience, go with his stream-of-consciousness narratives: **AS I LAY DYING** and, for the daredevil reader, **THE SOUND AND THE FURY**.

in Yoknapatawpha County (*see sidebar*). He outlined its geography and constructed a history of the area that set the foundation for a rich set of characters and provided a constant stream of inspiration. Characters from one novel might appear later in a short story, and subsequently meet new characters that would then reemerge in other tales. In 1946, Malcolm Cowley, editor of *The Portable Faulkner*, wrote that, "Faulkner performed a labor of imagination that has not been equaled in our time, and a double labor. First, to invent a Mississippi county that was like a mythical kingdom, but was complete and living in all its details; second, to make his story of Yoknapatawpha County stand as a parable or legend of all the Deep South."

Not every reader agreed with this assessment of Faulkner's work at the time. Although *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* (1930) received critical acclaim, sales of his work remained low. The Depression slowed sales, but, more importantly, the public did not embrace themes dealing with incest, suicide, mental retardation, and a three-day-old corpse. Though he had a brief moment of success with the sensationalistic (but lesser work) *Sanctuary* (1931)—an account of a coed's rape with a corncob—sales of his other

novels (including *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*) were also meager. So, during the early 1930s Faulkner turned to Hollywood screenwriting assignments to earn his living. In 1945, none of his 17 books was in print.

One year later, with the release of Cowley's *The Portable Faulkner*, readers started to notice Faulkner's prodigious talent. Cowley emphasized the grand achievement of Faulkner's fictional world with selected stories and judicious excerpts from novels that, for the first time, presented the tales of Yoknapatawpha County in chronological order. Cowley gave the public a much deeper appreciation of Faulkner's work and provided academics with a foundation for study. Publishers reprinted his novels, awards and honors started to pile up, and filmmakers adapted his work for the big screen (including 1949's *Intruder in the Dust*). Within four years Faulkner delivered what would become one of the most famous Nobel Prize acceptance speeches (*see sidebar*). He then finished his epic Christ allegory (*A Fable*, winner of 1954's National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize) and wrote what he called his "Huck Finn novel," *The Reivers*, in 1962 (winner of his second Pulitzer).

## FAULKNER: AN OVERVIEW

### THE MARBLE FAUN (1924)

A poetry collection. Later, when Faulkner turned primarily to fiction, he would call himself a "failed poet."

### SOLDIERS' PAY (1926)

After serving in World War I, Lt. Donald Mahon returns home to Charlestown, Georgia.

### MOSQUITOES (1927)

Faulkner's least successful novel is a satire set aboard a yacht on New Orleans' Lake Pontchartrain.

### SARTORIS (1929)

The first novel set in Yoknapatawpha County is an extensively cut version of *Flags of Dust* (1973). "It discloses a novelist of real imaginative power, who is more than half a poet."  
- *New York Herald Tribune Books* 2/24/1929

### \* THE SOUND AND THE FURY (1929)

### \* AS I LAY DYING (1930)

### SANCTUARY (1931)

"Good God, I can't publish this. We'd both be in jail," his publisher said after reading the sensational account of debutante Temple Drake's rape and kidnapping by Popeye, a sadistic bootlegger. It would be Faulkner's only top seller for the next 15 years.

### THESE THIRTEEN (1931)

This first mass-release short story collection includes "A Rose for Emily" and "That Evening Sun."

### \* LIGHT IN AUGUST (1932)

### PYLON (1935)

Four flyers compete in an aviation contest in New Valois, a thinly disguised New Orleans, during a Mardi Gras celebration.

### \* ABSALOM, ABSALOM! (1936)

### THE UNVANQUISHED (1938)

Early history of the Sartoris family during and immediately after the Civil War. Six of the seven stories were originally published in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

### IF I FORGET THEE, JERUSALEM (1939)

Two novellas. "The Wild Palms" depicts a doomed love affair. In "Old Man" a convict battles a flood to save a pregnant woman.

