



Pulitzer Prize Winner of the Year
An All-time Best Seller

THE
Confessions
OF
Nat Turner

William Styron

*"The most profound fictional treatment of
slavery in our literature"* THE NEW REPUBLIC

"A TRIUMPH" THE NEW YORK TIMES



★ TURNER'S ★ REBELLION

took place in the long hot summer of 1831, in the state of Virginia. When it was over, 59 white people were dead; the insurgents were all rounded up and either hanged or shown a clemency worse than death; and the preacher himself [Nat Turner] was induced to write a confession which Mr. Styron has managed to merge quite smoothly into his novel . . . No historical novel has ever done more . . . Styron's version of the old South is not the usual derivative, Daddy's plantation stuff, but a place freshly imagined stone by stone."

Wilfrid Sheed,
The New York Times Book Review

A daring imaginative leap into a tormented black psyche . . . disturbing . . . extraordinary."

The Nation

"One of the best novels that have grown out of the constantly heightening racial tension, and the best novel Styron has written."

Granville Hicks, *Saturday Review*

William Styron grew up not far from Southampton County, where Nat Turner's revolt took place. This overpowering novel, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1968, is the result of Styron's lifelong interest in the tragic Negro rebel. Styron is also the author of Lie Down in Darkness, Set This House on Fire, and The Long March, all available in Signet editions.

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THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

by William Styron



A SIGNET BOOK

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 67-12732

This is an authorized reprint of a hardcover edition published by Random House, Inc.

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*SIGNET BOOKS are published by
The New American Library, Inc.,
1301 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10019*

FIRST PRINTING, SEPTEMBER, 1968

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To

JAMES TERRY

to

LILLIAN HELLMAN

and to

MY WIFE *and* CHILDREN

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In August, 1831, in a remote region of southeastern Virginia, there took place the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of American Negro slavery. The initial passage of this book, entitled "To the Public," is the preface to the single significant contemporary document concerning this insurrection—a brief pamphlet of some twenty pages called "The Confessions of Nat Turner," published in Richmond early in the next year, parts of which have been incorporated in this book. During the narrative that follows I have rarely departed from the *known* facts about Nat Turner and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events—yet I trust remaining within the bounds of what meager enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery. The relativity of time allows us elastic definitions: the year 1831 was, simultaneously, a long time ago and only yesterday. Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative, but it has been my own intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an "historical novel" in conventional terms than a meditation on history.

WILLIAM STYRON

Roxbury, Connecticut
New Year's Day, 1967

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TO THE PUBLIC

THE LATE INSURRECTION IN SOUTHAMPTON *has greatly excited the public mind and led to a thousand idle, exaggerated and mischievous reports. It is the first instance in our history of an open rebellion of the slaves, and attended with such atrocious circumstances of cruelty and destruction, as could not fail to leave a deep impression, not only upon the minds of the community where this fearful tragedy was wrought, but throughout every portion of our country in which this population is to be found. Public curiosity has been on the stretch to understand the origin and progress of this dreadful conspiracy, and the motives which influence its diabolical actors. The insurgent slaves had all been destroyed, or apprehended, tried and executed (with the exception of the leader) without revealing any thing at all satisfactory, as to the motives which governed them, or the means by which they expected to accomplish their object. Every thing connected with this sad affair was wrapt in mystery, until Nat Turner, the leader of this ferocious band, whose name has resounded throughout our widely extended empire was captured. This "great Bandit" was taken by a single individual, in a cave near the residence of his late owner, on Sunday, the thirtieth of October, without attempting to make the slightest resistance, and on the following day lodged in the jail of the County. His captor was Benjamin Phipps, armed with a shot gun well charged. Nat's*

only weapon was a small light sword which he immediately surrendered and begged that his life might be spared. Since his confinement, by permission of the Jailor, I have had ready access to him, and, finding that he was willing to make a full and free confession of the origin, progress and consummation of the insurrectory movements of the slaves of which he was the contriver and head, I determined for the gratification of public curiosity to commit his statements to writing and publish them, with little or no variation, from his own words. That this is a faithful record of his confessions, the annexed certificate of the County Court of Southampton, will attest. They certainly bear one stamp of truth and sincerity. He makes no attempt (as all the other insurgents who were examined did) to exculpate himself, but frankly acknowledges his full participation in all the guilt of the transaction. He was not only the contriver of the conspiracy, but gave the first blow toward its execution.

