

INTRODUCING *THE SOUND AND THE FURY* by Robert Dale Parker

The Sound and the Fury tells about the Compson family. It is written in four sections, with each section told from a different perspective. The famous first section comes through the perspective of Benjy Compson, an idiot, not as we use the word colloquially, to mean a fool, but in the sense that denotes someone of extremely low intelligence. Benjy's intelligence is so low that he is not even capable of speech, although Faulkner records his process of mind in a language he might use if he could speak. As a result, Benjy's language is extraordinarily simple, so astonishingly simple that it can be difficult to read. Because Benjy understands so little, he sometimes fails to make connections that we all take for granted, such as between cause and effect; or he makes connections where we would not, such as between a golf caddie and his sister Caddy (Candance). At any moment, particular words or feelings can transport him to some remembered time that he doesn't distinguish from the present, although Faulkner usually gives some clue in language or typography to signal the transition that Benjy himself cannot understand. Gradually, as you read Benjy's section, you will crack the code. You will grow familiar with the different times that occupy Benjy's mind, and grow to recognize them by the people, places, events, and activities of each separate time.

Section 2 comes through the perspective of Benjy's brother Quentin. Quentin is intelligent, anxious, intellectual—in other words, a typical college student. Benjy's and Quentin's sections are the most famous American instances of what has come to be called stream of consciousness; that is, they follow the thoughts of a particular mind in whatever direction those thoughts go, even when those thoughts (like anyone's thoughts, sometimes) refuse to go in directions sensible, convenient, or clear. Benjy's section falls into a pattern, a code that you will eventually crack. You might find Quentin's section more profoundly and permanently difficult.

The third and fourth sections offer no special difficulties.

It might help to explain a few details. In three instances, two characters have the same name. Benjy is originally named Maury, after Mrs. Compson's brother. When they realize he is an idiot, they fear that naming him after Maury is in bad taste, so they change his name to Benjamin. Some references to Maury, then, refer to the young Benjy. Jason, the other Compson brother, is named after his father; and Caddy eventually has a daughter, whom she names Quentin after her brother, so that there are two Jasons and two Quentins. The only major confusion might come with the Quentins, but young Quentin has a minor role at first, and the context makes clear which Quentin is which. Also, "Damuddy" is the Compson children's name for their grandmother; "Nancy" is a horse—presumably part of a matched team with "Fancy"; and when the characters say "branch" they mean a brook or creek. Some readers get confused when Quentin tells his father (or imagines telling his father) that he has committed incest with his sister Caddy. He is lying; he has not committed incest, and his father knows he has not.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE BENJY SECTION

1890 Quentin born.

1892 Caddy born.

1894 Jason born.

1895 7 April Benjy born.

1900 Damuddy ("grandmother")'s funeral; Benjy's name is changed.

1900-01 Natalie episode. Quentin is roughly pre-adolescent, 10-12, and Caddy would be 8-9.

1906 Episode with Benjy and Caddy and perfume.

1908 Spring: Benjy takes letter from Uncle Maury to Mrs. Patterson by himself, is caught by Mr. Patterson, Mr. Patterson blackens Uncle Maury's eye.

1908-10 Caddy in swing with Charlie. During these years Caddy would be 15-17 and experimenting sexually; probably some time in these years she loses her virginity.

November: Quentin tells his father he was fighting because someone put a frog in the teacher's drawer, but his father knows he is lying.

1909 Fall: Quentin enters Harvard

1910 25 April: Caddy's wedding. Benjy, 15, attacks the Burgess girl shortly after Caddy's wedding; he is castrated.

1911 January: Miss Quentin born.

1912 Father dies.

1915 Roskus dies.

1928 April 6-8: Time present.

TIME LEVELS IN THE BENJY SECTION

1. **7 April 1928:** Luster and Benjy look for quarter.
2. **23 December 1908:** Benjy and Caddy take letter to Mrs. Patterson
3. **1912 or 1913:** Family trip to cemetery; Jason refuses to go.
4. **Spring or early summer 1908, probably:** Benjy takes letter to Mrs. Patterson by himself.
5. **1900:** Damuddy's funeral; children splashing in the creek; Caddy's muddy drawers.
6. **1910 April 25:** Caddy's wedding.
7. **1910 June 2:** Quentin's suicide.
8. **1912:** Father's death.
9. **1915:** Roskus's death.
10. **1906:** Caddy and Benjy give perfume to Dilsey.
11. **1908-1910:** Caddy and Charlie in swing.
12. **Spring 1910:** Benjy misses Caddy, soon after her marriage, while school is still in session. He begins the ritual of going to the closed gate to wait for the children coming home from school; chases girls, is castrated.
13. **1900:** Benjy's name change.
14. **1908-1909, November:** Caddy's loss of virginity; Quentin's fight with schoolmate, probably over Caddy's promiscuity and reputation.

Yoknapatawpha County: Pronounced "Yok ´ nuh puh TAW ´ fuh." A county in northern Mississippi, the setting for most of William Faulkner's novels and short stories, and patterned upon Faulkner's actual home in Lafayette County, Mississippi. Its county seat is Jefferson. It is bounded on the north by the Tallahatchie River (an actual river in Mississippi) and its southern boundary is the Yoknapatawpha River. It consists of 2,400 square miles, the eastern half of which is pine hill country. According to the map included in *Absalom, Absalom!* (published in 1936), the county's population is 15,611, of which 6,298 are white and 9,313 are black. Originally inhabited by the Chickasaw Indian tribe, white settlers first came to live in the area around 1800. Prior to the Civil War, the area was home to a number of large plantations, including Grenier's in the southeast, McCaslin's in the northeast, Sutpen's ("Sutpen's Hundred") in the northwest, and Compson's and Sartoris's in the immediate vicinity of Jefferson. The name "Yoknapatawpha" is apparently derived from two Chickasaw words: *Yocona* and *petopha*, meaning "split land." According to some sources, that was the original name for the Yocona River, also an actual river running through southern Lafayette County. According to Faulkner, *Yoknapatawpha* means "water flowing slow through the flatland." Arthur F. Kinney, however, postulates an additional possibility for the origin and meaning of the name. In *Go Down, Moses: The Miscegenation of Time*, he suggests Faulkner might have consulted a 1915 *Dictionary of the Choctaw Language* in which the word is broken down as follows:

ik patafo, a., unplowed.

patafa, pp., split open; plowed, furrowed; tilled.

yakni, n., the earth; ...soil; ground; nation; ...district....

yakni patafa, pp., furrowed land; fallowed land.