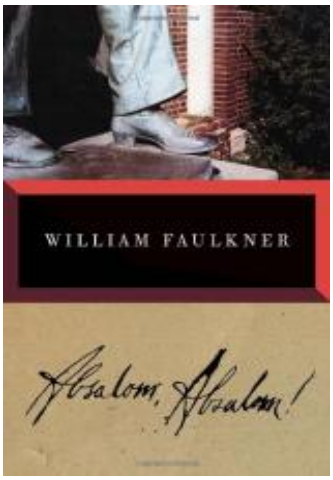
Absalom, Absalom!

by William Faulkner



About the Book

When he completed **Absalom, Absalom!** in May 1936, Faulkner said, "I think it's the best novel yet written by an American." He described it as "the story of a man who wanted a son through pride, and got too many of them and they destroyed him." It is the epic tale of Thomas Sutpen, who grows up as a dirt-poor boy in backwoods Appalachia and has his first glimpse of social hierarchy when his family moves to a plantation in Tidewater Virginia. One day he goes to the mansion's front door, carrying a message, and is told by a slave wearing the master's livery that he must go around to the back door. This experience has a searing effect on the boy's consciousness. From that moment forward, he sets in motion his grand design: to become, at any cost, a man of wealth and power. He goes to colonial Haiti and marries the daughter of a plantation owner he has saved from death during the slave revolt there, but he abandons his wife and newborn son, Charles Bon, when he learns that his wife has a strain of Negro blood. In 1833 he arrives in Mississippi with a gang of Haitian slaves, cheats a Chickasaw Indian out of a hundred square miles of land, and begins with a ruthless and fanatical determination to build a mansion in the wilderness, to carve out a plantation, to gather wealth, to acquire a second wife and forge a dynasty that will carry on his name. But the son he left behind returns to haunt him. At the university Charles Bon becomes the best friend of Henry, the son of Sutpen's second marriage, and eventually Henry kills Charles in order to prevent him from marrying their sister Judith. Henry repudiates his father and flees; ultimately Sutpen, with his plantation in ruins after the Civil War, is reduced to selling trinkets in a backwoods general store. After his plan to breed yet a third family with the sister of his dead wife fails, Sutpen impregnates the teenage daughter of a poor white man, who kills him with a scythe when he insults the girl because she has given birth to a daughter. In an ironic coda to Sutpen's dream of dynastic grandeur, the only descendant who survives to carry on the Sutpen blood is the grandson of Charles Bon, another of Faulkner's "idiots."

While it is the most challenging of Faulkner's works, **Absalom, Absalom!** also contains the most mature and profound examination of his greatest themes: the South's mixture of horror and pride in its own history, the interrelationship of incest and miscegenation, the tragic legacy of slavery, and, as always at the heart of it all, the family drama.

Discussion Guide

1. Any reader bewildered by the opening pages of **Absalom, Absalom!** will realize immediately that its greatest challenge lies in its complex narrative structure, and as with **The Sound and the Fury** and **As I Lay Dying**, you must learn how to read it as you go. How many narrators are there, and what is their relationship to one another? What are the sources of their authority as tellers of the Sutpen story? What, so far as you can make out, "happened," as opposed to what is conjectured by the various narrators? Why might Faulkner have chosen such a challenging narrative form, despite the difficulties it presents for his readers?

2. At the center of the novel is the gigantic figure of Sutpen--a man who drives himself to extraordinary lengths in the pursuit of his "design." Sutpen means different things to different people: to Rosa, he is a monster, but one she would have married, whereas to Colonel Compson, he is a human being with sympathetic characteristics. How does your view of Sutpen change as the web of his story emerges? How do you come away from the novel feeling about him? Is he evil? innocent? superhuman? mad? heroic? Does Sutpen's history, which he has told to Colonel Compson, justify his behavior?

3. Why do the various tellers of the story interpret and embroider the tale so differently? What is Faulkner telling us about the human need to order and interpret the past? How does each teller affect your response? Whose version of events do you find most attractive, most compelling? Whose version makes most sense to you? Is "truth" largely irrelevant?

