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The American Critical Archives is a series of reference books that provide representative selections of contemporary reviews of the main works of major American authors. Specifically, each volume contains both full reviews and excerpts from reviews that appeared in newspapers and weekly and monthly periodicals, generally within a few months of the publication of the work concerned. There is an introductory historical overview by a volume editor, as well as checklists of additional reviews located but not quoted.

This book represents the first comprehensive collection of contemporary published reactions to the writings of William Faulkner from 1925 to 1962. These articles document the response of reviewers to specific works and chronicle the development of Faulkner's reputation among the nation's book reviewers. It has often been assumed that a poor reception in the popular review publications contributed to Faulkner's lack of commercial success. The material presented here tends to refute that assumption, clarifies the development of Faulkner's literary career, and provides a fuller understanding of the part played by book reviewing in the sales, promotion, and success of American literature.

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Dedicated to
the memory of
Cleanth Brooks,
Faulkner's
best reader

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Series Editor's Preface

The American Critical Archives series documents a part of a writer's career that is usually difficult to examine, that is, the immediate response to each work as it was made public on the part of reviewers in contemporary newspapers and journals. Although it would not be feasible to reprint every review, each volume in the series reprints a selection of reviews designed to provide the reader with a proportionate sense of the critical response, whether it was positive, negative, or mixed. Checklists of other known reviews are also included to complete the documentary record and allow access for those who wish to do further reading and research.

The editor of each volume has provided an introduction that surveys the career of the author in the context of the contemporary critical response. Ideally, the introduction will inform the reader in brief of what is to be learned by a reading of the full volume. The reader then can go as deeply as necessary in terms of the kind of information desired—be it about a single work, a period in the author's life, or the author's entire career. The intent is to provide quick and easy access to the material for students, scholars, librarians, and general readers.

When completed, the American Critical Archives should constitute a comprehensive history of critical practice in America, and in some cases England, as the writer's careers were in progress. The volumes open a window on the patterns and forces that have shaped the history of American writing and the reputations of the writers. These are primary documents in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

M. THOMAS INGE

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Introduction

Faulkner's first book, *The Marble Faun*, issued on December 15, 1924, was a subsidized publication from what we have come to call a vanity press. Of course, he was not the first major American writer to begin his career in print that way, since Walt Whitman not only self-published but even helped set the type himself for the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Unlike Whitman, however, Faulkner did not have to write his own first review. Indeed, as far as we know, there were at least three—a brief mixed notice in the *Saturday Review of Literature* and two lengthier appreciations. Monte Cooper in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* found the book-length poem derivative from the British Romantics and certainly no better than his mentors' works, but fellow writer John McClure in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, probably out of friendship more than critical objectivity, offered high praise for a beginning performance and called Faulkner a "born poet, with remarkable ability." This was a writer, McClure correctly prophesied, "from whom we shall hear a great deal in [the] future," so we can praise McClure's ability to recognize a major talent in embryo, despite the unspectacular first step.

The next book, *Soldiers' Pay* (published February 25, 1926), was a novel issued by a respectable New York firm, Boni and Liveright. Writing under the inspiration, if not the tutelage, of Sherwood Anderson, with the encouragement of the community of writers in which Faulkner was living in New Orleans, gathered around the little magazine the *Double Dealer*, Faulkner had his eye on the contemporary literary marketplace then dominated by the satiric authors of the jazz age. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* had appeared the year before, and in England Aldous Huxley had begun his popular series of cynical society novels. The more than a dozen reviewers who took up the book tended to see it as an ineffective synthesis of the fictional styles of the time. John McClure at the *Times-Picayune* once again weighed in with warm praise and called it the "most noteworthy first novel of the year," but he was not alone in his admiration. Louis Kronenberger in the *Literary Digest* found touches of James Joyce in its wit and humor, and writing for his famed book page in the Nashville *Tennessean*, Fugitive poet Donald Davidson found it a "powerful book, done with careful artistry and with great warmth of feeling," superior in fact to another much praised novel of World War I, *Three Soldiers* by John Dos Passos of 1921.

