

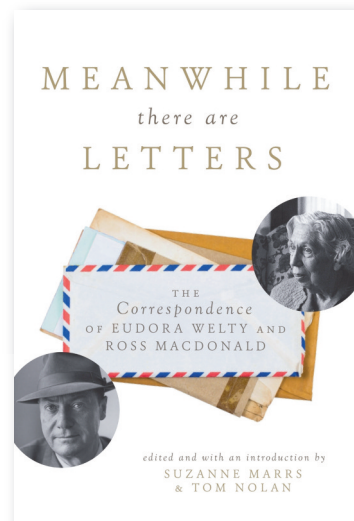


by Jon L. Breen

Pen Pals

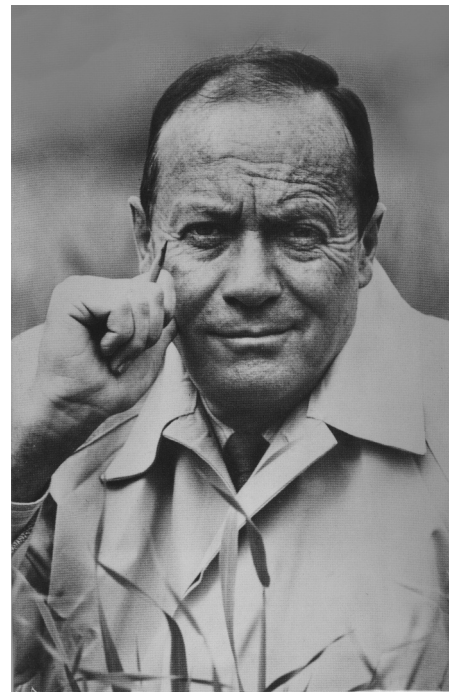
A new collection of the correspondence between Eudora Welty and Ross Macdonald chronicles the platonic love affair between two gifted, caring, and profoundly decent people.

26 MYSTERY SCENE



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Eudora Welty, one of the most celebrated American writers of her time, and Kenneth Millar, better known to mystery readers as Ross Macdonald, first corresponded during one of the professionally best and personally worst periods of Millar's life. On June 1, 1969, William Goldman's review of *The Goodbye Look* appeared on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, proclaiming the series about private eye Lew Archer "the finest detective novels ever written by an American," and an accompanying profile by John Leonard pronounced Macdonald "a major American novelist." In November of the following year, Millar's daughter Linda, who seemed to have achieved stability and contentment after a tragic and tumultuous early life, died suddenly, leaving behind a husband and young son.

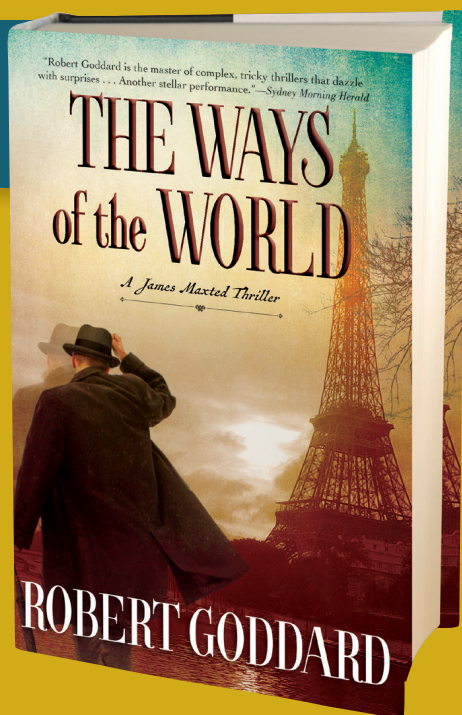


On May 3, 1970, Macdonald wrote Welty a "fan letter" (his phrase) inspired by her favorable reference to him in a *New York Times* interview. He observed that the Mississippi

characters in her recent novel *Losing Battles* shared a "recognizable North American language" with his Canadian aunts and uncles whose "words, imagery, jokes" were

very similar. She wrote back, delighted with this fresh idea. They went on to exchange books and opinions, encouragements and commiserations. In 1971, it was Welty who

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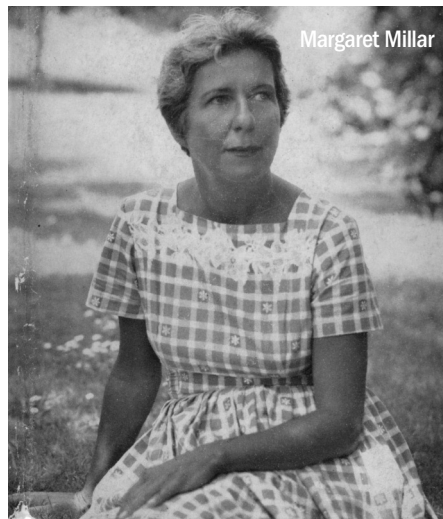
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would praise Ross Macdonald in a front-page *New York Times Book Review* essay on *The Underground Man*. The Lew Archer novel that followed, *Sleeping Beauty* (1973), would be dedicated to Eudora Welty. What began as a dialogue based on common interests and mutual admiration gradually morphed into a platonic love affair between two gifted, caring, and profoundly decent people. The exchange of letters would be two-sided until early in 1980 when Macdonald's advancing Alzheimer's disease made it impossible for him to write. Welty continued to write to him and visited him in Santa Barbara one last time in 1982, the year before his death.

