

The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy

Shelby Foote , Walker Percy , Jay Tolson (Editor)

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy

Shelby Foote , Walker Percy , Jay Tolson (Editor)

The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy Shelby Foote , Walker Percy , Jay Tolson (Editor)

In the late 1940s, Walker Percy and Shelby Foote, friends since their teenage years in Greenville, Mississippi, began a correspondence that would last until Percy's death in 1990. Walker Percy, the highly regarded author of *The Moviegoer*, wrote six novels, two volumes of philosophical writings, and numerous essays. Shelby Foote met with early success as a novelist, but his reputation today rests more upon his massive three-volume narrative history of the Civil War, and his role as commentator in Ken Burns's documentary *The Civil War*. The correspondence between Percy and Foote traces their lives from the beginning of their respective careers, when they were grappling fiercely and openly with their ambitions, artistic doubts, and personal problems. Although they discuss such serious matters as the death of Foote's mother and Percy's battle with cancer, their letters are full of sly humor and good-natured ribbing. Jay Tolson has selected, edited, and annotated the letters of these two remarkable writers to shed light on their relationship and their literary careers. Includes an eight-page insert with photographs of the writers chronicling their friendship.

The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy Details

Date : Published May 17th 1998 by W. W. Norton Company (first published 1996)


ISBN : 9780393317688

Author : Shelby Foote , Walker Percy , Jay Tolson (Editor)

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Language, Writing, Biography, American, Southern, History, Autobiography, Memoir, Literary Fiction

 [Download The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy Shelby Foote , Walker Percy , Jay Tolson (Editor)

From Reader Review *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy* for online ebook

Ken says

This is a compilation of letters between two authors who were close friends since their early teens in Greenville Mississippi. I can't remember the last time I recieved a personal letter but at one time it was common for people to sit down and write letters...really, it was.

The letters span four decades with some interesting remarks and opinions expressed about other authors, current events and each others' writing skills and habits. They knew several notable people including Eudora Welty and Dick Cavett and various publishers and literary critics. They shared their early drafts of book projects and offered comments and suggestions. It is interesting to see how Foote organized his writing. Percy was interested in philosophy and semiotics and Foote seemed more interested on Dante, Proust and Dostoyevsky. Most of the letters have literary comments with some personal news mixed in. Percy got religion, Foote went through several marriages. Shelby Foote spent 20 years writing his three volume narrative of the Civil War. Both men wrote novels focused on life and events in the south and New Orleans. Percy died in 1990 with Foote at his bedside. Foote went on to national celebrity due to his prominent role in Ken Burns' PBS Civil War series.

Kent says

Shelby Foote, author of the popular 3-volume *The Civil War*, and Walker Percy, also a Southern author, grew up together in Mississippi and corresponded with one another up until Percy's death in 1990. This collection of letters begins in 1948, when these two were both 32 years old.

For a book lover like myself, this was a great read. Both Foote and Percy were novelists (which I did not know about Foote) and were devoted to their craft. The emphases of their letters included 1) writing: authors they liked, advice on what to read, what they were working on, encouragement to the other to get working on the next project; 2) personal information: their families knew each other pretty well; 3) when and where can we get together next?

For authors or aspiring writers, a lot of good advice can be found in Foote's letters--he was writing before Percy was. One can also compile quite a list of books to read just by jotting down all the recommendations found in these letters (let alone the authors' own books). It's also interesting to see the two talk about how they're laying out their books, what concepts they're playing with, and so forth.

Foote took 20 years to write the full *Civil War*. It's interesting to read about his financial concerns, and then to see the income change as his *Civil War* became popular. Foote was also a classical music enthusiast; I enjoyed noting his tastes and recommendations in that area as well.

Authors mentioned/discussed by the two include Dickens, Dostoevsky, Chekov, Proust (Foote's absolute favorite, but definitely not Percy's), Flannery O'Connor, Tolstoy (whom Foote did not like), Faulkner, Shakespeare, Dante (they both loved his *Divine Comedy*), Keats, Hemingway, and Kafka, just to name a few.

