

Southern Women's Voices

Legacies from the South

Eudora Welty
Carson McCullers
Flannery O'Connor

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Three of our most beloved twentieth-century writers—Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor—penned classic fiction within a distinct Southern Gothic tradition. Writing between the 1940s and 1970s—the era that straddled Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement—they used grotesque and fantastical elements to portray what O'Connor called “the decaying South and its damned people.” Walker Percy once said that Southern writers were so good because the South lost the Civil War. Indeed, the legacy of slavery, class and racial tensions, the attempt to rebuild the region, and a humanity tarnished by guilt and prejudice have haunted Southern culture, shaping its people and producing a distinct, deeply insightful, and disturbing literature.

Welty, McCullers, and O'Connor, three white women, confronted the hypocrisy of their region's history without sentimentality. Against the backdrop of provincial communities, ancestral plantations, and newly industrializing towns, each writer explored different aspects of Southern history and life, mapping out social crises and questions of identity with wit, compassion, and often violent realism. They produced nuanced portraits of relationships between individuals—black and white, rich and poor, “bizarre” and “normal.” O'Connor once wrote that together they formed an “unhappy combination of Poe

and Erskine Caldwell.” While Welty celebrated Southern women's familiar lives and roles, McCullers and O'Connor introduced “freakish” characters at odds with Southern society. Each peppered her fiction with local color, regional dialect, and family lore. “When one Southern character speaks, regardless of his station of life,” O'Connor wrote in “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South” (1969), “an echo of all Southern life is heard.”

Although these writers offered some traditional looks at family, morality, community, and religion, they also grappled with changes slowly chipping away at life in the Old South. In the *Optimist's Daughter* (1972), Welty contrasted the New South of shopping centers, racial integration, and urbanization with the Old South's more closed, tight-knit communities. In depicting the South in transition, Welty, McCullers, and O'Connor also questioned gender roles.

Although they were neither Southern belles nor the “New Woman” that emerged in the '60s, each experienced the era's new opportunities for women—and its constraints. As a result, they didn't write about “traditional” women who married and raised children or the “career” woman. Writing when they did, it's not surprising that some of their fiction addresses the desire to break free from their isolated towns, experience the world, and then return (or not) to the family's land. In her autobiog-

WHERE TO START

Daughters and mothers, freaks and geeks—these writers cover it all. Eudora Welty's **THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER** is a poignant novel about two women representing the old Southern tradition and a newly modernized South. Carson McCullers's **THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER** portrays misfits in a Southern town with subtlety and compassion. And Flannery O'Connor's **THE COMPLETE STORIES** delivers provocative characters guaranteed to intrigue and enlighten.

raphy *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), Welty discussed the sheltered life typical of women nurtured in the Deep South during the early twentieth century. This life, she wrote, "can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within." Welty, McCullers, and O'Connor each possessed daring visions of the South. Collectively, their novels, plays, and stories challenged the South's traditional patriarchal society and religious hypocrisy, and uncovered the mysteries of relationships among friends, lovers, and families.

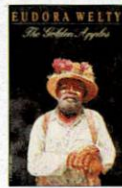
EUDORA ALICE WELTY

Eudora Welty, who plumbed the minds, manners, and lives of her native Southerners, is often considered the literary soul of the South. She believed that exposing truths about people built "the whole foundation" of her fiction, and she often used introspective and mythical themes to portray families and their small-town communities. Her hallmark was versatility; her legacy includes the mystical, symbolic novel *The Golden Apples* (1949) and the rollicking comedy of her famous story, "Why I Live at the P.O." She attributed her keen sense of Southern dialect to listening in on her mother's friends' gossip. "Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories," she wrote in her acclaimed autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings*. "Listening for them is something more acute than listening to them." Welty also claimed that her love of photography taught her that, "life doesn't stand still," a motif woven throughout her work (*One Writer's Beginnings*). Known for its lyrical sensuality and emotional themes, her writing reflects a deep devotion to the beauty and mystery of Southern life.

