

William
Styron
Sophie's
Choice

A NOVEL

*Sophie's
Choice*

*WILLIAM
STYRON*



RANDOM HOUSE

New York

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Published in the United States by Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in
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Editions Gallimard, Paris: Excerpt from *Lazare* by André Malraux.

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Portions of this book previously appeared in *Esquire*.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Styron, William, 1925-

Sophie's choice.

I. Title.

PZ4.S938So [PS3569.T9] 813'.5'4 78-21835

ISBN 0-394-46109-6

Manufactured in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

First Trade Edition

A limited edition of this book has been privately printed.

*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
inzusehen. Aber dies: den Tod, den ganzen
Tod, noch vor dem Leben so sanft zu enthalten
und nicht böß 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 chok-
ing core of a sweet apple? . . . Minds of mur-
derers 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*

one

IN 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 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 intimations 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 textbooks 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 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 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 demon-

strate 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, and eight others. In the same letter the author mentions her desperation over this MS—around which her entire life now revolves—and (I’m not kidding) adds a veiled threat of suicide. I should hate to be responsible for anyone’s death but it is absolutely imperative that this book never be published. Decline! (Why do I have to keep reading such shit?)

I would never have been able to make remarks like the last, nor allude in such a roguish fashion to the house of McGraw-Hill, had it not been for the fact that the senior editor above me who read all my reports was a man sharing my disillusionment with our employer and all that the vast and soulless empire stood for. A sleepy-eyed, intelligent, defeated but basically good-humored Irishman named Farrell, he had worked for years on such McGraw-Hill publications as *Foam Rubber Monthly*, *World of Prosthetics*, *Pesticide News* and *American Strip Miner* until, at fifty-five or so, he had been pastured out to the gentler, less hectically industrial surroundings of the trade-book branch, where he marked time in his office sucking on a pipe, reading Yeats and Gerard Manley Hopkins, skimming my reports with a tolerant glance and, I think, avidly contemplating early retirement to Ozone Park. Far from offending him, my jibes at McGraw-Hill usually amused him, as did the general tone of my reports. Farrell had long before fallen victim to the ambitionless, dronelike quietude into which, as if in some mammoth beehive, the company eventually numbed its employees, even the ambitious ones; and since he knew that the chances were less than one in ten thousand that I would find a publishable manuscript, I think he felt that there was no harm in my having a little fun. One of my longer (if not the longest) reports I especially treasure still, largely because it may have been the only one I wrote containing anything resembling compassion.

Harald Haarfager, a Saga, by Gundar Firkin. Poetry.

Gundar Firkin is not a pseudonym but a real name. The names of so many bad writers sound odd or made-up, until you discover that they are real. Could this have any significance? The MS of Harald Haarfager, a Saga came neither unsolicited through the mail nor from an agent but was delivered into my hands by the author himself. Firkin arrived in the anteroom about a week ago, carrying a manuscript box and two suitcases. Miss Meyers said he wanted to see an editor. Guy of about 60 I should say, somewhat stooped but strong, middle-sized;

weathered lined outdoor face with bushy gray brows, gentle mouth and a couple of the saddest old wistful eyes I've ever seen. Wore a farmer's black leather cap, the kind with snapped-up flaps that come down over the ears, and a thick windbreaker with a woolen collar. He had tremendous hands with great raw red knuckles. His nose leaked a little. Said he wanted to leave a MS. Looked pretty tired and when I asked him where he had come from he said he had just that hour arrived in N. Y. after riding on the bus three days and four nights from a place called Turtle Lake, North Dakota. Just to deliver the MS? I asked, to which he replied Yes.

He then volunteered the information that McGraw-Hill was the first publisher he had visited. This quite amazed me, inasmuch as this firm is seldom the publisher of first preference, even among writers as relatively unknowledgeable as Gundar Firkin. When I inquired as to how he had come to this extraordinary choice he replied that it had really been a matter of luck. He had not intended for McGraw-Hill to be first on his list. He told me that when the bus laid over for several hours in Minneapolis he went around to the telephone company, where he had learned they had copies of the Manhattan Yellow Pages. Not wanting to do anything so crude as to tear off a page, he spent an hour or so copying out with a pencil the names and addresses of all the scores of book publishers in New York City. It had been his plan to start alphabetically—beginning, I believe, with Appleton—and to go right down the list to Ziff-Davis. But when, just that morning after his trip, he emerged from the Port Authority bus station only one block eastward, he looked up and there in the sky he saw Old Man McGraw's emerald monolith with its intimidating sign: MCGRAW-HILL. So he came right up here.

