Eudora Welty, the South's Lyrical Master of the Short Story, Is Dead at 92

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was "excited and delighted" to learn that she had become the first
writing to be included in the presti-
gious Library of America series of
collective works by United States lit-
erary giants. The library's break
with its long tradition of choosing
only dead authors for its series of
definitive collections ushered Miss
Welty into a pantheon that includes
Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Henry
James, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather,
Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulk-
ner.

For decades she was pigeonholed
by critics who placed her with Faulk-
ner, Katherine Anne Porter, Flann-
ery O'Connor and Carson McCul-
ers as a writer of the so-called
Southern School. Her reputation as
a regional and apolitical writer was
often cited as a reason for her failure
to win a Nobel Prize. But her work,
like that of those other Southern writ-
ers, transcended region and pos-
sessed a universal relevance and ap-
peal.

"It is not the South we find in her
stories, it is Eudora Welty's South, a
region that feeds her imagination
and a place we come to trust," Ma-
ureen Howard said when she reviewed
Miss Welty's "Collected Stories" in
1980. "She is a Southerner in the
best sense of the word; she was a
Russian, because place provides them
with a reality — a reality as difficult,
mysterious and impersonal as life."

A Clan of Readers

Eudora Welty was born on April
13, 1909, in Jackson, the daughter of
Christian Webb Welty, an Ohio na-
tional, and Ethel Pauline "Paulie"
Kerrew, who had been a West Virginia
schoolteacher. The Welts settled in
Jackson county when Eudora was a
child. Her mother died when she was
three and her father died when she
took her to see the world, including
the Mississippi State Capitol at the
top of my street, where I could walk
through it on my way to school and
hear a ruckus, the echo of its marble
floor and over me the bell of its
rotunda."

"I'm not sure I realized stories
in my own life, a fuller awareness of what I needed to
find out about people and their lives
to be sought for through another
way, through writing stories. I knew
this anyway: that my wish, indeed
my continuing passion, would be not
to point the finger in judgment but to
part with the invisible, inaudible, in-
wisible that falls between people, the
veil of indifference to other's pres-
ence, each other's wonder, each oth-
er's human plight."

The Depression pictures were
exhibited in New York in 1936, the
same year that Miss Welty, who had sent
dozens of unsolicited stories to mag-
azines, finally made her first sale. A
small literary magazine called Man-
uscript accepted "Death of a Travel-
 ing Salesman," the often anthologized
recording of the last day in the life of a lonely, ill and fright-
ed shoe salesman who loses his
way in rural Mississippi. Before he
dies of a heart attack, he realizes
fleetingly how little he has under-
stood about himself and others.

It was the first of several stories
published in small magazines. "Note-
less of these publications paid, not real-
tly." Miss Welty recalled in an inter-
view when looking back. She was
not limited to the East Coast when
writing. She did work in New York,
which was then the center of literary
life. In 1936, she moved to New York
to find a more vibrant literary scene.

There she was allowed what she
called "a sweet devotion to the
rhythm of two books a day by the
stern-faced librarian. Several de-
clinations in my reading was re-
placed; the new one was named the
Eudora Welty Library.

Miss Welty learned to read before
starting public school and began
turning out stories as a child.

"It took Latin to thrust me into a
bode fable alliance with words in their
true meaning," she wrote. "Learning
Latin (once I was free of Caesarian)
fed my love for words upon words,
words in continuation and modification,
and the beautiful, sober accretion of a
sentence. I could see the achieved
sentence finally standing there, as
real, intact and built to stay as the
Mississippi State Capitol at the top
of my street, where I could walk
through it on my way to school and
hear a ruckus, the echo of its marble
floor and over me the bell of its
rotunda."

'Elocution for Stories'

Miss Welty said she discovered
stories in daily life. "Long before I
wrote stories, I listened for stories," she
wrote in 1954. "Listening for
them is something more acute than
listening to them. Suppose it's a
earl of participation in what goes on. Listening children
that stories are there. When their elders
sit and begin, children are just wait-
ing and hoping for one to come out
like a mouse from its hole."

Miss Welty attended the Missis-
issippi State College for Women,
where she helped to start a literary mag-
zine, and then the University of Wis-
consin, where she earned a bache-
lor's degree in 1929. After college
she returned to Jackson to marry
and, Mr. Welty became an exec-
utive of the Lamark Life Insura-
cence company. They also had two
sons, aged 19 and 22.