4. Faulkner's original title for the novel was "Dark House," and as in much of his work, we see in **Absalom, Absalom!** strong elements of the gothic literary convention: a ruined and possibly haunted house, a demonic hero, family secrets, hints of incest, a melodramatic plot, an overwhelming mood of decadence and decay. Yet in its depth and intensity, the novel clearly transcends the often trivial melodrama of much gothic fiction. How does Faulkner's use of gothic elements contribute to the novel's dramatic effect?

5. Consider Faulkner's brilliant development of the character of Charles Bon, the son that Sutpen has cast off. In both Quentin and Shreve's retelling and in Miss Rosa's, he is a figure of romance, while in Mr. Compson's version he is an opportunist, using both Judith and Henry to revenge himself upon his father. Which of these perspectives is more satisfying to you, and why? Why is the element of doubt about Bon's motivation--even about the extent of his knowledge about his origin--so crucial to Faulkner's plan?

6. The book's title is taken from the biblical story of Absalom, son of King David, told in the second book of Samuel--a dynastic tale of incest, rebellion, revenge, and violent death. How is your perspective on the novel enlarged after reading the Absalom story? How does the biblical tale inflect the novel's themes of incest, dynastic hopes and failures, rivalry between father and son? How does David's grief at the death of Absalom (2 Samuel 18:33) compare with Thomas Sutpen's seeming lack of feeling for his sons--or for anyone else?

7. Charles Bon is at heart of the incest plot, and it is the dual threat of incest and miscegenation that ruins Sutpen's great design. How do incest and miscegenation mirror each other? What is it that makes these two forms of mixing blood--endogamy and exogamy--so taboo? Do you agree that it is the thought of miscegenation, rather than incest, that Henry can't endure? Why do rage, self-loathing, and masochism play such a large role in the stories of Charles Bon's two direct descendants, Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon and Jim Bond?

8. What do you think of Mr. Compson's theory of the incestuous triad formed by Henry, Bon, and Judith, described as follows: "The brother...taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride" [p. 77]? Does Faulkner assume that a strong incestuous component is part of the psychology of every family? Or only of extremely unusual families like the Sutpens?

9. The concept of racial hierarchy is at odds with the domestic intimacy in which blacks and whites lived together in the South. During the Civil War, Judith, Clytie, and Rosa live together as sisters, eating the same food, working side by side. But when Rosa returns to the house in 1909, she warns Clytie not to touch her: "Let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too" [p. 112]. How does the novel expose the mental convolutions by which people tried to maintain the notion of an essential difference--a species difference--between black skin and white, even among members of the same family? What, in these circumstances, do you think of Clytie's loyalty and her efforts to protect Henry?

10. To what degree do you see the self-destructiveness displayed by just about all of the figures in this novel as Faulkner's deliberate allegory of the South?

11. Many critics have commented that Faulkner takes his stylistic eccentricity to its most involuted and exaggerated extremes in **Absalom, Absalom!**, making inordinate demands upon the reader's attention and patience. An anonymous reviewer for Time called this book "the strangest, least readable, most infuriating and yet in some respects the most impressive novel that William Faulkner has written." What use does Faulkner make of repetition, circularity, accumulation, and confusion? Are there aesthetic and intellectual reasons he takes his rhetoric and syntax to such exhaustive lengths, or do you feel that his style is too self-indulgent?

12. Absalom, Absalom! is a novel about the meaning of history, and about the extreme pressure of the past, particularly in the South, upon the inhabitants of the present. More importantly, it is about the doubtful process of coming to know, reconstruct, and come to grips with history. Mr. Compson says to Quentin, "We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales...we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting...performing their acts of simple passion and violence, impervious to time and inexplicable" [p. 80]. Why does Quentin, who is unrelated to Sutpen, seem to understand the tale as bearing directly upon his own identity and fate? If history is "a dead time" [p. 71], as Mr. Compson calls it, why does it command so much mesmerized attention in this novel?

