

THE LAST LIVING FAULKNER

In her insightful new memoir, Dean Faulkner Wells gives us a rare, human glimpse of a sometimes-impenetrable Southern literary icon. Here, in an exclusive interview, she describes what it was like to be raised by a man we all revere—and she knew simply as “Pappy”

By Kim Cross



It's a Southern rite of passage, the moment you decide you are ready to read Faulkner. For me, it happened a few months ago when I found my late father's yellowed copy of *As I Lay Dying*. In my hand, the brittle volume seemed slender yet substantial, as if the words inside had a specific gravity far beyond their 288 pages. As I read myself into the mind of a different character with each chapter, the book unlocked a door into Faulkner's Mississippi.

A month later, I was on my way to Oxford on a literary pilgrimage that might be cliché if my personal guide were not the last living Faulkner.

Dean Faulkner Wells, 75, is the sole mortal link to the greatest novelist of the 20th century. To the world, her uncle was a literary giant, winner of the Pulitzer and the Nobel Prize, three parts genius to two parts eccentric and one part deliberate drunk. But to Dean, he was “Pappy,” the closest thing she would ever know to a father. Her own father, William's youngest brother, Dean, was killed in a plane crash four months before her birth, on wings that William had given him. And so the author, then a struggling writer, vowed to raise his unborn niece in a way that would have pleased his baby brother. He told her ghost stories, put her through college, sent her abroad, and walked her down the aisle.

“I had a hand-me-down dress and a hand-me-down daddy,” Dean says, showing me a photo taken just before her wedding at Rowan Oak. Wearing a gown that belonged to her cousin Jill, Faulkner's only child, who died in 2008, Dean stands slightly swayback, trying in her 1-inch heels to look shorter than Pappy, who was just 5'6". I ask Dean if she remembers what they were saying at that moment.

“I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I said, ‘Pappy, was Judith real?’” Judith was the star of the ghost stories Faulkner told to the children in his life, a lovesick girl who leapt to her

death from the balcony above the entrance to Rowan Oak. “‘No, I made her up for you and all the other children,’ he said. ‘But I believe in her. Don't you?’”

Dean's family is not a simple one, and enough water has passed under the Faulkner bridge to drown a team of mules. But she has captured their world in a brave and poignant memoir, an intimate portrait of a fiercely private clan, told from the inside out. It is a book that only Dean could write, and only now, when all the others are gone. In wonderfully accessible prose, she

shows William Faulkner as an uncle, a husband, a brother, a father. A man underneath all the mythos. *Every Day by the Sun* is a book that every Southerner should read, perhaps even before they read Faulkner himself.

What is it like to write a book with a last name like Faulkner? I ask Dean.

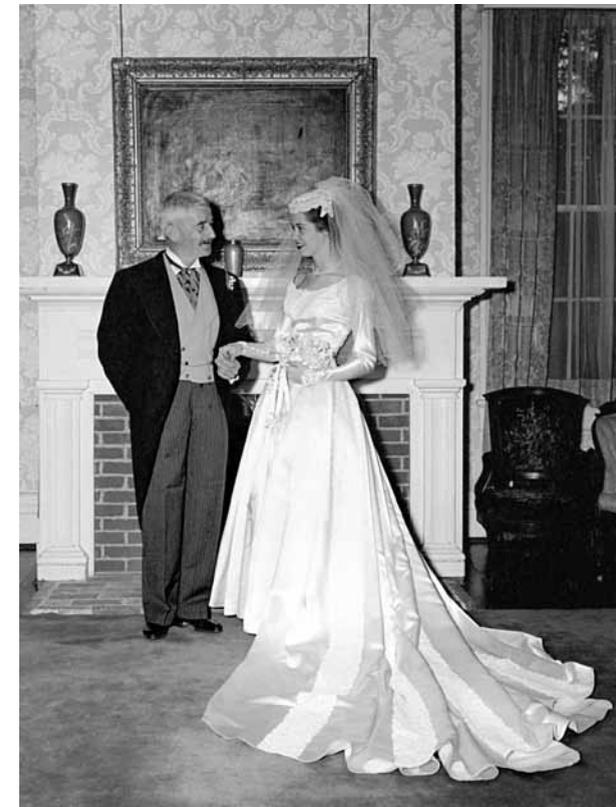
“It takes an incredible amount of either courage or madness,” she replies, with a textured voice and gravelly laugh that punctuates each story. “You have this huge shadow that is going to cast itself over every word you put down.”

