



# Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

72 | Spring 2019

Special Issue: Elizabeth Spencer

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### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2592>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2019

Number of pages: 267-271

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Lisa Alther, "One Afternoon in Vermont", *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 72 | Spring 2019, Online since 01 June 2021, connection on 24 April 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2592>

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- 1 The first time I met Elizabeth Spencer was in the early 1980s at the home of a mutual friend in Burlington, Vermont. She had come down from Montreal, where she would live for twenty-eight years with her British husband John Rusher, to tour some of the little Vermont villages, with greens surrounded by white-frame churches, schools, town halls and general stores. Our mutual friend was an English professor and writer, originally from Atlanta. Our conversation that summer afternoon, as we sat in a second-story window looking down at a leafy green back yard, was a typically southern one—no abstractions, just humorous anecdotes that nevertheless did sometimes make abstract points. As Elizabeth says about some characters in her courageous 1956 anti-white-supremacist novel *The Voice at the Back Door*, “They were silent for a moment, knowing in common with all Southerners that when the knot got too tangled it was just as well left alone. It was just as well to tell a story.”
- 2 Elizabeth and I were both reserved, but our extroverted hostess got us chatting—she in her Georgia accent, Elizabeth in her Mississippi accent, and me in my Tennessee accent, a rare occurrence in Yankee New England—about horses we had loved. I reflected that I was in the presence of living literary history. Elizabeth had known many writers of her own generation and the previous one. She had studied at Vanderbilt under Donald Davidson, the last Agrarian still standing in Nashville at that time. She had also known the Agrarians Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, and she had been a friend of Robert Penn Warren. Eudora Welty was her longtime friend, and she had shared at least an acquaintanceship with Saul Bellow, Caroline Gordon, Walker Percy, Katherine Anne Porter, Elizabeth Bowen, John Cheever, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner, among others. Stark Young was her distant cousin.
- 3 It is the province of reviewers to compare those they are reviewing to other writers, and Elizabeth had often been compared to Welty and Faulkner, no doubt because all three hailed from Mississippi. As Elizabeth herself said about Faulkner, “We were looking at the same things, like Italians painting madonnas.” She claimed Thomas Hardy as her most important influence because of his rural settings, his Anglo-Saxon sensibility, and his architectural structures. But Elizabeth’s early Mississippi novels do,

on occasion, resonate with Faulkner's Old Testament overtones, and her ability to make even the most ordinary detail of daily life shimmer with significance, like a Zen meditation object, sometimes reminds me of Welty. But as Elizabeth once put it, "I think you have to be Eudora to write one of her sentences." And the same is true for Elizabeth's sturdy style, which shifts subtly to accommodate her varied subject matter and characters. This passage of hers seems to me to summarize her method: "A word, one or two or three or more, actually connects inner to outer. It joins what is seen to what is there within that sees it. It fixes what is felt."

- 4 Faulkner grew up in Oxford, the home of the University of Mississippi. His great grandfather owned a railroad, his grandfather a bank, and his father was business manager at the university. Welty's hometown was Jackson, the state capitol. Her father was an insurance executive from Ohio, and her mother a schoolteacher from West Virginia. Welty herself attended the University of Wisconsin and Columbia. But Elizabeth was the Real Deal. Her mother's father, John McCain, Sr. (Senator John McCain's great-grandfather) had owned a 2000-acre plantation called Teoc, on which had lived 52 slaves. As a child, Elizabeth played with the descendants of those slaves, once explaining that, "I knew far more blacks than I did whites when I went to school because I used to spend a lot of time down at the plantation."
- 5 Elizabeth's hometown of Carrollton, a hill town on the edge of the Delta where her father owned the Chevrolet dealership, a heating oil company, and a cotton gin, had a population of 500 when she was growing up. Carroll County has the unfortunate reputation of being second in the state for its number of lynchings, largely because of the massacre of twenty-three African Americans in the Carroll County courthouse in 1886. Emmett Till was lynched nearby in 1955. In her memoir *Landscapes of the Heart*, Elizabeth remembers the family cook's appearing at their back door one night, beaten to a pulp for allegedly "sassing" a white woman. Her father, whose own father had lost an arm fighting for the Confederacy at Gettysburg, put the woman on a train out of town to save her life. So Elizabeth had had to confront in a deeply personal way the ramifications of that deadly Confederate legacy. In an interview she once stated, "All the descendants of slave-holding families I have ever known believe in the benevolence of their forebears as masters." She explains that she wrote *The Voice at the Back Door* "to straighten out my own attitudes about blacks and whites in the South." A woman character in it says, regarding her former boyfriend, "He would not run away with her and be free from the evil she saw in her family and in the whole South."
- 6 Elizabeth herself left Mississippi as an adult, to live in Nashville, New York, Italy, Montreal, and Chapel Hill. Although her stance against Jim Crow had upset her parents and many Mississippians, she retained an affection for many aspects of her homeland and continued to visit there. But she went on to write about people in the locales to which she had moved. Her greatest hit was the novella "The Light in the Piazza." It concerns American tourists in Italy and was made into a movie starring Olivia de Havilland, Yvette Mimieux, and George Hamilton in 1962. (It would be turned into a very successful Broadway musical in 2005.) The novella was, of course, compared by reviewers to the European novels of Henry James, despite the fact that the American mother in Elizabeth's story is at least as scheming as the Italians—and the Italian suitor as naive as the brain-damaged American ingénue. Elizabeth herself maintained that Boccaccio was a more appropriate comparison. His *Decameron* is a collection of novellas that deal with love and lust in all its varieties, and "The Light in the Piazza" does seem