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If the first novel was perceived as too much of its own time, this was especially true of *Mosquitoes* (published April 30, 1927), a smugly satiric roman à clef based on the characters and adventures of the New Orleans artistic community of which Faulkner was a part. John McClure, usually the first with praise, seemed to have grown disenchanted with the sarcasm, cruelty, and eroticism he saw in the book, or perhaps he was simply being defensive because many of Faulkner's friends show up there, and there is even a self-portrait of the novelist himself. Lillian Hellman, writing for the New York *Herald Tribune*, despite spotting evident influences of Joyce and Huxley, thought the novel clever, versatile, brilliant, and "full of the fine kind of swift and lusty writing that comes from a healthy, fresh pen." Davidson maintained his support in the Nashville *Tennessean*, noting that "Faulkner sits in the seat of the scornful with a manner somewhat reminiscent of James Joyce, but . . . with such gracious ease that you almost overlook the savagery." The other reviewers, fewer than a dozen this time, were mixed in their responses, but nearly all found something to admire in Faulkner's emerging competence as a novelist.

With the third novel, *Sartoris* (published January 31, 1929), it became evident to most of the reviewers, the old faithful as well as the skeptical, that Faulkner had reached a maturity of style and had come upon the proper subject matter for his writing—his "own little postage stamp of native soil," the life and times of the people he knew best in Mississippi. Drawing on the history of his own family and that of his community, Faulkner created the people and county of Yoknapatawpha, a fictional universe he would spend most of the rest of his career developing, although the seeds in terms of themes and many of the characters were there in *Sartoris* already. The discerning critic Henry Nash Smith greeted the novel with the opinion that Faulkner was undoubtedly "one of the most promising talents for fiction in contemporary America" in the Dallas *Morning News*. Davidson in the *Tennessean* stated that "as a stylist and as an acute observer of human behavior, I think that Mr. Faulkner is the equal of any except three or four American novelists who stand at the very top." Anticipating the mythological and allegorical theories of George Marion O'Donnell a decade later, Davidson noted, "I cannot help suspecting some allegorical meaning is in *Sartoris*."

Before the year was out, Faulkner would prove that both Davidson and Smith were right in their prognostications and would completely vindicate their support by the publication of his masterpiece *The Sound and the Fury* (published October 7, 1929). Predictably, some reviewers did not know what to make of the novel's experimental structure and innovative style, despite an appreciative pamphlet by Evelyn Scott that came with the review copy. The perceptive critics, and there were many, praised the work for raising the provincial to the level of the universal, for expanding the boundaries of the American novel, and for restoring their faith in the art form and its emerging

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practitioners. Whatever the nature or tenor of the reviewers' responses, from sarcasm to adulation, it was clear that a major talent had arrived on the American literary scene.

Close on the heels of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner published a second innovative and strikingly original novel, *As I Lay Dying* (published October 6, 1930). He switched his focus from a decadent Southern aristocracy to an eccentric family of poor-white sharecroppers, and he expanded his experiments in points of view, this time to let a large number of narrators tell the story in a style that borders on surrealism. Many reviewers were unsettled by the nitty-gritty details of the Bundrens' shabby way of life and some of the repulsive details of the novel (such as a rotting corpse), but most of them recognized the technical brilliance of the work and agreed with Ted Robinson in his review for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* that Faulkner was "one of the two or three original geniuses of our generation."

All this praise and recognition must have gratified the precocious novelist, but Faulkner still lacked the kind of national respect and financial success that should have come his way by this point in his career. So according to his own testimony, which is not always trustworthy, Faulkner began a deliberate plan to write a novel so shocking and controversial that both fortune and fame (or notoriety at least) would surely follow. He did the trick exactly with *Sanctuary* (published February 9, 1931), a novel in which he maintained the development of the experimental techniques of the previous two efforts but with the use of such perverse and criminal characters performing such sordid acts that no reader could fail to take notice. Not only did readers take notice, but *Sanctuary* received twice as many reviews as any of the previous books. Even some of Faulkner's most ardent supporters couldn't take the novel's brutality—Ted Robinson in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer,* for example, called it "obscenely diabolical"—but one result of the notoriety in the press was that Faulkner came to the attention of many critics who previously had felt it safe to ignore him as a "promising" writer not yet in full stride. It was with *Sanctuary* that Faulkner became identified with the school of Naturalism—through the comments of such critics as Henry Seidel Canby and Alan Reynolds Thompson—a mistaken notion that it would take another decade of writing and finally some overt statements of the author, especially the Nobel Prize Address, to eradicate.

