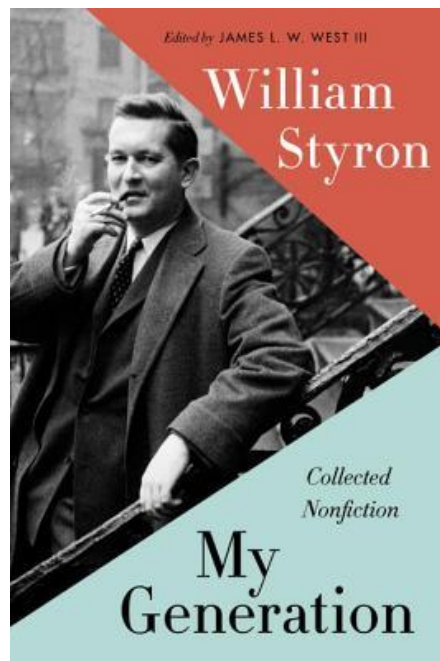




My Generation: Collected Nonfiction

William Styron , James L.W. West III (Editor)

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A vital, illuminating collection of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner's elegant, passionately engaged nonfiction

My Generation is the definitive gathering of William Styron's nonfiction, exposing the core of this greatly gifted, highly convivial, and profoundly serious artist from his literary emergence in the 1950s to his death in 2006.

Here are fifty years of Styron's essays, memoirs, reviews, op-eds, articles, eulogies, and speeches, reflecting the same brilliant style and informed thinking that he brought to his towering fiction and to a deeply committed public life. Including many newly collected and never-before-published items, this compendium ranges from the original mission statement of *The Paris Review*, which Styron helped found in 1953, to a 2001 tribute to his friend Philip Roth—creating an essential overview of arts and letters during the post–World War II years.

In these pages, Styron writes vividly of childhood days in Tidewater Virginia spent going to movies, not reading books. (“It does not mean the death of literacy or creativity if one is drenched in popular culture at an early age.”) He recalls being among the group of soldiers who would have been sent to invade Japan and were saved by Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb, which Styron feels was the right choice, “even though its absolute rightness can never be proved.” And he writes as few others have about midlife battles with clinical depression, “a pain that is all but indescribable, and therefore to everyone but the sufferer almost meaningless.”

Here, too, are Styron's personal encounters with world leaders, fellow authors, and friends, each of whom comes memorably to life. Styron recalls sharing contraband Cuban cigars with JFK (“a naughty memento, a conversation piece with a touch of scandal”), getting lost in the snow with Robert Penn Warren, and party-hopping with the young James Jones (an experience he likens to “keeping company with a Roman emperor”). The beginnings of his masterpieces *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice* are chronicled here, along with the controversy that greeted the former upon its 1967 publication. Throughout, Styron celebrates the men and women of his generation, whose lives were forged in the crucible of World War II.

Whether he's recounting a walk with his dog, musing on the Modern Library's list of the hundred best English-language novels of the twentieth century, or contemplating America's fraught racial legacy from his point of view as the grandson of a woman who owned slaves, William Styron writes always in urgent, finely calibrated prose. These fascinating pieces bring readers closer to this great writer and the world he observed, interacted with, and changed.

Praise for *My Generation*

“William Styron's *My Generation: Collected Nonfiction* is both unsurpassably charming and unflinchingly honest, whether recounting the fallout from *The Confessions of Nat Turner* or reminiscing about the slave-owning grandmother who warned him never to forget he was a Southerner.”—*Vogue*

“At its most accomplished, Styron's non-fiction mixes a conscientious, richly traditional prose style with a strong current of fellow feeling, a certain awe at the human condition, which is what gives power to his best

fiction. . . . Styron stood tall in his generation, and the best of him will stand up over time.”—*USA Today*

“A must for every Styron fan’s library.”—**BBC**

My Generation: Collected Nonfiction Details

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From Reader Review My Generation: Collected Nonfiction for online ebook

Mark Noble says

I read *My Generation*, William Styron's collection of nonfiction, over the summer. Like several people who have already commented on this book, I have never read any of Styron's novels. I do have a vague recollection of seeing *Sophie's Choice* when the movie came out in the early eighties but I could not name another of his novels. I have also been reading *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer*. In this book I learned that Mailer maintained lifelong friendships or relationships with several contemporaries that I have not read, among them James Jones and William Styron. I had decided to read Jones', *From Here to Eternity* as soon as I could find the time, but a review of Styron's collection, compiled by James West, caught my eye and I decided to read it first. It is a big book, 656 pages in the print version, but most of the essays are short and easy to read in a sitting, and what a broad range of topics are covered between the covers.

