

Chapter 15

Mississippi's Literary Tradition

Chapter Preview

PEOPLE

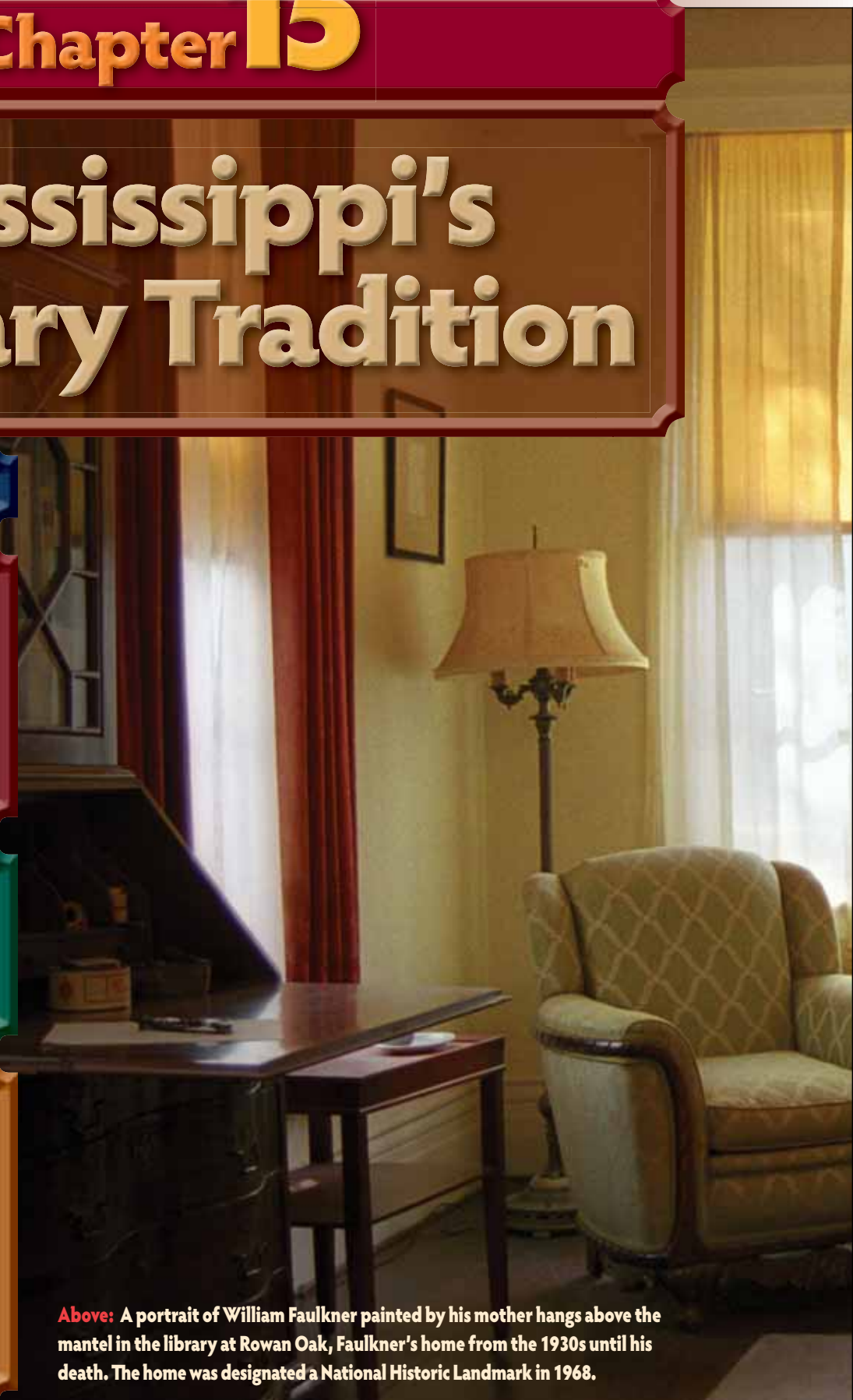
Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, John Grisham, Natasha Trethewey, Turner Catledge, Lerone Bennett Jr., Hodding Carter II, William Raspberry, Charles Overby, Craig Claiborne, Shelby Foote, David Donald, Winthrop Jordan

PLACES

Clinton, Hazlehurst, Carrollton, Glen Allan, Macon, Ocean Springs, Como, Okolona, Saltillo, Goodman, Southaven

TERMS

Nobel Prize in Literature, Pulitzer Prize, Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Harlem Renaissance, autobiography, writer-in-residence, National Book Award, Southern Renaissance, columnist, press secretary, Overby Center for Southern Journalism and Politics, Silver M Award



Above: A portrait of William Faulkner painted by his mother hangs above the mantel in the library at Rowan Oak, Faulkner's home from the 1930s until his death. The home was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1968.



Mississippi's literary tradition is a marvel in the world of letters and is the subject of numerous studies. The state's literary achievements have emerged from its rich cultural and racial diversity. The tradition of oral narratives, legends, and storytelling are an integral part of Mississippi's history. According to a Choctaw legend, the Choctaw Chieftain Pushmataha explained his birth: "I had no father, no mother . . . the winds howled, the rain fell, the thunder roared, and the lightning flashed; a pine tree was shivered and from its splinters Pushmataha stepped forth with his rifle on his shoulder." Mildred D. Taylor's books are literary enrichments of the stories she heard as a child.

Mississippi writers are also influenced by a strong sense of place. Eudora Welty explained that "Mississippi is rich in resources for the writer . . . for it is forever astir, changing, reflecting, like the mind of man itself." Literary scholars and historians also point to the state's preoccupation with the past, to conflict and change, and to the burden of southern history. William Faulkner said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." He also said that Mississippians do not study the past, they absorb it.

Mississippi writers have won so many awards that it is difficult to keep up with them. Because we cannot study all of Mississippi's writers, we will focus on our state's major literary figures.

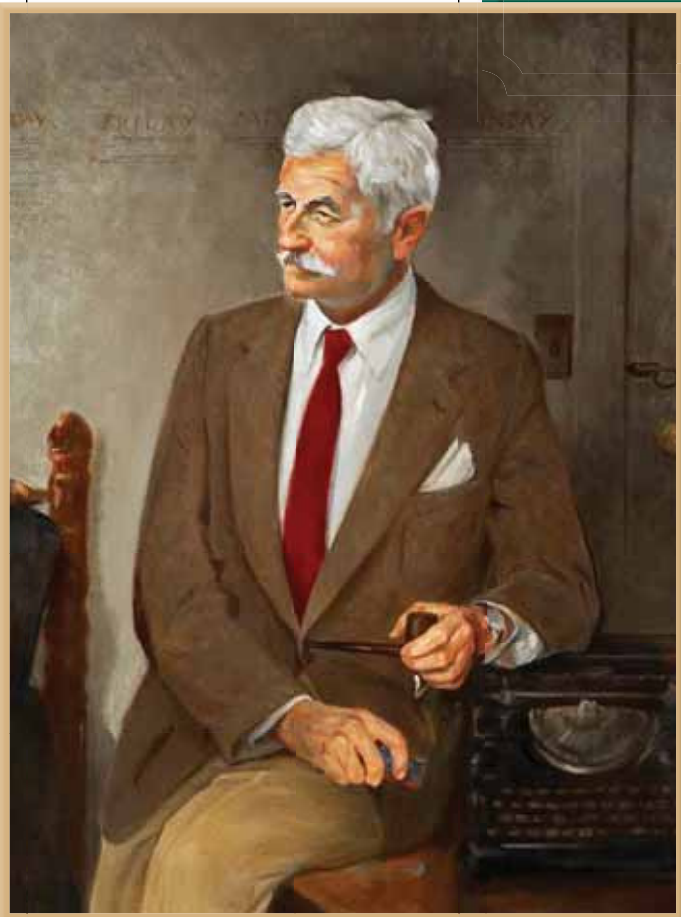
Section 1

Mississippi Writers

Below: William Faulkner, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature and two Pulitzer Prizes, is the greatest writer that Mississippi has produced, and one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. The great southern writer Flannery O'Connor once said of his work, "Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down."