From the beginning of his career, Faulkner had fancied himself a short-story writer, and a steady stream of rejection slips did little to dissuade him. Beginning with the appearance of "A Rose for Emily" in the April 1930 issue of *Forum* magazine, and as his reputation as a novelist grew, Faulkner was able to place a striking series of distinctive stories in America's major periodicals, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Story*. Thus, when he assembled a collection of stories for *These 13* (published September 21, 1931), he had an excellent body of material on

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which to draw and could include such masterworks as "A Rose for Emily," "Dry September," "That Evening Sun," and "Red Leaves." Except for two or three unfavorable reviews—most notably, one in the *Nation* by Lionel Trilling, who believed Faulkner's work was "too frequently minor"—this volume was warmly received, and the reviewers repeated a litany of praise for the writer as a major American talent, possessed perhaps by a moody spirit of gothic despair but brilliantly versatile in style and technique. Two publications in the summer of the following year received little notice—*Salmagundi* (published May 1932), a collection of three articles and five poems contributed by Faulkner to the New Orleans *Double Dealer* and the *New Republic* between 1919 and 1925, and *Miss Zilphia Gant* (published June 27, 1932), a limited edition of a short story originally accepted by the *Southwest Review*.

Given Faulkner's high reputation and the major accomplishments now behind him, one might expect the reviewers and critics to have been better prepared for what many consider another masterpiece, *Light in August* (published October 6, 1932). Several of them, however, were unsettled by what appeared to be a disjointed plot structure that failed to combine the separate stories of Lena Grove and Joe Christmas, by the frank treatment of social attitudes in the South on the subject of miscegenation, by the sensational depiction of prostitution and sexual perversion in sordid detail, and by the portrayal of the violence of decapitation and castration. Yet most of the reviews tended to be favorable, and their authors realized that this was not merely another chapter in Faulkner's history of the decline and fall of the South but a novel that touched on philosophic and social issues of broad relevance. In his treatment of the irrational reactions of man to the categories of race and color, Faulkner was ahead of his time. No other writer had dared explode the stereotype of the tragic mulatto in such a fashion. More important, however, he used racial identity as a metaphor to represent self-understanding in an increasingly disoriented world and thereby posited a situation of universal application.

Given Faulkner's standing by now as an author of undeniably powerful fiction, it is little wonder that the critics were taken aback by the ordinary quality of the poetry collected in *A Green Bough* (published April 20, 1933). It was clear in the reviews that the only reason the volume received the attention it did was that Faulkner the novelist had written it. Everyone felt obliged to call the poetry derivative, and among the names mentioned were Tennyson, Housman, Heine, Eliot, H.D., and Aiken. As the reviewer for the Cincinnati *Times-Star* put it, through the book "one may sketchily trace the history of English poetry from E. E. Cummings back to Marlowe or Jonson." Perhaps publishing the book served as a purgative for Faulkner, who never again nurtured the notion of being a poet.

The next book appeared a year later, *Doctor Martino and Other Stories* (published April 16, 1934), a collection of fourteen stories most of which had

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originally been published in popular magazines. The response was mixed, Faulkner's admirers seeking to find some few words of praise for an uneven selection of fiction, and his detractors taking delight in citing the inadequacies of the worst of the lot. Nearly everyone recognized the narrative power and gripping style of "The Hound," and the kind of respectful care exercised in discussing Faulkner, no matter the critical disposition, was itself an indication of the reputation he had achieved. From this point on, however, the press would never praise Faulkner's work again with anything like unanimity or ungrudging admiration.

