SALVATION SOUTH

TEMA STAUFFER'S SENSE OF PLACE

THIS AWARD-WINNING TENNESSEE-BASED PHOTOGRAPHER CAPTURES THE REAL AND IMAGINED PLACES FROM THE GREATEST SOUTHERN FICTION.

By Lauren Rhoades with photos by Tema Stauffer. **Jun 30, 2022**

Flannery O'Connor's horse barn, Andalusia Farm, Milledgeville, Georgia

I first met the photographer Tema Stauffer in May 2019 when she toured the Eudora Welty House in Jackson, Mississippi, and then again in January 2020 when she returned to shoot the house's interior. Stauffer photographed for hours that day without stopping for food or drink. She moved methodically from one room of the house to the next, capturing the changing light, casting her attention across every square inch of space. She used a dark cloth draped over her head to focus images on the glass viewfinder of her wooden 4x5 camera.

Though I mostly tried to stay out of Stauffer's way, her process captivated me because of the sheer stamina and endurance that the art demanded of her. Rarely do we get to see the artist at work. We see only the final story or image, not the 15 drafts or the hundreds of negatives that preceded it. But the artistic process is part of what intrigues Stauffer, too, as it intrigues all of us who think deeply about craft. Her photographs interrogate how the writer's surroundings translate to their work, and, by the same token, how the writer's work translates into how we see their world.

A keen sense of place is a trademark of Stauffer's work in large format photography. Her first collection of photos, *Upstate* (Daylight Books), depicts the beautiful but stark landscapes and industrial dilapidation of Hudson, New York. Stauffer, an associate professor of photography at East Tennessee State University, turns her eye southward in her latest project, titled *Southern Fiction*. The photographs in this collection invite us to look closely at the places and spaces that shaped the artistic imaginations of the South's greatest storytellers, including William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Flannery O'Connor, Alice Walker and Harper Lee, among others. Her images invite us to see the region as the fiction writer might see it, blurring the line between writer and photographer, between truth and fabrication, projecting onto the landscape a double vision — the fictional world of

story overlaid onto the real world of storyteller. In his book *A Place Like Mississippi: A Journey through a Real and Imagined Literary Landscape*, W. Ralph Eubanks argues that the familiar terrain for Mississippi (and by extension, Southern) writers comprises "both real and imagined places, where sometimes what is imagined seems real and what is real seems imaginary." Stauffer's photos of landscapes, vernacular architecture, and historically charged sites invite us into the same liminal space that Eubanks describes. The longer we look, the harder it is to distinguish between the real and the imagined. The line between the two is as mutable and ever-changing as the banks of the Mississippi River.

William Faulkner's kitchen curtains, Rowan Oak, Oxford, Mississippi

By the time I met Stauffer at the Welty House, her vision for *Southern Fiction* had already taken shape. She had photographed Flannery O'Connor's Andalusia Farm and William Faulkner's Rowan Oak. Her interest, however, was not in "literal spaces," but what she called "places that evoke the writer's fiction." As a result, her images are fresh, her point of view unexpected.

Through Stauffer's lens, Faulkner's homeplace feels airy and domestic. The eye is drawn first to the kitchen's pale-blue gingham curtains, then the worn table, then the same misshapen metal strainer that your grandmother probably had in her cupboard. In Faulkner's daughter Jill's light-filled room, tiny rocking chairs face the camera like expectant children. We see little evidence of whiskey-drinking, pipe-smoking "Pappy" in this tableau. Nor do we find a literal representation of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County in the photo of the abandoned house, hemmed in by pines, or of the muddied river overflowing its banks. We do, however, get a sense of the writer's themes — class conflict and sense of place and the inevitability of ruin — as well as a nod to the Bundrens' ill-fated river crossing in *As I Lay Dying*. Here, and throughout the collection, Stauffer redirects our gaze, as if to say, *This is not the place nor the person you thought you knew*.