As you read, look for

- the lives and works of Mississippi's most famous writers: William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams;
- the variety of contributions to the world of literature made by Mississippi's other major writers;
- terms: Nobel Prize in Literature, Pulitzer Prize, Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Harlem Renaissance, autobiography, writer-in-residence, National Book Award, Southern Renaissance.



Mississippi's most famous and widely acclaimed writers are William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams. They are literary giants, but they have not stifled creative writing in Mississippi. They have in fact inspired another wave of writers. In this chapter, we will examine the lives and works of some of those writers. On the crest of that second wave are two writers who are featured at the end of this chapter, John Grisham and Natasha Trethewey. John Grisham is an established writer who has published many best sellers in the last twenty years. Natasha Trethewey, a gifted poet, is a rising star in American literature. There are so many outstanding Mississippi writers that we cannot even name them all. The following writers are among Mississippi's prominent authors.

William Faulkner (1897-1962)

William Faulkner grew up in Oxford, where his father was business manager at The University of Mississippi for several years. Most of Faulkner's

novels and short stories take place in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Even though these people and places were created by this literary genius, they bear striking resemblance to real people in real towns, not only in Mississippi but around the world. Faulkner said, “To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi.”

The basic themes in Faulkner’s novels are not local but universal. They include honor and greed, human dignity and *depravity* (corruption), the dissolution of families, class distinction and racial prejudice, love, hate, jealousy, and violence. These are mankind’s deepest and innermost anxieties. Someone once asked Faulkner what he wrote about, and he said he wrote about the human heart in conflict with itself. The characters in his novels are Mississippians, but the struggles they face are shared by men and women everywhere. His writings have been translated into many languages, and he is widely read in Europe and Asia.

William Faulkner won a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949. The **Nobel Prize in Literature** is a prestigious award made by the Swedish Academy to a literary figure anywhere in the world. He also won a Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 1955 for *A Fable* and in 1963 for *The Reivers*. The **Pulitzer Prize** is awarded to Americans in categories relating to newspaper journalism, arts, and letters and fiction. Among Faulkner’s most famous novels are *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *The Reivers* (1962).

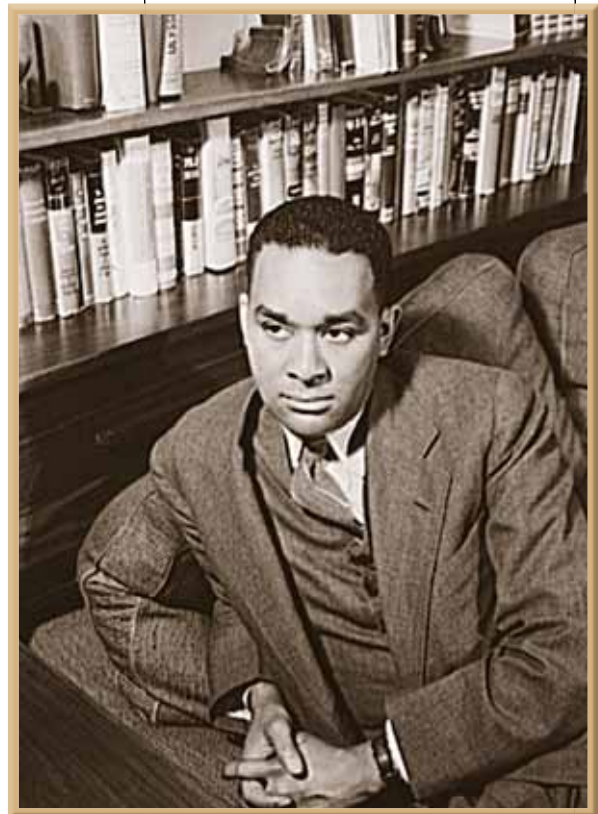
Richard Wright (1908-1960)

Considered by some literary critics as America’s major African American writer, Richard Wright was born a child of sharecroppers in Adams County, near Natchez. After his parents separated when he was five years old, Wright lived with various relatives in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee. In 1927, Wright joined the Great Migration and moved to Chicago to escape the racism and degradation in his native South. Throughout his youth, Wright developed an intense interest in literature and read most of America’s major authors. Wright’s first novel, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, was published in 1938. The following year he received a Guggenheim Fellowship that made it possible for him to write *Native Son* (1940), which was an immediate success. It was a Book-of-the-Month selection and was translated into six languages. In 1945, Wright published an autobiographical novel titled *Black Boy*.

The basic theme in Wright’s early novels is the black man’s struggle to maintain dignity in a white man’s world. Some critics describe Wright as an angry and bitter man because of the social and legal injustices blacks experienced in America. Disenchanted with his native country, Wright and his family moved to France in 1946, where he continued to write. None of his later works, however, equaled the quality and popularity of his earlier novels.

Something Extra!

Guggenheim Fellowships are grants to scholars, scientists, or writers and other artists who are “advanced professionals” in their fields. They receive funding for between six to twelve months so they can concentrate on their scientific or creative endeavor.



Above: Richard Wright, from Adams County, wrote his most famous novel, *Native Son*, while on a Guggenheim Fellowship. It was published in 1940.



Eudora Welty (1909-2001)

Mississippi's distinguished woman of letters, Eudora Welty, was born in Jackson. Welty spent most of her life in Mississippi, which is the setting for most of her novels and short stories. Unlike Faulkner's Mississippi, which is "a place of violent men and desperate struggle," Welty's Mississippi is "a tidy, protected little world" where people live their lives in relative tranquility. This does not mean that Welty did not deal with the struggles and conflicts of the human heart. It means that Welty dealt with them in a different way. Her characters are set in more

serene circumstances, and they respond to the human struggle in a more gentle and less desperate way. But, like Faulkner, Welty places great emphasis upon place and family in her novels and short stories.

Welty was a popular lecturer and held several visiting professorships at major universities in America and England. In addition to numerous other awards for her fiction, Welty received a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for her novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*.



Top: Besides being one of Mississippi's greatest writers, Eudora Welty was also a gifted photographer. **Above:** Now maintained by the Department of Archives and History, this house in Jackson was Eudora Welty's home from her teens until her death in 2001.

Something Extra!

Tennessee Williams's real name was Thomas Lanier Williams. "Tennessee" was a college nickname that stuck with him for the rest of his life.

Tennessee Williams (1910-1983)

One of America's most successful playwrights, Tennessee Williams, was born in Columbus and spent much of his childhood visiting his grandparents in Clarksdale. Many of his most successful plays have Mississippi or southern settings, and his characters speak a dialect and have manners that clearly reflect the Mississippi influence of his early youth.

A central theme in many of Williams's plays is the deceit and greed of mankind and the certainty of *retribution* (payback) for those weaknesses. Among his most successful Broadway hits are *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). Williams won both the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for two of his plays—*A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1948 and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955.

Other Major Writers

It is difficult to determine who should be included on a list of Mississippi's other major writers. Literature is a matter of taste and preference. The following people would be included on almost anyone's list of Mississippi writers. These biographical sketches are arranged alphabetically and are brief so more writers can be included on the list.



Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tennessee Williams (right) spent his early years in this house in Columbus (above).





Something Extra!

Because of its more than sixty-four published authors, Greenville has been called the "Athens of the Delta."



Margaret Walker Alexander (1915-1998)

This internationally renowned author spent most of her academic career at Jackson State University. She received the Yale Younger Poets prize, a Ford Fellowship, and a Houghton Mifflin Fellowship. She won wide acclaim for her book of poems, *For My People* (1942). Margaret Walker Alexander is best known for her novel, *Jubilee* (1966), the story of her great-grandmother, and for her book of essays, *On Being Female, Black, and Free* (1997). One of her major contributions to literary scholarship is her book, *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man, a Critical Look at His Work* (1988). In 1968, at Jackson State University, she founded the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People. In 1989, the institute was renamed the **Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center**.

