

9-1-2010

Faulkner's World

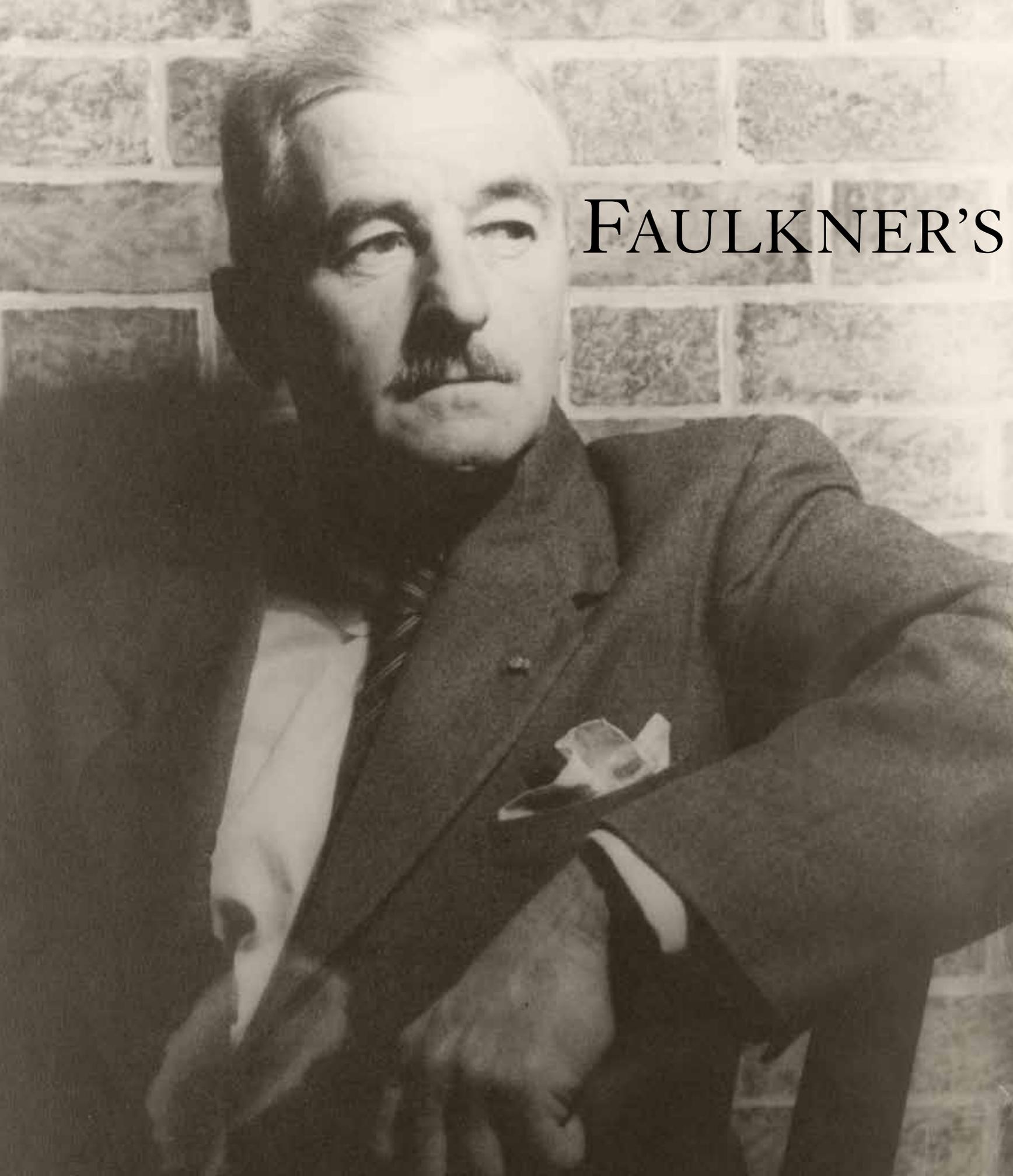
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Recommended Citation

Gramling, Martin (2010) "Faulkner's World," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 53 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol53/iss3/10>

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A black and white photograph of a man with a mustache, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light-colored shirt, and a dark tie. He is sitting in a chair, leaning forward slightly, with his right arm resting on the chair's back. The background is a brick wall. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows on the left side of his face and body.

FAULKNER'S

WORLD

A trip to Oxford, Mississippi, offers students the chance to experience firsthand the area that inspired the Nobel laureate's work.

