

CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

A Sheltered Life, Widely Shared

EUDORA WELTY:

A Biography.

By Suzanne Marrs. Harcourt. 652 pp. \$28

Reviewed by Michael Malone

The writer Eudora Welty (1909–2001) lived a long, full, kind life, and Suzanne Marrs has given her a long, full, kind biography. In some ways it was an ordinary life, with family and friends, work and travel, a little romance and plenty of heart-break, and daily duties done (dinner parties cooked, an ailing mother cared for) while the dramas of the world outside rumbled past on the radio and then on the television—the Depression, World War II, the struggle for civil rights in the South, the war in Vietnam, assassinations and resignations and impeachments, war in the Persian Gulf.

These events posed their threats to Welty (a beloved boyfriend fighting in the Allied invasion of Italy); the times made their demands (how could she effectively speak out against segregation in Mississippi?). But she was not a warrior and not a chronicler of her era, except in the profoundest sense that art tells us the truth. While a canvasser for liberal Democrats, she was no crusader for their causes, nor did she feel obliged to be one. The decades passed as Welty wrote her stories, took her photographs, traveled for business and pleasure, invited old friends to her home for the holidays. As she said in *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), a sheltered life can also be a daring one. Her pen and her camera had that daring—her extraordinary pictures of African-American washerwomen, preachers, and swing dancers in the Depression-era rural South are as revelatory

as her stories. She was a writer of enormous imagination, brilliant wit, and luminous style, who lived a writer's life.

Marrs's sturdy commitment to recounting that life is both personal (they were friends) and scholarly (she has taught Welty's fiction at Millsaps College, in Jackson, Mississippi, cataloged it for the Mississippi Archives, and analyzed it in the 2002 book *One Writer's Imagination*). The attention to detail here is meticulous and exhaustive, and if there is perhaps more than we care to know about Welty's problems with a review or a furnace, there is also invaluable research, understanding, and insight. Marrs is not a Boswell, who created a work of art from a life, but she makes no such claim. Throughout, her care as a scholar is exemplary, her affection for her subject, vivid.

Among her missions is to correct critical misimpressions about that mythically reclusive Southern lady, "Miss Eudora." A busy calendar and extensive correspondence amply prove that Welty was neither the naive, apolitical pawn of a racist patriarchy nor the repressed ugly duckling swimming ambivalently near beautiful swans (such as her lifelong friends, the writers Katherine Anne Porter and Elizabeth Bowen), nor the Dickensian maiden aunt petrified into perfect gentility by rage against her mother.

Although Eudora Welty lived into her nineties, unmarried, in her family home in Jackson, and although she never flung herself



Striking an uncharacteristic pose, Eudora Welty pretends she is a damsel in distress during the 1930s.

into the public eye, by affairs or addictions or political stands, Marrs's biography makes it clear that Welty was no 20th-century Emily Dickinson, whose letters to the world were returned to sender. On the contrary, Welty's short stories and novels were published widely during a distinguished and celebrated career. Her fiction was successfully turned into plays and films; it won her every laurel from a Guggenheim to a Pulitzer to a French Legion of Honor. From her earliest publications in *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*, her reputation has never been in doubt. Who has not come across "Why I Live at the P.O.," "Powerhouse," or "A Worn Path" in an anthology?

Her life was, moreover, a public one. She lectured at hundreds of universities and held honorary degrees from 39 of them; she was a fellow of places such as the Yaddo artists' community; she sat on the boards of the country's highest arts organizations; she met presidents, appeared on television shows, and even made *People's* list of "Ten Great Faces in America." As she told her good friend and editor William Maxwell, "I've just had too much awarded me."

No Mississippi wallflower, she met fame with a smile, a dancing gown, a cocktail, and a suitcase. She made dozens of transatlantic

crossings and motored and flew constantly until just before her death. She loved Manhattan nightlife, London pub crawls, Paris cafés with bohemians, and country weekends with English aristocrats. She dined with Martha Graham and the Baroness de Rothschild, drank with émigré artists in Florence, lunched with E. M. Forster at Cambridge, picnicked with the David Rockefeller family on an island in Maine ("Everyone came in their own sailboat"). It's a far cry from pickling okra and picking camellias on Pinehurst Place in Jackson, but she did those too.

At times, the hectic pace interfered with (perhaps was an excuse to avoid) her writing. No wonder it took her 15 years to finish her novel *Losing Battles* (1970), and after *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972) she published no other major new work. In the spring of 1975, for instance, "she flew to Seattle for [a National] Arts Council meeting and returned to Jackson to plan for the 50th reunion of her high school class. . . . Then it was off to Tulane for an honorary degree on May 16, to Dallas for another on May 18, and to Yale University for a third on May 19. Finally, she enjoyed a week in New York before coming home to repack and regroup for a trip to Santa Barbara."

Ordinary life and death also intruded, and always she made room for both. She celebrated; she mourned. Her father and one brother died young. Her mother and her other brother died within days of each other. She outlived friends and colleagues, her beloved agent, Diarmuid Russell, and her cherished editors. She outlived the two men with whom she was in love. One of these was Ken Millar, better known as the mystery novelist Ross Macdonald.

When the state of Mississippi hosted a Eudora Welty Day in 1973, attended by the literati of the nation, her reading took place in the Rotunda of the Old Capitol, where many years later she would lie in state. On this occasion, she read a sex scene from *Losing Battles*, to the delight of Millar, who had traveled across the country for the reading, and with whom she may or may not have been having an adulterous affair: He was married when they met. If Marris knows the sexual specifics, she doesn't share them, but she does make evident that the middle-aged Welty was in love with this man, took joy in their closeness, whatever its limits, and grieved passionately over the Alzheimer's disease that took his life in 1983.

