

Transcription of Dear Hubert Creekmore

Narrator: Dear Hubert. This is a bit awkward, me writing a letter to you after all this time, but a letter to you seems fitting, especially since it was from your letters to your family and friends, and their letters back, that help me find out more about you.

I have to be honest with you. History hasn't been kind to you in some regards.

More often than not, your name is not the first people think about when asked about a favorite, Mississippi writer.

But Eudora's is. I have a feeling that hearing Eudora Welty is still very popular would make you smile, her being practically family at all.

I learned about you from a friend who lives in Water Valley. She told me that you threw up there, but moved to New York, and that in the 1940s, you write a few novels about African Americans and the Jim Crow South, homosexuality and religious fanaticism.

I was intrigued by this, and it made me want to know more about you. Who was Hubert Creekmore?

I visited Water Valley several times before learning about you. However, since reading your books, I see the town differently. As I walk along the sidewalks or drive along the narrow streets, I think of Jim and Don from *The Welcome*, George from *The Chain in the Heart*, and Tessie from *The Fingers of Night*.

Jim, a gay man in a loveless marriage and Don, his childhood friend, returned home from living in New York.

George, a black child growing up in the Jim Crow South, and Tessie, the daughter of a religious zealot father.

I began to feel the sense of otherness they felt.

I see the familiarity of a small-town life is the confining spaces they experienced your fictional Ashton to be.

Voiceover: Under a quivering heated atmosphere, houses showed between clumps of sponge-like trees spreading down to the valley and up again on the Eastern Ridge to the pale blue sun-stricken sky. In Ashton, there was no courthouse square, so typical of a Southern County seat to serve as the focus of the business of the town. The stores, cafes, hotels in garages were aligned on the town's Main Highway, which crossed and re-crossed on wide bridges the stream that drained the valley. From this channel of commerce, residential streets for 4,000 inhabitants swept up the hills to east and west lined with late Victorian, Swiss chalet and bungalow homes coolly sheltered by big oak and elm trees, and sometimes perched high on a bluff where the road had been cut down. Sometimes when he thought of the town in comparison with Memphis or New Orleans or the exciting cities in movies, it seemed the dreariest of human settlements.

Narrator: Did you look out your window, Hubert, and gaze down at the train station longing for adventure? Your childhood home overlooks the main section of town that once held a bustling railway line when you lived here.

Did you wait for the whistle of the passenger trains and wonder about where they were going?

The train was your escape out of Water Valley, but you always found your way back home.

Why is water Valley so central to all your writings even though you only lived here as a child?

Voiceover: Carry me safely boards and iron, me and my fellows huddled by Seek for us somewhere hope and life. We do not want to die. Gray and the gray of winter dawn shaking the cold and rattling wheels. We look for sleep. Oh, let us sleep well and know how dreaming feels. We are the ones, oh puzzled world. We are the ones to think about. We are the pages of history unwritten and full of doubt. Give us our lost courageous eyes and the sturdy breath that hope instills. We cannot see the road ahead nor move against our wills.

Narrator: The more I learn about you, the more similarities I find between us.

The sense of being an outsider, an observer.

I wonder what it was like for you to grow up in Water Valley.

The youngest boy in a prominent family with two older brothers and a younger sister.

I wonder when did you realize you were different?

When did the town turn from being a haven to one of the dreariest of human settlements?

Voiceover: Softly he stepped across the peaked seams of the old planks on the porch and slowly opened the front door. Against the pane of glass forming the upper half of the door, he had leaned his forehead many times as a child gazing out at the bright empty street. The milky design on the glass edged with the diffused frills of some heartless valentine framed his search into a world of unknown longings. He could never discover what he looked for during those sweet lonely moments, perhaps some great adventure to move up the walk and engulf him, perhaps for some wild stranger to say to him “You are to come with me. You have a special gift for me and for the world.” Perhaps for some embodiment of escape and protection to bear him away from all that gave him security.