We're sipping coffee in her living room, a two-bedroom cottage she shares with husband Larry and dogs named Shakespeare and Lizzie. This was her Nannie's house, built in 1931 for William's mother, Maud. It has the look and creak of a house inhabited by generations of Faulknors. The walls are lined with books and portraits Maud painted of her sons. The house is haunted with history.

“The ghosts—and all Faulknors believe in ghosts—came back and helped me write,” Dean says. “I'd be dead asleep in the middle of the night, and suddenly I'd be wide awake, and this voice, Pappy's voice, would be saying, ‘Don't forget the part about...’”

Pappy's presence was so strong she could smell it. “The scent was of pipe smoke, horses and leather, tweed and bourbon. But mostly of pipe smoke.”

Dean is the keeper of this living museum, where she goes about her business among artifacts, like the silver tea set her great-grandfather won in an 1848 poker game. Literati past and present have tossed tales across her kitchen table. George Plimpton. Pat Conroy. Ellen Gilchrist. Barry Hannah. The late Willie Morris, an award-winning Mississippi writer and former editor of *Harper's* magazine,



Dean and William Faulkner share a moment by the mantel at Rowan Oak just minutes before her wedding.

COURTESY DEAN FAULKNER WELLS

held court here so often he claimed his own chair. Leaning on this storied table, Dean wrote her book in pencil on a legal pad. She thought it might take about six months to put her past on paper. It took her two and a half years.

In her dining room, Jimmy Buffett finished his manuscript of *Tales from Margaritaville* on the Absalom table. That's what Dean and Larry call the table where Pappy finished, under considerable duress, *Absalom, Absalom!* William completed this landmark of experimental fiction while camped out at his mother's table, sleeping on a folding cot in the dining room, rising at any hour to bring a glass of warm milk to his brother's widow, who was five months pregnant with Dean.

The couple still entertains a circle of young authors like Tom Franklin, Beth Ann Fennelly, Ace Atkins, and Neil White. They come for supper or to season the table with more whiskey-spiked tales. Writers are drawn to Dean like flies to butter, which seems fitting in a town that, the local joke goes, has more writers than readers. "I'm an oddity because I'm a link to somebody they all wish they knew," Dean says. "And I know that."

Outside of her inner circle, Dean is fully aware of the mixed feelings Oxford has had for its most famous—and most misunderstood—native son. Until I read her book, I didn't know that Faulkner struggled for years to pay the bills and win the respect of a hometown that largely ignored him and occasionally mocked him. "There's a black sheep in everybody's family, and Billy's ours," said his own uncle, a judge. "Not worth a cent." It wasn't until MGM came to town to film *Intruder in the Dust*, a 1949 movie based on his book, that the neighbors began to take him seriously.

Though she'd never admit it, Dean probably endures a little bit of the same snubbery from a town that alternately reveres Faulkner and tires of hearing

about him. I wonder aloud what it must be like to be the last living Faulkner in a place like Oxford.

"Oh, people around here don't give a rat's ass," she says. "Which is kind of nice. They really don't care."

Luckily, Dean has a sense of humor. In college, she made a midnight graveyard run to place a beer in the hand of "The Old Colonel," an 8-foot-tall statue towering over the grave of her

funny and tragic, flawed in such a way that you can't help but relate to, respect, and even feel a little sorry for the guy.

Dean shows us William the scoutmaster, the D student in English, and the worst assistant postmaster in the history of Ole Miss. Before dropping out of college, he pledged Sigma Alpha Epsilon and hosted a coed water-skiing party, then charmed his way out of trouble with the Dean of Women. He played golf barefoot, and shot squirrels with a .22. As a young man, he loved flying and became a pilot, but once lost the nerve to land his plane, handing his brother the stick. He wanted so badly to fly in WWI that he enlisted in the Canadian Royal Air Force. When the war ended before he served, he came home a self-decorated veteran, feigned a limp, and wore his RAF uniform with wings he bought at a pawn shop. Locals mocked him as "Count No 'Count."

