

# SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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SEPTEMBER 25, 2018

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## ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS RICHELLE PUTNAM, AUTHOR OF THE INSPIRING LIFE OF EUDORA WELTY

 JANUARY 29, 2015 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  1 COMMENT



Richelle Putnam

**AM:** Thank you for talking to us about your latest book, *The Inspiring Life of Eudora Welty*. If my memory is correct, this is the first interview that *Southern Literary Review* has done about a work in the young-adult (or, as they say, YA) category. I'd like to start by asking about your decision to write this book for that audience. Was the book commissioned? Did you feel strongly about telling Welty's story to a young audience? Do you just enjoy writing in that genre? Or was it something else? Welty published her first work at age 10, so it would make sense for you to want to inspire some of the young potential Welty's out there.

Thank you for interviewing me.

The History Press had just started a Children's nonfiction category and they approached me about writing a biography in this category. Much of my creative writing background specifically targeted children's literature. Almost immediately I knew I wanted to write about Eudora Welty, focusing on her family heritage and the eras she and her family lived through in Jackson, Mississippi, which included Women's Suffrage, the Roaring Twenties, the Depression, two World Wars, and the Jim Crow South.

Indeed it was the determination in Eudora's early years to pursue writing that inspired me to write her story for adolescents and young adults. Her desire, determination, and perseverance in early eras that rarely supported independent, ambitious women should be an inspiration to anyone.

**AM:** Why Eudora Welty? What does she mean to you? When did you first read her and what impression did she make on you that you would choose to write a book about her?

Around 2005 I began researching Eudora Welty for a Mississippi Writers Guild program that honored Mississippi writers. From this research, I wrote a monologue and portrayed Eudora Welty at various locations and events around the state, including the Eudora Welty Library in Jackson and the Southern

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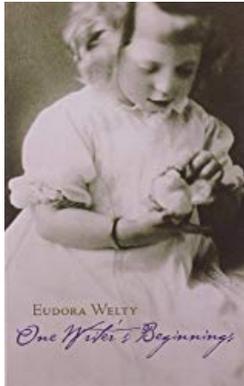
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Cultural Heritage Foundation in Vicksburg. In 2009, four writer friends and I wrote a one-act play "Was It Worth It?" The characters were William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Richard Wright, Muna Lee and Eudora Welty. Each of us wrote the dialogue for the writer we had researched. I wrote Eudora's dialogue.



All the content in the play was historically accurate. Much of Eudora's conversation in the play was her actual words from various interviews or her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*. This play won 1<sup>st</sup> place in the Tallahatchie Riverfest Playwriting Competition and was showcased during the Tallahatchie Riverfest. From there, we performed the play for special events in Mississippi and in Alabama, including the Alabama Writers Conclave Writers Conference.

Each time I portrayed Eudora, I felt closer to her. She inspired me in my writing and in the pursuit to be a successful writer. I loved her spunk, admired her humility and respected her devotion to family and to her home state. Even though I never met her personally, she became my mentor in both life and writing.

**AM: Although your book is about Welty, it's also about the cultural milieu in which she was born and raised. You talk a lot about Mississippi and about race relations and a bit about politics. How do you think this culture shaped Welty's fiction?**

Until I learned about Eudora the individual, I did not fully understand Eudora the writer. Her stories speak loudly and clearly of the times and the cultural mindset of the South. She developed her characters so honestly and blatantly, readers could view the South from the characters' perspectives. She was criticized for not "speaking out" in the 60s during the Civil Rights movement, but if the accusers had read her work critically ("Powerhouse," "A Worn Path," "Keela," and "Where is the Voice Coming From?" to name a few), they would have seen that she had long written about Civil Rights. In her essay "Must a Novelist Crusade," Eudora said: "A plot is a thousand times more unsettling than an argument which may be answered." I believe Eudora Welty was incredibly disciplined in her life and her work. That discipline was formed because of her culture and upbringing.

**AM: Welty was, of course, a master of the short story, a genre that some believe is dying out—a claim I understand but don't buy into. At least not yet. Do you feel that the short story has reached its zenith and entered into its decline? Are there any Eudora Welty's out there today?**

To the contrary, I believe that the short story will not only survive, but flourish in the coming times. We live in a fast-paced society that is growing faster all the time. We go for fast food and quick fixes and have traded long phone conversations for short text messages. Many readers like books with short chapters they can easily stop on without feeling they left in the middle of something.

That said, short stories, whatever the genre, satisfy readers quickly. I love a good novel, memoir and history book, but I always have a collection of short stories on my bedside table and in my suitcase. Some of the greatest, most memorable literature, in my opinion, has been short stories like "The Garden Party" (Katherine Mansfield), "Everyday Use" (Alice Walker), "The Lagoon" (Joseph Conrad), and "A Rose for Emily" (William Faulkner). The power of the short story cannot be denied.

