ALTHOUGH I DON'T USUALLY WRITE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL fiction, the main character in one of my short stories sounds suspiciously like the girl I used to be: “More than anything else in the world, I wanted to be a writer. I didn’t want to learn to write, of course. I just wanted to be a writer, and I often pictured myself poised at the foggy edge of a cliff someplace in the South of France, wearing a cape, drawing furiously on a long cigarette, hollow-cheeked and haunted. I had been romantically dedicated to the grand idea of ‘being a writer’ ever since I could remember.”

I had started telling stories as soon as I could talk—true stories, and made-up stories, too. My father was fond of saying that I would climb a tree to tell a lie rather than stand on the ground to tell the truth. In fact, a lie was often called a “story” in Southwest Virginia, and well do I remember being shaken until my teeth rattled with the stern admonition “Don’t you tell me no story, now!”

But I couldn’t help it. I got hooked on stories early, and as soon as I could write, I started writing them down, first on my mother’s Crane stationery when I was about nine, later in little books with covers I carefully made for them, pasting on pictures I’d cut out of magazines or catalogs, or illustrating them myself. I wrote my way through school, fueled by my voracious reading. I’d read anything: mysteries, romances, true crime, science fiction, all the books that came to our house from the Book of the Month Club. Finally at St. Catherine’s School in Richmond, during my last two years of high school, I was gently but firmly guided into the classics, though my own fiction remained relentlessly sensational.

Finding My Way Home

How two Southern literary giants led a young Appalachian writer to her own voice

By Lee Smith

Illustration by Ross MacDonald
At Hollins College, I wrote about stewardesses living in Hawaii (where I had never been), about orphans, evil twins, fashion models, and alternative universes, receiving Iliz and Co. and cryptic little comments from my professors Lex Allen and Richard Dillard that said, basically, “Write what you know.” I thought this was terrible advice. I didn’t know what they meant. I didn’t know what I knew. All I knew was that I was not going to write anything about Grundy, Virginia, ever, that was for sure. My last glimpse of home had been my mother and two of her friends sitting on the porch drinking iced tea and talking (endlessly) about whether one or the other of them ought to have a hysterectomy or not. Well, I sure wasn’t there.

But I was still drunk on words and books, just as I had been as a child, when I used to read under the covers with a flashlight all night long. My favorite professor at Hollins was Louis D. Rubin, Jr., who introduced us to Southern literature; I hadn’t even known it existed when we started out. I had already gotten drunk on Faulkner a couple of times, then had to go to the infirmary for a whole day when we read William Styron’s Lie Down in Darkness—I got too “wrought up,” as my mother used to say. The nurse gave me a tranquilizer and made me lie down.

Even so, I considered cutting class on the day that this woman with a funny name, from Mississippi, was coming to visit us. She was on campus, I believe, to receive the Hollins Medal, an honor undoubtedly engineered by Mr. Rubin, one of our favorite and longest champions. But I had never heard of her, and it was so pretty outside, a great day to cut class and go up to Carvins Cove and drink some beer or just stroll moodily around campus smoking cigarettes and acting like a writer. This was my plan until I ran into Mr. Rubin in the campus post office, and then I had to go to class.

There were a lot more people in that old high-ceilinged classroom than we had ever had before, and some of them were male, a rarity at Hollins in those days. The seats in the back of the room were filling up fast with faculty from our own college and from other area colleges, too (boots, leather patches on the elbows of their ratty sports jackets: not your dad), as well as graduate students from UVA and W&L. The graduate students needed haircuts and looked intense. In fact, they looked exactly like the fabled sixties, reputed to be happening at W&L. The graduate students needed haircuts and looked intense. In fact, they looked exactly like the fabled sixties, reputed to be happening at W&L. The graduate students needed haircuts and looked intense.

“Bette’s marble cake in town,” Mr. Rubin said, “is the best in the world as its secret sharer. My imagination takes its strange strength and guides its direction from what I see and hear and learn and feel and remember of my living world.”

