

#1 Bestseller

A novel for everyone

William Styron  
Sophie's  
Choice



*William Styron*

---

*Sophie's  
Choice*



*This low-priced Bantam Book  
has been completely reset in a type face  
designed for easy reading, and was printed  
from new plates. It contains the complete  
text of the original hard-cover edition.  
NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.*



SOPHIE'S CHOICE

*A Bantam Book / published by arrangement with  
Random House, Inc.*

**PRINTING HISTORY**

*Random House edition published  
April 1979*

*1st printing ..... June 1979  
7 printings through October 1979*

*Book-of-the-Month Club edition July 1979  
6 printings through December 1979*

*Serialized in ESQUIRE MAGAZINE*

*Bantam edition / July 1980*

*Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for  
permission to reprint previously published material:  
Editions Gallimard, Paris Excerpt from Lazare by André  
Malraux.*

*W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.: The lines from "The  
Fourth Duino Elegy" are reprinted from Duino Elegies by  
Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by J. B. Leishman and Stephen  
Spender, with the permission of W. W. Norton & Company,  
Inc. Copyright 1939 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Copy-  
right Renewed 1967 by Stephen Spender and J. B. Leishman.  
Originally published by Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.*

*George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., London: Excerpts  
from Commandant of Auschwitz by Rudolf Hoess, translated  
by Constantine FitzGibbon. English translation copyright ©  
1959 by George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd. Copyright ©  
1951 by Wydawnictwo Prawnicze, Warsaw. Published in the  
United States by The World Publishing Company.*

*Portions of this book previously appeared in Esquire.*

*All rights reserved.*

*Copyright © 1976, 1978, 1979 by William Styron.*

*Cover art copyright © 1980 by Bantam Books, Inc.*

*This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by  
mimeograph or any other means, without permission.*

*For information address: Random House, Inc.,  
201 East 50th Street, New York, New York 10022.*

ISBN 0-553-13545-7

*Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada*

---

*Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, Inc. Its trade-  
mark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the por-  
trayal of a bantam, is Registered in U.S. Patent and Trademark  
Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada. Bantam  
Books, Inc., 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10019.*

---

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Sophie's Choice

"SPLENDIDLY WRITTEN, THRILLING . . .  
A PASSIONATE NOVEL."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

---

"A PASSIONATE NOVEL . . . *Sophie's Choice* is a courageous book that treats two doomed lovers . . . It is a thriller of the highest order, all the more thrilling for the fact that the dark, gloomy secrets we are unearthing one by one . . . may be authentic secrets of history and our own human nature."

—John Gardner, front page,  
*The New York Times Book Review*

---

"A STUNNING WORK . . . A TRIUMPH . . . A compelling drama of our age's central horrors . . . A dazzling, gripping book of the highest intelligence, heart and style. It is literature of the highest order."

—Stephen Becker, *Chicago Sun Times*

---

"STYRON'S MOST IMPRESSIVE PERFORMANCE . . . It belongs on that small shelf reserved for American masterpieces. *Sophie's Choice* is in the main stream of the American novel. Like *A Portrait of a Lady* or *The Great Gatsby*, it is . . . wonderfully human . . . It offers splendid comedy, too."

—Paul Fussell, *Washington Post Book World*

## SOPHIE'S CHOICE

**“A MONUMENTAL WORK OF FICTION . . .**  
*Sophie's Choice* is a novel of and for our time . . .  
It is a novel of great architectural authority and  
scope . . . It's a work stamped with intelligence,  
humanity, and, above all, courage.”

—Alexandra Johnson, *Christian Science Monitor*

---

**“AN EXTRAORDINARY ACHIEVEMENT . . .**  
Anyone who reads *Sophie's Choice* must be  
affected deeply and I will venture to say that those  
whose powers of empathy are strong will find it  
truly wounding.”

—Ralph B. Sipper, *San Francisco Chronicle*

---

**“EERILY MASTERFUL . . .** If you read one new  
novel this summer, it had better be this one. It is a  
beautiful and audacious work by one of our best  
living writers.”

—Gail Godwin, *Chicago Tribune Book World*

---

**PRE-EMINENTLY GRAND . . .** It has a look of  
permanence about it . . . Sophie is as complex and  
as plausible a heroine as any in recent fiction.”

—Peter S. Prescott, *Newsweek*

## SOPHIE'S CHOICE

“BEAUTIFUL AND HORRIFYING . . . A love affair as star-crossed as any in contemporary literature. *Sophie's Choice* is positively staggering.”

