

ANALYSIS

Losing Battles (1970)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

“*Losing Battles* is Miss Welty’s most profound and most powerfully moving account of the folk society. In it we listen to a whole clan gathered for the birthday of its matriarch, great-grandmother Vaughn, and we hear them talk from the dawn of one day to near midnight and later on into the afternoon of the following day. It is wonderfully rich and exuberant talk and there are a variety of voices: male and female, gentle and quiet or aggressive and domineering, querulous and argumentative or ironic and conciliatory; but they are all voices of the folk and speak the characteristic folly or wisdom, joy or melancholy, of such a community.

In emphasizing the wonderful talk to be found in this novel—its quality and its quantity—I may have given the impression that nothing happens—that the novel is all just talk. Nothing could be further from the truth. All kinds of things happen. There are hairbreadth escapes from violent death, turnings of the table in which the judge who had sentenced Jack Renfro to the penitentiary turns up, through a curious set of happenings, at Granny Vaughn’s birthday party for the concluding banquet and actually spends the night under the same roof that shelters Jack Renfro on his first night home after returning from the penitentiary. Mysteries are unraveled: Jack’s bride, Gloria, the orphan who does not know who her parents were, has the puzzle worked out for her and discovers that she is her husband’s first cousin. But as she is welcomed into the clan as blood-kin, no longer just an in-law, it is revealed that Mississippi has passed a law against first cousins marrying each other. Gloom descends at once.

Will Jack, just home, have to return to the penitentiary because of this newly discovered offense? He had earlier had to give up his bride after only one night of married bliss. Now that he has held her in his arms once again, will he be snatched away? Yet it is his old antagonist, Judge Moody, who enables him to escape this new threat of the law.... Far from being simply a talky novel, *Losing Battles* is practically a melodrama—and thus far I have not even mentioned the violent physical action, such as the fist fights that occur or the wonderful episode in which Judge Moody’s car runs off the road and sits perched on an eminence so perilous that it takes truly superhuman efforts to get it down once more onto the road.

The truth of the matter is that *Losing Battles* is in spirit a kind of Tall Tale of the Old Southwest. Indeed, the action is so violent and some of the coincidences so improbably that it needs its folk language and sayings and ways for the actions depicted to pass muster as credible. Pass muster they do, for by virtue of its folk characters and the language they speak, the novel strikes the reader as being itself a kind of folk tale—bardic, outrageously strange, almost epic in its happenings.

In spite of the seriousness with which Eudora Welty takes this folk culture, she does not sentimentalize it. She does not make it too good to be true. If the clan loyalties of the Beechams and the Renfros are admirable and excite the envy of us modern readers who tend to be alienated, lacking in family ties, and lonely in our unhappy self-sufficiency, Miss Welty makes it plain that the pressure of this great extended Renfro family can be suffocating. Gloria wants to have Jack to herself. During his long absence she had tried to find a little privacy in this busy, cluttered, almost too tightly related tribe. Even after she has had revealed to her that her father was a Renfro too, she yearns to get away from Jack’s vast family. As the novel ends, she is still saying ‘And some day, some day, yet, we’ll move to ourselves. And there’ll be just you and me and Lady May.’ Lady May is their baby girl.

This counter note, this glimpse at the other side of the matter, is the necessary pinch of salt. The strength of family ties is touching, and the loyalties of the clan may well rouse in the modern a certain homesickness for a world that many of us have lost. But Miss Welty is not writing a tract in defense of the extended family. Rather, she is dramatizing such a family, and in doing so she is telling the truth about it. The virtues are there, but the Renfros have the defects of their virtues.

One of their defects is a kind of naivete. Jack is goodhearted, impulsive, loyal, essentially kindly, though very jealous of what he regards as his masculine honor. It is his naivete which first gets him into trouble, and in the course of the day and a half that we watch Jack's actions we see that his guileless simplicity continues to get him into trouble. His young wife Gloria is quite aware of this. She feels more protective of her husband than even he feels protective of her, for she realizes that he is far more vulnerable. He allows people to goad him into foolish actions. He is really incapable of taking care of himself. Some of Jack's aunts and uncles and cousins are more worldly-wise than he. Yet in a sense Jack Renfro's special vulnerability does hint at the vulnerability of the folk society itself. It is genuine, sincere, strong in integrity, resolute and capable of suffering without whining. But its chief virtues are those that can be handed down in a simple and basically unlettered society. Book learning, after all, does provide virtues too—very important ones—and these the Renfros tend to lack.

