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THE BEST OF BAD FAULKNER



CHOICE ENTRIES FROM THE FAUX FAULKNER CONTEST

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THE STUDY OF SOUTHERN CULTURE


WITH A PREFACE BY DEAN FAULKNER WELLS



The Best of Bad Faulkner

CHOICE ENTRIES FROM THE
FAUX FAULKNER COMPETITION
plus Peter DeVries, Shirley Jackson,
Kenneth Tynan, Derek Willey, and
Ernest V. Trueblood (~~William Faulkner~~)

Edited and with a Preface by
DEAN FAULKNER ~~WELLS~~





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PREFACE

This was the bait:

The flags waved in the inexorable dust of the somnolent hamlet as the avaricious old avatar sought sanctuary from the sound and the fury of mosquitoes swarming about the epicene body of his affable and profoundly unabashed comrade prone across the pagan catafalque as he lay dying.

Bad Faulkner was everywhere, like no-see-ums on a beach in July, but the Faulkner bug didn't bite anyone until *American Way* magazine teamed up with Yoknapatawpha Press and its *Faulkner Newsletter* and the University of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture to create a "Faux Faulkner" Contest—and then the would-be Faulkners came pouring in from three continents like bonsai Bundrens waving their sheets of misbegotten prose and shouting that *theirs* was the best bad Faulkner in the world.

The idea for the contest came in the wake of the late, lamented Imitation Hemingway Competition sponsored by Harry's Bar and American Grill. For years we had enjoyed

reading those fine, clean, big-game trophies, and it seemed inevitable that “Pappy” would follow “Papa” (should it have been the other way around?), that a *Best of Bad Faulkner* collection would evolve willy-nilly—and here it is.

The rules governing the “Faux Faulkner” Contest were beguilingly simple: Imitate the master’s unmistakable style, themes, characters, or plot in a short-short story of up to 500 words in length and mail it to the *Faulkner Newsletter* (P.O. Box 248, Oxford, MS 38655) by the February 1 deadline. The winning contestant (Saul Rosenberg, 1990; Gregory Sendi, 1991) and a companion would be flown to Memphis, compliments of American Airlines, and thence fetched to Oxford (not by limo nor even by Caddy but safely), where the prize-winning entry would be announced during the University of Mississippi’s Faulkner Conference in August.

As one contestant wrote, “This contest may not fly me to some sunken Italian city to have an exotic meal in a fancy world-famous bar and grill but it’s the closest I’ll ever get to [William Faulkner] and I can’t resist taking a chance on it even if it is in Mississippi in the dead of summer. (The sentence went on for sixty pages, and that was only his cover letter.)

And they must have liked it, all the faux Faulkners panting in the closets of their imaginations waiting to release their Benjies and Benbows, Ikes and Ikkemotubbes, because the entries poured in from some 48 states, including Alaska and Hawaii, and U.S. territories, Puerto Rico and Iraq (just kidding), and from would-be Faulkners living in the south of France, Wales, Australia, Japan, Yugoslavia—and Mississippi, don’t leave her out!

Who *are* these faux Faulkners? Well, they are college and high-school English teachers and their students, housewives and accountants, advertising executives and TV broadcasters, long-distance truckers, lighthouse keepers, stargazers—and a few “ringers,” professional writers whose names cannot be revealed to protect their reputations, considering that they did not win. In 1990, 650 contestants battered us into submission with such titles as “Inclusion in the Rust,” “As I Lay Dieting,” “Abstinence, Abstinence!” and “The Round and the Furry.” And 750 faux Faulkners had not had enough, returning to bedevil America in 1991. We won’t even try to guess what’s going to happen in 1992.

Alas, everybody could not win, though *The Best of Bad Faulkner* helps alleviate that unfortunate condition by releasing a broad selection of best/bad Faulkners into the world. Many wrote that entering the contest was a prize in itself because it rekindled an interest in reading Faulkner’s works (take note, Random House) and served as a reminder of (1) our debt to Faulkner, (2) our debt to Flem Snopes, and (3) how damned hard it is to imitate Faulkner. As testimony to this last point, the “Smokehouse” section of this collection features some imitations that previously had found their way into print, including “Afternoon of a Cow,” in which the master imitated himself.

So aspiring Faulkners obviously have had a good time writing, and we have had a whale of a good time reading. Our judges for the first two contests—George Plimpton, William Styron, Barry Hannah, Jack Daniels, and Willie Morris—worked into the wee hours to come up with a winner, which was no easy task. (“Was that stream of

PREFACE

consciousness or the jet stream?" And he: "*Whew!* I'm finished, now." And he: "I dont hate 'em, I dont, I dont. . . .")

In his book *Faulkner's Mississippi*, Willie Morris tells how Walker Percy, as a freshman at Chapel Hill, was required to write a placement theme. Already a devoted fan of William Faulkner, young Percy wrote a paragraph without punctuation and wound up in the "slowest" section of freshman English.

"All I wanted to do," Percy lamented years later, "was write like Faulkner."

—DFW

Oxford, Mississippi

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(William Faulkner)

Pounded in Fury



CHOICE CONTEST ENTRIES



DOOMED

• • • • • *I*f he had been born with a talent for brevity or even the ability to construct a simple cohesive sentence, he might now be turning his attention to a different contest, that would take him, if he won, to a good bar, an honest bar in an Italian city, that even as a boy he dreamed of seeing, where he could drink for free with other Americans and feel good, but that was not to be so, for like all men who had grown up in this part of the country where time was measured not in hours but in the length of a planting season his words flowed like a tangle of Spanish moss dragged through the swamp grass, dooming him or perhaps (as the Preacher Bailey would say) preparing him for this other competition, that would ask him to call upon all his pedantic talents and probably those of long departed family as well to secure a measure of fame and also those two free tickets that the airline company was offering, that he knew was bound to attract anyone who possessed either a fountain pen or a dream to be rid of hot sticky sweet lands, into trying their hand and perhaps very soul while hoping, no matter how small or how slim the odds might be that they would be the one chosen and that their words

(for at least one issue) would grace the pages of an “in-flight magazine” and in doing so would soar above the clouds and be carried out across the skies in every direction like the white cranes or the wild geese that he had watched while still a boy as he sat on the clay banks of the river dreaming that his words too might one day be read.

—*Jeff Sanders*