



## Episode 1,063: Nat Turner's Rebellion: Why a Historical Novel Was So Controversial

Guest: Gene Epstein

**WOODS:** All right, so let's talk about a topic I wasn't expecting to hit on before the end of the year, Nat Turner, and in particular this celebrated but it turns out quite controversial historical novel about him. So give us the background.

**EPSTEIN:** Well, first let me – my other announcement, which I think I've released to Tom Woods people on the Tom Woods elite page, I'm taking a buyout from *Barron's*. I'm going off to write longer form articles and books that I've been wanting to write. I had 26 years at *Barron's* and I think at the age of 73, maybe, Austrian economists, we usually are productive until we're about 100, so I've got 27 years remaining. And with the remaining 27 years, I wanted to do something different.

And this was part of my change of pace. I wrote an article for the Manhattan Institute's *City Journal* about one of the novels, one of the all-time novels that I love called *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron. And I noticed that the novel had been published 50 years ago, that usually when a novel that's still in print that's by an author that's hardly been forgotten hits its 50th anniversary, the publishers make something of that. In fact, when this novel hit its 25th anniversary in 1992, they issued a 25th anniversary edition. And I pointed out that maybe they're not going to issue one in paperback, but I noticed that there are a lot of 50th anniversary editions on Kindle, online. *Catch-22's*, for example, 50th anniversary edition is available online.

Why did this novel get overlooked by the publisher? Why didn't they want to capitalize on its 50th anniversary? Why weren't there any commemorative articles? There's a great deal of interest in slavery, in American slavery as an historical topic, and this is a classic novel celebrated in its day. And in fact, in 2016, there was an award-winning movie actually that was called *Birth of a Nation* about Nat Turner that appeared and got a fair amount of press. So why did this 50th anniversary get forgotten?

Now, my speculation is that the publisher and others did not want to rattle the cage. They were reluctant to risk getting embroiled in a replay of a controversy that erupted soon after the novel first appeared back in the late 1960s.

**WOODS:** And the response to it – what I liked about your article that you wrote about this whole controversy – is quite familiar to us today, because it sounds exactly like what would happen today if it were released, and as you point out, the one difference is that in those days there were still white scholars, mainstream white scholars who would stand up and defend the novelist and say, *Now, hold on a minute. This is*

*actually pretty well done.* In fact, your article – I'll dig it up in a minute, but your piece quotes Eugene Genovese, who at that time was very much still in his Marxist phase.

**EPSTEIN:** Oh, yes.

**WOODS:** I mean, it goes to show that there were Marxists you could respect in a certain way, because he said – I'll have to dig out the quotation, but you want to jump in...

**EPSTEIN:** Yeah, absolutely. See, the reason why I thought it was a fascinating bit of intellectual history is both in the ways that it could have happened now in exactly the way it happened then and in the way that it was somewhat different. In both cases, it's a little bit depressing for our current time. There was a book published called *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*.

**WOODS:** Right.

**EPSTEIN:** It was a collection of essays in which the novelist – that Styron was called an "unreconstructed Southern racist" suffering from "moral senility"; he "dehumanizes every black person in the book" with the goal of affirming "all of the myths and prejudices about the American black man." If anybody remembers Ralph Ellison, who wrote the classic novel *The Invisible Man*, Ellison publicly announced that he would not read Styron's novel, although he apparently did make time for *Ten Black Writers Respond*.

Now, you can imagine that that could have happened now. Styron was not only a white novelist; he was a Southerner. He hailed from Virginia. And so it's very clear that for a white man to have the temerity to write a novel in the first person about this black slave who really existed, a rebellious black slave, and to have the temerity furthermore to call this novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, he lifted his title from the document that was taken from Nat Turner in 1831 when his rebellion occurred and shortly before he was hanged. So this was clearly rather audacious on Styron's part.

The novel was celebrated. It won a Pulitzer Prize; it was on the bestseller list. He had a big movie deal with 20th Century Fox. But once this backlash set in, Styron was shouted down at meetings. Styron was naive enough to still try to travel the circuit and defend his novel, but he was stalked by people and 20th Century Fox cancelled the movie deal. All of that could easily have happened today, and in fact, it probably would have been worse today. The idea of a white Southerner writing a novel in the first person about this black Spartacus, this rebel against slavery, that would have been a no-no.