### THE HAMLET (1940)

The first book in the Snopes trilogy. Scheming Flem Snopes and landowner Will Varner disrupt quiet Frenchman's Bend.

### GO DOWN, MOSES (1942)

Racial identity and the vanishing wilderness play major roles in this episodic novel about the McCaslin family.

### THE PORTABLE FAULKNER (1946)

Yoknapatawpha County stories

compiled in chronological order; includes a new "Appendix" to *The Sound and the Fury*.

### INTRUDER IN THE DUST (1948)

Lucas Beauchamp (of *Go Down, Moses*) is accused of killing a white man. He tries to find the murderer before the lynch mob arrives.

### \* COLLECTED STORIES (1950)

### REQUIEM FOR A NUN (1951)

Half-prose, half-play sequel to *Sanctuary*. Nurse Nancy is accused of killing Temple Drake's infant daughter and sentenced to hang.

### \* A FABLE (1954)

### THE TOWN (1957)

Flem battles ruthlessly to take over the town of Jefferson and avenge his wife's infidelity. Second volume in Snopes trilogy.

### THE MANSION (1959)

Final novel in Snopes trilogy. Flem meets his end at the hands of a vengeful relative.

### THE REIVERS (1962)

★ WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE  
Comic novel about the adventures of three unlikely car thieves on the road to Memphis from rural Mississippi.

### FLAGS IN THE DUST (1973)

An unedited version of Faulkner's first Yoknapatawpha book published ten years after his death.

In the 1950s, Faulkner traveled the world as a lecturer and in 1957 became a writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia. From 1959 to 1962 he suffered from injuries from falls off of horses, alcoholism and extreme self-medication with pain pills. He returned to Oxford and died of a heart attack on July 6, 1962.

## The Southern Writer

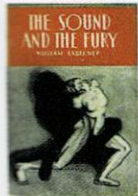
Faulkner believed that the “Old South” died with the Civil War. His work focuses on the post-bellum South—the “New South”—at its most impoverished time in history, bitter from the ruin of war, suffering deep racial hatred following the abolition of slavery, and economically devastated from the elimination of its captive agricultural labor force. Elite white landowners’ loss of power fueled their hatred of poor whites and free blacks, while blacks struggled daily in a society in which the laws had changed but behaviors and attitudes had not. “Racism spreads contagiously through [Faulkner’s] works, unavoidably,” noted critic Arthur F. Kinney in *Connotations* (Vol. 3:3, 1994). “Its force is often debilitating; its consequences often beyond reckoning openly. The plain recognition of racism is hardest to bear and yet most necessary to confront.” With the character Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, Faulkner demonstrates how race is fused with identity. Though his ethnicity is never made clear, Christmas is convinced that he is mixed black and white. His actions, and the actions of those around him, including an affair with white Joanna Burden and alienation from blacks at his work, all stem from the purely social projection of his race.

By exposing the common humanity in a troubled, seldom-chronicled part of the country, Faulkner’s distinctly regional work both enlightened and resonated with readers across the country. A crucial piece of America’s past lies in the wake of the Civil War and the Southern culture wrought from it. Faulkner’s literary contributions indelibly seared this haunted past and hopeful future into the national consciousness.

## MAJOR WORKS

### The Sound and the Fury (1929)

★ #6 ON MODERN LIBRARY’S 100 BEST NOVELS



The title derives from Shakespeare—“It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Though this tale does feature an idiot, it’s hardly devoid of significance; the dueling stream-of-consciousness narratives portray the slow decline of a prominent southern family. The author wanted to print the novel in colored ink to mark the shifts in time, but it was too expensive.

**THE STORY:** Four distinct voices relate the tragic tale of Caddy Compson. Her mentally retarded brother Benjy speaks first. All the events he relates, however confusing at first, are retold by the other narrators. Then Quentin, Caddy’s suicidal brother at Harvard, relives his sister’s teenage pregnancy and unhappy marriage. Her brother Jason opens his fierce tale about Caddy’s illegitimate daughter

## Yoknapatawpha County



According to Faulkner, “Yoknapatawpha” means “water flowing slow through the flatland,” a name that originated with the area’s first settlers, the Chickasaw Indians. This slow water and surrounding land lie in northern Mississippi, and owe much to the real-life Lafayette County.

*Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) includes a hand-drawn map of Yoknapatawpha County, population: 6,298 white and 9,313 black residents. The map is credited to “William Faulkner, Sole Owner & Proprietor.” The reading public didn’t take note of this fertile literary region until editor Malcolm Cowley compiled *The Portable Faulkner* in 1946. The book organizes the Yoknapatawpha stories chronologically, using short stories and excerpts from novels to produce an in-depth history of the region. Soon after, Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize.

with, “Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say.” Finally, a third-person narrator follows Dilsey, the house servant, to an Easter service.

**CRITICAL INSIGHT:** Critics were floored (or simply amazed that they made it through the text). Finally, America had given birth to a writer of Joycean magnitude.

**“It is true that *The Sound and the Fury* is insane and monstrous and terrible, but so is the life that it mirrors. It is difficult to read, but I could not put it down. I believe, simply and sincerely that this is a great book.”** LYLE SAXON, NEW YORK

HERALD TRIBUNE BOOKS, 10/13/29.

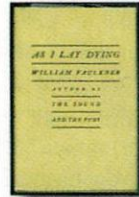
**“To many it will be as incoherent as James Joyce, but its writer is a man of mature talent, and the story, if read with patience, turns such a powerful light on reality that it gains a fast grip on the emotions of the reader.”** HARRY HANSEN, THE WORLD, 10/9/29..

**“It is a novel of power and of terrible sincerity.”** F.L. ROBBINS, OUTLOOK AND INDEPENDENT, 10/16/29.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Considered Faulkner’s most impressive and challenging work, *The Sound and the Fury* is a true American masterpiece.

### As I Lay Dying (1930)

★ #35 ON MODERN LIBRARY’S 100 BEST NOVELS



Reeling from poor sales of his previous novels and determined to support his new wife and her two children, Faulkner attempted to write a tour-de-force. Six weeks later, while working a night shift at a power plant, he completed *As I Lay Dying*. “Before I ever put pen to paper and set down the first word I knew what the last word would be and almost where the last period would fall,” he later explained.

**THE STORY:** The Bundren family sets off across the plains to honor the final wish of their wife and mother. Addie wants a burial in Jefferson, a several day journey across Mississippi. With a homemade coffin on their wagon, they face floods, buzzards, a demented child, and more. Fifteen characters, including Addie, deliver the 59 monologues that make up the novel.

**CRITICAL INSIGHT:** Many critics point out the considerable discrepancy between how his characters speak (in poetic language and imagery) and their education (or lack thereof).

**"The whole affair is a psychological jig-saw puzzle, the pieces of which are represented by the distorted mentalities of half a dozen characters. The fascination of the story lies in the manner in which the phosphorescent rottenness of the family gradually reveals itself to the reader."** C.P. FADIMAN, NATION, 11/5/30.

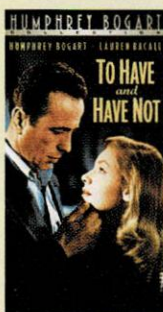
**"The style, save for occasional passages of meaningless word juggling, is well adapted to the material; and the colloquial idiom these farmers speak is excellently handled. As *I Lay Dying* does not offer a pleasant or inspiring view of humanity, but it is an uncommonly forceful book."** NEW REPUBLIC, 11/30.

**"The method Mr. Faulkner used in his last novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, is here greatly modified, so that though something of that extraordinary madness hangs like a red mist over it, the lines of demarcation are mercifully clear."**

M.C. DAWSON, NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE BOOKS, 11/5/30.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** More accessible than *The Sound and the Fury* but just as bold, stylish, and psychologically dark.

