

Miss Eudora

Eudora Welty lived an ordinary life extraordinarily, finding magic out her own front door

by Rich Warren

Most people thought I was mad a couple weeks ago when I drove 12 hours to Jackson, Mississippi, to attend the funeral of a 92-year-old Southern gentlelady. But this wasn't just any old lady. She was my hero.

I met Eudora Welty during my senior year at Kent State. An organization of English majors I belonged to had resolved to bring a major writer to campus. We'd sent out invitations to all the big names, even Solzhenitsyn, who we didn't realize couldn't speak English. We got nice refusals from John Updike and John Barth, a snippy little "no" from Joyce Carol Oates. What stung us most was a letter from the campus programming board, who was funding us. They said we were aiming too high and suggested a number of "second- and third-tier writers," none of whom we'd heard of. It was looking bleak.

Then we heard from the resident of 1119 Pinehurst St. in Jackson, a long and gracious letter saying how charmed she'd been by our sincere request, that she'd love to spend time with us, but could we accommodate the narrow time frame she had available? We'd have accommodated her at any hour of the day or night. We had landed Eudora Welty.

We were stunned—and starstruck—that we were about to host a woman some called the greatest living American writer. She was hardly a household name—the question most frequently asked of us was "Eudora who?" But for us, she quickly evolved into our personal Superauthor. Even before she arrived, we started affectionately calling her "Miss Eudora."

We caravanned to the Cleveland airport to meet her. You may have heard she was not pretty. Severely hunchbacked, with stringy white hair and huge teeth jutting from her jaw, she was downright homely. But hers was a beautiful soul. Within 30 seconds of meet-

ing Welty you wanted to spend the rest of your life with her. Charming, self-effacing, and with a mischievous wit, she hung on your every word and made life an adventure to laugh at.

For the next three days, we palled around with Miss Eudora, taking her to receptions with faculty and students, parties, the public reading. We adored her lavishly. We still have our favorite memories, like the drink she ordered at a restaurant: "Bourbon, with just a splash of wahtah."

She was knocked over with wonderment at everything around her, marveling in that beguiling Southern drawl at the beauty of everyday things. Once when we picked her up at her hotel, she couldn't wait to tell us a story. "What do you think I saw floating past my window?" she asked, her face all puckered with expectation. We couldn't guess. "Bubbles!" she declared, as if there could be nothing more wondrous. She found miracles even in children blowing bubbles on a balcony below her.

Her visit ended far too quickly, but not our adoration. We remained in sporadic contact. Some friends even invited her to their wedding; she sent back a handwritten note,

politely declining. Years later, someone told me he'd gone right up to her door in Jackson, knocked on it, and she'd had him in for tea. I always figured I would someday do the same. And when I finally planned a vacation through the South, I wrote to Miss Eudora proposing a dinner date. To my crushing disappointment, she wrote back explaining she expected guests that weekend but she still had "very fond memories" of her trip to Kent State. I did pass through Jackson and made a drive-by of her house—actually several drive-bys—to memorize its every detail. Other people stalk rock stars. Me, I go after noted literary figures.

I never lost track of Miss Eudora. I even subscribed to the *Eudora Welty Newsletter*, which, to my disgust, was scholarly and arcane. I wanted to know what private merriment she was finding! Then I heard her health was declining. I decided to surprise her. I drove to Hocking County in southern Ohio, where I knew her father had grown up on a farm.

It was a delightful day of mystery solving—poring through old real estate records to determine the farm's location and then careening around hairpin curves, spilling all over myself some sunflower seeds I'd bought in Logan. I took many pictures of the farm as it now looks and sent them to her. When she didn't write back, I knew her health problems were serious indeed. Then I heard there was a sign on her door, asking the uninvited no longer to knock.

Even long-expected deaths come as a blow, and so on July 23, I found myself contacting old friends from Kent, some as weepy as myself, as though we'd lost an old pal. There was no question I'd go to the funeral. It felt right, like something I both needed and

wanted to do.

So off I went. It was a rainy day in Jackson, but that didn't deter 600 people from coming out to honor their resident icon. There was even TV coverage! There were simple folks and there was Jackson's high society dressed to the nines. On the crowd's fringes, I spotted people like myself, who'd made the pilgrimage alone. Oddly, I talked to no one. This was an exceedingly private event for me.

The service slowly evolved into what I'd hoped—a soulful celebration of this remarkable woman's life with playful remembrances by a former Mississippi governor and her literary agent. Occasionally loud laughter rang out, exactly what she'd have relished. It was a fond, heartfelt sendoff by people who'd loved Miss Eudora even more than I. Still, nothing that day touched me more than the sight of a simple bouquet of flowers some stranger left on the front stoop of her house on Pinehurst Street.

Then it was back in my car for 12 more hours to ponder what this woman meant to me. Certainly she never wanted to be revered. An enthusiastic interviewer once gushed that he'd like to adopt her as his grandmother. "I don't want to be anyone's damn grandmother," she'd replied.

But revere her I did. And always will. If my house were on fire, the first things I'd save would be her autographed books and my tape of her reading *Why I Live at the P.O.*, by my estimation the most perfect gem of a story ever written. Even in her written words you hear her voice, her deep humanity, her joy of living. I can still see how her nose crinkled up whenever she laughed. She was the most charismatic person I ever met.

She lived such an ordinary life so extraordinarily, at home among people she'd always known. She didn't need to travel to the ends of the earth to find life's magic. She saw it out her own front door. She closes her magnificent autobiography *One Writer's Beginning* with the words, "As you have seen, I am a writer who comes of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within."

Those words will always send shivers up my spine.

A light's gone out in Mississippi. Farewell Miss Eudora. ca



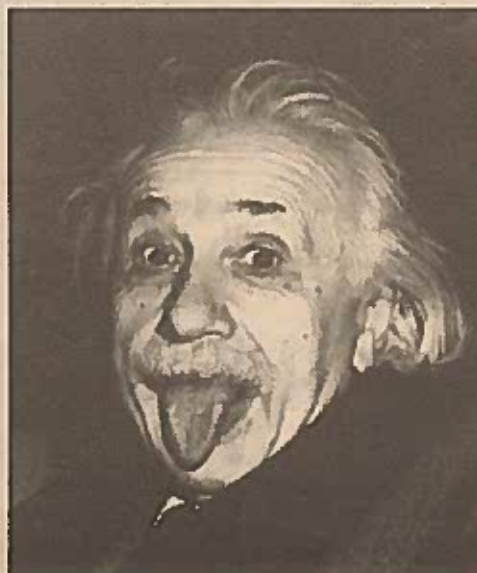
Eudora Welty, on her visit to Kent State

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