

A Fresh Look at Faulkner

A longtime literary friend recalls his association with the late author and some seldom appreciated elements of his greatness.

By MALCOLM COWLEY

FOUR YEARS after William Faulkner's death in 1962, I find myself looking back at him not only with the old admiration for his work but with respect for his character and also, it seems to me, with a degree of understanding. For all the differences between us, of which the enormous one was his genius, we were men of the same time, with many of the same standards, which were partly derived from our reading of the same authors, and we had the same instinctive love of the American land. His actions did not seem inexplicable to me, as they sometimes did to others. They were his own solutions, fresh and simple ones—as if he were acting without precedents—to problems that almost all the writers of our time had to face.

We were most of us countrymen, in one sense or another. There were exceptions, and Scott Fitzgerald, for example, was less at home in the country than he was in a residential suburb. Most of the others lived in the country by choice, though preferably not too far from New York or Paris or, in Hemingway's case, Havana; or they found another compromise, as E. E. Cummings did, by spending seven or eight months of the year in New York and the rest of it on a hilltop in New Hampshire.

Perhaps we might be called a transitional generation, bent on enjoying the urban pleasures, but at the same time hunters and fishermen eager to feel the soil instead of asphalt underfoot. We were radicals in literature and sometimes in politics, but conservative in our other aspirations, looking back for ideals to the country we had known in childhood, where people led separate lives in widely scattered houses; where there were broad fields in which a boy could hunt without fear of No Trespass signs,

and big woods, untouched by lumbermen, in which he could wander with a pocket compass. I suspect that we were the last generation in which those country tastes could be taken for granted. American fiction and poetry since our time have become increasingly urban or suburban.

Among us Faulkner was the only one who remained loyal to the neighborhood he had always known. The rest of us were uprooted and exiled from our native countrysides, at first by our schooling, then by the Great War, then by our travels. As one after another said, but Hemingway long before Thomas Wolfe, "You can't go home again." Faulkner seemed to be unaffected by that long deracination, as by the effort that followed it to put down new roots in middle age. He spent most of his life, and he died, in Oxford, Mississippi, the country town where he grew up, which is thirty miles as the crow flies from New Albany, the other country town where he was born. His genius, though international, was nourished on local tradition.

Even when his reputation was in eclipse, during the early 1940s, almost everyone was willing to admit that he had genius. Not so widely recognized then or later was that he also had talent. Here I am using the two words in one of their several pairings, one by which they are not measured on the same quantitative scale—with 180, for example, as a quotient for genius and 150 for talent—but instead are treated as sharply opposing qualities.

"Genius" in that sense would stand for everything that is essentially the gift of the subconscious mind—or of the Muses, as poets used to say (that is, for inspiration, imagination, the creative vision)—while "talent" would stand for conscious ingenuity, calculation, acquired skill, and the critical judgment that an author displays when revising his own work. "How many young geniuses we have known," Emerson said, "and none but ourselves will ever hear

of them for want in them of a little talent."

Faulkner had talent in abundance, as is clear to anyone who examines the early draft of *Sanctuary*, for instance, or his three successive versions of "That Evening Sun." Each of his many changes reveals a sound critical judgment. The detective stories he collected in *Knight's Gambit* are examples of misapplied but impressive ingenuity. Again it was talent, not genius, that he revealed while working in Hollywood. He said in the extraordinary interview that he gave to the *Paris Review* in 1956, "I know now that I will never be a good motion-picture writer," but what he meant is that he wouldn't be a great one.

He was good enough so that Warner Brothers made strenuous efforts to get him back to their studio, even in the years before they realized that he was a world-famous author. They wanted him because he could throw away the script and write new dialogue on the set, a technical achievement that few of their writers had mastered. But technique was never what excited him, and very often, I think, he sacrificed his talent to his genius.

THE sacrifice is revealed not only in his books but in many casual remarks like those he made to me on a visit to New England. "I listen to the voices," he said, "and when I put down what the voices say, it's right. Sometimes I don't like what they say"—that is, their message might be in conflict with his conscious standards—"but I don't change it."

Again he said, "Get it down. Take chances," that is, give rein to the unconscious. "It may be bad, but that's the only way you can do anything really good. Wolfe took the most chances, though he didn't always know what he was doing. I come next and then Dos Passos. Hemingway doesn't take chances enough."