Some EXCERPTS that I enjoyed (grammatical mistakes authentic):

Fortunately I had a birthday this week, and among the gifts was a 10-dollar bill from my mother: that keeps me in cigarettes.... God grant that all my troubles will always be financial: theyre the very best kind. Leroy told me the other night youre waiting to hear the results on an important X-ray; which makes my troubles seem small indeed. (Shelby Foote to Walker Percy, Nov 19, 1949)

Money trouble is never really serious; and, who knows? without it I might be much worse off. I mean that. Look at rich folks, lost and grieved by the wind; being without money wouldnt solve all their problems, of course, but it would solve a lot of them. As for myself, it gives me a chance to indulge in just the right amount of fret and self-pity. Besides, money with me leads to dissipation and sin—I'm a child where money is concerned, probably because Ive never really had any. If I had a thousand dollars today I would certainly act the fool, one way or another. (Shelby Foote to Walker Percy, Nov 19, 1949)

I have learned something these past few years, however. All religions except the Catholic and the Jewish are absolute junk. I went to church Sunday; they were dedicating a window to my uncle—the bishop preached. The whole affair (not the dedication: the service) made me want to stand up and call them fools. There was Johnny Kirk, chief vestryman, and a lot of exMethodists wanting to capture the carriage trade, and Ben Wasson enjoying the beauty of the language and the proximity of Alou Haycraft. There wasnt the slightest touch of sanctity; they werent even lukewarm. The blasphemer is ten times closer to God than theyll ever be. (Shelby Foote to Walker Percy, Oct 31, 1951)

Collapse, as often as not, is the result of persisting in an old attitude towards some important relationship, which, in the course of time, has changed its nature. (Shelby Foote quoting D. H. Lawrence, in a letter to Walker Percy, Mar 23, 1952)

But I write to say this: when you write the last sentence of the Narrative, send me a copy on a postcard and we'll meet you and Gwyn wherever you say, Vicksburg, Jackson, here, Gulf Shores, and I'll buy you a bottle of champagne. (Walker Percy to Shelby Foote, spring of 1973)

It occurred to me the other day how strange it is that almost no one in Dostoyevsky works for a living, has a job or has to face any kind of day-to-day life. That's no concern of his, and he leaves it out. Imagine Mitya with a job. Or even Ivan or Alyosha for that matter—they need all their time to concentrate on being characters in his books. (Shelby Foote to Walker Percy, Mar 1, 1978)

Jasonlyescampbell says

Good to read private conversations in a long, long friendship between writers. Shelby has many more letters (Walker only comes in toward the end) and is the elder writer even if they are roughly the same age. Shelby is also, well in his words from the end when he has read back over some of the letters -- "I was amazed to observe how didactic I was over the years--I don't see how you managed the grace to put up with it all that time. I'm putting you up for sainthood next time I'm alone with John Paul II." Ha! Pedantic is putting it nicely.

But of course, sometimes the pedantic among us are actually really capable and I was able to learn a lot from him about writing. Here is Shelby describing the kind of writing I have always felt drawn toward (Potok tells the same truth when he talks about his novels) -- "I'm pleased, too, to find you getting at the nub of the thing: what a novel really is. It's shape, a method of releasing experience, of relating words to life. How you tell is

everything, and every page is a new experience, a new endeavor to lick what cant be licked. You always come back to that: the realization that the craft is what makes it worth a grown man's time. Most people think mistakenly that writers are people who have something to tell them. Nothing I think could be wronger. If I knew what I wanted to say I wouldn't write at all. What for? Why do it, if you already know the answers? Writing is the search for the answers, and the answer is the form, the method of telling, the exploration of self, which is our only clew to reality.

