

# **One Writer's Beginnings Study Guide**

## **One Writer's Beginnings by Eudora Welty**

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# Plot Summary

One Writer's Beginnings by Eudora Welty is Welty's autobiography which details her childhood and certain factors that influenced her writing career. The first chapter of the book focuses on Welty's childhood and immediate family while the second chapter details her parents' childhoods with an emphasis on their family histories. The final chapter realigns the focal point to Eudora Welty by examining her early adulthood. One Writer's Beginnings is a very interesting and informative autobiography, written by an exceptional woman and author.

In the first chapter, "Listening," Eudora Welty describes her early childhood, which includes her parents' focus on learning and encouraging their children to read. Eudora loves books and reading from a very young age; before beginning to write, she listens for stories instinctively. She becomes a privileged observer by listening to her parents' conversations. Eudora Welty attends Jefferson Davis Grammar School and borrows many books from Jackson's Carnegie Library. Although she enjoys reading the Bible for herself, Eudora does not find a reverence for the holiness of life in organized religion. Welty's mother is relieved when Eudora decides to be a writer because her mother believes it is a safe occupation.

In "Learning to See," the second chapter, the Welty family takes a summer trip to West Virginia and Ohio in 1917 or 1918 to visit both of her parents' families. Chestina reveres and is devoted to her parents, Ned Andrews and Eudora Carden Andrews. Christian Welty meets and falls in love with Chestina Andrews while she is a schoolteacher in West Virginia. After their marriage, they relocated to Jackson, but Chestina takes a piece of the mountains to Jackson with her. The mountains of West Virginia give Eudora Welty a taste for independence, which is an inheritance from her mother. The Welty family visits Christian's family in Ohio next. Although Christian is strongly devoted to his father, Jefferson Welty, he does not tell his children stories about his family because he is more interested in the future than in the past. Eudora is excited to return to her family's home on Congress Street in Jackson, Mississippi. Life events find their own order in their significance as opposed to chronology.

The final chapter, "Finding a Voice," describes Eudora Welty's train ride with her father to West Virginia; this journey, and travel in general, influences Welty's writing. After her father's death, Eudora learns that her father often took the same train ride to visit her mother while they were engaged. When she finds her parents' love letters, she learns of a different, youthful side to her parents. Eudora attends Mississippi State College for Women as a freshman and sophomore but transfers to University of Wisconsin for her last two years of college. Christian Welty works at Lamar Life until he dies of leukemia at the beginning of the Great Depression. Eudora's first full-time job is at the state office of Works Progress Administration, taking photographs during the Great Depression. Eudora travels to New York City to attempt to sell stories and photographs, but she is eventually discovered in Jackson by Diarmuid Russell and John Woodburn. Eudora Welty invents the characters in her works, but she borrows aspects from people that she has met in the flesh. Memory is a living thing that joins and lives in one's

recollection. Eudora Welty is a writer who came from a sheltered life, which can be daring as well because all serious daring starts from within.

# I. Listening

## I. Listening Summary and Analysis

One Writer's Beginnings by Eudora Welty is Welty's autobiography which details her childhood and certain factors which has influenced her writing career. The first chapter of the book focuses on Welty's childhood and immediate family, while the second chapter details her parents' childhoods with an emphasis on their family histories. The final chapter realigns the focal point to Eudora Welty by examining her early adulthood. One Writer's Beginnings is a very interesting and informative autobiography, written by an exceptional woman and author.

In the introductory paragraph, Eudora Welty is young enough to take a long time tying her shoes, and she listens toward the hall to hear her father upstairs shaving and her mother frying the bacon downstairs. Her parents whistle "The Merry Widow" back and forth as a duet which nearly floats with laughter, in opposition to the Victrola record which seems to growl. Her parents keep whistling until she is ready to run downstairs and show them her shoes. This introductory paragraph shows the unity and happiness in the Welty family.

Eudora Welty is born and raised in a house on North Congress Street in Jackson, Mississippi as the oldest of three children. The striking of clocks in their house makes the children time-minded, which is good for a fiction writer to learn so penetratingly about chronology. Eudora's father, Christian Welty, loves and has many instruments to instruct and fascinate, such as maps, telescopes and puzzles. Christian Welty is a country boy with knowledge of the skies and weather, which he teaches his children. As a result, Eudora develops a strong meteorological sensibility, and the atmosphere takes an influential role in her writing. From youth, the Welty children receive educational gifts which represent their father's beliefs in progress and the future and are given as a means of preparing his children. Chestina Welty, Eudora's mother, also prepares her children with her different gifts. From the earliest age, Eudora learns that any room in their house is meant to be read in or read to, and her mother reads to her while taking care of the household. When Eudora learns that people write books, she is startled and disappointed since she previously believed that books were natural wonders that simply appear.

Eudora Welty is always in love with books, even during her illiterate youth. Neither of her parents comes from families that could afford to buy books, but Christian and Chestina Welty carefully select books that they feel their children should grow up with, stocking the bookcase in the living room which the family refers to as the "library." Chestina mostly reads novels and is in love with Dickens. Eudora owes her early acquaintance with Mark Twain to both of her parents. Some of the books in the family's collection come from Christian and Chestina's youth, yet Eudora receives books of her own from a very early age. Eudora is grateful to her parents for initiating her into the knowledge and love of the word; Eudora is drawn to the beauty of the alphabet because



"learning stamps you with its moments" (page 9). For children, learning is a pulse rather than a steady influence. Children use all their senses to discover the world, and Eudora's sensory education includes a physical awareness of the word and for what it stands. An example of this is when Eudora, at age six, gazes at the silver orb in the night sky and associates it with the word "moon." For years, she assumes that the moon rises in the west and does not learn her error until she is a writer and Herschel Brickell, a literary critic, corrects her error in a story.

Eudora's mother always sings to her children, and soon, Eudora is able to play lullabies to herself on the Victrola records. Ever since Eudora is first read to and then learns to read herself, she hears an inward voice reading the lines. She supposes that this is the case with all readers and writers, and she does not know if she could read or write without doing the other as well. When she writes, Eudora hears this voice and trusts it. In Eudora's youth, ladies leave calling cards, but Chestina Welty does not allow this to pertain to Chestina, going on her way with or without calling cards. When the Welty family buys their first car, they often invite one neighbor to join them on their Sunday afternoon ride, and Eudora enjoys this woman's gossip. Eudora's mother says that the woman never says anything; she is just ready to talk. As a result, Eudora Welty writes "Why I Live at the P.O." in the form of a monologue that possesses the speaker. Fannie, the old black sewing woman who often comes to the Welty's home to sew clothes for the children, often gossips, despite Chestina's reproofs that she does not want Eudora exposed to gossip. Before Eudora Welty begins to write stories, she listens for stories by instinct and is forced to distinguish between a lie and the truth.

As a child, Eudora Welty often asks her mother where babies come from, but her mother evades the question. When Eudora finds two nickels in her mother's treasure box and asks to spend them, Chestina says no because her first son, Eudora's older brother, died at birth, and the coins belong to him. Eudora learns how babies can die but not how they are born, learning one truth through a harder one. Chestina nearly died in childbirth with her first baby, but Christian Welty saved her. This fact makes it easy to see why Eudora's parents are overprotective and also why Chestina always wants Eudora to have the things that she never did as a child. For example, Chestina gives up her ticket to see "Blossom Time" at the Century Theatre because she prefers Eudora have the experience than that she see it herself. Eudora feels guilty because she desires independence from an early age and because she desires to protect those who love and protect her. There are two springs, love and guilt, that flow into the creation of Eudora's stories. When Eudora is six or seven years old, she is taken out of school for several months due to a "fast beating heart"; though she misses school, she still learns by listening to her parents talk and becoming a privileged observer. This is useful later in her writing because it allows her to get her distance and is prerequisite to her understanding of human events.

