

WALKER PERCY

Author of **THE THANATOS SYNDROME**

LANCELOT



A modern knight-errant on a quest after evil...
Convincing and chilling."

The New York Times Book Review

0380-1 (Canada \$5.95) U.S. \$4.95

LANCELOT

Walker Percy

Ivy Books

Published by Ballantine Books

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"A fine novel...Percy is a seductive writer, attentive to sensuous detail, and such a skillful architect of fiction that the very discursiveness of his story informs it with energy and tension."

Newsweek

"A funny and scarifying jeremiad on the modern age. *Lancelot* is easy to read and hard to forget."

Time

"*Lancelot* does what masterful fiction must: it tells a story that commands our attention, it introduces us to people whose struggles concern us, it touches our hearts and nettles our minds. We could not ask for more."

Miami Herald

"A complete living and breathing novel...An absolute piece of art."

Saturday Review

Also by Walker Percy:

Fiction

THE MOVIEGOER*

THE LAST GENTLEMAN*

LOVE IN THE RUINS*

THE SECOND COMING*

THE THANATOS SYNDROME*

Nonfiction

THE MESSAGE IN THE BOTTLE

LOST IN THE COSMOS

***Published by Ivy Books**

*Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti
alla salute sua eran già corti
fuor che mostrargli le perdute genti.
Per questo visitai l'uscio dei morti . . .*

PURGATORIO

He sank so low that all means
for his salvation were gone,
except showing him the lost people.
For this I visited the region of the dead . . .

Though the setting of this novel appears to be New Orleans and the River Road, this city and this famous road are used here as place names of an imaginary terrain. The River Road does not really run into "Feliciana Parish." In fact there is no Feliciana Parish now. There is no "English Coast" that I know of. There is an English Turn, but it is downriver not upriver from New Orleans. Felicity Street does cross Annunciation Street in New Orleans, but not near Lafayette Cemetery. Lafayette Cemetery does exist, but there is no jail or hospital or levee next to it. Murders and house burnings have occurred on River Road, but none, as far as I know, like those herein depicted. There never was a house named Belle Isle. There was a house named Northumberland in Spanish West Florida but it no longer stands. Nor do the characters bear any intentional relation to real persons living or dead.

LANCELOT



COME INTO MY CELL. MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME. TAKE the chair; I'll sit on the cot. No? You prefer to stand by the window? I understand. You like my little view. Have you noticed that the narrower the view the more you can see? For the first time I understand how old ladies can sit on their porches for years.

Don't I know you? You look very familiar. I've been feeling rather depressed and I don't remember things very well. I think I am here because of that or because I committed a crime. Perhaps both. Is this a prison or a hospital or a prison hospital? A Center for Aberrant Behavior? So that's it. I have behaved aberrantly. In short, I'm in the nuthouse.

I feel certain that I know you and know you well. It's not that I'm crazy and can't remember things but rather that the past doesn't seem worth remembering. It takes such an effort. Everything takes a tremendous effort and it's hardly worth the trouble—everything except staying in my little cell and looking at my little view.

A cell like this, whether prison or not, is not a bad place to spend a year, believe it or not. I think I have been here a

year. Perhaps two. Perhaps six months. I am not sure. A clean cell, a high ceiling, a cot, a chair, and a desk. It's not too cold or hot or damp and the food's edible. A remarkable prison! Or a remarkable hospital as the case may be. And a view, even if the view is nothing more than a patch of sky, a corner of Lafayette Cemetery, a slice of levee, and a short stretch of Annunciation Street.

Isn't that all you can see? No, look again. There's a great deal more. I know that narrow world by heart and I can tell you from here a few things you may not have noticed. For example, if you lean into the embrasure and crane to the left as far as possible, you can see part of a sign around the corner. By the utmost effort and if you press your temple against the bricks, you can make out the following letters:

*Free &
Ma
B*

Notice that it is impossible to see more than that. I have looked at that sign for a year. What does the sign say? Free & Easy Mac's Bowling? Free & Accepted Masons' Bar? Do Masons have bars?

My memory is coming back. I think you have something to do with it. When I saw you in the hall yesterday, I knew that we had known each other and closely. Haven't we? It's been years and you've changed a great deal, but I know you all right.

When our eyes met, there was the sense of our having gone through a great deal together, wasn't there? There was also the sense of your knowing a great deal more than I. You opened your mouth as if you were going to say something, then thought better of it. I feel like an alcoholic

who knows certain people only when he is drunk. You are like a tactful "drunk" friend who is willing not be acknowledged at certain times.

