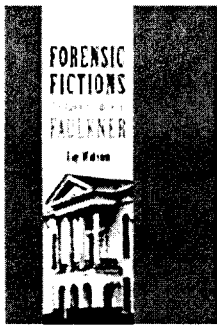


## Forensic Fictions: The Lawyer Figure in Faulkner, by Jay Watson

March 29, 2010 By Allen Mendenhall

Review by Allen Mendenhall



Kudos to the University of Georgia Press for this recent reprint of Jay Watson's *Forensic Fictions*, which has become something of a classic among law-and-literature scholars. A pioneering project, *Forensic Fictions* stands as the first critical work to interrogate the lawyer figure in Faulkner's oeuvre.

Watson submits that law is vast and multidimensional, "at once a deeply normative cultural system, a vehicle of ideology (in its constructive and destructive manifestations), a force of social stability and control, an entrenched and often blindly self-interested institution, and not least of all a human vocation, a form of practice that in some instances achieves the status of a calling."

In Faulkner's fiction, law helps to highlight the complexity, sometimes liberating and sometimes disorienting, of the "everyday" aspects of Southern culture, institutions, and traditions. Law is more than bills, statutes, judge-made opinions, codes, and the like. Law isn't a monolithic animal but a multiplicity of people and institutions; a product of self-serving performances by lawyers, judges, and politicians; and an accumulation of arguments couched in topoi of guilt and innocence, right and wrong, justice and equality. Law is, simply put, a network of human relations and a collection of stories.

Watson's book examines how lawyers and laws constitute and presuppose authority in the microcosm of Yoknapatawpha. "Lawyers of course advocate by narrating," Watson explains, "by telling their clients' stories in the language of the law." Lawyers, then, are raconteurs, and laws are products of language, even as they institute language.

Watson suggests that Faulkner internalized the “conspicuous and complicated presence” of real-life lawyers—Dean R.J. Farley, Governor Lee M. Russell, General James Stone, Ben Wasson, Jim Kyle Hudson, and Lucy Somerville Howorth, to name just a few—and then expressed mixed feelings about lawyers and the legal community in his writings. Although not a lawyer himself, Faulkner could boast of a legal pedigree, having been born into a family and a society overflowing with attorneys. Faulkner’s multifaceted and often contradictory ideas about law reflect these cultural associations.

Watson uses the term “forensic fictions” to refer to Faulkner’s depictions “of the legal vocation and the practice of law, a practice that extends from the official space of the courtroom and the professional space of the law office to the farthest reaches of the community.” Thus conceived, law is not only a communicative vehicle but also a way of life, as mundane as it is exciting.

Watson works out of the paradigms of forensic discourse. He treats law as a theater of differences and disparate perspectives and as a vast system of interrelated parts. An “important subtext” for Faulkner’s forensic fictions, according to Watson, “is the conviction that the values and concerns of the storyteller can and must carry over from a limited, private, aesthetic realm into a public world outside, where verbal creations can reinforce, challenge, or otherwise inform social norms.”

Three novels—*Intruder in the Dust*, *Knight’s Gambit*, and *Requiem for a Nun*—make up what Watson dubs Faulkner’s “forensic trilogy.” These novels portray the lawyer as citizen-spokesperson, able to appropriate the public sphere as a space for social celebration or critique.

Allowing himself wide latitude, Watson sometimes reconfigures Faulkner in terms of Continental philosophy—especially of the French variety—and other times toys with structuration theory, communicative action theory, New Historicism, and critical legal studies. An occasional Lacanian, he sets out to psychoanalyze Faulkner and to investigate the inner motives for Faulkner’s forensic fictions; an occasional Habermasian, he seeks to assess the public sphere in the Old South, a community shaped by prominent lawyers. As these differing currents of research suggest, *Forensic Fictions* is Theory-intensive.

Cleanth Brooks, Faulkner’s contemporary and an early architect of the rule of “intentional fallacy,” might roll over in his grave if made aware of Watson’s approach to Faulkner’s work. Nevertheless, Brooks could not deny the facility (let alone felicity) with which Watson investigates various legal mediums: opening and closing arguments, objections, storytelling. Watson even considers such seemingly insignificant legal signifiers as the witness box, the judges’ bench, judges’ robes, pressed suits, courtrooms, and litigious citizens—all by way of Faulkner’s fiction. Whether Watson is dissecting the figure of Horace Benbow or explaining the performative genius of Gavin Stevens, his hard-hitting prose and stark analyses will please and provoke.

Critically informed and methodologically ambitious, *Forensic Fictions* looks at law and legal processes from the perspective of literary theory and rhetoric. Faulkner’s texts, which grapple with legality and which depict numerous lawyers and legal settings, provide a clarifying focus

for these investigations. Watson's book, like the subject it undertakes, is complex. And difficult. And, in a word, smart. This particular reader hopes that Watson will write another, similar book very soon.