

Reading Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* with Carl Rollyson
Wednesdays, Nov 2, Nov 16, Nov 30, Dec 14, Dec 28, Jan 11
7:30-9:00pm EST

Many readers consider *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) William Faulkner's greatest and most difficult novel. Set in the antebellum South, during the Civil War and the early years of Reconstruction, and in the early twentieth century, this work is a meditation not only on the history of the South but on history itself, on the way history is made and told. The novel grew out of Faulkner's many earlier efforts in stories and novels to come to terms with his region's past but also with the trajectory of American and world history as he saw it unfolding in 1930's America. If readers find the novel difficult, it should be noted that Faulkner found writing it difficult as well. The course will explore how this novel got made by focusing on the circumstances of Faulkner's life and family history and his awareness of how important race was to his definition of America. Because the sentence structure of the novel is so intricate—paralleling the intricacy of history—special attention will be paid to the close reading of certain passages. If possible, bring with you to class the Library of America edition of the novel, which is included in *William Faulkner: Novels 1936-1940*, so that you will have immediate access to passages read in class.

The first session will begin with a basic discussion of what happens in the first chapter of the novel, and how that chapter prepares readers for what is to come in the subsequent eight chapters. It is recommended that you read the entire novel, after the first session, not worrying too much about what you do not understand, then re-read the chapters assigned for subsequent sessions. Certain biographies and other books about Faulkner (listed below) will be helpful in situating your reading of the novel, but none are required for the course.

Recommending reading

Joseph Blotner: *Faulkner: A Biography*. University Press of Mississippi paperback edition or ebook edition

Carl Rollyson, *The Life of William Faulkner, volume 2: This Alarming Paradox (1935-1962)*. University of Virginia, hardcover or ebook

_____. *Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner*, paperback or ebook

Urgo, Joseph, R., *Reading Faulkner: Absalom, Absalom!* University Press of Mississippi paperback or ebook

Nov 2: Introduction to the life of William Faulkner, his family's involvement in the Civil War and its aftermath, how his novel differs from popular works like *Gone With the Wind*

Introduction to Chapter 1 and to the novel: Quentin Compson meets Miss Rosa and begins to piece together what happened to Thomas Sutpen and his family

Nov 16: Discussion of Chapter 1; introduction to Chapters 2-4: What happens when Mr. Compson takes over the story?

Nov 30: Discussion of Chapters 2-4; introduction to Chapters 5-7; Miss Rosa's italicized monologue; the introduction of a new narrator (Shreve); Thomas Sutpen in his own words

Dec 14: Discussion of Chapters 5-7; introduction to Chapter 8: What Quentin and Shreve want to find out

Dec 28: Discussion of Chapter 8; introduction to Chapter 9; the repercussions of the Sutpen saga

Jan 11: Discussion of Chapter 9, Chronology and Genealogy: What is finally known about the Sutpen story and how it has been assembled

About the Instructor

Carl Rollyson, Professor Emeritus at Baruch College, The City University of New York, is the author of the two volume *The Life of William Faulkner* for University of Virginia Press. He has also published numerous biographies of literary figures such as Sylvia Plath, Susan Sontag, Lillian Hellman, Amy Lowell, Rebecca West, and Norman Mailer. His writing has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New Criterion*, and the *Washington Post*.