

Dear Mr Faulkner,

Thank you for your interesting and challenging submission. A point about the title - quoting from distinguished writers may provide reflected glow, but it is risky to suggest that your intention is to signify nothing, the more so if after several hundred pages the reader still has no idea where or when the action is taking place, who is speaking to whom, and about what.

On the positive side, your dialog is frequently convincing and your description vivid. However your characters engage in trivial and inconsequential activity, searching for quarters, eating nameless gruel, bickering endlessly and wrestling, almost always in mud, in service of what intention on your part it is impossible to ascertain. A general dissatisfaction with life emerges, particularly with rural life in the Southern states, nor do you appear impressed with Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Your apparent goal of shocking and disturbing your audience might be better served if you managed to establish that something shocking is indeed happening and perhaps even what it is.

In the light of this you may wish to revise the decision to tell a large part of the story as stream of consciousness from the point of view of a severely disabled character, incapable of speech or normal interaction with others, who reports raw sensory data without interpretation, who is unaware of the passing of time or cause and effect, who cannot grasp the persistence of objects or beings when they leave his sight, and whose reality drifts without warning between present and past.

When we finally leave Benjy's murky mind we find ourselves inside Quentin, suicidally depressed, so fey others think him drunk, whose fragmented fantasies wander distractedly around a core horror he denies, mentally deranged to the point of blacking out and getting beaten up.

Jason takes over, consumed with bitterness and so dishonest that he lies even to himself.

When the reader is clutching at any clue to untangle the knot of your arbitrary chronology, it is pure capriciousness to give one character two names and to give other pairs of characters the same name. It eventually emerges why Maury becomes Benjy, why Quentin is the name of both a boy and a girl of a later generation, and that Jason is named after his father. Consider though that your duty of communication may override such token nods to verisimilitude. You even have a golfer call "Caddie!" moments before you introduce Caddy. Benjy howls when he thinks he hears the nickname of his sister Candace, but Benjy is not alone in his perplexity.

Your exasperating overuse of pronouns is a major source of confusion. Pronouns are useful abbreviations only when it is clear to whom they refer. See the *Elements of Style*, by Strunk and White for more on this, tips on punctuation and correct use of the apostrophe.

You deliberately mystify at the expense of realism. While the stream-of-consciousness style can make some claim to represent a psychological reality, you omit large tracts of the information to which consciousness has access. Surely when recalling a conversation one knows to whom one is talking, and quite possibly some of the context.

To give your readers any hope of reassembling the narrative you constantly interrupt the flow with contrived dating information, such as Caddy stating that she is seven, Quentin asserting that he is older, and Luster mentioning Benjy's age to unspecified acquaintances in the mud. The assumption that your readers are keeping a calculator handy and tracking all of this may be ill-founded. Are you aiming for the Sudoku market?

It is difficult to decide which of your characters is the least deserving of sympathy: eloquent, nihilistic, alcoholic Father, dissolute and shiftless Uncle Maurie, vain, complaining, hypochondriac mother, bloated and blundering Benjy, vulnerable, depressed and aimless Quentin, affectionate, adventurous and weak Caddy, bullying Luster, furious and selfish Miss Quentin, or Jason, the cheating, embittered racist, beater of women, children, old men, and his retarded brother. You have

created only one admirable character in Dilsey, whom you work cruelly into arthritic old age.

Your preoccupation with time, death, lamps, shadows, sex, blood, water and mud has led to some heavy-handed and repetitive passages which you would do well to cut.

Your sound design in Benjy's section consists entirely of sobbing, howling, bellowing, wailing and rain falling. In Quentin's section we hear only ticking and chiming. The only variety is the show band and the church meeting, late in the piece. Consider having someone giggle occasionally.

Perhaps the whole point of the story is the slow revelation that Quentin fantasizes incest with Candace, his sister, that Caddy becomes pregnant out of wedlock, that Benjy has raped or almost raped her or him or some schoolgirl and has consequently been spayed, that Maury is engaged in a ménage à trois with Mrs Patterson and Roskus, or that something is going on between Jason and Queenie. If so, you make rather a meal of it. Extramarital sex, adultery, incest, homosexuality and bestiality, in mud, are not entirely unknown in the deep South, any more than paedophilia is a profound surprise to citizens of the greater Boston area, which brings me to suggest that you may wish to reconsider whether the leaden attempt at farce, in which you recount Quentin's mistaken arrest for kidnapping a young girl, is sufficiently amusing to justify its inclusion, given that it carries the piece considerably further outside the bounds of good taste, no mean feat.

