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Miss Eudora Welty: A Reminiscence

"You will never receive her permission to make a documentary film on her work. Eudora Welty is an extremely private person, almost a recluse in Jackson." This is what I was told on several occasions in Washington, D.C. and in New York when, in 1976, I was attempting to raise money for a series of films on American writers. Eudora Welty headed the list which included Toni Morrison, John Gardner, Wright Morris, Muriel Rukeyser, Ross MacDonald, and Robert Duncan.

With the funding in place, I was given Miss Welty's phone number in Jackson, Mississippi. She had been a member of the National Council on the Arts. The number was accompanied by more doubts and wishes of "Good luck."

Back in my production office in Mill Valley, California, I took a deep breath and called the number. The telephone was answered by the "reclusive" Miss Welty. I explained why I was calling and she asked that I write a letter explaining the project and my approach to making documentary films on writers. It was a very quiet and pleasant first encounter.

My letter explained that first and foremost we were interested in the work and hearing it read by the author as one means of arriving at an appreciation of the matter of language, rhythm, and voice. Secondly, we hoped to explore place and its relationship to the writer; and that, finally, we hoped to discover something about a writer's working methods and "workplace." The documentaries were to be edited from the writer's perspective, with no interpretive comments by the filmmaker or anyone else.

I received a letter in reply inviting me to Jackson.

I was still on guard against rejection by this famous but "reclusive" author as I approached the front door of her home in Jackson. The door was opened by Miss Eudora Welty, no maid, no secretary, no "security." Almost immediately we began talking about visiting various sites near Jackson, some of which she hadn't seen since her WPA days. She asked me when the crew

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would arrive and I told her they were waiting in the station wagon parked in front of her house. As if she had, somehow, been inhospitable, she exclaimed, "Well, invite them in!" We were off and running.

All of the readings from her work were filmed at home, but much of the time was spent filming in locations to be found in *One Time, One Place*. Miss Welty expressed a willingness, I might say an enthusiasm, for accompanying us on many of these one-day trips and it was at this point that I learned the reason for her undeserved reputation as a recluse. Miss Eudora Welty is a Mississippi "celebrity." This unfortunate phenomenon makes of one a "commodity" and everyone wants a piece: a snapshot, a sighting to report, a request to talk to the next meeting of the garden club or whatever. The only defense was to erect a screen. The crew and I were to become the guardians and the guarantors of anonymity.

We visited Rodney, Port Gibson, Mendenhall, Vicksburg, Simpson County, Natchez, several spots along the Pearl River, and other locations I have probably forgotten. Once I made a serious mistake and broke the pledge of anonymity.

Embarrassment has eliminated the town from my memory, but we had stopped at the local newspaper office for possible directions to sites imaged in *One Time, One Place*. "Miss Eudora Welty" was mentioned with Mississippi pride and reverence. "Too bad you won't get to meet her," was one comment.

Forgetfulness, vanity, stupidity—call it what you will—without a pause I replied "Oh, but I have. She's in the station wagon with us outside." Immediately, everyone, and I mean everyone, in that office bolted for the front door and the street. When I finally got out, I found the car surrounded. Explaining that we were late for our next location I carefully put the vehicle in motion, parting the excited crowd. I apologized at length. She forgave me, but I was left with the vivid image of Miss Eudora Welty as a prisoner in her own home, in her home state, due to her celebrity status as a Mississippian.

Eudora Welty made a rare visit to the West Coast to view the rough cut of the documentary. We both took great pleasure in the progress of the film. However, Mississippi was closer than either of us thought. My wife and I picked Eudora up at her hotel in Sausalito for breakfast. We were standing on a corner of

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the small bayside town next to the ferry slip and talking about a wonderful restaurant in Mendenhall where customers sit at a large circular counter while a lazy susan filled with every known southern delicacy passes, more or less at nose level, before one's eyes. When you see what you want you simple put out one hand to stop the turning, but sometimes you have to be quick about it or you will have missed your chance and must wait until the plate, hopefully, comes around again. While we talked, passengers from San Francisco were disembarking from the ferry and I noticed a group of women intently looking in our direction. Finally one woman detached herself from the group, came up directly to Eudora and asked, "Aren't you Miss Eudora Welty?" My recollection is that Miss Eudora Welty fled immediately to the safety of her hotel. Somewhat to my surprise the woman was not upset, she was delighted. There was a Eudora Welty sighting to report.

In the finished film, Eudora Welty remarks, "I just write stories." And her stories tend to flow from good talk.* The art of conversation as a primary means by which people amuse themselves and each other has largely disappeared from the American scene. Its last stronghold was the Deep South. As Eudora reports in the film:

People that live in a small town, and that included Jackson when I was little, amused themselves by dramatizing everything. . .I used to listen to people talk when I was just a little girl, and my mother says that I used to come and sit with a bunch of ladies and say, "Now start talking." And I would hear these exaggerated (not from my mother, I may say!) but these wonderful exaggerated tales of hurt feelings. . .it's just pure. . .you've got to amuse yourself somehow.

The truly great storytellers, from Homer onward, have not bothered to carry in their working imagination the immense baggage of symbolism, myth, and theories of the human condition that the critics discern in their work. Of course, it's undoubtedly there in the story for generation after generation of critics and readers whose interest lies more in meanings and signification than in stories. It's all there in the flow of talk, and the critics will have their say, but the gifted

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storyteller always gives us more than the most elaborate critical exegesis can ever hope to offer. The storyteller's voice rings true as good talk itself.

When I first read a Eudora Welty story, I must confess that my tone-deaf Yankee ear didn't really hear the story. Oh, I was impressed with the lively characterizations, the solid structure, and the "social commentary" of the story (it happened to be "Petrified Man"), but I was nowhere near the story itself in my reading. Then I heard a recording of "Why I Live at the P.O.," a Welty story I had read many times. As I listened, I began to "read" the story anew, because a wholly fresh world of sound, of rare good talk, opened up for me. Now I try to read all stories, as all good readers should, with the ear as well as the eye.

**What follows is taken, in part, from liner notes I wrote for the Caedmon recording of Eudora Welty reading "Petrified Man" and "Powerhouse."*