If the two preceding books failed by and large to please the reviewers, the next novel, *Pylon* (published March 25, 1935), pleased them even less. The hostility that discreetly lurked behind the demeanor of Faulkner's sharpest critics burst into outright defamation. For instance, Sterling North wrote of *Pylon* in the Chicago *Daily News*: "Faulkner's new book is a sloppy, disgusting, nauseating performance by a half-articulate southerner who never entirely learned his job as a novelist and, aside from a few short stories and parts of *Light in August*, is a second-rater." In that the plot moved entirely out of the Yoknapatawpha cycle of fiction, which had earned him prominence, the book created problems even for his staunchest admirers. The disillusioned barnstormers who wandered through the story told by a cynical reporter were closer to the inhabitants of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* than to the decadent Southern aristocrats and stoic peasants of Faulkner's best work. Even John Crowe Ransom, who had applauded his earlier efforts, now noted in the Nashville *Banner* that "it is such a bad book that it seems to mark the end of William Faulkner." Ironically, *Pylon* came just as Faulkner was receiving wider press than for any of his previous books. A few reviewers did look beyond the novel's weaknesses to detect the hand of a better than average novelist at work, and Faulkner had the satisfaction of seeing *Pylon* reach the best-seller list in spite of the critical hostility.

The next novel seemed partly to make up for Faulkner's past lapses and would resubstantiate his claim as a major writer. As experimental in form as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, and as closely focused on the psyche of the South as any of his Yoknapatawpha fiction, *Absalom, Absalom!* (published October 26, 1936) garnered more unreservedly enthusiastic reviews than any of his previous works. Of course, a few naysayers persisted, a minor chorus led most prominently by the arbiter of the book club set, Clifton Fadiman, who confessed in the *New Yorker* that Faulkner was beyond his grasp and concluded that *Absalom, Absalom!* marked the "final blowup of what was once a remarkable, if minor, talent." Fadiman and his followers were effectively drowned out by the unabashed adulation of scores of reviewers from all corners of the book world. Long analytic reviews became the order of the day, assessments that took into account Faulkner's past achievements and grappled for comparisons, analogues, and a critical vocabulary

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equal to the task of evaluating the novel. While some critics tried to ride the fence, most made up their minds decisively, and the favorable reviews outnumbered the unfavorable two to one.

In his next book, published more than a year later (February 15, 1938), *The Unvanquished*, Faulkner gathered together several of his best related short stories, such as "Ambuscade" and "An Odor of Verbena," and with minor revisions presented the whole as a novel. How well he succeeded may be gauged by the extent to which critics remained undecided about whether to treat the book as a novel or as a collection of short stories. Those who disliked the "blood and thunder" Faulkner of *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Light in August*, however, applauded the book for its lack of shock, sex, and perversity, while his admirers appreciated the fine writing but with considerably less enthusiasm than previous works had generated. In one odd, unexpected review, V. F. Calverton, writing for *Modern Monthly*, called Mississippi the "most backward state in the nation" and noted: "That fact is very significant in understanding Faulkner's fiction. He is dealing with a people who are inferior to all other Americans, who are living in a state of intellectual barbarism which is infra-medieval. . . . They are nothing more than the sick, stinking backwash of a dead but still rotting civilization." Faulkner usually irritated most of the conservative critics, but seldom had he received such a lashing from the press, although the bias was directed more at Mississippi than at the author.

Continuing his experimentation with structure, in *The Wild Palms* (published January 19, 1939) Faulkner juxtaposed two separate stories with alternating chapters and made no apparent effort to connect them, except for a thin reliance on the related themes of flight and refuge. While a few reviewers made a case for the success of the experiment, including Edwin Berry Burgum in *New Masses*, who found the two plots effectively integrated and called the book Faulkner's "most thoroughly satisfying" to date, most found it a failure.

