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## Sister Act: Margaret Walker and Eudora Welty

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STUDY *the* SOUTH



BY CAROLYN J. BROWN  
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IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE 2015 OXFORD CONFERENCE FOR  
THE BOOK

In a journal entry dated Tuesday, November 11, 1980, Margaret Walker wrote that Eudora Welty “and I did our act together for Mrs. Early’s class” at Southern Methodist University. Suzanne Marrs, author of *Eudora Welty: A Biography*, also recalls hearing Welty “say ‘sister act’ several times” in reference to her presence on the same panels as Walker.<sup>1</sup> This “sister act” came at the end of their lives, in the 1980s and ’90s, when both were recognized several times by their hometown and state for their long careers and bodies of work. The paths they traveled to reach this intersection of common recognition were quite different, however. Almost exact contemporaries—Welty lived from 1909 to 2001 and Walker from 1915 to 1998—they share similar timelines and histories, both having lived through the Depression, World War II, and the civil rights movement. But as one was white and one was black, their stories are very different, as are their paths to becoming nationally known writers.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 EARLY EDUCATION

Both Eudora Welty and Margaret Walker were born into families where education was given the highest priority. In her memoir *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Welty acknowledges the debt she owes to her parents for instilling within her a love of reading: “Indeed, my parents could not give me books enough. They must have sacrificed to give me on my sixth or seventh birthday—it was after I became a reader for myself—the ten-volume set of *Our Wonder World*.”<sup>3</sup> She also fondly recalls getting her first library card and making trips to the library on her bicycle every day because she was limited to checking out two books at a time: “I coasted the two new books home, jumped out of my petticoat, read (I suppose I ate and bathed and answered questions

put to me), then in all hope put my petticoat back on and rode those two books back to the library to get my next two.”<sup>4</sup>



**Walker's first house in Birmingham**

*Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library*

Welty grew up in Jackson; she lived in her first house on Congress Street from 1909 to 1925, and it was in this house, located across the street from her elementary school and conveniently near the library and later Jackson High School, that she developed what she calls her “knowledge of the word.”<sup>5</sup> Margaret Walker, on the other hand, was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and moved several times as a child. Her parents were Methodist educators, and her father was also a Methodist preacher: he supplemented his meagre pastoral income by teaching. Walker’s father moved his growing family to Meridian, Mississippi, when he and his wife were both offered teaching positions at the Haven Institute, a Methodist school. Walker started school at age five at Haven (like Welty, she learned to read quite young and was ready for school before most of her peers) and remembers her time in Meridian as “happy . . . I stayed that year in the first grade but I read with the fourth grade children.”<sup>6</sup> Meridian was not a happy place for Margaret’s mother, however. Walker writes, “Mama . . . never cared for life in Mississippi,” and she was relieved when the family returned to Birmingham.<sup>7</sup> Walker continued her schooling, but it was not as convenient for Walker as it was for Welty to get to school. After living in a series of dormitories, rented rooms, and Methodist parsonages, the Walkers bought a small house, which Walker describes as “a real achievement.”<sup>8</sup> It was located outside the city limits, and she was required to walk “a long way through a white neighborhood on the paved streets to the car line at Dabbs Drugstore” and then take the trolley car downtown to get to school. Once, she recalls, “three little white boys jumped on me and beat me on my way home.”<sup>9</sup> Despite these challenges, she was heartbroken

when the Central Alabama Institute, where her parents both taught, burned down. The Walker family was forced to move once again—this time to New Orleans, where her father found a job teaching at New Orleans University.

It was in middle school and high school that both Welty's and Walker's considerable writing talents were first recognized. Interestingly, Welty's first writing awards were for poems; at the age of twelve she won the Jackie Mackie Jingles Contest and received a twenty-five dollar prize along with recognition from the judges in the form of a statement of hope that she would "improve in poetry to such an extent as to win fame."<sup>10</sup> This award was followed by publication of two poems in *St. Nicholas* magazine, a nationally popular periodical for children that has published other well-known writers and poets in their youth, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Rachel Carson, and Ring Lardner. The poem, "In the Twilight," which Welty published at age sixteen, won a Gold Badge, the magazine's highest honor. Walker achieved similar recognition: in her twelfth-grade year at Gilbert Academy she was awarded a leather-bound Bible for an oration she gave on "The American Negro's Obligation to Africa," which was followed the next year by the freshman composition prize at New Orleans University, which was a five-dollar gold piece.

## 2 COLLEGE

Another similarity between the two writers is that neither graduated from the colleges where they started; both transferred to colleges in the Midwest which broadened their horizons and where they found mentors who nurtured their talents. Welty first went to the Mississippi State College for Women in Columbus, Mississippi, but dissatisfied and bored, she transferred to the University of Wisconsin–Madison where she completed her degree in English. Walker, like her parents, went to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, because it was a Methodist school and it was affordable. For both women, going North was difficult and lonely at times, but they both have acknowledged how eye-opening and important it was to their development as writers.

