

A SOUTHERN LITERARY POTLUCK



LETTERS

ALL THAT TIMELESS DELICIOUS AFTERNOON

FOOD AND FRIENDSHIP IN THE LETTERS OF EUDORA WELTY AND WILLIAM MAXWELL

by Michael Oates Palmer

What would I have done if you hadn't first made that time out of thin air and that dinner & the talk & the music out of your heads, like a story (because everything *had* been packed up, I could see it) and I hadn't had that evening at your house? It was so lovely. It came & afterwards vanished like the soufflé we had, & was just as real, though, and so pleasurable & getting better every minute, like all good visits snatched from the jaws of time...

Eudora Welty, letter to William and Emily Maxwell, June 10, 1970

SHE LIVED ALMOST HER ENTIRE LIFE IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI. He left his home state of Illinois as soon as he could, splitting his time between New York City and its suburbs.

Through five novels, three works of nonfiction, a children's book, and—perhaps most importantly—dozens of short stories, Eudora Welty cemented her status as the South's most prominent author since William Faulkner.

As fiction editor of *The New Yorker* for over forty years, William Maxwell played confidant and counsel to a pantheon that included J.D. Salinger and John Updike. His writing career produced six acclaimed novels, two works of nonfiction, and several volumes of short stories.

Theirs was a journey spanning more than half the twentieth century, one in which their relationship grew from that of writer and editor, to good friends, to, by the time they were both near ninety, surrogate siblings.



Separated by over a thousand miles, the intimate friendship of Eudora Welty and William Maxwell would have been impossible were it not for a correspondence that invited each other not just into their literary work, but into their day-to-day lives.

In letters that often included Emmy, his wife of over fifty years, Maxwell and Welty wrote about literature and writing.¹ They wrote about their shared interest in gardening, about his young daughters, about her beloved mother. And they wrote about food.

BORN A YEAR APART, their first contact came in their early thirties, when Welty wrote Maxwell at *The New Yorker*. Her first submissions were rejected, but their correspondence soon led to a friendship. As fiction editor, Maxwell championed Welty at the magazine, finally getting her published there in 1951.

Food first came up in the working dialogue between editor and writer. “For seasons, there is a little early June peach—though mostly they ripen in July, and so do the good watermelons,” explained Welty in 1953, apparently to answer a fact-checking question. “Would green tomato mincemeat be what we called pickelilly in Illinois, or is it really a form of mincemeat?” asked Maxwell in 1957.

Soon, though, food became a lexicon of friendship. Both Welty and Maxwell vividly described meals they wished to share, and relived those they did share. Welty recalled a New York picnic with the Maxwells in a 1966 letter: “Are you having beautiful warm days and cool nights as we are? I don’t know when I’ve ever seen it so fine, for so long, here—every day it holds. It’s like the picnic day when I came out to Yorktown Heights and we climbed up above the brook and Emmy brought out melon and prosciutto and artichokes and all sorts of al fresco joys and when finally we were able to move on we found a golf ball—I was astonished to see we’d been right on the brink of another civilization, all that timeless delicious afternoon.”

In 1973, while on vacation in Cape Cod, Maxwell wrote that “the Wellfleet woods are full of mushrooms and Emmy left her mushroom books at home, so we come back from walks with our hands full of

¹ What There Is to Say We Have Said: The Correspondence of Eudora Welty and William Maxwell, was edited by Welty scholar Suzanne Marrs and published by Houghton Mifflin in 2011.

mushrooms of all shapes, sizes, and colors, and then Emmy reads about them but so far no eating of em. But last night we had steamed clams and sea-bass, and E said why do people get so excited about lobster. It was marvelous, the bass, cooked in white wine and spices, in an iron fishpan.”

Welty and the Maxwells sent food as gifts over the decades, too. In 1953, Maxwell wrote to Welty about hosting his boss, *New Yorker* editor William Shawn, for dinner. The Maxwells served a gift from Welty: “They all came to dinner, and we had eggs en gelee and a baked ham and spinach and your watermelon pickle and Bavarian cream pumpkin pie (ask Emmy for recipe) and they all wanted to know who made the watermelon pickle.”

That Christmas, the Maxwells savored another gift from their friend in Jackson: “We are both enchanted with the pecans from Mississippi, which bear the same relation to pecans in stores that oranges direct from Florida do. Emmy has certain recipes that she has been longing to put into practice clearly marked out in her mind, and I slip in and undermine them by a nibble each day.... We all...were gratified to have you suddenly rise from the pile of gifts under our tree on Christmas morning.”

In 1955, Welty thanked the Maxwells for a fruitcake: “Sitting out in the backyard—afternoon, a white half-moon—and your fruit cake inside me—me, not the moon, though that speaks for where it could aim at, in its excellence.... As you see, I opened it like a letter. It came like a letter, & besides it had a center of gravity, that means something to eat.... Really it is the nicest and lightest I ever tasted.... Our next recipe-swapping on Bill’s typewriter, maybe I can copy it down?”

These are not just thank-you notes, but writers at work, using their tools to describe their appreciation for the gifts—and for each other. A 1957 gift tray from the Maxwells, wrote Welty, was “like an Impressionist still life... but with permission to eat it, which made it different from a Matisse.”

AS A PUBLISHED GENRE, literary correspondences are sometimes less casual than they first appear. Authors write not just for each other, but for posterity. Welty and Maxwell’s letters crackle with the genuine enthusiasm of two friends eager to share, eager to connect, eager to compensate for living so far apart.

Consciously or not, these writers practiced their craft through descriptions of meals, picnics, wines, desserts. The eye for detail and the sharing of memory are hallmarks of their respective work. Memory played a central role in Welty’s Pulitzer-winning *The Optimist’s Daughter*, with its prodigal sibling returning to the South to care for and then bury her ailing father. And Maxwell’s *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, winner of the National Book Award, blended memoir and fiction to relive a long-ago murder in Maxwell’s hometown of Lincoln. (In a letter to Welty after a Thanksgiving trip back to Illinois, Maxwell wrote, “The gossip was much worse than I remembered, the air simply marvelous. I don’t think I thought about the air very much when I was growing up. And of course, I hadn’t experienced champagne, which is what it was most like.”)

By sending food to enjoy and recipes to make, in telling of their meals without each other, or in remembering fondly the meals they shared, Maxwell and Welty fostered an intimate friendship despite busy lives and the distance from Jackson to Manhattan.

“Well it’s wonderful to be alive. Wonderful to be a writer.... Wonderful to care. Isn’t it?” wrote Maxwell to Welty in 1954.

In a letter written a year later, remembering a meal with the Maxwells, Welty captured how a shared love for food and a passion for expressing that love in writing were key to sustaining their friendship: “That day was so perfect, and as they say about the right roses, it has keeping powers—I held it coming down in the train, and have still got it.... I wonder how we got so many delicious things into one day—I think because time stretched out—I for one never thought of train time or felt the slightest responsibility for it—not while we had...roses, strawberries, Colette, conversation, beet greens—but I won’t let a list even appear to be forming over the surface of that pleasure—so think of my thanks like a little spring.” 🍷

Michael Oates Palmer’s writing credits for television include The West Wing, Army Wives, Rubicon, and the forthcoming Crossbones. He serves on the board of directors of the Writers Guild of America West.

ART, PAGE 8 by Hayley Gaberlavage.