

REGARDING EDWARD

a review by Terry Roberts

Elizabeth Spencer and Sally Greene. *The Edward Tales*. University Press of Mississippi, 2022.

TERRY ROBERTS is the author of five celebrated novels most recently, *The Sky Club* (Keylight Books, 2022). In addition, he has written extensively about Elizabeth Spencer, most notably *Self and Community in the Fiction of Elizabeth Spencer* (Louisiana State Press, 1994).

North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame inductee **ELIZABETH SPENCER** (1921–2019) moved to North Carolina in 1986 and taught at UNC Chapel Hill under her retirement in 1992. Her numerous awards include the Award of Merit Medal for the Short Story from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the North Carolina Award for Literature.

SALLY GREENE is an independent scholar who specializes in the literature of twentieth-century British and American women.

Elizabeth Spencer's masterful career – beginning with the publication of her first novel in 1948 and lasting through the collection of her late stories in 2014 – lasted for six decades. During this long and distinguished passage, she worked her way through at least four different phases of maturing artistry, while producing nine novels, eight collections of stories, an underappreciated memoir, and a play. All of which led to her being recognized by the Library of America with a 2021 selection of her work.

At several points in her career, Spencer used her fiction to revisit an important character, one who provided her with the perspective or magnitude to investigate an evolving collection of themes. The first of these characters is Marilee Summerall, who appeared in three stories between 1960 and 1978: "A Southern Landscape," "Sharon," and "Indian Summer." The Marilee stories provide an elegant summary of these twenty years of Spencer's career in that they move from relatively traditional narration to a complex mix of chronology, direct and indirect encounters, imagined conversations, and dreams. Read in succession, they reveal how Marilee's inner landscape becomes Spencer's primary concern, rather than any objective, external reality.

So important were these three stories in the evolution of Spencer's imagination that they were collected by the University Press of Mississippi in 1981

under the simple title of *Marilee: Three Stories*. In the Foreword, Spencer herself wrote that "it's the voice you talk about it with that makes the difference."¹ For eighteen years, Marilee's voice provided Spencer with a means to explore the inner lives of her characters and gave her an increasingly sophisticated persona with which to explore her own artistic process.

Then came Edward Glenn. Unlike Marilee Summerall, Edward is not the narrative persona through which Spencer regards the world. Rather, he is the object of that regard and remains in essence a mystery, despite the author's long and careful consideration. In *The Edward Tales*, Sally Greene has compiled Spencer's four portraits of Edward: her one play, *For Lease or Sale* (1989); and three short stories, "The Runaways" (first published in 1994); "The Master of Shongalo" (1995); and "Return Trip" (2009). Greene's thoughtful and carefully worked-out Introduction captures why Edward became so important to Spencer and why he is the key to understanding her late fiction.

As Greene suggests, there are a number of possible forerunners to Edward. The first is Arnie Carrington, the protagonist of Spencer's 1984 novel, *The Salt Line*. Although *The Salt Line* features a full cast of characters, at the novel's center is the soulful, wounded Carrington, who – unlike Edward – finds healing through the rebirth of community. Carrington is a precursor to

Edward in that he is searching for a home and a family within which he can live again.

From that same period is Spencer's 1985 long story titled "The Cousins," which is narrated by the restless, fifty-year old Ella Mason. Ella is in search of her cousin, Eric, who is, she reflects, a lifelong puzzle. Ella Mason has returned to Italy to visit the mysterious Eric and in so doing recalls for the reader another trip she made to Europe thirty years before with Eric and other young cousins. As the story develops, the clues that Spencer has dropped early in the story come to fruition: even thirty years later Ella Mason cannot find *herself* until she finds Eric – both literally in the present and figuratively in the past – and so this story is a tale of an internal as well as external journey of discovery. As Greene notes, Spencer herself saw a connection between the mystery of Eric and the mystery of Edward.

Spencer was famous throughout her career for her portrayal of rich, complex female characters; indeed, the 2001 Modern Library Collection of her work was appropriately titled *The Southern Woman*. What is intriguing about the Arnie Carrington of *The Salt Line* and Eric of "The Cousins" is that she has turned her attention to male characters who have fully developed inner landscapes, even though Eric's inner life remains mysterious to us until the very end of the story. They, and other characters like them, set the stage for Edward Glen, who first

appears several years later in *For Lease or Sale* and who continues to surface for the next twenty years of Spencer's writing life.²

What do we know about Edward Glenn? Greene does a masterful job of summarizing how the four puzzle pieces we are given (the play and three masterful stories) fit – or don't quite fit – together. Juxtaposing the chronology and cartography of the four works sheds a reflective light on each, but in the final analysis, the edges of the picture are still blurred. With Greene's help, we see that Edward Glenn is a Southern intellectual of great promise. He grew up in the house that provided the stage in *For Lease or Sale* and also has family connections to the mysterious old house named Shongalo (both houses in Mississippi). His life is derailed, however, by a disappointing marriage and a disastrous divorce, which leave him disoriented. While licking his wounds in Mexico, he meets a dying woman and returns with her to California, where they marry. By the time we see him in "Return Trip," he is a widower in search of a home, a refuge, that will once again give him a certain sense of his own identity, his place in the world.

Edward is both cynic and romantic, extraordinarily sensi-

tive and yet willing to wound. He is a mystery to himself, as he admits from time to time, and often almost opaque to others. But here is the consistently interesting thing about him across all the pages and the years: he invariably angers and alienates men while drawing women to him like a magnet. Claire, Patsy, and even Aline, his ex-wife, in *For Lease or Sale*; Jocelyn in "The Runaways"; Milly in "The Master of Shongalo"; and Patricia in "Return Trip" – all find in Edward the clues to their own identity while he wanders across the landscape seeking his own.

Part of the magic of Spencer's mature storytelling is that the past and the present coexist for her characters. Edward is obsessed with the past, in particular the past as it existed in



COURTESY OF TERRY ROBERTS

¹ Elizabeth Spencer, Foreword, *Marilee: Three Stories* by Elizabeth Spencer (UP of Mississippi, 1981) 8.

² Read reviewer Terry Roberts's essay on this play, "Waiting for Edward: Elizabeth Spencer's *For Lease or Sale*," in *NCLR* 2009: 85–92.

ABOVE Terry Roberts with Elizabeth Spencer

specific places where knowing is possible. And he rouses the same obsession in the women who encounter him. With the exception of Jocelyn, the dying woman in "The Runaways," all the women who cross paths with Edward – especially in the stories – are themselves faced with the mysteries encapsulated in their own past lives. It's as if he unlocks the past for them, and in order to make peace with what happened all those years before, they must answer his questions as well as their own. In this sense, Edward Glenn is "The Master of Shongalo."

Ultimately, the questions go unanswered, which gives these stories their unique power. And peace comes to these women, who regard Edward so intently, only when they are able to live in harmony with both past and present, able to hear, as does Patricia at the end of "Return Trip," the "Mississippi voices" of the past as they intertwine and converse with the voices of the present. Perhaps that is what made Edward Glenn so irresistible to Elizabeth Spencer and to us as readers: his ability to take us home even as he continues to wander.

In this slim volume, the University Press of Mississippi has given us a beautiful book (the cover illustration is a story in and of itself). Sally Greene has performed miracles of persistence and scholarship to honor Elizabeth Spencer – who has left us – and Edward Glenn – who has not. My advice? Read and reread *The Edward Tales* to savor the mystery. ■