William Attaway (1911-1986)

The Delta town of Greenville has produced a number of prominent writers and editors. William Attaway was one of those writers. Attaway was also a major figure in the **Harlem Renaissance** (a period of prolific writing, art, and music by African Americans in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s).

His novels, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (1939) and *Blood on the Forge* (1941), deal with the tribulations of segregation in the early twentieth century and the Great Migration of African Americans from the South.

Larry Brown (1951-2004)

Larry Brown was born in Oxford and grew up on the family farm in Lafayette County. His major works include the novels *Dirty Work* (1989); *Joe* (1991); *Father and Son* (1996), which won the Southern Book Award; and *Faye* (2000). He also wrote *On Fire* (1994), an account of his brief career as a fireman, and two volumes of short stories, *Facing the Music* (1988) and *Big Bad Love* (1990).

David Cohn (1896-1960)

David Cohn, one of the Greenville writers, wrote books on a wide range of topics: the influence of the automobile on American society; the technological revolution in American agriculture; and the mail-order sales technique of Sears, Roebuck and Co. He also wrote a humorous and perceptive account of life in the Delta titled *Where I Was Born and Raised* (1948). At the time of his death, Cohn left a seven-hundred-page **autobiography** (the life story of a person written by himself or herself), which has not been published.

Ellen Douglas

This seventh-generation Mississippian was writing poetry and sketches at the age of nine. Ellen Douglas was born in Natchez but moved to Greenville after her marriage to Kenneth Haxton Jr. Her novel, *A Family's Affairs*

Something Extra!

As a child, Richard Ford (right) lived across the street from Eudora Welty and went to the elementary school she had attended. He even had some of her same teachers, though they were thirty-five years apart in age.

(1961), won the Houghton Mifflin Award and was listed as one of the five best novels in 1961 by *The New York Times*. Among her other works are *Black Cloud, White Cloud* (1963); *Apostles of Light* (1973); *The Rock Cried Out* (1979); *A Long Night* (1986); and the nonfiction books, *Truth: Four Stories I Am Finally Old Enough to Tell* (1998) and *Witnessing* (2004).

Richard Ford

A native of Jackson, Richard Ford attended Michigan State University and the University of California, and claims that he is not a southern writer. Among his works are *A Piece of My Heart* (1987); *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981); *The Sportswriter* (1986); *Rock Springs* (1987); and *Wildlife* (1990), a collection of short fiction. Ford won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for *Independence Day*, a sequel to *The Sportswriter*. In 2012, he published *Canada*, another best seller.

Barry Hannah (1942-2010)

Barry Hannah was one of Mississippi's most beloved writers. He grew up in Clinton and attended the creative writing program at the University of Arkansas. Hannah was catapulted into fame for his first book, *Geronimo Rex* (1972), which won the William Faulkner Prize. Some critics think it is his finest work. Among his other books are *Night-Watchmen* (1973), *Ray* (1980), *The Tennis Handsome* (1983), *Hey Jack!* (1987), *Boomerang* (1989), *Never Die* (1991), *Men Without Ties* (1995), *High Lonesome* (1996), and *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001). His collections of short fiction include *Airships* (1978), *Captain Maximus*



Above: Ellen Douglas is the pen name of Josephine Ayres Haxton. Opposite page, above: Margaret Walker Alexander taught for many years at Jackson State University. Opposite page, below: Greenville novelist William Attaway.



Top: Barry Hannah won the William Faulkner Prize with his first book.

Above: Playwright Beth Henley is best known for *Crimes of the Heart*.



(1985), and *Bats Out of Hell* (1993). He was **writer-in-residence** (a prominent writer who is a faculty member at a college or university and teaches writing) at The University of Mississippi when he died.

Beth Henley

Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1978) is a play about three awkward and ill-at-ease sisters in Hazlehurst. The play was a remarkable success and won several awards, including the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize, both in 1981. Her two-act play, *The Miss Firecracker Contest* (1985), was also a huge success. Both plays were made into popular movies. Among her other works are *Impossible Marriage*, which premiered in New York in 1998; *Family Week* (2000); and *Ridiculous Fraud* (2006).

Greg Iles

Best known for his thrillers, which have won rave reviews, Greg Iles was born in Germany at the height of the Cold War when his father was stationed at the American Embassy. Iles graduated from The University of Mississippi in 1983 and published *Spandau Phoenix* in 1993.

His second novel, *Black Cross*, appeared two years later. Since then, Iles has published several novels in rapid succession. Among his works are *24 Hours* (2000), which was made into a movie called *Trapped* in 2002; *The Footprints of God: A Novel* (2003); *Turning Angel* (2005); and *The Devil's Punchbowl* (2009).

Anne Moody and Donna Tartt

Anne Moody and Donna Tartt are famous Mississippi writers. They are not known for a large volume of work, but for the one book each one wrote that was praised by critics as an outstanding work of literature.

Anne Moody won fame and acclaim for her autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968). *Coming of Age* is a compelling story of a young black woman, a child of sharecroppers, growing up in rural Mississippi during the civil rights movement. Moody became an active member of the NAACP, CORE, and SNCC. Her autobiography was required reading in colleges all across the country. *Coming of Age in Mississippi* won the Brotherhood Award from the National Council of Christians and Jews, the Best Book of the Year Award from the National Library Association, and the International

PEN/Faulkner Award. Anne Moody eventually moved to New York City.

Donna Tartt "took the literary world by storm in 1992" when she published *The Secret History*, a story of murder and intrigue at a small fictional Vermont college. Donna Tartt wrote her first poem at five years of age and

published her first sonnet in a literary review at thirteen. At Ole Miss, she took Barry Hannah's graduate course in short stories in her freshman year. She began writing *The Secret History* during her sophomore year at Bennington College in Vermont. The initial printing of *The Secret History* was 750,000 copies, a remarkable number for a first novel. Since her fabulous debut, Donna Tartt has written only one other book, *The Little Friend* (2002).

Willie Morris (1934-1999)

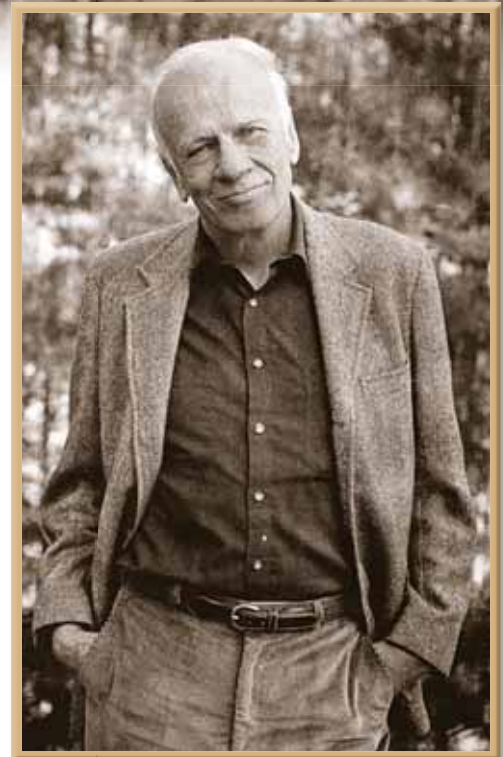
When Willie Morris graduated from Yazoo City High School, his father advised him to leave Mississippi to seek greener pastures and broaden his horizons. Willie Morris went to the University of Texas and edited the *Daily Texan*, the largest student newspaper in America. After graduating, he moved to New York City and soon became the youngest editor of *Harper's*, one of America's oldest and most prestigious magazines. Morris chronicled these early years of his life in *North Toward Home* (1967), a popular memoir and an American classic. In 1980, he came back home as writer-in-residence at The University of Mississippi. He wrote about his coming home in the book *Homecomings*, which was illustrated by William Dunlap, a celebrated Mississippi artist. Among Morris's many popular books are *Yazoo: Integration in a Deep-Southern Town* (1971); *Terrains of the Heart* (1981); *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* (1983); *Faulkner's Mississippi* (1990); *New York Days* (1993); *My Dog Skip* (1995), which was made into a popular movie; and *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers* (1999).