Less innovative in form and style but more sensational in its bawdy humor and violent subject matter than the earlier major works was *The Hamlet* (published April 1, 1940), the first of a trilogy to be devoted to the history of the Snopes family. While the book seemed to test the patience of many of Faulkner's old supporters and slowly but surely to earn a few new friends, even some of his usually puzzled and wary readers began to show a grudging respect for his obvious talents in comic writing. His longtime booster Ted Robinson found himself flinging the book aside when he reached the passages about the idiot Ike's love affair with a cow, or so he reported in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, but Sterling North of the Chicago *Daily News*, who had earlier excoriated *Pylon*, took into account the magnificent sweep of *The Hamlet* in its depiction of Southern class and type, its vivid creation of characters from the sultry Eula Varner to the indomitable Flem Snopes, and its incredible range of style, to find the book one of the "outstanding novels of his [Faulkner's] brilliant career." Hardheaded Clifton Fadiman, of course, had to proclaim

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once more "I make no claims whatever to any ability to comprehend what Mr. Faulkner is about" in the *New Yorker*, and Don Stanford in the *Southern Review* thought the book phony, insensitive, and stupid in its delineation of character. The majority of reviewers, in any case, looked forward to the further adventures of the Snopeses as they took over Yoknapatawpha County economically and socially.

The Hamlet had been partly constructed of previously published short stories revised for their appearance within a new work. The next book was also a compilation of such stories, and Faulkner himself was uncertain whether to present the volume as a unified work or as an anthology; hence the first printing was entitled *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* (published May 11, 1942), while subsequent printings were simply called *Go Down, Moses*. Perhaps there was intentional wisdom in calling the book a collection of stories at first, since this prevented the nitpickers from accusing him, as they had done earlier, of attempting to pass off a set of loosely related pieces as a unified work. If so, the strategy had the opposite effect. Many reviewers were quick to assert that despite its use of seven stories related primarily by their treatment of the adventures of the McCaslin-Edmonds family, the volume had a unified effect and dealt significantly with a period of rapid social and economic change in the South. By and large, the book garnered more consistent praise than many of his earlier works. Reviewers noted that Faulkner's style was impressive; his range of characterization and setting, realistic; and his themes, relevant to the times. Friend and foe alike were taken with "The Bear," a work that elicited comparison with *Moby-Dick* and other classic works of American fiction and that many rightly predicted would become a classic itself.

At this stage, it was perfectly clear that with or without large sales, Faulkner had arrived as one of the two or three top American writers in the estimation of the reviewing establishment. For this reason, it is doubtful that the main cause of the growing appreciation of Faulkner at this point in his career was the appearance of Malcolm Cowley's edition of *The Portable Faulkner* (published April 29, 1946), as has often been claimed. The appreciation and the reputation were already there, slowly building over the years, even though perhaps a bit out of the public mind with the lapse of four years since the appearance of the preceding book. What Cowley's compilation did accomplish, however, was its orderly establishment of a sense of the chronology and interconnected historical nature of the Yoknapatawpha cycle Faulkner had woven through Cowley's arrangement of short stories and excerpts from the novels. Faulkner's epic intent became clear for the general reader. Although it received few reviews, *The Portable Faulkner* did occasion an essay by fellow novelist Robert Penn Warren in the *New Republic* that proved a turning point in Faulkner criticism and an influential source of basic ideas to be developed in the following years. Warren's review has been frequently anthologized as

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one of the classic pieces of American literary criticism (and for that reason does not appear in this volume).

As Faulkner's career progressed, the number of journals and newspapers that reviewed his work gradually increased, especially on the heels of the notoriety of *Sanctuary* in 1931, with the most attention being paid to *Pylon* in 1935 and *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936. *Intruder in the Dust* (published October 18, 1948), however, elicited twice as many reviews as any other book to that date. This polemical novel, in the form of a detective story, attracted such attention because of the political stance Faulkner adopted on the race question. Basically, he asserted that the racial conflict in the South could be resolved only by Southerners; that although the blacks deserved equality, it would never be accomplished through legislation; and that Northerners, liberals, and reformers were doing more to damage the cause of civil rights by interfering than to help in the achievement of justice. Needless to say, such an attitude antagonized both liberals and conservatives, both supporters of a strong federal authority and states-righters. Thus the reviews were full of political polemics for and against Faulkner, depending on the disposition of the journalist or periodical. Neither his friends nor his foes found it possible to deny the power and appeal of the novel as a work of fiction, and most called the book a literary event of the first order. After examining a cross section of sixty reviews, the New York *Times* on November 14, 1948, reported the score sheet:

> *Verdict*: Yes, by about 10 to 1. On the whole, amazingly well received, in view of the high style and the indirect defense of the South in the matter of South vs. Negro. Attacks generally from the North, and on political rather than literary grounds. Most of the attackers never got around to discussing the novel as a novel.