The Welts were devoted to books
and learning. "In One Writer's Be-
ginnings," Miss Welty's 1984 memoir,
Miss Welty's father owned a book
shop in Jackson. The early 1930's,
Miss Welty wrote for a radio
station and contributed society items
to The Commercial Appeal of Mem-
phis. During the Depression she got
a publicity job at the Works Progress
Administration, which enabled her
to travel throughout Mississippi. She
was troubled and fascinated by the
people she saw and took hundreds of
snapshots with a cheap camera, de-
viloping her prints in her kitchen at
night. In 1971 Random House pub-
lished a "One Writer's Travel Notebook." "One Time, One Place: Mississippi
in the Depression." The book's stark,
often grim black-and-white photo-
graphs revealed a world Miss Welty,
the long-admired sense of observation
that lay on the ground.

During World War II, Miss Welty
was briefly on the staff of The New
York Times Book Review and some-
times contributed reviews under the
pseudonym Michael Ravenna. But
she returned to Jackson during the
1950's, when her mother and broth-
er fell seriously ill. For almost 15
years, from the mid-50's to the late
60's, she published just a few short
stories, some book reviews and a
children's book, "The Shoe Bird" (1964). During this period she cared
for her family and worked on two
novels. Some writers speculated that
she also suffered some spiritual or
deal or artistic crisis. After the
death of her mother and brothers,
she returned in the 70's with the
novels "Losing Battles" and "The
Optimist's Daughter." Miss Welty's
stories often reflected the
fruits of her wide reading and special
interests. The Robber Bridegroom," for example, incorpo-
rates elements of folklore, fairy
tales, classical myths and legends of
the Mississippi River and the Natch-
eez Trace, the road of pioneer days
that stretched from Natchez, Missis-
issippi, to Nashville.

An Internet Legacy

Many years later Eudora, the
widely used e-mail program, was
named after Miss Welty because its
human faces of 'Clytie' to the fore-
boding near-violence of the title
piece, from the jazzy 'Powerhouse'
to the satiric 'Petified Man,' from
the wild comic 'Why I Live at the
P.O.' to the dignified 'A Worn Path'
(the grave, persistent, meditative
sound of Old Phoenix Jackson's cane
in the frozen earth establishes the
tone at the outset)."

"Why I Live at the P.O." combined
Miss Welty's antic sense of humor
with her pleasure in language. As the
narrator prepares to leave her fam-
ily's home, she says: "So I hope to
tell you I marched in and got the
radio. And they could of all bit a
nail in two, especially Stella-Rondo, that
it used to belong to, and she knew
she couldn't get it back. I'd sue
for it like a shot... The thermom-
eter and the Hawaiian ukulele were cer-
tainly mine, and I stand on the step-
ladder and get all my watermelon-
rind preserves and every fruit and
vegetable I put up, every jar

mate sense of place. We grew up in
the fact that we live here with people
about whom we know almost every-
thing that can be known as a citizen of the world. We learn significant
things that way.
We know what the place has made
of these people, what they've made
of the place through generations.
We have a sense of continuity and
that, I think, comes from place.

And because she was in her partic-
ular place in the racially discordant
60's, she said, "I was one of the
writers who received dead-of-night
telephone calls, when I was being
battered by strangers saying, 'Why
are you sitting down there writing
your stories instead of out condem-
nning your society?'"

"I didn't need their pointers to
know that there was injustice among
human beings or that there was trou-
ble," she continued. "I had been writ-
ing about that steadily right along.

by letting my characters show this. I
see as my privilege writing about
human beings as human beings with
all the things that make them up,
including bigotry, misunderstanding,

ness and whatever else. Whatever else
makes them up interests me."

Miss Welty made one notable ex-
cception to her rule against direct
bashing when Medgar Evers, the
black civil rights leader, was shot to
death by a sniper in Jackson in 1963.

"I did write a story the night it
happened," she said. "I was so upset
about this, and I thought: I live down
here we're bombing and I believe
I must know what a person like
that felt like - the murderer. There
had been so many stories about such
a person. I put myself in the story,
written by people who didn't know
the South, so I wrote about the
murderer, the first person, which was
a very daring thing for me to do."

In the Mind of an Assassin

The story, "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" was rushed to
print in The New Yorker only days
after Evers's killer was arrested.
Taking up only two pages, it was a
chilling journey into the mind of a
bigoted psychopath. Hailed as a
disturbingly effective examination of
the roots of racial hatred, it has since
been included in many anthologies.
Miss Welty never married. (Mar-
riage, she said, "never came up."
She prefers to remain single.

Although she was a shy person, she
had many friends who were writers,
among them Porter, Robert Penn
Warren, Eudora Welty, William
Pritchett, Cleath Brooks, Shelby
Feute, Walker Percy, Elizabeth
Bumby and many others.