## Faulkner's Hollywood Story



**"YOU KNOW HOW TO WHISTLE, DON'T YOU, STEVE?** You just put your lips together, and blow." Lauren Bacall's lines to Humphrey Bogart in *To Have and Have Not* (1944) belong to a screenplay co-written by William Faulkner (from the Hemingway novel). His tenure as a script doctor provided much-needed cash, but the binding studio contracts created major business headaches.

In order to compensate for the dismal sales of his novels, Faulkner turned to Hollywood to earn a living. *Today We Live* (1933), starring Joan Crawford and Gary Cooper, was his first screenplay, and it's based on his story "Turn About." Howard Hawks, with whom Faulkner worked on four other features, including the popular Bacall-Bogart vehicles *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep* (1946), directed the film. He also made an uncredited contribution to Jean Renoir's film *The Southerner* (1945).

Faulkner viewed his script work as "trash and junk" that corrupted his true calling. "[Screen writing] is a good medium," he said, "but you can never do anything in it, too much commercialism." As for Los Angeles, he was vocal about his feelings. "I don't like the climate, the people, their way of life," he declared in 1947.

## Light in August (1932)

★ #54 ON MODERN LIBRARY'S 100 BEST NOVELS



*Light in August* is the fifth full-length novel set in Yoknapatawpha County, and it covers the widest range of characters.

**THE STORY:** Hugely pregnant, young Lena Grove walks shoeless in the dust in search of a lover who promised marriage. On the day she arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi, the town is in an uproar. Joanna Burden, a white heiress and devoted abolitionist, has been murdered and her house burned. Joe Christmas, a half-Negro mill worker and Joanna's lover, is the suspected culprit. In his hideout in the woods, Joe recalls his troubled life of persecution.

**"Written with amazing vividness, capable of the most breathless accuracy and brutality, unerring in its character strokes ... this narrative aims to depict--does depict--the futility and superficiality of civilization ..."** EDWARD WEEKS, ATLANTIC BOOKSHELF, 1/33.

**"It is a broader, stouter work than anything Faulkner has done before. It counts less upon the disembodied emotion, and it is packed, bursting with a mass of detail which explores every phase in the lives of its characters ..."** M.C. DAWSON, NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE BOOKS, 10/9/32.

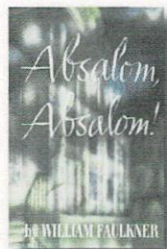
**"Light in August is a powerful novel, a book which secures Mr. Faulkner's place in the very front rank of American writers of fiction."** J.D. ADAMS, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 10/9/32.

**"It is a novel of extraordinary force and insight, incredibly rich in character studies, intensely vivid, rising sometimes to poetry, and filled with that spirit of compassion which saves those who look at life too closely from hardness and despair."**

H.S. CANBY, SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE, 10/8/32.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** The author's most compelling indictment of racism in one of his most admired works. Stylistically this is Faulkner's most straightforward novel, and with Lena Grove he introduces his most hopeful character yet.

## Absalom, Absalom! (1936)



When he finished this gothic melodrama, Faulkner proclaimed, "I think it's the best novel yet written by an American." That was right before an extended drinking binge that sent him to a Mississippi sanitarium. A reviewer for *Time* called this book "the strangest, least readable, most infuriating and yet in some respects the most impressive novel that William Faulkner has written" (11/2/1936).

**THE STORY:** In 1833 Thomas Sutpen arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi with a gang of slaves, cheats an Indian tribe out of 100 square miles of land, builds a mansion, and becomes a member of the local aristocracy. That's when Charles Bon, the mixed-race son Sutpen abandoned, reappears. Harvard freshman Quentin Compson (of *The Sound and the Fury*), one of the narrators, tries to piece together the convoluted

tragedy. The book's title refers to King David's lament over his dead son Absalom, part of a biblical tale of incest, revenge, and violence.

**"Absalom, Absalom! is not strange for its shocking theme ... it is strange because of the amazing indirectness with which Faulkner has managed to tell a basically simple story."** HAROLD

STRAUSS, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 11/1/36.