I was deeply disappointed. Why, she certainly didn’t look like a writer! She didn’t have a cape, or boots, or anything. What she wore was one of those dirty-looking, fake-flannel sweaters, which just like all the other nice ladies I had known in my life, just like my mother and all her friends. In fact, she looked a little bit like Miss Nellie Hart, my eighth-grade English teacher. (My favorite English teacher ever, but still…)

I can’t remember what Mr. Rubin said when he introduced her. I was probably busy staring lazily at the back of the room while appearing not to.

Then Eudora Welty began to read “A Worn Path” out loud in her fast light voice that seemed to sing along with the words of the story. And I was suddenly right there—in Mississippi with Phoenix Jackson as she sets out to get the medicine for her grandson, encountering the thorny brush, the scarecrow, and the black dog, the young hunter and the lady along the way. I could see that “yearly cloud of mistletoe” near the beginning and then Phoenix’s little grandson near the end. “He got a sweet look. He was luminous, lit from within. Now, having finished, she looked nearly shy, though her huge blue eyes were shining. ‘Well,’ she said, looking all around, ‘any questions?’ Hands waved everywhere.

She chose the young man who seemed the most impressed. Knowing what I know now, I’ll bet anything his dissertation was riding on his question. He leapt to his feet to ask it.

“Twowords,” he said, his dark curly hair going everywhere, “if you could comment upon your choice of marble cake as a symbol of the fusion between dream and reality, between the temporal and the eternal, the male and the female, the union of yin and yang…” He made yin-yang motions with his hands.

Miss Welty smiled sweetly at him. “Well,” she said slowly, considering, “it’s a lovely cake, and it’s a recipe that has been in my family for years.”

Marble cake! My own mother made the best marble cake in town.

It would be years before I would understand the exchange, and what really took place in our classroom that day. Later, in the final section of One Writer’s Beginnings, Miss Welty would put it best when she wrote that “the outside world is the vital component of my inner life. My work, in the terms in which I can see it, is as dearly matched to the world as its secret sharer. My imagination takes its strength and guides its direction from what I see and hear and learn and feel and remember of my living world.”

Immediately after Miss Welty’s visit, I read everything she had ever written. And it was like that proverbial lightbulb clicked on in my head—suddenly, I knew what I knew! With the awful arrogance of the nineteen-year-old, I decided that Eudora Welty hadn’t been anywhere much either, and yet she wrote the best stories I had ever read. Plain stories about country people and small towns—my own “living world.”

I sat down and wrote a little story myself, about three women sitting on a porch drinking iced tea and talking endlessly about whether one of them does or does not need a hysterectomy. I got an A on it.

**AS EUDORA WELTY’S INFLUENCE FANNED MY OWN beginnings, I have always felt that one of the most important functions of any good writing teacher is to serve as a sort of matchmaker—fixing up a new writer with the fiction of a successful published author whose work comes out of a similar background, place, same life experience. A certain resonance, or recognition, occurs. This can be an important step in finding a voice. Especially when we are just starting out, we encounter other writers who are like lighthouses for us.**

For instance, when I introduced the young Kentucky writer Silas House to the work of Larry Brown, Silas recalls, “Faither and Son had a profound impact on me. The way his characters were so intertwined with place—they couldn’t be separated. I recall shortly after receiving the book that a major reviewer said Brown wrote ‘about the characters with whom you’d never want to have supper.’ I thought: ‘Those are the folks I’ve been eating with my whole life!’ And Larry’s work really gave me permission to write about my people in all of their gritty glory, a grit formed by the rough land where we lived.’ But even though my reading of Eudora Welty had led me to abandon my stewards, setting my feet on more familiar ground, telling simpler stories about small-town Southern life, I was never able, somehow, to set my first stories in those deep mountains I came from, or to write in my first language, the beautiful and precise Appalachian dialect I had grown up hearing as a child.

This did not happen until I encountered James Still—all by myself, actually. The manager that boarded me up in the Hollins College library.