That was the argument at a distance between Faulkner and Hemingway, which sometimes became embittered on

This article is based on the book, *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories*, to be published this summer by The Viking Press, Inc.

Hemingway's part. They had to differ for the simple reason that they were rivals who—partly by the influence on both of them of their time—resembled each other in many fashions.

Both of them had sharp eyes for landscape. Both liked to go barefoot as boys and even as young men, as if they weren't satisfied with merely seeing the countryside, but had to feel it as well. Both were hunters by devoted avocation. Both loved the wilderness, lamented its passing, went searching for remains of it, and were proud of their ability to find their way in it without guides. Both returned in their work to many of the same themes: for example, the primitive mind, the mystical union of hunter and hunted, the obsessions of wounded men, and the praise of alcohol. There were even trivial resemblances, as in the British style of dress and the British officer's World War I mustache that Hemingway wore in his early years and Faulkner all his life. They differed radically, however, in their attitude toward the craft of writing.

Hemingway kept his inspiration in check, for he liked to know what he was doing at every moment. Quite the opposite of Faulkner in this respect, he sometimes sacrificed his genius to his talent. I think of one remark he made: "Faulkner has the most talent of anybody"—here he was using "talent" in another sense than mine—"but hard to depend on because he goes on writing after he is tired and seems as though he never threw away the worthless. I would have been happy just to have managed him."

Hemingway was an excellent manager of others, and of himself until the last years, but it seems to me that he was wrong in this instance. The crucial problem with Faulkner was not that of managing his talent—let us say, of refining his skill and conserving his stamina as if he were a boxer training for the big fight—but rather that of keeping his genius alive through the years. To that problem he had to find his own solution.

ALL his life Faulkner was a problem-solver. Obviously that was the way his mind worked: he regarded each new situation as a problem, which he usually reduced to a single question; then he tried to find his answer. It is, of course, a common procedure, but most of us make it easier by looking for precedents and then by responding to the problem with some action of which we hope the neighbors will say, "It's what any sensible person would have done in his case."

Faulkner was not concerned with what his sensible neighbors might have done. He approached each problem as if nobody else had ever been faced with it and as if it required some radically new solution. In that respect he preserved a sort of innocence, a quality of



—The American Academy of Arts and Letters.

William Faulkner, presents The Gold Medal for Fiction to John Dos Passos at the May 1957 Ceremonial of the National Institute and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Malcolm Cowley, then president of the institute, is on the right.

mind or character that makes one think of the youngest son in fairy tales. Always the older brothers believe that the youngest is hopelessly stupid and ignorant of the world, but always he performs the right actions out of sheer simplicity.

So it is in the tale of "The Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was." His quest leads him into a haunted castle where anyone who spends three nights will be rewarded with an immense treasure. Nobody else has come out alive after the first night, but the youth survives till morning by finding the proper answers. Then on the second night (I quote from the Brothers Grimm),

he again went up into the old castle, sat down by the fire, and once more began his old song: "If I could but shudder!" When midnight came, an uproar and noise of tumbling about was heard; at first it was low, but it grew louder and louder. Then it was quiet for a while, and at length with a loud scream, half a man came down the chimney and fell before him.

"Hullo!" cried the youth [as Faulkner might have cried], "another half belongs to this. This is not enough."

Then the uproar began again, there was a roaring and howling, and the other half fell down likewise. "Wait," said he, "I will just stoke up the fire a little for you." When he had done that and looked round again, the two pieces were joined together and a hideous man was sitting in his place.

"That is no part of our bargain," said the youth. "The bench is mine." The man wanted to push him away. The youth, however, would not allow that, but thrust him off with all his strength, and seated himself again in his own place.

Problem: What do you do when two

halves of a body fall down the chimney, when they join together into a hideous man, and when he takes your place by the fire? Why, nothing could be simpler: you push him off the bench. *Problem that follows:* what do you do when other men fall down the chimney, bringing with them two skulls and nine thigh-bones of dead men, then stand up the bones and start playing ninepins with the skulls? Why, nothing could be simpler, considering that you have had the foresight to provide yourself with a turning lathe. You grind the skulls till they are round and join happily in the game. *Problem:* (this time in Faulkner's terms): What do you do when you find yourself at a grisly Hollywood party, with guests more fearsome to you than specters in a haunted castle, but when you don't want to embarrass the host by making public excuses for leaving? Why, nothing could be simpler. You go upstairs, open a window, and escape by climbing down a trellis.