Yes, I asked you to come. Are you a psychiatrist or a priest or a priest-psychiatrist? Frankly, you remind me of something in between, one of those failed priests who go into social work or "counseling," or one of those doctors who suddenly decides to go to the seminary. Neither fish nor fowl. If you're a priest, why don't you wear priest clothes instead of those phony casuals? You're as bad as the nuns. What nuns don't realize is that they look better in nun clothes than in J. C. Penney pantsuits.

You're the first person I've wanted to see. I've refused all psychiatrists, ministers, priests, group therapy, and whatnot. After all, what is there to talk about? I've nothing to say and am certainly not interested in what they say.

No, what first struck me about you was that you're the only person around here who doesn't want to talk. That and an abstracted look in which I recognize a certain kinship of spirit. That plus the fact that I knew you and saw that you knew me even better.

What? Yes, of course I remember Belle Isle and the night it burned and the tragedy, the death, the deaths of . . . But I think that was because I've been told about it and have even been shown the newspapers.

But you . . . I actually remember you. We were close, weren't we? You see, I've been rather depressed and "in the dark" and only lately have managed to be happy just living in this room and enjoying the view. But when I saw you yesterday, it was like seeing myself. I had the sense of being overtaken by something, by the past, by myself. One look at that same old sardonic expression of yours and it was as if I suddenly remembered everything and was not even surprised. I even knew what you were going to say

when you shook your head and opened your mouth to say something and didn't say it. You were going to say as usual, weren't you, "For Christ's sake, Lance, what have you gone and done now?" Or something like that. Right?

Only later that night I remembered that I remembered something on my own hook, without being told. My own name. Lance. Rather remembered your liking to pronounce all of it: "Lancelot Andrewes Lamar," you used to say. "You were named after the great Anglican divine, weren't you? Shouldn't it have been Lancelot du Lac, King Ban of Benwick's son?"

It was as if I remembered everything but could not quite bring myself to focus on it.

I perceive that you're not a patient but that something is wrong with you. You're more abstracted than usual. Are you in love?

You're smiling. Smiling but not saying anything. You have to leave? Will you come tomorrow?



COME IN, COME IN. SIT DOWN. YOU STILL WON'T?
I have a confession to make. I was not quite honest yesterday when I pretended not to know you. I knew you perfectly well. There's nothing wrong with my memory. It's just that I don't like to remember. Why shouldn't I remember you? We were best of friends, in fact inseparable if you recall. It's just that it was quite a shock seeing you after all these years. No; not even that is true. I noticed you in the cemetery day before yesterday. Still I hardly knew what to say to you. What do you say to someone after twenty years when you have already said everything.

It bothers you a bit too, doesn't it? You are shy with me. But you like my window and my little view, I can see.

You still look doubtful. About my sanity? Well yes, after all, here I am in the nuthouse. But I remember you perfectly, everything we ever did, every name you ever had. We knew each other by several names depending on the oblique and obscure circumstances of our lives—and our readings. I bet I remember your names better than you. To begin with, you were simply Harry, when you lived at Northumberland close to us on the River Road and we

went to school together. Later you were known variously as Harry Hotspur, a misnomer because though you were pugnacious you were not much of a fighter. Also as Prince Hal, because you seemed happy only in whorehouses. Also as Northumberland, after the house you lived in. Also as Percival and Parsifal, who found the Grail and brought life to a dead land. Also by several cheerful obscene nicknames in the D.K.E. fraternity of which the least objectionable was Pussy. Miss Margaret Mae McDowell of Sweet Briar, I want you to meet my friend and roommate, Pussy. Later, I understand you took a religious name when you became a priest: John, a good name. But is it John the Evangelist who loved so much or John the Baptist, a loner out in the wilderness? You were a loner.

So as you see, I remember a great deal about you. Right?

Ah, you smile your old smile.

Yet you prefer to look at the cemetery.

It makes a pretty scene today, don't you think? All Souls' Day. A pleasant feast for the dead: the women in the cemetery whitewashing the tombs, trimming the tiny lawns, setting out chrysanthemums, real and plastic, lighting candles, scrubbing the marble lintels. They remind me of Baltimore housewives on their hands and knees washing the white doorsteps of row houses.

A pretty sight, the bustling cluttered cemetery, the copper-penny-colored rain trees, the first fitful north wind blowing leaves every which way. If you listen carefully, you can hear the dry curlicues of crepe-myrtle leaves blowing up and down the paths like popcorn. When the wind shifts you catch a whiff of coffee and tar from the Tchoupitoulas docks.