From the first, Eudora is clamorous to learn, mostly the when as opposed to the what, how, why or where. She is sent across the street to Jefferson Davis Grammar School at age five. The principal of the school is Miss Duling whose high standards yield total authority. Eudora is frightened of Miss Duling and nearly paralyzed with fear during exams due to her fear of being expected to measure up. Although Eudora is born left-



handed, she is forced to learn to act as though she is right-handed because the majority is right-handed. In Jackson, Mississippi, in Eudora's youth, it is very important to do well in school, and Eudora succumbs to this expectation. Every week, teachers visit Davis School for special lessons: Miss Johnson, the singing teacher, comes on Mondays; Miss Eyrich, the physical education teacher, visits on Thursdays; and Miss Ascher, the art teacher, arrives every Friday. On one occasion, Eudora and her friend, Elizabeth, discuss their weekend plans in the bathroom at school. Mrs. McWillie, the strict teacher of the other fourth grade class, overhears Elizabeth's bad grammar and threatens to tell Miss Duling. Although Mrs. McWillie never scares Eudora into good grammar, Eudora is jealous of the other fourth grade class since Mrs. McWillie reads "The King of the Golden River" to her class on rainy days while Miss Louella Varnado, Eudora's teacher, does not. When Eudora finally obtains and reads "The King of the Golden River" herself, it does not measure up to her expectations.

As a child, Eudora often goes to Carnegie Library, despite her fear of Mrs. Calloway, the librarian. Mother is not afraid of Mrs. Calloway and takes Eudora to get her own library card at the age of nine, also giving permission for Eudora to read anything on the children or adult shelves except "Elsie Dinsmore." Eudora's reading is stifled by Mrs. Calloway's strict rules of limiting the number of books that anyone can check out at a time. Chestina shares Eudora's insatiability for reading. Both of Eudora's parents come from religious families, but Eudora's family is not a church-going family despite living in a very religious-minded society. In her youth, Eudora is sent to Sunday School every week where she sings hymns directed by Miss Hattie. Evangelists frequently visit Jackson, especially Gypsy Smith who sweeps Jackson "like an epidemic"; however, neither Eudora nor her parents are swept up by Gypsy Smith, causing Eudora to realize that her reverence for the holiness of life is not likely to be found in organized religion, yet she finds pleasure in reading the Bible for herself. After Sunday school, Christian often takes his children to his office and allows them to take turns writing letters to their mother on his typewriter.

While she remains an only child, Eudora does not have much of a sense of humor, but when Edward is born, they both become comics. Walter, the youngest, is more somber than either Eudora or Edward. He is the most serious in his expression as well as the calmest, taking the most after their father. When they are sick, Eudora, Edward and Walter write notes back and forth which their parents deliver between them. All the children in town enjoy going to the movies, including Eudora and Edward. A little boy lives several streets over and is sick in bed. The circus parade travels past his house just for him, but the boy dies soon after, causing the other children to feel betrayed. There is an ominous feeling attached to a procession, and Eudora never resists when a procession rises up to mark the story's unfolding in her own writing. Eudora's family has the same sense of humor but is very different in the ways that each loses their temper. Eudora screams and hits objects. Anger is the emotion that is least responsible for Eudora's writing because she has no adversary in writing and the act of writing makes her happy. The only of Eudora's stories rising from anger is "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" in reaction of the death of Medgar Evers in the 1960s. As Eudora and her brothers grow up, their mother is always prepared to help them reach whatever they want in the world. Eudora believes her mother is relieved when Eudora chooses to write

stories because Chestina thinks that writing is safe. The first chapter, "Listening," details Eudora Welty's early childhood and emphasizes the close relationships between her primary family members, as well as the ways in which these relationships taught her and influenced her writing.





## II. Learning to See

### II. Learning to See Summary and Analysis

After "Listening", a photograph addendum of ten pages follows. On the first page, there is a photograph of Eudora with her father's watch, circa 1910, and another of her playing on Congress Street with the Davis School in the background. The second page shows Eudora with her father, Christian Welty, and the third is of her mother, Chestina Andrews Welty. The fourth page shows Eudora and Edward in 1913, and on the same page, there is a photograph of Eudora, Edward, Mother and Walter from 1917. The next page shows Chestina Andrews and Christian Welty in West Virginia in 1903, during their courtship. This is followed by a photograph of a tintype of Eudora Carden Andrews, Chestina Andrews Welty's mother, which was made by Edward Raboteau Andrews in West Virginia, circa 1882, and the second half of the page shows a photograph of Edward Raboteau Andrews, Chestina's father. The seventh page shows Chestina Andrews Welty coming down the stairs at the family house at 741 N. Congress St., Jackson, Mississippi. The next page shows Eudora Carden Andrews, seated with five of her six children at their mountain-top home near Clay, WV, followed by a photograph of the Welty family on their summer trip through the Mississippi Delta in 1917. The penultimate page of this addendum shows the family car being ferried across the Kentucky River, as well as a photograph of Grandpa Jefferson Welty on the farm near Logan, Ohio, with Edward, Walter and Eudora in 1917. The last page of this addendum shows Eudora in 1936, at the time that her first story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman" was published, and also of Eudora in 1941, at the time that her first book, "A Curtain of Green" was published.

When Eudora Welty's family goes on a summer trip to West Virginia and Ohio in 1917 or 1918 in order to visit her parents' families, Chestina navigates as Christian drives. The journey takes about a week each way, and the road has Christian by the shoulders like writing grips Eudora when she is unable to stop writing a story. Chestina keeps a log of their travels. When the car has to be ferried across the rivers, Christian is an optimist while Chestina is a pessimist; yet, Christian prepares for the worst while Chestina is a daredevil, such as when she runs into a burning house to rescue her set of Dickens. The Welty family enjoys their trip through the country, but Chestina never fully gives in to the pleasure because Christian has a loaded pistol in the pocket of the car door in case he needs to protect his family. Although this is not Eudora's first visit to her grandmother in West Virginia, it is the first trip that she recollects. She visits the house where her mother was born and raised, and her mother shows Eudora where she first read her Dickens' volumes which she received for agreeing to cut her hair.

Ned Andrews, Chestina's father, was the county's youngest member of the bar and was renowned for his oratory style and courtroom flair. Mother regards his human failings, drinking and lying, with tenderness. For example, Ned lies to Eudora Carden, his future wife, about his age in order to marry her. He also teases her because she is superstitious. Eudora Carden comes from the home of a Baptist preacher. Ned takes



tintype photographs of Eudora Carden to show how beautiful he finds her. At one time, Chestina receives a homemade drawing of the Andrews family tree. The Andrews family is not a rural clan like the Weltys; they live in Virginia, but Ned leaves home at eighteen to settle in West Virginia. He often sits at the kitchen table working legal cases. At the age of fifteen, Chestina accompanies her father to the hospital but returns alone from Baltimore with Ned's coffin on the same train since he dies from an infected appendix. Very soon after, Chestina begins to successfully teach in a one-room schoolhouse. On the ferry to school, she recites the poems in McGuffey's Readers aloud to pass the time, and she can still recite them on her deathbed, teaching Eudora another valuable lesson: emotions do not grow old.

From her money earned as a teacher, Chestina is able to attend and graduate from Marshall College. It is also as a schoolteacher that she first meets Christian Welty while he works one summer in the office of a nearby lumber company. Chestina finally leaves her childhood home when she marries Christian Welty, and they move to Jackson, Mississippi. Chestina's brothers like to play music or sing together without accompaniment; this is what Eudora remembers from her early visit. Chestina is the oldest of her siblings, and her brothers best remember their father's songs while her image of their father is a childlike, uncorrectable vision. Christian Welty is the exact opposite of Ned Andrews, and Chestina's brothers are never happy to see him because he comes to take their sister away. They are sad when Chestina married Christian Welty in October, 1904. Neither Chestina nor her family ever really gets over her absence from home. When she moves to Jackson, Chestina brings some of West Virginia with her. Chestina and her mother write letters, containing small and larger events, to one another every day until Grandma Andrews' death. That summer, Eudora lies in the grass and listens to the mountains' silence. The mountaintop gives her a delicious taste of independence which thrills her and causes her to feel that she has come here to do something on her own. One day, Eudora takes a walk with her mother and uncles. When she travels down a superior path, she falls and rips her dress. Back at Grandma Andrews' house, Eudora's uncles tell Grandma what happened, and she says she will sew the hole as she looks from Eudora to Chestina. Eudora learns that the look means matching family faces.

