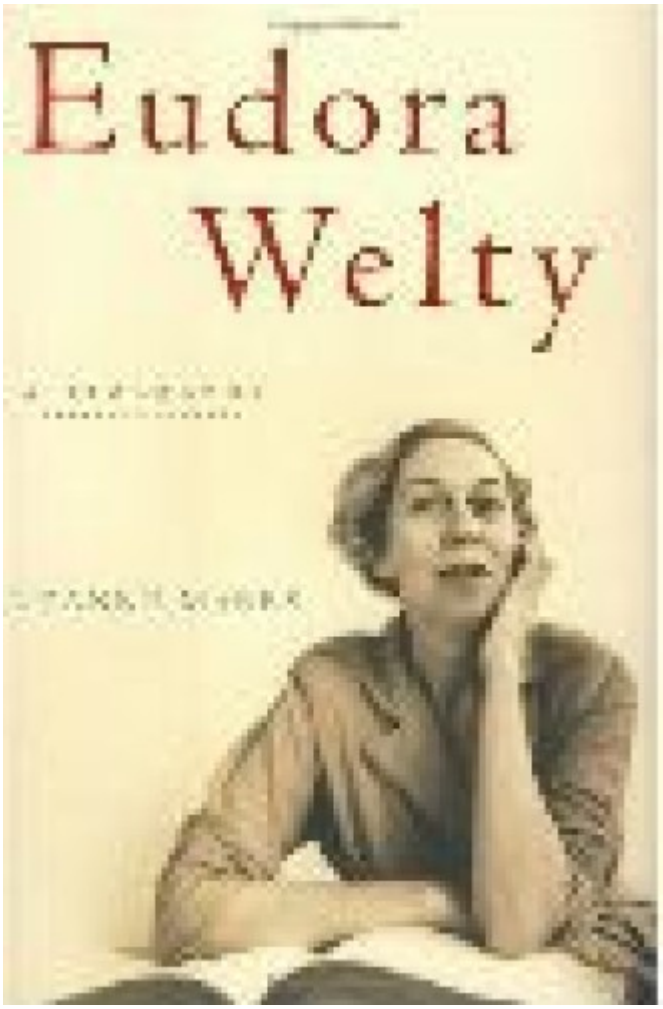
Eudora Welty

reviewed by Shirley Hershey Showalter in the January 24, 2006 issue

In Review



Eudora Welty: A Biography

Suzanne Marrs
Harcourt

"To make a prairie," Emily Dickinson once wrote, "it takes a clover and one bee, / . . . And revery." But "the revery alone will do, / If bees are few." To make a great

literary biography it takes a great subject, a biographer’s understanding—and reverie. In the new biography of Eudora Welty by Suzanne Marrs the ingredients are all there. Marrs’s account of Welty’s life locates her essential loves and sheds light on the national, local and personal issues that wove their way into her fiction and essays.

Welty, her native Mississippi and her worldwide network of friends come alive in this telling of her life. Marrs is particularly good at illuminating paradoxes—the personal and the political, the particular and the universal, the life and the work—all of them simultaneously simple and complex. She fiercely defends the Welty she knew intimately for nearly 20 years from earlier writers and critics who, in Marrs’s view, sometimes saw only the outline, not the real human being.

Born in 1909, within a decade of the Wright brothers’ first flight and the introduction of the Model T, Eudora Welty was the last of a breed of U.S. women writers who came of age in the early 20th century and were the first of their sex to win Pulitzer Prizes, become members of PEN, participate in the American Academy of Arts and Letters and attract multiple honorary degrees. Welty died just a few weeks before September 11, 2001. She and the 20th century were one, just as Queen Victoria and the 19th century were one.

Like Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, the first two women to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Welty has been depicted as reclusive, asexual, imitative of male writers, lonely and unattractive. In each case it has taken a biographer to complicate such images. R. W. B. Lewis turned biography into literary detective work by finding letters documenting Wharton’s passionate affair with Morton Fullerton prior to her divorce from Teddy Wharton in 1913. Sharon O’Brien’s treatment of Willa Cather’s complex sexuality helped her to render refreshing new readings of Cather’s novels and short stories. The same is true of Suzanne Marrs’s handling of the two great loves of Welty’s life—first John Robinson and then Kenneth Millar. Robinson eventually recognized his homosexual orientation, and Millar was already married when he met Welty. Because passion more than privation fuels great writers’ work, biographies of women writers who came of age before the sexual revolution are important contributions to the historical record and to the understanding of the texts that are any writer’s most important legacy.

With the aid of previously private letters, Marrs goes beyond her sensitive telling of the two major love stories of Welty’s life to provide many details of Welty’s other

passions—especially home and family, gardens, laughter, language, politics and friends. She shares examples of the candid photographs Welty took in the 1930s of black men and women in the Jim Crow south. Welty was a lifelong liberal in a state where many of the battles of the civil rights movement were fought, but she resisted calls to make public declarations, preferring instead to read her fiction before racially integrated audiences. She knew that fiction holds the power of love and forgiveness.

A great literary biographer gets inside the skin of the subject and reveals her own subjectivity as she guides the reader through the narrative of a life. Marrs chose to place herself in the story, beginning with 1983, when she first met Welty. This generally proves to be a good decision, with a few exceptions. When Marrs exclaims "how palpably unjust" a *New Yorker* essay about Welty is, she shows less faith in art than her subject had. And Marrs's closeness to Welty, as well as the sheer volume of letters, may have led her to include more detail than necessary at some points in the story.

Despite a few flashes of too-loyal partisanship, Marrs succeeds at debunking a number of myths about Welty—myths about her ugliness, her seclusion, her lack of romance, her petrification as a southern lady. She runs the risk, however, of creating another myth—that of the long silence.

The book jacket includes a statement from Welty's close friend and fellow writer Reynolds Price describing "a troubling creative silence" at the end of her life. It is true that Welty did not write any major fiction after *The Optimist's Daughter*, which came out in 1972, the year she turned 63. However, she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 and published five books after that—enough to win tenure at almost any university during the years when most people are retired. Although it is true that the fiction well ran dry at the end, and that this silence troubled the author and her friends, Welty completed much other creative work in this period, including an excellent literary autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings*, in 1984. This volume, along with her lectures and essays, will stand the test of time just as her fiction will, and it deserves recognition as a creative work. Because she lived so much longer than most great writers, Welty had to rechannel her creativity. That she was able to do so is more of a triumph than a tragedy.

To have lived 92 years and to have loved deeply and fully all that time, to have bequeathed the world not only fiction but also essays and letters that deserve lasting attention, to have found in Suzanne Marrs an excellent and sensitive

biographer—all this is to the credit of a writer who was the best expert on her own life. Welty said it well in her conclusion to *One Writer's Beginnings*: "All serious daring comes from within."