Driven to write, he struggled for years. His first stab was a one-act play he printed, bound, and illustrated with drawings of bare-breasted women. (The six-copy first edition quickly went out of print in the frat house.) His first book, *The Marble Faun*, was a collection of poetry that he self-published with financial help from a local lawyer.

When he finished *Flags in the Dust*, his first truly ambitious novel and the first one set in Yoknapatawpha, his fictional county inspired by the real Lafayette, it was rejected by his editor. "As he approached his thirtieth birthday, the fear of failure and burden of genius lay heavy upon him," Dean writes. "Yet he was about to enter the most productive period of any writer in all of American letters."

Pappy spent quality time with the children he loved, playing croquet in a thunderstorm, taking them sailing on Sardis Lake, playing Ping-Pong, and enduring road-trip serenades of "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall." He told them elaborate ghost stories beneath the magnolias at twilight. He took

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A FIRST-TIMER'S GUIDE TO FAULKNER

The author's works—19 novels and many short stories—fit like puzzle pieces that define fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Ole Miss English professor Jay Watson, president of the William Faulkner Society, shares where to begin.

If you may not get past the Table of Contents...

TRY: His short stories. Jay says: "Many were originally written for magazines, so they're more accessible than his experimental works. But you still get a sense of his flair for language and his thick, dense love for words."

If you're just interested in tackling a novel...

TRY: *Light in August*. "This is probably his most accessible, truly great novel. It's

somewhat experimental, but it's more linear and a good place to start."

If you're a literary buff ready for anything...

TRY: *The Sound and the Fury*. "Faulkner takes you inside the mind of a mentally handicapped man. One thing he often does with plot is give you effects before their causes. So you almost have to commit to rereading at some point, because then things are more apparent."

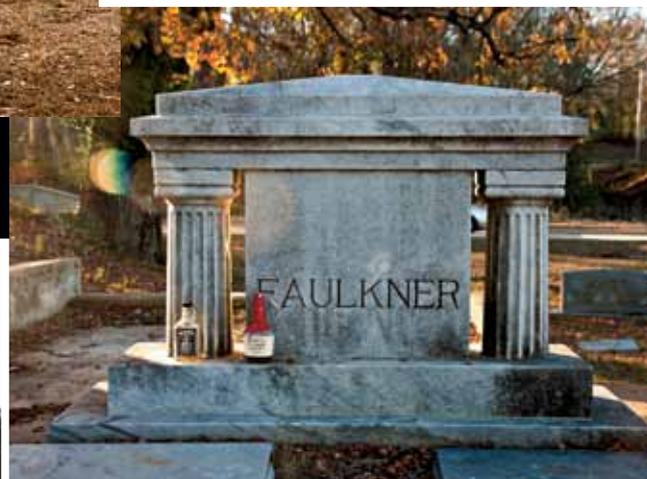
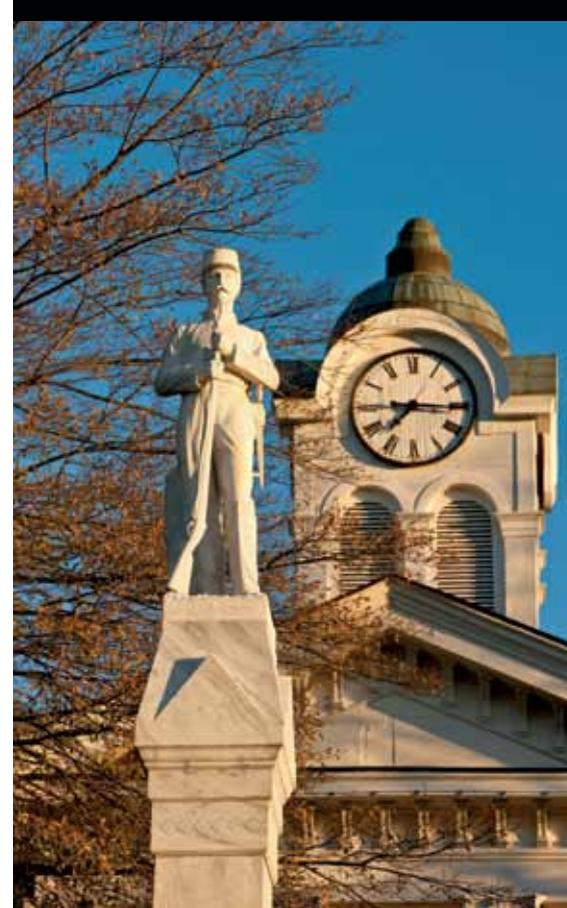
HEAR, SEE, AND READ MORE: Visit southernliving.com/faulkner to read an excerpt from *Every Day by the Sun*, plan a Faulkner-themed tour of Oxford, hear a clip from a Q&A with Dean, and buy a signed copy of her book.