Welty recalls the shock of taking an art class at the University of Wisconsin: "I walked into my art class and saw, in place of the bowl of fruit and the glass bottle and ginger jar of the still life I used to draw at MSCW, a live human being. As we sat at our easels, a model, a young woman, lightly dropped her robe and stood, before us and a little above us, holding herself perfectly contained, in her full self and naked."<sup>11</sup> Welty, too, was inspired by her professors, and discovered in listening to English professor Ricardo Quintana that she had "learned the word for the nature of what I had come upon in reading Yeats . . . *passion*."<sup>12</sup> Quintana, in turn, recognized Welty's talent, finding his student's work "brilliant" and imbued with "an unusually acute literary sense."<sup>13</sup>

Welty enjoyed being close to Chicago; she often traveled there on the weekends to take in a show or go to a concert. Before entering the University of Wisconsin–Madison, she had already traveled extensively, even going on a cross-country train trip with her father. Walker, on the

other hand, had never been out of the South, and the 950-mile car trip from New Orleans to Evanston, Illinois, was not an easy one in 1932. Walker wrote that the family “carried food, water and a five gallon can of gasoline in the car with us, because we dared not stop at a strange white filling station.”<sup>14</sup> Blacks traveling North had to be especially careful: Walker recalls that “Southern Illinois had a legendary sign that said ‘Nigger, don’t let the sun go down with you in this town.’”<sup>15</sup> And when Walker arrived in Chicago, she had never seen anything like it in her life. She describes her fear and intimidation of the big city: “Those first few weeks at Northwestern Mercedes [Margaret’s sister] and I were awed by the greatness of the University. Deering Library was new and I would stare up at the ceilings which seemed full of oak leaves and acorns hand carved of wood. . . . We found our way around in downtown Evanston with great trepidation.”<sup>16</sup>

Walker realized, like Welty, that her earlier education had not quite prepared her for her new curriculum. She entered as a junior, but had to take several sophomore level English classes, zoology (“which I was very grateful to pass”), and two years of Greek (that “nearly killed me”).<sup>17</sup> But she became stronger for it, and writes that “I am sure going to Northwestern was the making of me.”<sup>18</sup>

Much of the credit for Margaret Walker’s development as a writer goes to her English professor E. B. Hungerford. Hungerford, according to Margaret Walker scholar Maryemma Graham, shaped and directed Margaret’s education:

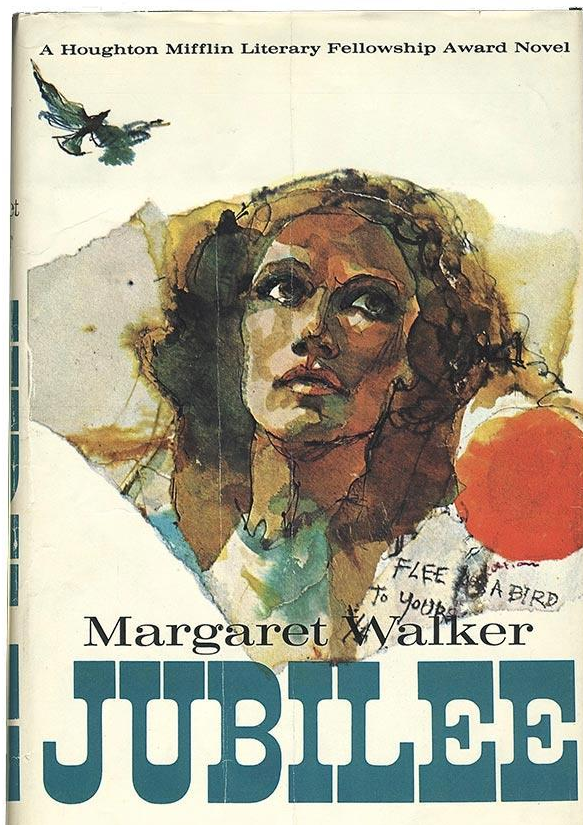
Under Hungerford, she learned all the forms of English poetry and the English metrical system; she learned how to do the scansion of a poem and memorized the versification patterns. She read the English poets, focusing on the Romantic writers, and developed a keen interest in Shakespearean sonnets, the odes of Shelley and Keats, and the long poems of Wordsworth, all important influences upon her future work.<sup>19</sup>

Hungerford, like Quintana, recognized his young student’s talent; it was in his creative writing class that she wrote the very first draft of her now famous novel *Jubilee*, and he rewarded her writing efforts by providing her “with a host of little magazines and poetry, suggesting some places where she submit some of her work.”<sup>20</sup> He also gained her admittance to the all-white Northwestern chapter of the Poetry Society of America, giving her not only literary credibility and respect, but breaking down a racial barrier at the time.

### 3 THE WPA

For both women writers, college was followed by the Depression and the desperate need to find employment. Welty returned to Jackson; after her father’s premature death from leukemia in 1931, she stayed at home caring for her mother and working at various jobs—writing for a radio station, taking photographs for a local dress shop, even substitute teaching. Walker stayed in Chicago following graduation; she searched for a job for months, never holding one

for very long. It was not until both women found work with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) that their lives and careers got back on track.

