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A TRIBUTE TO DORIS BETTS

BY Maurice C. York

recipient of the 2008
Roberts Award for
Literary Inspiration



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY DONNA KAIN

In his outstanding recent biography of Jesse Helms, *Righteous Warrior*, historian William Link tells the sad story of Michael Paull, a “modest, unassuming” graduate student in the Department of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In the fall of 1966, Paull had asked his students to describe six elements of style in seventeenth-century English poet Andrew Marvell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress.” Helms, widely known for his “Viewpoint” editorials on WRAL-TV, learned of the assignment and of Paull’s editorship of an issue of the *Carolina Quarterly* that included a fictional work Helms considered vulgar. In a series of editorials, Helms unfairly accused Paull of encouraging his students to write papers that were obscene. With the recent controversy concerning the Speaker Ban Law fresh in their minds, university officials acted hastily, removing Paull from his teaching position. His students unanimously protested the decision, and a committee appointed to investigate the matter reported that Helms’s persistent attack was unfounded. Paull returned to the classroom, shaken by the widespread media attention the

episode generated. Link states that Paull had been replaced by Doris Betts, “a lowly graduate student . . . who later became an acclaimed novelist on the Chapel Hill faculty.”¹

In truth, Betts was not a graduate student; she had just been hired as an instructor in the Department of English – an appointment made in recognition of her growing reputation as a creative writer. By 1966, Putnam’s and Harper & Row had published two collections of her short stories and two novels. Happily, this temporary position led to a fruitful career of more than thirty years at Carolina. During this time Doris Betts demonstrated outstanding devotion to her countless students, a tireless commitment to serving the university and broader community, and to creativity that resulted in increasingly well received novels grounded in her life experiences. Her well-lived life is testimony to the positive influences of family, church, and public higher education.

Doris June Waugh Betts grew up in Statesville, North Carolina, where her father worked in a mill. William Elmore Waugh employed Sunday comic strips

¹ William A. Link, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2008) 95.

² Doris Betts, “Bible Reading,” *News & Observer* (Raleigh) 26 June 1994, G-1.

³ Quoted from the dust jacket of Doris Betts, *The Gentle Insurrection and Other Stories* (New York: Putnam’s, 1954).