

CONNECTING WITH WOMEN OF WORDS



I've made my living as a writer for three decades, but only recently did it occur to me that most of my professional role models have been women.

I count many male writers among my favorites, too: Michel de Montaigne, Henry David Thoreau, E.B. White, and John Updike, among others. But if I were to name all of my literary standard-bearers, the list would include more women than men. I wonder if there's some prevalent quality in the work of female poets, essayists, and novelists that accounts for my preference.

I first encountered Eudora Welty, an early inspiration, in a college literature class, rendered helpless with laughter by her short story "Why I Live at the P.O." Welty, who lived only a few hours away from me in Jackson, Mississippi, made me aware that a writer doesn't have to dwell within an iconic city such as Paris or New York to find something to say. Her admiration for Jane Austen pointed me toward *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, charmed by their clever dialogue and incisive social observation. Welty acknowledged Austen's critics who complained that she didn't write overtly about the great political events of her day. "But what must be indelibly certain," Welty

... Many women of letters developed insights into the intimacies of place that can instruct readers of any gender.

answered, "is that never did it escape Jane Austen that the interesting situations of life can take place, and notably do, at home."

Through Welty, I also connected with Virginia Woolf, another writer deeply attuned to the powerful and profound insights that can unfold at one's private address. Woolf was a person of the world, the greatness of her work bound inextricably with the greatness of her beloved London. But what I like best about her novels and essays is the way they capture the worry and wonder within the walls of her own rooms.

Woolf's most famous room, of course, is the "room of one's own" she argued for in her defining essay about the special challenges women have faced in finding the time, place, and support to think and write. While I haven't suffered the prejudices against women that Woolf identifies, her grasp of the competing claims on a writer's life really spoke to me — especially in my earliest years as a husband and father, when a baby often sat on my lap as I hammered at the keyboard.

As a child of the 1970s, I grew up in an era that called men to more fully engage in the domestic obligations of marriage and parenthood — responsibilities that, when properly embraced, require husbands and fathers to spend more time at home.

Maybe that's why so many women writers resonate with me. Steered — and often unjustly confined — by historical gender norms to focus on the happenings of home, many women of letters developed insights into the intimacies of place that can instruct readers of any gender.

Perhaps that's also why the male writers I've admired have usually defied gender stereotypes by looking to the landscape of home — not the battlefield or boardroom — as a source of contemplation.

Robert Louis Stevenson, another author I treasure, traveled widely, yet discovered his best ideas close by. "You may paddle all day long," he told readers, "but it is when you come back at nightfall, and look in at the familiar room, that you find Love or Death awaiting you beside the stove; and the most beautiful adventures are not those we go to seek."

DANNY HEITMAN (Southeastern Louisiana University), a columnist for *The Advocate* newspaper in Louisiana, frequently writes about literature and culture for national publications.