—Jonathan Yardley, *Washington Star*

---

“MAGNIFICENT . . . Perhaps the highest compliment one can pay a book that cannot be praised too much is that it fulfills the aspirations of a novelist who has set out to be great.”

—Howard Kissel, *Women's Wear Daily*

---

“SUPERB . . . By far the best book Styron has written in his distinguished literary career. It also may be the best novel so far this year.”

—Judson Hand, *New York Daily News*

---

“BRILLIANTLY SUCCESSFUL . . . Every character and situation he touches springs instantly and memorably to life . . . A triumph on every level.”

—Richard Freedman, *Newsday*

To the Memory  
of  
My Father  
(1889–1978)

*Wer zeigt ein Kind, so wie es steht? Wer stellt es ins Gestirn und gibt das Maß des Abstands ihm in die Hand? Wer macht den Kindertod aus grauem Brot, das hart wird,—oder läßt ihn drin im runden Mund so wie den Gröps von einem schönen Apfel? . . . Mörder sind leicht einzusehen. Aber dies: den Tod, den ganzen Tod, noch vor dem Leben so sanft zu enthalten und nicht böse zu sein, ist unbeschreiblich.*

*Von der vierten Duineser Elegie*  
—Rainer Maria Rilke

*. . . je cherche la région cruciale de l'âme,  
où le Mal absolu s'oppose à la fraternité.*

—André Malraux, *Lazare*, 1974



Who'll show a child just as it is? Who'll place it within its constellation, with the measure of distance in its hand? Who'll make its death from grey bread, that grows hard,—or leave it there, within the round mouth, like the choking core of a sweet apple? . . . Minds of murderers are easily divined. But this, though: death, the whole of death,—even before life's begun, to hold it all so gently, and be good: this is beyond description!

From the fourth *Duino Elegy*  
—translated by J. B. Leishman  
and Stephen Spender

. . . I seek that essential region of the soul  
where absolute evil confronts brotherhood.

*Sophie's Choice*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WILLIAM STYRON was born and raised in Virginia. He attended Duke University and then spent a brief, unhappy tenure in the publishing field. He left that occupation in pursuit of the Great American Novel, and found it in *Lie Down in Darkness*, the book that made him famous at the age of 26. From that time on, he has been one of America's most important and popular novelists. His next novel, *Set This House on Fire*, was followed by the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The public then had to wait twelve years before they would again see a new William Styron novel in print. That novel was *Sophie's Choice*. Mr. Styron, who has published only these four books in his 32-year career, claims that, "the advantages to my slow pace are enormous. Namely, you can sit down and painstakingly do your thing and make your vision come true even if you're only writing one paragraph a day. It's the only way I can work." In writing *Sophie's Choice*, Mr. Styron was confronted with a very sensitive subject. He does not feel, however, that this should have prevented him from writing about it. "No event could be so hideous that it would defy a novelist to trespass upon it. It was an episode in history that cried out to be explored, the ultimately challenging subject for a novelist." The book, five years in the writing, was "suggested by a mere germ of experience. I had been living in a boarding house in Brooklyn one summer just after the war and such a girl lived on the floor above me; she was beautiful, but ravaged. I never got to know her very well, but I was moved by her plight. Then, about five years ago, I awoke one morning with a remembrance of this girl; a vivid dream haunted my mind. I suddenly sensed that I had been given a mandate to abandon the novel I had been at work on and write her story." Mr. Styron is living in Roxbury, Connecticut in a house he has owned for over a quarter of a century, working on the novel he abandoned six years ago.



## Bantam Book Catalog

Here's your up-to-the-minute listing of over 1,400 titles by your favorite authors.

This illustrated, large format catalog gives a description of each title. For your convenience, it is divided into categories in fiction and non-fiction—gothics, science fiction, westerns, mysteries, cookbooks, mysticism and occult, biographies, history, family living, health, psychology, art.

So don't delay—take advantage of this special opportunity to increase your reading pleasure.

Just send us your name and address and 50¢ (to help defray postage and handling costs).

**BANTAM BOOKS, INC.**

**Dept. FC, 414 East Golf Road, Des Plaines, Ill. 60016**

Mr./Mrs./Miss \_\_\_\_\_  
(please print)

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Do you know someone who enjoys books? Just give us their names and addresses and we'll send them a catalog too!