Walker Percy (1916-1990)

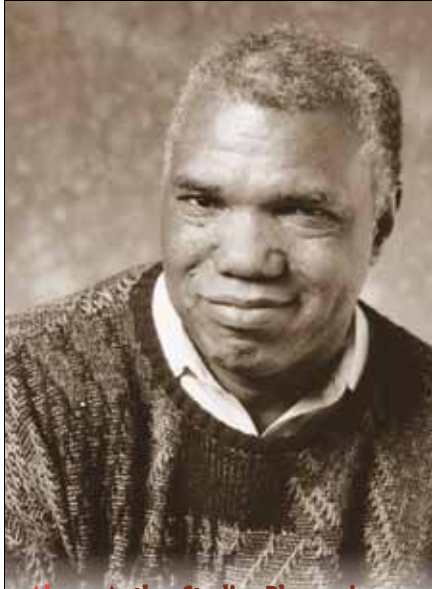
Although born in Alabama, Walker Percy moved to Greenville after his parents died. He grew up in the home of his cousin, William Alexander Percy. Walker Percy earned a medical degree, but bad health prevented his practice of medicine and he became a successful and highly acclaimed writer. In 1962, Percy received a National Book Award for his novel, *The Moviegoer*. The **National Book Award** is an award chosen by independent panels of five writers in four categories: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and young people's literature. Walker Percy also wrote *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Message in the Bottle* (1975), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987).

William Alexander Percy (1885-1942)

This distinguished Greenville writer is best known for his classic autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941). William Alexander Percy chronicled life



When his parents died, Walker Percy (above) moved to Greenville, where he lived with his cousin, the writer and poet William Alexander Percy (top).



Above: Author Sterling Plump is best known for his poetry. Below: Elizabeth Spencer was honored with a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1953. Opposite page, above: Entrepreneur Clifton Taulbert is also a respected author and lecturer.

in the Mississippi Delta in the 1920s and wrote of his father's resistance to the racial violence of the Ku Klux Klan. (His father was LeRoy Percy, the Delta planter and politician we first learned about in Chapter 8.) William Alexander Percy also published several volumes of poetry, including *Sappho in Levkas*, and *Other Poems* (1915) and *In April Once* (1920).

Something Extra!

In 2001, Sterling Plump hit a million dollar jackpot in the Illinois lottery.

Sterling Plump

As a small boy, Sterling Plump worked in the cotton fields near Clinton with his grandparents. When he was fifteen years old, he moved to Jackson, where he completed his high school education. He was valedictorian of his class in 1960. After two years in the U.S. Army, Plump enrolled at Roosevelt University and graduated in 1968. Although he is best known as a poet, Plump has written several books, including *Portable Soul* (1969); *Half Black, Half Blacker* (1970); *Clinton* (1976); *The Mojo Hands Call, I Must Go* (1982); *Blues: The Story Always Untold* (1989); *Harriet Tubman* (1996); *Ornate With Smoke* (1997); and *Paul Robeson* (1998).



Elizabeth Spencer

Born in Carrollton and educated at Belhaven College and Vanderbilt University, Elizabeth Spencer published her first major novel when she was twenty-seven years old. *Fire in the Morning* (1948) was listed in the book review section of *The New York Times* as one of the three best novels of 1948. While serving on the faculty at The University of Mississippi, Spencer published *This Crooked Way* in 1952. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1953 and spent two years in Italy researching her novel, *The Light in the Piazza* (1960). Her novel titled *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956) won the Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters (now called the American Academy of Arts and Letters).

Kathryn Stockett

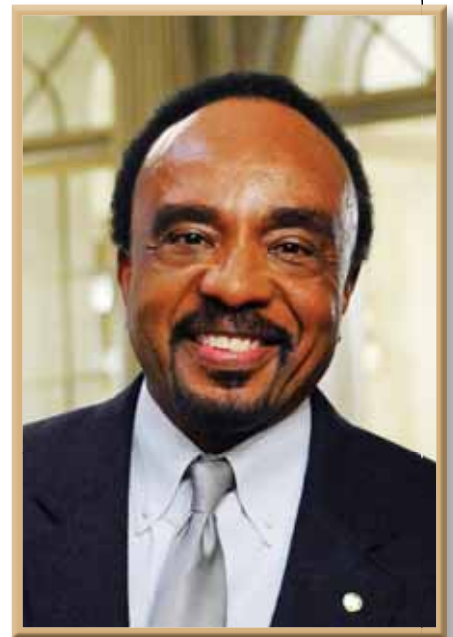
Seldom in the history of American literature has a first book achieved so much acclaim as Kathryn Stockett's 2009 novel *The Help*—or, it might be added, sold 3 million copies. The setting is Jackson during the civil rights movement. The major characters are two African American maids and a young white woman who recently graduated from Ole Miss. *The Help* is a significant book, and Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks Studio released a film version of the book in 2011. Much of the filming took place in several Delta towns.

James Street (1903-1954)

James Street's novel *Tap Roots* (1942) was about the legendary "Free State of Jones" and was made into a popular movie. In his later years, Street wrote two religious novels, *The Gauntlet* (1945) and *The High Calling* (1951).

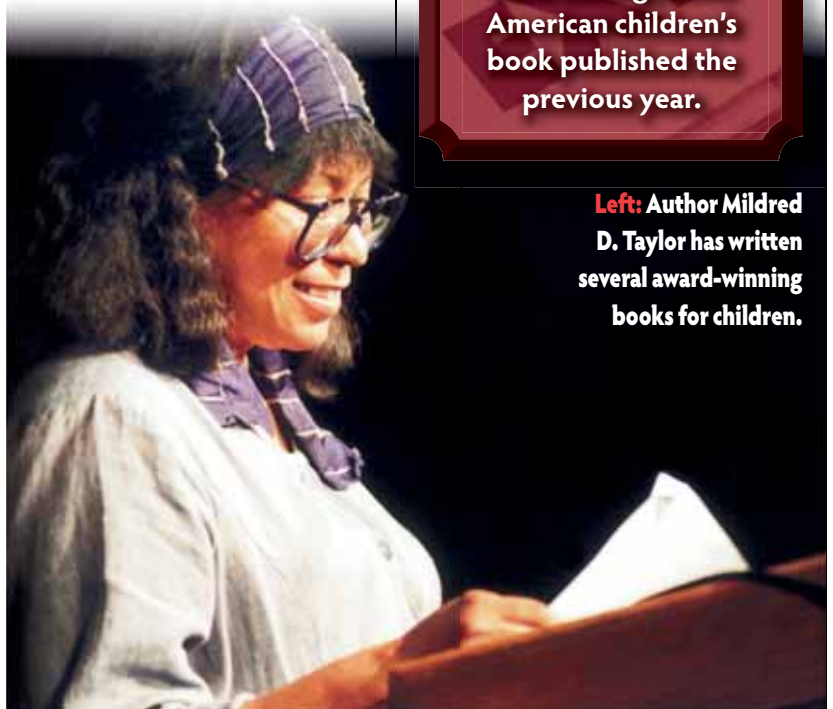
Clifton Taulbert

A successful author, lecturer, and entrepreneur, Clifton Taulbert came of age during the early days of the civil rights movement in Glen Allan, a small community in the Mississippi Delta. His first book, *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* (1989), is a compelling account of his childhood. Rather than focusing on the barriers between blacks and whites, Taulbert writes about the bonds that held his extended family together during those days of conflict and change. His second book, *The Last Train North* (1992), chronicles his decision to leave Mississippi and join the U.S. Air Force. Among Taulbert's other works are *Watching Our Crops Come In* (1997), *Eight Habits of the Heart: The Timeless Values That Build Strong Communities* (1997), *The Journey Home: A Father's Gift to His Son* (2002), and three children's books. Taulbert was awarded the 27th annual NAACP Image Award for Literature and the Mississippi Arts and Letters Award for Nonfiction. *Time* magazine named Taulbert one of America's outstanding entrepreneurs.