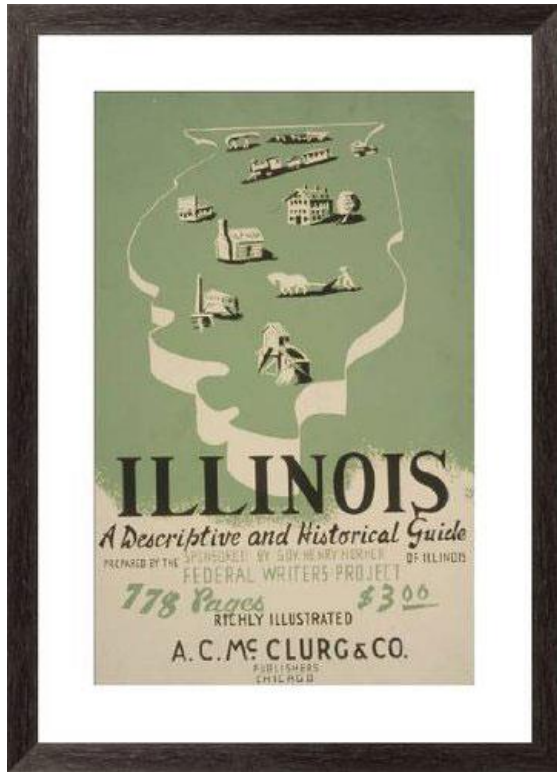


Cover of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*

The WPA was created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to generate jobs for people during the Great Depression. It offered opportunities to millions to carry out public works projects, including the construction of public buildings and roads, as well as arts, drama, media, and literacy projects. Welty found work with the WPA as a junior publicity agent which, she said in a 1989 interview, was a title that referred to her gender, not her youth. Welty traveled all over Mississippi with the WPA, “writing the Projects up for the county weeklies to print”<sup>21</sup> and tells friend Frank Lyell how she suddenly saw her state in a new light:

I was so ignorant to begin with about my native state. . . . I didn't really get an idea of the diversity and all the different regions of the state, or of the great poverty of the state, until I had talked to people. I don't mean schoolgirls like myself that were at college with me, but *people*, you know, in the street.<sup>22</sup>

Walker, too, became a writer for the WPA, working as a junior writer on the *Illinois Guide Book*. Unlike Welty, she did not identify the word “junior” as a reference to gender; rather, she noted that as a “junior writer” she earned less than fellow WPA employee, writer Richard Wright. He was a supervisor (hers, as a matter of fact) and earned \$125 per month; Walker's salary was \$85 when she first started and later raised to \$94.<sup>23</sup>



The WPA *Illinois Guide Book*, on which Margaret Walker worked as a junior writer.

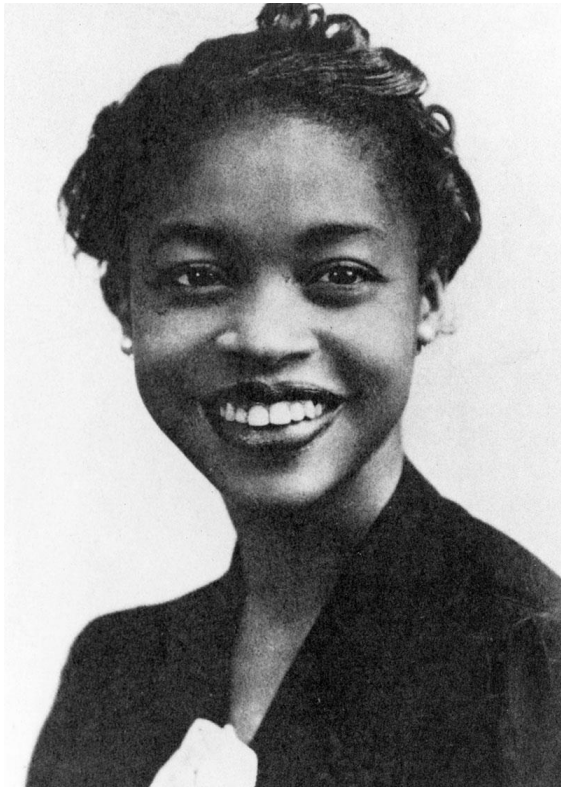
Welty worked for the WPA for only six months because the national office closed the Mississippi branch. Walker worked for the WPA for three years—twice as long as the law deemed employees could. For both women, the period following their employment with the WPA would be the most significant in terms of their careers; they would finally find the writing success that they sought.

#### 4 EARLY WRITING SUCCESS

Welty first found success as a writer in 1936. *Manuscript* magazine accepted two of her short stories for publication: “Death of a Traveling Salesman” and “Magic.” The editor, John Rood, was the first to recognize Welty’s writing ability: “Without any hesitation we can say that ‘Death of a Traveling Salesman’ is one of the best stories that has come to our attention—and one of the best stories we have ever read. It is superbly done.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, when her stint with the WPA came to an end that same year, Welty was not heartbroken. She was starting to see results from her labors, and from 1937 to 1939 she published ten stories in three different magazines. She also won an O. Henry Award and had stories collected in *Best American Short Stories* in 1938, 1939, and 1940. Perhaps the greatest prize of all came in 1940 when Diarmuid Russell, her longtime agent, first contacted her and asked if she wanted literary representation. She hired him and never had to worry about publication again. Russell negotiated Welty’s first short story collection, *A Curtain of Green*, which was published in 1941 and included an introduction by Katherine Anne Porter.