The Cardens live in West Virginia before it becomes a state. Eudora Carden's mother, Eudora Ayres, marries a poor dreamer, William Carden, and they settle in Enon, West Virginia, a state recently separated from Virginia. Chestina's Grandpa Carden is a Baptist preacher at the Enon-near-Gilboa church; Chestina and her brothers spend a lot of time at their grandparents' house with Chestina acting pretty lively toward her grandfather in her youth. After Ned Andrews' death, his wife lives on in courage and grace. Their children are devoted to Ned and Eudora Carden and believe that their parents can do no wrong. After Grandma Andrews' death, her sons make their own lives but keep the family house as a retreat where Chestina and her brothers often visit each other. The independence that possesses Eudora on the mountaintop is an inheritance from which her mother tries to protect her; for Chestina, this independence is deeply connected to the mountains. When Chestina is an old, ill widow losing her sight, she demands Eudora to bring back the Steinway piano that Chestina bought for Eudora from her housekeeping money and play "The West Virginia Hills." Eudora complies, and



this one moment seems to please her mother who proudly tells Eudora that "a mountaineer always will be free" (page 61).

As the Welty family crosses the line from West Virginia into Ohio, Chestina announces their arrival in the north. Christian Welty grows up on a farm in southern Ohio. The house is enveloped in stillness as Eudora's family visits during harvest time. Chestina and Grandpa Welty get along well, and Grandma Welty is actually Christian's step-mother. Neither Welty grandparent expects much conversation. Compared to the Andrews clan, the Welty family seems scarce of kin, and Christian never tells a single family story because he is more interested in the future than history. Surprisingly, he is very devoted to his father whom he writes regularly. After Eudora publishes her first book, an English Welty writes her about their family history; although her father is already dead, he would have been uninterested. An organ stands in the Welty's parlor, but it is not played because it belonged to Christian's mother, Allie. Eudora Welty's middle name is Alice after her father's mother; however, it is recalled too late that Allie was short for Almira, not Alice. Eudora enjoys going to the springhouse or the barn to play while visiting her Welty grandparents. On Sundays, the Weltys take the buggy to church, and Grandpa Welty allows Eudora to stand between his legs and hold the reins. Sundays are when Eudora hears her grandfather's voice the most since he leads the choir. Evenings at the Weltys' farmhouse are not filled with talking or tales being told. Instead, everyone listens to the music box.

As a child, Eudora is unable to imagine her father growing up in such an environment of unspeakable loneliness as an only child. She never sees her father's keepsake book until after his death. In this book is a message from Christian's mother on the date of her death, adjuring him to be a good boy and join her in heaven. The book contains many other messages to Christian Welty, and he keeps it his entire life. After evening prayers, it is time for bed at the Welty farmhouse. Back on Congress Street in Jackson, Mississippi, Christian Welty unlocks the door, and Eudora rushes upstairs, welcoming them back. Another element in these trips influences Eudora's mind: they were stories, not only in form, but in taking on direction, movement, development and change. Each trip changes something in Eudora's life and makes its own particular revelation. When Eudora Welty begins to write, the short story is a shape in the back of her mind. It is not surprising that Eudora makes her first attempt at a novel through the eyes of a child riding on a train. The events in life find their own order in their significance, which is not necessarily chronological, as the continuous thread of revelation. This chapter focuses on the background of Eudora's parents and the way they were raised in relation to how this affects the way they raise their own children as seen in the previous chapter.



## III. Finding a Voice

### III. Finding a Voice Summary and Analysis

When Eudora is no more than ten years old, she and her father travel by train, and he explains how everything works and where they are. Everything is new to Eudora but is a landmark to her father. They dine in the dining car and sit on the open-air observation deck to watch the sparks on the tracks from the train. Christian puts the journey into a frame of regularity and predictability. Eudora watches the towns and people they pass, never thinking that they continue the same after the train passes. Then and for a long time to come, Eudora proceeds in fantasy. Not until after Christian's death does Eudora learn how well her father knew the journey. Christian fell in love with Chestina while she was a teacher in West Virginia and he was working in the office of a lumber construction company. When they decide to marry, Christian and Chestina agree to move to a new, far away place. Christian rents a house in Jackson, Mississippi and gets a job at Lamar Life insurance company where he is promoted to secretary then director and where he works his entire life. During their engagement, Christian takes the train to visit Chestina as often as possible. Christian and Chestina also send letters by train daily. Although Eudora easily recognizes her mother's writing, it is not so with her father's ardent, tenderly expressed letters, but these letters allow Eudora to feel her parents' inexperience and the strength of their hopes and desires. As a child on the train, Eudora sees the world passing her window. Only when she realizes that she is the one passing does her self-centered childhood end. In her twenties, Eudora discovers a passion to connect herself to the world. She first becomes aware of the outside world and her own introspective way of becoming a part of it through travel. The outside world is a vital component of her inner life, and her works matches the world. Her imagination takes strength from what Eudora sees, hears, learns, feels and remembers of the living world around her. She slowly learns that the inner and outer worlds are different than what they seemed to her in the beginning.

Although the best liberal arts college in the state is in Jackson, Eudora wants to go away for school. Since her parents feel she is too young at age sixteen, they send Eudora to the Mississippi State College for Women, two hundred miles to the north. The college is full of girls from all over Mississippi, leaving no space for solitude. Eudora lives in Old Main dormitory, and the girls often slip down the fire escape before bedtime. Eudora often slips down the fire escape to read the first book that she buys from the college bookstore, William Alexander Percy's *In April Once*. She especially loves "Home", a beautiful poem about desiring a beautiful spring night. As a freshman, Eudora reports for *The Spectator*, her college newspaper, and writes stories. In Mr. Lawrence Painter's sophomore year English survey class, Eudora realizes she has come unprepared for the immediacy of poetry. As Mr. Painter reads, the poetry comes into the room as if the poems were visible. Eudora transfers to University of Wisconsin in her junior year where she feels the need to learn poetry. Additionally, she learns the word for the nature of what she had come upon in reading Yeats: passion. Chestina supports Eudora's wish to be a writer emotionally and imaginatively, and Christian buys his



daughter her first personalized dictionary in 1925; however, Christian also expresses reservations about Eudora achieving financial success as a writer and warns her to be prepared to earn her living some other way. After Eudora graduates from the University of Wisconsin, her parents agree to send her to Columbia University School of Business in New York City. Eudora is certain she does not want to be a teacher because she is not selfless enough, though the majority of the heroines in her writing are teachers. Although Christian does not explicitly state it, part of his objection to Eudora becoming a writer is due to his disapproval of fiction, which he feels is a waste of time. Unfortunately, Eudora is unable to show him what she can do in time.

Christian is very involved with the construction of the new Lamar Life building which is finished in 1925 and is Jackson's first skyscraper. The same year, the Welty family has a new house built, but Christian dies only six years later. The Lamar Life tower is now overshadowed by larger buildings, but Lamar Life still operates there. Christian does not pass on his enthusiasm for business, but his conception of the building and his pride at seeing it constructed enters Edward who becomes an architect while Walter works for a life insurance company like his father. Eudora's first paid job is in communications at Jackson's first radio station, which is also housed in the Lamar Life tower. Her first full-time job is at the state office of works' Progress Administration. The job is more rewarding than she could have foreseen as she takes photographs during the Great Depression that "constitute a record of that desolate period" (page 84). Photography teaches Eudora to capture transience, which affects her writing later in life. Eudora thinks one of her early stories is sophisticated, but it is actually a perfect example of her father's view of fiction. At first, Eudora finds it hard not to start stories to show off what she can write. In writing "Acrobats in a Park," Eudora writes about a family of acrobats about whom she knows nothing, but at the heart of the story is the structure of the family about which she has been writing ever since. Writing "Death of a Traveling Salesman" opens Eudora's eyes to her real subject: human relationships.

Eudora's temperament and instinct directs her to be invisible as the author of her stories. Her early stories are fantasy, but the way Eudora views the world changes. Writing a story or novel is a way to discover the sequence in experience. In writing of her parents in her seventies, Eudora sees connections that she never noticed while they were living. Writing fiction gives Eudora a "respect for the unknown in a human lifetime and a sense of how to connect the threads" (page 90). Her father's keepsake book left him with questions to ponder. His choice of a career in life insurance shows that he saw life in terms of the future and worked hard to provide that future for his children. Due to his own mother's death, he was also painfully aware of the mortality of a parent. Comparatively, Ned Andrews also looked to the future and left the past behind him; maybe, this is what Chestina loved so dearly in both men. Christian insured his life with no cause to fear for the future. Then, the Great Depression arrived, and in 1931, leukemia claimed Christian in a matter of weeks at age fifty-two. The guiding emotion in Chestina's life becomes pity for which she is inconsolable. When Christian lies dying in the hospital, Chestina volunteers to give her blood for the transfusion, but he dies on the surgery table. Chestina never recovers emotionally, though she lives for over thirty more years. She views this as her failure to save her husband's life.