In New Orleans I have noticed that people are happiest when they are going to funerals, making money, taking

care of the dead, or putting on masks at Mardi Gras so nobody knows who they are.

Well, I found out who you are. Your profession, that is. A priest-physician. Which is to say, a screwed-up priest or a half-assed physician. Or both. Ah, I managed to surprise you, didn't I? Yes, someone told me yesterday. But it is more than that. It was something I observed.

You were taking a shortcut through the cemetery. One of the women scrubbing the tombs stopped you to ask you something. Obviously she recognized you. You shook your head and moved on. But what could she have asked you? Only one thing under the circumstances. To say a prayer for the dead. An old custom here, particularly on All Souls' Day. You turned her down.

So something went wrong with you too. Or you wouldn't be here serving as assistant chaplain or substitute psychiatrist or whatever it is you're doing. A non-job. Are you in trouble? Is it a woman? Are you in love?

Do you remember "falling in love," "being in love"?

There was a time when I thought that was the only thing that really mattered. No, there were two things and two times in my life.

At first I thought "being in love" was the only thing. Holding a sweet Georgia girl in your arms and dancing to the "Limelight" theme in the Carolina mountains in the summer of '52, out of doors, with the lightning bugs and the Japanese lanterns.

Later I became coarser or perhaps more realistic. I began to wonder if there was such a thing as "being in love," or whether the best things in life might not be such simple, age-old pleasures as ordinary sexual intercourse and ordinary drinking. Indeed, what could be finer than to be a grown healthy man and to meet a fine-looking woman you've never seen before and to want her on the spot and to

see also that she likes you, to invite her to have a few drinks in a bar, to put your hand under her dress, to touch the deep white flesh of her thigh, to speak into her ear, "Well, now, sweetheart, what do you say?" Right? No?

But that's falling in love too, in a way, isn't it? Yet very different. I wonder which is better. To tell you the truth, I haven't quite sorted it out yet.

But certainly "love" is one or the other, no doubt the latter. Sometimes I think we were the victims of a gigantic hoax by our elders, that there was an elaborate conspiracy to conceal from us the one simple fact that the only important, certainly the best thing in life, is ordinary sexual love.

I "fell in love" with Lucy Cobb from Georgia and married her. Then she died. Then I "fell in love" with Margot and married her. She died too.

Would it surprise you if I told you that I might be falling in love again? With the girl in the next room. I've never seen her. But they tell me she was gang-raped by some sailors in the Quarter, forced to commit unnatural acts many times, then beaten up and thrown onto the batture. She won't speak to anybody. And she has to be force fed. Like me she prefers the solitude of her cell. But we communicate by tapping on the wall. It is strange. Her defilement restores her to a kind of innocence.

Communication is simple when you are "in love." Driving with Lucy Cobb through the Carolina summer night with the top down and the radio playing the "Limelight" theme, one could say to her simply:

"I like that, don't you?"

And she could say: "Yes."

With the girl in the next room it is the same. Yesterday I tapped twice.

She tapped back twice.

It might have been an accident. On the other hand, it

could have been a true communication. My heart beat as if I were falling in love for the first time.

Then you know my story? I know it too of course, but I'm not sure how much I really remember. I think of it in terms of headlines: BELLE ISLE BURNS. BODIES OF FILM STARS CHARRED BEYOND RECOGNITION. SCION OF OLD FAMILY CRAZED BY GRIEF AND RAGE. SUFFERS BURNS TRYING TO SAVE WIFE. No doubt I read such headlines. I wonder why the headlines are easier to remember than the event itself.

Now I've begun to remember some things perfectly. It was seeing you that did it.

The first thing I remembered was the exact circumstances under which I discovered that my wife was deceiving me. But what did that have to do with you? Memory is a strange thing.

The next thing I remembered made more sense. I remembered the first time I had seen you since childhood. You were sitting in the fraternity house alone, drinking and reading Verlaine. That made quite an impression on me. I remember wondering whether you were not trying to make an impression. What kind of an act is that, I wondered. (It was a bit of an act, wasn't it?)

Then this morning I remembered a great deal more. It was not as if I had really forgotten but rather that I didn't have the—the what?—the inclination to think about the past. I had got out of the trick of doing it. Seeing you was a kind of catalyst, the occasion of my remembering. It is like the first time you look through binoculars: everything is confused, blurred, unfocused, flat; then all of a sudden