

# Voices in Black & White: A History of Modern Southern Literature

## Study Guide

### About the film

*Voices in Black & White* is a three-part documentary series about modern southern literature. Six years in the making, the film is a tale of unprecedented cultural and artistic expression amid social and economic turmoil--the first documentary to dramatize the story of southern literature. From World War I to the Civil Rights Movement to the Sun Belt, the writers of the South, both black and white, have explored the mysteries of their region's troubled soul, giving us stories of paradox and beauty.

### Making the Film

*Voices in Black & White* is the first film ever made that examines the history of the literature of the Twentieth Century South.

### Pre-Viewing Activities

#### Southern Literature & Literature History

Many scholars have speculated about how a region of such poverty and backwardness, where the public libraries were inferior and the public schools abysmal, could produce such great literature and music in the first half of the twentieth century. In the film, literary critic Cleanth Brooks says that "it's the defeated who remember wars" and who tell stories. While he is talking about southern whites defeated in the Civil War, one can see in the African-American music and literature discussed in the film that it is those who experience hardship of other sorts as well, who find creative ways to release their emotions. Allen Tate, one of the Fugitive poets, thought that the Southern Renaissance occurred when it did because white southerners finally had enough distance on the Civil War to look at their society more critically. In "A Southern Mode of the Imagination," Tate argued that between the world wars, the nature of southern literature shifted "from melodramatic rhetoric to the dialectic of tragedy." He used W.B. Yeats's epigram to explain his theory, "Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." Intellectual historian Daniel Joseph Singal questions Tate's theory that the social conflict between the South's agrarian past and the industrial future had produced the outburst of creativity, given that industrialism had not fully arrived in the South by the 1920s. Singal suggests that modernist intellectual ideas and forms of expression were equally influential in fostering the Southern Renaissance.

Periodically scholars have predicted the demise of the literary South as the twentieth century has progressed and the South has changed, but the South in the forties and fifties, the decades covered in Part II, was rigidly segregated, dominated by small-town life, and economically behind the rest of the United States. As a result, its writers continued to create a literature distinctive in its regional differences and the southern literary renaissance continued.

Literature by writers born in the American South was first anthologized after the Civil War in order to assert and maintain regional distinctiveness, but early in this century Charles William Kent created a seventeen-volume, *Library of Southern Literature*, to show how the South had contributed "to the history of our national literature." For most of this century, southern literature has been studied as the preserve of white male writers. In the last thirty years, literary scholars have ceased to treat white women writers as if they were minor authors, and they have added the study of African-American writers to create a more complex and accurate portrait of the South's literary history.

*Voices in Black & White* continues this revision of southern literary history by comparing black and white writers in innovative and provocative ways. Part I juxtaposes Nashville's Fugitive poets with the Mississippi Delta's blues singers, compares the literary modernism of William Faulkner and Jean Toomer, and contrasts the lives and works of writers Zora Neale Hurston and Thomas Wolfe, who left the South. Such juxtaposition causes viewers to think about both the writers and about southern literature in new ways.

### Discussion Questions

- Draw a map of the South. What states have you included? Why?
- List five adjectives that come to mind when you think about the South. What is your relationship to the South? How has this relationship affected your map and your list?
- In talking about the South, Mary Lee Settle says, "There is so much wrong and so much that you love, and to try to put them together, somehow, it seems to me to be the main job of the southern writer." What does this statement suggest to you?
- How will viewers be able to recognize the filmmaker's concerns, interests, biases?
- How is the history of the American South distinctive? How might these distinctions be reflected in southern literature?
- What is the difference between local color literature and regional literature?
- Is regional literature less universal and more provincial than other literature? Or is the general more compellingly expressed through the particular?
- How do recent anthologies of southern literature differ from earlier ones?