By Martin Gramling

Pulling off Interstate 78 onto one of the Mississippi backroads that presumably would deposit us pilgrims in Oxford, our Jerusalem, was a surreal experience.

Interstate highways are always safe territory no matter what strange country they may traverse. To exit the interstate, however, is an act of faith and fortitude, especially in a place like Mississippi, a place-name which even for a South Carolina boy evokes tall tales of gruesome exoticism.

As our car turned onto a narrow tree-shaded lane, which according to a faded road sign led to a place called "Pontotoc" (a neighbor of Oxford, we could only pray), I was reminded of William Faulkner's translation of Agamemnon's lament to Ulysses: "As I lay dying, the woman with dog's eyes refused to close my eyes for me as I went down to Hades."

Led by English professor Willard Pate, whose passion for Faulkner knows no bounds, our class had spent the 2010 spring semester studying the author's semi-fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Now eight of us had come to Lafayette County, not only because it was Faulkner's home, but because Lafayette County is Yoknapatawpha County, and Oxford is Faulkner's town of Jefferson. The characters and locations in such novels as *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* and *Absalom, Absalom!* are modeled on the real people and places among whom Faulkner lived.

Faulkner's most famous line reminds us: "The past is never dead. It is not even past." And indeed, the past hangs heavy over Mississippi.

Vestiges of Faulkner's life and times still haunt the landscape. The sacred shrine of our pilgrimage was Rowan Oak, Faulkner's home in Oxford, which has been preserved almost exactly as it was when he died in 1962. Cedar trees, those ever-present sentinels of southern graveyards, lined the gravel drive through the ruined garden (which Faulkner

left purposefully dilapidated) to his imposingly columned front porch.

We toured the house and grounds, but it was the porch that most captivated my imagination. The front porch was the great inculcator of the southern oral tradition which is at the foundation of so much of Faulkner's writing. It was the stage on which the southern bards told their stories. As we milled about the grounds, I could imagine a silver-haired, exquisitely mustached Faulkner reclining in the late evening on the porch with a glass of bourbon, half-listening to some friend's tall tale while musing intently upon the peculiar nature of the evening light in August.

Not every aspect of our trip was strictly tied to Faulkner. One afternoon Dr. Pate suggested we visit a small dairy farm a few miles outside of Oxford, near the area Faulkner called Frenchman's Bend. The farm did, however, have a literary connection; it was run by Billy Ray Brown, son of the late Larry Brown, a novelist, two-time recipient of the Southern Book Critics Circle Award, and author of a book of essays called *Billy Ray's Farm*.

The farm was picture perfect, set in a golden sea of blooming wildflowers and anchored by an old white farmhouse. As we stepped out of our cars three small children charged down from the front porch and breathlessly introduced themselves. Blonde, 7-year-old Molly was recovering from a recent visit from the tooth fairy. Her sister Emily, 6, was an aspiring teacher. Harris, a dusty 3-year-old boy, was less enthusiastic about our intrusion and repeatedly wandered off to play with his trucks in a mud puddle.

I'm normally no fan of small creatures that make loud noises, but these children quickly captured my heart as they swept us off on a whirlwind tour of the farm. "These are the chickens!" "Here's the hog!" "One of the cows just had a baby. Wanna see?"

Perhaps the greatest difference between the real and fictional counties is that Yoknapatawpha is timeless, but Lafayette is not. Yoknapatawpha will always be available for exploration and discovery, but the Lafayette County that Faulkner knew will eventually disappear.

Of course we wanted to see, so Molly and Emily introduced us to Harris Junior, a spindly legged, confused-looking bull calf that epitomized the sort of warmth and fuzziness that attracts suburbanites to the idea of farming. It's the same sort of warmth and fuzziness that little boys are innately motivated to destroy, and Harris Senior, now provided with an audience, was no exception. He climbed the fence, ran up to the calf, and kicked the defenseless animal squarely in the nose.

This brazen act of aggression elicited gasps and even screams from the audience, which only encouraged the young ruffian to follow up his first assault by hurling an empty plastic bucket at Harris Junior. The calf, which was actually taller than the boy (making the kick that much more impressive), did not seem overly shaken by the attack, but Harris had made his point. His dominance asserted, he climbed back over the fence, kicked off his boots, and returned to the solitude of his mud puddle.

Molly and Emily now had us firmly within their power. They issued each of us a nickname so they could better keep track of us. Jane-Allison was rechristened "Jennifer," Jill became "Princess," and Mary Elizabeth was inexplicably named "Toothless." The little girls had little use for Calvin and me — Calvin was renamed "Meanie," while I fared better with "Bob" — and we were soon ejected from the games of the group.