The folk society is a bit skittish about book learning. It is natural that it should eye with a certain suspicion the world of books and the rhetoric of false grandiloquence that goes with it. A little learning is indeed a dangerous thing, and on this point the suspicion manifested by the folk makes a certain sense. But the folk are even more afraid of profound learning—for this smacks of a strange and unfamiliar world filled with abstractions.

Miss Welty has made this point subtly but very forcibly in *Losing Battles*. Though we never see Miss Julia Mortimer, the school teacher who has made her impact on so many lives in Banner, the bailiwick of the Renfros, her name comes up again and again throughout the novel. She has just died. Indeed, her funeral is held the day after the Renfro reunion, and the whole community repairs to the cemetery to witness her burial. Judge Moody and his wife attend it, and so do Jack Renfro and Gloria. Gloria had in fact been a protégé of Miss Julia's and had come to the Banner community as the mistress of its one-room school. It was in the school that she met Jack, an average pupil, and fell in love with him, married him, and gave up the career of a teacher, the profession to which Miss Julia has hoped Gloria would devote her life.

Miss Julia had been a great teacher and a formidable power in the community. Judge Moody, for example, had been one of her pupils, and several of her best pupils had gone on to glory in the great world outside. On the day of her funeral men of more than merely local fame had returned to Banner to pay their respects. Yet in the talk that we hear from the Renfro clan, we note a certain uneasiness and suspicion. They respect Miss Julia and even take some pride in having weathered their experiences in her school-room. But they think of schooling as a necessary evil, and their awe of Miss Julia is mingled with a certain fear. She was the dedicated priestess of what was for them an arcane mystery. They were never really comfortable with her.

A folk community is usually uneasy in the presence of those who exalt the written word, and in this regard Miss Welty's Banner community is not special. Other Southern writers have made the same point. An excellent example is Peter Taylor's fine story 'Miss Leonora When Last Seen'.... In *Losing Battles* this mingling of respect with certain resentment, and gratitude with fearful apprehension, comes to a head in the person of Gloria. Gloria owes much to Miss Julia, and yet she resents the fact that Miss Julia had not approved her marriage to Jack Renfro. Gloria seems to count herself a brand snatched from the burning, a maiden rescued by her own St. George from the dragon of permanent spinsterhood. Yet, much as she loves her young husband and baby, she resists sinking back into the clannish domesticity of the Beechams and Renfros. She does want her own life as a wife and mother, but not on just any terms.

The suspicion in which any teacher is held by the generality of the folk—particularly their suspicion of the person who means to teach them how to read and write and spell—is not, however, merely Southern. I'm inclined to say that it is All-American.... Thus the Renfros, who instinctively flinch from the sophistications of the great world outside, see the school teacher as the prime agent of that studiedly artificial world.... The genuine artist does not threaten the oral tradition of the folk. The genuine artist, though aware of the limitations of the unwritten tradition, respects it. He appreciates its honesty and its other basic virtues. He knows that these virtues are not really antagonistic to the virtues of the great written tradition. He remembers that Homer, the father of the poetry of Western civilization, was himself a poet of the oral tradition, even though he was to become the very cornerstone of the written tradition. The genuine

artist not only respects and admires the oral tradition; he knows how to use it, how to incorporate it into the written, and thus how to give it an enduring life. Eudora Welty is just such an artist.”

Cleanth Brooks
“Eudora Welty and the Southern Idiom”
Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks
(U Mississippi 1979)

“Julia is a marvelous woman who is a teacher of fierce dedication, not (thankfully) another saintly schoolmarm. The will, energy, and sacrifice she expended in the service of teaching her pupils are only to be admired... Julia’s great public triumph...was when her Banner pupils spelled down the Mississippi legislature.... But, it should be stressed, what is grand about Miss Julia Mortimer, teacher, belongs to her and not to her profession. This is a necessary distinction because the novel does not authorize the wholesale elevation of Education over what has been learned in the way of the reunion, what in the *Paris Review* Eudora Welty has called, ‘a narrative sense of human destiny’.... When Julia says that ‘there’s a measure of enjoyment’ in having spent a lifetime in what she considers a losing battle, we assent to the affirmation because we know the conditions out of which that modulated affirmation has been won. The same should be true of the family....

Julia Mortimer has been, until nearly the very end of her life, a romantic empiricist (her letter to Moody, as Gloria disapprovingly recognizes, exhibits ‘a change’); it is what has given shape and meaning to her existence and has been the source of many of the fine things she has done with her life. She had a rationalistic program for the improvement of society.... ‘Yes’m,’ says Dolphus, ‘she taught the generations. She was our cross to bear.’ For Nanny and Birdie, too, Julia’s obsessive commitment to learning—‘She’d follow you, right to your door’—took the joy out of childhood for ‘the poor little children.’ ‘She put an end to good fishing’ says it all. Some of them take a curious pleasure in their successful resistance to learning, perversely proud that Julia didn’t penetrate their ‘pore hot skulls’...