But as you say, Tom, the other part of it that I note is not only that at the time two prominent scholars, not just Eugene Genovese – it's interesting, you remind me that I know a few things about Genovese that's fascinating. Those of us old enough to remember, he was a pretty important figure in his day.

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**EPSTEIN:** Also, Martin Duberman, who I believe is still alive, who's also a pretty prominent left-wing historian – both of them left-leaning in both cases – Now, I mean, Genovese's Marxism was kind of strange, by the way, even in those days. But it wasn't just that Duberman and Genovese wrote prominent articles defending Styron against his attackers, but it was that Duberman published his defense in *The New York Times*, that progressive journal, and Genovese published his attack in *The New York Review of Books*, another progressive journal. Hard to imagine that *The New York Times* and *New York Review of Books* would publish such slashing pieces by these two people today had Styron been publishing his novel today.

**WOODS:** Right. Now Gene, let me quote – because you've got amazing quotations. Here's Duberman, again, a top historian, saying, "Speaking as a professional historian, and one who has done most of his teaching and writing about the pre-Civil War years, I was astonished at Styron's mastery of both the details and interpretive themes of the period." So in other words, somebody who was actually qualified to speak on it has that judgment, whereas you have somebody who refuses even to read it but then wants to contribute to the response anthology. It's just bizarre.

And then he describes it as "superlative history . . . [which] provides the most subtle, multifaceted view of antebellum Virginia, its institution of slavery and the effects of that institution on both slaves and masters." And he uses the words "grotesque," "absurd," and "obscene" to refer to the charges against Styron, and he says, "what makes Styron a better historian than any of his critics is that he will not bury unpleasant evidence or minimize the complexities of past experience in order to serve some presumed contemporary need."

And if you wouldn't mind, let me just read the one sentence from Gene – the other Gene, Eugene Genovese. So it says – he says this: "[T]he black intelligentsia faces a serious crisis. Its political affinities lie with the black-power movement, which increasingly demands conformity, myth-making, and historical fabrication." Yeah, good thing that went away, Gene [laughing].

**EPSTEIN:** [laughing] Right. Yeah, I want to fill in the point that the idea that this novel could get endorsements from two white scholars, again, in *The New York Times* and *New York Review of Books*, ringing endorsements as a work of history was quite impressive. Genovese was certainly at that point establishing his reputation as a real scholar in the field of slavery. Duberman had some chops, as well.

Another funny side light, by the way, is that when Duberman – Duberman, just to show his left-wing credentials, when he published in book form his defense of Styron, he stood by it, but he actually said that he could understand that the black scholars were a little bit miffed at the fact that Styron made a fortune of money from publishing this book while they were sort of scraping by on far less. I mean, Styron spent five years working on that novel, and Styron got great success from it, but of course, if you're a left-winger you want to show your credentials about inequality and grant that the black scholars had a legitimate beef that Styron was getting rich and they hadn't written a novel so they were poor. So I mean, it just – But on top of that, of course Duberman still stood by his ringing defense of Styron and still called these accusations against Styron obscene and absurd.

But as you suggest, Tom, that statement of Genovese's, again, that the political affinities are increasingly demanding "conformity, myth-making, and historical fabrication," I mean, for that to appear in *The New York Review of Books* was of course quite extraordinary. And then the depressing part of it is that it applies with special force today, and so that's even worse.

And by the way, there was an echo of the accusations against Styron when the movie came out. This was a movie that had nothing to do with Styron's novel. It actually got awards and got a lot of favorable critics liking it. I saw the film. I thought it was just cliché-ridden, and it was actually dishonest. But Nate Parker, who was the director and star and screenwriter of the film, did an interview with *Vanity Fair* in 2016, in which he hauled out the same accusations against Styron that had been in that original book, the *Ten Black Writers Respond*. They were just allowed to stand. Parker again just apparently – he could not possibly have read Styron's novel. But the point is that those accusations were allowed to stand without any challenge and without any real challenge.

Although, interestingly, *Vanity Fair* published another article in which the book got a fair amount of praise from a writer named Sam Tanenhaus. But Tanenhaus did not have the courage to point out that Parker's accusations against Styron again indicated he could not possibly have read Styron's book.