Born in 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, Welty devoted much of her autobiography to examining her sheltered upbringing and her parents' influence on her writing. Her father Christian, an Ohio-born insurance executive, shared with her his curiosity about machines and inventions, and her mother Chestina imparted her love of reading. Welty attended Mississippi State College for Women between 1925 and 1927 and finished with a BA at the University of Wisconsin in 1929. In 1931, she attended Columbia University business school, but her father's unexpected death brought her back to Jackson. Her first collection of short stories, *A Curtain of Green*, was published in 1941 to wide acclaim. Her legacy boasts five novels, four story collections, two collections of photographs, three works of non-fiction, and one children's book. Welty, who never married, died at 92. Her rumored last words underscore her modesty and elegance: When the doctor asked if he could do anything for her, she replied, "No, but thank you so much for inviting me to the party."



The Golden Apples (1949)



These interlocking stories reflect Welty's deep interest in mythology. Although each character's "heady dreams" identify him or her with ancient gods and heroes, each remains grounded in the provincial southern community of Morgana, Mississippi.

THE STORIES: The mysterious King Mclain, like Zeus, seduces two women in the town. The spinster piano teacher and outcast, Miss Eckhart, struggles to belong. And, the young, passionate Virgie Rainey breaks her ties to Morgana after her mother's death and strives to understand her place in the world. These linked stories portray the joys of self-discovery and the burden of disillusionment and isolation in youth and old age.

"... the quality of life among the main families of Morgana is, to speak rudely, not worth 244 pages." MARGARET MARSHALL,

THE NATION, 9/10/49.

"The characters in *The Golden Apples* are superb creatures of fiction. Miss Welty is excelled by none in her ability in these stories, to express the universal human experience in the particularized southern environment." LOUIS RUBIN, HOPKINS REVIEW,

SPRING 1950.

"I doubt that a better book about 'the South'—one that more completely gets the feel of the particular texture of Southern life, and its special tone and pattern—has ever been written."

HAMILTON BASSO, NEW YORKER, 9/3/49.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Morgana comes alive as each character reveals Welty's vision of the human condition.

The Optimist's Daughter (1972)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE, 1972



The publication of the short story "The Optimist's Daughter" in *The New Yorker* in 1969 and as a novel in 1972, not long after Welty's mother's death, broke a long silence for the author. Many critics hailed its spare but profound depiction of the relationship between families and communities and the growing conflict between New South materialism and the Old South's traditions.

THE STORY: Laurel McKelva Hand, a widow in Chicago, returns home to Mount Salus, Mississippi, when her elderly father, Judge McKelva, undergoes surgery. Laurel and the Judge's young wife—the flashy, self-centered Fay, representing the "new"—immediately clash. When the Judge dies, his funeral turns comic and macabre as the community embraces Laurel as their native daughter. But with her newfound knowledge of memory, love, and death, will she ever feel certain of her place in Mount Salus again?

"The best book Eudora Welty has ever written, *The Optimist's Daughter*, is a long goodbye in a very short space not only to

the dead but to delusion and to sentiment as well.” HOWARD MOSS,
NEW YORK TIMES, 5/21/72.

“The Optimist’s Daughter is an unlikely triumph, combining Chekhovian understatement with Faulknerian verve, displaying the author’s powers at their best. She has lost nothing over the years: her unerring ear, the comic vitality of her characters, the authenticity of furniture and flowers and small-town mores remain compelling. And the profundity of her moral imagination has deepened.” PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS,

THE HUDSON REVIEW, 1972.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A complex, emotional novel, about going home and finding the courage to accept loss and love.