### Pre-Viewing Activities for Part I

- Have your students listen to a blues song by Robert Johnson or another blues singer, such as Son House, Charlie Patton, or Muddy Waters, and answer these questions: What is the subject matter of the lyrics? How would you describe the music?
- Have your students read one or more of the works that are dramatized in Part I of the film: Ransom's "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," Toomer's "Fern" from *Cane*, the opening scene in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, the courting scene between Janey and Teacake in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ben Gant's death scene in Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*.
- Have your students read "The Sahara of the Bozart" (1917) by H. L. Mencken. What were his views of the South? Why?
- Read the introduction to *I'll Take My Stand* by Twelve Southerners. In what ways are their concerns similar to issues confronting the United States today? How do they differ?
- Have your students go to a library and examine some of the period magazines that published the early southern authors' works: *The Fugitive*, published in Nashville; *The Crisis* and *The Messenger*, published in New York; *Reviewer*, published in Richmond; and *The Southern Review* published in Baton Rouge. Students might like to read the 1939 copy of *Time*, in which Faulkner appeared on the cover or special issues of the *Saturday Review of Literature* that were devoted to the South: "The Deep South," September 19, 1942, and "The Old South," January 23, 1943.
- Have your students view *Gone With the Wind*. How is the South portrayed? Are any historical facts of the Civil War and Reconstruction omitted or romanticized?

### Pre-Viewing Activities for Part II

- Have your students read the "Preview to Understanding" or a chapter from W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*. What were his goals in writing the book? What is "the mind of the South"? Does it still exist?
- Have your students read Richard Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" and discuss the effects of racial discrimination on a person's identity and sense of self-worth.

- Have your students read an essay on the South or southern culture by H. L. Mencken, such as "Mississippi Flood," the article mentioned in the letters to the editor in the Memphis newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal*, that Richard Wright read. What were his views of the South and southern literature? Discuss why Richard Wright may have found Mencken's work interesting.
- Have your students read one or more of the works or portions of them that are dramatized in the film: *Native Son*, *Intruder in the Dust*, *All the King's Men*, and *Invisible Man* (the Prologue).
- Have your students go to a library and examine some of the magazines that published the southern authors' early works: *New Masses*, *The Saturday Review*, *South Today*, *The Southern Review*, *Story Magazine*.
- Have your students examine anthologies of southern literature published in different decades of the twentieth century. How do recent anthologies of southern literature differ from earlier ones?
- Have your students ask someone who lived during the period of racial segregation to tell them what it was like? Then discuss race relations today.

## Part I: Tell About the South

Part I of the documentary examines the period from World War I to World War II, which includes both the Southern Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance. The film makes clear the fascinating connections between these two bursts of creativity that at first glance might seem totally unconnected. Indeed, it is these hidden connections between black and white writers of the American South that the documentary seeks to illuminate. Part I features the works of blues singers, Fugitive poets, Jean Toomer, William Faulkner, Margaret Mitchell, Erskine Caldwell, Zora Neale Hurston, Thomas Wolfe, and many others. It includes interviews with Pat Conroy, Rita Dove, Wilma Dykeman, Shelby Foote, Ernest Gaines, George Garrett, Nikki Giovanni, Andrew Lytle, Albert Murray, Willie Morris, Reynolds Price, William Styron, Alice Walker, and Eudora Welty. Narrated by Pulitzer-Prize winning poet Rita Dove, Part I contains commentary by scholars Cleanth Brooks, Thadious Davis, Mary Helen Washington, and Joel Williamson.

### General Discussion Questions

- \* What images does the filmmaker use to begin Part I? What portrait of the South do they convey? Why do you think the filmmaker began this way? What is the effect of the way the film ends?
- \* What has the filmmaker accomplished by comparing black and white writers of the American South? What story is the filmmaker telling about the South?
- \* A documentary filmmaker carefully juxtaposes words and images and music. View one segment of the film again, such as the opening or another section elsewhere in the film, and analyze this juxtaposition, not only of words and images, but images and images, as well as images and music, explaining the effect.
- \* What do the images used in the film reveal about the writers that the filmmaker examines, especially those who are examined in depth?

