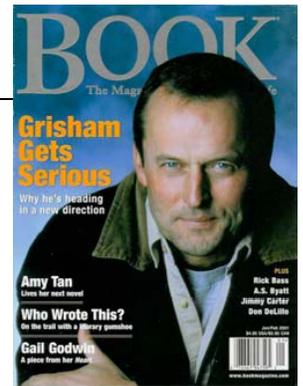


Yoknapatourism in William Faulkner's Back Yard

Gary Bridgman

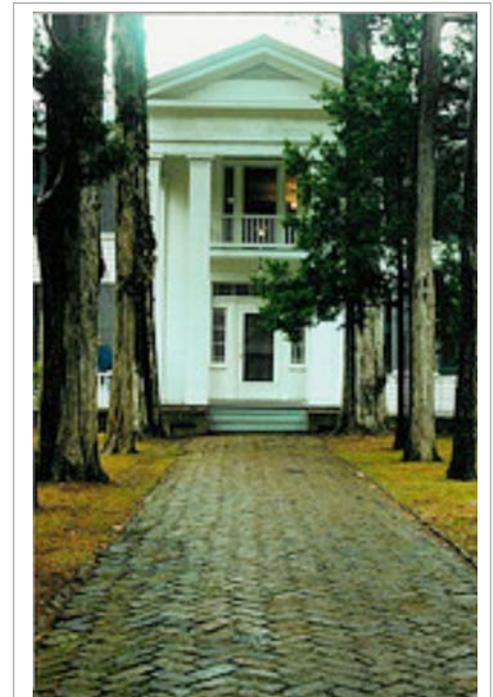
Faulkner may have put Oxford, Mississippi on the literary map, but he's not the only reason it has stayed there.



Most of the entry points into beautiful and bookish Oxford, Mississippi, are cleverly disguised--guarded even--by the blasted landscapes common to the sub-rural South: Strip malls in varying degrees of decay; double-wide homes for sale, still in their clear wrappers; foodmart/filling stations selling more heat-lamped grease than motor oil. Closer to the center of this town of 10,000 people, one sees the mom-and-pop stores miraculously opening their doors each morning in defiance of the Wal-Mart.

Beneath these layers lies Oxford's Square, famously described by William Faulkner in *Requiem for a Nun*: "Above all, the courthouse, the center, the focus, the hub sitting looming in the center of the county's circumference, like a single cloud in the ring of the horizon." The courthouse and its grounds, along with the thriving businesses surrounding it, comprise one of the most enjoyable—even hip--public spaces in the Deep South. Infused with the youthful vigor and economy of a university town, while enjoying a reputation as a writers' community, Oxford actually lives up to predictable chamber of commerce hype about "small town charm with big city amenities."

So is Oxford where Mayberry collides with Greenwich Village? Hardly. Bantamweight millionaires who keep vacation homes just for Ole Miss football weekends have recast it into a moonlight 'n' magnolia Aspen, while parts of it are more Mayberry than Mayberry. But there are indeed three places on the Square where one may buy a *grande* cappuccino to go. The body-pierced kids behind those coffee



Rowan Oak, home of William Faulkner, now a museum run by the University of Mississippi

counters know how to look cool and bored, just like everywhere else, but the soft drawls and “yes sir’s” and “no ma’am’s” tend to drain their mystique, leaving irony intact.

The literary feel is impressive and pervasive. A few years back, author Rick Bass stopped by Square Books to read and sign *Where the Sea Used to Be*. In the middle of answering a question, he spotted local novelist Barry Hannah near the back of the audience. “Shit! There’s Barry Hannah!” he said, looking almost embarrassed to be standing behind a podium in his presence. “You all don’t know what you’ve got here.” They do, actually.

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The vibrant literary life of Oxford began within the feverish imagination of William Cuthbert Faulkner, who arrived there as a boy with his family when his father took a job at the University of Mississippi in 1902. For a span of 38 years (1924-62), he produced experimental prose; written mainly in Oxford and about Oxford, although he dubbed his backyard universe “Yoknapatawpha County.”