Read the forward by Tom Brokaw: it is a wonderful introduction to this book and one which I will not attempt to compete. I found three recurring topics that caught my attention, and all three are related. First and foremost, the issue of race and slavery in the USA was a topic that was often on Styron's mind. His controversial Pulitzer prize winning novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, (which I have just started to read) was published to wide acclaim in 1967 and then, over the years, became a target for black groups who did not believe a white writer should pen a novel in the first person about a black slave. Several essays in the collection give very interesting background about the time he was writing the book as well as his feelings about the negative reactions that came later. He also writes lovingly of the south, especially his boyhood home in the Tidewaters of Virginia, even as he grapples with the fact that the first slaves to arrive in America disembarked at the Jamestown, Virginia settlement in 1619.

The second topic is the Holocaust. *Sophie's Choice* was his fictional work dedicated to the theme; he often comes back to this topic with insightful thoughts about some of the greatest evils unleashed by mankind, including camps such as Auschwitz, the bombing of Hiroshima and man's predilection for war and mistreatment of other humans in general. Thirdly, like Mailer, he spent some time thinking about the US prison system, specifically, the death penalty. So, the slavery of the black race in the USA, the Nazi work camps, which were designed to eradicate another race, the Jews, through work, starvation and outright murder, and the incarceration, especially of blacks, in our US prison system, designed to reduce humans to something less, rather than provide for a redemption and second chance as intended, are clearly linked and are frequent topics in this collection.

The breadth of his nonfiction writing is also remarkable. He touches on movies, writing for TV, cigarettes and cancer, his failed bid for a Rhodes scholarship, early days at the Paris Review, clinical depression, life in the marines, his family and dozens of other subjects. One of the most interesting essay is a biographical piece which describes a time when he was incorrectly diagnosed with syphilis. I also thoroughly enjoyed most of his snapshots of people who he had met. He writes about authors, politicians, friends and neighbors. His verbal pictures of Kennedy, Mitterand, Jones and Robert Penn Warren are fantastic. His writing style is literary but accessible: his descriptive talent is incredible. I found myself checking the Kindle dictionary on every other page but this did not impact the flow of his words. The quality of his writing is simply superb. I found myself wondering why our modern, popular novelists are not producing such well written nonfiction in between novels: we see nothing of the sort from Baldacci, Box, Grisham, Koontz, et al.

I could not wait to begin reading one of Styron's novels well before I finished this wonderful, thought provoking collection.

victor harris says

Magnificent command of prose writing and exquisite in its phrasing. A collection of Styron's essays heavily centered on his roots in Virginia and how his experiences there shaped his views on race. His commentary is great mix of insight, wit, and empathy. Whether you are familiar with Styron through his fiction works (most prominently the famous Nat Turner Revolt) or visiting his writing for the first time, you won't be disappointed. A delight to read whether you agree with his positions or have just a passing interest in some of the subject matter.

Carol Storm says

Most of the picked-up pieces in this collection are pretty bland. Styron fawns over John F. Kennedy. Styron pals around with Arthur Miller. Styron sentimentalizes the South. Styron sentimentalizes his childhood. Styron says what he has to say in order to get in good with the literary establishment.

But if you read very closely, there are a couple of eye-opening moments where the great Virginian inadvertently reveals what's really cooking beneath the studied blandness and the mask of southern gentility. Reviewing a book about legendary American general Douglas MacArthur, ("I shall return") Styron wanders off into an inadvertently hilarious hissy-fit about how "most Americans" hate military service and have no fondness for the rituals of military life. It's not that Styron is wrong, exactly. But he expresses himself like Margaret Dumont dressing down Groucho Marx! If you base your whole literary persona on the image of a tough, WWII Marine, (which Styron did,) it's not good salesmanship to whine about "hideous food, horrible people, unspeakable boredom." Styron always manages to imply in his writing that he was a natural born Marine, yet somehow you get the impression that he was a spoiled southern brat with a vast sense of entitlement who loved the *idea* of the Marine Corps (as a white gentleman's club) but just couldn't handle being lumped in with the Yankee/immigrant riff-raff. Plenty of shout-outs to Chesty Puller and E.B. Sledge. No mention of John Basilone!

