



Orphans' Home: The Voice and Vision of Horton Foote (Southern Literary Studies)

By Laurin Porter

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A Pulitzer Prize--winning playwright, an Emmy-winning television writer, and an Oscar-winning screenwriter of such notable films as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Tender Mercies*, and *A Trip to Bountiful*, the amazingly versatile Horton Foote has been a force on the American cultural scene for more than fifty years. By critical consensus, Foote's foremost achievement is *The Orphans' Home Cycle* -- a course of nine independent yet interlocking plays that traces the transformation over twenty-six years of a small-town southern orphan, Horace Robedaux, into a husband, father, and patriarch. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including interviews with Foote, Laurin Porter demonstrates why the author's masterpiece is a unique accomplishment not only in his personal oeuvre but also in the canon of American drama.

Set in and near Harrison, Texas, the fictitious counterpart to Foote's native Wharton, and based partly on his father's childhood and his parents' courtship and marriage, the plays introduce two extended families -- those of Horace and his wife, Eliabeth -- across three generations, as well as numerous townspeople whose lives intertwine with theirs. The result is a wide-ranging, intricate work of interconnected stories reminiscent of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha saga.

Porter shows how the small-town southern culture speaks through Horace while she examines the functions of family and community in identity formation. She explains that Foote's signature style -- which replaces stage directions, poetic language, and suspense-driven narratives with sparse, restrained dialogue and seemingly actionless plots -- creates a simmering power by stressing subtext over text, a strategy more often associated with the novel than drama. Similarly, Foote uses recurring character types and motifs, interrelated images and symbols, and parallel and inverted events that reverberate within and among the plays, employing language and structure in innovative ways. In comparing the cycle with the works of William Faulkner and Eugene O'Neill, Porter positions Foote at the intersection of southern literature and American drama.

Foote's emphasis, Porter concludes, is not so much on returning home as on leaving it and building a new family, contending that for Foote home is not a place but a geography of the heart. Her definitive Orphans' Home shines much-needed light on an understudied talent and proves Foote's to be a vital American voice.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Laurin Porter is a professor of English at the University of Texas at Arlington, where she teaches drama, nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, and women's studies. She is the author of *The Banished Prince: Time, Memory, and Ritual in the Late Plays of Eugene O'Neill* and lives in Arlington with her husband and two daughters.

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