

LIFE INTO FICTION

Eudora Welty's Response

From her Pinehurst Street home, Eudora Welty struggled with the social climate of fear, hatred, and terror in 1960s Mississippi. Although most of her time between 1955 and 1966 was devoted to the care of ailing family members, she managed to write two stories during these years, both reflecting the turbulence of the era. "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" (1963) and "The Demonstrators" (1966) were urgent calls for social justice. Her revulsion over the violence inflicted upon African Americans is particularly evident in "Where Is the Voice Coming From?," written immediately after Medgar Evers died. In her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*, she writes:

In the 1960s in my hometown of Jackson, the civil rights leader Medgar Evers was murdered one night in darkness, and I wrote a story that same night about the murderer (his identity then unknown) called "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" But all that absorbed me, though it started as outrage, was the necessity I felt for entering into the mind and inside the skin of a character who could hardly have been more alien or repugnant to me. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982. p. 39)

When Fiction and Reality Collide

The narrator-assassin of "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" speaks in a self-serving voice and finds his own worth only by denying the worth of others. Though Welty wrote her story before Beckwith's arrest, she captured with startling accuracy the jealousy, resentment, and insecurity that fueled racial prejudice and hatred like his. Her first draft was so true to life that it had to be edited for publication. As she later recalled:

By then, an arrest had been made in Jackson, and the fiction's outward details had to be changed where by chance they had resembled those of actuality, for the story must not be found prejudicial to the case of a person who might be on trial for his life. (Preface, *The Collected Works of Eudora Welty*. New York: Harcourt, 1980. p. xi.)

Medgar Evers became "Roland Summers," linking the hero of a French epic poem to the man so recently martyred. The city of Jackson became "Thermopylae," literally the "hot gates" and the site of an ancient battle, thereby emphasizing the embattled atmosphere of the South in the early sixties. Delta Drive became "Due West Road" in an early version and was changed again to "Nathan Bedford Forrest Road." This final revision suggested a clear historical link between Forrest, the founder of the Ku Klux Klan, and the story's assassin.

The Mind of the Assassin

The final version of "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" was published in *The New Yorker* on July 6, 1963. The following images from the police investigation of Evers' murder, placed next to quotes from the story, show that even after it was edited the story still shared key details with the actual events. The most profound truth of "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" lies, however, in Welty's portrait of the assassin's mind.



Figure 1: "All I had to do was pick my tree and walk in close behind it."



Figure 2: "As soon as I heard the wheels, I knowed who was coming. That was him and bound to be him. It was the right nigger heading in a new white car up his driveway towards his garage with the light shining..."



Figure 3: "Where's the gun then?" my wife says. "What did you do with our protection?"

"I says, 'It was scorching! It was scorching!' I told her, 'It's laying out on the ground in rank weeds, trying to cool off, that's what it's doing now.'"

Photos courtesy of the DeLaughter Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.