And since I know Walker's writing, it is fascinating to see and read what thoughts he is having around his novels. Love in Ruins explores a polarized country and both right and left running off in bad directions, forget right in left, it explores the worst aspects of america running off ... money-grubbing, religion as social club, hippee-but with no political protest, etc. While he is writing it, he shares this in a letter to Shelby:

This summer I reached the nadir of my popularity here in Covington: testified in federal court as an expert witness (an observer of culture) in a dispute about flying the Confederate flag at the high school. The blacks want it out. I said they were right. So I got threatened by the Klan: bomb the house, etc - we slept in the attic for 2 weeks - not that I thought there was one chance in 1000, but didn't want Ann and Bunt to get blown up. Then I accused the local Catholic school of getting rid of black people, running a seg school with holy water thrown on it. Now the Catholics (most) are mad at me. And I do believe they're more unpleasant than the Klan."

Jed Park says

Wonderful book. Male friendship isn't a topic you see explored much these days and these two literary giants(ok, maybe Foote was only above average) give an insight into two of Southern Lit's finest.

Meryal Annison says

I couldn't find anything I did not like about this book. Not everyone likes first person or autobiographical writing. I'm such a snoop, I relish getting the inside scoop on someone's personal lives and/or opinions. I read about these guys and the names they mention in high school and college modern literature classes. For me, this book was a real joy.

Jonfaith says

I read this one evening after my wife became angry with me. I had been rather stupid and deserved such. I awoke in the middle of the night and found myself drawn to this collection, which I believe I had purchased while we were in Oxford, MS earlier in the year.

John says

What a delight to be able to share in the private epistles of two of America's best writers of the latter 20th century. It is fascinating to read how they move from project to project, discuss the ins and outs of the publishing industry, and the life of a writer.

It has certainly given me the inspiration to read more of their works.

Cathy says

Fascinating. Learned how little I know about literature being in on these huge minds discussing it.

Gregory says

If you're not a fan of Percy or Foote, I suspect you may find this less enjoyable than I did, but it's so rare to see the arc of a longstanding friendship between two men (not to mention two very different writers). Their individual personalities resonate throughout this collection and afford a more intimate view not always accessible through the traditional approach of a biography. I thoroughly enjoyed this.

Dave Reidy says

Fascinating for writers and readers alike--the tale of two divergent careers. Foote and Percy experience fame and acclaim, but never at the same time. Their friendship persists through it all. One might never imagine that men can sustain each other via letter, but this book proves it happens.

Paul Secor says

I've only read two of Walker Percy's novels. I've read none of Shelby Foote's novels and have only read the excerpted *The Stars in Their Courses: The Gettysburg Campaign* from his Civil War Collection. Why would I want to read the collected letters between the two men? The answer is that I once spent a wonderful three hours watching and listening to Shelby Foote being interviewed in the library of his home. If you have three hours to spare and want to spend it with a gracious host: <http://www.c-span.org/video/?165823-1...>

So I read forty one years of correspondence between the two men with some ups and some downs. The first 120 pages are a one way street - Foote writing to Percy - because, with one exception, Shelby Foote didn't begin to save Walker Percy's letters until 1970.

The letters contain much literary talk - books that are being written, books that are being read, recommended books - especially by Foote - it took over forty years for him to finally persuade Percy to read Proust, try as he did over the years - complaints about publishers, a few complaints about reviewers - both men had a good attitude about this: do what you do and ignore the reviews, and talk about immediate and extended families.

Foote's letters tend to be longer, as befits a man who wrote three volumes totaling 1,700,000 words on the Civil War.

There are a fair number of moments I'll remember (most of which come from Foote) - a few here:

Percy to Foote: "Glad to hear the war is going great guns." (Referring to Foote's magnum opus on the Civil War.) "I keep thinking we might win it this time."

Foote to Percy: "Dear Walker

I killed Lincoln last week - Saturday, at noon. While I was doing it (he had his chest arched up, holding his last breath to let it out) some halfassed doctor came to the door with vols I and II under his arm, wanting me to autograph them for his son for Xmas. I was in such a state of shock, I not only let him in; I even signed the books, a thing I seldom do. Then I turned back and killed him and had Stanton say, 'Now he belongs to the ages.'"

Foote to Percy on a critical article: "I did a better job than I ever knew, and any time I have any doubt about my immortality I just go back and limp my way back through another of those articles for reassurance."