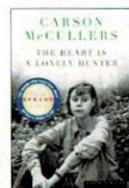
CARSON MCCULLERS

Carson McCullers’s work, defined by her isolated, lonely characters, reflected what she called the South’s “voices and foliage and memory.” Yet, unlike the genteel Welty and revered O’Connor, she was not always welcome in her hometown of Columbus, Georgia. After she published her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), the Ku Klux Klan threatened her, claiming her novels sympathized with homosexuals and African Americans. But McCullers persisted in exploring the taboo subjects that distinguished her work from that of her fellow regionalists. More than once she said, “I must go home periodically to renew my sense of horror,” and the “horrors” of Southern life inspired her best work. When accused of sensationalizing the abnormal in her fiction, she argued

that her mutes, dwarves, and other grotesque characters symbolized impotence, unrequited love, and alienation. In her compassionate portrayal of social outcasts, McCullers universalized their plight in twentieth-century American literature. “Surely I have more to say than Hemingway, and God knows, I say it better than Faulkner,” she wrote.

McCullers was born Lula Carson Smith in 1917. Her mother, Marguerite, told her when she was young that she would be famous. Barely 17, McCullers took creative writing classes at Columbia University, but repeated illnesses drove her back to Columbus to recuperate. On one such trip in 1935, she met struggling author Reeves McCullers, whom she married in 1937. Alcoholism, homosexual affairs, and Reeves’s jealousy of his wife’s success when she published *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in 1940 derailed their marriage. Between 1940 and 1946, McCullers hit her writing zenith, publishing four major novels about the South while living mostly in New York and Paris. Although frequent illnesses, strokes, and depression plagued her short life, she continued to write daily. She published the play *The Square Root of Wonderful* in 1958 and the novel *The Clock Without Hands* in 1961. She told a reporter in 1963 that, “Writing is not only how I earn my living; it is how I earn my soul.” She died from a cerebral hemorrhage at age 50 at her home in Nyack, New York.

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter (1940)



McCullers was only 23 when she published this classic, which contains some autobiographical elements, including characteristics of the heroine, Mick Kelly. The first line, “In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together,” plunges the reader into McCullers’s dark world of moral isolation, loneliness, and repressed violence. Praised for its insight into adolescence and unrequited love, her debut turned McCullers into an overnight sensation.

THE STORY: John Singer, a deaf-mute, “listens” and befriends four lonely and outcast characters in a Southern mill town in the 1930s. Mick Kelly, an awkward tomboy, dreams of writing symphonies and becoming famous. Jake Blount, an itinerant drunk, longs for the unification of poor mill workers. Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, a black doctor and intellectual, fails to improve the lot of his people. Finally, Biff Brannon, an introverted café owner, struggles with his sexual identity. Singer validates their obsessions and friendship, but when his good friend, Antonapoulos, enters an insane asylum, he finds little reason to continue living.

“[McCullers] recounts incidents of death and attitudes of stoicism in sentences whose neutrality makes Hemingway’s terse prose seem warm and partisan by comparison. Hovering mockingly over her story of loneliness in a small town are primitive religion, adolescent hope, the silence of deaf mutes—and all of these give the violent colors of the life she depicts a sheen of weird tenderness.” RICHARD WRIGHT, NEW REPUBLIC,

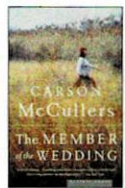
AUGUST 1940.

"You wonder at first how a twenty-two-year-old writer could have visualized those secret people, but you don't wonder long. They are a mystic fellowship, yet the impersonations of a frustrated unripe imagination. A lonesome and self-tortured imagination, one guesses." MAX PUTZEL, ACCENT, AUTUMN 1940.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Considered McCullers's finest work—a powerful novel revealing how friendship and love offer hope for humanity.

A Member of the Wedding (1946)

♦ NEW YORK DRAMA CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD



McCullers claims the inspiration for this novel came after an elaborate Thanksgiving dinner with her roommate Gypsy Rose Lee. She looked at Lee and suddenly exclaimed, "Frankie is in love with the bride of her brother and wants to join the wedding." This clarified McCullers's scheme for the novel, which had been troubling her for years. Critical reception was mixed; some felt her bizarre symbolism and characters showed unprecedented talent, while others read the novel as simply another coming-of-age story lacking depth and energy.

