The Cambridge Introduction to
William Faulkner

Known for his distinctive voice and his evocative depictions of life in the American South, Nobel laureate William Faulkner is recognized as one of the most important authors of the twentieth century. This introductory book provides students and readers of Faulkner with a clear overview of his life and work. His nineteen novels, including *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*, are discussed in detail, as are his major short stories and nonfiction. Focused on the works themselves, but also providing useful information about their critical reception, this *Introduction* is an accessible guide to Faulkner's challenging and complex oeuvre.

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The Cambridge Introduction to
William Faulkner

Theresa M. Towner
University of Texas at Dallas
For Alison Leslie Sloan
– my girl
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Preface

The Mississippi-born, Nobel Prize-winning writer William Faulkner gave the world Yoknapatawpha County. He joined the Canadian Royal Air Force in the Great War and learned to fly but never saw action; he lived in Oxford, Mississippi, for nearly his whole life and once turned down an invitation to an artists’ dinner from the Kennedy White House because he said it was too far to go to eat with strangers. He rode to the fox hounds in Charlottesville, Virginia, in his later years and had his portrait made in formal riding clothes, yet he was just as likely to pose for photographs in his tattered khakis and nearly ruined Harris tweed jacket. To say he cherished his privacy is to understatement the case radically: he once wrote that “it is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history . . . in the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be them both: He made the books and he died.”

He has now done both those things – made the books and died – and more than forty years after his passing, he remains widely read, discussed, assigned, analyzed, and invoked. Every major school of criticism has been applied to his most famous novels; every major anthology of American and world literature includes his work. Most of the published commentary on Faulkner is written by and aimed at an academic and scholarly audience, yet most of Faulkner’s new readers find him because teachers make students read his work in a variety of contexts and then take on the task of “explaining” what it means in class. Even Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club consulted specialists for help. Yet such help, either printed or on the internet, often obscures understanding because of the uneven quality (and varying degrees of accuracy) in such a crowded field of study. That study tends to remain categorized by type – biography, textual analysis, influence study, historiography, and so forth. Because The Cambridge Introduction to William Faulkner treats Faulkner’s life and work as well as their contexts and critical reception, this volume can serve as a reader’s first stop in Faulkner criticism, as a companion reader of his texts more than the latest word in scholarship.

Readers may use this book either by reading it from beginning to end or by consulting sections of interest, including those devoted to individual texts.
Preface

Owing to space constraints I have not cited the original source of every idea herein but have instead relied on the published criticism to address what seem like the most common questions for a beginning reader to have. And whether one is a high school student, a curious adult reader, an undergraduate, or a senior citizen, when we begin to read Faulkner we all begin together – in confusion. But like Dante on his way through Inferno or Pilgrim on his Progress, we can come through it.

Let’s begin.

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