Toward the end of the Great Depression, Eudora saves as much money as possible to travel to New York City to show her stories and photographs to editors in hopes of being published; however, it takes a long time to receive encouraging responses. As Eudora rides the train to New York, she knows that her mother is already writing to her, comparing this to how her mother waited for Christian while he left on business trips. The trip to New York City takes two nights and part of three days, and Eudora changes trains several times. Eventually, without leaving home, Eudora writes enough stories that are the best she can make them, and Diarmuid Russell, her future literary agent, and John Woodburn, her future editor, find her. Travel is part of a longer continuity. Eudora finds some of her father's negatives and has them developed to find landscapes. After also finding a railway table from the summer before her parents married, Eudora recalls that Christian gave Chestina two options of places to live, Jackson or Thousand Islands. Since Chestina chose Jackson, Christian must have brought photographs of both places to enable her to make a decision. Eudora also finds a trick photograph of her father appearing to stand in the rapids of Niagara Falls which he likely had made to make Chestina laugh. Of course, she would not because he knows how terrified she is of water.

All the discoveries Eudora makes in writing begin with the particular, not the general. She always wants each story to be a new experience, but certain patterns repeat themselves. Eudora writes a number of stories before realizing she consistently uses the same characters, in terms of identities, kinships, relationships and affinities, though not names. All of Eudora's characters live in some sort of dream or illusion. She invents characters but borrows bits of people she has encountered in the flesh. She never intends to create a character to speak for her, the author, but years later, Eudora realizes she feels oddly in touch with Miss Eckhart from "The Golden Apples." In this character, Eudora puts her own passion for her own art and the risk of exposing herself. In the making of Miss Eckhart's character out of Eudora's most inward and deeply feeling self, Eudora finds her voice in her fiction. All writers are partially all of their characters. In learning about her parents at a later date, Eudora glimpses the whole of her family life. This inward journey leads to discovery, and experience is one of the fields of fiction. To Eudora, the only symbol with any weight is confluence which exists as reality and a symbol at once, such as in the last scenes of her novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*. The greatest confluence of all is the human memory. Memory is also a living thing that joins and lives in the recollection. Eudora Welty is a writer who comes from a sheltered life, which can be daring as well because all serious daring starts from within.



# Characters

## Eudora Welty

Eudora Welty is born and raised in a house on North Congress Street in Jackson, Mississippi as the oldest of three children. As a result of her father's knowledge of meteorology, Eudora develops a strong meteorological sensibility, and the atmosphere takes an influential role in her writing. From youth, Eudora Welty receives educational gifts which represent their father's beliefs in progress and the future and are given as a means of preparing his children. From the earliest age, Eudora learns that any room in their house is meant to be read in or read to, and her mother reads to her while taking care of the household. When Eudora learns that people write books, she is startled and disappointed since she previously believed that books were natural wonders that simply appear. Eudora Welty is always in love with books, even during her illiterate youth. Eudora owes her early acquaintance with Mark Twain to both of her parents. Eudora receives books of her own from a very early age. Eudora is grateful to her parents for initiating her into knowledge and love of the word; Eudora is drawn to the beauty of the alphabet because "learning stamps you with its moments" (page 9). Eudora's sensory education includes a physical awareness of the word and for what it stands. Ever since Eudora is first read to and then learns to read herself, she hears an inward voice reading the lines. She supposes that this is the case with all readers and writers, and she does not know if she could read or write without doing the other as well. Before Eudora Welty begins to write stories, she listens for stories by instinct and is forced to distinguish between a lie and the truth.

As a child, Eudora Welty often asks her mother where babies come from, but her mother evades the question. When Eudora finds two nickels in her mother's treasure box and asks to spend them, Chestina says no because her first son, Eudora's older brother, died at birth, and the coins belong to him. Eudora learns how babies can die but not how they are born, learning one truth through a harder to tell truth. Eudora feels guilty because she desires independence from an early age, and because she desires to protect those who love and protect her. There are two springs, love and guilt, that flow into the creation of Eudora's stories. When Eudora is six or seven years old, she is taken out of school for several months due to a "fast beating heart"; though she misses school, she still learns by listening to her parents talk and becoming a privileged observer. This is useful later in her writing because it allows her to get her distance and is prerequisite to her understanding of human events. From the first, Eudora is clamorous to learn, mostly the when as opposed to the what, how, why or where. She is sent across the street to Jefferson Davis Grammar School at age five. During her summer trip to visit her grandparents, the independence that possesses Eudora on the mountain top is an inheritance from which her mother tries to protect her. Another element in these trips influences Eudora's mind: they were stories, not only in form, but in taking on direction, movement, development and change. Each trip changes something in Eudora's life and makes its own particular revelation. When Eudora Welty



begins to write, the short story is a shape in the back of her mind. It is not surprising that Eudora makes her first attempt at a novel through the eyes of a child riding on a train.

When Eudora is no more than ten years old, she and her father travel by train, and he explains how everything works and where they are. Everything is new to Eudora but is a landmark to her father. They dine in the dining car and sit on the open-air observation deck to watch the sparks on the tracks from the train. Christian puts the journey into a frame of regularity and predictability. Eudora watches the towns and people they pass, never thinking that they continue the same after the train passes. Then and for a long time to come, Eudora proceeds in fantasy. As a child on the train, Eudora sees the world passing her window. Only when she realizes that she is the one passing does her self-centered childhood end. In her twenties, Eudora discovers a passion to connect herself to the world. She first becomes aware of the outside world and her own introspective way of becoming a part of it through travel. The outside world is a vital component of her inner life, and her works matches the world. Her imagination takes strength from what Eudora sees, hears, learns, feels and remembers of the living world around her. She slowly learns that the inner and outer worlds are different than what they seemed to her in the beginning.

Although the best liberal arts college in the state is in Jackson, Eudora wants to go away for school. Since her parents feel she is too young at age sixteen, they send Eudora to the Mississippi State College for Women, two hundred miles to the north. The college is full of girls from all over Mississippi, leaving no space for solitude. Eudora lives in Old Main dormitory, and the girls often slip down the fire escape before bedtime. Eudora often slips down the fire escape to read the first book that she buys from the college bookstore, William Alexander Percy's *In April Once*; she especially loves "Home," a beautiful poem about desiring a beautiful spring night. As a freshman, Eudora reports for *The Spectator*, her college newspaper, and writes stories. In Mr. Lawrence Painter's sophomore year English survey class, Eudora realizes that she has come unprepared for the immediacy of poetry. Eudora transfers to University of Wisconsin in her junior year where she feels the need to learn poetry. Additionally, she learns the word for the nature of what she had come upon in reading Yeats: passion. After Eudora graduates from the University of Wisconsin, her parents agree to send her to Columbia University School of Business in New York City. Eudora is certain that she does not want to be a teacher because she is not selfless enough, though the majority of the heroines in her writing are teachers. At first, Eudora finds it hard not to start stories to show off what she can write. In writing "Acrobats in a Park," Eudora writes about a family of acrobats about whom she knows nothing, but at the heart of the story is the structure of the family about which she has been writing ever since. Writing "Death of a Traveling Salesman" opens Eudora's eyes to her real subject: human relationships.

All the discoveries that Eudora makes in writing begin with the particular, not the general. She always wants each story to be a new experience, but certain patterns repeat themselves. Eudora writes a number of stories before realizing she consistently uses the same characters, in terms of identities, kinships, relationships and affinities though not names. All of Eudora's characters live in some sort of dream or illusion. She invents characters but borrows bits of people she has encountered in the flesh. She





never intends to create a character to speak for her, the author, but years later, Eudora realizes that she feels oddly in touch with Miss Eckhart from *The Golden Apples*. In this character, Eudora puts her own passion for her own art and the risk of exposing herself. In the making of Miss Eckhart's character out of Eudora's most inward and deeply feeling self, Eudora finds her voice in her fiction. All writers are partially each of their characters. In learning about her parents at a later date, Eudora glimpses the whole of her family life. This inward journey leads to discovery, and experience is one of the fields of fiction. To Eudora, the only symbol with any weight is confluence, which exists as reality and a symbol at once, such as in the last scenes of her novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*. The greatest confluence of all is the human memory. Memory is also a living thing that joins and lives in the recollection. Eudora Welty is a writer who comes from a sheltered life, which can be daring as well because all serious daring starts from within.

