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Author

Miller, Ryder W.

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Review: Faulkner and the Ecology of the South

Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie (Eds.)

Reviewed by [Ryder W. Miller](#)
San Francisco, USA

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Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie (Eds.). *Faulkner and the Ecology of the South*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. 173 pp. ISBN: 1-57806-782-0. \$45.00 (trade cloth). Alkaline paper.

From the 30th Annual Mississippi University Faulkner Conference (2003): Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, the editors have collected a group of papers focusing on the social ecology of William Faulkner's (1897-1962) oeuvre. Explored in ten essays is much of Faulkner's canon, which mostly centered on the documentaries depiction of the imagined southern Yoknapatawpha County and its residents. The authors explore Faulkner's literary depiction of nature, a depiction that includes people in its ecological web. Ecology here is not solely about natural sciences or preservation, but is more broadly defined to include civilization and its denizens.

In the introduction Joseph Urgo writes: "By ecology we do not exclude the natural world, though what we have in mind is more akin to the idea of a human ecology, the interaction of humans with their environment--made and found, communities as well as habitats." (p. ix) This use of the word *ecology* expands upon the strict definition of Nature, which is sometimes assumed to exclude human culture.

Faulkner, who died before Earth Day, never used the term "ecology," and by *environment* he meant social ecology: "human beings in conflict with their nature, their character, their souls, with others, or with their environment." Nature was sometimes part of his exploration of place, and one can find passages in which characters interact with and appreciate the natural world.

As the contributors contend, humankind often plays a negative role in the ecology of Yoknapatawpha County. They bring with them a selfish genetic drive, which has caused devastation to land, community, civilization, and psyche. The drive to commit violence to others or the environment is equated with an ecological Darwinian imperative.

Here one finds the rationale behind the religious right's interest in contesting Darwinism, which in Yoknapatawpha County justifies and explains violence, crime, selfishness, and competition. Faulkner described the Snopes of his famous Snopes family trilogy (*Hamlet, The Town, The Mansion*): "like an influx of snakes or varmints from the woods." Religious teachings offer a

different explanation for "fanged and clawed" interactions, and support the belief in a solution--faith and morals--even if such a solution seems disingenuous.

Faulkner's views of and concerns for the natural world are diverse, expressed in his many literary creations and characters. The contributors point out that these views can be contradictory. Faulkner wrote stories in which there were still primeval forests in southeastern America. He also describes the overpowering force of the river, the "Old Man," in a story of the same name. The land, which has been damaged, has its turn for retribution. Faulkner biographer Jay Parini referred to Faulkner as Anteaos, after the mythological figure that derived his strength from contact with the earth. Faulkner liked the farm and the forest, but was more often drawn inside and to others. As the contributors show, Faulkner supplied us with a fascinating contradictory mega-text from which a wide range of readers can draw inspiration. The assembled essays provide insights that better enable the reader to appreciate Faulkner's complex body of work.

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Ryder W. Miller <dolphin1965@hotmail.com> is a freelance environmental and science reporter who has been published in Sierra Magazine, California Coast & Ocean, California Wild, and Hydrosphere.