



William Styron: A Life

James L. W. West III

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On the door to William Styron's writing studio is a quotation from Flaubert: "Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work." Styron has lived by that injunction, addressing major subjects--slavery, the Holocaust, mental illness--with a power that has gripped readers around the world.

Though reared in the South, Styron spent most of his adult working life in the North. His first book, *Lie Down in Darkness*, was a brilliant debut, which inspired him to go abroad for the first time. In Paris, he fell in with other young American writers and helped found *The Paris Review* along with George Plimpton and Peter Matthiessen. Styron spent a year in Rome, married, and returned to the States.

After writing *Set This House on Fire*, an ambitious novel set in Italy, he began working on *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, the moving story of a slave rebellion in Virginia. James Baldwin, who lived in a small house on Styron's property in Connecticut during this period, became a sounding board, as well as an inspiration, for the novel. It was also about this time that Styron began lifelong associations with Philip Roth, Arthur Miller, Carlos Fuentes, Willie Morris, and, in particular, James Jones. Readers will be fascinated by the full story of Styron's feud with Norman Mailer, an estrangement so severe that each refused to speak to the other for almost twenty-five years.

Styron's political life has been active, from his presence at the riot-torn 1968 Democratic national convention in Chicago to his controversial long-term opposition to the death penalty.

The Confessions of Nat Turner made Styron famous, but it also brought him under attack. At one point, the explosive reaction to the novel led Styron to imagine that his wife, Rose, had been abducted.

In *Sophie's Choice*, Styron turned to another charged subject--the Holocaust--and Auschwitz became the focus of his life for several years. The result was a novel that added a major tragic figure, Sophie Zawistowska, to the enduring literature of our time.

In the aftermath of a mental breakdown, Styron produced the unflinchingly candid *Darkness Visible*, a book that dramatically altered the nation's negative perception of clinical depression.

James West has studied William Styron's life and career for over twenty years. He has had complete access not only to Styron's papers, letters, and manuscripts, but also to his friends, and has produced an outstanding portrait of one of the most controversial and admired authors of his generation.

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