Walker was not as fortunate. Like Welty, publication and success came from literary prizes, but those awards did not ultimately result in a lifetime relationship with an agent who directed her career. After her WPA employment was terminated, Walker decided she needed to earn a graduate degree in order to teach at the college level. She traveled to Iowa to the new master's of fine arts program there (which today is the acclaimed Iowa Writer's Workshop) to work on a master's in English, and again, as she did at Northwestern, she found a mentor who helped her develop her poetic voice. It was Paul Engle and, under his tutelage, she completed her first collection of poetry, *For My People: A Volume of Verse*. She submitted her unpublished poetry collection three times to the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition and, two years after she graduated from Iowa with a master's degree in English, she finally won the competition. She learned later that Stephen Vincent Benét, one of the judges of the competition, had fought for her; he felt that his colleagues were refusing to give her the prize based on her race. It was not until he threatened to not name anyone else as the winner that they relented and gave Walker the prize.



**Walker publicity shot for *For My People: A Volume of Verse*, 1942**

*Harsh Collection, Chicago Public Library*

It is not an understatement to say that winning the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition changed Margaret Walker's life. She had already had held two teaching positions since graduating from Iowa (going to teach wherever the salary was best), and this award provided her with financial freedom and independence for the first time in her life. It also gave her the



opportunity to travel to New York City, read her poetry aloud in front of a large audience, and get her first collection of poetry published (with a foreword written by Benét himself). According to Richard K. Barksdale, “In 1942, when, at twenty-seven, she published her first volume of poems—*For My People*—she became one of the youngest Black writers to have published a volume of poetry in this country. . . . Moreover, when [this] volume won a poetry prize in 1942, Margaret Walker became the first Black woman in American literary history to be so honored in a prestigious national competition.”<sup>25</sup> Although she did not find an agent following this recognition, she did sign a contract with the National Artists and Concert Corporation, which set up a five-year reading tour for her and paid her a salary three times as much as she was making teaching.



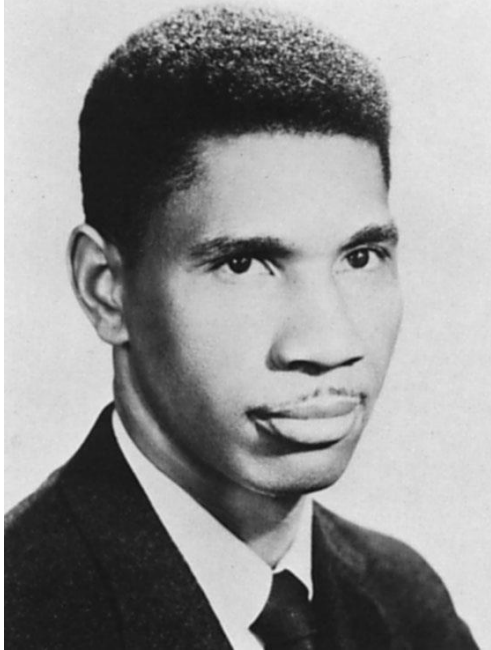
**Walker (seated, second from left) at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York, 1943**  
*The New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Yaddo Records*

Both Welty and Walker followed similar paths after initial publishing success: both attended Yaddo, the writer’s colony in Saratoga Springs, New York—Welty in 1941 and Walker in 1943; both won fellowships that provided financial support while they wrote full-time: Welty won two Guggenheims (1942 and 1949); and Walker earned a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1944 followed by a Ford Fellowship in 1953, both of which she used to finish her second work, her novel *Jubilee*, which would win Houghton Mifflin’s Literary Fellowship Award. She had started *Jubilee* while she was at Northwestern and would not complete it until 1965, thirty years later.

## 5 PERSONAL LIVES

The twenty-four years between major publications in Walker's career is explained by the major difference in the two writers' lives: Margaret Walker married and had four children; Eudora Welty never married. In 1942, the same year Walker published *For My People: A Volume of Verse*, she met the man who would become her husband, Firnist James Alexander, whom she fondly called "Alex." Alex was a disabled veteran, and for much of their marriage he had health problems and could not hold a permanent job. Margaret was the primary breadwinner for the family; she had four children in ten years and joined the English Department at Jackson State in 1949 in order to provide for her family by teaching full-time. Welty's great love, John Robinson, whom she had hoped to marry one day, also was affected by the war. When he returned from service in 1945 he was not the same man. According to Eudora Welty biographer Suzanne Marrs, "He did not want to resume his career as an insurance adjuster, he thought longingly of permanent residence in Italy, he was moody and often depressed."<sup>26</sup> Eudora continued to hope for a permanent union with him and even moved to San Francisco to live near him during the fall of 1947. But Robinson "was reluctant to equate love and marriage."<sup>27</sup> Welty returned to Jackson and "continued to hope that marriage to Robinson was part of her future."<sup>28</sup> She distracted herself, however, with writing and traveling through Europe. In 1951, age 42, she finally learned the truth about Robinson and why he would not commit to a longterm relationship with her: he was gay and she discovered he had been living with a young man while in Italy. She would have to move on without him.

