Eudora Welty 1909 - 2001

Born in 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, the daughter of Christian Webb Welty and Chestina Andrews Welty, Eudora Welty grew up in a close-knit and loving family. From her father she inherited a “love for all instruments that instruct and fascinate,” from her mother a passion for reading and for language. With her brothers, Edward Jefferson Welty and Walter Andrews Welty, she shared bonds of devotion, camaraderie, and humor. Nourished by such a background, Welty became perhaps the most distinguished graduate of the Jackson Public School system. She attended Davis Elementary School when Miss Lorena Duling was principal and graduated from Jackson’s Central High School in 1925. Her collegiate years were spent first at the Mississippi State College for Women in Columbus and then at the University of Wisconsin, where she received her bachelor’s degree. From Wisconsin, Welty went on to graduate study at the Columbia University School of Business.

After her college years, Welty worked at WJDX radio station, wrote society columns for the MemphisCommercial Appeal, and served as a Junior Publicity Agent for the Works Progress Administration. During these years, she took many photographs, and in 1936 and 1937 they were exhibited in New York; but they were not published as she had wished. Her first publication was instead a short story, “Death of a Traveling Salesman.” In 1936, the editor of Manuscript literary magazine called it “one of the best stories we have ever read.”

Her first book was published five years later. In A Curtain of Green, Welty included seventeen stories that move from the comic to the tragic, from realistic portraits to surrealistic ones, and that display a wry wit, the keen observation of detail, and a sure rendering of dialect. Here she at times translated into fiction memories of people and places she had earlier photographed, and the volume’s three stories focusing upon African American characters exemplify the empathy that was present in her photos. Toni Morrison has observed that Eudora Welty wrote “about black people in a way that few white men have ever been able to write. It’s not patronizing, not romanticizing — it’s the way they should be written about.”

In 1942, Welty followed with a very different book, a novella partaking of folklore, fairy tale, and Mississippi’s legendary history. A year after this novella appeared, Welty published a third book of fiction, stories that were collected as The Wide Net (1943) and that were fewer in number and more darkly lyrical than those in her first volume. Then came Delta Wedding, her first novel. Set in the Mississippi Delta of 1923, though published in 1946, the book was originally criticized as a nostalgic portrait of the plantation South, but critical opinion has since counteracted such views, seeing in the novel, to use Albert Devlin’s words, the “probing for a humane order.”

In Welty’s next book, the unity of the novel is missing but not wholly. The Golden Apples (1949) includes seven interlocking stories that trace life in the fictional Morgana, Mississippi, from the turn of the century until the late 1940s. When Welty began writing the stories, however, she had no idea that they would be connected. Midway through the composition process, she finally realized that she was writing about a common cast of characters, that the characters of one story seemed to be younger or older versions of the characters in other stories, and she decided to create a book that was neither novel nor story collection. It is perhaps the greatest triumph of her distinguished career, an unmatched example of the story cycle.

After the publication of this book, Welty traveled to Europe and drew upon her European experiences in two stories she would eventually group with “Circe,” a story narrated by the witch-goddess, and with four stories set in the American South. Though the interlocking nature of The Golden Apples is gone, a new theme emerges. Most of these stories investigate the ways individuals can live and create meaning for themselves without being rooted in time and place. Even before she pulled The Bride of the Innisfallen and Other Stories (1955) together, she published The Ponder Heart (1954), an extended dramatic monologue delivered by Edna Earle, a character who truly is a character.

Welty had produced seven distinctive books in fourteen years, but that rate of production came to a startling halt. Personal tragedies forced her to put writing on the back burner for more than a decade. Then in 1970 she graced the publishing world with Losing Battles, a long novel narrated largely through the conversation of the aunts, uncles, and cousins attending a rambunctious 1930s family reunion. Two years later came a taut, spare novel set in the late 1960s and describing the experience of loss and grief which had so recently been her own. Welty would uncharacteristically incorporate a good bit of biographical detail in The Optimist’s Daughter, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize.

Welty’s exploration of such different subjects and techniques involved, of course, more than art for art’s sake. In her essay, “Words into Fiction,” she describes fiction as “a personal act of vision.” She does not suggest that the artist’s vision conveys a truth which we must all accept. Instead, she suggests, the artist, must look squarely at the mysteries of human experiences without trying to resolve them. Eudora Welty’s ability to reveal rather than explain mystery is what first drew Richard Ford to her work. It drew Reynolds Price as well. Price, though, focuses not on the term mystery, but on the complexity of her vision. He writes that Eudora is not “the mild, sonorous, ‘affirmative’ kind of artist whom America loves to clasp to its bosom,” but is instead a writer with “a granite core in every tale: as complete and unassailable an image of human relations as any in our art, tragic of necessity but also comic.”

Welty’s achievements include more than her fiction. Her early photographs eventually appeared in book form: Her photograph book One Time, One Place was published in 1971, and more photographs have subsequently been published in books titled Photographs (1989), Country Churchyards (2000), and Eudora Welty as Photographer (2009). Her essays and book reviews were collected in the 1978 volume titled The Eye of the Story, and her autobiography One Writer’s Beginnings, published in 1984 by Harvard University Press, was a nationwide best seller. For a time during her last three decades, Welty periodically worked on fiction, but completed nothing to her own high standards, standards that made her a literary celebrity. She appeared on televised interviews, received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the French Legion of Honor, served as the subject of a BBC documentary, and was chosen as the first living writer to be published in the Library of America series. After a short illness and as the result of cardio-pulmonary failure, Eudora Welty died on 23 July 2001, in Jackson, Mississippi, her lifelong home, where she is buried.