### Fugitive Poets/Blues Poets

By the 1920s the southern legacy of slavery and the loss of the Civil War had produced a bifurcated literary tradition that reflected the South's racially segregated society. In Nashville a group of educated white men, excited by the innovations of modernist poetry and thought, came together and began to write a poetry of wit and irony that the journalist H. L. Mencken had said the South lacked. They called themselves the Fugitives and later went on to write essays for the collection, *I'll Take My Stand*, which championed the agrarian society of the South over the industrialized society of the Northeast. At the same time African-American musicians of the Mississippi Delta were creating the blues songs that revealed another, more painful side of the agrarian South. As Albert Murray says in the film, the music was a "device for confronting the facts of life. . . . life is a lowdown dirty shame that shouldn't happen to a

dog, but you confront that and you accept it and it inspires you. Even as the lyrics point out, or spell out, a tale of woe, the music counterstates it."

### Discussion Questions

- \* Why did the Fugitive poets feel like outcasts?
- \* The film compares Fugitive poets and blues singers. What similarities and differences are suggested by the filmmaker's images?
- \* How do the Fugitive poets write about the South in the early twentieth century? the blues singers? Why?
- \* After viewing the film, what is your definition of the blues? Several southern writers defined the blues in the film. Is one definition more memorable to you than another? Why?

### Harlem Renaissance/Jean Toomer

Military service in World War I provided some African-Americans in the South with a different perspective on their lives and their society's Jim Crow laws; economic and social hardships during the 1920s and 1930s caused many African-Americans to look outside of the region for work. These factors combined to cause what has been called the "Great Migration" of African-Americans out of the South. Some went to Chicago and Detroit; others to Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and New York. The creative energy that converged on New York was released in an outpouring of literature, music, and scholarship that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. In 1925, Alain Locke published an anthology of contemporary work entitled *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Locke distinguished this "New Negro" from the "Old Negro" of the past who was "more of a myth than a man." As Thadious Davis says in the film, "The New Negro had a history and a heritage that included Africa but also the American South." As a result, African-American writers, such as Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston, who had moved North, found themselves writing about the African-American folk heritage of the South, about the beauty of the southern landscape, and about both the richness and the pain of African-American life in the South.

### Discussion Questions

- \* Why had so many southern African-Americans moved to New York by the 1920s?
- \* As a man of mixed racial ancestry, Jean Toomer proclaimed himself one of the first "new Americans." Why has it taken the United States so long to think of people of mixed black and white ancestry in this way?
- \* Literary critic Thadious Davis says that African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance wanted to reclaim the South as "a positive space." What do you think she means?
- \* Compare the Fugitive poets' manifesto against northern industrialism, *I'll Take My Stand*, to Jean Toomer's interests in the South as expressed in *Cane*.
- \* Poet Rita Dove terms some of the pieces in Toomer's *Cane*, "mood pieces." What mood does the filmmaker create by the dramatization of "Fern"?

### Mississippi Mythmaker/William Faulkner

The Southern Literary Renaissance, which had its beginnings with the writings of the Fugitive poets, came to full flower with William Faulkner's fiction. He created a fictional place, Yoknapatawpha County, modeled after his own home territory of Oxford, Mississippi. Taken together, Faulkner's novels set in this mythical place are one long quarrel with white southern bigotry, complacency, and provincialism. Although Faulkner left Oxford briefly--at the beginning of his career he went to New Orleans to write, in the middle he went to Hollywood to make money writing film scripts, and late in life he was a writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia--he made his home in Mississippi because the tales he heard there were the lifeblood of his fiction. Faulkner's experimental fiction, though difficult to read, captures the complexity of life in the South from many perspectives: black and white, aristocrat and sharecropper.

### Discussion Questions

- \* What does it mean that Faulkner created a literature of the past in the present?
- \* Why do you think Faulkner's white neighbors were scandalized by his fiction?

