

# An Afternoon With Eugene Walter

*Remembering Mobile's  
Renaissance man,  
the toast of  
two continents*

*Editor's Note: Even though Eugene Walter passed away this March, his love of life will always be an inspiration. This is his story.*

A knock on Eugene Walter's door sends a covey of cats scattering, under and atop furniture, meowing for all the world to hear.

"Oh, dears, do settle down," says their trusted friend, maneuvering through stacks of papers and boxes to greet the sunlight. "Please—do come in," he says in his lilting, rose water soft voice. "Welcome, friends, to Mayhem Manor."

Eugene's dimly lit domain is a turn-of-the-century bungalow near downtown Mobile, where books, scripts, letters, artwork, and curious treasures collected during his writing life fill every nook and cranny. "There's been a leak, so I won't turn on the lights. I don't want you to see that ceiling there," Eugene says, pointing upward. "See it? Well, don't look," he says, waving it from sight. "I've had *such* a time since that hurricane. The one with that harmless little name—Danny, I think it was. Imagine."

We make our way to a nearby drawing room. "Let's toast to better turns of events, shall we?" There we sink into a lazy afternoon. Jelly glasses of sherry are for inspiration. "Oh, wait. Let's move Edna Belle," Eugene says, alighting from the sofa. The unintended guest is a life-size cardboard likeness of country singer Dolly Parton. "She sent



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me that photo as a thank-you for a poem I wrote about her," he says turning her to face the wall. "Now. We can think."

As he takes a dainty sip of sherry, a lamp casts a honeyed glow on his milky hair, alabaster skin, and mischievous blue eyes. His genteel demeanor can go from cuddly to catty to coy in the wink of an eye, and it becomes apparent that one simply doesn't talk with Eugene, one is absorbed in drama. He boyishly bites his bottom lip and raises his glass: "To life—*la dolce vita*," he says, relishing the moment. "I'm game."

He is that. In his 77 years, half of them spent in New York and Europe before moving home in 1979, the charmingly eccentric Mobile native has done everything including the kitchen sink. He's been a prolific poet (*Monkey Poems* and *Shapes of the River*), novelist and short-story writer (his first novel, *The Untidy Pilgrim*, won the Lippincott Fiction Prize, and the short story "Troubadour" garnered an O. Henry cita-

tion), script writer and set designer, artist and illustrator, musician and puppeteer, Army cryptographer and language interpreter, cofounder of *The Paris Review* and *The Transatlantic Review*, actor and Italian movie-industry insider (appearing as the American journalist in friend Federico Fellini's *8½*); and avid gardener and Southern food writer (*Time-Life's American Cooking: Southern Style*). Most recently, he hosted the weekly Alabama Public Radio segment, "Eugene at Large," in which he mused on everything from the lost art of front-porch chats to the origins of Southern flowers.

Reared in Alabama during the Depression, Eugene recalls that it was his Austrian grandmother who inspired his love of language and his desire to live abroad. "You see, many people spoke French in Mobile in those early days, and I remember sitting on the porch with my grandmother and the lady from across the street—the great, great granddaughter of one of Napoleon's



generals," he says, lowering his voice to almost a whisper. "And when they'd begin to gossip, they'd all start speaking French, you see, and they'd look at me out of the corners of their eyes while some very juicy tales were unfolded. From that time on I decided I'd know *just exactly* what they were saying."

His home, ("where Grandfather never allowed water at the table, only wine—and I had a thimble-size glass") was ripe for creativity. "I learned to read before I went to school," he says, "and my parents and grandparents all let me stay up as late as I liked, painting and scribbling. New York and Rome didn't exist in my young world, but like Thomas Jefferson said, every man needs two countries, so later I went to school in New York and then spent 27 years in Paris and Rome to make up for my lack."

His life, though, certainly wasn't lacking. After high school, Eugene worked with the Civilian Conservation Corps in Mississippi, where his favorite job was painting road signs reading "Soft Shoulders." ("Ah, what a lovely thought," he says dreamily.) Next he was off to a U.S. Air Force base in Alaska during World War II, and then back in Mobile to help get the city's opera and symphony on its feet. Afterward, in hopes of working as a language translator, he was bound for New York, then Paris, then Rome.

"It's been a whirlwind," he says. Finding success in both the world of art and the world of gab, he hobnobbed with the rich, the famous, the fringe. "I met *everyone*, darling." He entertained the likes of Anaïs Nin, Isak Dinesen, Judy Garland, William Faulkner, Dylan Thomas, Franco Zeffereilli, and fellow Ala-



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bamians Truman Capote and Tallulah Bankhead. "I gave some pretty good parties," Eugene boasts, pouring another round of sherry. "How could I not? I'm a Southern boy. You know how it is. When in doubt, give a party. It's like when I met Fellini. I just knew he would think I was some Southern simpleton. But he was delightful. He was a country boy from a port town, just like me."

Since returning to the States, Eugene hasn't entertained quite as much, but he still fancies company—and self-amusement. "I stay close to home much of the time," he says, "unless, of course, someone's buying dinner, and then I'm a boy with bells on. Otherwise, I simply rise and do a little sonnet writing, then take a nap, then read a little, eat a little, and then, when there's an emergency (and there always is), I fill my bathtub up with Jim Beam and swim my way to safety." He sparkles at the notion, then shakes his head. "They'll soon tell me to fill that thing up with butter-

milk. But that's no fun."

Eugene's coffee table reflects his taste for a new generation of regional writers: Mark Childress (*Crazy in Alabama*) and Robert Bell (*The Butterfly Tree*). "He was raised in Mobile," Eugene says of Bell. "I like the fact that he writes about what he knows. He and others with similar styles capture so much that is on the verge of being lost. That's why I fear the future of today's

young people. Too many of them are locked in the back room, with television eating them alive. Where are the new storytellers? Who's teaching children to paint or draw or learn classical mythology? Just look at today's handwriting," he tsks. "It's abysmal. There's no style to the soul."

More musings and hours pass, and no one has left the room. Time for a scene change. "To the garden!" he directs. Outside, the daylight is sobering. "Let's sit a spell and rest our tired brains," he says, perching in his favorite chair in his backyard. "It's my secret garden—a jungle, really—much to my neighbors' dismay. But I find it very comforting, especially at sunset," Eugene says. There we reflect on his fascination with monkeys and reincarnation, and his love of fried grits, French snails, and Mobile.

"You know, we all come back home, sooner or later," he says. "The old Greeks believed that if a man wanted to live long, he'd return to the spot where he was born and sleep naked on the earth for one night." He pauses and looks toward a neighbor's set of windows. "I haven't done that yet," Eugene says with a sly smile. "But I might."

And we regret that he didn't get the chance to do just that. *Denise Gee*