



JAS Bookshelf

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INTRODUCING THE JAS BOOKSHELF

This issue introduces the first of several new initiatives that we will establish during our tenure as associate editors: The *JAS* Bookshelf. We will be inviting contributors to reflect upon a single written work – fiction, scholarship, or otherwise – that has been indispensable in shaping their research, their teaching and their outlook beyond academia. Our aim in developing this strand is to curate a “living,” eclectic, and diverse Bookshelf on our website from these various contributions that will grow over time and will be sustained during subsequent associate editorships. To propose a topic for a Bookshelf entry or cluster, please contact the associate editors: jasassociateditors@baas.ac.uk.

Our first Bookshelf cluster looks at the life and work of Nobel laureate, William Faulkner. Ahmed Honeini’s entry focuses on his first encounter with *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and the ways in which his engagements with Faulkner have guided his navigation of early career academia. This is followed by two contributions, from Carl Rollyson and Bernard T. Joy, on the artistic and intellectual innovations of Faulkner’s labyrinthine modernist monument *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936).

Associate Editors NICOLE GIPSON AND AHMED HONEINI

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NOW I CAN WRITE: THE TENACITY AND ENDURANCE OF WILLIAM FAULKNER’S *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

The path that led William Faulkner to write *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), his first canonical work of American modernism, was in no way an easy one. His first two novels, *Soldiers’ Pay* (1926) and *Mosquitoes* (1927), had been moderately well received critically but had not made an impact upon the general reading public. His third novel, *Flags in the Dust*, had been extensively edited and published in a much condensed form as *Sartoris* (1929). By the time he began *The Sound and the Fury*, he had grown disillusioned and dejected with the publishing process. “When I began the book,”

Faulkner said in 1933, “I had no plan at all. I wasn’t even writing a book”; ultimately, he observed,

one day it was as if a door had clapped silently and forever to between me and all publishers’ addresses and booklists and I said to myself, Now I can write. Now I can just write. Whereupon I, who had three brothers and no sister and was destined to lose my first daughter in infancy, set out to make for myself a beautiful and tragic little girl.”¹

That girl was Caddy Compson, whose exile from her family and her banishment from her Mississippi hometown is at the heart of Faulkner’s novel. *The Sound and the Fury* is told from the perspective of Caddy’s three brothers, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, and contributed to his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950. In 1957, nearly three decades after the novel’s publication, Faulkner still held Caddy’s story in the highest esteem. By his own admission, the novel was “the one I worked at the longest, the hardest, that was to me the most passionate and moving idea.”²

I first read *The Sound and the Fury* in my early twenties as an undergraduate at King’s College London. Looking back, reading it changed my life in profound ways, leading me towards my PhD topic and the unstable life of the early career academic. Upon my first reading, I found the “passionate and moving idea” at the heart of the novel – that the South of Faulkner’s time could not survive beyond its present while it ignored the rights of women and African Americans – profoundly affecting. I was also awestruck by Faulkner’s literary technique, and the ways in which he effortlessly blends four wildly divergent narrative styles with free indirect discourse (where first- and third-person narration merge seamlessly) and interior monologue (where the internal thought patterns of a particular narrator are presented idiosyncratically and without authorial intervention). *The Sound and the Fury* not only rivals the best of European high modernism (such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Woolf’s *The Waves*), but also proves that, for all of the deliberate and purposeful difficulty within the novel, Faulkner is one of the few modernists capable of telling a good, satisfying story. Indeed, Faulkner’s primary endeavour as an author was to strive always to be “a storyteller, introducing comic and tragic elements as I like. Thus I stack and lie at times, all for the purposes of the story—to entertain.”³ In my academic career, I have been driven by this admiration for Faulkner’s aesthetic innovations and skills, and a desire to unpick the complex threads of his work. I founded the first research network in the United Kingdom dedicated to his work, published a monograph exploring the prevalence of mortality in his major fiction, and have been fortunate enough to gain many friends and colleagues in the worldwide Faulkner community. None of that would have been possible or even conceivable without first encountering *The Sound and the Fury* in my early adulthood, and so I will always be grateful to ole Bill’s legacy and the opportunities he has (unwittingly) afforded me.

If reading *The Sound and the Fury* was the starting point of my journey into academia, then Faulkner’s struggles with writing it have also shaped how I approach my

¹ James B. Meriwether, ed., *William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches & Public Letters* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 292–93.

² Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957–1958* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 77.

³ James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds., *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 277.

own work and career. As I mentioned at the start of this entry, the circumstances prior to Faulkner writing the novel were challenging. Faulkner had to relinquish any sense of pretence and all ambition of literary celebrity with his first three novels and “just write.”⁴ His tenacity, thankfully, paid off. More than sixty years after his death in 1962, *The Sound and the Fury*, along with his broader body of work, has proven to be “the props, the pillars [that] help him endure and prevail,” to echo Faulkner’s own Nobel Prize acceptance speech.⁵ How does Faulkner’s capacity for endurance connect to my own experiences as an early-career academic? Above all, his reflections on his own writing have taught me to never give up. In the aftermath of COVID-19, the political and social instabilities throughout the world, and the unrelentingly bleak atmosphere of the last few years more generally, the prospect of entering any profession, let alone academia, seems nightmarish and unsustainable. However, early-career researchers in particular have so much to contribute that academia in general, and the field of American studies in particular, would be infinitely poorer without them. In closing, my advice to anyone in that position reading these words is to keep going, hang in there, and try your best. Absorb Faulkner’s wisdom, and endure, then prevail.

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BECOMING MY OWN AUTHORITY

In the fall of 1966, during my sophomore year at Michigan State University, I enrolled in two courses in the philosophy of history and southern literature. Reading R. G. Collingwood’s *The Idea of History* and William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* marked out a lifelong interest in the uses to which we put the past. Their work led to my dissertation and first book, “Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner,” supervised by Michael Millgate, and eventually to my two-volume biography, *The Life of William Faulkner*, with a dedication to M. Thomas Inge who introduced me to the work of William Faulkner in that southern literature class.

I read Cleanth Brooks and Hyatt Waggoner, authors of two major studies of Faulkner’s work, along with other critics searching for what they said about Faulkner’s understanding of history. Both Waggoner and Brooks acknowledged the historiographical dimension of *Absalom, Absalom!* but not what historians and philosophers had to say about the interpretation of the past that could be compared to Faulkner’s methods. Collingwood is the key figure to consult in a reading of *Absalom, Absalom!*. He argues that historians reenact in their own minds the thoughts of those who acted in the past. He emphasizes thought patterns, not documents or other kinds of evidence, but rather the historian’s own capacity to imagine the past.

Of course, Collingwood, like other historians, relies on documents. But to his mind, too much emphasis can be placed on the material reality of data. A letter – some kind of record – remains essential to the historian’s enterprise, to be sure, but too much of written history turns out to be what he calls a “scissors-and-paste” job, as though the

⁴ Meriwether, 293.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.