Here I found the beautiful and heartbreaking novel River of Earth, a kind of Appalachian Grapes of Wrath chronicling the Baldwin family’s desperate struggle to survive when the mines close and the crops fail, familiar occurrences in Appalachian life. Theirs is a constant odyssey, always looking for something better somewhere else—a better job, a better place to live, a promised land. As the mother says, “Forever moving, you’n buck, settin down nowhere and for good and all, searching for God knows what. Where are we expecting to draw up to?”

**EUDORA’S VISION**

“The outside world is the vital component of my inner life,” wrote Eudora Welty—life-changing advice for the author, Lee Smith.

Photograph by Kay Bell, courtesy of Eudora Welty LLC
The murder Daddy saw when he was a boy, out riding his little pony—
ing in the courthouse square; how Petey Chaney rode the flood; the
times; how my uncle Vern taught my daddy to drink good liquor in a
River of Earth
heading for—of all places!––Grundy
I read this passage over and over. I simply could not believe that Grundy
working. I been hearing of a new mine farther than the head of
“...I was born to dig coal,” Father said. “Somewhere there’s a mine
Vanderbilt but was still unable to get a job in the midst of the Great
county, Kentucky, in 1932, where he finally found employment at the
universities, though I live in Piedmont North Carolina now and eat pasta
Cumberland Gap, Tennessee, where he worked as a janitor in the library
accessible only by eight miles of dirt road and two miles
Mile and wolfpen creek near Wolfpen, where he worked his whole life as a
and “pick up a little old leather suitcase I’ve got up here someplace”; the
in his later years I had the honor of helping
school started its now-famous Appalachian Writers’ Workshop. I had the immense plea-
other publications, textbooks, and anthologies.
Mr. Still wrote: “I have always been interested in the story he had often repeated to all of us there on the porch after dinner,
script of River of Earth
speech of getting to know Mr. Still and becoming
First, my friend, from my first visit there in the sev-
central America, and the results of his neighbors as he was in the Mayan cul-
to imagine the heart of it to be in the hills of eastern Kentucky where I have lived and feel at home and where I have ex-
truest material. But sometimes we are lucky enough to find it.
H E R I T A G E
I shall not leave these prisoning hills.
Though they topple their burden heads to level earth
As the lumbering ox drawing green beech logs to mill,
acres of Maryann Smith, from which the book chronicles her
...I cannot leave. I cannot go away.
WHERE JAMES STILL LIVED
his Appalachia poems.
He loved children and also wrote for them—
true story he had often repeated to all of us there on the porch after dinner,
Unfortunately, she worked under a rented old Lincoln over the mountain to Hazard, Kentucky, for a
restaurant steak. Just before his death, Mr. Still wrote, asking me to come
And the forests slide uprooted out of the sky.
We were both influenced by Mr. Still and understood for imagining the heart of it to be in the hills of eastern Kentucky
And in his later years I had the honor of helping him get together a collection of his Appalachian Mother Goose poems.
Mr. Still never married, but loved women, even at ninety. I will always
(his friend, from my first visit there in the sevent-
time stories: my great-grandaddy’s “other family” in West Virginia, Hardcase Breeding, who was Beulah, four
Times, how my uncle Vern taught my daddy to drink good liquor in a
Bear Creek and Dead Mare Branch near Wolfpen, accessible only by eight miles of dirt road and two miles
He earned another bachelor’s degree in library science at the University
appreciated as much freedom and peace as the world allows.
Kentucky where I have lived and feel at home and where I have ex-
so it is not in it for money or fame but for the love of
Mr. Still’s Appalachian-themed writing is his Appalachian Father’s Notebooks, pub-
...I cannot leave. I cannot go away.
Finding My Way Home
ers don’t––can’t––do this. Most of us are always searching, through our
work and in our lives: for meaning, for love, for home.
Writing is about those things. And as writers, we cannot choose our
triumph. In a way, he had a...