The old fellow seemed so exhausted and bewildered—he later said he had never before been east of Minneapolis—that I decided that the least I could do was to take him downstairs for coffee in the cafeteria. While we sat there he told me about himself. He was a son of Norwegian immigrants—the original name had been “Firking” but somehow the “g” got lopped off—and all of his life he had been a wheat farmer near this town of Turtle Lake. Twenty years ago, when he was about 40, a mining company discovered huge coal deposits beneath his land and, although they didn't dig, they negotiated a long-term lease on the property which would take care of any money problems for the rest of his life. He was a bachelor and too set in his ways to cease farming, but now he would also have the leisure to start a project which he had always cherished. That is, he would begin writing an epic poem based on one of his Norwegian ancestors, Harald Haarfager, who was a 13th-century earl, or prince, or something. Needless to say, my heart simultaneously sank and broke at this awful news. But I sat there with a straight face as he kept patting the manuscript box, saying: “Yes sir. Twenty years work. It's right there. It's right there.”

And then I had a change of mood. In spite of his hick appearance,

he was intelligent and very articulate. Seemed to have read a great deal—mainly Norse mythology—although his favorite novelists were people like Sigrid Undset, Knut Hamsun and those four-square Midwesterners, Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather. Nonetheless, suppose I were to discover some sort of rough-hewn genius? After all, even a great poet like Whitman came on like a clumsy oddball, peddling his oafish script everywhere. Anyway, after a long talk (I'd begun to call him Gundar) I said I'd be glad to read his work, even though I had to caution him that McGraw-Hill was not particularly "strong" in the field of poetry, and we took the elevator back upstairs. Then a terrible thing happened. As I was saying goodby, telling him that I understood how pressed he might feel for a response after twenty years work, and that I would try to read his manuscript carefully and have an answer within a few days, I noticed that he was preparing to leave with only one of the two suitcases. When I mentioned this, he smiled and turned those grave, wistful, haunted, hinterland eyes on me and said: "Oh, I thought you could tell—the other suitcase has the rest of my saga."

I'm serious, it must be the longest literary work ever set down by human hand. I took it over to the mail room and had the boy there weigh it—35 pounds, seven Hammermill Bond boxes of five pounds each, a total of 3,850 typewritten pages. The saga itself is in a species of English, one would think it was written by Dryden in mock imitation of Spenser if one did not know the awful truth: those nights and days and twenty years on the frigid Dakota steppe, dreaming of ancient Norway, scratching away while the wild wind out of Saskatchewan howls through the bending wheat:

"Oh thou great leader, HARALD, how great is thy grief!
Where be the noseays that she dight for thee?"

The aging bachelor edging up on Stanza 4,000 as the electric fan stirs the stifling prairie heat:

"Sing now, ye trolls and Nibelungs, sing no more
The tunes that HARALD made in her praise,
But into mourning turn your former lays:
O blackest curse!
Now is the time to die. Nay, time was long ago:
O mournful verse!"

My lips tremble, my sight blurs, I can go on no longer. Gundar Firkin is at the Hotel Algonquin (where he took a room at my heartless suggestion) awaiting a telephone call I am too cowardly to make. Decision is to decline with regret, even with a kind of grief.

It may have been that my standards were so high or the quality of the books so dreadful, but in either case I do not remember recommending a single submitted work during my five months at McGraw-Hill. But truly

there is some irony in the fact that the one book that I rejected and—at least to my knowledge—also later found a publisher was a work which did not languish unknown and unread. Since those days I've often fantasized the reaction of Farrell or one of the other higher-ups when this book came out under the imprint of a Chicago publisher, a year or so after I had long vacated McGraw-Hill's oppressive pile. For surely my report must have registered in the memory of someone of the senior echelon, and just as surely this old-timer must have returned to the files, and with God knows what cruel mixed sensations of dismay and loss, reread my cool dismissal with its cocksure, priggish and disastrous cadences.

. . . so it is of some relief after these bitter months to discover a manuscript containing a prose style that does not cause fever, headache or retching, and as such the work deserves qualified praise. The idea of men adrift on a raft does have a certain appeal. But for the most part this is a long, solemn and tedious Pacific voyage best suited, I would think, to some kind of drastic abridgement in a journal like the *National Geographic*. Maybe a university press would buy it, it's definitely not for us.

This was the way I dealt with that great classic of modern adventure, *Kon-Tiki*. Months later, watching this book remain first on the best-seller list for unbelievable week after week, I was able to rationalize my blindness by saying to myself that if McGraw-Hill had paid me more than ninety cents an hour I might have been more sensitive to the nexus between good books and filthy lucre.

Home for me at this time was a cramped cubicle, eight by fifteen feet, in a building on West Eleventh Street in the Village called the University Residence Club. I had been lured to this place, on my arrival in New York, not alone by its name—which conjured up an image of Ivy League camaraderie, baize-covered lounge tables littered with copies of the *New Republic* and *Partisan Review*, and elderly retainers in frock coats fretting over messages and catering to one's needs—but by its modest rates: ten dollars a week. The Ivy League business was, of course, an imbecilic illusion. The University Residence Club was only one small cut above a flophouse, differing from Bowery accommodations to the extent of nominal privacy in the form of a locked door. Nearly all else, including the tariff, fell short of resemblance to a flophouse only by the most delicate of degrees. Paradoxically, the location was admirable, almost chic. From the single grime-encrusted window in my rear fourth-floor cubicle I could stare down into the ravishing garden of a house on West Twelfth Street, and occasionally

I glimpsed what I took to be the owners of the garden—a youngish tweedy man whom I fantasized as a rising star at *The New Yorker* or *Harper's*, and his lively and astonishingly well-proportioned blond wife who bounced around the garden in slacks or in a bathing suit, disporting herself from time to time with a ridiculous, overgroomed Afghan hound, or lying asprawl on an Abercrombie & Fitch hammock, where I fucked her to a frazzle with stiff, soundless, slow, precise shafts of desire.