Mildred D. Taylor

When Mildred D. Taylor was three months old, her family joined the Great Migration and moved to Ohio. In the early years of her childhood, her father often brought the family back to visit their relatives in Mississippi. During those visits, storytelling was a regular feature of Mildred Taylor's homecoming. The stories she heard about the dignity and survival of her people living in a hostile and segregated society left a lasting impression on Taylor. The characters and events in all of her novels are drawn largely from her memory of those family stories. Her first novel, *Song of the Trees* (1975), won the Council on Interracial Books for Children Award. Her second novel, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), won the Newbery Award from the American Library Association and was made into a popular motion picture. She has written several other widely read novels about the fictional Logan family.



Something Extra!

The Newbery Medal is awarded each year by the American Library Association for the most distinguished American children's book published the previous year.

Left: Author Mildred D. Taylor has written several award-winning books for children.

Jesmyn Ward

One of Mississippi's most brilliant and promising young writers is Jesmyn Ward, who grew up in DeLisle, a small town on the Gulf Coast. After



receiving degrees from Stanford University and the University of Michigan, she began her teaching career at the University of New Orleans. Her family, like many others, was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

After publishing her first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds*, in 2008, Ward was widely acclaimed as “a fresh new voice in American literature.” During the 2010-2011 academic year, Ward was the John and Renee Grisham Writer-in-Residence at The University of Mississippi. In 2011, she published her second novel, *Salvage the Bones*, a story of travail and survival in the aftermath of Hurricane

Katrina. One critic wrote that the novel “has the aura of a classic about it.” This highly praised novel won the prestigious 2011 National Book Award.

Ida B. Wells (1862-1931)

A journalist, teacher, and social activist, Ida B. Wells was a pioneer in the civil rights and women’s suffrage movements. She was born into slavery in Holly Springs in 1862. After her emancipation, she devoted her life to the elevation of blacks and women to full citizenship. She was active in the Niagara Movement that evolved into the NAACP. The story of her life is told in *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (1970), which was edited by her daughter.

Ben Ames Williams (1889-1953)

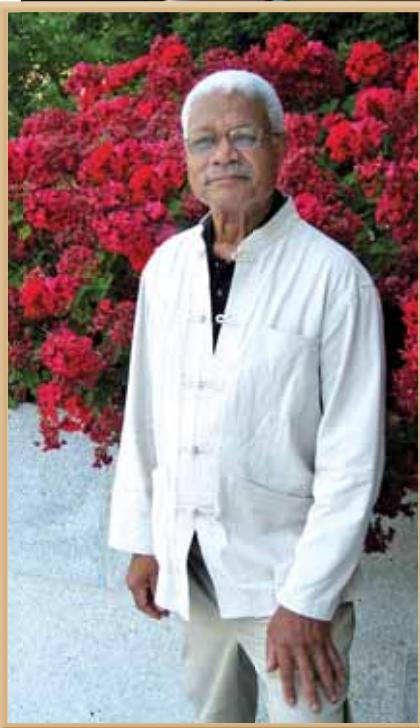
Born in Macon, Ben Ames Williams wrote his first major novel, *All the Brothers Were Valiant* (1919), about a seafaring family of New England. It became a major motion picture. In later years, he wrote several Civil War novels. His *House Divided* (1947) ranks with Stark Young’s *So Red the Rose* (1934) and Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1936) as America’s best and most popular Civil War novels.

Al Young

Born in Ocean Springs, Al Young majored in Spanish at the University of California. His interest in language and music is evident in his writing, which includes fiction, poetry, and films. Among his major

Something Extra!

From 2005 to 2008, Al Young was the Poet Laureate of California. The governor appointed him to spread the art of poetry across the state and inspire a new generation of poets.



Top: Jesmyn Ward from DeLisle won acclaim for her first novel and a National Book Award for her second.

Above: Al Young was born in Ocean Springs in 1939. In addition to poetry and fiction, he has written several musical memoirs and film scripts.

works are the novels *Who Is Angelina?* (1975), *Sitting Pretty* (1976), *Ask Me Now* (1980), and *Seduction by Light* (1992). His collections of poems include *Dancing* (1969), *The Song Turning Back Into Itself* (1971), *Geography of the Near Past* (1976), *The Blues Don't Change* (1982), and *Heaven* (1988). Young has been writer-in-residence at the University of Michigan and the University of Arkansas.

Stark Young (1881-1963)

The sudden appearance of numerous southern writers in the 1920s and 1930s is called the **Southern Renaissance**. Stark Young of Como is considered one of the most important of those writers. *So Red the Rose*, which Young published in 1934, is considered—along with *Gone With the Wind* and *House Divided*—one of the best Civil War novels in American fiction. For many years, Stark Young was also one of America's foremost literary critics. At various times during his long career, he wrote for *Theatre Arts Monthly*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Times*.

More about Mississippi Writers

To learn more about Mississippi's literary tradition, there are two websites that you can visit for additional information. The Mississippi Writers Page, produced by The University of Mississippi at www.olemiss.edu/mwp, and the Mississippi Writers and Musicians Project, produced by Starkville High School at www.shs.starkville.k12.ms.us/mswm, feature photographs and articles on many of the state's writers and musicians who are not covered in this textbook. For biographical sketches of famous Mississippians in a wide variety of endeavors, you can consult Neil White, (ed.), *Mississippians* (2010).



Above: Novelist and critic Stark Young of Como was one of the leading writers of the Southern Renaissance. His novel *So Red the Rose* ranks among the best Civil War novels ever written.

Reviewing the Section

1. Define in sentence form: Nobel Prize in Literature, autobiography, Southern Renaissance.
2. Where do most of William Faulkner's novels and short stories take place?
3. Which of the writers in this section have an association with Greenville?

Something Extra!

Renascence is another way of spelling *Renaissance*, which means a rebirth or revival.

Section 2

Journalists and Historians

Below: Turner Catledge of Choctaw County served as editor of the nation's premier newspaper, *The New York Times*, from 1943 to 1970. **Opposite page, above:** Lerone Bennett Jr. was the senior editor of *Ebony* magazine for almost thirty years. **Opposite page, below:** Charles Overby became editor of *The Clarion-Ledger* in 1982.



As you read, look for

- the influence of Mississippi's journalists, both in our state and throughout the country;
- the contributions of Mississippi's historians;
- terms: **columnist, press secretary, Overby Center for Southern Journalism and Politics, Silver M Award.**

In addition to Mississippi's tradition of creative writing, the state has also produced many noteworthy journalists and historians. And, like our study of famous writers, we can only consider a few of Mississippi's renowned journalists and historians.