more comfortable in their company. That day in Vermont she bemoaned the fact that she had written it in a month, yet it received much more enthusiasm than novels that had taken her several years. She also bemoaned the fact that everyone ever since had wanted her to write a sequel, when she wanted to be writing about the rootlessness of post-World War II America or the underlying symbiosis between Good and Evil.

- 7 The muted golden glow of late afternoon light through the upstairs window began to backlight her auburn hair like a corona, casting a shadow across her attractive face, with its high cheekbones and fine features. Surprisingly deep dimples formed when she smiled. As she talked, I thought about how much her conversational style mirrored her writing style. She displayed a sharp sense of humor that didn't suffer fools, and she constructed vivid scenes in thin air by showering us with sensuous details. In her books, if she is describing a hot Mississippi afternoon in the days before air-conditioning, you can actually feel beads of sweat popping out on your upper lip.
- 8 People outside the South sometimes don't realize that there are several different Souths, like sub-atomic particles when an atom is split. My hometown of Kingsport, Tennessee, was incorporated in 1916 as a colony for northern industry. It hosted a chemical plant, a paper mill, a couple of textile mills, a book printing press, a glass-making factory. Located in a river valley between the Blue Ridge and the Cumberlands, the terrain had been too rough for more than a handful of plantations, and only seven percent of the current population is African American. The first abolitionist newspaper in America had been published in a nearby town in 1820. When Tennessee seceded from the Union, East Tennessee tried unsuccessfully to secede from Tennessee.
- 9 The factory managers in Kingsport were mostly from the north or from urban centers farther south. All my life I had observed the differences in style between these two groups. The northern wives, many of Puritan descent (including my own mother from upstate New York), valued education and good works. Those from the Deep South valued elegance, charm, and hospitality. I didn't want to choose sides, but I couldn't see how to be both at once, so I moved to Vermont and became a hippy instead. But in Elizabeth, for maybe the first time, I saw these two modes combined in one woman. She was intelligent and well-read without being an intellectual, witty but not a cynic. She was also glamorous in her appearance, tall and graceful, and she was charm itself in her manner, questioning and listening until you believed that she actually cared what you thought.
- 10 Following that afternoon, whenever we were at the same festivals, we attended each other's readings and chatted afterwards. Moving to Chapel Hill in 1986 to serve as writer-in-residence at the University of North Carolina, she became friendly with my brother, the writer and sociologist John Shelton Reed, who also taught at the university and who attended the Episcopal Church there with her. Through him I heard what she was up to from time to time. I read her books as they came out. She sent me a nice message about one of mine via my brother.
- 11 The last time I saw Elizabeth she was installed in a bed in her modest suburban house on a quiet back street in Chapel Hill, attended by hired caregivers, visited by church members and by the younger writers she had befriended, as older writers had once befriended her. We discussed that sunny Vermont afternoon when we had first met. We also gossiped about an affair a mutual friend was having, which she frowned upon as disrespectful to the woman's husband. I reminded her of my favorite line from one of

her novels: “In order to get the maximum kick out of a thing, you’ve got to be absolutely certain it’s a sin.” She smiled her famous dimpled smile.

- 12 When I left, it didn’t occur to me that I wouldn’t see her again, even though she was 96 years old. The only consolation to me now—for the fact that neither of us took the time to become real friends, and that now there is no time left—is that her remarkable books still exist. Most writers feel, as I do, that our books contain all that is best about us. I have started rereading hers as a way to continue getting to know her. She herself had a mystical streak and once claimed in an interview, “Communication goes on even though a person’s gone.” So who knows?
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## AUTHORS

### LISA ALTHER

Lisa Alther was born and grew up in Kingsport, Tennessee, and now lives in Tennessee and Vermont. She has published seven novels, a book of short stories, a narrative history of the Hatfield-McCoy feud, and two memoirs. They have been translated into seventeen languages, and four were *New York Times* bestsellers. Her novel *Swan Song: An Odyssey* will be published in June of 2020.