THE STORY: Twelve-year-old tomboy Frankie Addams finds herself alone and belonging to "no club and ... a member of nothing in the world." When her brother, Jarvis, gets married, she becomes obsessed with joining the wedding party and leaving with the couple after the ceremony. She changes her name to the more mature F. Jasmine and then to Frances. But after she barely escapes being raped by a drunken soldier and then has to be dragged from the wedding couple's car, she realizes her new identity won't deliver the love and belonging she seeks. In the end, her hard-earned wisdom allows her to look toward her future.

"In the androgynous heroine, Frankie, Carson McCullers has done little more than repeat her picture of adolescent life in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*." ELIZABETH HARDWICK, PARTISAN REVIEW, SUMMER 1946.

"Rarely has emotional turbulence been so delicately conveyed. Carson McCullers's language has the freshness, quaintness and gentleness of a sensitive child." ISA KAPP, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, 3/24/1946.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A sensitive portrayal of a young woman's search for identity and struggle toward adulthood.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Like Welty and McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, considered one of the greatest short story authors of the twentieth century, explored the rural South's brutal legacy in her two novels and 31 short stories. Essentially a religious writer, her Catholic upbringing in Bible-belt Georgia inspired her fiction, which exposes the darker side of human nature. She described the South as "Christ-haunted" and her subject matter as "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil." Her characters, often physically or spiritually deformed, struggle with hypocrisy



and self-righteousness. Critic Orville Prescott once said her writing "held the power of a blow between the eyes," and her stories became known for their stark, brutal, and grotesque elements.

Born in 1925 in Savannah, Georgia, as the only child of a devout Catholic family, O'Connor moved to Milledgeville when she was 12 after her father developed lupus—a degenerative blood disease she inherited. At age 16 she attended Georgia State College for Women and later enrolled at the University of Iowa and studied writing with Paul Engle. After completing her master's degree, she lived and wrote at Yaddo writers' colony until an attack of lupus forced her to return to her mother's dairy farm in Milledgeville. Undaunted by her disease, she published her first novel, *Wise Blood*, in 1952, a short story collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find* in 1955, and her second and last novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, in 1960. Of her writing and what she called the "habit of art," she said, "A story is good when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you. In fiction two and two is always more than four" (*Mystery and Manners*, 1969). O'Connor continued to write short stories and lecture widely until lupus claimed her life at age 39.

Wise Blood (1952)



Many critics compared the comical *Wise Blood* to the harsh and satirical *Miss Lonelyhearts* by Nathaniel West (1933). Some praised its rich imagery, ironic elements, and flawless Southern dialect, but others panned the characters as exaggerated and grotesque. Overall, *Wise Blood* established O'Connor as a fearless talent, unafraid to tackle Southern religious fundamentalism in a tragicomic way.

THE STORY: After losing his faith in the Army, 22-year-old Hazel “Haze” Motes returns to his Tennessee hometown and founds the “Church Without Christ” in order to purge Jesus from his life. While preaching nihilistic sermons from the hood of his car, he falls under the spell of Asa Hawks, a preacher who supposedly blinds himself in the name of faith, and Hoover Shoats, a greedy evangelist who tries to earn money by preaching with Haze.

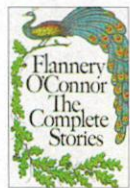
“... a few times she writes herself into episodes that have to contrive themselves to deliver her out of them, and then she is compelled to go on too far beyond or in the direction of sensationalism.” WILLIAM GOYEN, NEW YORK TIMES, 5/18/52.

“Some of the power of Miss O’Connor’s writing comes from her understanding of the anguish of a mind tormented by God, and some from her ability to anchor the fantastic in the specific ...” SYLVIA STALLINGS, NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE BOOK REVIEW, 5/18/52.