AND still another problem solved in Faulkner's terms: A motion-picture studio has put him on its payroll, but without telling him what to do. Instead of going to Hollywood, he simply waits at home for instructions. Then a telegram arrives: WILLIAM FAULKNER, OXFORD, MISS. WHERE ARE YOU? MGM STUDIO. As he later told Jean Stein when being interviewed for *Paris Review*,

I wrote out a telegram: MGM STUDIO, CULVER CITY, CALIF. WILLIAM FAULKNER.

The young lady operator said, "Where is the message, Mr. Faulkner?" I said, "That's it." She said, "The rule book says that I can't send it without a message, you have to say something." So we went through her samples and I selected

I forget which one—one of the canned anniversary messages. I sent that.

Those pleasant anecdotes reveal a pattern that Faulkner also followed, or tells us he followed, in writing his novels: always there was the problem reduced to a simple question, and always there was the simple but unprecedented answer. In writing *Sanctuary*, he says that the problem was chiefly that of making money, and the answer was to invent "the most horrific tale I could imagine." In *As I Lay Dying*, the problem was what an imagined group of people would do when subjected to what he calls "the simple universal natural catastrophes, which are flood and fire, with a simple natural motive to give direction to their progress."

THE answer in the writing of the novel "was not easy," he says. "No honest work is. It was simple in that all the material was already at hand. It took me just about six weeks in the spare time from a twelve-hour-a-day job at manual labor."

The problem was never the same. In *The Sound and the Fury*, it was presented by an obsessive mental picture: "the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers in a pear tree, where she could see through a window where her grandmother's funeral was taking place and report what was happening to her brothers on the ground below." But who were the children, what were they doing, and why were her pants muddy? By the time those questions were answered in his mind, Faulkner says—again in the *Paris Review* interview—"I realized it would be impossible to get all of it into a short story and that it would have to be a book." *The Wild Palms*, that novel with

a double plot told in alternate chapters, started as the story of two people "who sacrificed everything for love, and then lost that." The question was how to keep the story at a high pitch of intensity.

When I reached the end of what is now the first section of *The Wild Palms* [he told Jean Stein], I realized suddenly that something was missing, it needed emphasis, something to lift it like counterpoint in music. So I wrote on the "Old Man" story until "The Wild Palms" story rose back to pitch. Then I stopped the "Old Man" story at what is now its first section, and took up "The Wild Palms" story until it began again to sag. Then I raised it to pitch again with another section of its antithesis, which is the story of a man who got his love and spent the rest of the book fleeing from it . . .

As he explains the writing of each novel, he makes it sound as innocent as the behavior of the youth in the haunted castle. Faulkner, too, was exorcising demons and specters, but that seemed to be a trifling matter for a man who couldn't shudder. All he had to do, apparently, was to resolve each threatening situation into a question that could be answered in its own terms. We say once more, "Why, nothing could be simpler," and then with a start we realize that the questions were new and that the answers in each case were those of genius.

There were continuing problems in life to which he applied the same pattern of response. Of course the great problem of his early years was one that perplexes almost every young writer: how to live while getting his work done. Without reading Thoreau, it would seem, he instinctively chose Thoreau's answer: "Simplify, simplify!" He reduced his needs to the requisites of the writer's

trade, which are, as he listed them to Jean Stein, "whatever peace, whatever solitude, and whatever pleasure he can get at not too high a cost," and beyond these, "Paper, tobacco, food, and a little whisky." The requisites could be supplied by any sort of odd job that was locally available, including house painting, rum running (from New Orleans), and shoveling coal in the University of Mississippi power station—always provided that the job didn't engross his attention and that he didn't hold it beyond the point of utter boredom.