Foote to Percy: "It occurred to me the other day how strange it is that almost no one in Dostoyevsky works for a living, has a job or has to face any kind of day-to-day life. That's no concern of his, and he leaves it out. Imagine Mitya with a job. Or even Ivan or Alyosha for that matter - they need all their time to concentrate on being characters in his books."

Foote to Percy: "A week or so ago, I wrote to Bob Coles telling him how much I liked the full-length version of his book on you, and today I got a strangely gloomy note in reply. ... I reckon we're none of us exempt from the doldrums. Anyhow there's no more use expecting a psychiatrist to be happy than there is expecting a G.P. to be healthy."

Percy to Foote: "There's an absolute miracle ... you ought to order: Schubert's C Major string quartet, Op. 163, recorded by the Guarneri Quartet with Leonard Rose on the extra cello. ... I once considered it the greatest piece in all Romantic music, & maybe still do."

(Reviewer's note: I like the recording by the Hollywood Quartet plus Kurt Reher, but I plan on checking out Mr. Percy's version.)

There's a lot of chaff mixed in with the better stuff, but that's to be expected in forty year's worth of letters. Down to a rating: My head says probably three stars, maybe three and a half - I got this from the library and it's not a book I'd buy and want to keep. My heart says four stars - when it ended as it had to with Shelby Foote speaking at a commemoration service for Walker Percy - I didn't want it to end. When the head and the heart come into conflict, I go with the heart. Thus four stars.

Soundtrack music during some of the time I was reading this:

E.C. Ball (Rounder) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8Lho...>

The Best of Frank Stokes (Yazoo) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNtAM...>

Jesse Winchester: *Third Down, 110 To Go* (Bearsville) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLqQJ...>

The Best of Booker T and the MGs (Atlantic) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9y-n...>

Lisa says

Lovely book. Longterm friendships between women get their due a hundred times over, so it's refreshing to be privy to a really warm and intimate male relationship. Percy and Foote met as high school students and hit it off instantly, and their friendship lasted until Percy's death -- Foote was with his family at his deathbed. What's nice is reading the letters, of course, but also seeing each man become more of who he was as he got older, married, remarried, had children, published books, did readings and lecture tours, had money, needed money, traveled, stayed home. There's something about being privy to two entire lives like that that goes beyond the voyeuristic into the realm of benevolent.

Really a nice book of correspondence, definitely recommended.

James Murphy says

I found interesting how these two lifelong friends contrasted in their approach to writing. For almost half the book no Percy letters are included because none were saved. So we have only Foote's brooding and pedantic intelligence, his high sense of self and achievement. Though Percy, when he makes his entrance, demonstrates he's philosophically the heavier hitter he doesn't thrust his confidence forward like a cowcatcher. He seems to radiate a quiet grace and thanks for his gifts. Foote has his own grace, of course, and freely showed how much he cared for Percy and his work. A Southerner myself I liked that they were aware of their regional sensibilities and proud of them. In these letters they didn't disagree much and, always eager to affirm their love of region and each other, never in their recognition of what it means to be Southern. Still, as much as I love Foote's Civil War trilogy, I've complained in the past about its pro-South tone because I thought it diluted his work as history. I had to smile when reading the letter in which Percy scolds him because his work is so partisan. But I realized while reading that the trilogy's called a narrative rather than a history. Foote would be the first to remind us he could tell the story any way he wanted to.

Gavin says

This was wonderful, the only complaint that I have is that Shelby and Walker kept recommending books to each other that of course I added to my reading pile.

A wonderful friendship that sprung from perhaps unlikely childhoods of the time, but more of a pattern today, except I'm not sure about the literary experience. Perhaps that is improper for me to think, but in my search for knowledge, these guys did fairly well in the twentieth-century. That time has passed however, but I think we are the worse for it.

In an age of electronics, I'm not sure that friends can communicate, much less write as well, to each other today. Lots of questions, dreams, explanations of writing intentions and hoping for success.

That should fit the lives of all of us as far as expectations. Writing is a good thing and these two friends did that well and perhaps that made them closer. Kudos.

Wm says

I went to school with Shelby Foote's son. I've always been fascinated by his historical work, and the man was a wonderful storyteller.