It will thus appear, that whilst every thing upon the surface of society wore a calm and peaceful aspect; whilst not one note of preparation was heard to warn the devoted inhabitants of woe and death, a gloomy fanatic was revolving in the recesses of his own dark, bewildered and overwrought mind schemes of indiscriminate massacre to the whites. Schemes too fearfully executed as far as his fiendish band proceeded in their desolating march. No cry for mercy penetrated their flinty bosoms. No acts of remembered kindness made the least impression upon these remorseless murderers. Men, women and children, from hoary age to helpless infancy, were involved in the same cruel fate. Never did a band of savages do their work of death more unsparingly. Apprehension for their own personal safety seems to have been the only principle of restraint in the whole course of their bloody proceedings. And it is not the least remarkable feature in this horrid transaction, that a band actuated by such hellish purposes, should have resisted so feebly, when met by the whites in arms. Desperation alone, one would think, might have led

to greater efforts. Each individual sought his own safety either in concealment, or by returning home, with the hope that his participation might escape detection, and all were shot down in the course of a few days, or captured and brought to trial and punishment. Nat has survived all his followers, and the gallows will speedily close his career. His own account of the conspiracy is submitted to the public, without comment. It reads an awful, and it is hoped, a useful lesson as to the operations of a mind like his, endeavoring to grapple with things beyond its reach. How it first became bewildered and confounded, and finally corrupted and led to the conception and perpetration of the most atrocious and heart-rending deeds. It is calculated also to demonstrate the policy of our laws in restraint of this class of our population, and to induce all those entrusted with their execution, as well as our citizens generally, to see that they are strictly and rigidly enforced. If Nat's statements can be relied on, the insurrection in this county was entirely local, and his designs confident but to a few, and these in his immediate vicinity. It was not instigated by motives of revenge or sudden anger, but the results of long deliberation, and a settled purpose of mind. The offspring of gloomy fanaticism, acting upon materials but too well prepared for such impressions, it will be long remembered in the annals of our country and many a mother as she presses her darling infant to her bosom, will shudder at the recollection of Nat Turner, and his band of ferocious miscreants.

Believing the following narrative, by removing doubts and conjectures from the public mind which otherwise must have remained, would give general satisfaction, it is respectfully submitted to the public by their ob't serv't,

T. R. GRAY

*Jerusalem, Southampton County, Va.
Nov. 5, 1831.*

We the undersigned, members of the court con-

vened at Jerusalem, on Saturday, the fifth day of Nov., 1831, for the trial of Nat, alias Nat Turner a negro slave, late the property of Putnam Moore, deceased, do hereby certify that the confessions of Nat, to Thomas R. Gray, was read to him in our presence, and that furthermore, when called upon by the presiding Magistrate of the Court, to state if he had anything to say, why sentence of death should not be passed upon him, replied he had nothing further than he had communicated to Mr. Gray. Given under our hands and seals at Jerusalem, this 5th day of November, 1831.

JEREMIAH COBB,	[seal]
THOMAS PRETLOW,	[seal]
JAMES W. PARKER,	[seal]
CARR BOWERS,	[seal]
SAMUEL B. HINES,	[seal]
ORRIS A. BROWNE,	[seal]

Part

I

**JUDGMENT
DAY**

*And God shall wipe away all tears from
their eyes; and there shall be no more
death, neither sorrow, nor crying,
neither shall there be any more pain:
for the former things are passed away.*