- \* How does the filmmaker use Faulkner's map of Yoknapatawpha County?
- \* To represent Faulkner's large body of work, the filmmaker uses a montage of images and quotations from various novels. Which novel captured your imagination? Why?
- \* Jean Toomer and William Faulkner are both literary modernists who experiment with narrative forms. Compare their experimental techniques and subject matter by examining a work by each, such as Toomer's *Cane* and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.
- \* Does the film itself replicate any of the techniques of literary modernism that the filmmaker presents in his narration of southern literature?

### Storytelling/Popular Fiction

One of the commonplaces about literature of the American South and also about African-American literature is that both come out of traditions of storytelling. As a variety of writers testify in the film, rural life, poverty, lack of formal education, but a love of words combined to create an environment conducive to storytelling. The film explores two of the most popular storytellers of the 1930s: Margaret Mitchell and Erskine Caldwell. Both writers specialized in fast-moving plots and larger-than-life characters. Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, with its romantic story of the "Lost Cause" and of southern love of the land, and Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, with its tenant shacks and violent melodrama, have created images of the American South that have reverberated around the world and sometimes interfered with more accurate understandings of the South and its people.

### Discussion Questions

- \* Are there any good storytellers in your family? When and where were the stories told? What function did storytelling play? Are we losing the storytelling tradition? Why or why not?
- \* Shelby Foote says that "storytelling is a very strong southern tradition." How does the filmmaker enact this tradition? If you remember a story that one of the writers or scholars told, why does it stand out in your mind?
- \* In their day, the popular writers Margaret Mitchell and Erskine Caldwell sold millions more books than William Faulkner or Zora Neale Hurston. Why do you think this was the case?
- \* What stories about the South did Mitchell and Caldwell tell?
- \* How have works by Mitchell and Caldwell affected the way people, not only in the United States but all over the world, see the South?

### Leaving the South/Zora and Tom

Throughout the film, black and white writers are juxtaposed, but in the last segment the filmmaker actually interweaves the life stories of Zora Neale Hurston and Thomas Wolfe. The stories of these two writers who both left the South for New York, but who both found their subject matter to be rooted in the South, suggest many similarities. But the juxtaposition also reveals significant differences based on race and gender. While both had rich patrons in New York, Thomas Wolfe's friend Aline Bernstein made his writing easier by providing money and places to write. Zora Neale Hurston's patron was also a rich white woman, Mrs. Osgood Mason, who loved what she termed "primitive art," but she, not surprisingly, was condescending to Hurston. While Aline encouraged and inspired Wolfe, Hurston never found a man who was not threatened by her career.

### Discussion Questions

- \* What do you think was the filmmaker's purpose in interweaving the stories of Hurston's and Wolfe's lives and works? What is revealed by this technique?
- \* What similarities and differences are revealed in Hurston's and Wolfe's lives and works? Do race and gender have anything to do with the differences?
- \* How does the filmmaker suggest that Zora Neale Hurston's and Thomas Wolfe's lives affected their works?
- \* Pat Conroy says that he feels "edited" when in the South, that the "South could do this thing of love you to death--of smother you." He thinks some southern writers leave the South so that they "can look back and write about the South accurately and with distance." From what you learned from the film about Hurston and Wolfe, speculate about what stories they told about the South from a distance that they might not have been able to see or might not have wanted to tell while still living in the communities they grew up in.

## Activities

- The film dramatizes several works of literature: Ransom's "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," Toomer's "Fern," Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How do these dramatizations cause you to think about any of these works you have read? In filming novels, the filmmaker could only choose one scene. What did his choice reveal about the filmmaker's perception of that work? If you read the work after viewing the film, how did the film affect your reading?
- Part I comments briefly on a number of other southerners' writing between the wars. Have your students choose one writer who most intrigues them and read some of the literature. Then have each student either write an essay suggesting why that writer deserved more than a minor role in the film or an essay planning how he or she would convey the writer's life and work on film.
- Ask your students to have someone they know tell them a story. When Faulkner was a writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia, he said that when someone tells a story, "he's actually telling his own biography, talking about himself, in a thousand different terms, but himself." Have each student tape the story to share with their classmates, but then have them analyze the stories as Faulkner would have--to determine what the story he or she heard actually reveals about the storyteller.