Welty never married, and although that is a major difference between the two writers, one characteristic they share is that they were both caretakers for their families, which would interrupt their writing at different times in their lives: Welty lived with and cared for her mother, who had been in declining health since the death of her husband in 1931, as well as for her brother Walter's two daughters when he became ill with severe arthritis and later died. Walker, in addition to her responsibilities as a mother of four children, often had to care for her husband who needed medical care off and on throughout his life.



Medgar Evers, the first NAACP field secretary for Mississippi, who was fatally shot on June 21, 1963, by Byron De La Beckwith. His death inspired writings by both Walker and Welty.

## 6 MEDGAR EVERS

In addition to having similar caretaking responsibilities, both writers were troubled by the political turmoil in Mississippi during the 1950s and '60s. The incident that ties them together most closely is the assassination of Medgar Evers in the driveway of his home on Guynes Street in Jackson in 1963. For Walker, the cold-blooded murder could not have been physically closer: Walker also lived on Guynes Street, a few houses down from Evers, and their children played together. Walker was even in the same neighborhood garden club as Medgar's wife, Myrlie. Her response to Evers's death was a poem, "Micah," comparing the young civil rights leader with the biblical prophet. Walker's book of poetry, *Prophets for a New Day*, where this poem was first published in 1970, contains many poems equating civil rights martyrs with biblical figures as well as other poems about civil rights battlegrounds, such as Jackson and Birmingham. Welty responded to the brutal murder of Evers with a short story composed the same night that he died. "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" was written from the point of view of the white assassin and was accepted immediately by the *New Yorker* magazine. Editor William Maxwell recognized the enormous risk Welty took in writing it and admired her courage. Both writers were greatly affected by the violence and political turmoil of the 1960s and would continue to return to it in their writing.

It is interesting to compare the two Jackson writers in this instance that links them so closely both physically and historically. As writers, they do not share much in common in terms of the genres they favored: Welty is known for her voluminous fiction—short stories, novellas, and novels, although she demonstrated a knack for poetry as a young girl and published one poem,

“A Flock of Guinea Hens Seen from a Car,” in the April 20, 1957, issue of the *New Yorker*. Walker, on the other hand, was committed to poetry as an adolescent until the end of her life. She even writes about her development as a poet in the preface to her final book of poetry, *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, tracing her poetic milestones, listing her favorite poetic genres, and revealing her major subject: the South. She clearly connects herself with Welty, whose subject was the same, when she says, “The South is my home, and my adjustment or accommodation to this South—whether real or imagined (mythic and legendary), violent or nonviolent—is the subject and source of all my poetry. It is also my life.”<sup>29</sup>

Welty wrote the short story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” from the point of view of the white assassin, fully imagining what the evil perpetrator of this crime was thinking and feeling. In her preface to *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, she shares the unique way this particular story came about, a process that Walker can relate to as she had a similar burst of inspiration writing her most famous poem, “For My People”:<sup>30</sup>

. . . when Medgar Evers, the local civil rights leader, was shot down from behind in Jackson, I thought, with overwhelming directness: Whoever the murderer is, I know him: not his identity, but his coming about, in this time and place. . . . The story pushed its way through a long novel I was in the middle of writing, and was finished on the same night the shooting had taken place.<sup>31</sup>

The narrator remains anonymous, but even without a name his anger at and envy of Roland Summers (the Medgar Evers of the story) is very real. Suzanne Marrs describes him in her discussion of the story in *One Writer's Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty*:

The story's narrator is a poor, uneducated, ungrammatical white man who feels threatened by the possibility of political and economic equality for African Americans. He resents the prominence and prosperity of civil rights leader Roland Summers. He is threatened by a black man who no longer accepts his position of inferiority and who in fact seems clearly superior. He resents Summers' fame, his face on T.V. He resents Summers' paved street and drive, his lush green lawn, his new white car. Killing Summers lets him feel “on top of the world myself. For once.” And he tells the dead Summers, “There was one way left, for me to be ahead of you and stay ahead of you, . . . and I just taken it. Now I'm alive and you ain't.”<sup>32</sup>

Walker's focus is on the victim, Medgar Evers; Welty's is on the killer.

Walker wrote two poems about Medgar Evers: the first, “Micah,” compares the civil rights leader to the Old Testament prophet, but she invokes both past and present in her imagery:

Micah was a young man of the people  
Who came up from the streets of Mississippi  
And cried out his Vision to his people;  
Who stood fearless before the waiting throng  
Like an astronaut shooting into space.