13. Absalom, Absalom! shares certain characteristics with classical tragedy, and Faulkner uses Mr. Compson to make the connection clear. He alludes to Aeschylus's great play **Agamemnon** with his discussion on pages 48-49 of the name of Sutpen's daughter by a slave, suggesting that Sutpen might have meant to call her Cassandra rather than Clytemnestra. Elsewhere, Mr. Compson sees the story as a dramatic tableau, with "fate, destiny, retribution, irony--the stage manager"

[p. 57]. Aristotle noted that a certain blindness, a character flaw he called **hamartia**, was common to tragic heroes. What are the flaws in Sutpen that contribute to his tragedy? If Sutpen is a character who stands for pure, unswerving will, what role does fate play in the story?

14. Why does Faulkner have Quentin tell his story to Shreve McCannon, a Canadian, in a room at Harvard in January, 1910? Why does this reconstruction of a uniquely Southern tale take place on Yankee soil? What is the meaning of the relationship between story and setting, as contained in the following phrase: "that fragile pandora's box of scrawled paper which had filled with violent and unratiocinative djinns and demons this snug monastic coign, this dreamy and heatless alcove of what we call the best of thought" [p. 208]? What do you make of the book's final line, in which Quentin hysterically insists that he doesn't hate the South?

15. In the last few pages of the novel we learn at last, as in a mystery, what Quentin's role in the story has been. He has entered into the final chapter of the nightmare of the Sutpen family with his own eyes, accompanying Miss Rosa to Sutpen's Hundred, where he sees the dying Henry. He seems unable to emerge from this experience into ordinary life. Why does the past have such hallucinatory power for Quentin? What does his meeting with Henry mean to him? Do you see Clytie's burning of the house, with herself and Henry in it, as a final purgation of the family curse? Why then does this history seem to be a nightmare from which Quentin is unable to awaken?

Author Bio

William Faulkner (1897-1962), who came from an old southern family, grew up in Oxford, Mississippi. He joined the Canadian, and later the British, Royal Air Force during the First World War, studied for a while at the University of Mississippi, and temporarily worked for a New York bookstore and a New Orleans newspaper. Except for some trips to Europe and Asia, and a few brief stays in Hollywood as a scriptwriter, he worked on his novels and short stories on a farm in Oxford.

In an attempt to create a saga of his own, Faulkner has invented a host of characters typical of the historical growth and subsequent decadence of the South. The human drama in Faulkner's novels is then built on the model of the actual, historical drama extending over almost a century and a half. Each story and each novel contributes to the construction of a whole, which is the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County and its inhabitants. Their theme is the decay of the old South, as represented by the Sartoris and Compson families, and the emergence of ruthless and brash newcomers, the Snopeses. Theme and technique - the distortion of time through the use of the inner monologue are fused particularly successfully in THE SOUND AND THE FURY (1929), the downfall of the Compson family seen through the minds of several characters. The novel SANCTUARY (1931) is about the degeneration of Temple Drake, a young girl from a distinguished southern family. Its sequel, REQUIEM FOR A NUN (1951), written partly as a drama, centered on the courtroom trial of a Negro woman who had once been a party to Temple Drake's debauchery. In LIGHT IN AUGUST (1932), prejudice is shown to be most destructive when it is internalized, as in Joe Christmas, who believes, though there is no proof of it, that one of his parents was a Negro. The theme of racial prejudice is brought up again in ABSALOM, ABSALOM! (1936), in which a young man is rejected by his father and brother because of his mixed blood. Faulkner's most outspoken moral evaluation of the relationship and the problems between Negroes and whites is to be found in INTRUDER IN THE DUST (1948).

In 1940, Faulkner published the first volume of the Snopes trilogy, THE HAMLET, to be followed by two volumes, THE TOWN (1957) and THE MANSION (1959), all of them tracing the rise of the insidious Snopes family to positions of power and wealth in the community. THE REIVERS, his last - and most humorous - work, with great many similarities to Mark Twain's HUCKLEBERRY FINN, appeared in 1962, the year of Faulkner's death.

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