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Dollarhide and Abadie, Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks

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Louis Dollarhide and Ann J. Abadie. eds. *Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1979, xii, 138 pp. \$9.95. Paper — \$4.95.

When reading the papers from some conference, I am often satisfied not to have attended it. Especially if they carry worthwhile substance, they can be too formidable to take in by ear. Those presented for a “celebration” of Eudora Welty’s achievements — the inaugural function at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi — surely held the audience and probably pleased rather than embarrassed or irritated the guest of honor herself. At least that is a reasonable judgment about the seven collected into a slim book, for which the editors — one clue indicates — did exercise selectivity, on whatever grounds. Perhaps because the editors forestalled the reviewer, none of the seven gives her or him a text for demonstrating as strong an ability to complain as to approve. Likewise, to single out any essay as the jewel seems unfair to the other six. They all make us want to read more of Welty, not just assign her to the academic canon or recommend her to the high explicationists. The recurring admiration for her humor, supported by generous examples, swells that feeling. Though the New Critics have trained us to abhor the biographical “fallacy,” the tributes from two close friends (Reynolds Price and Charlotte Capers) reinforce the sense that the fiction welled up from an authentic, engaging personality whose work continues to deepen and justifies Price in declaring that “an American writer has at last produced a third act in her career.”

Cleanth Brooks — to take the other five contributors by the order of appearance — examines in detail how Welty combines the oral and the written traditions. Focused more narrowly, Michael Kreyling plays up the comedy in *The Robber Bridegroom* before exploring the underlying seriousness. Without trendy concepts or a doctrinaire tone, Peggy R. Prenshaw traces the interplay of male and female principles within Welty’s characters. Tracing her lineage to the tribal storyteller, William Jay Smith identifies further her ties with the oral mode. Noel Polk sets up the thorniest subject of all to analyze how she projects the “tender savagery of family relationships” and the “ferocious possessiveness of love.” If a born skeptic should notice that her work apparently has not lost any battles with art, such perfection seems possible in the glow of this volume. But those who like to bet on sure things should note that its consensus elects *The Optimist’s*

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REVIEWS

Daughter as Welty at her most enduring.

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