

## 56 QUOTATIONS



Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

Eudora Welty the gracious southern lady, the Mississippi neighbor and friend of William Faulkner, wrote a number of the greatest short stories in American literature. She is a Realist whose art is enhanced by Modernism, resembling Faulkner, on a smaller scale. In 1936 she began publishing stories in elite magazines including the *New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly*, fiction so impressive that she was hired by *The New York Times Book Review* and attracted the attention of Katherine Anne Porter, who became her mentor and wrote the introduction to her first collection *A Curtain of Green* in 1941. Welty also wrote novels, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for *The Optimist's Daughter*, taught creative writing at colleges and workshops and lectured at Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge. Her fictions are deeply personal expressions of place, usually her own southern community, featuring ordinary characters particularized by local traits while also transcending the personal in their general humanity. Two of the best examples are her most popular—and grotesquely humorous--“Petrified Man” and “Why I Live at the P.O.” Her comic use of the grotesque recalls Flannery O’Connor, though more subtle and without the theological dimension. Also among her best are “The Wide Net” and “Powerhouse,” a richly ironic story of race relations based on her observations of the black jazz pianist Fats Waller. “A Curtain of Green” is a moving Modernist story dramatizing a struggle to overcome grief culminating in a transcendent experience. Arguably her greatest story is “A Worn Path,” the archetypal journey of an old black woman—unconsciously heroic--to get medicine for her sick nephew, an allegorical masterpiece that parallels ancient mythology. Eudora Welty is the first living author published in the *Library of America*.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, morality, egalitarian Realism, Modernism, Katherine Anne Porter, Hemingway, Faulkner, the grotesque, symbolism, plot, the short story, writing, the personal, style, politics, Postmodernism, death:

### YOUTH

A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

The home tie is the blood tie.

Beware of a man with manners.

Through travel I first became aware of the outside world; it was through travel that I found my own introspective way into becoming a part of it.

Writers and travelers are mesmerized alike by knowing of their destinations.

I've always been lucky—my work has always landed safely and among friends.

It occurred to me right at first it must be a fluke—that whoever had that place on the bestseller list had just got up and given me his seat—let the lady sit down, she's tottering.

It gives me a terrible sense of exposure, as if I'd gotten sunburned.

## MORALITY

The most important point: that morality as shown through human relationships is the whole heart of fiction, and the serious writer has never lived who dealt with anything else.

Great fiction shows us not how to conduct our behavior but how to feel.

## EGALITARIAN REALISM

The novel...says what people are like.

Fiction, ideally, is highly personal but objective.

The source of the short story is usually lyrical. And all writers speak from, and speak to, emotions eternally the same in all of us: love, pity, terror do not show favorites or leave any of us out.

When we write about people, black or white, in the South or anywhere, if our stories are worth the reading, we are writing about everybody.

Fiction is properly at work on the here and now, or the past made here and now; for in novels *we* have to be there. Fiction provides the ideal texture through which the feeling and meaning that permeate our own personal, present lives will best show through.

"Spotted Horses," by William Faulkner, is a good case in point. At the same time that this is just about Mr. Faulkner's funniest story, it is the most thorough and faithful picture of a Mississippi crossroads hamlet that you could ever hope to see. True in spirit, it is also true to everyday fact.

Validity of a kind, and this is of course a subjective kind, gained in whatever way that had to be, is the quality that makes a work reliable as art.

A fiction writer's responsibility covers not only what he presents as the facts of a given story but what he chooses to stir up as their implications; in the end, these implications, too, become facts, in the larger, fictional sense. But it is not all right, not in good faith, for things *not* to mean what they say.

## MODERNISM

In reading great works one feels that the finished piece transcends the personal.

Chekhov is one of us—so close to today’s world, to my mind, and very close to the South.

[Virginia Woolf] was the one who opened the door. When I read *To the Lighthouse*, I felt, Heavens, what is this? I was so excited by the experience I couldn’t sleep or eat. I’ve read it many times since.

Fiction penetrates chronological time to reach our deeper version of time that’s given to us by the way we think and feel. This is one of the reasons why even the first “stream-of-consciousness” novels, difficult as they must have been for their authors breaking new ground, were rather contrarily easy for the reader to follow.

Sometimes I needed to make a speech do three or four or five things at once—reveal what the character said but also what he thought he said, what he hid, what others were going to think he meant, and what they misunderstood, and so forth—all in his single speech.

#### KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

Of course, Katherine Anne Porter was wonderfully generous to me from the beginning...she wrote the introduction to my first book of stories, and I owe her very much for that. We’ve been friends all these years.

#### HEMINGWAY

We are taught by Hemingway, who is instructive by method, that the world is dangerous and full of fear, and that there is a way we had better be.

If we have thought of Hemingway’s stories as being bare and solid as billiard balls, so scrupulously cleaned of adjectives, of every unneeded word, as they are, of being plain throughout as a verb is plain, we may come to think twice about it, from our stargazer distance.