But here's the other odd part of it, that Styron's portrayal of Nat Turner – and again, this is one of my favorite novels of all time. I highly recommend it. It isn't just that he plunges you. It's what historical novels are great at doing. I've never read a historical novel that's as good as this in the sense that Genovese and Duberman endorsed it, that he really plunges you into a feeling for what the 1930 antebellum South for slaves and slaveholders must have felt like.

But he also gets into the mind and heart of this character. And when you get to the passage in the book two-thirds in that he's decided that his divine mission is to kill all the white people in the county and to go beyond that, you were shocked. You were shocked that he's going to kill every man, woman, and children, lead a bloody rebellion. But Styron manages to make you understand how this human being in this time and place could commit such brutality. It's tragic. It's wrenching. But you sort of see things from Nat Turner's point of view.

But interestingly, Styron shows unflinchingly the murder of women and children. Nate Parker in his movie completely omits to mention that, to mention that Turner did indeed indiscriminately commit murder. And so Styron is honest, and Nate Parker's movie is dishonest. But so that's really the end of the Styron story, except to say that if you're looking for an historical novel to read – I happen to have a fondness for historical novels – then I do highly recommend that novel.

But getting back to what you pointed out, the "conformity, myth-making, and historical fabrication" that's so common today, I think we should comment on that, as well.

**WOODS:** Well, we'll pick this up in just a minute after we thank our sponsor.

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Okay, we're back now. Let's talk about — because you sent me another article. I'm also linking to that at [TomWoods.com/1063](http://TomWoods.com/1063). And that's an article that looks at Antiracism as kind of a religion. It's written by John McWhorter, who's a black professor at — is he at Columbia?

**EPSTEIN:** He's at Columbia. He's actually a professor of linguistics, although he writes a lot about these issues. And McWhorter mentions today's bestselling black author on the subject of race. That's Ta-Nehisi Coates. And I think it's instructive to compare Ta-Nehisi Coates with James Baldwin. Baldwin was certainly a flawed thinker from a libertarian standpoint, but Baldwin had his value. I think he articulated certain attitudes that were really worth listening to. And Baldwin was actually a friend of William Styron's and had originally encouraged Styron to write about Nat Turner in the first person, just as Baldwin himself had taken the point of view of white characters in his novel *Another Country*.

Now, Styron, in his introduction, his afterword to the 25th anniversary edition of his novel about Nat Turner, quoted brave and lovely words of Baldwin's that you would never hear from Ta-Nehisi Coates. Baldwin wrote, "Each of us helplessly and forever contains the other — male in female, female in male, white in black, and black in white. We are part of each other." So Baldwin's message, while it was often muted by other attitudes, Baldwin's message was really one of unification, and that's another reason why, for all his flaws, there's a certain reason to respect Martin Luther King. Again, his dream was again the unification of the races, that there was the potential for love between all races. Now, contrast that with the message of a Ta-Nehisi Coates, who is today's answer, today's dismal answer to James Baldwin, and you'll have an idea of why *The New York Times* and *New York Review of Books* would be very unlikely to defend William Styron's novel in the same way that they did in the late 1960s. And the essay by McWhorter called "Antiracism" I think speaks very much to that issue.

Now, I read Ta-Nehisi Coates. I'll tell you a personal anecdote about Ta-Nehisi Coates. When I read his first book, a runaway bestseller called *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates literally wrote that when the World Trade Center blew up and all those white people were killed — all those firefighters is actually what he said — he said he didn't have an ounce of sympathy for them. He was completely indifferent to their deaths. And this is a book, *Between the World and Me*, which is technically a letter written to his own son. So it's instructing his own son to have no sympathy whatsoever for innocent people who happen to be firefighters who were killed in the Twin Towers. Now, that's not the sort of — I mean, that's just sort of — that's kneejerk racism.

Ta-Nehisi Coates also in that same book, he said when he heard that Michael Brown in Ferguson had been given a — that the grand jury decided not to indict the policeman who had shot and killed Michael Brown, he immediately decided that this was an outrage. It did not matter to Ta-Nehisi Coates that the Obama Justice Department had done an extensive investigation into that case in Ferguson and had decided that the grand jury decision was correct not to bring an indictment against the cop. And we can pretty much rest assured that if the Justice Department had found anything different, they would have said so. I actually read that 98-page study by the Obama Justice Department, and again, it was scrupulously fair.