Third party to this benign triangle was Macdonald's wife and fellow novelist Margaret Millar. She was surely aware of how close the friendship of Macdonald and Welty was, and how important to them. She is mentioned frequently, always lovingly and respectfully, in the letters. The two women were friendly and admiring of each other's work. Some of the editors' connecting narrative, including a description by Welty of Margaret's cruel remarks to her husband during that final visit, show Margaret as a mercurial and often difficult person, caus-



In one letter, she remarks on her pleasure at rereading Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* after going through a mixed bag of Pulitzer Prize submissions. When Macdonald was compiling his anthology *Great Stories of Suspense*, she was asked for suggestions and was happy to oblige. She was especially pleased Dick Francis would be included, and on the publishers' insistence on having something by Macdonald himself, she wrote that not to do so "would be like Gershwin having a party and having everybody else play but not play himself..."

Welty herself had at least one venture as a mystery writer: the comic novella *The Ponder Heart* (1954) is arguably a crime story and certainly a mystery, structured to withhold the solution to the end. Over a quarter of the wordage is devoted to a

murder trial, one of the funniest in all literature from its very first witness, a blind small-town coroner.

Both Welty and Macdonald are superb correspondents. Quotable passages abound. Macdonald on aging: "[Margaret] will meet age head-on, and refuses to grow old without a struggle. I am likely to grow old without knowing it." Welty on an odd display of paintings in a Texas museum: "...[T]here was a beautiful line of Mary Cassatts going up the staircase wall, that you couldn't really look at, for being too close and for having to go on upstairs—the only way you could have seen them less well would be by sliding down the bannisters." Many friends and colleagues are mentioned, with rarely a bad word to say about anybody, save some critics and biographers who did wrong by lit-

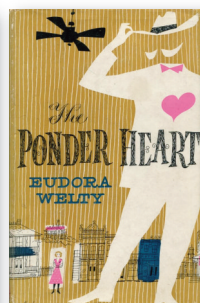
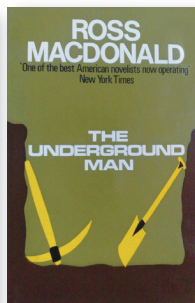
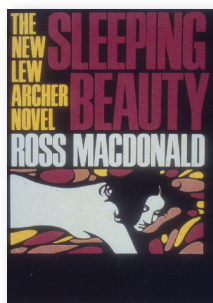
erary heroes F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ford Madox Ford. Apart from the literary, common interests included nature, dogs, birds, jazz, and politics.

The first indications of Macdonald's gradual memory loss come as early as 1974, when he seems to repeat information that he has already written in earlier letters. He first mentions it explicitly in a letter of August 15, 1976: "a failure of the memory function which is probably within normal limits for my age but which, because I had had a nearly perfect memory, scared and depressed me." The diagnosis of Alzheimer's did not come until 1981, and it was first revealed publicly by Margaret Millar in a *Los Angeles Times* interview the following year. Welty's unfinished short story "Henry," which deals fictionally with their relationship and his Alzheimer's, appears as an appendix to the book.

**The Welty-Macdonald
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Among its other virtues, the Welty-Macdonald correspondence shows how much is lost when people stop writing letters. Can even the most scrupulously preserved emails or blog posts equal the humanity and style of great letters by great letter writers? This is one of the finest books in an unusually rich year for biographical and critical works in the mystery field. The Edgar, should it win one, would presumably go to the editors, Welty biographer Suzanne Marrs and Macdonald biographer Tom Nolan, who have expertly provided the necessary bridges and identifications to shape the material into a rewarding whole. In effect, Macdonald and Welty have collaborated on a posthumous epistolary novel, one that delivers through reality the emotional power and truthfulness of great fiction. I think they would enjoy that. ✦

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Jon L. Breen is a two-time winner of the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Award for his criticism. His most recent novel is Probable Clause (Five Star).



tic and temperamental, similar to her quiet and gentle husband in many ways but completely different in others. An odd match, perhaps, but there is little doubt that the marriage was solid and that the two Millars were devoted to each other, and had many common interests apart from writing and family: exercise, ecology, birdwatching, court watching. During the time covered by the letters, Margaret had to deal with the death of a daughter and her own severe health problems and writer's block, as well as the diminishment of her husband. Viewing her as the villain of the piece would be unfair.

Eudora Welty's interest in mystery fiction long antedated her discovery of Ross Macdonald. Some of her favorite writers in the genre were Julian Symons, Agatha Christie, Elizabeth Daly, and Ngaio Marsh.