For then sex, or rather its absence, and this insolent and gorgeous little garden—together with the people who inhabited it—all seemed to merge symbolically to make ever more unbearable the degenerate character of the University Residence Club and to aggravate my poverty and my lonely and outcast state. The all-male clientele, mostly middle-aged or older, Village drifters and losers whose next step downward was skid row, emitted a sour smell of wine and despair as we edged past each other in the cramped, peeling hallways. No doting old concierge but a series of reptilian desk clerks, each with the verdigris hue of creatures deprived of daylight, mounted guard over the lobby where one small lightbulb pulsed dimly overhead; they also operated the single creaking elevator, and they coughed a lot and scratched in hemorrhoidal misery during the interminable ascent to the fourth floor and the cubbyhole where, night after night that spring, I immured myself like a half-mad anchorite. Necessity had forced me to this, not only because I had no extra money for entertainment but because, as a newcomer to the metropolis, less shy than simply proudly withdrawn, I lacked both the opportunity and the initiative to make friends. For the first time in my life, which had for years been sometimes witlessly gregarious, I discovered the pain of unwanted solitude. Like a felon suddenly thrown into solitary confinement, I found myself feeding off the unburned fat of inward resources I barely knew I possessed. In the University Residence Club at twilight in May, watching the biggest cockroach I had ever seen browse across my copy of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of John Donne*, I suddenly encountered the face of loneliness, and decided that it was a merciless and ugly face indeed.

So during those months my evening schedule rarely varied. Leaving the McGraw-Hill Building at five, I would take the Eighth Avenue subway train (a nickel) to Village Square, where, after debarking, I made straight for a corner delicatessen and bought the three cans of Rheingold my severe and budgetary conscience permitted me. Thence to my roomlet, where I would stretch out on the corrugated mattress with its Clorox-fragrant sheets laundered to transparency and read until the last of my beers grew warm—a matter of an hour and a half or so. Mercifully, I was at that age when reading was still a passion and thus, save for a happy marriage, the

best state possible in which to keep absolute loneliness at bay. I could not have made it through those evenings otherwise. But I was an abandoned reader and, besides, outlandishly eclectic, with an affinity for the written word—almost any written word—that was so excitable that it verged on the erotic. I mean this literally, and were it not for the fact that I have compared notes with a few others who have confessed to sharing with me in their youth this peculiar sensibility, I know I would now be risking scorn or incredulity by stating that I can recall the time when the prospect of half an hour's dalliance with a Classified Telephone Directory caused me a slight but nonetheless noticeable tumescence.

In any case, I would read—*Under the Volcano* was just one of the books which I remember held me captive that season—and at eight or nine o'clock would go out for dinner. What dinners! How vividly there still lingers on my palate the suety aftertaste of the Salisbury steak at Bickford's, or Riker's western omelette, in which one night, nearly swooning, I found a greenish, almost incorporeal feather and a tiny embryonic beak. Or the gristle embedded like an impacted tumor in the lamb chops at the Athens Chop House, the chops themselves tasting of old sheep, the mashed potatoes glutinous, rancid, plainly reconstituted with Greek cunning from dehydrated government surplus filched from some warehouse. But I was as innocent of New York gastronomy as I was of a lot of other things, and it would be a long time before I would learn that the best meal for less than a dollar in the city was a couple of hamburgers and a slice of pie at a White Tower.

Back in my cubicle, I would savagely seize a book and plunge once more into make-believe, reading into the early hours of the morning. On several occasions, however, I was forced to do what I had come distastefully to regard as my "homework," that is, composing jacket blurbs for forthcoming McGraw-Hill books. As a matter of fact, I recall that I had been hired in the first place largely on the basis of a trial blurb I had written for an already published McGraw-Hill tome, *The Story of the Chrysler Building*. My lyrical yet muscular copy had so impressed Farrell that it not only was an important factor in my getting the job but obviously made him feel that I could produce similar wonders for books about to be published. I think it was one of his major disappointments in me that I couldn't repeat myself, not a single time; for unbeknownst to Farrell, and only partly apparent to me, the McGraw-Hill syndrome of despair and attrition had set in. Without being willing quite fully to admit it, I had begun to detest my charade of a job. I was not an editor, but a *writer*—a writer with the same ardor and the soaring wings of the Melville or the Flaubert or the Tolstoy or the Fitzgerald who had the power to rip my heart out and keep a part of it and who each night, separately and together, were summoning me to their