

First Book on Doris Betts Published

by Dorothy M. Scura

Evans, Elizabeth. *Doris Betts. Twayne United States Authors Series 689. Boston: Twayne, 1997. \$28.95.*



Photograph by Jerry Bauer

Doris Betts

Readers will welcome this first book on Doris Betts which presents an overview of her life and work. The author is Elizabeth Evans, retired professor from Georgia Tech and author of earlier single-author volumes on Thomas Wolfe, Eudora Welty, May Sarton, and Anne Tyler. Not only is Evans a practiced hand at dealing with large subjects in a slender format (137 pages for Betts), but she grew up in Statesville with Doris Betts. Don't expect, however, that she tells the readers any secrets from Betts's youth. She did consult the Betts Collection of manuscripts and papers at Boston University, and she quotes from letters Betts wrote to a long-time friend, but she lets Betts tell the story of her life by drawing liberally on the many interviews in print – a bril-

liant solution to writing about an author whose flexible, exact, memorable, and pithy way with words – even in casual conversation – is a forbidding challenge to any scholar.

This book comes at a fine time for followers of Betts's work. Four novels are in print – *The River to Pickle Beach* (1972; Simon and Schuster, 1996), *Heading West* (1981; Simon and Schuster, 1995), *Souls Raised from the Dead* (1994; Simon and Schuster, 1995), and *The Sharp Teeth of Love* (Simon and Schuster, 1997) – and three collections of short stories – *The Gentle Insurrection and Other Stories* (1954; Louisiana State UP, 1997), *The Astronomer and Other Stories* (1965; Louisiana State UP, 1995), and *Beasts of the Southern Wild and Other Stories* (1973; Scribner, 1998). Adding to the increased attention to Betts's work is her frequent appearance in recently published books. Two examples are an interview in *Growing Up Southern: How the South Shapes Its Writers* (Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald, eds., Emerald House Group, 1997) and Betts's article on Randall Kenan, her former student, in *Southern Writers at Century's End* (Jeffrey J. Folks and James A. Perkins, eds., UP of Kentucky, 1997).

If Betts composed a comprehensive vita and included her publications, articles on her work, teaching experience, academic positions, community work, public service, and the many awards she has won, it would be as many pages long as this first book written about her. She seems to have been living at least four lives: one as a writer of fiction and nonfiction; one as a distinguished professor and faculty member; one as a dedicated public servant in her church, community, and nation; and a personal life with a family to whom she is devoted – a husband (the same one for forty-six years) and children. Evans attempts to

weave all of Betts's lives into one tapestry in the first chapter of her book entitled "The Many Threads of One Life."

The second chapter, "One Woman's Intriguing Mind: A Life of Writing and the Story Collections," provides an overview of the three books of short fiction. Betts began as a writer of short stories, and she is generally acclaimed a master of the genre. Evans calls *Beasts of the Southern Wild* her "most impressive short story collection, evidence of her skill and maturity as a writer." This book includes, in addition to the title story, "The Spider Gardens of Madagascar," "The Mother-in-Law," and "The Ugliest Pilgrim," the latter of which has attained classic status. This story has been included in many anthologies and has been adapted for film and stage with the title of *Violet*. The film won a 1981 Academy Award for best short feature, and the play won the 1997 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best musical.

The next two chapters deal with Betts's six novels, published between 1957 and 1997, with the three earlier novels grouped together and then the three most recent ones. Evans provides an overview of each novel with a plot summary, a discussion of the critical reception, and some critical observation. The liveliest discussion is of *Heading West*, while the treatment of *The Sharp Teeth of Love* seems incomplete because Evans wrote that section before reviews appeared. As with the short stories, Evans sees growth in the long fiction along with fine character development and technical variety. The brief last chapter is entitled "Private Self – Public Life."

I do object to the unflattering photograph of Doris Betts on the cover, doubtless taken from an awkward angle at the end of a long day. It contrasts sharply with

my unforgettable first view of her, thirty years ago in the Freshman English office at UNC, dressed in a black miniskirt and tall boots, with waist-length black hair and flashing brown eyes, brandishing a long cigarette holder. The photo of her in *Growing Up Southern* captures a five-year-old, already recognizable as the miniskirted Betts, and the smiling writer in the black-and-white print in *The Sharp Teeth of Love* could be the older sister of the miniskirted one. Although Betts has probably never sat for a formal portrait and is not at all concerned with appearances, she should be presented to the reader in a photograph that captures some of her energy, good nature, spirit, and attractiveness.



Photograph courtesy of Doris Betts

Doris Betts, age 5

I extend kudos to Elizabeth Evans for providing an introduction to the work of Doris Betts. A chronology offers a brief history of Betts's life, starting with her birth in 1932 and ending with the publication of *The Sharp Teeth of Love* in 1997. The bibliography includes both primary and secondary work. Annotations for critical articles and interviews inform the reader of the content of each piece. An index aids the

reader in locating material. This is a truly useful work for students, readers, and scholars. Let us hope it heralds the publication of more books on this gifted writer, whose work contains material for volumes of critical exploration.

Dorothy M. Scura, Professor of English at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, teaches Southern women writers and writes about them. She has edited two books on Ellen Glasgow and has written about Doris Betts in *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation* (U of Alabama P), *Fifty Southern Writers After 1900* (Greenwood), *Southern Quarterly* (1983), and *Southern Review* (1997).

The Fiery Soul of the (Extra)Ordinary: A Review of Lee Smith's New Short Story Collection

by Tanya Long Bennett

Smith, Lee. *News of the Spirit*. New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1997. \$23.95

News of the Spirit is just what the storyteller, Lee Smith, brings us in this latest collection of her short stories. Through her captivating characters, Smith portrays the powers of fear, courage, memory, and imagination that offer to the discerning mind insight into the human experience. A collection of only six stories, *News of the Spirit* captures a variety of perspectives that allows us to receive the "News" in its fullness. Like the characters of her other short story collections, *Cakewalk* (1970) and *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*

(1990), the characters that fill this collection do not rise above the people we know in our everyday lives; on the contrary, Smith reveals that *because* they are those people we know – regular folks – they are prophets, mediums, seers.

Mr. Lefcowicz, the creative writing teacher in "The Bubba Stories," advises his students, as creative writing teachers do, to "write what you know" (20). Smith sticks to Mr. Lefcowicz's advice. In all these stories, Smith's protagonists are Southern women from small Southern towns. Ranging from preadolescent to aged, these women reveal, through their particular experiences in well-defined and honestly-depicted moments, what it is to be caught up in life, with its lack of order, its violence, and, in even its most threatening moments, its beauty. The "News" that Smith seems to "know" is that there is a danger in attempting to hide from life. Sarah, in "Blue Wedding," illustrates this message when she makes a final, desperate decision to stay home and go through the linen closet rather than to venture out on a date. She fears the possible violence of passionate lives such as that of her sister, who died years ago of an ectopic pregnancy, the product of an affair with a married man; or that of a young acquaintance, who in a passionate fury has "busted" the head of her husband with a two-by-four. For Sarah, the messiness of living is simply too frightening to face. The alienation she has created for herself, however, seems just as threatening as she closes the door against the world of disorder, locking herself into orderly but cold isolation.

In contrast, Alice of "The Happy Memories Club" and Paula of "News of the Spirit" embrace the gamble of existence. Alice, reflecting on her life from the confines of a nursing home, rec-