**Five Books That Shaped My Life**

(written for Kevin Kelly, fivebooks.com)

**Book of Common Prayer (1549-1928)**

Many Southern writers have spoken of the importance of being raised on the King James Bible, but for this cradle Episcopalian, even more important was the Book of Common Prayer. Heard and spoken week after week, how could it not have improved my prose and maybe even my character? Too bad for Southern literature that both the Bible and the Prayer Book have been vandalized in my lifetime.

**Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand (1930)**

For a Tennessee boy in a New England college, coming across this 1930 “Agrarian” defense of the South, written in the wake of the Scopes Trial, was a eye-opening experience. Whatever its shortcomings (a subject for another time) it proved to me that “Southern intellectual” isn’t a contradiction in terms.

**Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Morris Rosenberg, The Language of Social Research (1955)**

The great Viennese-born sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld was a pioneer of quantitative social science research and my mentor when I was in grad school at Columbia University. This book was an exciting introduction to the kind of stuff he and his students were doing. I’m still just an ole country positivist.

**Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)**

In 1968 the SDS and other student radicals shut Columbia down. I was there, and I feared that they were wrecking something precious and irreplaceable. When I turned to Burke (someone must have recommended him) I found a kindred spirit.

**Walker Percy, Lancelot (1977)**

Imagine: a Southern writer who’s not trying to write or trying not to write like Faulkner, writing about a South that resembles the absurd region we live in now, where stereotypes are consciously enacted and history is less a burden than a commodity. My literary friends sneer when I say that this is my favorite Percy novel, but it’s the only one I’ve read more than once.