But Ta-Nehisi Coates didn't care. Just a kneejerk idea that if a black man is killed by a white cop, it's got to be indictable. So again, this is kneejerk racism. And McWhorter calls it Antiracism, but we could level the label against Coates as a clear reverse racist. You would never, ever have heard such a thing from somebody like James Baldwin.

Now, in fact, I'll tell you just another minor story. I went to an evening in which Ta-Nehisi Coates was being interviewed onstage, and we were allowed to write questions from the audience. To my surprise, the question that I had written was addressed. I asked, "You wrote in your book that you had no sympathy whatsoever for the white firefighters killed at the World Trade Center. Do you still feel that way?" And at least Ta-Nehisi Coates said, "No, no, I don't feel that way anymore." Probably he's — now, I would then have asked him as follows: "How could you possibly write that in the book, though? You're backing off from that statement in public because you're embarrassed about how ugly it sounds?" But indeed, I got him to say on the stage that no, he doesn't feel that way anymore. He's given up on the idea of not having any sympathy for innocent people, innocent white people being killed. That's the kind of ugliness that comes out of somebody like Ta-Nehisi Coates these days.

**WOODS:** And it's usually a lot of flowery language that has no substance to it. It always boils down to — I mean, it really does boil down to: you're white; you can never possibly know blah, blah, blah. How many — I mean, that's just really, really tiresome after a while.

And the McWhorter piece that you sent takes this on really nicely and says this whole religion of getting people to acknowledge their privilege and understand this and that — he says, first of all, there's no way this practically helps any black person. It makes people think that I've solved the problem by having this interior reconciliation and this enlightenment, and then they move on. He says, what the heck does that do? That's not going to help anything.

And then he says this: let's think about what happens when black students come out on the bottom when they take standardized tests. Well, an Antiracist comes out and says the test is racist. We all know that. There's no need to investigate further. The test is racist. So then when the test is racist, in the old days, they used to just add — like if it was a civil service thing or the fire department or whatever, they would just add extra points. They would use race norming. So if you were black, they'd give you this many extra points; Hispanic, this many extra points. They stopped doing that. They weren't allowed to do it anymore. So then they started making the tests so easy that an idiot could pass them.

But anyway, everybody knows that the test must be racist. So what he starts asking is — he says, what about the idea that maybe we could just have a massive effort — you know, kind of like the effort we've shown ourselves capable of when it comes to fighting police abuse — how about an effort on that scale to train black kids in taking standardized tests? And he says, well, that idea doesn't come up because the "Scripture" of Antiracism turns our heads in other directions.

**EPSTEIN:** Mm hmm, mm hmm.

**WOODS:** What do you say to that? There's no response to that. He's got them.

**EPSTEIN:** Yes, absolutely. And getting back to the cops killing black men, I think McWhorter is especially good on that topic. When he writes — I want to quote one line. He writes, "Why are black people so upset about one white cop killing a black man when black men are at much more danger of being killed by one another?" But he goes on to make a pointed observation about that. He writes, "[I]t is thrilling to see the fierce, relentless patrolling...that young black activists...have been doing to call attention to cops' abuse of black people. That problem is real and must be fixed...However, imagine if there were a squadron of young black people just as bright, angry and relentless devoted to smoking out the bad apples in poor black neighborhoods...in alliance with police officers" who kill other black people. "I fear," he says, "we'll never see it—Antiracism creed forces attention to the rogue cops regardless of whether they are the main problem."

Again, I think that's even more pointed. You know, work against all killing of innocent black people. Where cops do it, work against that, but where other black people do it in even greater numbers, work against that as well. And that's what you don't get. It's all about the white cops, and that I think is especially poignant and a courageous point and an insightful point for McWhorter to make.

I mean, when I read McWhorter, I often think of Jews. I grew up — I've known so many Jews with a persecution complex. And you know, they have a point. Irving Howe, the social observer Irving Howe — actually, he quoted the line, the famous line: "In the warmest of hearts, there's a cold spot for the Jews." I've encountered anti-Semitism in my time. When I went to college my freshman year at Penn, I met a whole lot of guys who had all kinds of preconceptions about what Jews were like, which I found surprising and rather hurtful. And indeed, there still is anti-Semitism.