Journalists

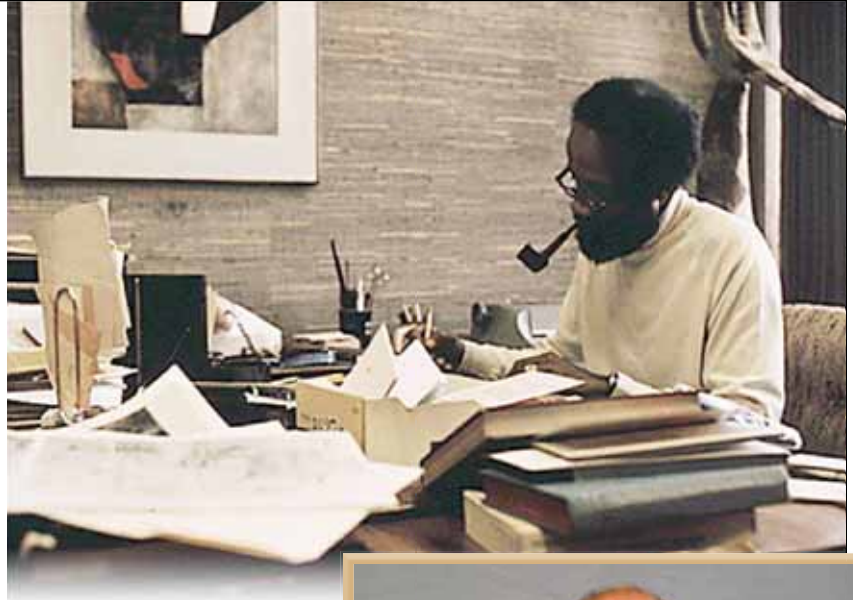
Since Andrew Marschalk brought the first printing press to Mississippi in 1798 and edited several newspapers during the territorial period, journalism has been a powerful influence in Mississippi society and politics. Until the beginning of radio transmission in the 1920s, newspapers were virtually the only source of news and information available to the American people.

Turner Catledge (1901-1983)

Mississippi's most prestigious journalist was Turner Catledge, the editor of *The New York Times*. A native of Choctaw County and a graduate of Mississippi State University, Catledge began his career in journalism as a fourteen-year-old part-time printer at the *Neshoba Democrat* in Philadelphia. Catledge later became editor of the *Tunica Times*, where he wrote several editorials condemning the Ku Klux Klan. Angered by those editorials, the Klan set fire to the newspaper's building. After serving briefly as editor of the *Tupelo Journal*, Catledge joined the staff at *The New York Times* in 1929. In 1943, Catledge was promoted to editor of one of the world's great newspapers. A year after he retired in 1970, Catledge published a popular autobiography, *My Life and The Times* (1971).

Lerone Bennett Jr.

Lerone Bennett Jr., one of Mississippi's most prominent black writers, was born in Clarksdale in 1928. Bennett is a journalist, historian, and essayist. He is best known as editor of *Ebony* magazine, where he was senior editor from 1958 to 1987. Among his major works are *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America* (1962), *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1964), and *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (2007).



Hodding Carter II (1907-1972)

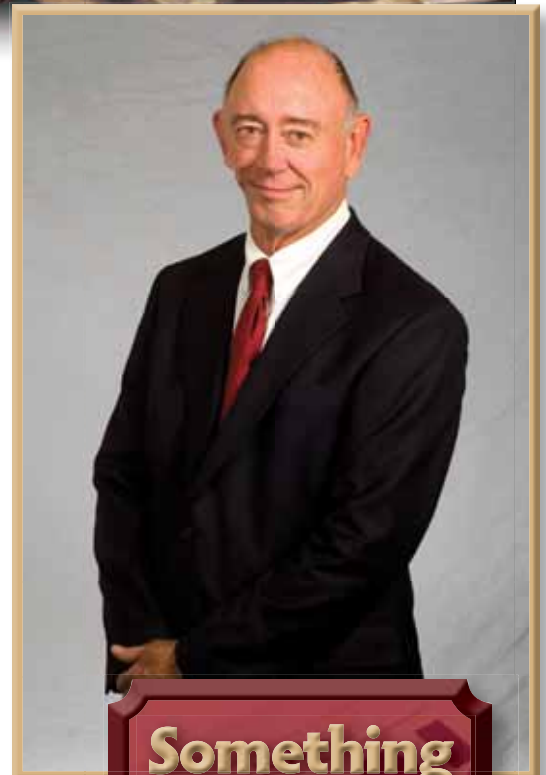
Although Hodding Carter II was not born in Mississippi, he spent most of his adult life in Greenville, where he edited the *Delta Democrat-Times*. Carter was an influential journalist who frequently criticized Mississippi's long tradition of racial discrimination. For his editorials condemning the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, Carter was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for journalism in 1946. In addition to his editorial achievements, Carter won recognition for his other publications including *The Lower Mississippi* (1942); *Man and the River* (1970); and his popular memoir, *Where Main Street Meets the River* (1953).

William Raspberry (1935-2012)

One of America's most distinguished African American journalists was William Raspberry, who was born in Okolona. He spent most of his career as a columnist with *The Washington Post*. A **columnist** is a person who writes a newspaper feature of opinion, commentary, or information—called a column—on a regular basis. During the 1970s and 1980s, his column appeared on *The Post's* editorial page and in more than two hundred newspapers across the country. Raspberry won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Commentary. From 1995 until his retirement in 2008, Raspberry was the Knight Professor of Journalism and Public Policy at Duke University. He died in 2012 at the age of 76.

Charles Overby

In 1967, Charles Overby began his career in journalism at The University of Mississippi as editor of the *Daily Mississippian*. After serving briefly as **press secretary** (a person in charge of press relations for a prominent public figure) for Senator John C. Stennis, Overby worked at several southern newspapers owned by the Gannett Company. In 1982, when Gannett bought *The Clarion-Ledger*, Overby returned to Jackson as editor of the state's



Something Extra!

Charles Overby served as chief executive officer of the Newseum, a Washington, DC, interactive museum about news and journalism, until his retirement in 2011.



largest newspaper. Under Overby's leadership, *The Clarion-Ledger* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for its articles supporting Governor William Winter's 1982 Education Reform Act. In 2008, the **Overby Center for Southern Journalism and Politics**, funded by a \$5 million grant from the Freedom Forum, was established at The University of Mississippi and named in honor of Charles Overby.

Craig Claiborne (1920-2000)

One of Mississippi's most widely read journalists was Craig Claiborne, the food editor of *The New York Times* from 1957 to 1986. Before he became the newspaper's food editor, he was editor of *Gourmet* magazine. As the food editor at *The New York Times*, Claiborne is credited with introducing America to Asian and Latin cuisines. Claiborne also published more than twenty cookbooks and wrote a *syndicated* (sold for publication in many newspapers at once) column that appeared in papers throughout the country.

Ira Harkey (1918-2006)

In 1948, Ira Harkey purchased the Pascagoula *Chronicle-Star*, and this young white editor almost immediately became embroiled in a war of words with Mississippi's white power structure. He supported the 1954 *Brown* decision and James Meredith's admission to Ole Miss in 1962. For his courageous editorials, Ira Harkey won a Pulitzer Prize in 1963. In 1967, Harkey published a memoir titled *The Smell of Burning Crosses*.



Top: As editor of the Pascagoula *Chronicle-Star*, Ira Harkey was an early advocate of civil rights. **Above:** *Lexington Advertiser* editor Hazel Brannon Smith was another advocate of civil rights. White boycotts eventually drove the newspaper out of business. **Opposite page, above:** Charles Tisdale was the longtime owner/editor of the *Jackson Advocate*. **Opposite page, below:** Historian Shelby Foote became a familiar face on television as a commentator on the eleven-hour PBS documentary, *The Civil War*.

Hazel Brannon Smith (1914-1994)

Like Ira Harkey, Hazel Brannon Smith was a young white Mississippi editor who championed the cause of racial and social justice. As editor of the *Lexington Advertiser* in Holmes County, Smith supported the *Brown* decision, advocated the repeal of Mississippi laws that discriminated against black citizens, and endorsed Robert Clark in his campaign for the Mississippi legislature in 1967. Hazel Brannon Smith won a Pulitzer Prize in 1964. That was little consolation because an advertising and subscription boycott of her newspaper forced her to file for bankruptcy. She eventually moved to Tennessee.

