

Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

HILR Study Group, Fall 2021, 10-week delayed

Stephen Senturia

Extended Description

Catalog Description

Fiction is, at its simplest, the telling of a story. The author arranges the telling, but the telling is done by some agent: the “narrator.” The paradigmatic narrator is single-voiced, objective, and knowledgeable, but in the works of William Faulkner, things can be very different. We find an enormous richness of narrative invention, especially “displaced narration,” where the story emerges from a merging of points of view or from a retelling of some kind. *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner’s greatest novel about the Civil-War-era south, takes us into the fuzzy area between narration and myth, a multiply displaced telling of events through various witnesses, with many details lost in the haze of time. Our goals are to enjoy one of the world’s greatest books and to deepen our sensitivity as readers to the richness of story and characterization that different narration styles can provide. An Extended Description is posted on the website.

(Reading 50 pages/week; no reports.)

Book (specific edition required – ISBN 978-0-679-73218-1)

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Corrected Text* (Vintage, 1990), Pbk, \$14.45.

Excerpts from *Sartoris* and from Carolyn Porter's *William Faulkner* will be provided by the study group leader.

Study Group Leader

Stephen Senturia taught Electrical Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for 36 years. Since his retirement, he has published two novels (*One Man's Purpose*, and *Cross Purposes*) and writes an occasional blog entitled “Education as Conversation.” He has led study groups on subjects as diverse as adapting fiction to film, volcanoes, the physics of musical instruments, and Faulkner’s novels.

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Extended Description

Fiction is, at its simplest, the telling of a story. The author arranges the telling, but the telling is done by some agent: the “narrator.” The paradigmatic narrator is single-voiced, objective, and knowledgeable, but in the works of William Faulkner, we find an enormous richness of narrative invention. We will do a close reading of Faulkner’s greatest novel of the Civil-War era, with emphasis on narrative voice, how that affects characterization, and, especially, on what could be called the “displaced narrator,” where the story emerges from a merging of points of view or from a retelling of some kind.

We will begin with what may look like a diversion: the opening chapter of *Sartoris*, the first of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County novels, published in 1929. It heralds Faulkner's ability to bridge time within individual sentences, sweeping the relevant history into the present and anticipating the future. We will then take up *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), perhaps Faulkner's greatest work. It takes us into a fuzzy area between narration and myth, a multiply displaced narration of events through various witnesses, reported down through the years, with many details lost in the haze of time and having to be reimagined, reconstructed, reinterpreted, or even reinvented. The receiver/re-imaginer of this tale is the same Quentin Compson who will, within a matter of months, commit suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), another multi-voiced epic that jumps across time and place, again forcing the reader to create the integration of events into a story.

Reading Faulkner is not easy. He typically obscures as much as he reveals, but with patience, what is revealed is immensely gratifying. This Study Group will, first of all, provide a major assist with what might be, on your own, difficult reading. We will, when the time is right, use web-based plot summaries and character lists, but not until we have confronted Faulkner's text on its own terms. Second, we will look carefully at how the story emerges through the narrative choices, the omissions, the cross-references, the images, the voices. Third, we will place the novel within a critical framework using the very readable (and short) interpretative biography by Carolyn Porter entitled *William Faulkner*.

The class style will be discussion based, with key questions posted along with each week's reading assignment.

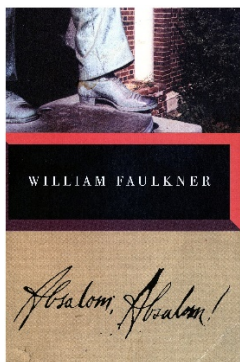
Because we will be doing close reading of the text with reference to specific pages, it is required that all participants have the same edition:

ISBN: 978-0-679-73218-1. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Corrected Text* (Vintage, 1990 Edition), pbk, \$14.45;

The excerpts from *Sartoris* and from Carolyn Porter's *William Faulkner* will be provided.

To be sure you find a paperback with the correct pagination, I include cover shots below:

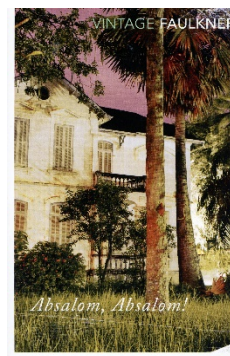
THIS ONE - 1990
Correct pagination



ALSO OK – 1990
Correct pagination



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Incompatible pagination



Syllabus

The preliminary plan for the 10-week Study Group is shown below:

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|----|----------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Faulkner Introduction; Narration | Porter 1-38; Nobel lecture |
| 2 | Ch 1 of Sartoris | Ch One of Sartoris |
| 3 | Absalom, Absalom! - 1 | AA Ch 1, 2 pp. 3-45 |
| 4 | Absalom, Absalom! - 2 | AA Ch 3, 4 pp. 46-106 |
| 5 | Absalom, Absalom! - 2.5 | AA Ch 4, pp. 70-106 |
| 6 | Absalom, Absalom! - 3.5 | AA Ch 5, pp. 107-140 |
| 7 | Absalom, Absalom! - 3 | AA Ch 6, pp. 141-175 |
| 8 | Absalom, Absalom! - 4 | AA Ch 7 pp. 176-234 |
| 9 | Absalom, Absalom! - 5 | AA Ch 8 pp. 235-287 |
| 10 | Absalom, Absalom! - 6 | AA Ch 9 pp. 288-302; Porter 104 - mid 133 |