Oh, but it gets weirder. Much weirder. Styron sneers at MacArthur for coming down hard on Japanese war criminals like General Homma, he of the infamous Bataan Death March. That's okay, I guess. It's hard not to suspect there was some vengeance-seeking and racial animus at the trial. But then Styron comes out of nowhere with this jaw-dropper: "Homma was a man of enormous virtue and personal dignity, in no way responsible for atrocities committed by far-off elements of his command." Huh? Oh, I get it. A losing general, fighting in a hopeless cause, evil is going on but it's not his fault, he's a saint -- Styron is confusing Homma with his old boyfriend General Lee. Desperation, that's what this is. Styron copping a plea for the South by excusing Imperial Japan!

And then it gets really, really weird. Styron is reviewing a book about the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, and he really piles it on thick about how he hates that no-good William Calley. Well, duh. Who doesn't hate William Calley? But Styron has to wander off into Styron-land again, babbling about how wars used to be fought by "gentlemen" who played by "the rules." Guess who's masturbating to the Stars and Bars again? Guess he never heard of the Fort Pillow Massacre! But then, out of nowhere, writing about the good guys in Calley's platoon, who refused to shoot women and children, Styron *marvels* at their strength of character. He says something like, "after all, they were the deprived, and the semi-deprived, with their bubblegum, their comic books, and their grass." WHOA!!! Staggering condescension, yes? And this is from a guy who idolizes the Confederate Army, which was, you know, largely illiterate. But not in Styron world! The way he

remembers it, the entire Confederate army was made up solely of officers. And gentlemen. And if it weren't for the cruel ironies of history, Styron would have been with them, instead of being trapped in the Marine Corps with the rest of us -- the scum of 20th century American life.

Thank you, William Styron. Thank you for not punching me in the head!

Tessa says

L'écriture de Styron est d'une grande beauté. La raison pour laquelle j'ai mis tant de temps à lire ce livre, c'est que je l'ai intercalé de la lecture de deux de ses romans (entre autre), parce qu'il y faisait référence et que je n'avait lu à ce jour que Le choix de Sophie.

La récollection de tous ces articles rédigés pour des revues littéraires ou magazines est bien structurée, par thème et chronologiquement, ce qui permet aussi d'apprécier l'évolution de sa pensée. Ce livre n'est pas encore traduit en français. Je ne peux donc pas le recommander à mes (nombreux amis unilingue francophones).

J'ai lu plusieurs commentaires de lecteurs sur Goodreads et je suis d'accord avec la plupart d'entre eux pour dire qu'il s'agit d'un livre (posthume) remarquable.

Kathleen says

Beautiful. Short reviews, articles, letters written in tribute to others, musings about writers of his generation, his comments on the times, candid thoughts about his literary influences. Great stuff for Styron fans.

Alan says

Since I think Styron writes the most gorgeous prose of any American writer (Alice Munro is Canadian), I thought I would try this collection of his non-fiction. Good idea. In addition to those wonderful long sentences, he had great politics, especially on race and the South(where he grew up). But best of all are his articles on his peers (all friends) - James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, James Jones, Saul Bellow, Phillip Roth, Truman Capote, Arthur Miller - the Golden Age of white male writers all openly competing to be top dog.

Shaun says

Wow, there is a ton of content in this book. It's hard to review something that is so varied and lengthy. I find myself just reading a couple of pieces per day and really enjoying them.

The book description gives a very good overview of the content, so I'll avoid doing that, however the writing is superb. I have not read Styron prior to this, so was not aware of his style. I had heard of two of his books, however. Reading this collection has motivated me to add some of his fiction to my reading list. The writing is dense, but in a good way, as it shows what a truly talented writer Styron was.

If you enjoy short pieces of reflective thought or opinions and thoughts of the times the pieces were written,

then definitely check out this book.

I received a copy of this book through a Goodreads First Reads giveaway.

W. says

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-confe...>

When Gertrude Stein declared those who came of age during World War I a lost generation, she did not anticipate that they would not be the last. The novels of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner would be the touchstones of a post-World War II generation of writers who also saw themselves as lost, though in a different way. While lacking the spiritual alienation of their literary forebears, this group, among them Norman Mailer, Philip Roth and James Baldwin, still felt detached from American life, given the conformity and homogeneity that dominated the postwar cultural landscape.