Your use of degrading racial epithets is in no way excused by placing them in the mouths of your characters. Who do you think you are, Quentin Tarantino? The terms African American and Italian American are commonly acceptable and should be used to avoid offense to minorities. You may use the term Jew rather than kike, or it may prove more practical simply to leave Jews out of the story.

Your fanciful phonetic transcription of Southern African American dialect is insulting, perpetuates demeaning stereotypes and far from creating atmosphere, serves only to further obscure any glimmer of meaning. Rewrite this dialog in plain English.

As Dilsey, the black matriarch, is the only effective person in the entire cast of characters, it appears that you are not making a racist statement, but the reader wouldn't know it to hear you talk: "... a nigger is not so much a person as a form of behavior.." muses Quentin mildly, or as you permit Jason to ponder, "Let one stay around white people for a while and he's not worth killing."

You are not much better on women. Quentin learns from his father that women "...have no respect for each other for themselves... have an affinity for evil for supplying whatever the evil lacks in itself...", and comprise a "...Delicate equilibrium of periodical filth between two moons balanced...". Caddy's virginity or lack of it, is the central issue on which the decline of the entire family hinges. Caddy refers to her own pregnancy as sickness. Women's bodies are their own, Mr Faulkner.

You manage a masterful merging of prejudices: "Why must you do like nigger women in the pasture the ditches..." Presumably for the mud.

Benjy is sensitive to scent, howling, inarticulate and desexed. Why not make him a dog? People love animal stories. A cognitively disabled man is not an animal, Mr Faulkner.

You may be cataloging this prejudice, superstition and cultural baggage to show the damage they do, dividing families, restricting personal and intellectual development, nurturing hypocrisy and hatred, however your misery is so general and your intention so obscure that one cannot tell.

Typographical tics, such as a space before a final quotation mark, apparently indicating speech arrested by strong emotion, are at best arch and at worst distracting and annoying. When you set up a typographical convention, such as italics to indicate a change of scene or temporality, try to use it consistently. In Benjy's stream the temporal italics revert after a paragraph or so, then appear again when the action shifts back. In Quentin's stream the entire temporally and spatially shifted episode is italicized. One tries to give you the benefit of the doubt and infer some difference in Benjy's and

Quentin's thought processes, but one suspects you have simply lost what passes for the plot.

There is one joke: Of a handsome youth: That mouth should be on a girl's face. Youth: It often is. You break this up to ensure no one will get it. Father has a few epigrams, lamed by Quentin's retelling. With the vast body of politically incorrect humor at your disposal, this seems a poor crop.

Your action writing is lamentable. Rather than ending your one car chase spectacularly you let the air out of its tires. Several times you set up a buggy to overturn and then shy away. Nancy's fall in the ditch and Quentin's fall from the horse take place off stage, as does Quentin's leap from the bridge. Of the fights you describe not a single blow. As for the sex, is there any?

May I suggest that you employ a traditional narrator much earlier than Part IV, to introduce scenes and characters and delineate relationships. Your story is simple enough.

In the early nineteenth hundreds the Compson family lives on a small, muddy farm in Jefferson, Mississippi with their loyal African American retainers. Jason Richmond Compson is a preacher, well educated, eloquent and humorous, but nihilistic and alcoholic. His wife, Caroline née Bascomb, of a less eminent family, constantly complains of illness. She pursues a gentility beyond her means while neglecting her children. Their four children, in order of descending age, are Quentin, Candace (Caddy), Jason and Maury. Maury, later called Benjamin, never progresses beyond a mental age of three. Caroline's unemployed brother Maury, lives with them.

The household and children are managed, by Dilsey Gibson, matriarch of the African American family who work the farm. She is aided by her husband Roskus, and children Versh, T.P. and Frony. Benjy cannot be left alone and a member of Dilsey's family always accompanies him.

The family owns a little pasture, two cows, a few horses, pigs and a succession of howling dogs.

