

## *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner recommended by R. T. Smith

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, R. T. Smith—editor of *Shenandoah* and recipient of the 2002 Library of Virginia Poetry Prize for *Messenger*—recommends *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



I can think of no novel more chillingly beautiful than William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, which chronicles the final days of Addie Bundren's frustrated life and her rural family's forty-mile, nine-day journey to bury her at New Hope, Mississippi. For the small cortege of mourners and their livestock, the obstacles presented by floodwaters, fire and the near-feral instincts of Addie's warring offspring gather force until they resemble the ordeals of ancient epic. For readers who follow the Bundren's bizarre odyssey, Faulkner's elliptical style and jigsaw structure may present similar ordeals, but in the end, the author shines a powerful light into the human darkness and finds that, even there, radiance resides.

Faulkner wrote this brief novel in six weeks while he worked on the night shift shoveling coal into a furnace. Popular legend claims that he composed his initial draft using a wheelbarrow for a table, pausing to feed the fire. Considering the fragmented fury of the book—"fifty-nine chapters spoken (or thought) by fifteen narrators"—and its involuted, near-cryptic intensity, this legend is appealing. When I first read the novel while working as a night watchman, I struggled to understand both the literal narrative and the symbolism without ever quite crossing the threshold. Then I read it aloud, and it worked its spell.

The novel's mysteries are solvable, and the solutions begin to emerge as the reader fathoms the fierce needs of the sons—"the stoical Cash, the mad or clairvoyant Darl, innocent Vardaman, the passionate Jewel"—and the urgencies of their sister Dewey Dell, who feels "like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth." In one chapter, told less obliquely than most, Addie, the grim question mark at the heart of the story, provides essential keys.

Add to this the unimaginative stubbornness of widower and anti-Job Anse, described by a neighbor as one who "had wore himself down being surprised and was, even surprised at that," and you have a recipe for folly, nobility and storms of rivalry beyond anything the forces of nature can inflict. Faulkner's words perform a gothic morality play which testifies that dignity can emerge in the wake of cruelty and selfishness.

This description, however, fails to suggest the lyrical and grotesquely comic dimensions of *As I Lay Dying* that have enchanted readers since 1930. While few would argue that these mostly uneducated farmers could actually articulate the sentences in their interior monologues, Faulkner conveys the complexity of their emotions with a convincing poetry that is at once hard-scrabble and divine. He presents a dreamy and dangerous landscape and orchestrates the multiple

voices driven by primal needs but complete with buffoonery, horror, sacrifice and betrayal. In this respect, *As I Lay Dying* is as immediate and dazzling as today's most radical literary experiments. If it is a riddle, it is a riddle of light and discovery. I would recommend it to anyone interested in the South and in the soul.

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