## Christian Welty

Christian Welty, Eudora's father, loves and has many instruments to instruct and fascinate, such as maps, telescopes and puzzles. Christian Welty is a country boy with knowledge of the skies and weather which he teaches his children. Christian and Chestina Welty carefully select books that they feel their children should grow up with, stocking the bookcase in the living room which the family refers to as the "library." After Sunday school, Christian often takes his children to his office and allows them to take turns writing letters to their mother on his typewriter.

When Eudora Welty's family goes on a summer trip to West Virginia and Ohio in 1917 or 1918, in order to visit her parents' families, Chestina navigates as Christian drives. The journey takes about a week each way, and the road has Christian by the shoulders like writing grips Eudora when she is unable to stop writing a story. When the car has to be ferried across the rivers, Christian is an optimist while Chestina is a pessimist; yet, Christian prepares for the worst while Chestina is a daredevil, such as when she runs into a burning house to rescue her set of Dickens. Christian never tells a single family story because he is more interested in the future than history. Surprisingly, he is very devoted to his father whom he writes regularly. As a child, Eudora is unable to imagine her father growing up in such an environment of unspeakable loneliness as an only child. She never sees her father's keepsake book until after his death. In this book is a message from Christian's mother on the date of her death, adjuring him to be a good boy and join her in heaven. The book contains many other messages to Christian Welty, and he keeps it his entire life.

When Eudora is no more than ten years old, she and her father travel by train, and he explains how everything works and where they are. Everything is new to Eudora but is a landmark to her father. They dine in the dining car and sit on the open-air observation deck to watch the sparks on the tracks from the train. Christian puts the journey into a frame of regularity and predictability. Not until after Christian's death does Eudora learn how well her father knew the journey. Christian fell in love with Chestina while she was a teacher in West Virginia, and he was working in the office of a lumber construction company. When they decide to marry, Christian and Chestina agree to move to a new,



far-away place. Christian rents a house in Jackson, Mississippi and gets a job at Lamar Life insurance company where he is promoted to secretary then director and where he works his entire life. During their engagement, Christian takes the train to visit Chestina as often as possible. Christian and Chestina also send letters by train daily. Christian buys his daughter her first personalized dictionary in 1925; however, Christian also expresses reservations about Eudora achieving financial success as a writer and warns her to be prepared to earn her living some other way. Although Christian does not explicitly state it, part of his objection to Eudora becoming a writer is due to his disapproval of fiction, which he feels is a waste of time. Unfortunately, Eudora is unable to show him what she can do before he dies.

Christian is very involved with the construction of the new Lamar Life building which is finished in 1925 and is Jackson's first skyscraper. The same year, the Welty family has a new house built, but Christian dies only six years later. Christian's choice of a career in life insurance shows that he saw life in terms of the future and worked hard to provide that future for his children. Due to his own mother's death, he was also painfully aware of the mortality of a parent. Christian insured his life with no cause to fear for the future. Then, the Great Depression arrived, and in 1931, leukemia claimed Christian in a matter of weeks at age fifty-two.

## Chestina Welty

Chestina Welty, Eudora's mother, also prepares her children with her different gifts by teaching her children that any room in their house is meant to be read in or read to, and her mother reads to Eudora while taking care of the household. Christian and Chestina Welty carefully select books that they feel their children should grow up with, stocking the bookcase in the living room which the family refers to as the "library." Chestina mostly reads novels and is in love with Dickens. In Eudora's youth, ladies leave calling cards, but Chestina Welty does not allow this to pertain to her, going on her way with or without calling cards. When Eudora finds two nickels in her mother's treasure box and asks to spend them, Chestina says no because her first son, Eudora's older brother, died at birth, and the coins belong to him. Eudora learns how babies can die but not how they are born, learning one truth through a harder-to-tell truth. Chestina had nearly died in childbirth with her first baby, but Christian Welty had saved her. This fact makes it easy to see why Eudora's parents are overprotective and also why Chestina always wants Eudora to have the things that she never did as a child. For example, Chestina gives up her ticket to see "Blossom Time" at the Century Theatre because she prefers that Eudora have the experience than see it herself. Chestina is not afraid of Mrs. Calloway, the librarian, and takes Eudora to get her own library card at the age of nine, also giving permission for Eudora to read anything on the children or adult shelves except "Elsie Dinsmore,"

Chestina shares Eudora's insatiability for reading. As Eudora and her brothers grow up, their mother is always prepared to help them reach whatever they want in the world. Eudora believes her mother is relieved when Eudora chooses to write stories because Chestina thinks writing is safe. When Eudora Welty's family goes on a summer trip to



West Virginia and Ohio in 1917 or 1918 in order to visit her parents' families, Chestina navigates as Christian drives. Chestina keeps a log of their travels. When the car has to be ferried across the rivers, Christian is an optimist while Chestina is a pessimist; yet, Christian prepares for the worst while Chestina is a daredevil, such as when she runs into a burning house to rescue her set of Dickens. In the house where she was born and raised, Chestina shows Eudora where she first read her Dickens' volumes which she received for agreeing to cut her hair. At the age of fifteen, Chestina accompanies her father to the hospital but returns alone from Baltimore with Ned's coffin on the same train since he dies from an infected appendix. Very soon after, Chestina begins to successfully teach in a one-room schoolhouse. On the ferry to school, she recites the poems in McGuffey's Readers aloud to pass the time, and she can still recite them on her deathbed, teaching Eudora another valuable lesson: emotions do not grow old. From her money earned as a teacher, Chestina is able to attend and graduate from Marshall College. It is also as a schoolteacher that she first meets Christian Welty while he works one summer in the office of a nearby lumber company.

Chestina finally leaves her childhood home when she marries Christian Welty, and they move to Jackson, Mississippi. Chestina's brothers like to play music or sing together without accompaniment; this is what Eudora remembers from her early visit. Chestina is the oldest of her siblings, and her brothers best remember their father's songs while her image of their father is a childlike, uncorrectable vision. Christian Welty is the exact opposite of Ned Andrews, and Chestina's brothers are never happy to see him because he comes to take their sister away. They are sad when Chestina married Christian Welty in October, 1904. Neither Chestina nor her family ever really gets over her absence from home. When she moves to Jackson, Chestina brings some of West Virginia with her. Chestina and her mother write letters, containing small and larger events, to one another every day until Grandma Andrews' death. Chestina supports Eudora's wish to be a writer emotionally and imaginatively. The guiding emotion in Chestina's life is pity for which she is inconsolable. When Christian lies dying in the hospital, Chestina volunteers to give her blood for the transfusion, but he dies on the surgery table. Chestina never recovers emotionally, though she lives for over thirty more years. She views this as her failure to save her husband's life.

## **Eudora Carden Andrews**

Eudora Carden Andrews is Chestina Welty's mother and Eudora's maternal grandmother after whom Eudora is named. She lives in her mountain top home near Clay, West Virginia. Eudora Carden Andrews is a woman of "unceasing courage and of considerable grace, with a great deal to make the best of" (page 60). She marries but outlives Ned Andrews. Eudora Carden Andrews' children are devoted, and Chestina writes to her regularly until her death.



## Edward Raboteau Andrews

Edward Raboteau Andrews, who is more frequently known as Ned, is Chestina's father and Eudora's maternal grandfather. He is the county's youngest member of the bar after attending Trinity College where he organized a literary society and working in Norfolk, Virginia as a journalist and photographer. Although Ned drinks and tells tall tales, Chestina views his human failings only with tenderness. Ned dies of a ruptured appendix when Chestina is only fifteen years old, which means that Eudora Welty never meets him.

## Jefferson Welty

Jefferson Welty is Christian Welty's father and Eudora Welty's paternal grandfather. He is a farmer in Lucas, Ohio. Although he says little, he gets along very well with Chestina Welty. Christian Welty greatly respects his father.