Nancy falls in a ditch and Roskus is obliged to shoot her. Her bones remain as a constant reminder of death and mud. Nancy, one hopes, is a horse.

The children come home after playing in the mud to discover that Damuddy, their grandmother, has died. Benjy smells the death. Caddy, in muddy drawers, climbs a tree to look in at the wake while her brothers watch.

Uncle Maury is having an affair with Mrs Patterson, a neighbor's wife, for ten years or more.

Young Maury is renamed Benjy due to the scandalous and dissolute behavior of Uncle Maury.

Caddy reaches puberty and takes an interest in boys. Benjy and Quentin are upset.

Quentin breaks his leg while horse riding. It sets badly and has to be broken and reset. He is incapacitated inside while Caddy's beau wanders along the fence trying to lure Caddy out.

Caddy's adventurous and affectionate nature leads her into sexual encounters. She necks with Charlie on the porch swing. She dresses up and uses scent. Benjy, his olfactory sense highly developed, prefers Caddy's natural odors. Caddy allows him to give her perfume away to Dilsey.

Mr Patterson intercepts Benjy carrying a love letter to Mrs Patterson and beats Uncle Maury up.

Caddy disposes of her virginity with Dalton Ames. Outraged and hurt, Quentin fights with the guilty, stricken and possibly pregnant Caddy, almost carrying out a suicide pact with her, in mud. Quentin confronts Ames, insisting he leave town. They meet on a bridge. Ames demonstrates his shooting skills, to discourage Quentin from a duel. He humiliates Quentin but does not hurt him.

Faced with Caddy's indiscretions, Father starts drinking uncontrollably.

There is an encounter, at least in Quentin's mind, between Quentin and someone else, possibly Caddy, involving the barn, the rain, a hog wallow (smelly mud) and a lot of moaning and panting.

Pregnant and in search of a husband, Candace is sent to the French Lick resort in Indiana and becomes engaged to well-do-do Herbert Head, who has a car and unashamedly flatters Mother. Quentin knows from Harvard that Herbert cheated at cards and his mid-term exams. He confronts Herbert. Caddy comes in and breaks up the fight. She asks Quentin to promise to look after Father and Benjy. Quentin tries to talk her out of the marriage. She says "I've got to marry somebody."

At the wedding T.P. and Benjy get drunk on sarsaparilla. Benjy falls over more, but is otherwise much the same. Quentin, outraged, fights T.P. Realizing Caddy is leaving him, Benjy bellows. Caddy runs. Benjy corners her and pulls at her gown. Caddy gives Benjy her satin wedding slipper.

Distressed at Caddy's departure, Benjy escapes from the house, grabs a passing schoolgirl, and is castrated to prevent further rape attacks.

After Caddy's marriage Quentin is away at Harvard. He cuts classes. With ponderous symbolism he deliberately breaks his watch, but the watch ticks on and bells chime incessantly. He recalls confessing to his father both that he is a virgin and that he has committed incest. He obsesses about Caddy. He is attracted to his plump, bespectacled misogynist Canadian roommate. Others notice and suggest they are married. He has confused feelings for his handsome schoolmate Gerald.

Quentin puts on his best suit and plans suicide by jumping off a bridge weighted with flatirons. He wanders along the banks of the Charles, no doubt nostalgic for mud, followed by a little girl with whom he has shared buns, and is arrested for kidnapping. Freed, he goes to a party and starts a fist fight with Gerald who is being ungallant. He goes home on the trolley, beaten and bloodied.

Quentin cleans his vest, brushes his teeth, posts some letters, and carries out his suicide plans, perhaps in sheer frustration at having no idea what he means by "found not death at the salt lick".

Caddy gives birth to a girl and names her Quentin. The father is probably Ames as Quentin died a gay virgin. Herbert abandons Caddy, aware he is not the father.

Father dies of drink and disappointment. Benjy smells the death. Dan, the dog, howls. Quentin is sent to be raised by Dilsey. Mother, abetted by Jason, disowns Caddy for her moral depravity.

Caddy comes to her father's funeral and pays Jason to arrange for her to see her daughter Quentin. Jason gives her only a glimpse of Quentin as he drives past. She later confronts him and he blackmails her. Jason hates Caddy because with the collapse of her marriage Jason lost the prospect of a job at Herbert's bank and is forced to work for the long-suffering Earl at the hardware store.