There appeared to be little doubt in the minds of *all* the commentators about Faulkner's status as a major figure on the literary scene.

Whereas *Intruder in the Dust* may have been a piece of social protest fiction disguised as a detective novel, *Knight's Gambit* (published November 27, 1949) was a collection of detective stories (all but one previously published) disguised as a novel. The presence of Gavin Stevens as a country-store Sherlock Holmes was the only thing the pieces had in common, and the delineation of his character was the main item of interest. Despite the book's weaknesses, the respect accorded *Intruder in the Dust* was sustained by the majority of the reviewers, with Warren Beck in the Chicago *Sunday Tribune* nominating Faulkner as the "Shakespeare of American fiction" and Malcolm Cowley rightly predicting in the New York *Herald Tribune* that he would win the Nobel Prize. Even though this ultimate literary prize was exactly one year away, Orville Prescott in the New York *Times* still found it possible to announce:

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> William Faulkner is considered by many Frenchmen and a few Americans as the most important living American writer. That he might have been, since his natural talents are so undeniably great, seems to me a defensible proposition. That he is not seems to me obvious. Undisciplined gifts, intermittent flashes of blazing power, a morbid preoccupation with violence and degeneracy and a monstrously turgid and obscure style are not convincing qualifications for literary pre-eminence.

The appearance of Faulkner's *Collected Stories* (published August 21, 1950) provided an opportunity to address the question of his considerable talents as a writer of short fiction, which he had steadily published since 1930 in popular magazines and collected or revised into several earlier books. His admirers came forward with many comparisons with other world masters of the short story, many apt and others mere exaggeration, including Poe, Chekhov, James, Kafka, Lawrence, and Joyce, but nearly everyone agreed that the collection itself was uneven, especially for the first-rate writer who just a few months after the release of *Collected Stories,* on November 10, 1950, would be announced as the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, as several critics had predicted.

The Nobel Prize would act as a lightning rod, attracting to Faulkner both the highest praise and retrospective I-told-you-so pieces from his supporters and the vehemence of his incredulous detractors, finally to be focused on the unlikeliest book to withstand such commentary, *Requiem for a Nun* (published September 27, 1951). It was presented as a novel in the form of a play, and the hybrid form and the experimental style again confounded the purists who had resisted the lack of traditional elements in the earlier works. As usual, people like Sterling North in the New York *World-Telegram and the Sun* waxed sarcastic about the "ungrammatical, clumsy prose"; Clifton Fadiman intentionally misspelled Faulkner's name throughout his review in *Holiday* magazine and recommended that he write for the comedian Jimmy Durante, since both had a genius for violating the English language; Maxwell Geismar in the New York *Post* thought the book "cold, empty, slick ... trite, and sophomoric in its values"; and Carl Victor Little's review for the San Francisco *News* was a single sentence of 550 words parodying the famous sentence in *Requiem* of 49 pages. Several critics, usually discerning and fair, found it difficult to praise much in the book, but some of the most influential—such as Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Harrison Smith, Irving Howe, Robert Penn Warren, Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks, and Ray B. West, Jr.—saw no reason to hedge their enthusiasm despite the controversial nature of the work. *Requiem for a Nun* garnered even more reviews than had *Intruder in the Dust*, and given Faulkner's international prominence now, no one found it possible *not* to review each new volume as it appeared. When *Requiem* was actually staged on Broadway in 1959 as a play, the critical response was lukewarm, although

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it had been successfully staged abroad in a dozen countries. Some found the prose powerful but the dramatic values weak, so it had only a short run.