## Grandma Welty

Grandma Welty is Christian's step-mother who says very little but makes excellent bread.

## Almira Welty

Almira Welty is Christian Welty's mother, and her nickname is Allie. The organ in the Weltys' parlor belongs to Allie and goes untouched. Eudora Welty's middle name is Alice, but after Eudora is christened, it is recalled too late that Allie was short for Almira, not Alice. On the day of Almira Welty's death, April 15, 1886, she writes a note to Christian at the age of seven in a keepsake book to "be a good boy and meet [her] in heaven" (page 67).

## Fannie

Fannie is the old, black sewing woman who gossips in front of Eudora Welty to Chestina's disapprobation.

## Miss Duling

Miss Duling is the principal of Davis School of whom Eudora is frightened. Miss Duling holds her students to high, inflexible standards and reigns with absolute authority. Miss Duling emerges in a large number of Eudora's works in the embodiment of schoolteacher characters.



## **Miss Johnson**

Miss Johnson is the singing teacher who comes to Davis School on Mondays.

## **Miss Eyrich**

Miss Eyrich is the physical education teacher who comes to Davis School on Thursdays.

## **Miss Ascher**

Miss Ascher is the art teacher who comes to Davis School on Fridays.

## **Mrs. Calloway**

Mrs. Calloway is the librarian at Jackson's Carnegie Library and has a commanding voice which frightens Eudora. Her strict rules about borrowing library books stifle Eudora's reading.

## **Mr. Lawrence Painter**

Mr. Lawrence Painter is the only male teacher at Mississippi State College for Women; he teaches English Survey to sophomores, causing Eudora Welty to realize that she came to college unprepared for the immediacy of poetry.

## **Edward Welty**

Edward Welty is Eudora's younger brother. He is three years her junior, and the two make each other laugh. As an adult, Edward becomes an architect.

## **Walter Welty**

Walter Welty is Eudora's youngest brother; he is six years younger than her and three years younger than Edward. He is more somber than Edward or Eudora. Walter is resourceful and practical in his anger and everything else. Eventually, he works at a life insurance company like his father.



## Objects/Places

### Jackson, Mississippi

Jackson, Mississippi is the city where Eudora Welty is born and raised after her parents relocate there to start a family.

### 741 North Congress Street

741 North Congress Street is the Welty family's address in Jackson, Mississippi.

### Davis School

The Davis School is the grammar school which Eudora Welty attends in Jackson, Mississippi. It is located across the street from the Weltys' home and is run by Miss Duling.

### Logan, Ohio

Eudora Welty's paternal grandparents live in Logan, Ohio, which is where Christian Welty was raised.

### Clay, West Virginia

Eudora Welty's maternal grandmother, Grandma Andrews, lives in Clay, West Virginia. This is where Eudora's mother, Chestina Andrews, was raised.

### Death of a Traveling Salesman

"Death of a Traveling Salesman" is the first of Eudora Welty's stories to be published.

### A Curtain of Green

A Curtain of Green is the first of Eudora Welty's novels to be published.

### Lamar Life

Lamar Life is the life insurance company in Jackson, Mississippi where Christian Welty works until his death.



## **Great Depression**

The Great Depression is the tragic American depression through which Eudora Welty lives and during which her father dies.

## **Leukemia**

Leukemia is the disease from which Christian Welty dies.

## **Mississippi State College for Women**

Eudora Welty attends Mississippi State College for Women during her freshman and sophomore years at college.

## **University of Wisconsin**

Eudora Welty transfers to the University of Wisconsin for her junior and senior years of college.

## **Christian Welty's Keepsake Book**

After her father's death, Eudora Welty finds his keepsake book, given to him by his mother, with many messages from the people in his life, including a message from his mother of the date of her death adjuring him to be a good boy and meet her in heaven.

## **Blossom Time**

Blossom Time is a play that Eudora Welty attends in her youth when her mother relinquishes her ticket because she prefers Eudora have the opportunity to see it rather than seeing it herself.

## **Books**

Although it is a financial strain, Christian and Chestina Welty strive to keep books in their house and encourage their children to read.



# Themes

## Family History

As an autobiography, one of the prevalent themes in *One Writer's Beginnings* by Eudora Welty is that of family history. The first chapter focuses on Welty's childhood, which includes her relationship with her parents and with her brothers. Welty is born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi as the oldest of three children. Her father, Christian Welty, teaches his children about meteorology, while her mother, Chestina Welty, imparts her love of books and reading to her children. Although Chestina avoids Eudora's questions about where babies come from, when Eudora finds two nickels in her mother's treasure box, Chestina explains that they belong to Eudora's older brother who died at birth. The fact that Chestina wants to give her daughter everything possible is the result of wanting to give Eudora the things that she, Chestina, did not have in her youth. Although both of Eudora's parents are from religious families, her parents are not very religious, which reflects in Eudora's own life.

The photograph addendum shows photographs of Eudora with various members of her family or simply family members. Included in these photographs are Eudora's parents, siblings, grandparents and maternal uncles. On the Welty family's summer trip to West Virginia and Ohio in the second chapter, Eudora provides background on her mother's family, the Andrews, and her maternal grandmother's family, the Cardens. She shares much information about the Carden side of the family; however, she is unable to share very much information about the Welty side of her family because her father is more interested in the future than the past and has little information to impart and little desire to discuss past family history.

## Education

An important theme in "*One Writer's Beginnings*" by Eudora Welty is education, both formal and informal. The striking of clocks in their house makes the children time-minded, which is good for a fiction writer to learn so penetratingly about chronology. Eudora's father, Christian Welty, loves and has many instruments to instruct and fascinate, such as maps, telescopes and puzzles. Christian Welty is a country boy with knowledge of the skies and weather, which he teaches his children. As a result, Eudora develops a strong meteorological sensibility, and the atmosphere takes an influential role in her writing. From youth, the Welty children receive educational gifts which represent their father's beliefs in progress and the future and are given as a means of preparing his children. Chestina Welty, Eudora's mother, also prepares her children with her different gifts. From the earliest age, Eudora learns that any room in their house is meant to be read in or read to, and her mother reads to her while taking care of the household. When Eudora learns that people write books, she is startled and disappointed since she previously believed that books were natural wonders that simply appear. Eudora is grateful to her parents for initiating her into knowledge and love of the





word; Eudora is drawn to the beauty of the alphabet because "learning stamps you with its moments" (page 9). For children, learning is a pulse rather than a steady influence. Children use all their senses to discover the world, and Eudora's sensory education includes a physical awareness of the word and for what it stands.

On the ferry to school when she is a teacher, Chestina Welty recites the poems in McGuffey's Readers aloud to pass the time, and she can still recite the poems on her deathbed, teaching Eudora another valuable lesson: emotions do not grow old. The mountain top gives Eudora a delicious taste of independence which thrills her and causes her to feel she has come here to do something on her own. One day, Eudora takes a walk with her mother and uncles. When she travels down a superior path, she falls and rips her dress. Back at Grandma Andrews' house, Eudora's uncles tell Grandma what happened, and she says she will sew the hole as she looks from Eudora to Chestina. Eudora learns that the look means matching family faces. As a child on the train, Eudora sees the world passing her window. Only when she realizes that she is the one passing does her self-centered childhood end. In her twenties, Eudora discovers a passion to connect herself to the world. She first becomes aware of the outside world and her own introspective way of becoming a part of it through travel. The outside world is a vital component of her inner life, and her works match the world. Her imagination takes strength from what Eudora sees, hears, learns, feels and remembers of the living world around her. She slowly learns that the inner and outer worlds are different than what they seemed to her in the beginning.

Although the best liberal arts college in the state is in Jackson, Eudora wants to go away for school. Since her parents feel she is too young at age sixteen, they send Eudora to the Mississippi State College for Women, two hundred miles to the north. The college is full of girls from all over Mississippi, leaving no space for solitude. Eudora lives in Old Main dormitory, and the girls often slip down the fire escape before bedtime. Eudora often slips down the fire escape to read the first book that she buys from the college bookstore, William Alexander Percy's *In April Once*; she especially loves "Home" a beautiful poem about desiring a beautiful spring night. As a freshman, Eudora reports for *The Spectator*, her college newspaper, and writes stories. In Mr. Lawrence Painter's sophomore year English survey class, Eudora realizes that she has come unprepared for the immediacy of poetry. As Mr. Painter reads, the poetry comes into the room as if it were visible. Eudora transfers to University of Wisconsin in her junior year where she feels the need to learn poetry. Additionally, she learns the word for the nature of what she had come upon in reading Yeats: passion. After Eudora graduates from the University of Wisconsin, her parents agree to send her to Columbia University School of Business in New York City. Eudora is certain she does not want to be a teacher because she is not selfless enough, though the majority of the heroines in her writing are teachers.

