



Smithsonian Associates

Reading Faulkner: Chronicler of the American South

Light in August

Monday, August 23, 2021 - 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET

Suggestions for Reading (new items added for August)

The best recent introduction to Faulkner's work is Philip Weinstein, *Becoming Faulkner* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Weinstein also edited *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), which can be supplemented by *The New Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner*, ed. John T. Matthews (2015). Good libraries should have Robert Penn Warren's classic collection of early Faulkner criticism, *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice Hall, 1966). From the same period comes Cleanth Brooks' *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (Yale University Press, 1963).

More specialized studies include John T. Irwin's *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), which focuses on *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* and Minrose Gwin's *The Feminine and Faulkner: Reading (beyond) Sexual Difference* (University of Tennessee Press, 1990). Robert Alter's *Pen and Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton University Press, 2010) has an exceptionally useful chapter on the language of *Absalom, Absalom!*; Peter Brooks' has a similarly valuable chapter on that novel's narrative structure in *Reading for the Plot* (Knopf, 1984). Noel Polk's "Trying Not to Say: A Primer on the Language of *The Sound and the Fury*" is a model of close reading (in Polk, ed. *New Essays on The Sound and the Fury*, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

With *Light in August*, I especially recommend the sections in Weinstein's *Becoming Faulkner*; the chapter on the novel in Eric J. Sundquist's *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); and Cleanth Brooks' chapter on the novel as well. There is a Norton Critical Edition of the novel in preparation, edited by Melanie Benson Taylor (Dartmouth College) but it will not be out until next year.

Carl Rollyson's two-volume *The Life of William Faulkner* (University of Virginia Press, 2020) is the most recent biography. I especially admire Don Doyle's *Faulkner's County* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), a historical study of the actual place on which he based Yoknapatawpha.

My own work on Faulkner includes the Norton Critical Edition of *The Sound and the Fury* (W.W. Norton, 2014), which reprints a number of valuable critical essays, and *The Saddest Words: William Faulkner's Civil War* (Liveright, 2020).

Questions on *Light in August*

What was the novel like to read? Don't think about interpreting it yet, but focus on the experience of reading. The shifts in voice, the quick change from one plot line to another.

What's the relation of Lena's story to Christmas'? How does her presence change the overall mood of the book? Is there a sense in which we can consider it a comedy?

How does the novel deal with the question of race? What difference would it make to know for sure that Joe does, or does not, have any black ancestry.

How does Faulkner ask to see or conceive of Jefferson? What kind of place is it? What difference does it make that all the major characters are outsiders there?

The role of religion? Of a fiercely unforgiving Calvinism?

To what degree does it matter that the major characters--Lena aside?--are not especially sympathetic?

The Sound and the Fury presented its characters as caught by a familial past. How about here? To what degree--and how--is the past present in this novel.