

Eudora Welty: The Complete Novels recommended by Susan Garrett

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Susan Garrett—author of the memoir *Quick-Eyed Love* and two books on health care and aging—recommends *Eudora Welty: The Complete Novels*. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



The scene rests in my mind. I believe it to be part of a story or novel by Eudora Welty. Here is what I remember. A young couple walks into a grandmother's dining room and sits at the table. Some very old people come and sit down with them. The young woman, with a soft groan, complains about being with old people. The young man looks at her and says, "Do not hold yourself back from a single living one of them."

Where is this scene? I read it a long time ago. I think of it when I visit one of the adult day care centers of JABA, our local area agency on aging, where the staff listens to each older person with generous, concentrated interest. And in church, where the minister greets every member of the congregation with loving recognition. I will go back, joyfully, through Eudora Welty's fiction to find and relive the moment.

Where to begin? I will skip over some of the stories I have loved, such as "A Wide Net," "Moon Lake," "Why I Live at the P.O.," knowing I can reread them later. The scene takes place at a large gathering. Is it a wedding, a reunion, a funeral? Perhaps it is in *Delta Wedding*. I follow Laura, the lonely, motherless child surrounded by a clamorous family, young and old. The family takes her in, her loneliness is cared for. I reread this wonderful novel and am carried forward by the pace, the constant movement of stories and presence. I might have missed the scene I was looking for. Or it could be in *Losing Battles*, that hilarious love-drenched epic full of

talk that never stops, with a young couple, Jack and Gloria, at the center? Loneliness is here, in Gloria, an orphan, a bride whose husband Jack has just returned from two years in the penitentiary. Jack's family has gathered for his grandmother's birthday. Is there a quiet moment in this novel, in which the scene could have taken place? I am filled with the energy of the prose, the dialogue, the stories, and I read too fast. If it is there, I missed it.

Rereading *The Optimist's Daughter*, Eudora Welty's late novel, is an arrival. It begins quietly, with Laurel, the central character, who travels from Chicago to take her father, Judge McKelva, to a hospital in New Orleans, accompanied by his second wife, Fay. The Judge dies, the family gathers in the Judge's home in a small Mississippi town. All the elements of the earlier work—stories, talk, loneliness, memory—are here, but wonderfully brought to a center, a calm. Laurel has lost all her husband, mother, now her father. The loneliest of Welty's characters, she is the strongest. If she were with a gathering of elderly people, she would not hold herself back from a single living one of them.

In my joyous journey back through Eudora Welty's fiction, I have missed the scene I was looking for. Where is it? Perhaps it is only in my imagination.

Someone will know.