## **Influences on Eudora Welty's Writing**

Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* contains the repetitive theme of highlighting the influences in Welty's life that affect and guide her writing style and career. Besides her



education and inheriting her mother's love for reading, Welty mentions her father's immense meteorological knowledge and how the atmosphere takes an influential role in her writing. Additionally, Welty is grateful to her parents for initiating her into knowledge and love of the word; Eudora is drawn to the beauty of the alphabet because "learning stamps you with its moments" (page 9). For children, learning is a pulse rather than a steady influence. Children use all their senses to discover the world, and Eudora's sensory education includes a physical awareness of the word and for what it stands. An example of this is when Eudora, at age six, gazes at the silver orb in the night sky and associates it with the word "moon." Ever since Eudora is first read to and then learns to read herself, she hears an inward voice reading the lines. She supposes that this is the case with all readers and writers and does not know if she could read or write without doing the other as well. When she writes, Eudora hears this voice and trusts it. While hearing ladies' gossip, Welty instinctively listens for stories long before she actually starts writing stories. She becomes a privileged observer by listening to her parents' conversations. Anger is the emotion that is least responsible for Eudora's writing because she has no adversary in writing and the act of writing makes her happy. The only of Eudora's stories rising from anger is "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" in reaction of the death of Medgar Evers in the 1960s. As Eudora and her brothers grow up, their mother is always prepared to help them reach whatever they want in the world. Eudora believes that her mother is relieved when Eudora chooses to write stories because Chestina thinks that writing is safe. The first chapter, "Listening," details Eudora Welty's early childhood and emphasizes the close relationships between her primary family members, as well as the ways these relationships taught her and influenced her writing.

Travel also strongly influences Eudora Welty's writing style, as does the independence and love of the mountains that she inherits from her mother. Her family trips to West Virginia and Ohio influence Welty because they are stories not only in form but in taking on direction, movement, development and change; each changes something in Welty's life, making a particular revelation of its own. When Eudora Welty begins to write, the short story is a shape in the back of her mind. It is not surprising that Eudora makes her first attempt at a novel through the eyes of a child riding on a train. The events in life find their own order in their significance which is not necessarily chronological, as the continuous thread of revelation. This chapter focuses on the background of Eudora's parents and the way they were raised in relation to how this affects the way that they raise their own children as seen in the previous chapter. As a child on the train, Eudora sees the world passing her window. Only when she realizes that she is the one passing does her self-centered childhood end. In her twenties, Eudora discovers a passion to connect herself to the world. She first becomes aware of the outside world and her own introspective way of becoming a part of it through travel. The outside world is a vital component of her inner life, and her works matches the world. Her imagination takes strength from what Eudora sees, hears, learns, feels and remembers of the living world around her. She slowly learns that the inner and outer worlds are different than what they seemed to her in the beginning. Eudora is certain she does not want to be a teacher because she is not selfless enough, though the majority of the heroines in her writing are teachers.



Photography teaches Eudora to capture transience which affects her writing later in life. Eudora thinks one of her early stories is sophisticated, but it is actually a perfect example of her father's view of fiction. At first, Eudora finds it hard not to start stories to show off what she can write. In writing "Acrobats in a Park" Eudora writes about a family of acrobats about whom she knows nothing, but at the heart of the story is the structure of the family about which she has been writing ever since. Writing "Death of a Traveling Salesman" opens Eudora's eyes to her real subject: human relationships. Eudora's temperament and instinct directs her to be invisible as the author of her stories. Her early stories are fantasy, but the way Eudora views the world changes. Writing a story or novel is a way to discover the sequence in experience. In writing of her parents in her seventies, Eudora sees connections she never noticed while they were living. Writing fiction gives Eudora a respect for the unknown in a human lifetime and a sense of how to connect the threads. All the discoveries Eudora makes in writing begin with the particular, not the general. She always wants each story to be a new experience, but certain patterns repeat themselves. Eudora writes a number of stories before realizing she consistently uses the same characters, in terms of identities, kinships, relationships and affinities, though not names. All of Eudora's characters live in some sort of dream or illusion. She invents characters but borrows bits of people that she has encountered in the flesh. She never intends to create a character to speak for her, the author, but years later, Eudora realizes that she feels oddly in touch with Miss Eckhart from *The Golden Apples*. In this character, Eudora puts her own passion for her own art and the risk of exposing herself. In the making of Miss Eckhart's character out of Eudora's most inward and deeply-feeling self, Eudora finds her voice in her fiction. All writers are partially each of their characters. In learning about her parents at a later date, Eudora glimpses the whole of her family life. This inward journey leads to discovery, and experience is one of the fields of fiction. To Eudora, the only symbol with any weight is confluence which exists as reality and a symbol at once, such as in the last scenes of her novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*. The greatest confluence of all is the human memory. Memory is also a living thing that joins and lives in the recollection. Eudora Welty is a writer who comes from a sheltered life which can be daring as well because all serious daring starts from within.

# Style

## Perspective

Eudora Welty wrote *One Writer's Beginnings*. She was raised by parents who were dedicated to her learning and encouraged both Eudora and her younger brothers, Edward and Walter, to read and become educated. From her youth, Eudora Welty is in love with books and words. With her parents' encouragement, Welty went to college at Mississippi State College for Women during her freshmen and sophomore years, following this with completing her undergraduate degree at University of Wisconsin. She then attended Columbia University School of Business in New York City.

Though she started writing early in life, Eudora Welty began writing professionally shortly after the Great Depression ended. She published her first story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman" in 1936, which she followed with the publication of *A Curtain of Green*, her first book in 1941. Additionally, she has written numerous other short stories and novels, such as "Why I Live at the P. O." Among her many honors, Eudora Welty has received the Pulitzer Prize, the American Book Award for fiction and the Gold Medal for the Novel, given by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Because this is an autobiographical work, Welty's perspective is subjective for the most part, though at times, she assumes the perspective of someone peeping in on someone else's life. Much of what Welty writes about her youngest years and family history is, of course, secondhand anecdotes from those who were adults in her life at the time. Because this book is autobiography, there is always a gray line separating "truth" from "fiction." Not that Welty would fictionalize her life, but there is always an element of fiction in autobiography because of the imperfection of human memory. What Welty records in this account of her life and family history is the truth as she has experienced it and remembers it, a point that any reader of autobiography must take into account.

## Tone

The tone of Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* is autobiographical. Welty writes about her youth, her parents' childhoods and her early adult life while simultaneously explaining how certain experiences in her youth affected her writing career. The tone is also very introspective as Eudora Welty examines the effects that specific events in her past have had on her work. The tone demonstrates how Welty feels about her youth, her parents and her writing career. It also shows the many things that her parents have taught her as she reminisces on her past in a rather cheerful and nostalgic way.

The tone of this book is extremely subjective as the author's focus is on her own life. The first chapter's emphasis is on Welty's early childhood, while the second chapter focuses on her parents' childhoods and both sides of her family's histories. The third chapter discusses Welty's early adulthood; this is the chapter that is most effective in



explaining how certain events in Welty's past contribute to her writing career. This tone creates a confidential and comfortable feeling between the work and the reader. At the end of the book, the reader is left with the impression that they are familiar and friendly with Eudora Welty, a very admirable woman.

## Structure

One Writer's Beginnings by Eudora Welty is divided into three chapters, as well as a one-paragraph introduction and ten pages of photographs. Each chapter is titled to refer to the portion of Welty's learning upon which the specific chapter focuses. These titles also allude to the sense in a progression of learning. The first chapter is "Listening," which discusses Welty's earliest youth and details her learning through listening to others. "Learning to See" focuses on Welty's parents' childhoods and her beginning to learn on her own without guidance. "Finding a Voice" emphasizes the ways that Welty's past has experienced her writing. While the first two chapters also mention the influences of Welty's past on her writing, this chapter focuses the most strongly on this theme in the novel.