Mother and Benjy start taking trips to the cemetery. Roskus is getting too old and arthritic to work and drive the carriage. T.P. does it, badly.

Roskus dies. Blue, the dog, howls. Luster sees Pappy's ghost in the barn.

By 1928, Benjy, Jason and Mother are left on the decaying farm, with Dilsey, Frony and her children. Uncle Maury is still sponging. Benjy at thirty three is led around his childhood haunts with their painful memories, by Frony's son Luster, who bullies and tortures Benjy by reminding him of Caddy. Dilsey calms Benjy with Caddy's wedding slipper, now yellowed and cracked.

Jason has grown from a whining, tattletale child into a dishonest, hypocritical adult, his only talents dark humor and sinister cunning. He is cynical and sarcastic with his mother and bullies everyone else, particularly seventeen year old Quentin, who says she is going to hell, plays truant from school and climbs out of her bedroom window for sexual encounters. Caddy sends Mother checks to support Quentin. Jason substitutes forged checks which Mother burns to demonstrate her piety and Caddy's sinfulness. Jason cashes the original checks and gambles the proceeds unsuccessfully on the stock market, soon to crash. He is deeply anti-semitic and racist. He is a grudging and unreliable employee in the hardware store. He sleeps with Lorraine, a prostitute.

Jason tries to belt Quentin but is stopped by Mother and Dilsey. Quentin takes up with a man from a visiting show. Jason follows them. They let the air out of his tires and drive off honking derisively.

Quentin runs away, taking the several thousand dollars Jason keeps in a strongbox. When they discover her missing they think at first she has committed suicide like her namesake. Then Jason discovers the money is gone, calls the police and sets them on to her. Jason's influence is not what he thought it was. The Sheriff refuses to assist and indicates he suspects Jason of theft.

Jason pursues Quentin but fails to find her and is humiliated.

Dilsey takes Ben and Luster to an African American church service at which a guest preacher moves them. You almost manage an upbeat moment here, then Dilsey says "I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin."

Luster begins to drive Ben to the cemetery. As they pass to the left of the confederate monument Ben begins to howl, so he can at least tell left from right. Jason hears him, beats them both savagely and sends them back to their miserable home.

Note that by rearranging the events in order the story can be related considerably more clearly and efficiently. What emerges is a chronicle of small doings. Apart from a few shadowy hints of sexual peccadilloes, several deaths, one illegitimate birth, one suicide and one castration, none of which you explicitly describe, no events of any significance actually occur. Mud happens.

No one needs to read about dysfunctional families. If you are seeking innovation you could write a story about a loving, happy family that somehow confronts its difficulties successfully.

There arises a cold dread that this is allegory. Perhaps Caddy is the old South, beautiful, welcoming and fertile but finally violated and abandoned, Master Quentin an impotent memory of its moral values, Mother its hypocritical gentility, Jason its venality and prejudice, Dilsey its stoic persistence, and Benjy inarticulate anguish at its loss. You might include a few diagrams.

More frightening is the possibility that the Compsons are engaged in a psychological struggle to find fullness, constructing order and a sense of self through language. Benjy is the unconscious, Jason is the ego, Quentin is the superego, Caddy is the virgin whore mother, traumatically separated from the self, Queenie is the id.

Perhaps the similarly named Queenie and Quentin are aspects of the same identity, and the Compsons are flogging a dead horse.

You forcefully make the point that home care in a loving environment is preferable to institutionalization, but if this is a treatise on management of the disabled, perhaps a few well-captioned photographs might pack more punch.

Your shrewd strategy of avoiding coming to any point whatever promises fertile ground for critics.

Unfortunately our Dismal Incomprehensible Novels list is full and we cannot find a place for your piece at this time. However we have openings in our Culinary list. Much of the action takes place in Dilsey's kitchen. Can you redraft with more emphasis on the recipes?

Above all, do not be discouraged. Writing can be stimulating and therapeutic, and provided you type with both hands, can reduce participation in less healthy activities. You have an excellent vocabulary and a proclivity for puzzle-making. Have you considered authoring crosswords? Your chief talent seems to reside in deferring the release of vital information. A role in the intelligence services might suit. We wish you every success in your eventual choice of career.

Yours sincerely, Neale Morison, December 29 2007