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British aristocrats, Southern boys, Scottish girls, and Norwegian existentialists

Ed Tarkington '95

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BRIDESHEAD REVISITED by Evelyn Waugh

I long avoided the novels of Evelyn Waugh, thanks to a grudge dating back to my sophomore year at Furman. I had just met my first serious girlfriend's father, who happened to be a Brit lit aficionado. Knowing I was planning to major in English, he wanted to talk books. I was doing a fair job of hiding my ignorance until he asked me if I'd read any Evelyn Waugh. "No, sir," I said, "but she's on my list." The father smiled. "Evelyn Waugh is a he, son," he said. For years, I couldn't even think of Evelyn Waugh without wincing. Mercifully, I got over the memory of that humiliation and am now a great admirer of Waugh's masterpiece *Brideshead Revisited*, the bitterly elegiac chronicle of a young man drawn into the fold of a doomed family of devoutly Catholic English aristocrats

British aristocrats, Southern boys, Scottish girls, and Norwegian existentialists

We asked soon-to-be debut novelist Ed Tarkington '95 what works are currently inspiring him.

BY ED TARKINGTON '95

ABOUT THE AUTHOR *Ed Tarkington '95 studied English and philosophy at Furman before earning an MA in literature and theory at the University of Virginia and a PhD in English from the creative writing program at Florida State University. He teaches English and coaches wrestling at Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville, and is a frequent contributor to Chapter16.org, a website devoted to the literary culture of Tennessee. His debut novel, Only Love Can Break Your Heart (Algonquin), will be published in January 2016.*

in the years between World Wars. Waugh's tortured ambivalence toward both religiousness and the English class system makes this novel both sublimely moving and deeply unsettling.

ALIENS IN THE PRIME OF THEIR LIVES by Brad Watson

The stories of Brad Watson are small miracles, drenched with beauty and sorrow, damp heat and bright color, hilarity and tragedy. This most recent collection of his spans a surreal spectrum of settings, from the haunted air of the rural South to the cheap hotels and chain restaurants of modern Southern California. The understated yearning in Watson's voice and vision reminds me of Hawthorne's famous words about Melville: "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his

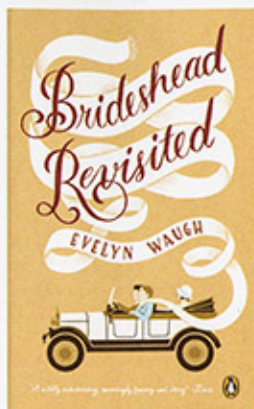
unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us."

PILGRIM IN THE RUINS: A LIFE OF WALKER PERCY
by Jay Tolson

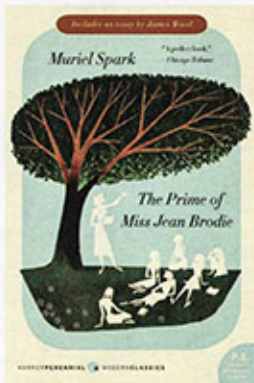
Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* is the master text for Southern white boys who want to be writers: a slim, contemplative novel about an aimless son of privilege and his search for meaning, in post-war New Orleans. Percy perfectly captures the peculiar angst that comes along with being given everything and having no idea what to do with it. Percy's life, however, was equally compelling. Born into a prominent family, he lost both parents to suicide. Raised a skeptic and a devotee of science, he contracted tuberculosis while working as a pathologist. While convalescing, he decided to abandon his medical career, convert to Catholicism, and embark on a life as a novelist. Jay Tolson's perceptive book is rich with insight into Percy's evolution as a thinker, his progress from fledgling writer to literary master, and his devotion both to the church and to ideas seemingly incompatible with religiousness.

THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE
by Muriel Spark

Set in a girls' school in 1930s Edinburgh, Scotland, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is a cross between *Mean Girls* and a parody of *Dead Poets Society* in which the charismatic maverick teacher is a woman "in her prime" who



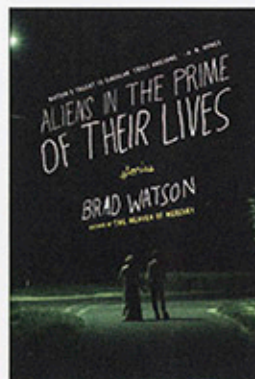
The bitterly elegiac tale of a young man and doomed family



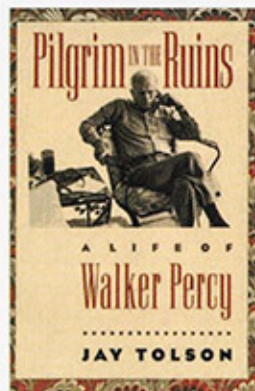
A ruinous torrent of jealousy and betrayal



A six-volume exploration of grace in the banal



Drenched with damp heat and bright color



Religion, and ideas incompatible with religiousness

cultivates a set of pupils whom she "educates" by discoursing on her summer travels, her admiration for Mussolini, and her love life. Eventually, Miss Brodie manipulates one of her "set" into an illicit affair with a male teacher, provoking a ruinous torrent of jealousy and betrayal. Spark's mastery of language and narrative technique is awe-inspiring, but I admire this book most as a treatise on the secret lives of girls (something I'm curious about both as a novelist and a father) and the dangerous power of a captivating mentor.

MY STRUGGLE
By Karl Ove Knausgaard

In the few years since *My Struggle* began to be translated from the original Norwegian, Karl Ove Knausgaard has become an international literary rock star. Not coincidentally, he looks the part. With his stylishly long and unkempt hair and beard, blue eyes, prominent cheekbones, and ever-present cigarette, Knausgaard seems way too cool to be the author of a 3,600-page, six-volume dissertation of Proustian anecdotes from a mostly typical middle-class childhood and cranky ruminations on the emasculating indignities of 21st-century fatherhood. I started reading *My Struggle* largely to prove to myself that it wasn't worth the hype. By the time I reached the end of the first section—a meditation on the human compulsion to shield ourselves from the reality of death—I was a zealous convert to the Church of Karl Ove. As I read on, my jaw continually dropped open with admiration for the grace with which Knausgaard gives meaning to even the most banal aspects of daily life. *My Struggle's* hypnotic power is undeniable, and irresistible. **E**