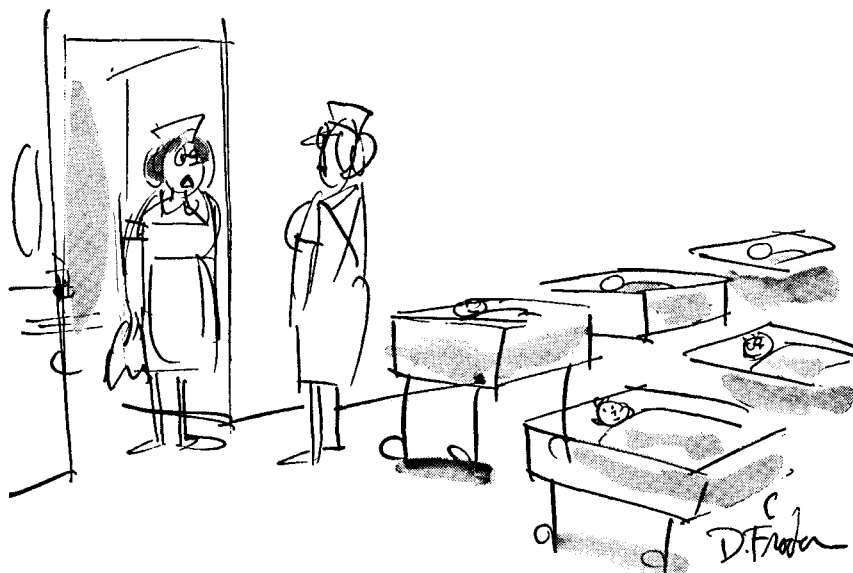
THAT sort of barefoot heedlessness couldn't last after his marriage in 1929; his income as a family man had to be less intermittent. For a few years after *Sanctuary* (1931), his books and magazine stories produced enough to support the household. Then, in the later years of the Depression, he found another expedient, which was to work in Hollywood for six months of the year and, by frugal living, to save enough from his never brilliant salary to carry him through the next six months in Oxford. Though not a happy answer, it was the best to be found.

But other problems remained, among them the one which I said was really crucial and which persisted from the years of obscurity into those of fame: that is, the problem of keeping his genius alive in a generally hostile environment. Faulkner's genius was essentially his sustained power of imagination. It could not be locked in a vault like precious stones; it needed space and air and especially solitude.

In writing an introduction to *The Portable Faulkner* (1946), I had suggested that intellectual solitude was responsible for the faults in his writing (and Faulkner had agreed with me), but I should have seen even then that it was also a precondition of his writing. Only in solitude could he enter the inner kingdom—"William Faulkner, sole owner and proprietor"—that his genius was able to people and cultivate. Only by standing guard at the borders of the kingdom could he bar out invaders who might lay it waste. And that was only part of his guardianship, for he also had to be vigilant against tempters and corrupters who might destroy it from within.

His struggle against those two dangers was more precarious and his measure of victory over them was more admirable than is generally recognized. What we forget is that Faulkner was the first distinguished American man of letters who spent most of his life in a country town remote from any metropolitan center.

Concord, of course, was also a country town, and the fact might help to explain some curious points of resemblance between Faulkner and the Concord sages, especially Hawthorne, who felt the same



"Miss Wilson, I'm afraid I threw one out with the bath water."

need for solitude. There was also Emerson, who said in one of his journals—as Faulkner might have echoed—“Alone is wisdom. Alone is happiness. Society nowadays makes us low spirited, hopeless. Alone is heaven.” But when Emerson got tired of being alone in heaven, he had literary neighbors for distraction, and Concord in his time was only an hour on the cars from Boston. For Thoreau it was a half-day’s walk from the Harvard Library.

So Concord is no exception to my generality, and neither is the fact that a few gifted women had survived as writers in towns no larger than Oxford; one thinks first of Emily Dickinson, then of Mary Noailles Murfree and Elizabeth Madox Roberts. A gentlewoman’s problem was slightly different in a country town, that is, if she didn’t marry; she was permitted by public opinion, she might even be encouraged, to spend her leisure writing books instead of painting china. A man, however, was expected to follow some practical pursuit like farming or merchandising or legal counseling, at the cost, if he failed to do so, of being ridiculed as “Count No’count.”

Perhaps that weight of public ridicule and incomprehension has been the greatest enemy of the arts in rural America. Faulkner was by no means the first man to resist it, but he was the first not to be warped by his resistance; the first simply to stand and pursue a fruitful career.

To do so required pride, willpower, and tough-hided indifference, in a measure of all three that is not generally associated with an imaginative writer. Moreover, he also had to display those qualities on another battlefield. When he emerged from his country town for six months of the year, it was to work in Hollywood, which used to have a notorious fashion of embracing and destroying men of letters. After publishing an admired book, or two or three, the writer was offered a contract by a movie studio; then he bought a house with a swimming pool and vanished from print. If he reappeared years later, it was usually with a novel designed to have the deceptive appeal of an uplift brassière. The process aroused Faulkner’s scorn. “Nothing can injure a man’s writing,” he told Jean Stein, “if he’s a first-class writer. . . . The problem does not apply if he is not first-rate, because he has already sold his soul for a swimming pool.”

