



# Selected Letters of William Styron

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## **Selected Letters of William Styron** William Styron

In 1950, at the age of twenty-four, William Clark Styron, Jr., wrote to his mentor, Professor William Blackburn of Duke University. The young writer was struggling with his first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, and he was nervous about whether his “strain and toil” would amount to anything. “When I mature and broaden,” Styron told Blackburn, “I expect to use the language on as exalted and elevated a level as I can sustain. I believe that a writer should accommodate language to his own peculiar personality, and mine wants to use great words, evocative words, when the situation demands them.”

In February 1952, Styron was awarded the Prix de Rome of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which crowned him a literary star. In Europe, Styron met and married Rose Burgunder, and found himself immersed in a new generation of expatriate writers. His relationships with George Plimpton and Peter Matthiessen culminated in Styron introducing the debut issue of *The Paris Review*. Literary critic Alfred Kazin described him as one of the postwar “super-egotists” who helped transform American letters.

His controversial *The Confessions of Nat Turner* won the 1968 Pulitzer Prize, while *Sophie’s Choice* was awarded the 1980 National Book Award, and *Darkness Visible*, Styron’s groundbreaking recounting of his ordeal with depression, was not only a literary triumph, but became a landmark in the field.

Part and parcel of Styron’s literary ascendance were his friendships with Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, John and Jackie Kennedy, Arthur Miller, James Jones, Carlos Fuentes, Wallace Stegner, Robert Penn Warren, Philip Roth, C. Vann Woodward, and many of the other leading writers and intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century.

This incredible volume takes readers on an American journey from FDR to George W. Bush through the trenchant observations of one of the country’s greatest writers. Not only will readers take pleasure in William Styron’s correspondence with and commentary about the people and events that made the past century such a momentous and transformative time, they will also share the writer’s private meditations on the very art of writing.

## **Advance praise for *Selected Letters of William Styron***

“I first encountered Bill Styron when, at twenty, I read *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Hillary and I became friends with Bill and Rose early in my presidency, but I continued to read him, fascinated by the man and his work, his triumphs and troubles, the brilliant lights and dark corners of his amazing mind. These letters, carefully and lovingly selected by Rose, offer real insight into both the great writer and the good man.”—President Bill Clinton

“The Bill Styron revealed in these letters is altogether the Bill Styron who was a dear friend and esteemed colleague to me for close to fifty years. The humor, the generosity, the loyalty, the self-awareness, the commitment to literature, the openness, the candor about matters closest to him—all are on display in this superb selection of his correspondence. The directness in the artful sentences is such that I felt his beguiling presence all the while that I was enjoying one letter after another.”—Philip Roth

“Bill Styron’s letters were never envisioned, far less composed, as part of the Styron oeuvre, yet that is what

they turn out to be. Brilliant, passionate, eloquent, insightful, moving, dirty-minded, indignant, and hilarious, they accumulate power in the reading, becoming in themselves a work of literature.”—Peter Matthiessen

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