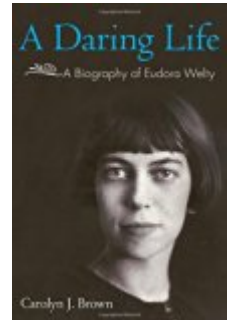


Carolyn J. Brown. *A Daring Life: A Biography of Eudora Welty*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. x + 124 pp. \$20.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61703-295-0.



Reviewed by Nathan Tipton

Published on H-Southern-Lit (October, 2013)

Commissioned by Anthony Dyer Hoefer (George Mason University)

Biographical information published on Eudora Welty in recent years is certainly not in short supply, and for good reason. After all, even twelve years after her death at age ninety-one, Welty remains a revered and beloved figure in American literature, letters, art, and photography. Yet because of the sometimes difficult and mature themes recurring throughout her work, the majority of Welty's audience necessarily skews toward college-aged or older readers. Carolyn J. Brown's offering *A Daring Life: A Biography of Eudora Welty*, however, introduces the writer to younger readers in an effort to broaden the Weltyan audience. In fact, *A Daring Life* is notable as being the first young adult biography of Welty, and in it Brown carefully sketches out Welty's life, family, education, and, of course, long and successful writing career. The book's breezy, approachable style seems designed to appeal to a wide range of readers ranging from young adults to casual Welty researchers wishing to know a bit more about the woman behind the work.

Brown, who draws a great deal of her biographical information from Suzanne Marrs's definitive work *Eudora Welty: A Biography* (2005), arranges *A Daring Life* in a quasi-linear, decade-by-decade fashion that allows her to focus on notable people, places, and events that inspired and influenced Welty's myriad creative pursuits. Much attention is paid to Welty's family, which appears to be a purposeful part of Brown's strategy for attracting young adult readers to Welty. While this approach is both laudable and relatively successful, it ironically and too frequently detracts from meaningful explication—or even mention—of Welty's numerous literary works that Brown ostensibly wants her readers to explore. For instance, Brown offers only a fleeting allusion to *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), barely any discussion about *The Ponder Heart* (1954), and a brief comment about *Losing Battles* (1970). These elisions are certainly understandable due to the necessary space limitations imposed by young adult biography, but Brown just as easily could have devoted a few sentences—or even a short, expository para-

graph--so that her readers would have something to further induce them into reading these novels.

In addition to these omissions, Brown also includes a number of shorthand textual explications that, while enticing, nevertheless would ultimately frustrate any reader, including young adults. For instance, she includes a quote from Welty's memoir *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), in which Welty reminisces about her years at the University of Wisconsin and her discovery of William Butler Yeats. Welty observes that Yeats's poetry affected her profoundly, and she notes that one poem in particular had a remarkable influence on her future work: "the poem that smote me first was [Yeats's] 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'; it was the poem that turned up, fifteen years or so later, in my stories of *The Golden Apples* and runs all through that book" (p. 27). Oddly, though, Brown simply lets this quote pass without further comment, leaving the reader to wonder what about this particular poem compelled her to use it as a primary theme in *The Golden Apples* (1949).

This lack of comment occurs with disappointing regularity in *A Daring Life*, making readers wish that Brown would write more. In so doing, not only would a more nuanced picture of Welty emerge, but readers would also have a better contextual understanding of Welty's experiences. Brown, for example, twice mentions Welty's attendance at a Fats Waller concert and how this event directly influenced the short story "Powerhouse." Yet Brown supplies no pertinent information about Fats Waller or why he made such an impression on Welty. Nor does she explain why it was important that Welty was one of only two white people at this concert. Instead, readers are merely told, "Eudora, exhilarated from the performance, immediately went home and 'transformed her impressions of Waller into fiction'" (p. 43). This lack of detail comes across as dismissive or distracting, especially for young adult readers, because it is clear that a great deal of useful information is not included.

These criticisms aside, though, *A Daring Life* contributes many illuminating additions to the wide net of Welty biography. For instance, Brown gives much-needed attention to Welty's artistic side, something in relatively short supply in most books about Welty. She also includes within the book a number of drawings, photographs, and a lovely (if short) appendix showcasing some of Welty's paintings and "doodles." Additionally, an afterword is devoted entirely to Welty's house in Jackson, Mississippi, which is, as Brown points out, "one of the most intact literary houses in America in terms of its authenticity" (p. 85). These sections are arguably the ones most likely to attract readers' attention because they have an immediacy that fosters a sense of familiarity and connectivity, particularly for young adults. Indeed, despite its shortcomings, *A Daring Life* is a fine addition to already existing Welty biographies, and it is a good starting point not merely for teens and young adults but also for readers of all ages who want to acquaint themselves with the indomitable Miss Welty.

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Citation: Nathan Tipton. Review of Brown, Carolyn J. *A Daring Life: A Biography of Eudora Welty*. H-Southern-Lit, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

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