Stauffer's photos of the Welty house similarly avoid any overt symbols of the writer's trade, such as desk and typewriter. Instead, they dwell on the objects that stoked the writer's imagination, like her stacks of books, or her teal Princess phone. The image of Welty's kitchen window is also a playful homage to the photo William Eggleston took in the same spot circa 1983, the year before the author published her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings.*

Eggleston's photo shows a casual domestic scene: old-fashioned ice tray, metal corkscrew, glass jars of honey and jam on the table, and the

lush green of early summer through the open window. In Stauffer's 2020 photo, the window is closed; the same kitchen table is bare, as are the trees outside. Aside from these changes, the passage of time is scarcely perceptible.

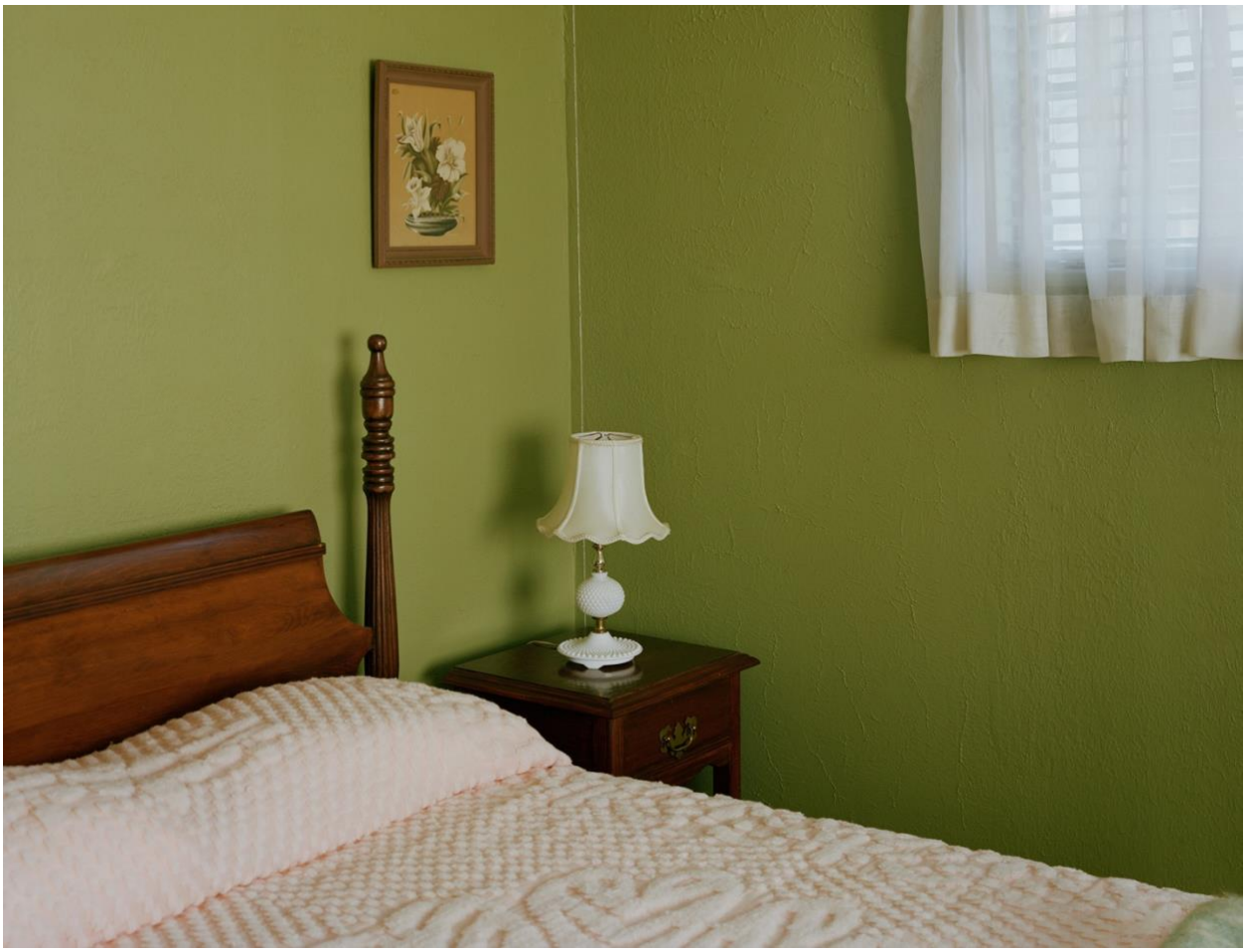
Today, and in Stauffer's photographs, the Welty House looks as it did in the 1980s, when the writer was at the height of her literary prowess. Squint, and you might convince yourself that Miss Welty has just gone to "make groceries" at the Jitney 14.