Her language is strong and forceful; the poem's lines are short and she uses repetition and punctuation to great effect, giving Micah (Medgar) a powerful voice, like a prophet on a pulpit:

Micah was a man who spoke against Oppression  
Crying: Woe to you Workers of iniquity!  
Crying: Woe to you doers of violence!  
Crying: Woe to you breakers of the peace!  
Crying: Woe to you, my enemy!<sup>33</sup>

The unnamed murderer in Welty's story cares about staying superior in this life, declaring, "We ain't never now, never going to be equals and you know why? One of us is dead. What about that, Roland?"<sup>34</sup> Walker's Micah cares more about the life beyond, employing a rich, resonant biblical voice to declare victory over the white enemy: the "rich men . . . full of violence . . . [and] full of deceit . . . shall not enter the City of good-will. . . . And they shall not be remembered in the Book of Life." Yet, although the focus is on the afterlife, she concludes the poem by bringing the reader back to Evers's humanity, simply stating "Micah was a man."<sup>35</sup> Walker continues weaving this thread of humanity in her second poem dedicated to Evers, a poem that was written after "Micah" and first published in *This Is My Century*. It is entitled "Medgar Evers, 1925–1963," and it is an excellent example of Walker's skill as a sonneteer. It is an unusually complex sonnet in its form and focuses on the peace that Evers will have now that he is at rest:

The birds overhead will build their nests;  
In the twilight hours sing a serenade.  
The grass will gradually creep into shade  
Where this martyred man sleeps unafraid.  
And he will have neighbors good and true  
Who have given their lives for freedom, too.<sup>36</sup>

Walker and Welty were both powerfully moved by the assassination of Evers in their hometown, and although they took opposite points of view to express their anger and sorrow—Welty focusing on the murderer and Walker on Evers himself—they clearly convey their despair in unique voices that speak to the horror of the tragedy.<sup>37</sup>

## 7 SISTER ACT

So when did Eudora Welty and Margaret Walker finally meet? They were both in Jackson in the 1950s and '60s, but the first evidence that the two women writers were in contact with one another is a letter dated September 14, 1977, from Eudora Welty to Margaret Walker. The letter alludes to an earlier communication between the two of them that had occurred on April 21, 1977. Margaret Walker apparently had invited Welty to participate in the National Conference on the Teaching of Creative Writing. Welty had responded affirmatively, but had not heard back from Walker. Welty writes:

Dear Dr. Alexander,

I can't find that I've had any further word from you about your National Conference on the Teaching of Creative Writing since last April 21, when you wrote to ask me to participate. I wrote you that I would be glad to, and have hoped to receive further information about what you wished me to do.

In typically modest Welty fashion, she concludes the letter by stating that she feels it is perhaps her fault that Walker has not been able to reach her as she has been out of town: "Since I've been travelling around a good deal, I feel you might well have tried to reach me and couldn't. I hope all is going well with you, and it will be nice to hear from you. Sincerely, Eudora Welty."<sup>38</sup>

The next evidence of the two writers sharing the stage at a literary event is found three years later in Margaret Walker's journal. Two weeks after the death of her beloved Alex, Walker writes in an entry dated Tuesday, November 11, 1980, that she has just arrived at the Twin Sixties Motor Hotel in Dallas, Texas, for a literary festival hosted by Southern Methodist University. She interrupts her description of Dallas to discuss her despair over the recent presidential election: Ronald Reagan has won in a landslide and she writes that "many Americans and almost all Black Americans [are] stunned by this so-called conservative reactionary victory." On the election she shares similar political views as Welty, who was a lifelong Democrat. Walker returns to the festival several pages later, and it is a quite poignant passage as the festival occurred at a particularly emotional time for her: "Tomorrow marks two weeks since my husband's funeral. This trip is an effort to pick up the broken pieces of my heart and my life and try with God's help to go on and in my beloved Alex's words, 'try to live.'"<sup>39</sup>

She then describes the conference at Southern Methodist, and it is evident that Walker enjoys sharing the spotlight with Welty. She writes that "Sunday night Eudora Welty opened the festival with a reading of two of her stories. Yesterday at noon she and I did our act together for Mrs. Early's class. Marshall Terry and Mrs. Joe Brown joined us at 3:30 for the fiction panel. Last night we went to dinner at the Ken Shield's house."<sup>40</sup> The friendship continues into the holidays as approximately six weeks later Walker notes in her journal in an entry dated December 24, 1980, that "Cora Norman and Eudora Welty came over for coffee and fruitcake."<sup>41</sup>

In 1984 both writers were included in *Taste of the South*, a cookbook put together by the Symphony League of Jackson as a fundraiser. Other notable Mississippi writers were included, such as Willie Morris and Elizabeth Spencer. The state's famous authors did not provide recipes, although both Welty and Walker could have (both enjoyed entertaining and are known for particular recipes); instead they were asked to write culinary introductions to the various sections of the book. It's interesting to compare how each writer handled her assignment: Welty was given the breakfast section, but rather than writing a short essay on the nature of breakfast she simply quoted a passage from her fiction. Walker, on the other hand, composed a brief essay on the subject of "Luncheon," her assigned topic, discussing how it had changed over time and the various types of lunches that are enjoyed.