THE BOTTOM LINE: One of O’Connor’s most controversial works that explores the religious themes of good vs. evil and faith vs. doubt, offering a scathing attack on America’s commercial culture.

The Complete Stories (1971)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD, 1972



Published posthumously, these 31 stories represent O’Connor’s crowning achievement. Nineteen come from the critically acclaimed collections *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), but 12, derived from her master’s thesis at the

University of Iowa, appear for the first time. They showcase her driving style, acerbic wit, and illustrate her belief that the short-story writer must “reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible” (*Mystery and Manners*, 1969).

THE STORIES: Bristling with black humor and violence, these stories relate the trials of spiritually depraved characters struggling to find divine grace. One of the best known stories, “A Good Man is Hard To Find,” features a hypocritical grandmother who is shocked into spiritual awareness by the Misfit, a murderer. “Revelation,” “Good Country People,” and “The Artificial Nigger” haunt the reader with their religious symbolism, and “A View of the Woods” and “The River” introduce characters so poignant that readers will accept and understand their brutality. As critic Walter Clemons said, these stories “burn brighter than ever” and clearly portray O’Connor’s ability to shock and inspire.

“[O’Connor] could put everything about a character into a single look, everything she had and knew into a single story. She knew people with the finality with which she claimed to know the distance from hell to heaven. For her, people were complete in their radical weakness, their necessarily human incompleteness.” ALFRED KAZIN, NEW YORK TIMES, 11/28/71.

“The interaction of Miss O’Connor’s vigorous Catholicism with the Southern situation sets her apart, but her consciousness of violence, pain, endurance, and redemption places her squarely in the center of the Southern tradition.” JONATHAN

YARDLEY, PARTISAN REVIEW, 1973.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Unforgettable stories that reveal the universal struggle for spiritual awareness and redemption. ■

Selected Welty Works

THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM (1942)

A highwayman masquerading as a gentleman kidnaps a planter’s daughter—only to have her fall in love with him.

DELTA WEDDING (1946)

A young relative, Lauren, witnesses the perfectly ordinary workings of an oversized, tight-knit Southern family on their plantation in the 1920s.

THE PONDER HEART (1954)

This farcical novel stars Edna Ponder, who narrates the story of her Uncle Daniel Ponder, a man determined to give away his fortune.

LOSING BATTLES (1970)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

A comic novel set over two days in which Granny Vaughn’s family gathers to celebrate her 90th birthday.

THE EYE OF THE STORY (1978)

Nonfiction essays on the art of writing.

THE COLLECTED STORIES OF EUDORA WELTY (1980)

Contains 41 published stories.

ONE WRITER’S BEGINNINGS (1984)

♦ AMERICAN BOOK AWARD

A bestselling memoir.

Selected McCullers Works

REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE (1941)

On a Southern army base in the 1930s, the bisexual Captain Penderton loses his wife to a charming Major.

THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ (1951)

Miss Amelia and her hunchback cousin turn her store into a café and expel their inner loneliness—until Miss Amelia’s estranged husband returns.

THE SQUARE ROOT OF WONDERFUL (1958)

Based on trauma McCullers experienced after her husband committed suicide in 1953.

CLOCK WITHOUT HANDS (1961)

A fictional look at class and race set in Georgia at the time of court-mandated integration and the decay of the Old South.

ILLUMINATION AND NIGHT GLARE (1999)

Written 30 years before it was published, McCullers’s autobiography offers insight into her short, sad life.

Selected O’Connor Works

THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY (1960)

Orphaned Francis Marion Tarwater fights his dead uncle’s prophecy that he’ll become a prophet.

THE HABIT OF BEING: LETTERS (1979)

O’Connor’s letters offer insight into her views on writing, religion, and more.

MYSTERY AND MANNERS: OCCASIONAL PROSE (1969)

This nonfiction collection focuses on O’Connor’s views on writing.