great-great-grandfather, Col. William Falkner. She judged a "faux Faulkner" contest and published the best essays in a book called *The Best of Bad Faulkner*. Humor is her way of handling a sense of duty for a task that, shy of a solid funny bone, might have been incapacitating. "It is a responsibility that made me sit down at the kitchen table and try to tell the truth."

So much has been written portraying Faulkner as a recluse, a contrite and sometimes cruel drunk. (While on a bender, he once told Jill "Nobody remembers Shakespeare's child.") But Dean's Pappy is endearingly tender,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Rowan Oak; Dean at her storied kitchen table; anonymous gifts on Faulkner's grave; Dean (left) with Jill; "Count No 'Count"; the Oxford courthouse and statue that appear in several works



OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: ROBBIE CAPONETTO (4); COURTESY DEAN FAULKNER WELLS (2)

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them trick-or-treating, and gave them fatherly lectures. When he escorted 11-year-old Dean to her first social tea, she nervously asked for both milk and lemon, then watched her faux pas curdle in her cup. “Milk or lemon?” the hostess then asked Pappy. He said, “Thank you, ma’am. I’ll take both.”

All the while, Pappy was writing landmark fiction in a house overrun with children and dogs, and supporting an extended family of 11 on a writer’s paycheck during the Great Depression. To add electricity and a stove to primitive Rowan Oak, he wrote feverishly, submitting 37 short stories in one year—and selling only six. Just after publishing *The Sound and the Fury*, he took a night job at a power plant. He went to work with a roll of legal paper, and between shifts, wrote *As I Lay Dying* in 47 days. Dean never knew until she read his biography, as an adult, that he ever struggled financially.

She also had no idea, as a child, of what a big deal her uncle was. It dawns

on her in my favorite scene from her book, when Pappy takes her to New York for a sort of coming-out trip. It’s just before he sends her off to Paris, and he uses the trip to expose her to the cosmopolitan life. He takes her to nice restaurants, buys her the right dress, and treats her like a lady. Dean writes:

*As we walked down Park Avenue on our way to Pappy’s favorite restaurant...I began to notice heads turning. “This is it,” I thought. “I am the cutest thing to hit New York...” Within one block reality set in. They were staring at my distinguished escort Pappy, who continued smiling and chatting, either oblivious or accustomed to the attention. Not since the film premiere of *Intruder in the Dust* had I realized who he was, a world-renowned author, but this was New York...and these were complete strangers and we were a long way from home.*

Dean holds that she may have been insulated from his darker side by virtue of being a stepdaughter instead of a daughter. But she was close enough to know him in a way the outside world

never could, and the normal moments of her childhood are precisely what make her book worth reading.

Dean shared with me one scene that was cut from the book which forever changed my impression of Faulkner, the man. Pappy takes young Dean and her cousins for a walk deep into the Mississippi woods, and sits them down on a fallen log. “Pappy knelt in front of us, and he picked up a mound of dirt and leaves, and said, ‘Smell it,’” Dean says. “And then he handed it to each of us, and we smelled, and he said, ‘This is precious. This belongs to you, only for you to take care of. Treasure it.’”

His sense of provenance over his native soil was one of the qualities that led Faulkner to become what he was. And so his greatest legacy to Dean, and to all Southerners, is a solid sense of place and the courage to rise above it. Dean loves to quote Turner Catledge, former editor of the *New York Times*: “He said, ‘The greatest gift a parent can give a child is roots and wings.’ And the Faulkners gave me that.” 