## Part II: Prophets & Poets

Part II of the documentary, *Prophets & Poets*, examines the 1940s and '50s and explores the lives and works of Richard Wright, Lillian Smith, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison, Flannery O'Connor, and many more, in the context of the South's biracial culture and deep sense of place. It includes interviews with Pat Conroy, Stanley Crouch, Rita Dove, Sally Fitzgerald, Shelby Foote, Ernest Gaines, George Garrett, Nikki Giovanni, Andrew Lytle, Willie Morris, Albert Murray, Reynolds Price, Mary Lee Settle, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker, and Eudora Welty. Narrated by Pulitzer-Prize winning poet Rita Dove, Part II contains commentary by scholars Joseph Blotner, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Coles, Thadious Davis, John Egerton, John Hope Franklin, C. Erik Lincoln, and Louis Rubin.

### General Discussion Questions

- The documentary begins with a statement about how the South is "sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation." What images does the filmmaker use to begin Part II? What do they suggest about southern "singularity"?
- What do the brief remarks by various writers at the beginning of the film convey about race relations in the 1940s and 1950s?
- What has the filmmaker accomplished by comparing black and white writers of the American South? What story is the filmmaker telling about the South?
- A documentary filmmaker carefully juxtaposes words and images and music. View one segment of the film again, such as the opening or another section elsewhere in the film, and analyze this juxtaposition, not only of words and images, but images and images, as well as images and music, explaining the effect.
- What do the images used in the film reveal about the writers that the filmmaker examines, especially those who are examined in depth?
- What is the effect of the way the film ends?

### Mississippi Son/Richard Wright

Born in the backwoods of southern Mississippi in 1908 during a time when black men were lynched and black families most often made a living by sharecropping on white-owned farms, Richard Wright felt alienated from his region as a boy and left the South forever at age 19.

First he went to Memphis, then on to Chicago, where he discovered a group of kindred spirits at the local Communist Party writers' club, and he began to publish his poems in their magazine, *New Masses*. But Wright became disillusioned with the Communist Party's position on Negroes and so moved to New York. There he won first prize in a writing contest sponsored by *Story Magazine*, which led to the publication of his first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of four terrifying stories detailing the extremes of racial violence in the South. In 1940, Wright published his first novel, *Native Son*, which Ralph Ellison called "the first philosophical novel by an American Negro." The popular and critical success of *Native Son* was followed by a partly fictionalized account of his Mississippi childhood called *Black Boy*. By this time, Wright realized that racism was endemic to American society, not just the South, so he moved his family to Paris and lived the rest of his life there.

### Discussion Questions

- What effect did Richard Wright's life have on his work? Why did he keep moving, first from Mississippi to Chicago, then to New York, then to Paris?
- Richard Wright says that he realized from reading H. L. Mencken's essays that Mencken was "fighting with words." How does Wright fight with words?
- What is "naturalism"? Why do you think Wright was attracted to works by white writers like Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Emile Zola?
- Why was Wright attracted to Communist ideas?
- The filmmaker frames his portrait of Richard Wright with two long anecdotes. John Egerton tells the first about Wright growing up in Memphis unable to check books out of the public library. Willie Morris tells the final anecdote about visiting Wright in Paris near the end of his life. Why did the filmmaker use these anecdotes?
- Several other writers describe how Wright's work affects them. Which description is the most memorable? Why?