Narrator: By 1860, Water Valley had three different Christian houses of worship.

There seems to be at least a dozen near the main street now.

With crosses and Steeples dotting the skyline in every direction.

The influence of religion is in all your novels, Hubert.

But especially in *The Fingers of Night*.

Voiceover: Tessie’s mother, dying slowly, the mother called sinful by her father, the mother who said when it comes your turn to sin, be brave and not a sneak and a coward, lay swollen and bruised in her bed. Tessie heard her father pray asking him to take her mother and punish her so that the children could be saved. She is going to die, he had said. She is being punished for her sins. God is taking her to eternal damnation in hell.

Narrator: What was it like for you growing up as a young man to write about George Murchison and his family?

What made you explore the lives of former slaves and their children?

Three generations of African Americans living in Ashton from the end of the Civil War and through a time when Mississippi was divided by color lines. It was still divided when you finished *The Chain in the Heart*.

There's a mural in town across the street from the post office that reminds me of a scene from the book.

In the romanticized mural, I now see the longing for a past that never was.

Voiceover: Mr. Rawson, his face and bald head flushed and perspiring, was standing in the center of the room. He was nervous with anger and almost charged at George when he entered. The boy shrank against his mother's hip as she put her arm above his shoulder. "Well, give me that marble, you little black bastard," Mr. Rawston shouted. George recoiled fearfully.

Mr. Rawston was a big man with piggish eyes sunken into the bulging flesh of his cheeks and a thick fold over the neck of his collarless shirt. There was no answer in his father's eyes when George looked there.

Mr. Rawston came closer and held out his fat hand. "If you were old enough, they would hang you for fighting a white boy. I ought to throw all of you out. Where's the marble?" "It's mine. I found it in the ditch," George gasped. Mr. Rawson whacked his palm against the boy's face. "Shut up," he cried. "Don't call me a liar."

Narrator: I can't imagine what life was like for you, Hubert.

There's silence in your writing when it comes to the welcome. There are no rough drafts and only scant mentioning of the books, except in a few letters home.

The silent understanding about Jim and Don's relationship lingers throughout your hometown.

I wonder what you would have thought about the queer bookstore in town, and if you would have even walked through the door.

Voiceover: Living in Ashton, he had been able to feel no freedom, no separate life, no life at all actually, except for what he had had with Don, for his other friends were getting married.

College was over, and now he must set his mind, not to reading and thinking, but to the adult activities of making money, a home and a place in the community. As a young unmarried man, he had no place there, was in fact looked on as shirking his duties to society, vague illusions, direct questions, and occasional innuendo from his family and friends.

Narrator: Were your visits to Water Valley only in your memories?

Voiceover: Reading, I had dropped to sleep and stretched beside the window in the piercing sun. At length, there came a friend who saw me touch the window lightly with his knuckles. The. As I awoke and through the window wide, he came smiling, leaned upon the sill. So simply done seemed everything I did that thinking never went beyond the smile.

But it could be that I would fall asleep and someone knock upon my window pane, and I'd not hear, but lie their mouth agape, and I did not lift the window up nor lean to talk upon the sill. Then all would say "He's gone. Amen." Yet, would I be away.

Narrator: I didn't realize all the places I would find you and your influence when I started this project, from the archives at Boston University, to the New York Public Library, walking the streets of lower Manhattan,

And the West Village where you once lived, along the highways and the Saturday drives to Department of History and Archives in Jackson.

I've had conversations about you and your friends with people across the U.S. and all over the world.

But in all the travel and research, down all the roads and paths and reading through all the letters and scrapbooks that you kept, I kept finding myself in Water Valley.

I hope this letter inspires others to learn more about you.

I'd love to walk into the local bookstore and see your novels and poems in the Mississippi writer's section.

Your writing made an impact on me, Hubert.

I hope that you can feel that wherever your spirit may be.

But in the meantime, I hope that you rest easy in knowing that you are not forgotten.