\_\_\_\_\_

Mr./Mrs./Miss \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Mr./Mrs./Miss \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

# One

**I**n those days cheap apartments were almost impossible to find in Manhattan, so I had to move to Brooklyn. This was in 1947, and one of the pleasant features of that summer which I so vividly remember was the weather, which was sunny and mild, flower-fragrant, almost as if the days had been arrested in a seemingly perpetual springtime. I was grateful for that if for nothing else, since my youth, I felt, was at its lowest ebb. At twenty-two, struggling to become some kind of writer, I found that the creative heat which at eighteen had nearly consumed me with its gorgeous, relentless flame had flickered out to a dim pilot light registering little more than a token glow in my breast, or wherever my hungriest aspirations once resided. It was not that I no longer wanted to write, I still yearned passionately to produce the novel which had been for so long captive in my brain. It was only that, having written down the first few fine paragraphs, I could not produce any others, or—to approximate Gertrude Stein's remark about a lesser writer of the Lost Generation—I had the syrup but it wouldn't pour. To make matters worse, I was out of a job and had very little money and was self-exiled to Flatbush—like others of my countrymen, another lean and lonesome young Southerner wandering amid the Kingdom of the Jews.

Call me Stingo, which was the nickname I was known by in those days, if I was called anything at all. The name derives from my prep-school days down in my native state of Virginia. This school was a pleasant institution to which I was sent at fourteen by my distraught father, who found

*William Styron*

me difficult to handle after my mother died. Among my other disheveled qualities was apparently an inattention to personal hygiene, hence I soon became known as Stinky. But the years passed. The abrasive labor of time, together with a radical change of habits (I was in fact shamed into becoming almost obsessively clean), gradually wore down the harsh syllabic brusqueness of the name, slurring off into the more attractive, or less unattractive, certainly sportier Stingo. Sometime during my thirties the nickname and I mysteriously parted company, Stingo merely evaporating like a wan ghost out of my existence, leaving me indifferent to the loss. But Stingo I still was during this time about which I write. If, however, it is perplexing that the name is absent from the earlier part of this narrative, it may be understood that I am describing a morbid and solitary period in my life when, like the crazy hermit in the cave on the hill, I was rarely called by any name at all.

I was glad to be shut of my job—the first and only salaried position, excluding the military, of my life—even though its loss seriously undermined my already modest solvency. Also, I now think it was constructive to learn so early in life that I would never fit in as an office worker, anytime, anywhere. In fact, considering how I had so coveted the job in the first place, I was rather surprised at the relief, indeed the alacrity, with which I accepted my dismissal only five months later. In 1947 jobs were scarce, especially jobs in publishing, but a stroke of luck had landed me employment with one of the largest publishers of books, where I was made “junior editor”—a euphemism for manuscript reader. That the employer called the tune, in those days when the dollar was much more valuable tender than it is now, may be seen in the stark terms of my salary—forty dollars a week. After withholding taxes this meant that the anemic blue check placed on my desk each Friday by the hunchbacked little woman who managed the payroll represented emolument in the nature of a little over ninety cents an hour. But I had not been in the least dismayed by the fact that these coolie wages were dispensed by one of the most powerful and wealthy publishers in the world; young and resilient, I approached my job—at least at the very beginning—with a sense of lofty purpose; and besides, in compensation, the work bore inti-

## *Sophie's Choice*

mations of glamour: lunch at "21," dinner with John O'Hara, poised and brilliant but carnal-minded lady writers melting at my editorial acumen, and so on.

It soon appeared that none of this was to come about. For one thing, although the publishing house—which had prospered largely through text-books and industrial manuals and dozens of technical journals in fields as varied and as arcane as pig husbandry and mortuary science and extruded plastics—did publish novels and nonfiction as a sideline, thereby requiring the labor of junior aestheticians like myself, its list of authors would scarcely capture the attention of anyone seriously concerned with literature. At the time I arrived, for example, the two most prominent writers being promoted were a retired World War II fleet admiral and an exceptionally flyblown ex-Communist stool pigeon whose ghostwritten *mea culpa* was doing middling well on the best-seller lists. Of an author of the stature of John O'Hara (although I had far more illustrious literary idols, O'Hara represented for me the kind of writer a young editor might go out and get drunk with) there was no trace. Furthermore, there was the depressing matter of the work to which I had been assigned. At that time McGraw-Hill & Company (for such was my employer's name) lacked any literary *éclat*, having for so long and successfully purveyed its hulking works of technology that the small trade-book house in which I labored, and which aspired to the excellence of Scribner or Knopf, was considered something of a joke in the business. It was a little as if a vast huckstering organization like Montgomery Ward or Masters had had the effrontery to set up an intimate salon dealing in mink and chinchilla that everyone in the trade knew were dyed beaver from Japan.