### Lillian Smith

No southern writer was more deeply engaged in the issue of racial injustice than Lillian Smith. Born and raised in the deep South, she lived most of her adult life with her companion Paula Snelling on a mountain top in North Georgia, where they ran a summer girl's camp, published a literary magazine called *South Today*, and spoke out brilliantly and often on the problems of race, gender, and class in the South. In 1944, Smith published her most famous work of fiction, *Strange Fruit*, a novel dealing with the effects of segregation on both races in a small southern town. In 1949, Lillian Smith wrote perhaps her finest work, *Killers of the Dream*, in which she asked the question, "Why has the white man dreamed so fabulous a dream of freedom and human dignity, and again and again tried to kill his own dream." Not long afterwards, much of her house was destroyed by arson, leaving her dazed, but undeterred.

### Discussion Questions

- Why do you think the filmmaker chose to place the segment on Lillian Smith after the one on Richard Wright? What did she have in common with Wright? What are the differences?
- Why did Lillian Smith stay in the South?
- This segment opens with the photograph of a lynching. Why do you think the filmmaker lingers on the photograph longer than on most?
- Smith's novel about an interracial love affair in rural Georgia was banned in Boston. In a documentary about southern literature, why do you think the filmmaker included that fact?
- Lillian Smith said that "segregation is a way of life so wounding, so hideous in its effect upon the spirit of black and white that it is without any redeeming feature." Compare and contrast the ways it wounded both races.

- Smith also said "white southerners split their lives in a way shockingly akin to those sick people we call schizophrenics." What do you think she meant?
- Both scholars who talk about Lillian Smith refer to her as a prophet. Why?

### Eudora Welty

Eudora Welty grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, the oldest of three children. She briefly attended the Mississippi State College for Women, then left home to attend the University of Wisconsin and Columbia University. The death of her father in 1931 forced Welty to return home to help support her family, and eventually she landed a position with the Works Progress Administration, a job that changed her life. She reported on the various WPA projects for the county newspapers. She wrote feature articles, took photographs, and listened to people, both black and white—thereby gathering material for the stories she would write, becoming interested in the importance of place in fiction, attuning her ear to the rhythms of southern speech, and training herself in the art of seeing life. Her first collection of stories, *A Curtain of Green*, appeared in 1937 with an introduction by her mentor Katherine Anne Porter. During the next fifteen years she published a steady stream of prize-winning stories and novels until forced to cut back her writing in order to care for her ailing mother and brothers. She ended the decade of the 1940s with the publication of her finest work, *The Golden Apples*, a cycle of inter-related stories about a small Mississippi town. Welty's first novel, *Delta Wedding*, was inspired by her memories of growing up; her most recent work is a memoir about her development as a writer, *One Writer's Beginnings*.

### Discussion Questions

- Because Eudora Welty is the only living writer that Part II covers, Welty is the only writer the filmmaker was able to interview. Does the interview make this segment of the film feel different for the viewer?
- The segment begins with two introductions to Eudora Welty: one filmed with Susan Shreve introducing Welty at the Folger Library in Washington, D.C., where she received the PEN/Malamud Award for Lifetime Achievement in writing short fiction; the other described by Willie Morris with a photograph of the Jackson, Mississippi grocery store, the Jitney Jungle. What effect do you imagine the filmmaker was trying to achieve by this double introduction?
- In her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty wrote, "I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well." What did she mean by this paradoxical statement? How do the photographs and the interview underscore this point?
- During the Depression in the 1930s, Welty traveled around the state publicizing the WPA by writing stories and taking pictures for the county newspapers. The film includes a montage of her photographs. How would you categorize them?
- In the interview, Welty makes a distinction between editorializing or preaching and writing honest fiction. Explain. How would you categorize her writing?
- What aspect of writing fiction interests Welty the most? Compare what she says about her writing to one of her stories you have read.

