

THE FAULKNER INVESTIGATIONS

In the darker manifestations of their brilliant complexity William Faulkner's characters commit murder or violence. What distinguishes these descents into evil from ordinary deeds of malefaction is the extraordinary degree of compassion shown by the author for his sinners. In the late 1940s two equally compassionate authors independently investigated Faulkner's appropriation of the detective story form for his own artistic purposes.

At a time when the books he wrote still appeared under his given name, Kenneth Millar, Ross Macdonald wrote a foreword to the Faulkner story, "The Hound," that was published in the mystery anthology "Murder By Experts." Shortly thereafter, Eudora Welty's review of "Intruder In The Dust" appeared in The Hudson Review.

Faulkner, Welty, Macdonald – triangulated literary and personal affinities intersect, connecting them. All three authors' libraries revealed a strong predilection for mystery and detective fiction. Faulkner wrote to fellow Mississippian Welty in praise of her first novel, "The Robber Bridegroom," and took her sailing. Two decades later he received a Gold Medal from The Institute of Arts and Letters, and it was Miss Welty who presented it to him.

Ross Macdonald acknowledged Eudora Welty's review of "The Underground Man" as that novel's most important, and dedicated his next book, "Sleeping Beauty" to her. She in turn dedicated her collection of essays, "The Eye Of The Story," to him. Macdonald, whose dual Canadian / California roots nourished his work, wrote that "Faulkner's provincialism and his refusal to turn away from his province was the mother of his strength." Eudora Welty identified Faulkner as "the triumphant example in America ... of the mastery of place in fiction."

The family as self-destructive unit, exploding itself after generations of smoldering is descriptive of the thematic concerns of Faulkner or Macdonald. Faulkner wrote one short letter to Eudora Welty, whose lengthy unpublished correspondence with Kenneth Millar ended with the latter's death several years ago.

There is enough biographical evidence for one to posit a time when a conjunction of the three could well have occurred. On a given day in the mid-Forties while Eudora Welty was searching New Orleans' second-hand book shops for out-of-print Faulkner titles, Lt. Kenneth Millar might have been boarding the U.S.S. Shipley Bay with several Faulkner hardcovers stowed in his duffel bag. As for Faulkner, who was at the time commuting between Mississippi and Hollywood where he was employed as a screenwriter, he might have been at the movies, seeing "The Big Sleep" screenplay he wrote from Raymond Chandler's bleak mystery transmogrified into a jazzed-up version that capitalized on wise-cracking electricity generated by Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall.

When a killer looks down at the man he has just shot in cold blood and thinks: "Something darker than him, like the wings of a bird, spread on his back and pulled him down." The smoke from his gun could be curling from the pages of a Ross Macdonald novel, or, perhaps, rising in the Yoknapatawpha wind. As it is, this tragic symbol emanates from "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" Eudora Welty's prophetic short story inspired by the murder of black activist Medgar Evers.

Such delayed identification of the author of the quote above does not mean to imply that the words of these modern masters are interchangeable. William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Ross Macdonald, all devotees and users of the detective story form, are separate wellsprings – from places as various as Canada, as California's Santa Barbara and Hollywood, as Mississippi's Jackson and Oxford – feeding into the mainstream of American literature.

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