Each new book would, of course, receive from this point more careful scrutiny and considered attention than ever before. The reviews of *The Faulkner Reader* (published April 1, 1954) were largely positive and became occasions for reflecting on his entire career. Irving Howe, in a balanced overview for the New York *Times*, placed Faulkner in the company of such greats as Melville, James, and Twain, and saw him the equal of Hemingway or Fitzgerald, noting: "For once we have not begrudged an American artist the praise due him." Yet, a few insisted that Faulkner was receiving undue praise, including Charles H. Nichols, who wrote in *Phylon*:

> One has the feeling that all the grandeur of Faulkner's style—his Mississippi baroque—all his grotesqueries and posturing, all his high-flown bombast are attempts to wrest from his material a profound meaning which has persistently eluded him. It is high time that someone pointed out that the emperor has no clothes.

Faulkner had been working on the manuscript of his next novel for ten years; therefore it was much discussed and anticipated before publication as *A Fable* on August 2, 1954. Everyone rushed into the fray, eager to have his or her say on this most reviewed of all Faulkner's novels—more than two hundred reviews seeing print. Given the unusual theme and structure of *A Fable*—a retelling of the Christ story set during World War I and patterned after the Passion Week—extreme reactions were guaranteed. Orville Prescott (New York *Times*) found it "stiff and lifeless," Leslie Fiedler (*New Republic*) believed that the passion of Faulkner's rhetoric had "turned to stone," Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (*The Intercollegian*) regretfully called it "a great failure by our greatest novelist today," and James Aswell (Houston *Chronicle*) bluntly announced that Faulkner "ought to be hanged." Maxwell Geismar (*Saturday Review*), at the other end of the spectrum, noted, "It is by far the best novel Faulkner has published in the last decade," Granville Hicks (New York *Post*) described it as "a great novel and an act of Faulknerian heroism," Warren Beck (Milwaukee *Journal*) thought that more than ever it demonstrated Faulkner was "our greatest novelist," and Delmore Schwartz (*Perspectives U.S.A.*) declared it a "masterpiece." A good many reviews fell somewhere in between, their authors aware of being in the presence of powerful prose but unable to define or describe the nature of its grandeur. *A Fable* has remained a novel that rests uncomfortably in the canon and in the minds of critics, its importance in American fiction still an open question.

In 1955, Faulkner decided to draw together four of his hunting stories, including his famous tale "The Bear," and connect them with a surrounding narrative about the natural history and legendry of the South. The result was

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Big Woods, which met with almost unalloyed praise. Perhaps reviewers were happy to see him return to the fictional territory of which he was undisputed master, or they were pleased to have a book more in the American grain, the pastoral tradition of Cooper, Thoreau, and Twain. In any case, most agreed with Lewis Gannett in the New York *Herald Tribune* that *Big Woods* represented "Faulkner at his finest."

The Town (published May 1, 1957), Faulkner's first major piece of writing since *A Fable,* occasioned a similar number of reviews (in fact, both remain the most frequently reviewed of all the novels, with *The Reivers* coming in a close third five years later). Because *Big Woods* returned to familiar territory and characters in its content and displayed the most popular brand of Faulknerian folk humor, the press was mainly positive, and many critics engaged in lengthy and often accurate assessments of his place in modern letters. A few claimed to remain confused by Faulknerian rhetoric and complexity, despite the relative clarity of the new work. As John L. Longley, Jr., put it in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, "Those reviewers who in 1936 and 1942 decided never to forgive Faulkner have not done so." But more and more of the critical quarterlies—such as *Sewanee Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Epoch*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Western Review*—began to pay attention with review essays by leading literary critics that began to establish to a large extent the critical guidelines by which Faulkner was to be judged. Because *The Town* was the middle work in the trilogy about the Snopes family, it also allowed for further discussion of Faulkner's moral vision and view of modern society.