**"There are flashes of psychological insight, now and then turns of illuminating phrase, occasional passages of direct clarity and vigor. But their value is offset by the prolonged and heavy labor of getting through to them."** SPRINGFIELD

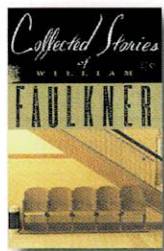
REPUBLICAN, 11/8/36.

**"From the first page of this novel to the last we are conscious that the author is straining for strangeness. He will say nothing simply."** D.L. MANN, BOSTON EVENING TRANSCRIPT, 10/31/36.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** This is Faulkner's most focused portrait of the South's decay in the wake of the Civil War. Unfortunately, it demands very hard work on the part of the reader with less reward than previous efforts.

## The Collected Stories of William Faulkner (1950)

★ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD



The 1946 arrival of *The Portable Faulkner* marked a revival of critical and popular attention for Faulkner. In June 1950, a month before *Collected Stories* was published, he was awarded the Howells Medal for distinguished work in American fiction. A few months later he received word that the Swedish Academy had voted to honor him with the Nobel Prize for literature. This compilation proves he is perhaps the "most considerable twentieth-century American writer of short fiction" (*Saturday Review of Literature*, 8/26/50).

**THE STORY:** *Collected Stories* includes 42 selections previously published in magazines. The stories are arranged under themed headings—The Country, The Village, The Wilderness, The Wasteland, The Middle Ground, and Beyond.

**"For the reader not yet lost from the world of literature, Faulkner can be a deep and continuous source of wisdom."**

HARRY SYLVESTER, THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 8/20/50.

**"Faulkner's blazing skill and lazy improvisations, his rich humor and corny folksiness, his deep sense of tragedy and tasteless gothic excesses are all brought together ... he is a writer of incomparable talents who has used and misused those talents superbly and recklessly."** TIME, 8/28/50.

**"If Faulkner's extraordinary rhetoric is at times obscure, and is at times as baroque as the plot and substance of some of his stories, he has also written more passages of unmistakable lucidity than any writer of his generation."**

HORACE GREGORY, NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE BOOK REVIEW, 8/20/50.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Solidified Faulkner's position as the foremost authority on the Deep South.

## Nobel Speech

**O**UR TRAGEDY TODAY is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.

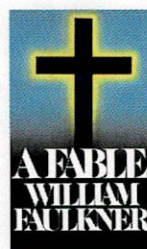
... I decline to accept the end of man. ... I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."

Nobel Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1950.

## A Fable (1955)

★ PULITZER PRIZE

★ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD



For more than ten years Faulkner toiled on this story, "writing and rewriting, weighing every word." The plot proved to be so complex that the author scribbled an outline on his office walls. In the years leading up to publication his health steadily declined; severe back pain and periods of alcoholism repeatedly landed Faulkner in the hospital.

**THE STORY:** Corporal Stefan, determined to deliver the world from evil, leads a mutiny in the French trenches of World War I. *A Fable* is a retelling of the Christ story, complete with the Last Supper, Judas's betrayal, and a climatic crucifixion, ending at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

**"Creatively, it is an extraordinary achievement with its underlying commentary on an unready world. Practically, it is difficult reading, and often obscure."** KIRKUS, 7/1/54.

**"The novel as a whole seems to me spurious and unreal—a heroically ambitious failure."** C.J. ROLO, ATLANTIC MONTHLY, 9/54.

**"A Fable is a bad small novel, absurdly distended in scale. Its failure, unlike the failure of a major work, is therefore neither very interesting in itself nor very important, except for the sorry fact that a man of genius has wasted so much pell-mell vitality on it."** BRENDAN GILL, THE NEW YORKER, 8/28/54.

**"Faulkner has paralleled the greatest story in man's experience, but he has failed to use it to philosophical or dramatic advantage."** TIME, 8/2/54.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** In spite of the prestigious awards, the stilted allegory seems forced and tedious for many readers.