

A sense of place: Honoring our treasured Eudora Welty



Your Turn
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Eudora Welty teaches us to listen — not just to one another but also to the voice of history. But even a talent as great as hers needs a fertile environment in which to grow and thrive. Mississippi was, and is, such a place. It is a natural home for storytellers. Today, state and national leaders are affirming this truth by placing the first marker of the Mississippi Writers Trail on Miss Welty's quiet, tree-lined street in Jackson before her elegant Tudor home and garden.

As chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and as a Mississippian, I am proud to have worked with the Mississippi Humanities Council to award a special bicentennial grant for the creation of the newest cultural trail for the state. Our federal agency was also an early funder of the Mississippi Blues Trail. NEH has awarded 62 grants, totaling more than \$14 million, to the state in the past decade.

NEH has contributed more than a million dollars for projects on Miss Welty's literary work and photography, including \$450,000 for educational programming at the Eudora Welty House.

Speaking of her childhood, Miss Welty wrote that "It had been startling

and disappointing to me to find out that story books had been written by people, that books were not natural wonders, coming up of themselves like grass."

I hesitate to disagree with a single sentence in *One Writer's Beginnings*, but Miss Welty's stories are, in fact, natural wonders. They come toward the reader out of the tall grass, from behind a live oak tree or across a freshly plowed field, walking along the levee as the evening sun goes down into the muddy river.

Her stories are rooted in place. And they keep us rooted, too.

When I went through the U.S. Senate confirmation process this year, I discussed how our agency might best serve Americans outside of the large coastal cities, including those in rural or underserved areas. I quoted Miss Welty to underscore my viewpoint: "A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within."

As a boy seeing her at the Jitney thumping a melon to judge its ripeness, as a student reading her in a darkened library, as a bookish traveler in a foreign land, I was learning from her what may constitute a "daring life" — a life devoted to the arts, humanities, and the pursuit of knowledge. She was giving me permission. She was giving thousands of us, hundreds of thousands of us, permission.

This new trail gives permission, too. It will follow the lives and works of Wil-

liam Faulkner, Jesmyn Ward and other internationally acclaimed writers to where they found the muse or were found themselves.

The cultural trail system is an exemplary example of the catalytic role that state and federal government funding can play in cultural tourism. Every dollar that NEH invests in a community generates five dollars in economic activity.

This project is a collaboration by the Mississippi Humanities Council, Mississippi Arts Commission, Mississippi Development Authority, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and other partners.

Together, these organizations tell a full and complex story of a remarkable place through vibrant new museums, heritage trails, music and book festivals, performance venues, and other cultural centers. My colleagues and I look upon this approach as a national model.

Our nation has many talented writers. But passing few, at any time or in any place, have been what Miss Welty was and continues to be: a national treasure. Today, her beloved state claims her as such for all time.

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