Eudora Welty's kitchen, Jackson, Mississippi

Eudora Welty's bedroom, Jackson, Mississippi

Four miles from Eudora Welty's Belhaven neighborhood, across literal and metaphorical tracks, is the Elraine subdivision in West Jackson. The story of Belhaven and Elraine is familiar. It's not unique to Jackson, Mississippi, or the South. The stories of segregation, of redlining, of white flight, of the siphoning of resources from primarily Black neighborhoods to primarily white suburbs, are acutely American ones. Perhaps these are the stories you, too, read into Stauffer's photo of the silver car, parked in front of the boarded-up house. Time has not been kind to this part of the city. Turn back the clock 60 years, and this house would have been brand new, vibrantly painted, with a manicured lawn and a smooth asphalt road out front. Elraine was the first post–World War II subdivision created for middle-

class African Americans in Mississippi, and Medgar and Myrlie Evers, two of the country's most influential civil rights activists, purchased one of the first houses here. They lived with their children on Guynes Street, now Margaret Walker Alexander Drive.



Medgar Evers' bedroom, Jackson, Mississippi

Silver car, Jackson, Mississippi

Medgar Evers' legacy — and house — is inextricably linked to his traumatic assassination by a white supremacist on June 12, 1963, memorialized in fiction in Eudora Welty's short story "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" The bullet that killed the civil rights leader entered through the house's front window, pierced the living room wall, ricocheted off the refrigerator, and landed on the kitchen counter. The window was subsequently replaced, the wall patched, the blood stains on the driveway cleaned. Then, 50 years later, the bullet hole in the living room wall was carefully reopened, like a wound being exposed to light. The bullet hole is now part of the story of the house, but it's not the focal point of Stauffer's photograph. The room that she

photographs is the bedroom, which is untouched by reminders of violence.

Here, Stauffer anchors us in objects that are both familiar and intimate. Chenille bedspread. White bedside lamp. Dark wood and soft shadow against olive-green paint. A mass-produced painting of a narcissus and a lily (chosen, perhaps, by Myrlie Evers, who, along with Black Arts Movement writer and professor Margaret Walker Alexander, was part of a neighborhood garden club). Like a story, an image can momentarily shelter us. From this view, we might forget that in the other bedroom, the Evers children slept on mattresses on the floor to protect them from stray bullets. We might instead see this room as a quiet space, a sanctuary even.

Time stands still in the photos of the Evers house, the Welty house, and Rowan Oak. Or at least, Stauffer captures the illusion of a place frozen in time, like the familiar setting of a favorite book. In reality, maintaining this illusion is costly, effortful. In the museum world, defying the passage of time is otherwise called "preservation." Much of my work with the Mississippi Arts Commission — from overseeing the painting of window frames to telling the story behind a particular lamp in Eudora Welty's living room — is in the service of preserving a very specific and — to me, at least — very important part of literary history. But what is preserved and what is not is also a reflection of our values as a society, and these values are very much skewed in favor of whiteness, maleness, wealth.

Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, HIghway 6, Mississippi

Stauffer's photos are a study in preservation and its inverse: decay. Images of white clapboard churches in various states of dilapidation echo the work of William Christenberry. And like Christenberry, Stauffer's photos of these timeworn buildings pulsate with quiet reverence, while also bringing to mind Flannery O'Connor's observation that the South isn't so much "Christ-centered" as "Christ-haunted." I am particularly taken with the image and story of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, an African American church with late-autumn foliage framing its whose weathered front. When Stauffer asked around the area, locals living nearby on Highway 6 could not recall its name. It was by a chance encounter with the groundskeeper that she learned the church's true name, as well as the unfortunate fact that it

was slated for demolition. How many more of these small-town churches — none of them considered official “landmarks” worthy of preservation — have already faded into the past, preserved only in the aging memories of the people who once attended them?

Mt. Zion No. 1 Baptist Church, Rodney, Mississippi

The passage of time is a preoccupation for Stauffer, as it is for the Southern writer. It’s one reason Eudora Welty became fascinated with the ghost town of Rodney, Mississippi, once a busy river crossing point for Native American travelers and traders, then a thriving port city whose economy was destroyed when the Mississippi River shifted course. In the author's writings and photographs, Rodney stands for the transience of time, the weight of history, and the resilience of

people who survive at the margins. Decades later, the ghost town of Rodney persists. In Stauffer's photo of Mount Zion No. 1 Baptist Church, mud and trees and vines threaten to swallow the white structure, which was built in 1850 at the height of the town's prosperity. Water, pooled in tire ruts, reflects the twilit sky. The ruts are evidence of a recent truck-driving visitor, and I can't help but wonder if that visitor was a benevolent caretaker, a curious passerby, or an unsavory troublemaker.

Anderson Cotton Gin, Clarksdale, Mississippi

Rollins Funeral Home, Port Gibson, Mississippi

Stauffer captures scenes that speak to the Southern gothic writer's imagination, images that — despite being devoid of people — are rich with the evidence of human life, with stories of the oppressors and the oppressed. A kudzu-laced cotton gin suspended between field and sky in the Mississippi Delta; the faded façade of the Rollins Funeral Home in Port Gibson; a porch rocking chair — that Southern trope — exiled to dust and time; the boarded-up "Cooper's Gro.," forgotten but for the neatly pruned crape myrtle tree out back. One might expect to find Flannery O'Connor's Misfit, or one of his cronies, escaped from Milledgeville's Central State Hospital, or Carson McCullers' Frankie Addams darting barefoot through overgrown grass, pausing beneath the blooming mimosa.

But these time-warped scenes also conjure up the prose of today's most innovative and exciting Southern fiction writers, such as Mississippi novelist Jesmyn Ward. In her writings, Ward unfurls images so rich and alive that we are left staggering — and bracing for trouble.

In Ward's fiction, as in all Southern fiction, place reveals character. Place propels plot. To be a Southern writer, one must have a deep, abiding connection to home — fraught though that connection may be — and the ability to see one's home with cool detachment.

There is an early, somewhat autobiographical short story by Eudora Welty titled "A Memory," in which the narrator reflects on a particular summer as a young girl, when she would lay by a lake and look out at

the world with her hands “squared over her eyes” like a make-believe camera lens.

“It did not matter to me what I looked at,” the narrator says, “from any observation I would conclude that a secret of life had been nearly revealed to me.” The young artist’s framed fingertips serve a twofold purpose: They narrow her focus, and they distance her from her surroundings. Only then, by looking closely from a self-imposed distance, is a “secret of life” revealed. This paradox is at the heart of the artist’s craft.

What secrets do Tema Stauffer’s photographs reveal? What tales do they tell? Stauffer lets us peer through her camera lens to see the terrible beauty, the deafening quiet, the domesticated wildness of a region that has shaped — and been shaped by — imagination. These photographs are brimming with stories, stories that complicate our understanding of an already complicated place.

Lauren Rhoades lives in Jackson, Mississippi, where she is the grants director at the Mississippi Arts Commission. Lauren’s essays, reviews and editorials have been published in various literary journals and outlets, including the Southwest Review, the Mississippi Books Page and Jackson Free Press.