One of the group's resounding voices was William Styron (1925-2006). Styron's first novel, "Lie Down in Darkness," was published in 1951, when he was only 26, and immediately led to his being hailed as one of the great literary voices of his generation. "The Confessions of Nat Turner," published in 1967, bolstered his fame and earned him the Pulitzer Prize. At the same time, it earned him the censure of black writers, who accused him of stereotyping and cultural appropriation, since the book is told from the perspective of the historical figure, Nat Turner, who led a slave revolt in Virginia in 1831. By the time Styron published "Sophie's Choice" in 1979, his place in the literary firmament was secure. While he continued to write, his battle with depression, so eloquently recounted in "Darkness Visible" (1990), hampered his output. The personal essay came to be a form that suited his temperament.

As his daughter, Alexandra Styron, recounted in her 2011 memoir, "Reading My Father," Styron was a writer with a "cunning sense of history" who knew that at certain times, ideas enter the cultural conversation with special urgency and relevance. This collection of his nonfiction work, "My Generation," is a testament to his engagement with history and the ideas that shaped his era.

Collected essays and nonfiction by major literary figures are often a hodgepodge. But James L.W. West III has put a great deal of thought into how a reader might engage with Styron's writings. The thematic organization of "My Generation"—and the chronological order of essays within its 16 sections—allows the book to serve as a biographical sketch of Styron, which isn't a surprise, since Mr. West is also the author of "William Styron: A Life," an authorized biography published during Styron's lifetime.

Mr. West lets Styron's raconteur persona and his failings come through in this book, especially in the section titled "Race and Slavery." These 10 pieces of nonfiction illuminate what led Styron to write "The Confessions of Nat Turner" and the way he dealt with the criticism levied on him in the wake of the book's publication.

Advertisement

In his 1965 essay "This Quiet Dust," commissioned for Harper's magazine by its brush-of-the-comet editor Willie Morris, Styron recounts how he chose Nat Turner as a subject. When he was 10 or 11 years old, Styron read about the slave in a Virginia history textbook. He doesn't recall the book's exact language but writes that he remembers the following description: "In 1831, a fanatical Negro slave named Nat Turner led a terrible insurrection in Southampton County, murdering many white people. The insurrection was immediately put down, and for their cruel deeds Nat Turner and most of the other Negroes involved in the

rebellion were hanged.” As the grandson of a woman who owned slaves—his grandmother often told the story of a slave girl who was her childhood companion until emancipation—Styron felt the burden of Southern history intensely. “To come to know the Negro,” he writes in this essay, “has become the moral imperative of every white Southerner. I suspect that my search for Nat Turner, my own private attempt as a novelist to re-create and bring alive that dim and prodigious black man, has been at least a partial fulfillment of this mandate.”

Yet Styron failed to realize that, as a white Southerner in the mid-1960s, he would not be thought of as a writer who could write about black life without condescension or with anything close to understanding. In 1967, when he traveled to Wilberforce University, the oldest private historically black university in the United States, to receive an honorary degree, he recalled the moment as one “of intense warmth and brotherhood.” He had no hint of the storm that was brewing.

The burgeoning Black Arts movement, with its emphasis on African-Americans telling their own stories, left no room for writers like Styron. The author was blindsided when a group of black intellectuals published the book “William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond” (1968). For Styron, this was the wound that never healed, which is made clear in his American Heritage essay “Nat Turner Revisited.” This piece, written in the wake of Los Angeles’s Rodney King riots, acknowledges the “defects and vulnerabilities” of his novel, noting how Faulkner remarked that novelists are known for “the splendor of our failures.”

When Styron wrote “Sophie’s Choice,” he worried about the issue of authenticity, still bruised by his experience with “Nat Turner.” He recounts how he wrestled with his doubts in “A Wheel of Evil Come Full Circle,” published in 1997 in the *Sewanee Review*. While the book didn’t face a similar onslaught of criticism—there was no “Ten Rabbis Respond” written in reaction to the book, Styron remarks—his essay reveals that he was troubled by how accurate his rendition of the Holocaust might be. This concern led to a private conversation with Hannah Arendt, during which she asked Styron what, before writing *Nat Turner*, he had known about slavery. “An artist creates his own authenticity,” Arendt noted. “What matters is imaginative conviction and boldness, a passion to invade alien territory and render an account of ones discoveries.”

By contrast, it was the familiar territory of Styron’s own psyche that yielded some of his most powerful essays, as revealed in the section “Disorders of the Mind.” The section opens with a 1988 *New York Times* op-ed, “Why Primo Levi Need Not Have Died,” written in reaction to a symposium on the Italian writer, who committed suicide in 1987. The symposium participants seemed incredulous that Levi, a Holocaust survivor, would consider suicide. Some participants saw Levi’s suicide as a moral failing.