### William Faulkner and the Nobel Prize

The Southern Literary Renaissance which had its beginnings with the writings of the Fugitive poets came to full flower with William Faulkner's fiction. He created a fictional place, Yoknapatawpha County, modeled after his own home territory of Oxford, Mississippi. Taken together Faulkner's novels set in this mythical place are one long quarrel with white southern bigotry, complacency, and provincialism. Throughout his life, Faulkner left Oxford briefly--at the beginning of his career he went to New Orleans to write, in the middle he went to Hollywood to make money writing film scripts, and late in life he was a writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia--but he made his home in Mississippi because the tales he heard there were the lifeblood of his fiction. Faulkner's experimental fiction, though difficult to read, captures the complexity of life in the South from many perspectives: black and white,

aristocrat and sharecropper. Faulkner had been America's most adventurous writer from the publication of *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 to the appearance of *Go Down, Moses* in 1942 (see Part I), but money problems, domestic unhappiness, and a restrictive Hollywood contract smothered his literary goals until the publication of *Intruder in the Dust* in 1948. Although the novel is short, it is a milestone on the subject of race relations in the United States. In 1950, William Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the highest honor that a writer can receive.

### Discussion Questions

- Shelby Foote comments that not enough attention has been paid to the fact that Faulkner was "one of the great communicators of sensation." How does the documentary highlight this talent?
- Albert Murray says that "nobody was more aware of the intrinsically mulatto dimension of the American culture than Faulkner." What does he mean? What have you learned about the "mulatto dimension of American culture" by viewing *Voices in Black & White*?
- George Garrett reminds viewers that Faulkner experimented with choosing fictional forms that best expressed the meaning of his various novels. What form did the filmmaker use to summarize the novel *Intruder in the Dust*? How does this form emphasize the novel's focus on race relations?
- John Egerton says that Faulkner was making a point about honor in *Intruder in the Dust*. What is the difference between the old Confederate honor and the new type of honor based on conscience that Faulkner is interested in? How would race relations be affected by choosing one code of honor over the other?
- Why do you think the filmmaker chose to end the segment on Faulkner with Willie Morris's anecdote about Faulkner's niece?

### Southern Men of Letters/Warren and Ellison

Throughout the film, black and white writers are juxtaposed, but in this segment the filmmaker interweaves the life stories of Robert Penn Warren and Ralph Ellison. The stories of these two writers who both left the South for the North, but who both found their subject matter to be rooted in the South, suggest many similarities. But the juxtaposition also reveals differences based in part on race. Robert Penn Warren and Ralph Ellison were friends and fellow writers who dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to the craft of writing and who, together, won every literary honor but the Nobel Prize. Both were cosmopolitan men, erudite and earthy and energetic, who wrote in several genres. Both used history in their fiction, believing that the more conscious people are of their personal, cultural, and national history, the freer they will be.

### Discussion Questions

- What do you think was the filmmaker's purpose in interweaving the stories of Warren's and Ellison's lives and works? What is revealed by this technique?
- What similarities and differences are revealed in Warren's and Ellison's lives and works? Does race have anything to do with the differences?
- How does the filmmaker suggest that Robert Penn Warren's and Ralph Ellison's lives affected their works?
- Poet Rita Dove says that *Invisible Man* expresses black history and psychology while writer Albert Murray stresses the novel's universality. How can a book be both particular and universal?
- In Part I, Pat Conroy says that he feels "edited" when in the South, that the "South could do this thing of love you to death—of smother you." He thinks some southern writers leave the South so that they "can look back and write about the South accurately and with distance." From what you learned from the film about Warren and Ellison, speculate about what stories they told

about the South from a distance that they might not have been able to see or might not have wanted to tell while still living in the communities they grew up in.