His home was Rowan Oak, which has become something of a thinking person’s Graceland in these parts. One of the oldest structures in Oxford, this Greek Revival fixer-upper on Old Taylor Road was built in the 1840s by a Colonel Shegog. Faulkner bought the crumbling house, then known as the “Bailey Place” in 1930 and promptly renamed it, then slowly refurbished it. Faulkner’s daughter



sold Rowan Oak to the university in 1972 so “it could become a place for people from all over the world to learn about her father’s work,” according to curator William Griffith.

The best room in the house is Faulkner's study, where his handwritten outline of the plot of *A Fable* is still legible on the walls. One may also swoon at the sight of his Underwood typewriter.

"Younger people are more interested in Faulkner's writing while the older people are more into the history, architecture and the grounds," said Griffith. "I know I'm doing my tour right when they old guys start asking me what they should read."

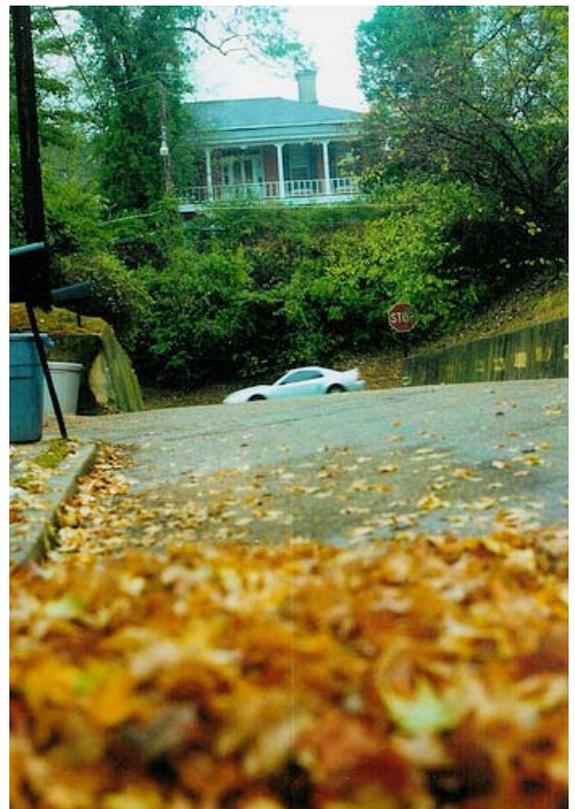
A former Rowan Oak docent, Jim Higgins, tells a funny story about one busload of senior citizens who took a bus tour from a casino in nearby Tunica County, Mississippi. A woman walked up to Higgins and demanded to see the swimming pool "where his wife drowned last year." Knowing that Estelle Faulkner died of natural causes decades earlier and that there was never a pool at Rowan Oak, Higgins was mystified by the request until he realized that the woman thought this was the home of William *Shatner*.

Faulkner's grave in St. Peter's Cemetery (look for the historical marker on Avent St. off Jefferson Ave.) is the other popular Faulkner pilgrimage site. It's usually festooned with coins, flowers, and whiskey bottles.

He was widely praised and often misunderstood. Then he died, and was quickly replaced as the town's most famous living resident by James Meredith, Ole Miss' first black student.

The deadly riots that followed Meredith's enrollment branded the community as a bastion of racial hatred, which didn't seem to bother most white Mississippians, and the only writers hanging around were journalists who slept with their shoes on. Today, that image has faded just enough to make it more interesting than dangerous. "Oxford Town" was the Bob Dylan song that described the 1962 violence, and today *Oxford Town* is the name of the local newspaper's weekly entertainment supplement.

The town was transformed from one writer's town to a Writers' Town around



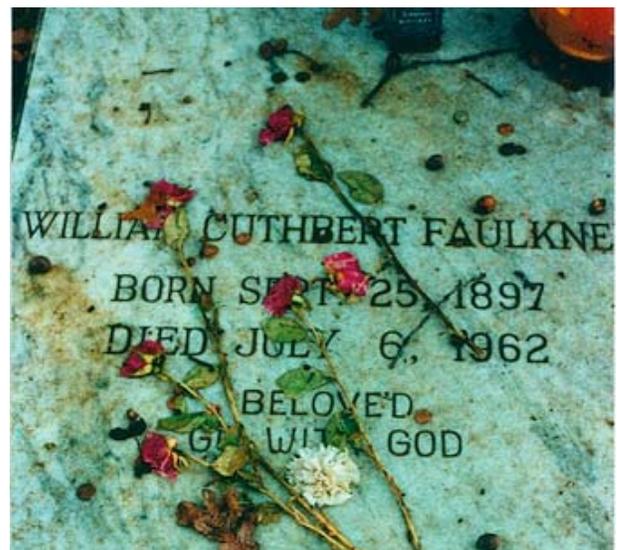
1980, when native Mississippian Willie Morris (*North Toward Home, My Dog Skip*) became the writer in residence at the university. He knew many renowned authors from his youthful tenure as editor of *Harper's* during the 1960s, and cajoled a few of them to come and read at Square Books, which Richard and Lisa Howorth had opened two years earlier.