The first chapter is thirty-seven pages long; the second is twenty-seven, and the final chapter is thirty-two pages long. This format allows the reader to foresee what each chapter will refer to while associating each chapter with the others. The only downside to this structure is the possibility of some readers being unable to make the connection between the three forms of learning. Also, the ten pages of photographs are beneficial as they provide the reader with a visual image of the people Welty discusses in her book. Throughout this autobiography, Eudora Welty frequently demonstrates and explains the many effects that her past has had on her writing style.

## Quotes

"We all of us have been time-minded all our lives. This was good at least for a future fiction writer, being able to learn so penetratingly, and almost first of all, about chronology. It was one of a good many things I learned almost without knowing it; it would be there when I needed it." "Listening," page 3

"All of this, but especially the train, represents my father's fondest beliefs- in progress, in the future. With these gifts, he was preparing his children." "Listening," page 5

"It had been startling and disappointing to me to find out that story books had been written by people, that books were not natural wonders, coming up of themselves like grass. Yet regardless of where they came from, I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them- with the books themselves, cover and binding and the paper they were printed on, with their smell and their weight and with their possession in my arms, captured and carried off to myself. Still illiterate, I was ready for them, committed to all the reading I could give them." "Listening," page 5-6

"Learning stamps you with its moments. Childhood's learning is made up of moments. It isn't steady. It's a pulse." "Learning," page 9

"Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story or the poem itself. The cadence, whatever it is that asks you to believe, the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. I have supposed, but never found out, that this is the case with all readers- to read as listeners- and with all writers, to write as listeners. It may be part of the desire to write. The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me. Whether I am right to trust so far I don't know. By now I don't know whether I could do either one, reading or writing, without the other." "Listening," page 11-12

"The future story writer in the child I was must have taken unconscious note and stored it away then: one secret is liable to be revealed in the place of another that is harder to tell, and the substitute secret when nakedly exposed is often the more appalling." "Listening," page 17

"There is no wonder that a passion for independence sprang up in me at the earliest age. It took me a long time to manage the independence, for I loved those who protected me- and I wanted inevitably to protect them back. I have never managed to handle the guilt. In the act and the course of writing stories, these are two of the springs, one bright, one dark, that feed the stream." "Listening," page 19-20

"Every book I seized on...stood for the devouring wish to read it being instantly granted. I knew this was bliss, knew it at the time. Taste isn't nearly so important; it comes in its



own time. I wanted to read immediately. The only fear was that of books coming to an end." "Listening," page 30

"Even as we grew up, my mother could not help imposing herself between her children and whatever it was they might take it in mind to reach out for in the world... But I think she was relieved when I chose to be a writer of stories, for she thought writing was safe." "Listening," page 39

"The journey took about a week each way, and each day had my parents both in its grip. Riding behind my father I could see that the road had him by the shoulders, by the hair under his driving cap. It took my mother to make him stop. I inherited his nervous energy in the way I can't stop writing on a story. It makes me understand how Ohio had him around the heart, as West Virginia had my mother. Writers and travelers are mesmerized alike by knowing of their destinations." "Learning to See," page 44

"[My mother] was teaching me one more, almost her last, lesson: emotions do not grow old. I knew that I would feel as she did, and I do." "Learning to See," page 52

"I think when my mother came to Jackson she brought West Virginia with her. Of course, I brought some of it with me too." "Learning to See," page 55

"It seems likely to me now that the very element in my character that took possession of me there on top of the mountain, the fierce independence that was suddenly mine, to remain inside me no matter how it scared me when I tumbled, was an inheritance. Indeed it was my chief inheritance from my mother, who was braver. Yet, while she knew that independent spirit so well, it was what she so agonizingly tried to protect me from, in effect to warn me against. It was what we shared, it made the strongest bond between us and the strongest tension. To grow up is to fight for it, to grow old is to lose it after having possessed it. For her, too, it was most deeply connected to the mountains." "Learning to See," page 60

"A mountaineer always will be free." Chestina Andrews Welty, "Learning to See," page 61

"My father is not the one who told me this: he never happened to tell us a single family story; could it have been because he'd heard so many of the Andrews stories? I think it was rather because, as he said, he had no interest in ancient history- only the future, he said, should count." "Learning to See," page 63

"The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable not necessarily- perhaps not possibly-chronological. The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation." "Learning to See," page 68-69

"This is, of course, simply saying that the outside world is the vital component of my inner life. My work, in the terms in which I 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. But I was to learn slowly that both these worlds, outer and inner, were different from what they seemed to me in the beginning." "Finding a Voice," page 76

"At length too, at Wisconsin, I learned the word for the nature of what I had come upon in reading Yeats. Mr. Ricardo Quintana lecturing to his class on Swift and Donne used it in its true meaning and import. The word is passion." "Finding a Voice," page 81

"With the accretion of years, the hundreds of photographs- life as I found it, all unposed- constitute a record of that desolate period; but most of what I learned for myself came right at the time and directly out of the taking of the pictures. The camera was a hand-held auxiliary of wanting-to-know. It had more information and accuracy to teach me. I learned in the doing how ready I had to be. Life doesn't hold still. A good snapshot stopped a moment from running away. Photography taught me that to be able to capture transience, by being ready to click the shutter at the crucial moment, was the greatest need I had." "Finding a Voice," page 84

"My temperament and my instinct had told me alike that the author, who writes at his own emergency, remains and needs to remain at his private remove. I wished to be, not effaced, but invisible- actually a powerful position. Perspective, the line of vision, the frame of vision- these set a distance." "Finding a Voice," page 87

"The frame through which I viewed the world changed too, with time. Greater than scene, I came to see, 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." "Finding a Voice," page 90

"The torment and guilt- the torment of having the loved one go, the guilt of being the loved one gone- comes into my fiction as it did and does into my life. And most of all the guilt then was because it was true: I had left to arrive at some future and secret joy, at what was unknown, and what was now in New York, waiting to be discovered. My joy was connected with writing; that was as much as I knew." "Finding a Voice," page 94

"What discoveries I've made in the course of writing stories all begin with the particular, never the general. They are mostly hindsight: arrows that I now find I myself have left behind me, which have shown me some right, or wrong, way I have come. What one story may have pointed out to me is of no avail in the writing of another. But 'avail' is not what I want; freedom ahead is what each story promises- beginning anew. And all the while, as further hindsight has told me, certain patterns in my work repeat themselves without my realizing. There would be no way to know this, for during the writing of any single story, there is no other existing. Each writer must find out for himself, I imagine, on what strange basis he lives with his own stories." "Finding a Voice," page 98

"In writing, as in life, the connections of all sorts of relationships and kinds lie in wait of discovery, and give out their signals to the Geiger counter of the charged imagination, once it is drawn into the right field." "Finding a Voice," page 99





"Characters take on life sometimes by luck, but I suspect it is when you can write most entirely out of yourself, inside the skin, heart, mind, and soul of a person who is not yourself, that a character becomes in his own right another human being on the page."  
"Finding a Voice," page 100

"Through learning at my later date things I hadn't known, or had escaped or possibly feared realizing, about my parents- and myself- I glimpse our whole family life as if it were freed of that clock time which spaces us apart so inhibitingly, divides young and old, keeps our living through the same experiences at separate distances." "Finding a Voice," page 102

"Of course the greatest confluence of all is that which makes up the human memory- the individual human memory. My own is the treasure most dearly regarded by me, in my life and in my work as a writer. Here time, also, is subject to confluence. The memory is a living thing- it too is in transit. But during its moment, all that is remembered joins, and lives- the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead." "Finding a Voice," page 104

"As you have seen, I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within." "Finding a Voice," page 104



## Topics for Discussion

Explain the significance of the titles of the chapters ("Listening," "Learning to See" and "Finding a Voice") in relation to each chapter's contents.

How do each of Eudora Welty's parents influence her future writing?

Compare and contrast the Andrews family with the Welty family.

Explain why Eudora Welty states that travel shaped her writing, using specific examples from the book?

Describe Eudora Welty's education, both formal and informal.

What does Eudora Welty learn about her parents after their deaths, and how does she gain this information?

What aspects of Eudora Welty's childhood affect her writing career, and in which ways?