So in my capacity as the lowest drudge in the office hierarchy I not only was denied the opportunity to read manuscripts even of passing merit, but was forced to plow my way daily through fiction and nonfiction of the humblest possible quality—coffee-stained and thumb-smearred stacks of Hammermill Bond whose used, ravaged appearance proclaimed at once their author's (or agent's) terrible desperation and McGraw-Hill's function as publisher of last resort. But at my age, with a snootful of English Lit. that made me as savagely demanding as Matthew Arnold

## William Styron

in my insistence that the written word exemplify only the highest seriousness and truth, I treated these forlorn offspring of a thousand strangers' lonely and fragile desire with the magisterial, abstract loathing of an ape plucking vermin from his pelt. I was adamant, cutting, remorseless, insufferable. High in my glassed-in cubbyhole on the twentieth floor of the McGraw-Hill Building—an architecturally impressive but spiritually enervating green tower on West Forty-second Street—I leveled the scorn that could only be mustered by one who had just finished reading *Seven Types of Ambiguity* upon these sad outpourings piled high on my desk, all of them so freighted with hope and clubfooted syntax. I was required to write a reasonably full description of each submission, no matter how bad the book. At first it was a lark and I honestly enjoyed the bitchery and vengeance I was able to wreak upon these manuscripts. But after a time their unrelenting mediocrity palled, and I became weary of the sameness of the job, weary too of chain-smoking and the smog-shrouded view of Manhattan, and of pecking out such callous reader's reports as the following, which I have salvaged intact from that dry and dispiriting time. I quote them verbatim, without gloss.

### Tall Grows the Eelgrass, by Edmonia Kraus Biersticker. Fiction.

Love and death amid the sand dunes and cranberry bogs of southern New Jersey. The young hero, Willard Strathaway, heir to a large cranberry-packing fortune and a recent graduate of Princeton University, falls wildly in love with Ramona Blaine, daughter of Ezra Blaine, an old-time leftist and leader of a strike among the cranberry harvesters. The plot is cute and complex, having largely to do with an alleged conspiracy on the part of Brandon Strathaway—Willard's tycoon father—to dispose of old Ezra, whose hideously mutilated corpse is indeed found one morning in the entrails of a mechanical cranberry picker. This leads to nearly terminal recriminations between Willard—described as having “a marvelous Princetonian tilt to his head, besides a considerable



## *Sophie's Choice*

feline grace”—and the bereaved Ramona, “her slender lissomeness barely concealing the full voluptuous surge which lurked beneath.”

Utterly aghast even as I write, I can only say that this may be the worst novel ever penned by woman or beast. Decline with all possible speed.

Oh, clever, supercilious young man! How I gloated and chuckled as I eviscerated these helpless, underprivileged, subliterary lambkins. Nor was I fearful of giving a gentle dig in the ribs at McGraw-Hill and its penchant for publishing trashy “fun” books which could be excerpted in places like *Reader's Digest* for a hefty advance (though my japery may have contributed to my downfall).

The Plumber's Wench, by Audrey Wainwright Smilie.  
Non-fiction.

The only thing going for this book is its title, which is catchy and vulgar enough to be right down McGraw-Hill's alley. The author is an actual woman, married—as the title coyly indicates—to a plumber living in a suburb of Worcester, Mass. Hopelessly unfunny, though straining for laughs on every page, these illiterate daydreams are an attempt to romanticize what must be a ghastly existence, the author eagerly equating the comic vicissitudes of her domestic life with those in the household of a brain surgeon. Like a physician, she points out, a plumber is on call day and night; like that of a physician the work of a plumber is quite intricate and involves exposure to germs; and both often come home smelling badly. The chapter headings best demonstrate the quality of the humor, which is too feeble even to be described properly as scatological: “Rub-a-Dub-Dub, the Blonde in the Tub.” “A Drain on the Nerves.” (Drain. Get it?)

“Flush Times.” “Study in Brown.” Etc. This manuscript arrived especially tacky and dogeared, having been submitted—according to the author in a letter—to Harper, Simon & Schuster, Knopf, Random House, Morrow, Holt, Messner, William Sloane, Rinehart,