

*was the friend of
Charles W. Chesnut*

William Styron looks back on



William Styron first published these three stories in *Esquire*.

"A Tidewater Morning: Three Tales from Youth," by William Styron. Random House, \$17.

By TOM BUTLER

William Styron is a decidedly old-fashioned writer. This set of stories deals with a young man's memories of rural childhood and his first confrontations with mortality. Both the writing and the values are clearly those of a Depression-bred American. The linked tales of Paul Whitehurst at 20, 10 and 13 reveal a poignancy and sensitivity often missing in contemporary short fiction.

These three stories, which appeared in *Esquire* magazine between 1978 and 1987, possess a richness of detail and linguistic variety that have little to do with minimalism or postmodern theories. Styron recaptures intimate moments in a young man's

dealings with his parents, his community and his own courage.

"Love Day" shows Paul as a 20-year-old Marine lieutenant on a troop ship headed for his first combat mission. Paul and his platoon will face the Japanese in a major amphibious landing. Or so they think. By his own admission, Paul has volunteered for the most dangerous job in the war. Marine lieutenants have the highest mortality rate of anyone in combat.

As Paul observes the lurid, almost mindless bravado of the colonel he lionizes, the young man remembers the deep philosophical musings of his father, a naval draftsman who helped design the ship taking Paul to battle. Paul discovers that his ship will only be part of a diversion. He will not get to test his courage. Silently, he rejoices in not having to be a hero, not having to test the odds of dying.

"Shadrach" is a more traditional local

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K5

poignant pictures of youth

color piece, celebrating the joyful slackness and slovenliness of the Dabney clan. Ten-year-old Paul plays with one of the sons, Mole, even though Paul's own family is well above these bootleggers and layabouts.

This story concerns a 90-year-old ex-slave who wants nothing but "to die on Dabney land." The family was once prosperous and Shadrach worked on their plantation. He has walked from Georgia to be buried in this ground. The family take him to what remains of their estate and plan to bury Shadrach in its ancient graveyard. Paul enjoys the efforts but with the Dabneys feels the futility of modern life which prohibits this simple act of kindness. Paul learns of death in this bittersweet comic tale.

The title story is far more intimate. At 13, Paul must watch his mother die of cancer while he hauls newspapers to help

out with the bills. The memories of his loving but oddly matched parents and their frequent disputes dominates the story.

The intellectual father and the artistic mother who gave up music and society to raise a son in a Virginia backwater have shaped Paul's young mind. Balancing the pressures and grief with the mundane struggles to lug heavy Sunday papers and battle a skinflint boss proves too much for the boy. Vivid re-creations of overwhelming personal events and trivial daily activity enliven the story.

Styron's collection of simple, strong biographical stories is a minor work but an admirable one. It recaptures a long-passed era with tenderness but without pretense or nostalgia.

Tom Butler is a Newark technical writer who regularly reviews books for *The News Journal*.