Yet Percy...complains that Julia didn’t make them ‘stay in school, and learn some profit.’ Like any self-satisfied ignoramus, some of them dismiss what they do not know as not worth knowing and those who know it as not worth emulating. She expected too much out of people and ‘never did learn to please’; she was a cracked old main driven slightly batty by devoting herself to accumulating books rather than children. How else, they ask, can one explain a grown healthy woman reading in the afternoon, throwing herself on the dictionary during the cyclone, spending all she had on a library, and wasting her lovely voice on poems, multiplication tables and other such ‘rigmarole.’

These moral vulgarities (as Julia herself finally realizes) are the result of the family’s deep-seated and passionate commitment to surviving in the only way it knows how...just sticking together.... ‘She wanted us to quit worshipping ourselves so wholeheartedly’...both an unbearable insult and a powerful threat aimed at the very nerve center of the family’s life. So they fight back in the only way they know how, and it disfigures them.... The family’s climactic rejection of what Julia stood for [is dramatized by] Lexie’s refusal to give the dying Julia a pencil to write with or a book to read....

The title would perhaps merit little remark except that I suspect that it has subtly encouraged readings of the novel somewhat too somber, readings which tip the novel toward what is known in Shakespearean criticism as ‘dark comedy.’ Louise Gossett, for example, calls it a ‘comedy of loss,’ in which ‘Miss Welty keeps us company—both tender and robust—as we edge along avoiding doom.’ For me, such a reading misses the essence of Welty’s comic vision, which is basically celebrative, joyous, and affirmative (‘My natural temperament is one of positive feelings,’ she remarked in an interview for the *Paris Review*).

Her comic fiction, the culmination of which is *Losing Battles*, displays an enchantment with the energy, diversity, and indomitability of what Emerson in less self-conscious terms would have capitalized as Life; it bears testimony to a vision which sees life as skirting free of the social, moral, and philosophical formulations which would command it into shape; it exhibits a reverence for freedom, a condition in which people and their feelings are not fixed, defined, and labeled, where life has preserved something of its dazzling mobility and dramatic variousness. Clearly this is no shallow optimism; for Welty, like the

Emerson or Whitman whom she in some general ways resembles, knows the conditions out of which praise and celebration must be won.... Welty is in the American Transcendentalist comic tradition...

Losing Battles is a family novel... Its spiritual ebullience is the result of Welty's grand understanding of the joys and griefs of her large cast of characters who, do what they will to tip the world, cannot upset its balance. There is something in the universe which does not like a fall—call it the life force or the natural order or whatever. This impulse is most obviously and hilariously caught in the image of the Moody car, which was kept from crashing with its occupants into the ravine by one of Uncle Nathan's religious signs—'Destruction Is At Hand!' There it remains throughout most of the novel impossibly suspended on Banner Top—its motor running, its tires exploding, its precarious equilibrium depending on an amiable simpleton in the back seat—waiting to be saved. And it is. The salvation is not exactly the kind Nathan had in mind, but it is the kind of salvation that occurs in the world of *Losing Battles*: it's a bit battered but it'll run....

Generally speaking, critics have been reluctant to give full assent to the novel's 'wholly affirmative' comic vision.... The tendency has been to darken the novel, this darkening coming in various shades. It has been characterized as 'elegiac,' as another Welty treatment of 'the illusions with which people protect themselves in the losing battles of their experience,' as a story of 'the separateness of each of us isolated within our shells of individuality'.... Welty gently but firmly disagreed: "I don't feel it's a novel of despair at all. I feel it's more a novel of admiration for the human being who can cope with any condition, even ignorance, and keep a courage, a joy of life, even, that is unquenchable.... I see human beings as *valuable*. Each life is very valuable in itself, regardless, and in spite of everything.' And in the *Jackson Daily News* (5 April 1970), she characterized her novel as being 'about all the battles which we *seem* to be losing'....

One should note in these remarks that Welty's 'admiration' is not selective: it apparently applies to *both* sides of the 'battle'—Julia Mortimer and the Renfro/Beecham family. Welty loves all of her characters (Cleo perhaps excepted) and, as Jack says, 'You can't blame who you love.' This love, which comes of the author's 'generous ingenuity' in the way of narrative—an almost magical balancing of all the elements in the novel. In contrast to such grand impartiality, the critics of the novel have tended to take sides, to give their allegiance (albeit some with agreeable qualifications) to the 'anti-family' forces—Miss Mortimer and all those (like Gloria) who fight against what has been variously characterized as the suffocating insularity, pettiness, smug ignorance, and prejudice of the back country family....