Two years after *The Town* came the final volume of the Snopes saga, *The Mansion* (published November 13, 1959). Largely relieved to see it completed, Faulkner's supporters found things to admire, although hardly anybody was satisfied with its disjointed structure and the distinctly political turn it took in introducing socialism and communism into Yoknapatawpha County. Paul H. Stacey in the Washington *Post* mentioned Melville and Hawthorne as points of comparison in his review, and he defended the structure as a "large cubistic painting put together in enormous chunks," but more frequently reviewers described the novel as repetitive, didactic, or, as Orville Prescott noted in the New York *Times*, "an intolerable bore." Prescott best summed up the status of Faulkner's reputation at this juncture when he wrote:

> By this time every literate American citizen who reads contemporary fiction at all has made up his mind about William Faulkner and reached one of two possible verdicts: He thinks that the demon-ridden chronicler of a score of fantastic novels about a nightmare South is a master novelist who eminently deserved the Nobel Prize. Or he thinks that Mr. Faulkner is one of the most naturally gifted, but most disastrously undisciplined and sadly self-indulgent of American writers.

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Many critics took note in their reviews of *The Mansion* of Faulkner's statement that "this book is the final chapter of, and the summation of, a work conceived and begun in 1925," and several misunderstood it to mean that Faulkner was through with writing and had completed his life's work. But there was to be one more novel, which indeed would complete the sizable bookshelf of fiction from his pen—*The Reivers* (published June 4, 1962). The publication date came just one month before Faulkner's sudden and untimely death on July 6, 1962. His writing career could not have been concluded in a more celebratory and fitting way, in that *The Reivers* was a return to the kind of rambunctious and rollicking humor that most of his readers, friend and foe alike, found enjoyable in his fiction. He resorted, as well, to a straightforward narrative and engaged in few of the stylistic pyrotechnics that both dazzled and irritated the critics.

The reviews were largely favorable. The critics appreciated the moral vision implicit in the events, the comic elements drawing on the frontier tradition of tall-tale humor, the folk idiom of the dialogue, and the easy flow of the story. They enjoyed, too, the simple pleasure of reading the entertaining adventures of a motorized Huckleberry Finn who takes an automobile ride to Memphis rather than a raft down the Mississippi and in the course of the trip is initiated into the pains and responsibilities of adulthood. The works of Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, the humorists of the old Southwest, Mark Twain, and James Thurber were the most frequently cited analogues for what Faulkner had done.

Some reviewers expressed doubts about certain coincidental plot elements and the credibility of an oral narrative told in one setting without pause for three hundred pages. Stanley Edgar Hyman in the *New Leader* found the novel a mere lightweight boy's book and "not even a superior specimen of the genre," and a semihysterical commentator for the *Catholic Register* was deeply offended by the "trashy" language and the stupidity of the Nobel Prize committee in recognizing Faulkner's wasted talent. She concluded, "Why waste good God-given moments on literature of this type?" Faulkner's old nemesis Clifton Fadiman, forced to deliver the selection committee's report in the *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, complimented the novel as a "highly sophisticated folk comedy" and admitted that although he was not "a Faulkner devotee . . . *The Reivers* caught, held, and delighted me, despite the impediments of the famous style, the crisscross structure, the acrobatic play with time sequence." The naysayers were a decided minority, and Winfield Townley Scott felt inspired to write in the *New Mexican*: "Take the book altogether, I can only, however awkwardly, record my curious sensation that I was reading a book which had long been a classic in American literature. I daresay that's what is going to happen to it." Willingly or unwillingly, most critics became reconciled to the idea that Faulkner was a major force in American letters. In what turned out to be a highly appropriate review, called "Prospero in

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Yoknapatawpha," *Time* magazine compared the novel to Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Little did the anonymous reviewer suspect that as was true for the Bard, this was the work after which Faulkner would break his golden pencil and retire into immortality.

In making the selections for this volume, I examined every known review of a book by Faulkner. These were gathered through existing bibliographies, an examination of the Random House files, a study of all other files of reviews held by institutions or individuals, and other sources. Although I have aimed to be exhaustive, I am sure additional reviews will surface as research continues.

The texts of the reviews have been reprinted as they originally appeared, except that obvious typographical errors have been silently corrected and the names of books and characters are consistently spelled correctly. Omissions are indicated by ellipses. In some instances, full bibliographic data were not available for items reprinted or listed. All such items, however, may be found in the Random House or other files now housed at the University of Virginia, where they may be consulted.

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