Faulkner protected his soul, or rather his genius, by doing honest work for less than the usual Hollywood salary, and by living in a cubbyhole where he had few visitors. His only extravagance, except for buying conservative clothes, was a riding mare. Once the novelist Stephen Longstreet, then working in the same studio, found him sitting in a car at the



“Remember, Worthington—that’s five cents a day for every day over two weeks.”

curb, with the mare, swollen-bellied, behind him in a trailer.

“Hi, Bill, where you going?” Longstreet asked him.

“Home to Oxford,” Faulkner answered. “I don’t want any mare of mine to throw a foal in California.”

Faulkner himself was used to foaling his books in Oxford, but meanwhile the struggle against the Hollywood atmosphere must have been harder than he later made it appear. There is a note of triumph against odds in the letter that he sent me with his genealogy of the Compson family: “. . . it took me about a week to get Hollywood out of my lungs, but I am still writing all right, I believe. . . . Maybe I am just happy that that damned West Coast place has not cheapened my soul as much as I probably believed it was going to do.”

BUT the problem of keeping alive his genius was still with him when he got back to Oxford. As his reputation spread, even the townspeople learned that he was a famous man, and some of them must have tried to invade his private life in the hope of being strengthened by his mana. There were also marauders from the outer world: “Last month two damned swedes,” he said in a 1946 letter, “two days ago a confounded Chicago reporter, and now this one”—it was the Russian novelist Ilya Ehrenburg—“that cant even speak english. . . . I swear to christ being in hollywood was better than this where nobody knew me or cared a damn.” He was faced with the beginning of the process by which an author is snatched from his private world and transformed into a public institution, a combined lecture hall, post office, and comfort station, all humming with strange voices.

Even at this early stage, it must have been hard for him to maintain that “inner hush,” as Scott Fitzgerald calls it, in which the voices of his genius could be heard above an intrusive babble. One thinks of Coleridge and the dream he had that was “Kubla Khan.” “On awaking,” Coleridge says, describing the experience in the third person, “he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour . . .” and that was the end of the vision. When Coleridge went back to his writing table, the rest of the poem “had passed away,” he says, “like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast.”

Faulkner did not dream his stories (nor did Coleridge dream his poems, except for “Kubla Khan”). We shall never know how the stories first occurred to Faulkner, though it may be that the germ of more than one was the sort of “mental picture” that he mentioned as the beginning of *The Sound and the Fury*. It seems more certain, however, that the stories were consciously elaborated and revised in his mind, so that sometimes the process of setting them down was as simple as copying out a manuscript. At such times he could be interrupted by persons on business without damage to the text. The periods of solitude he required were the moments or hours when his imagination was at work.

He stood at his threshold, as it were, to bar them out. He took measures

against them, of which the simplest was not reading their letters, while in cases of threatened incursion he might flee to a cabin in the woods. Other measures failing, he was known to retreat behind an impenetrable wall of drunkenness.

The intruders he feared were not the plain people of the town and countryside: hunters, carpenters, small farmers, black or white tenants, bootleggers, and deputy sheriffs; these offered no menace to his kingdom, and indeed they served to enrich its resources by the stories they told around campfires or sitting on the gallery of a crossroads store. There were many other people he was glad to see, for it is to be noted that one of his aims—besides that of protecting his imagined world—was living in the real world as a private person closely attached to family and friends. But that sort of private and professional life, with days to be spent alone, could be preserved only by building walls against the world.

The strangers he feared were the infiltrators who tried to climb over the walls—the correspondents, interviewers, aspiring novelists, literary ladies, and society people (unless they knew a lot about horses) generally speaking, all those who were trying to use him or to make him over in their images. Sometimes he was rude to the wrong persons; I think of Ehrenburg, whom he would have found stimulating if they could have established communication, and there were many others. But the gifted people he snubbed might remember that for all their good intentions, the part they might have played in Faulkner's days was that of persons from Porlock.