This negative response is at least partly the result, I believe, of two separate but related things: the ease with which the reader can identify the greatness in Julia and the powerfully concentrated accounts we are given of her suffering in the service of that greatness; and the ease with which we can miss, or at least slight, the suffering of the family because they come to us either in a ritualized form which deliberately deflects the pain or in an almost offhand and glancing manner. Julia's losing battles are so overpowering because they are so painfully concentrated in Lexie's account of her last days and in Julia's final letter to the world.... We can *see* Julia bleeding. A mind watching itself going back on itself; the desperate attempt to hold onto some vestige of what she has given her life for, if only symbolically, like the speller she sleeps on; the waiting for ex-students who never come; her summation, without self-pity, of her failure to transform the community; her refusal to quit fighting even though she knows she's just about licked—'I'm ready for all they send me'; her lonely death on the road, her last words—'What was the trip for?'—shadowed with the ultimate doubt. It could, indeed, as the judge says, 'make a stone cry.'

That the family's sufferings might not make a stone cry is hardly the sign of their lack of human cost—that has been enormous. It is rather the index of the family's capacity for absorbing private anguish into its communal life, of which the reunion is the annual rite.... It is harder to be on their side because it is harder to *see* them bleeding.... The relationship between Julia and the family is only one, though the most important, relationship in the novel in which oppositions turn out to be 'like foes well-matched or sweethearts come together,' in which collisions are both hurts and comminglings.... Ultimately, then, in the comic world of *Losing Battles* there are no 'sides,' though people take them. Like the election posters nailed to trees, 'There were the faces of losers and winners, the forgotten and remembered, still there together and looking like members of the same family....

Most surprising of all is Beulah. As the novel's most vociferous defender of the value of 'the splendid mothers at home,' she is apparently Julia's chief antagonist, and has been accused of viewing Julia 'with unreasoning hatred.' Yet she confesses, in an unguarded moment, that Julia is 'responsible for a good deal I know right here today,' and she has evidently accepted with equanimity her daughter Elvie's ambition to follow in the teacher's footsteps....Vaughn, Jack's younger brother...is presently the best speller in his class.... Vaughn loves school with a passion that is almost pain... The last time we see him tells us where he is going. Clutching his school books to his side, he leaps towards the new teacher he 'was so ready to worship' and lands almost in her arms. He has, in effect, landed in the arms of Miss Julia. "When the battle's over, something may dawn there—with no help from the teacher"...

It is, however, in the relationship between Julia and Nathan, the family's darkest figure, that we can feel how deeply and decisively the souls of Julia and the family are intertwined. No one in the world knows, except some of the family and Julia, to whom he has confessed, that Nathan killed Dearman and allowed an innocent Negro to hang for his crime.... Just as the force of Julia-as-teacher moves with increasing momentum from the early Renfros through Beulah to culminate in Vaughn, so too does Julia as a moral presence move from Granny through Nathan to Jack. In his long day's living, Jack has been both pulled by the family reunion and pushed to the funeral of Miss Julia Mortimer.... Although he has 'never laid eyes' on Julia, Jack, in a transcendent moment of imaginative sympathy, comes to 'love her' because, as he explains to an astonished Gloria, 'I heard her story.' Julia, then, willy-nilly, continues to exert an almost mythic force on the lives of the family....

The suggestion that the true relationship between the family and Julia is one of unconscious congruities, interacting polarities, unperceived affinities as well as moral antipodes meets its severest test in the figure of Lexie. Her treatment of Julia in the last days of Julia's life has been called sadistic; and she has been accused of taking a perversely cruel pleasure in recounting that treatment. Lexie is the hardest member of the family, the least gracious. Her tough-bird personality is...her way of having maintained some dignity in the face of a life in which she lives nowhere and has suffered the double blow of being wanted as neither wife nor teacher.... Her home is where she takes care of those too sick and old to take care of themselves; everything she has in the world she carries in a single bag.