Percy Greene (1897-1977)

In 1938, Percy Greene founded the *Jackson Advocate*, which is published weekly and is the state's oldest African American newspaper. By 1948, the

Jackson Advocate had a circulation of 3,000; by 1973, its circulation reached 10,000. Percy Greene was editor of the *Advocate* from its founding until his death in 1977, and he was often a controversial figure. Some of his critics complained that he was too conservative and that he was too friendly with the State Sovereignty Commission.

Charles Tisdale (1926-2007)

After Percy Greene's death, Charles Tisdale became the owner and editor of the *Jackson Advocate*. During his long tenure as editor, Tisdale was *ardent* (enthusiastic) in his support for black rights and was an outspoken critic of both black and white leaders who failed to meet his high standards. Tisdale often received death threats, and his office was firebombed twice. After Tisdale's death in 2007, his wife Alice assumed the role of editor. The current circulation of the *Advocate* is approximately 8,000.

Ronnie Agnew

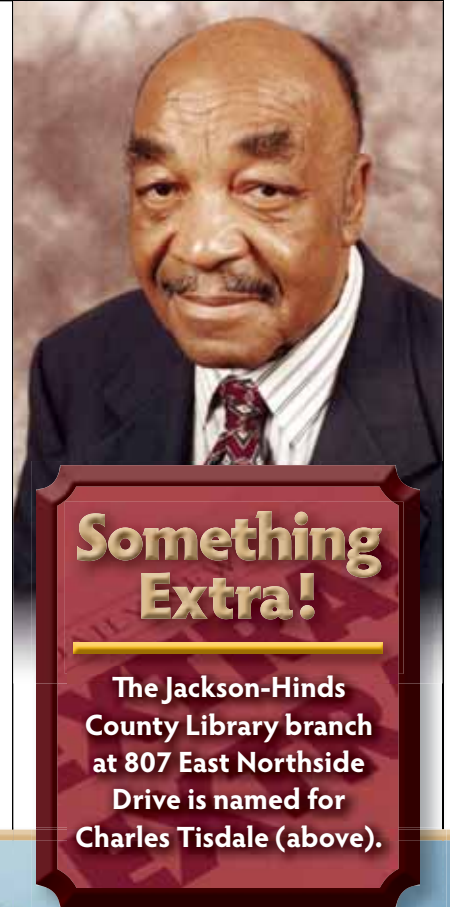
A son of sharecroppers, Ronnie Agnew grew up in Saltillo. After graduating from The University of Mississippi in 1984, Agnew began his journalism career as a reporter for the Greenwood *Commonwealth*. In 1986, he joined the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, where he was assistant city editor and later suburban editor. In 1993, he was named managing editor of the *Hattiesburg American*. In 2001, Agnew informed his wife that he now had his dream job; he had just been named managing editor of *The Clarion Ledger*. A year later, he was named executive editor. In 2008, Ronnie Agnew received the **Silver M Award**, The University of Mississippi's award for distinguished journalism. On August 15, 2011, he left *The Clarion-Ledger* to become executive director of Mississippi Public Broadcasting.

Historians

Because Mississippians are so preoccupied with the past, it is only natural that the state would produce many prominent historians. Among the state's earliest historians were John W. Monette, who published a two-volume *History of the Discovery and Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi* (1846), and J. F. H. Claiborne, the author of *Mississippi, as a Province, Territory and State* (1880).

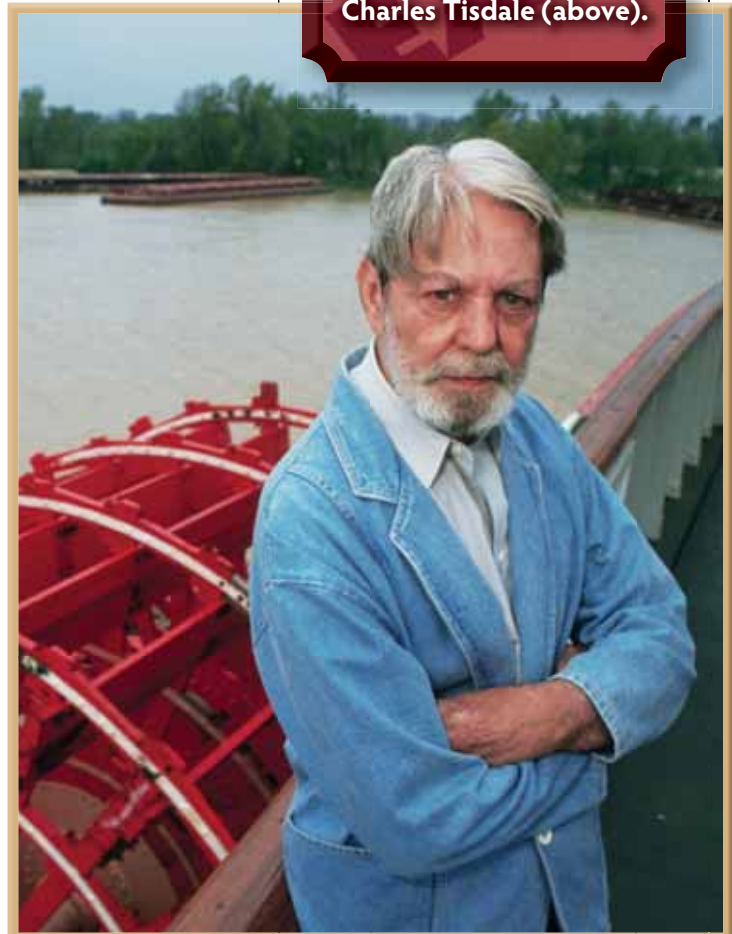
Shelby Foote (1916-2005)

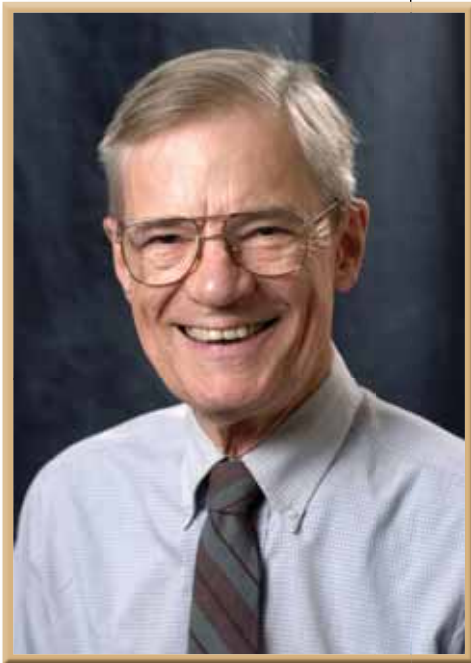
After publishing several novels that included *Tournament* (1949), *Follow Me Down*, (1950), and *Love in a Dry Season* (1951), Shelby Foote began his masterpiece three-volume history of



Something Extra!

The Jackson-Hinds County Library branch at 807 East Northside Drive is named for Charles Tisdale (above).





Above: Longtime Ole Miss history professor Winthrop Jordan won a National Book Award for *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro*, published in 1968.

the Civil War. He spent twenty years writing *The Civil War: A Narrative* (1958-1974). Foote was a consultant and commentator on Ken Burns's 1992 award-winning PBS series on the Civil War. His frequent appearances on this popular series made him a national figure.

David Donald (1920-2009)

David Donald, a native of Goodman and a graduate of Millsaps College, received a Pulitzer Prize in 1961 for his biography of the Massachusetts abolitionist Charles Sumner. He won a second Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for his biography of the great southern writer Thomas Wolfe.

Winthrop Jordan (1931-2007)

A professor of history at The University of Mississippi from 1982 until his retirement in 2004, Winthrop Jordan was the author of *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro* (1968). This account of race relations in early America is considered a *seminal* (original, containing the seeds of later development) work in American history. *White Over Black* won a National Book Award and a Bancroft Prize for outstanding books in the field of history. In 1993, Professor Jordan published *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry Into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy*. This remarkable account of an unsuccessful slave rebellion near Natchez also won a Bancroft Prize.

