



Smithsonian Associates

Reading Faulkner: Chronicler of the American South

Absalom, Absalom!

Monday, September 27, 2021 - 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET

A Note from Michael Gorra

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This is a novel in which one's always tempted to make a distinction between its "story" (the tale of Thomas Sutpen) and the way that story is told (Quentin and Miss Rosa and so on.) It won't work. You have to think of both together, just as you have to think of Faulkner as both a Southern writer and a modernist writer at once. That is, however, precisely what makes him so difficult, and in this book in particular. Its narrative is a set of nesting boxes, with different voices overlaying each other, and in which it's hard to know just what we can take for truth. And it is also deeply, deeply involved in Southern history. So the more you know about plantation life, about slavery, about the Indian removals, the Civil War, Reconstruction--well, the more you're going to see in it.

For background reading--future reading, presumably. There are classic formalist interpretations of the novel in Cleanth Brooks' *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* and in Peter Brooks' (no relation) *Reading for the Plot*. John T. Irwin has an extraordinary and endlessly provocative book that looks at *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* in terms of each other: *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge*. Eric Sundquist's *Faulkner: The House Divided* offers one of the most detailed readings of the novel in historical terms. I can also recommend the sections on the novel in Philip Weinstein's *Becoming Faulkner* and John T Matthews, *William Faulkner: Seeing through the South*.

There is a Norton Critical Edition of the novel in preparation, edited by Susan Scott Parrish of the University of Michigan. I suspect it will be out next year.