She also had many readers. Ser-
ious ones. A readership that was
largely made up of other writers.
She received innumerable letters
from people who were inspired by
her writing. People who found
comfort in her words. People who
found hope in her stories.

And so, as the world says goodbye
to Eudora Welty, we are reminded
of the power of words. The power
to inspire. The power to comfort.
The power to heal.

Eudora Welty in a photo released in 1941, when she won second prize in the O. Henry short-story awards.
And We’re Going to Live Forever

From the story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” (1963):

Never seen him before, never seen him since, never seen anything of his black face but his picture, never seen his face alive, any time at all, or anywhere, and didn’t want to, need to, never hope to see that face and never will. As long as there was no question in my mind.

He had to be the one. He stood right still and waited against the light, his back was fixed, faced me like a preacher’s eyeballs when he’s yelling, “Are you saved?” He’s the one.

I’d already brought up my rifle, I’d already taken my sights. And I’d already got him, because it was too late then for him or me to turn by one hair.

Something darker than him, like the wings of a bird, spread on his back and pulled him down. He climbed up once, like a man under bad claws, and like just blood could weigh a ton he walked with it on his back to better light. Did—

Life at the P.O.

Miss Welty began to attract attention after The Atlantic Monthly published two of her stories destined to become classics: “Why I Live at the P.O.” and “A Worn Path.” The first, one of the most popular of the dozens that were to be printed in the years to come, is a first-person explanation by a small-town postmistress of why she is moving out of her economic family’s home to live at the post office. The second won Miss Welty her first of six O. Henry Awards.

When they were climbing the long approach to a bridge after leaving Cairo, rising slowly higher until they rode above the tops of the bare trees, she looked down and saw the pale light widening and the river bottoms opening out, and then the water appearing, reflecting the long, early sun. There were two rivers. Here was where they came together. This was the confluence of the waters, the Ohio and the Mississippi. And they themselves were a part of the confluence. Their own joint act of faith had brought them here at the very moment and matched its occurrence, and proceeded as it proceeded. Direction itself was made beautiful, momentous. They were riding as one with it, right up front. It’s our turn! she thought exultantly. And we’re going to live forever.

Many years later Eudora, thewidely praised e-mail program, was named after Miss Welty because its designer, Steven Dorner, said he had been processing so much e-mail that he felt like the Welty character who lived at the post office.

In 1941 Miss Welty followed “A Curtain of Green” with “The Wide Net and Other Stories,” and in 1942 she published “The Robber Bridegroom,” a novel that later became a successful musical in an adaptation by Alfred Uhry and Robert Waldman. Her first full-length novel, “Delta Wedding,” appeared in 1946. Three years later, a group of short stories set in Morganza, an imaginary small town on the Mississippi Delta, was published under the title “The Golden Apples.” All of Miss Welty’s gifts for compression, metaphorical language and poetic structure were on display. So was her genius for using the details of daily life to illuminate the mysteries of the heart. In the story “The Whole World Knows,” she charted a doomed meeting between a young couple who were estranged:

“There in the flower beds walked the same robins. The sprinkler dripped now. Once again we went into the house by the back door. Our hands touched. We had stepped on Tellie’s patch of mint. The yellow cat was waiting to go in with us, the door handle was as hot as the hand, and on the step, getting under the feet of two people who went in together, the Mason jars with the busy cuttings in them were taken out for Mama’s! — a thousand times we had gone in like that. As a thousand bees had flown and burrowed in the ears of the Mississippi River and the Natchez Trace, the road of pioneer days that stretched from Natchez, Miss., to Nashville.

In “Delta Wedding,” Miss Welty concentrates on the frenzied activities of the extended Fairchild family in the week before the marriage of a daughter to the plantation’s overseer, who is considered by several of the Fairchilds to be an intruder unworthy of admission into the family.

Fiction of Family Life

That book, as well as the short novel “The Ponder Heart” (1954) and her longest one, “ Losing Battles” (1970), are examples of Miss Welty’s preoccupation with family life. They focus on weddings, reunions and funerals, which bring family members together to recall the past, criticize and lavish praise on one another and settle old scores.

Her novels and stories expose the foibles to which large clans are prone, their tendencies to resist change, squelch individuality and ostracize outsiders. Miss Welty often shifts points of view to accomplish this, but in “The Ponder Heart,” she demonstrates her extraordinary ear for dialect and a sense of the ridiculous as she tells the entire story as a comic monologue by Edna Earle Ponder, a garrulous hotel manager. This novel was adapted for the stage by Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov and became a hit when it opened on Broadway in 1956.

Commenting on many critics’ observations that “Losing Battles” and her other works carried a strong sense of place, Miss Welty said: “I think Southerners have such an inti—

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