

An Audience with Mr. Faulkner: A Centennial Memoir

Robert Drake

"NOW WHATEVER YOU DO, don't ask him about his work or anything else really *literary*." And I wondered what I *could* talk to him about; somehow I didn't think it would do to ask him about the state of his cotton crop, even if he did call himself a farmer. So I thought I had just better trust in the Lord, who might somehow put suitable words in my mouth. And thus when I was ushered into William Faulkner's presence in Charlottesville, *something* would come out.

As it turned out, though, it was he who spoke first: he asked me whereabouts I was *from* and thereby confirmed his Southernness right away. We always want to know that because it helps us to "place" the stranger, to know where he belongs, and what we can expect from him—a rationale ratified by none other than Flannery O'Connor when she complained that all the literary folks she met at cocktail parties in New York "ain't *from* anywhere" and that was what was the matter with them.

So to the distinguished, well-groomed gentleman (my mother would have said you could tell he was *folks*) sitting across the desk from me, clad in the inevitable

seersucker jacket and khaki trousers, smoking a corn cob pipe, I immediately replied, "Ripley, Tennessee, which is about 100 miles northwest of Oxford, Mississippi," which I thought ought to get us all squared away at once. But there was more to come, more than I had certainly bargained for because there was yet another question: "Were there ever any Indians up there?" To which I dutifully replied, "Yes, sir, I think there were because there's a community out in our county called Mounds and there are small hills right in the middle of the fields there, which look like they might have been Indian mounds." Surely, I thought, that would be enough; but it wasn't because there was yet one more inquiry: "What tribe?" And gratefully, I said I thought they were Chickasaws and, privately, I hoped that would be the end of it, though I had no earthly idea what we would talk about next.

I had been told I shouldn't stay more than 20 minutes either, and I could see it might be the longest 20 minutes of my life, right in the middle of my visit to what my Virginia relatives always called "*the University*," where, in that May of 1958, I was being considered for a job. Every instinct I had whispered to me to get up and run, but somehow I had sense enough to know that this was one of the most important things that had ever

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happened to me in my life and I didn't want to just throw it away.

So far my encounters with the rich and famous had been negligible, but I had always been one for taking advantage of your opportunities whenever and wherever they might occur. I didn't want anything to go to waste. And I *was* an English teacher and thus bound to take an interest in the Presence across the desk from me, even if I then had read comparatively little of his work. (The first of his novels I had ever tried reading was *Sanctuary*—mainly, I think, because I had heard it was “dirty.” But even though I was a high school senior at the time, I could find little to be scandalized by there. Really, I thought it was all rather dull.)

But some years later—after I had begun my teaching career and he had won the Nobel Prize and thus been appropriately certified as “great,” and after I had begun reading more of his novels with greater insight and appreciation—my parents and I had driven down to Oxford, to see what might be there to be seen—the stately home, Rowan Oak, the usual Southern scenery of court house and square, maybe even, if we were lucky, see Shelley himself plain. But when we went into a café just off the square to have lunch and I asked the waitress whether “Mr. Faulkner” ever came in there, she replied, quite matter of factly, “Which one?” And I got the idea that, as one usually found in visiting the home towns of celebrities, they themselves didn't cut much mustard there; they were just home folks. And that was all right too—again, something like finding out where *they were from*.

As it turned out, we did, after a couple of throat-clearings, fall easily into conversation: I asked him whether it was true that he and Mrs. Faulkner were planning to move to Charlottesville, as I had heard; and he replied, “Well, Mrs. Faulkner wants to be closer to the grand-

son; you know how grandmothers are.” I had recovered somewhat by that time, so I asked, perhaps all too archly, “Well, don't grandfathers feel that way too?” But the answer to that was something of a comedown: “O, I don't care anything about *boys*; I like *girls*.” And then I relaxed because I felt I knew where we were then, where we both were *from*. And on the whole, that was just about the truth because somehow we started discussing the difficult racial situation which prevailed in the South at the time and what might be its future for both white and black.

I had been told that, while he was in residence at Mr. Jefferson's university, he had refused all invitations to speak, even for considerable fees, at neighboring institutions of higher learning except for several black ones that were nearby, where he had spoken without charge. So I thought this might be a “safe” subject for discussion. And it apparently was because he immediately launched forth into the difficulties of the situation but the obligations both sides had to make the best of things as soon as possible so we Southerners, of both races, could get on with our lives and our work: we were all in this together, he said. On the other hand, we had to be careful because “it was a question of just how much equality the Negro could take” right then. And I thought for a moment that that sounded more like a step backward than anything else to me and I had better not repeat that far and wide. (And I didn't for many years.) But then I reflected that it might just be another way of saying “with all deliberate speed” or even “make haste slowly”—all on the side of prudence and common sense. And I think now perhaps it was just that. But I was glad when he changed the subject and went on to something else—what it was I can't even remember now, but something “safe,” I'm sure.

My 20 minutes were surely gone by

then, I knew, without looking at my watch, but I simply *had* to say *something* to mark this as a memorable occurrence for myself if not for him. I hadn't really read enough of his work at that point to ask an intelligent question about it, even if some of it had not already been proscribed as being in questionable taste. (I was only in my mid-twenties then and hadn't even taught more than a couple of years by that time.) I couldn't even think of anything to say about his eloquent Nobel Prize speech either except that I could recall hearing Robert Penn Warren observe that its "affirmative" nature had come as no surprise to anybody who had been reading his work with any insight all along. But I didn't know whether that would be tactful. (I remembered that Faulkner had said the real story of *All the King's Men* was not Willie Stark's but Cass Mastern's and perhaps I had best keep quiet.)

But just before I went out of the door (he had risen with great courtliness to see me off), I did say, "Mr. Faulkner, I recently saw a movie called *The Long Hot Summer*, that was supposed to be based on some of your work; but the only similarity I could find was that some of the characters just happened to have the same names as yours." Whereupon his eyes twinkled and he took an extra puff on his pipe and said, "That's what they tell me. I haven't seen it." But somehow

that still wasn't quite enough for me, so I added, "And Mr. Faulkner, I think you ought to know that we're all mighty proud of you down here." That time he simply raised one eyebrow and looked quizzical as though wondering what sort of creature this was that had been let loose upon him. And I felt sure then that I wasn't the only one who wouldn't forget our meeting.

Well, that's about all there is to tell now except that I didn't get the job for which I had been interviewed, but then neither did the other candidate. Nevertheless, my visit had been memorable in more ways than one, and after all these years it still is. Its concluding exchange, however, was not so dramatic perhaps as one passed on to me some years later in New York by a very kind lady whose husband was the owner of the Algonquin Hotel, where I've stayed for over 25 years. Yes, she recalled, she was very fond of Mr. Faulkner, who had stayed there quite often. And she even remembered that once in the hotel's one elevator she had undertaken to introduce him to another distinguished patron of the famous hostelry so popular with writers and other artists by merely saying: "After all these years it's time you two boys knew each other—William Faulkner, meet Thornton Wilder." I'm sure it was all downhill after that, but I won't complain. I'll still settle for what I got.