And I myself bridle, by the way, at the kneejerk idea that if you're going to criticize the policies of Israel — as I, by the way, am quite willing to do — then you are necessarily a Jew hater. So we all have that issue. Irish, Hispanics, all of us have had at least some taste of what discrimination is all about. We also, as Baldwin said especially eloquently, we have powers of empathy and we can understand, have some grasp for how other people feel and respect the way they feel. So it isn't as though we have to abide by the Antiracist creed, the idea that all white people are racists and that black people are always a victim.

And obviously to make yourself into a victim — that's, by the way, McWhorter's main point, which is that to go through life portraying yourself solely as a victim is to give up, to give up your own individuality and your sense of self and your own potential in the world. And I think that's really the positive point that people like McWhorter are making, contrary to Coates' point, which is that you want to wallow in self-pity and not think you have the resources to get through life. Because, by the way, McWhorter grants that of course there's racism. Of course there are people who feel racist toward blacks, just as, by the way, in a smaller sense there are people who feel hateful toward Jews for different reasons. But the idea that you can't cope in this world, that you have to be defeated by those people, that's not the way to lead your life.

**WOODS:** There was a young woman who lived in my building in graduate school, nonwhite, who went on to – she was very idealistic and she was going to be a school teacher in an inner-city New York school. And I think it was about a year she lasted. She was called every filthy name you could possibly imagine, abused, treated like garbage, not backed up by any parent anywhere, and finally decided, you know what? Screw this. Screw this. You want to act like that? Screw it. And she left. She's now living on the complete opposite end of the country doing something entirely different. Now, we're supposed to pretend that didn't happen.

We're supposed to pretend that everything is racism and that's the – All you have to do – That's not to say – I would be the last one to deny that the state's police forces might not be the most professional and might even be lethal. Why would I deny that? But to walk down the corridor – just walk down the corridor of one of these schools, watch the behavior you observe, and ask yourself, "Could white police possibly be responsible for this?" Are we maybe not focusing obsessively in one area and not at all in another?

**EPSTEIN:** Oh, indeed, and no – I mean, certainly beyond that of course, probably in proportion to their criminality, I believe the numbers indicate that the killing of innocent whites is at least as prevalent. I mean, there is a problem with the cops for whites and blacks, by the way, and as McWhorter says, that is a problem that must be addressed and that the patrolling by young black activists in black neighborhoods about cops' abuse is important. But the idea then that they gave a pass to the criminality of black people in their own neighborhoods against other black people, or indeed give a pass to the criminality of white cops against innocent white people, all of that, the idea of leaving that out of the tragic story, that clearly shows a very tragic racist bias.

And that's the sort of thing that McWhorter – and of course I put McWhorter together with other commentators as Jason Riley, as well, who's written about this, and then of course the older breed. There was Walter Williams. I know Williams has been on your show. And I guess you never did get Thomas Sowell on, but I got a chance to talk about him. So there are indeed a brilliant corps of people – the older generation, Sowell and Walter Williams, and then the younger generation, McWhorter and Jason Riley – who speak out fearlessly against these trends.

**WOODS:** And you know what's interesting to note is that we owe Walter Williams a tremendous debt, not only for all the work of his that we know about, but also in that Bob Murphy when he got to meet Williams not too long ago was able to go up to him and say, "I want you to know that you played a central role in making me an economist." It was reading Walter Williams that got Bob interested in becoming an economist.

And by the way, that's the kind of question I asked Williams when he was on my show some time ago. I said, "You know, here you are, this accomplished PhD economist and when I go to your website and I look at the exams you give your students, they're very high-level and very difficult. And yet, every time you're on the radio or TV, all they want to talk to you about is race, when you have all these other things to talk about. You could talk about monopoly, public goods, taxation, regulation – you could talk about all these other things. Doesn't it annoy you that all they want to talk about is

race?" And he says, "Yeah, I guess it is kind of annoying." But that is also an outcome of this Antiracism obsession, because it makes every single black person be a racial authority first and foremost when, I'm sure he knows about race, but he's a PhD economist. We can't even let him be an economist, for heaven's sake.

All right, anyway, I'm going to let things stand here and just say thank you, Gene. This is one of the last few episodes of 2017. Thanks for helping to make 2017 a really, really great year for this show, because your episodes have been an indispensable ingredient in that.

**EPSTEIN:** I hit the dozen mark, Tom, and maybe in the next few years I can do a dozen more. Thank you, Tom, and hope to talk to you soon.