After Barry Hannah (*Airships, High Lonesome*) joined Morris as a writer in residence in 1982, the two went on to instruct or encourage hundreds of nascent writers, including Donna Tartt (*The Secret History*), John Grisham (*A Time to ... well, you know*) and Larry Brown (*Dirty Work, Fay*). Brown went on to teach fiction workshops himself at Ole Miss (while Hannah served as interim director of the Iowa Writers Workshop on the heels of a Pulitzer nomination) and later the University of Montana, while Grisham has personally endowed a visiting Southern writer in residence program at the university.

It is unfortunate that while Ole Miss is given to self-congratulation for its host town's literary talent, the school offers no MFA degree in writing--that must-have union card for teaching slots in accredited programs. Stalling the writing program at this "intramural" level, the university unwittingly chases off young talents who stay just long enough to take in the scenery before enrolling in other graduate schools.

While the university has slacked in its support of a graduate writing program, there are a few significant cultural offerings on campus for the literate traveler. The Center for the Study of Southern Culture, housed in the antebellum Barnard Observatory (which never had a telescope) on Grove Loop, the center hosts special events that exhaustively explore all things Southern. It co-sponsors the annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference with the English department each August, the Southern Foodways Symposium in October, and the outstanding Oxford Conference for the Book with Square Books each April.

Pop next door to Farley Hall and visit the Blues Archive, which houses a sizeable collection of records, books, photographs, posters, clippings, and memorabilia, many of which were donated by B.



B. King. A few old brick buildings west of there, the J.D. Williams Library's Archives and Special Collections Department displays the papers and mementos of William Faulkner and James Meredith, including Mr. Bill's Nobel citation.

Meanwhile, back at the Square, visit Southside Gallery to see the photographs Martin Dain took of Faulkner and Oxford in 1961 and 1962. There is a good selection of Southern and Cuban folk art as well. Across the street, browse racks full of independent-label Delta and North Mississippi blues recordings at Uncle Buck's Records, named after a character from Faulkner's *Go Down Moses*. After reading book spines till your eyes and neck ache at Square Books, one of the best bookstores anywhere, it's time to eat, then drink, then eat again. Here are the restaurants and watering holes that the local literati seem to prefer:

Ajax Diner, 118 Courthouse Square. Awesome Southern classics in a very fun atmosphere. Larry Brown is a regular customer, as is Barry Hannah.

City Grocery, 152 Courthouse Square. Arguably the best fine-dining restaurant in Mississippi. Make reservations if you want dinner (662.232.8080), but the real scene is in the bar upstairs, especially during Friday happy hours or right after a reading at Square Books. They serve a good lunch, too.

Bottletree Bakery, 923 Van Buren Ave., just off the Square. This is a cultured hangout for morning people, or lunch people. In addition to baked goods and good coffee, they serve healthier alternatives to the area's typically deep fried delicacies. Good place for Sunday brunch.

Taylor Grocery & Restaurant, Take Old Taylor Road south off Highway 6 for 7 miles or so and you'll hit the tiny village of Taylor. Taylor Grocery is often referred to as "Taylor Catfish" by Oxonians because that used to be the only thing they served. There's a bigger menu now. There are thousands and thousands of customers' names scrawled on the wall. Supposedly, the first two signatures (long buried under other pens) belong to the late Willie Morris and U.S. Senator Thad Cochran, who left their marks there in the early 1980s.

The best place to stay near the Square is the **Downtown Inn**, 400 N. Lamar Blvd. at Jefferson Ave., 3 blocks north of the Square. 800.606.1497 or 662.234.303. ★