I used this opportunity to try to track down someone on the farm who had progressed beyond the first grade. It turned out there was only one — Paula Brown, the children's mother and wife of Billy Ray, who was away tending vegetables and securing pizza for dinner.



Mrs. Brown instructed us in the basics of dairy farming. It's an intensive process; the cows must be milked every day, "including Christmas and Easter," she reminded us. We were invited to become involved in a hands-on way. I confess that my skill at milking cows is somewhat lacking, a fact that Molly and Emily made sure to rub in my face.

We did enjoy tasting the end product. Normally I don't drink milk, except in conjunction with a sugary breakfast cereal, but the stuff produced by the Brown farm was something divine. Ice-cold, unhomogenized, and definitely whole, its rich, smooth flow was something of an epiphany.

The sun was sinking low in the sky when we finally left the farm, with Molly and Emily begging us to stay. Harris merely glanced toward us from his mud puddle.

As we pulled away, it occurred to me that here were some of the same sorts of people that inspired the characters that populated

Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha — characters quickened by the same loves and hatreds and fears and jealousies that animated the real inhabitants of Lafayette County. Part of Faulkner's genius was his ability to create characters and places that could carry the heavy weight of his symbolism while remaining realistic and believable. The locations might be spied along the dusty roads of Lafayette County, and the characters could well be walking the streets of Oxford.

Perhaps the greatest difference between the real and fictional counties is that Yoknapatawpha is timeless, but Lafayette is not. Yoknapatawpha will always be available

for exploration and discovery, but the Lafayette County that Faulkner knew will eventually disappear. Farmlands will give way to suburbs (to "row after row of small crowded jerrybuilt individually owned demiurban bungalows," to quote *The Sound and the Fury*), and the last country store will close or be transformed by the forces of Disneyfied historicism into a kitschy gift shop/museum — perhaps a fate worse than even the bulldozer.

We witnessed this process firsthand. Dr. Pate, a frequent visitor to the area, mentioned as many structures that "used to be here" as she did those still standing. "There used to be a big white house here," on a spot now occupied by a mobile home (with a tacked-on porch wider than the actual residence). "I think there's still an old dogtrot house over there," but it was gone.

In the Ripley Cemetery, the stern statue of Faulkner's great-grandfather now looks out over a Dollar General and Pizza Hut set amid an ashen sea of empty parking spaces. There's

something undeniably saddening about all this, and it reminds me of the changes in the area of my childhood in upstate South Carolina, where the once endless rows of peach trees continue their long retreat before the onslaught of suburbia, their verdant shadows relegated to isolated patches tenuously holding out against extinction.

Yet with this destruction comes a kind of renewal. More than old buildings are passing away in Mississippi and throughout the South; so too is the old social order.

When we visited the University of Mississippi, we saw the monument to James Meredith, whose admission to the university in 1962 provoked massive riots. If the physical reality of Yoknapatawpha County is fading into oblivion, so too are the rancid injustices of the racial, sexual, and economic system that shaped and destroyed the lives of such Faulkner creations as Joe Christmas, Lucas Beauchamp, and the Compsons, McCaslins, Bundrens and Sutpens.

The Lafayette County that Faulkner knew may have passed out of existence to join his solely owned Yoknapatawpha in the realm of legend and myth, but with it has expired the long and brutal reign of those garrulous old ghosts.

Mississippi is not, in fact, Hades. But there does hang about some parts of Lafayette County something otherworldly, and around its neatly tilled postage stamps of farmland something almost primordial, as though here survives some antique vestige of rural America before the triumph of suburbs.



No, Mississippi is not Hades. In fact, as I thought as our car merged back onto Interstate 78 to head for home, it is inexplicably compelling. As field and tree again gave way to asphalt and automobile, I thought I could be perfectly happy spending every day of my life sipping bourbon with Billy Faulkner on his front porch, while Billy Ray's kids run squealing through the yard.

And I don't even like bourbon. Or kids. |F|

This article appeared in its original form in Engage magazine, Volume 6, Issue 3, a publication of the Office of Admission. The author (pink shirt above), a 2010 graduate from Charleston, S.C., works for an international design-build company. Although he majored in political science, he says he most enjoyed

the classes he took in history and English — the former for showing him that “a life devoted to the study of ninth century Norman clerical vestments is not, in fact, wasted,” and the latter for encouraging in him “a pernicious vanity called writing.”

Photo of William Faulkner: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection (reproduction number, e.g., LC-USZ62-54231). Other photos by Willard Pate.