He was not Welty's first love. She gave many years of her life (agonized through a war, moved across the country) to another complicated and finally impossible romantic relationship. She called it, when writing about it as fiction, "a prolonged and hopeless love affair" with "no way out." She was in love with a man, John Robinson, whose homosexuality she only reluctantly and belatedly accepted. Marris quotes from Welty's painfully honest letters to him. (His letters to her were destroyed by Welty.) "How could I be all right in my heart or my mind while not knowing how you felt or doing anything or being anything that would count? It seems a preposterous life to me. Sometimes I feel part of something I don't know all of—or its destinations—sometimes left, no part." It may be difficult to believe that a woman as intuitive as Welty could recommend Freud's biography of Leonardo da Vinci to Robinson without suspecting his "destinations"; what remains is that his sexual rejection of Welty did not cost him her

love. They stayed close until his death in 1989.

A woman with a genius for friendship, she might have taken as her creed her friend Forster's famous line, "Only connect." With relatives, with friends both at home and in the world of the arts, she had an amazing capacity to stay connected. Of human contact, Welty wrote to Ken Millar, "I believe in it, and I trust it too and treasure it above everything, the personal, the personal, the personal! I put my faith in it not only as the source, the ground of meaning in art, in life, but as the meaning itself."

A culture is known by the stories it tells, and Southern stories are rooted in such connections, place and family and neighbors and friends, in shared memories passed down like recipes. Welty knew that in the South, there is a "we" to the stories. We are all members of the Delta wedding. "A family story is a family possession, not for a moment to be forgotten, not a bit to be dropped or left out—just added to. No good story ever became *diminished*." You stay at funerals till the tent comes down. You show up at the family reunion, even if you have to escape from prison to do it. You repeat the stories you share. For Welty, memory was "a living thing," through which the present can reclaim the losses of the past.

I once drove the 700 miles from North Carolina to Jackson to tell Eudora Welty how much I admired her. Writers knew where her house was; she'd lived there a long time. In the end I lost my nerve. I sat in the car across the street for hours, and then I drove back home. Many years later, I met Miss Welty in the lobby of the Algonquin Hotel and I told her that story. She laughed. "Honey, was that you? I almost called the police on you!"

Then, in a moment of kindness, she taught me the best lesson I ever learned as a writer. She said, "Let your fiction grow out of the land beneath your feet." It was a lesson no one ever understood more profoundly than she did.

She filled a long and not always happy life with such brief encounters of kindness, and with such enduring friendships as hers with the writer Reynolds Price, whom she loved as a son and whose early career she generously

mentored, as she did those of Elizabeth Spencer and Richard Ford and many others. Her goodness was not naive, nor her politeness prudery, nor her love of home provincial. If, for Sinclair Lewis, everyone needs a hometown to get away from, for Welty, her hometown was home. Her art made of it an everywhere. William Buckley once asked her on *Firing Line*, "How . . . could a sensitive Southern writer have lived" in Mississippi with its lynchings and fiery crosses? She answered, in a polite way of course, How could she not?

Like Carson McCullers (whom she didn't like), Eudora Welty knew that the heart is a lonely hunter; like Flannery O'Connor (whom she admired), she knew that the violent bear it away. But, most of all, like

William Faulkner ("besides being the greatest writer to me, an attractive, darling person"), she knew that we are kin as well as strangers, and laughable as well as heroic; she knew that comedy and tragedy, "the bizarre and the terrible," cannot be separated, and that given a choice between grief and nothing, she'd take grief.

An optimist's daughter, she agreed with Ken Millar's response to the bombing of Hanoi, "I believe we'll turn back from our own violence, and see what we have done is something that we can never do again." She would know now that they were wrong. But she wouldn't stop hoping.

>MICHAEL MALONE's novels include *Handling Sin* (1986), *Time's Witness* (1989), and *The Last Noel* (2002).

Fallen Chief to Fallen Chads

RESTLESS GIANT:

The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore.

By James T. Patterson. Oxford Univ. Press.

448 pp. \$35

Reviewed by David M. Oshinsky

When Richard Nixon resigned his presidency in August 1974, there was more relief than celebration. The country had been spared a lacerating impeachment process. A new president, widely hailed for his honesty, was sworn into office without violence or disorder. "Our long national nightmare is over," Gerald R. Ford assured the public. "Our Constitution works."

This remarkable moment provides the opening for *Restless Giant*, the latest contribution to the multivolume Oxford History of the United States. Previous books include James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) and David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear* (1999), both Pulitzer Prize winners, as well as James T. Patterson's own *Grand Expectations* (1996), a superb history of the United States from 1945 to 1974. *Restless Giant* is a cut below these works—partly because there hasn't been enough time and distance to re-

flect fully on such recent events, and partly because so much has changed since the bitter campaign, political and then legal, of Bush versus Gore. Despite the author's imposing narrative skills, I suspect that this book will be seen more as a starting point than as a standard work for future scholars.

Patterson, a historian at Brown University, notes that the 1970s didn't go as smoothly as Gerald Ford had hoped. The long nightmare may have been over, but a lot of bad dreams remained. The OPEC oil embargo, the fall of South Vietnam, the near meltdown at Three Mile Island, the Iran hostage crisis—all contributed to a mood of pessimism and unease. The civil rights movement, so confident in the heroic era of bus boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins, split over such issues as forced busing and black power. As middle-class whites fled to the suburbs in record numbers, New York and other cities went bankrupt, laying off thou-