Eudora Welty and Mystery: Hidden in Plain Sight

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married. She ends her story by sharing a few thoughts on the impact of segregation in Cornelia.

The book also contains stories of Native American women of Appalachia, including Amanda Sequoyah Swimmer (1921-2018), a member of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians of North Carolina. Amanda, a prominent potter, was named a “Beloved Woman,” a title considered the highest honor bestowed upon a Cherokee woman (p. 177). Her life was committed to preserving the language, ceramics, and culture of her tribe. Although the Cherokee once occupied vast lands over the states of Tennessee and Georgia, all but a few Cherokees had been forced out of the region and into Oklahoma. Those who could hide or return formed the Eastern Band in Western North Carolina where Swimmer was born and raised. Her father, Running Wolf Sequoyah, was a farmer. He also hunted and fished for their family and made furniture used in their log home. Swimmer describes a happy childhood going to school and playing outside with her many siblings, although they were too poor to own toys. She married Luke Swimmer and had nine children of her own, to whom she gave both Cherokee and English names. Her interview focuses on the many changes that she has seen for her tribe, including the influx of tourists into the region, which gained recognition for its history and crafts. She also talks about the loss and reemergence of the Cherokee language in some areas.

In writing this review, it was a struggle to choose only a few stories to feature, as each was more fascinating than the next. It must have been even more difficult for editor Kami Ahrens to select just 21 from the entire Foxfire series. The personalities of the women popped and sparkled in every chapter as they spoke of their love and commitment to the Appalachian region, the changes that they had seen, and their hopes for the future. Also fascinating are the perspectives of the student interviewers who had such unique experiences with these women. The reader hears their personal accounts about what it was like to see an automobile, hear a radio for the first time, or watch demonstrations of traditions passed down from their ancestors, such as weaving, planting, and canning. Before this project, it is unlikely that the students had ever heard of “granny witches” and their importance to the lives of the local people, or how locals lived, worked, and even died in this mountain environment.

Yet be assured, The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Women does not read like a history book. The stories continually question what it means to be an Appalachian woman. The answers are given through 21 distinctively different experiences, but also with a thread of commonality of the land, the traditions, and of the uniqueness of the region. This book would be ideal for those who are interested in the history of Appalachia, women’s history, and regional crafts, as well as for teachers who might be inspired by a class project that provides a life-changing experience for students.

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Eudora Welty and Mystery: Hidden in Plain Sight

Jacob Agner & Harriet Pollack, Eds
Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022
ISBN: 9781496842718
252 p. $30.00 (Pbk)

Jacob Agner and Harriet Pollack’s edited collection, Eudora Welty and Mystery: Hidden in Plain Sight, showcases Eudora Welty’s appreciation for and adaptation of the mystery genre in her own works. Welty’s love of mystery is evidenced by her large personal collection of popular and historical mystery novels, which far outnumbered other genres in her collection. A record of Welty’s personal collection was made in June 2021. The collection contained over 5,000 books, 6% of which were mysteries. Along with her expansive personal collection, many chapters comment on her relationship with Ken Miller, a popular hardboiled mystery writer who wrote under the name Ross Macdonald. The two corresponded for over 10 years and were very influential in each other’s work, often exchanging ideas for each other’s writing in their letters. Only a few of Welty’s early works are out-and-out mysteries, and these attempts were made when she was in college. It takes a well-tuned eye to see the mystery genre conventions at work, but once this is accomplished, you can see the heavy influence
of the genre in Welty’s writing. Namely, she used these conventions to point out injustices and prejudices in her stories, making sure to never end up with a perfectly explained or solved crime and leaving the reader to grapple with unsatisfied and uncomfortable feelings with her endings.

Welty’s short stories include classic mystery genre elements like doppelgängers, disappearances, false identities, and informants. These elements are often used to expose white villains and show the evils of white supremacy. In “Reading Eudora Welty’s Petrified Man and Old Mr. Marblehall as Southern Pulp,” Katie Berry Frye states, “Welty pinpoints the Jim Crow South as the cradle of crimes, a place where white men, petrified with fear of being rendered invisible and immobile, are deceitfully unstable” (p. 54). At a time when the “mythic Black rapist” ran rampant in Southern culture, Welty purposefully made the rapist in Petrified Man white to remind readers of white violence. Welty also used mystery genre tropes to poke at the misogyny that was rampant in noir works. Popular/pulp fiction of the time celebrated male fantasy; Welty villainized it. In “Eudora Welty and Mystery: Noir Variations,” Michael Kreyling notes that with the exception of noir, mystery fiction was not considered intellectual in the 1930s and ‘40s. Welty made a point to include elements of both popular (lowbrow) and noir (highbrow) fiction in her stories. This is exemplified in Welty’s evocation of the noir male gaze in her story No Place for You My Love. Welty gives the owner of the gaze no name as he points out the mediocrity of the woman he views, thus displaying male cruelty. Welty also often used real crime as inspiration for her stories. One of her more chilling works is the first-person perspective of a killer on the run in Inside the Mind of a Murderer.

Several chapters reference Welty’s work The Ponder Heart for its crafty manipulation of noir elements, notably Michael Kreyling’s “Eudora Welty and Mystery: Noir Variations” and Rebecca Mark’s “Court’s Opened: The Ponder Heart and Murderous Women.” Mark points out Welty’s play on the femme fatale in The Ponder Heart, saying that Welty’s women have the brains of the femme fatale but not the sexuality, and they are instead butch fatales. Mark later goes on to say that femme fatales are at fault and ultimately defeated, while butch fatales turn the tables on men and are victorious. Kreyling points out several similarities in location, plot, and themes of isolation between The Postman Always Rings Twice and The Ponder Heart. Welty branches out from noir with themes of sexuality. In Postman and other noirs, sexual relationships end with murderous lust, while Welty ends hers with sterility in men.

Welty bends mystery genre staples to both draw in her audience and subsequently turn their expectations upside down by using well-known conventions to point out current societal issues. Welty’s love of mystery has a deep and resonating presence in her work. This book is intended for readers of Southern writers, women writers, and literary criticism. It is best suited for academic and public library collections.

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