#### FAULKNER

I don’t know how other people work. It may be entirely different, especially with a genius like William Faulkner, who had a comprehensive sense of the whole deep, deep past and more far-reaching, bred-in country knowledge than I have, which is so valuable, besides all the rest of his equipment that I don’t need to tell you about.

I liked him ever so much. We met at a dinner party in Oxford, just old friends of his and old friends of mine, which was the right way for it to happen, and it was just grand. We sang hymns, and we sang some old ballads—and the next day he invited me to go sailing.

I was naturally in the deepest awe and reverence of him.... It was like living near a big mountain, something majestic—it made me happy to know it was there, all that work of his life.... When I thought of Faulkner it was when I *read*.

Faulkner achieves the startling reality and nearness of the outside world by alternately dilating reality to the reach of abstraction and bringing it home with a footprint. It is reality that not only *is*, but *looms*—and this is not just one time to one character, but over and over, with an insistent quality.

#### THE GROTESQUE

In those early stories I’m sure I needed the device of what you call the “grotesque.” That is, I hoped to differentiate characters by their physical qualities as a way of showing what they were like inside—it seemed to me then the most direct way to do it...it is easier to show somebody as lonely if you make him deaf and dumb than if you go feeling your way into his mind.

I had identified love at once. The truth is that never since has any passion I have felt remained so hopelessly unexpressed within me or appeared so grotesquely altered in the outward world.

## SYMBOLISM

But all devices—and the use of symbolism is another—must come about organically, out of the story.

Symbols have to spring from the work direct, and stay alive.... However alive they are, they should never call for an emphasis greater than the emotional reality they serve, in their moment, to illuminate. One way of looking at *Moby Dick* is that his task as a symbol was so big and strenuous that he *had* to be a whale.

The novel exists within the big symbol of fiction itself—not the other way round, as a conglomeration of little symbols. I think that fiction is the hen, not the egg, and that the good live hen came first.

## PLOT

Plot, by the very strength, sparseness and boldness of its construction-in-motion, forms a kind of metaphor....a plot is a device organic to human struggle designed for the searching out of human truth.

## THE SHORT STORY

A short story is confined to one mood, to which everything in the story pertains. Characters, setting, time, events, are all subject to the mood. And you can try more ephemeral, more fleeting things in a story—you can work more by suggestion—than in a novel. Less is resolved, more is suggested, perhaps.

## WRITING

Passion is the chief ingredient of good fiction.

The real dramatic force of a story depends on the strength of the emotion that has set it going.

Time and place make the framework that any story's built on.

The hardest thing for me is getting people in and out of rooms—the mechanics of a story.

Greater than scene is situation. Greater than situation is implication. Greater than all of these is a single, entire human being, who will never be confined in any frame.

What I do in the writing of any character is to try to enter into the mind, heart and skin of a human being who is not myself. It is the act of a writer's imagination that I set the most high.

To imagine yourself inside another person...is what a storywriter does in every piece of work; it is his first step, and his last too, I suppose.

Writing fiction has developed in me an abiding respect for the unknown in a human lifetime and a sense of where to look for the threads, how to follow, how to connect, find in the thick of the tangle what clear line persists.

The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order in the continuous thread of revelation.

Writing a story or a novel is one way of discovering sequence in experience, of stumbling upon cause and effect in the happenings of a writer's own life.

You must know all, then not tell it all, or not tell too much at once: simply the right thing at the right moment.

## THE PERSONAL

I believe in it, and I trust it too and treasure it above everything, the personal, the personal, the personal! I put my faith in it not only as the source, the ground of meaning in art, in life, but as the meaning itself.

## STYLE

Style, I think, is whatever it is in the prose which has constantly pressed to give the writing its objective. Style does not obtrude but exists as the sum total of all the ways that have been taken to make the work stand on its own, apart. Born subjective, we learn what our own idea of the objective is as we go along.

## POLITICS

In my own view, writing fiction places the novelist and the crusader on opposite sides. [Modernism]

The zeal to reform, which quite properly inspires the editorial, has never done fiction much good. The exception occurs when it can rise to the intensity of satire... Large helpings of naivete and self-esteem, which serve to refresh the crusader, only encumber the novelist.

The crusader's voice is the voice of the crowd and must rise louder all the time, for there is, of course, the other side to be drowned out. Worse, the voices of most crowds sound alike. Worse still, the voice that seeks to do other than communicate when it makes a noise has something brutal about it; it is no longer using words as words but as something to brandish, with which to threaten, brag or condemn....

## POSTMODERNISM

We are like trapped flies with our feet not in honey but in venom. It's not love that is the gluey emotion; it's hate. As far as writing goes, which is as far as living goes, this is a devastating emotion. It could kill us.

The challenge to writers today, I think, is not to disown any part of our heritage.

## DEATH

Never think you've seen the last of anything.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from  
"Eudora Welty, *The Art of Fiction*" (1972)  
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