If you have been impressed with Mississippi's remarkable literary tradition, you will be equally proud of Mississippi's contributions to the performing and visual arts, and its number of sports heroes. With the next chapter, we will conclude our journey through the long and fascinating history of "A Place Called Mississippi."

Something Extra!

Bancroft Prizes are two annual prizes awarded to authors in either or both of these categories: American history (including biography) and diplomacy.

Reviewing the Section

1. Define in sentence form: columnist, press secretary, Silver M Award.
2. Which Mississippi journalist became editor of *The New York Times*?
3. In what era of history did Shelby Foote specialize?

Of Special Interest

John Grisham and Natasha Trethewey

John Grisham

The Mississippi Writers Page refers to John Grisham as “an international phenomenon” and identifies him as “one of the world’s bestselling novelists.” There are 250 million John Grisham books in print, and they have been translated into 29 languages.

Grisham was born in Arkansas, but his family moved to Southaven when he was 12 years old. After graduating from Mississippi State University in accounting in 1977, and the Ole Miss Law School in 1981, Grisham established a law practice in Southaven. In 1983, he was elected to the state legislature and served in the House of Representatives until 1990. His first novel, *A Time to Kill* (1989), received good reviews but was not a best seller. His second novel, *The Firm* (1991), was a runaway best seller and a popular motion picture. It launched one of the most remarkable literary careers in American history. Grisham has published 27 books, most of which are best-selling legal thrillers.

Among those are *The Pelican Brief* (1992), *The Chamber* (1994), *The Runaway Jury* (1996), *The Brethren* (2000), *The Last Juror* (2004), *The Associate* (2009), *The Confession* (2010), and *The Litigators* (2011).

John Grisham has shared his good fortune with his fellow man. When he is not writing, Grisham and his wife Renee devote their time and resources to worthy causes. They raised \$8.8 million for the relief and



recovery of the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. Grisham also participates in the Innocence Project, a national organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted individuals and reforming the criminal justice system to prevent future injustice.

Natasha Trethewey

Mississippi’s most recent recipient of the Pulitzer Prize is poet Natasha Trethewey. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007 for her book of poems, *Native Guard*. Trethewey was born in Gulfport but grew up in Decatur, Georgia. During her early childhood, Trethewey spent the summers with her grandmother in Mississippi and New Orleans. She has often written about her life as the child of a white father and a black mother growing up in the South. Among her other books are *Domestic Work* (2000), *Bellocq’s Ophelia* (2002), *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010), and *Thrall* (2012).

Her many awards include the 2008 Mississippi Governor’s Award for Excellence in Poetry and the 2009 Richard Wright Award presented annually by the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration. Natasha Trethewey holds the Phillis Wheatley Distinguished Chair in Poetry at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. In June 2012, the Library of Congress named Natasha Trethewey America’s Poet Laureate.

Chapter Review

Chapter Summary

Section 1 Mississippi Writers

- Mississippi's most famous writers are William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams. The new wave of writers includes John Grisham and Natasha Trethewey.
- William Faulkner, a Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner, set most of his novels and short stories in fictional Yoknapatawpha County.
- Richard Wright was born to sharecroppers near Natchez, but moved to Chicago in the Great Migration. His most famous novels are *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.
- Eudora Welty, a Jackson native, spent most of her life in Mississippi—the setting for many of her novels and short stories. She received a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for *The Optimist's Daughter*.
- Playwright Tennessee Williams was born in Columbus and made many childhood visits to his grandparents in Clarksdale. His most successful plays include *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.
- Margaret Walker Alexander, a poet, novelist, and essayist, founded a research center.
- Among Greenville's many prominent writers are William Attaway, David Cohn, Ellen Douglas, Walker Percy, and William Alexander Percy.
- Larry Brown has written novels, short stories, and an account of his firefighting career.
- Richard Ford won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Independence Day*.
- Barry Hannah was writer-in-residence at The University of Mississippi when he died.
- Beth Henley's popular plays include *Crimes of the Heart* and *The Miss Firecracker Contest*.
- Greg Iles is best known for his thrillers.
- Writers known for one outstanding book are Anne Moody, Kathryn Stockett, and Donna Tartt.

- Willie Morris has written memoirs of his life in the North and his homecoming to Mississippi.
- Sterling Plump is best known as a poet.
- Elizabeth Spencer spent two years in Italy researching her novel *The Light in the Piazza*.
- James Street's novel *Tap Roots* is about the legendary "Free State of Jones."
- Clifton Taulbert is a successful author, lecturer, and entrepreneur.
- Mildred D. Taylor moved to Ohio in the Great Migration.
- The autobiography of Ida B. Wells was edited by her daughter.
- Ben Ames Williams and Stark Young are known for their Civil War novels.
- Al Young, writer of fiction, poetry, and films, has been writer-in-residence at two universities.

Section 2 Journalists and Historians

- Turner Catledge was editor of *The New York Times* from 1943 to 1970.
- Lerone Bennett Jr. is best known as editor of *Ebony* magazine.
- Hodding Carter II was the influential editor of the *Delta Democrat-Times*.
- William Raspberry won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1994.
- Charles Overby became editor of *The Clarion-Ledger* in 1982. Ronnie Agnew was its executive editor from 2002 to 2011.
- Craig Claiborne was food editor for *The New York Times* and *Gourmet* magazine.
- Ira Harkey and Hazel Brannon Smith wrote editorials supporting racial and social justice.
- Percy Greene founded the *Jackson Advocate*. Charles Tisdale took it over after Greene's death.
- Among Mississippi's honored historians are Shelby Foote, David Donald, and Winthrop Jordan.

Activities for Learning

Understanding the Facts

1. Identify the basic themes found in William Faulkner's novels.
2. When Richard Wright emigrated from the United States in 1946, where did he settle?
3. For what novel did Eudora Welty receive a Pulitzer Prize?
4. What was Tennessee Williams's given name?
5. What Jesmyn Ward novel is a story about survival during Hurricane Katrina?
6. What was the only source of news available to most people prior to the 1920s?
7. How long did Turner Catledge serve as editor of *The New York Times*?
8. How did Hazel Brannon Smith suffer because of her support for the civil rights movement?
9. What is the name of the state's oldest African American newspaper?
10. What was the subject of Shelby Foote's historical masterpiece? How long did Foote spend writing it?

Developing Critical Thinking

1. Why has Mississippi produced several prominent historians?
2. Why did Ira Harkey experience conflict with Mississippi's white power structure?

Writing across the Curriculum

Select one of the many prominent Mississippi writers, journalists, or historians featured in this chapter. Research and write a report about this individual's childhood (including place and date of birth, parents' names and occupations, hometown, schooling, friendships, and important events in his or her early life).

Exploring Mississippi on the Internet

Go to www.olemiss.edu/mwp/. Read three of the short biographies about prominent Mississippi literary figures. Note one interesting fact you learned about each of the three individuals selected.

Go to <http://mdah.state.ms.us/welty/house1.html>. Tour the home of author Eudora Welty. Why do you think Eudora Welty remained in this home most of her life?

Building 21st-Century Skills: Map Skills

For your vacation, you want to visit the birthplaces of as many Mississippi literary figures as possible. However, you have limited resources, specifically time and money. As a result, you can travel no more than 600 miles; you cannot go over your mileage limit. Visit as many birthplaces as possible until you have used your allotted mileage.

Before departing you must plan your trip by creating a travel itinerary. Consult this chapter and compile a list of birthplaces you would like to visit. You will also need a state highway map to design your route.

Create a table with five columns labeled "Departure City," "Destination City," "Route Taken," "Literary Figure," and "Mileage Used." Complete the table for each leg of your journey. Be sure to include a detailed account of the route taken to your next destination. Remember to include the mileage for the return home.