**Walker and Welty at Governor's Awards in 1992** — *Courtesy of Charlotte Moman*

It was in the 1990s that the two Jackson writers truly could be considered a “sister act” as they were often honored or in attendance at important programs in the capitol city, or included in the same books as they were in *Taste of the South*. For instance, both women received the Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts, which is “presented annually to outstanding writers, artists, performers, craftsmen, and educators who have made significant and lasting contributions through their work.” Welty received the award in 1990 and Walker in 1992. Welty attended the event when Walker won it, and a photograph shows them talking together with Mississippi Governor Kirk Fordice in the background. Then, in 1997, both Walker and Welty were photographed and interviewed for University of South Carolina Press’s book entitled *Southern Writers*. These brief profiles capture the humor and wit both women were known for, as well as their desire to continue their writing even though both were suffering from severe health problems. In Margaret Walker’s interview, she responds when asked her age, “eighty-one (I don’t look it, do I?),” and admits that even though she has been slowed by the lingering effects of a stroke, she is not ready to stop working: “Things go a little more slowly for me, but I’m not ready to quit. I’ve got nine grandchildren, too. Do I look like I’m ready to stop anything?” And Welty, who was 87 at the time of the book’s publication, says, “I have some projects in my head. . . . If worse came to worse, I’d write with my teeth.” And the interviewer, William W. Starr, recalled, as she “accompanie[d] the photographer to the door, which boast[ed] a ‘Re-elect Clinton-Gore’ sticker” that her final words on the way out, delivered “with a smile, [were] [I]et’s dump Dole.”<sup>42</sup>





Eudora Welty, Thalia Mara, and Margaret Walker— *Courtesy H. Kay Holloway*

On Thursday, July 30, 1998, Welty and Walker were honored, along with Thalia Mara, founder of the International Ballet Competition, in a special event sponsored by the Arts Alliance of Jackson, entitled “Three Women, Three Lifetimes, One Night” at Thalia Mara Hall in Jackson. Eudora Welty was not well enough to attend the actual event, so prior to the ceremony the three honorees gathered at Welty’s house for photographs taken by photographer H. Kay Holloway. The photograph of all three women has Welty and Walker seated side by side with Thalia Mara posed between them. During this same photography session, Holloway also took a portrait of Walker seated in Eudora Welty’s favorite reading chair. This portrait is especially meaningful as it speaks to their friendship over the last twenty years and because Walker would be diagnosed with breast cancer a short time later and die of the disease in November.



**Ayer Hall on the Jackson State University campus, in which the Margaret Walker Center is housed.**

*Courtesy of the Margaret Walker Center, Jackson State University*

Perhaps what links the two women writers more than any program or conference or book is their vision for their legacies. Both Walker and Welty were very clear about what they did and did not want in institutions bearing their names. According to the Eudora Welty Foundation website, after Eudora Welty deeded her home to the state of Mississippi, “She emphasized that it was the house of her family, a family that honored books and reading. She did not want a ‘house about her’ but about literature and the arts in culture.”<sup>43</sup> And Margaret Walker stated emphatically that she wanted her papers at the institution where she taught for over thirty years, Jackson State, and that they be used for scholarly research. In a 1992 interview she told Jacqueline Miller Carmichael, “When I’m told that my papers should go to the Library of Congress, I remind them that all the Library of Congress will do with my papers is take them to the basement. . . . They’re not going to process them and microfilm them and set them up for scholarly research. That’s what I want done with my papers.”<sup>44</sup> Both would be impressed with how their respective centers in Jackson have grown since their deaths: the Eudora Welty House and Garden not only provides a tour that offers an intimate look at Welty’s life and the beautiful garden her mother, Chestina Welty, started, but it also provides programming for students and teachers, as well as book groups and literary events. The Margaret Walker Center has become an important repository of oral history and African American scholarship, and plans are under way to build a larger center that will expand not only the current exhibit about Walker’s life and her most famous works “For My People” and *Jubilee*, but also will include studio space for artists, a 150-seat auditorium, and an environmentally improved and expanded archival and storage space.<sup>45</sup><sup>45</sup>

(audio file is streaming with this article)

**Margaret Walker reading “For My People” at the University of Mississippi, February 13, 1990.**

*Courtesy of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture.*

Immediately following their deaths, both Margaret Walker and Eudora Welty were honored by having their bodies lay in state. Welty was honored in the rotunda of the Old Capitol Museum and Walker at the Margaret Walker Center. Both are buried in Jackson beside loved ones. Walker lies beside her beloved husband Alex at Garden View Cemetery and her epitaph simply reads: "She tried to make her life a poem." To all who knew her, she succeeded, and perhaps it was her minister, the Reverend Hickman M. Johnson, who said it best in the eulogy he delivered at her funeral:

Margaret Walker Alexander was a wife, a mother, a friend, a teacher, a scholar, a poet, a writer, a college administrator, a neighbor, and a citizen of the world. She brought honor to this, her adopted state—a state where her family had taught black people for more than a century beginning with her great-uncle, and continuing with her grandfather (a Baptist preacher), her mother, her father (a Methodist preacher), and her sisters.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike Walker, Welty was originally from Jackson and lived in the same house for over seventy-five years. Welty also was remembered fondly at her funeral, and biographer Suzanne Marrs described the scene:

Timothy Seldes [Diarmuid Russell's literary agency partner] and Mississippi's former governor William Winter delivered the eulogies. Tim read from letters about Eudora that he had just received from Pamela Russell Jessup, Diarmuid's daughter, and from [writer] Reynolds [Price]. The letters reminded all present of Eudora's keen sense of humor, and laughter filled the sanctuary. . . . Burial took place at Jackson's Greenwood Cemetery, beneath a beautiful magnolia tree, next to the brother who had died before Eudora's birth, and within sight of the house where she had been born.<sup>47</sup>

Eudora Welty and Margaret Walker were more like sisters than they ever knew. Both left legacies that make the city of Jackson and the state of Mississippi proud. But, even more importantly, both left their mark upon the world with their writing and the centers that bear their names. For this reason they are truly a "sister act," two women bound together by their mutual dedication to literature.

**Carolyn J. Brown** is a writer, editor, and independent scholar. She attended Duke University (BA) and then the University of North Carolina—Greensboro for her MA and PhD. *A Daring Life: A Biography of Eudora Welty* was her first book. It won the Mississippi Library Association's Award for Nonfiction in 2013 and was selected by the Mississippi Library Commission to represent the state of Mississippi at the National Book Festival in Washington, D.C., in 2012. Her second biography, *Song of My Life: A Biography of Margaret Walker*, was published by the University Press of Mississippi in November 2014. She lives in Jackson, Mississippi, with her husband and two sons.



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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Walker, *Journal* 107, 314; and Suzanne Marrs, e-mail, October 22, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> All information in this article that is not documented internally comes from either one of my two biographies, *A Daring Life: A Biography of Eudora Welty* (University Press of Mississippi, 2012) or *Song of My Life: A Biography of Margaret Walker* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Eudora Welty, "A Sweet Devouring," *Mademoiselle*, December 1957, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Walker, "Autobiography of Margaret Walker" (Jackson: Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center), 25. The pagination of Margaret Walker's unpublished autobiography was provided by Walker herself and the Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Mackie Pine Oil Specialty Co. to Welty, 29 August 1921, Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

<sup>11</sup> Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 80.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Ricardo Quintana to Welty, 3 September 1929, Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

<sup>14</sup> Walker, "Autobiography", 58.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>19</sup> Maryemma Graham, "I Want to Write, I Want to Write the Songs of My People: The Emergence of Margaret Walker," in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Eudora Welty, *One Time, One Place* (New York: Random House, 1971), 349.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Lyell, quoted in Bill Ferris, "A Visit with Eudora Welty," in *Conversations with Eudora Welty* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 155.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright, Daemoniac Genius* (New York: Amistad Press, 1988), 72.

<sup>24</sup> John Rood to Welty, 19 March 1936, Eudora Welty Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

<sup>25</sup> Richard K. Barksdale, "Margaret Walker: Folk Orature and Historical Prophecy," in *Black American Poets between Worlds, 1940–1960*, ed. R. Baxter Miller (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 106.

<sup>26</sup> Suzanne Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, 2005), 140.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Walker, preface to *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), xlvii.

<sup>30</sup> In the preface to *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*, Walker writes, “Shortly after my twenty-second birthday I sat down at my typewriter and in fifteen minutes wrote all but the last stanza of the poem ‘For My People,’” xiv.

<sup>31</sup> Eudora Welty, preface to *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (New York: Harcourt, 1980), xi.

<sup>32</sup> Suzanne Marrs, *One Writer’s Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 184.

<sup>33</sup> Walker, *This Is My Century*, 83, 1-10

<sup>34</sup> Welty, *Collected Stories*, 604.

<sup>35</sup> Walker, *This Is My Century*.

<sup>36</sup> Walker, *This Is My Century*, 176.

<sup>37</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these two works as well as others inspired by the death of Medgar Evers, see Minrose Gwin’s book *Remembering Medgar Evers: Writing the Long Civil Rights Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Eudora Welty to Walker, 14 September 1977, Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson, Mississippi.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Walker, Journal 107, 11 November 1980, Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson, Mississippi, 312–13.

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Walker, Journal 107, 314.

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Walker, Journal 108, 24 December 1980, Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center, Jackson, Mississippi, 60. Cora Norman is the founding director of the Mississippi Humanities Council.

<sup>42</sup> William W. Starr, *Southern Writers* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> Eudora Welty Foundation, accessed 11 March 2015, <http://www.eudorawelty.org/the-house/>.

<sup>44</sup> Jacqueline Miller Carmichael, “Margaret Walker’s Reflections and Celebrations: An Interview,” in *Trumpeting a Fiery Sound: History and Folklore in Margaret Walker’s “Jubilee”* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 122.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Lockett, Feasibility Study, Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center.

<sup>46</sup> Hickman M. Johnson, *Farewell My Friends: A Book of Eulogies and Tributes* (Trafford Publishing, 2010), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Marrs, *Eudora Welty*, 570–71.