**AM: You love Mississippi, don't you?**

I do love Mississippi, its beauty, its hospitality, its charity and its ability to produce some of the world's most renowned artists. I do believe Mississippi is misunderstood and that many who criticize Mississippi either haven't ever been here or have never been here long enough to experience the people who happily cross racial, social and cultural lines to build long-lasting friendships and relationships.

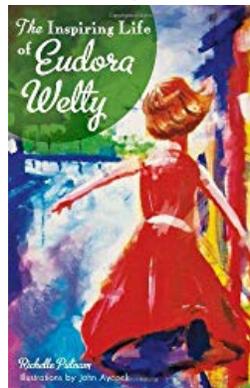
However, I never use these good traits to excuse bad behavior and negligent attitudes. The Jim Crow South damaged our country in many ways as much as the Civil War. In my opinion, we must finally recognize ourselves as a country and not as either North and South, Yankee or Rebel, African-American, Caucasian, Hispanic, etc., Baptist, Catholic, or Buddhist, Democrat, Republican, etc.

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The more labels we use, the more we separate ourselves as Americans. I guess I'm more idealist than realist (okay, two more labels). I think most writers are. Nevertheless, idealistic dreams urge change and spur action. Look at what Martin Luther King accomplished because he had a dream.

**AM: When did you first decide you were a writer?**

I've written as long as I can remember. I submitted my first short story to a magazine in 1972, just out of high school. Of course, I had no idea what I was doing. Submission guidelines? What are those?

My work, of course, was not successful, but the desire to write and submit never dwindled, so I never gave up. I pursued all the creative writing education I could afford while working and being a single mom for many years. I have file cabinets filled with handwritten poetry and typed (electric typewriter) short stories. In this way, I related to Eudora's determination, even though she never married and had children. She never let rejection kill her dream. I hope I never do either.

**AM: Are you working on any projects now that our readers should know about?**

The History Press approached me about another book on Mississippi. This was after good friend and mentor author/artist Diane Williams asked me to co-author a book with her on the Depression in Mississippi. After submitting that idea to The History Press, our plans are to co-author both books for them.

Another project I'm excited about is for The University Press of Mississippi (UPM). UPM contacted my friend and incredible photographer, Glynn Fought, about a coffee-table book highlighting Mississippi cemeteries. He suggested that they include "stories behind the headstones." They were excited about the idea and Glynn contacted me about co-authoring this book with him. I'm excited about all these projects and working with two of the most talented artists I know!

**AM: Thanks so much for this fascinating interview. All the best from all of us at *Southern Literary Review*.**

Thank you for all you do for Southern literature and authors!

*Richelle Putnam is listed on the Mississippi Arts Commission Artist/Teaching Artist Roster and the Mississippi Humanities Speaker Board. She is a recipient of the 2014 Mississippi Arts Commission Literary Fellowship. A current student in the Gotham Writers of New York's Memoir Certificate Program, she holds diplomas from The Institute of Children's Literature, Gotham Writers Fiction Certificate Program, Open College for the Arts Advanced Writing Program, Writers Digest and other accredited writing institutions. She has taught creative writing at Meridian Community College and through libraries and schools and online. She has received awards from Writers Digest, Writers Journal, Song of the Year, Songwars, Billboard Songwriting and American Songwriting Magazine and more. Her literary work has been published in Common Ties, Pif Magazine, The Copperfield Review, Birmingham Arts Journal and in three bestselling series: A Cup of Comfort for Mothers and Daughters, A Cup of Comfort for Christmas Prayer, and A Cup of Comfort Twelve Days of Christmas. Her work has also been chosen for The Copperfield Review's 10th Anniversary Celebration Anthology. Her work for children and about children literature has been published in Boy's Quest, Hopscotch, Appleseed, The Institute of Children's Literature and more. She writes for Town & Gown Magazine, Mississippi Magazine, Parents & Kids, Well Being, Portico, and Social South magazines. History Press commissioned her to write Lauderdale County, Mississippi: A Brief History, released in November 2011. She co-authored Legendary Locals of Meridian, Mississippi (Arcadia Publishing) with June Davidson, released in October 2013. Her young-adult nonfiction book The Inspiring Life of Eudora Welty, published by History Press in April 2014, received the 2014 Moonbeam Children's Book Awards Silver Medal for YA non-fiction e-book.*

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### About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is associate dean at Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center. His books include *Literature and Liberty* (2014), *Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Pragmatism, and the Jurisprudence of Agon* (2017), *The Southern Philosopher: Collected Essays of John William Corrington* (2017) (editor), and *Lines from a Southern Lawyer* (2017). Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](#).

## COMMENTS

**Susan** says:

February 5, 2015 at 2:53 PM

Just the name "Welty" pulled me to the Putnam interview . In removing a sense of place,as indicated, (subjective) by homogenizing southern life in story telling? Welty's stories stand on their own. Inspired? No doubt, the breath of life comes to all her(Welty) stories. But to indicate the removal of labels, it's fiction.

While Ms.Putnam's book is what it will be, An inspiration to write...

By a Southern Storyteller ...sounds better than just Storyteller..

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