### Georgia Prophet/Flannery O'Connor

For Flannery O'Connor, the South was both a prison and an inspiration. She grew up in Milledgeville, Georgia, the only child in an Irish-Catholic family surrounded by the solidly Protestant South. She was deeply religious and wryly funny and looked forward to leaving her small town to join the world of writers in the North. After a stint in the famous writing program at the University of Iowa, where she studied under Robert Lowell, she found her way to the Connecticut home of Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, two equally devout Catholic writers. Her first published work, *Wise Blood*, remains her best-known novel, but as a writer, she is perhaps best known for her short stories, which were collected in *The Complete Short Stories* in 1971, a volume that won the National Book Award for Fiction. Unfortunately, O'Connor did not live to receive this award. Diagnosed with lupus in the early 1950s, she died in 1964. During the last decade of her life she lived with her mother on the family dairy farm in Milledgeville. Despite the debilitating effects of her illness, she raised peacocks, entertained guests, and devoted three hours each morning to writing her exquisite short stories—stories that baffled critics, but dazzled a host of admirers.

### Discussion Questions

- Flannery O'Connor's biographer Sally Fitzgerald says readers find O'Connor's stories "unsettling." She says, "Lots of people don't like them at all, but they don't forget them." Given what you know of O'Connor's short fiction, do you think Fitzgerald is right?
- Alice Walker contrasts the writing of O'Connor and Faulkner, her "freshness" to his "mugginess." What does her metaphor suggest about the differences in both the content and form of their writing?
- The anecdote of the rattlesnake in the clothes dryer that George Garrett tells in this segment is longer than most anecdotes the filmmaker uses in the documentary. What is its purpose?
- What do you think Flannery O'Connor meant when she said that "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted"?

### Activities

- *Voice in Black & White* uses film clips or dramatizes scenes from several works of literature: Wright's *Native Son*, Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, Warren's *All the King's Men*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*. How do these dramatizations cause you to think about any of these works you have read? In filming novels, the filmmaker could only choose one scene. What did his choice reveal about the filmmaker's perception of that work? If you read the work after viewing the film, how did the film affect your reading?
- Have your students listen to a blues song by Robert Johnson or another blues singer, such as Son House, Charlie Patton, or Muddy Waters, and answer these questions: What is the subject matter of the lyrics? How would you describe the music? Then have them read a story by Richard Wright from *Uncle Tom's Children*. Ask them how Wright's stories compare to the blues songs.
- In reacting to critics who charged that Welty should have been writing more directly about racial injustice during the civil rights movement, poet Rita Dove says, "To write without self-consciousness about a character, imbuing that character with all the complexities of human beings, even when the rest of the world only thinks of that character as a type. That's protest too." Choose a story by Welty and explain how she has taken a character that could have been a type, beyond stereotype.

- Play the jazz piece "Circus" by Lester Young and Band, which begins the documentary. Have students research the history of jazz and/or the influence of jazz on the writing of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray.
- Have your students find other examples of racial and cultural hybridity in popular culture, for example, rock music. The first part of the PBS series *The History of Rock and Roll* is an excellent example of racial and cultural hybridity in the South, where rock and roll originated during the time period Part II covers.
- In the segment on Flannery O'Connor, the filmmaker uses excerpts from several of O'Connor's short stories. Read one or more of these stories and speculate about why the filmmaker chose each excerpt.
- In making the documentary the filmmaker used clips from several major motion pictures that were based on novels. Have your students read a novel mentioned in the documentary and then view the movie made from it. Have them analyze the differences and the effects of the differences on readers/viewers.
- Have your students choose a book mentioned in the film and then compare book reviews published in southern newspapers with those published in other regions of the country.
- Several of the writers wrote memoirs or autobiographies, Wright's *Black Boy*, Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*. Have your students choose one and read it in conjunction with a fictional work by that writer.
- The documentary comments briefly on a number of other southern writers. Have your students choose one writer who most intrigues them and read some of the literature. Then have each student either write an essay suggesting why that writer deserved more than a minor role in the film or an essay planning how he or she would convey the writer's life and work on film?
- Near the end of the documentary several writers suggest what the southern sense of place means to them. What does the place you live in or grew up in mean to you? How would you define it or describe it?