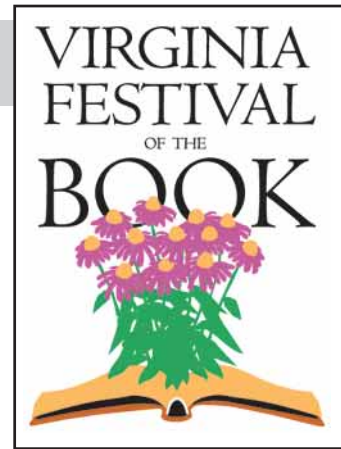


William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* recommended by David Baldacci

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. David Baldacci, author of six novels, has selected William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, chosen this year by the Library of Virginia for its "All Virginia Reads" program. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss together a work that raises issues and questions of our times. Please join David Baldacci and us this month in reading *Sophie's Choice*.



It is difficult enough to write first-rate fiction without embroiling one's self in controversial issues that make the author as much of a target as his work. Few authors in history can measure up to William Styron on that score. He has not one but two works to his credit (the other being *The Confessions of Nat Turner*) which have driven different factions of society to distraction, and—could it be—discussion? emotional truth? And to that I say: Thank God for authors like William Styron.

Sophie's Choice is the story of a transplanted Virginian, Stingo, a struggling writer in New York City after World War II and the woman he befriends, Sophie. Stingo initially understands Sophie to be a Polish Catholic Holocaust survivor, but as her tale unfolds, we recognize that Stingo has been told a series of lies by Sophie fabricated not so much to deceive but to protect her from remembering her father's complicity in the Nazi extermination of the Jewish people.

When I first read *Sophie's Choice* in my final year of college in Richmond, I was struck by the twenty-two year-old Stingo, his love of words, his forgivable—if unforgettable—naiveté, his passionate caring for Sophie (and even her mad if brilliant suitor Nathan), his unwavering curiosity ... it was all exactly right. Not one characteristic, inflection, or circumstance in which Stingo found himself, however audacious, tragic or comic, rang false. I didn't see William Styron standing there before me in the cloak of Stingo; yet I saw someone as meaty,

wonderful and flawed as God ever created. Being a struggling writer of roughly the same age as Stingo when I first read the novel, there was much about the gentleman from Tidewater that struck me as both familiar and worrisome, yet also comforting. I saw I was not alone in my self-doubts, as I struggled to make sense of my own world through the writer's prism.

I also thought Styron had accomplished one of the most difficult tasks a writer can undertake. He had taken on a story with the potential for shallow melodrama, fraught with the peril of being inaccessible for all but the most intellectual among us, taking direct aim at perhaps the defining series of events for several generations of humankind, a story whose results could have been so disastrously off-target, falling to the unseemly depths of the caricature and the bully pulpit. Instead, he gave the novel a heart so big, a soul so relentless, and thrust it all into a world so real and recklessly contagious, that it could not help sweeping us all into the pathos, joy, awakening and eventual maturity of a young man from Virginia observing what would be, in many ways, the pinnacle of what life would be willing to allow him of its treasures.

I never saw the movie (and doubt I ever will, despite Meryl Streep's Oscar-winning performance) because, for me, there's no substitute for the book. Having heard Styron lecture and compare the system of American slavery and the horrors of the Holocaust and having met him personally, *Sophie's Choice* seems to me to be

his exploration of acts of genocide, racism and moral outcry, undertaken if for no other purpose than for his own self-understanding of such human conundrums. The potential for evil exists everywhere and sometimes arises in the most unlikely souls. However, as a counter to

this threat, the opportunity for compassion, hope and courage – the indomitable human spirit – is also always with us. I would encourage anyone who hasn't read the novel to do so immediately for your own understanding, or read it again for the new insights it inspires.

Virginia Festival of the Book

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