



Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy (Chapel Hill Books)

Jay Tolson

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When *The Moviegoer*, an extraordinary first novel by an unknown Louisiana author, won the National Book Award in 1962, it marked the arrival of an exceptional literary talent. With his five successive novels and his wide-ranging philosophical and occasional essays, Walker Percy shored up his reputation as one of America's greatest writers - an ironic moralist and perhaps the shrewdest chronicler of life in the New South. Yet even by the time of his death in 1990, little was known about this intensely private man. Based on extensive interviews, written with access to Percy's letters and manuscripts, Jay Tolson has fashioned the first major biography of the writer, an authoritative portrait that brings Percy alive as it illuminates his distinguished body of work. We see Percy's life and his brilliant career against the background of the American South, whose colorful and tragic history is rooted deeply in the hearts and minds of its most talented sons and daughters. With a novelist's eye for character and the judgment of an informed critic, Tolson captures the lifelong drama of genius, always attentive to its artistic, psychological and spiritual dimensions. Percy was the scion of a proud, honorable and accomplished family, a clan haunted by a crippling streak of melancholy that issued repeatedly in suicides, including the self-inflicted deaths of Walker Percy's father and grandfather. Tolson depicts the struggle of Percy's life and the heroism with which he battled his family demons (and his own tubercular condition) and worked his way toward a writing career. Here is the young Percy in the days after his father's death, traveling with his brother and his mother (who would soon die herself, in mysterious circumstances) from his childhood home of Birmingham, Alabama, to Athens, Georgia, and then on to Greenville, Mississippi, and the sprawling house of his Uncle Will. Adopted at 16 by this remarkable "bachelor-poet-lawyer-planter," the most important single influence

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