And Faulkner himself: did he find the right answers to his problems in life and in the continued production of his works? There are no completely right answers. It had better be said that his later books, in general, had not the freshness and power of the early ones. That is the common fate of imaginative writers (except for a few poets); some original force goes out of them. The books they write after the age of fifty most often lose in genius what they may possibly gain in talent.

Faulkner lost substantially less than others. Though none of his later books was on a level with *The Sound and the Fury* or *Go Down, Moses*, none of them made concessions to other people's tastes. One hears a person speaking in each of them, not an institution, and a person with reserves of power who may surprise us on any page. Some of Faulkner's best writing is in passages of *Requiem for a Nun*, and *Intruder in the Dust*, and especially—almost at the end—in the Mink Snopes chapters of *The Mansion*. In retrospect I should judge that he solved the problem of keeping alive his genius better than any other American novelist of our century.

SR-ANISFIELD-WOLF AWARDS

Books that Change Men's Minds

By JAMES F. FIXX

HOW MANY of the books published each year in the United States make a significant contribution toward improving men's relationships with each other? No one knows the exact number, of course, nor can anyone even begin to guess the myriad ways in which a book can penetrate and change a reader's mind. By at least one standard, however, there is evidence that an increasing number of authors are finding themselves moved to write about what is sometimes referred to as inter-group relations.

That standard is the SR-Anisfield-Wolf Awards, which are presented each year to books that have made a distinguished contribution to such relationships. The awards have seemed in recent years to be a gauge to something of a literary change for the simple reason that the awards committee—headed by anthropologist Ashley Montagu—has found the task of narrowing down its choices increasingly difficult. Customarily two books are selected as winners. In one recent year, however, the committee finally felt obliged to throw up its hands and name three winners ("In view of their quality," wrote Professor Montagu at the time, "the committee found it impossible to decide otherwise"). This year's judging, just completed, proved to be an even more agonizing experience, and the results show it: There are four winners.

Those that came out on top are *Manchild in the Promised Land*, by Claude Brown (Macmillan, \$5.95); *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Grove Press, \$7.50); *Your Heredity and Environment*, by Amram Scheinfeld (Lippincott, \$12.50); and *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought*, by H. C. Baldry (Cambridge, \$7.50).

Each winning author receives a \$750 award. The awards, first presented in 1935, were provided by the late Mrs. Edith Anisfield-Wolf in memory of her father and her husband.

What is the special quality in each of the 1966 winners that moved the judges to give it an award?

Manchild in the Promised Land is the autobiography of a nineteen-year-old Negro who was born in Harlem and bred in its street gangs and its squalor—"crowded into a dirty, stinky, uncared-

for closet-size section of a great city." Young Claude Brown was quick to learn the ways of the street. By the time he was nine he was a member of the Buccaneers, a streetfighting gang, and of the Forty Thieves, the Buccaneers' elite stealing arm. At eleven he was sent to a school for emotionally disturbed and deprived boys where he stayed for two years. Released, he soon found himself in reform school for the first of three such commitments. He was still only fourteen.

WITHIN the next few years, however, something startling happened to Claude Brown, and he ultimately graduated from Howard University and at last report, a few months ago, was making plans to enter law school. It is the story of the struggle to create for himself a decent life, always against the vast and vastly menacing odds of his Harlem background, that provides much of the stark drama in *Manchild in the Promised Land*. And that drama is wondrously and often movingly heightened by a style that is swift, sure, and unmistakably a reflection of the life it describes. A sample: "Mama's favorite question was, 'Boy, why you so bad?' I tried many times to explain to Mama that I wasn't 'so bad.' I tried to make her understand that it was trying to be good that generally got me into trouble. I remember telling her I played hooky to avoid getting into trouble in school... When I stole things, it was only to save the family money and avoid arguments or scoldings whenever I asked for money." The book is full of such insights.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X, written with the assistance of veteran magazine writer Alex Haley, is the posthumously published story of a Negro leader who once called himself "the angriest black man in America." A leader of the Black Muslims, Malcolm X was ultimately slain by assassins in a Harlem ballroom, but before his death he was able to complete this graphic piece of testimony to what it means to grow up as a Negro in America. "The American white man," he says in discussing the Black Muslim cause, "has so thoroughly brainwashed the black man to see himself as only a domestic 'civil rights' problem that it will probably take longer than I live before the Negro sees that the struggle of the American black