Nonsense, argued Styron. Publicly revealing his own battle with depression, he admitted to having suicidal thoughts himself. “In the popular mind, suicide is usually the work of a coward,” Styron notes. From the perspective of experience, though, “the torment that precipitates the act makes it often one of blind necessity.” The real tragedy, Styron makes clear, is that Levi’s death was not inevitable and that with care he would have been “rescued from the abyss.”

There are a few works of Styron’s nonfiction that could perhaps have been omitted from “My Generation,” such as speeches and tributes to contemporaries like Philip Roth and Ralph Ellison, which read like dinner-hour toasts rather than essays. Yet one benefit of these shorter, less significant pieces is that they reveal that Styron knew of the debt he owed to members of the lost generation. In “An Elegy for F. Scott Fitzgerald,” written for the *New York Review of Books* in 1963, Styron wrote that writers like Fitzgerald “might be quite dead, but their spirits remain immortally fleshed, and we are capable of talking about them as we talk about devoted friends.” The essays in “My Generation” render William Styron immortally fleshed, brilliantly illuminating the world he created in his fiction.

James says

If an author's highest ambition is for his reader to know people then Styron has hit the mark again and again in this collection.

Rick says

Fiction it seems was more Styron's gift. Nonfiction he was serviceable at. He is a little stuffy, a little self-promotional, a little flat in his prose. However, as a witness he brings interesting testimony to his time and his literary (mostly) brethren of the title, *My Generation*. Further, the volume benefits strongly from his willingness to talk about several then and now critical issues: race, war, the death penalty, and mental health. There is value and courage in this willingness and in the perspectives—he is very much the southern gentleman but a questioning one.

Still and all, *My Generation* is extensive and a more selected collection might have been a better route to go. There are too many redundancies among the essays and a handful of what might be better classified as memorabilia—Styron's notes for a toast at a party for his and his wife's anniversary, for example. The book is thematically organized, which, alas, reinforces the redundancies since they tend to follow immediately on one another. Apprenticeship, The South, Race and Slavery, Final Solutions, Disorders of the Mind, Warfare and Military Life, Prisoners, Presidential, Reports, Literary, Antecedents, Friends and Contemporaries, Crusades, Complaints Gripes, Bagatelles, Amours, and In Closing are the section titles with anywhere from two to eighteen essays per section. Some sections could have been dropped entirely, Amours, for example, which is two toasts and an introduction. Others might easily have benefited from being well-trimmed to eliminate either the redundant or the shallow.

Nonetheless it adds up to a useful self-portrait of a mid-20th century novelist and his mostly white, entirely male peers (except for Lillian Hellman). James Baldwin was a friend and makes frequent appearances. So too were James Jones, Ralph Ellison, Peter Matthiessen, Philip Roth, Terry Southern, who also makes frequent appearances, Irwin Shaw, Arthur Miller, Robert Penn Warren, James Dickey, and Truman Capote. If this is a generation of writers you are interested in there is additional value in the collection. For me the best part was the flawed, but enlightened for the time, and still entirely relevant, comments on race, mental illness, and the death penalty.

Styron was very much a man of his time but he understood the injustice bred into American history. He had a family connection to slavery (a grandmother he recalls with affection and unexamined frequency), and was willing to strive to see history and culture from a black perspective (but shocked and too wounded by a political reaction to this presumption from black radicals—one of the weaknesses of his writings about Baldwin is Styron's defensiveness around that one aspect of the otherwise positive response to his Confessions of Nat Turner, ever holding up Baldwin's blessing as his get out of honky jail card. Styron appears to be a great friend and husband, a wonderful drinking companion, and a good novelist whose reputation likely peaked in his lifetime. His best non-fiction was his slender book on his battle with depression. His essays are useful and would be a much better reading experience if they were presented with less fat and gristle.

Peter Mcloughlin says

I haven't read Sophie's Choice or the Confessions of Nat Turner but I have become more familiar with the author of these works in his collection of Nonfiction from the 1950s up until his death in 2006. He seems like a humane gentleman and open minded writer. He has southern roots but did not shrink from the darker side of his tidewater legacy. I like this author. I may pick up his fiction.

In this collection Styron talks about his bouts of depression, his thoughts on race, his pride of his southern roots, and various items of interest in the tumultuous postwar period to the early 2000s. He is a good writer with a command of the language and gentle feel to him. Pretty good collection.

Mills College Library says

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