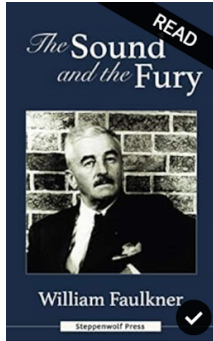


ON “TOWN IDIOTS” AND DISABILITY



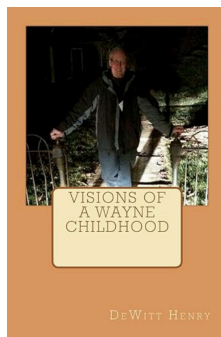
Think of Faulkner’s Benjy in *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*, set in Mississippi’s “Yoknapatawpha county” in the 1930s.

As Faulkner later wrote in an Appendix to *THE PORTABLE FAULKNER*: “[Benjamin] loves three things: the pasture which was sold to pay for Candace’s wedding and to send Quentin to Harvard, his sister Candace, and firelight. Who lost none of them, because he could not remember his sister but only the loss of her, and firelight was the same bright shape as going to sleep, and the pasture was even better sold than before, because now he and Luster could not only follow tireless along the fence the motions which it did not even matter to him were human beings swinging golf sticks...Gelded 1913. Committed to the State Asylum, Jackson, 1933. Lost nothing then either because, as with his sister, he remembered not the pasture but only its loss, and firelight was still the same bringing shape of sleep.”

And the novel’s devastating close:

“Ben sat, holding the flower in his fist, his gaze empty and untroubled. Luster hit Queenie again and swung her to the left at the monument. . . . For an instant Ben sat in an utter hiatus. Then he bellowed. Bellow on bellow, his voice mounted, with scarce interval for breath. There was more than astonishment in it, it was horror; shock; agony eyeless, tongueless; just sound, and Luster’s eyes backrolling for a white instant. “Gret God,” he said, “Hush! Hush! Gret God!” He whirled again and struck Queenie with the switch. It broke and he cast it away and with Ben’s voice mounting toward its unbelievable crescendo Luster caught up the end of the reins and leaned forward as Jason came jumping across the square and onto the step. With a backhanded blow he hurled Luster aside and caught the reins and sawed Queenie about and doubled the reins back and slashed her across the hips. He cut her again and again, into a plunging gallop, while Ben’s hoarse agony roared about them, and swung her about to the right of the monument. Then he struck Luster over the head with his fist. “Dont you know any better than to take him to the left?” he said. He reached back and struck Ben, breaking the flower stalk again. “Shut up!” he said, “Shut up!” He jerked Queenie back and jumped down. “Get to hell on home with him. If you ever cross that gate with him again, I’ll kill you!” “Yes, suh!” Luster said. He took the reins and hit Queenie with the end of them. “Git up! Git up, dar! Benjy, fer God’s sake!” Ben’s voice roared and roared. Queenie moved again, her feet began to clop-clop steadily again, and at once Ben hushed. Luster looked quickly back over his shoulder, then he drove on. The broken flower drooped over Ben’s fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right; post and tree, window and doorway, and signboard, each in its ordered place.”

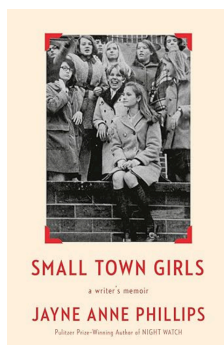
For Main Line Philly in 1950s, see my writer’s memoir, *VISIONS OF A WAYNE CHILDHOOD*.



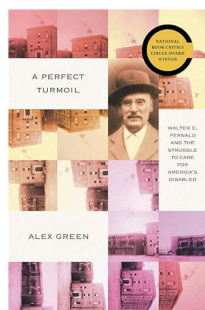
Occasionally, during my Grammar School years, I would see a squat, chubby, mentally disabled man named Bobby on the sidewalks of Wayne, perhaps with his mother. Mom explained to me that he was “retarded,” that he had a twin sister, whom we only saw once riding in a car, and that he was, perhaps, in his thirties or older. Both he and his sister had bloated mongoloid features, carrot-colored, straight hair, scattered around their heads, and wore thick glasses. We used to joke at dinner about the terms idiot, imbecile, and lunatic, my sister Judy pointing out that an imbecile was feebleminded, with a mental age of three to seven years; an idiot had a mental age of three or less years; a lunatic could be intelligent, but be mentally ill.

"I may be an imbecile, but I'm not an idiot," she would boast. Bobby, the sight of whom I found frightening at first, and whom I tried to avoid seeing, or being addressed by (his speech was grunting and slurred), became a more and more common sight around town, often hanging around the traffic policeman on the corner. He was, in fact, friendly and open in disposition, and came to be accepted as a kind of town mascot, first by the police and firemen, and later, by the time I was in Senior High, by the school football and basketball teams and by our coach, Warren Lentz. Bobby, in his forties by then, followed Lentz everywhere and would come to our practices as water boy, to our pep-rallies, and to the games, where he led cheers in imitation of the girl cheerleaders. Occasionally some of the cruder, unthinking kids would play on his suggestibility for laughs; someone taught him, for instance, to grab his crotch on cue and start thrusting his hips, but other kids, or Lentz himself, would step in angrily to stop them.

For small town West Virginia in the 1960s, see Jayne Anne Phillips's recent memoir **SMALL TOWN GIRLS: A WRITER'S MEMOIR**.



"I think of the man who lives in the house next to the town jail, just across the parking lot of the theater. He's an older man with the mind of a boy; my mother has told me he's a mongoloid, using a word that was still in accepted usage. The word reminds me of the country of Mongolia, and he does look ancient, foreign, with his jowls and his wrinkled, down-sliding face. Doglike, he sits at the window staring toward the traffic on Kanawha Street, his forehead pressed to the glass. He is a prisoner. I feel my soul turn over when I glimpse sight of him, as though I have imprisoned him there, in his chair by the window. I've never seen him outside and I've never seen his mother."



And lastly, see Alex Green's moving, well-researched recent biography, **A PERFECT TURMOIL: WALTER E. FERNALD AND THE STRUGGLE TO CARE FOR AMERICA'S DISABLED**, which addresses this historical "othering." Great to see it win the 2025 NBCC award!

"Given the many possible diagnoses they could now make, (Walter E.) Fernald told the doctors they should abandon the terms idiot and imbecile and refer instead to the overall class of conditions...as feeble-mindedness....Being sensitive to such things was the only way, he told them, that they could also be better doctors....Whatever the cause, an ethic led him to call simultaneously for curiosity, compassion, and kindness while also speaking bluntly of the people he was committed to caring for, and the

ways in which they lived when deprived of family and community. Every word mattered and generalizations were evidence of a lack of understanding that only made things worse..."