She comes to Julia when the teacher, against her will and to her surprise, has been 'put out to pasture,' and when old age has worn down Julia's body and intensified her characteristic indifference to pleasing into an aggressive hostility. Julia drove everybody away, Lexie says, and 'the she wondered what had happened to everybody.' Having no other object, Julia's bitterness turns on Lexie, whom she strikes, calls fool and old woman...and insults... Lexie ties Julia in bed to keep her from running off and hurting herself; refuses her a pencil when she sees that Julia's letters are attacks on people...and meanly refuses to bring Julia a book because Julia doesn't name a specific title. In coming to the reunion, Lexie, it turns out, has left Julia alone to die. It is important to remember, however, that of all the family Lexie has most loved Julia. 'I worshipped her! Worshipped Miss Julia Mortimer!... When Lexie was a child, Julia 'encouraged' her to be a teacher, made the little girl feel important, worthwhile.... Lexie is grieving at what she has done... So far from being motivated by cruel pleasure, Lexie tells the story out of a troubling guilt. Her story of Julia begins in shame and pain and ends in conversion.... At the reunion [she] announces that she knows now how to treat Mr. Hugg, to whose house she is going: 'It's to give him every single thing he wants'.... Once again Julia has touched a member of the clan....

On several occasions Miss Beulah remarks with exasperation that Julia's funeral has become a part of the reunion. It has indeed.... Resist as it may, the reunion is nevertheless forced to listen to an account of Julia's last days, to hear her last will and testament read to them, and to have to accept the incredible news that Julia will be buried not under her beloved schoolhouse but in their sacrosanct burial ground. This last fact is not, however, merely an unexpected comic reversal... It is, rather, a symbolically apt finale to what has not been much noted—that Julia is to be buried with those whom she has deeply touched in all the days of their lives. It turns out to be one of Welty's angelic ingenuities that the battle between the family and Julia Mortimer, like Jack and Curly's fistfights or the family's sworn enmity towards Judge Moody, is not the collision of discrete antagonisms but, paradoxically, of 'foes well-matched or sweethearts come together.' The novel suggests that the relationship between Julia and the family, as with all the other relationships in the novel, is that of interpenetrating polarities, foes and sweethearts; only the 'foes' has

been emphasized, however, to the detriment of Welty's extraordinary balancing act.... The glory of *Losing Battles* is that it allows you to feel what it would be like *really* to believe in life."

Seymour Gross
"A Long Day's Living: The Angelic Ingenuities of *Losing Battles*"
Eudora Welty: Critical Essays
(U Mississippi 1979)

"In *Losing Battles* (1970), a family clan gathers for the ninetieth birthday of Granny Vaughn. Her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, as well as friends and townspeople, come to celebrate, and it is as if the entire country were coming together, since Granny's life spans several eras. Once gathered, they tell and retell tales, stories of their own and others' losing battles, an aural orgy. But lost or not, the battles indicate life met on its own terms, as part of an organic community. Voices drone on and on, regional accents piled on regional accents, stories blending, family members somewhat indistinguishable, a cast of characters that recalls *War and Peace* in length and diversity, yet behind it all is insistence on a timeless life, a pastoral existence which, whatever loss it may have entailed, allowed for a community of interests."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 71

"Eudora Welty's latest novel, *Losing Battles* (1970), shares a relationship with *Delta Wedding* of 1946 that is similar to the one between the two intervening shorter novels. Like *Delta Wedding* it is a family novel, this time, however, set in Banner, Mississippi, a small community in the hilly northeastern part of the state. Like the characters in *Delta Wedding* the people in Banner are blood relatives for the most part, mainly Beechams and Renfros, poorer than their Delta counterparts but equally proud and equally inclined to clannishness. The subject explored and ultimately vindicated in this novel, as in its predecessor, is one that persists as a theme in much of Welty's work: the communion in love between and among human beings that she sees as essential equally to marriage, family, and community.

The manifestation of such communion here is the annual gathering of the Beecham-Renfro clan to celebrate the birthday of their family matriarch, Granny Vaughn (actually her ninetieth, although she persists in declaring it her hundredth). This time two other events coincide: first, the death of Miss Julia Mortimer, local schoolmistress long retired, who has taught most of the Renfros and the Beechams and attempted with only partial success to inculcate in her students the virtue of independence and make them aware of a world beyond, and in her view superior to, Banner, Mississippi; and second, the return of young Jack Renfro from the state penitentiary at Parchman in the expectation of a happy reunion with his wife, Gloria. Gloria Renfro, however, an outsider reared as an orphan, is the protégé of Miss Mortimer and her successor at the school, and she privately resists exchanging her independence for allegiance to a family, Jack Renfro's or anyone else's. The resulting 'battle,' which duplicates the struggle of most of the characters in the novel are undertaking in one way or another, is a battle to be lost if genuine love is to triumph over selfishness, confirm the marriage, ensure the continuity of family, and triumph in defeat, as it does in Welty's hands, convincingly and without sentimentality."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 144-45

Michael Hollister (2015)