The Optimist’s Daughter
By Eudora Welty

About the book….

Winner of the 1973 Pulitzer Prize.

The Optimist’s Daughter is the story of Laurel McKelva Hand, a young woman who has left the South and returns, years later, to New Orleans, where her father is dying. After his death, she and her silly young stepmother go back still farther, to the small Mississippi town where she grew up. Alone in the old house, Laurel finally comes to an understanding of the past, herself, and her parents. (From the publisher.)

About the author ….

Eudora Welty was an award-winning writer and photographer who wrote about the American South. Welty was born in Jackson, Mississippi and lived a significant portion of her life in the city's Belhaven neighborhood, where her home has been preserved. She was educated at the Mississippi State College for Women (now called Mississippi University for Women), the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Columbia University's business school. While at Columbia University, she also was the captain of the women's polo team.

During the 1930s, Welty worked as a photographer for the Works Progress Administration. This job sent her all over the state of Mississippi photographing people from all economic and social classes. Collections of her photographs are One Time, One Place and Photographs. Welty's true love was literature, not photography, and she soon devoted her energy to writing fiction.

Her first short story, Death of a Traveling Salesman, appeared in 1936. Her work attracted the attention of Katherine Anne Porter, who became a mentor to her and wrote the foreword to Welty's first collection of short stories, A Curtain of Green, in 1941. The book immediately established Welty as one of American literature's leading lights and featured the legendary short stories A Worn Path, Why I Live at the P.O., and Petrified Man, all of which have been included in many short story anthologies and literature text books through the years.
In 1992 Welty was awarded the Rea Award for the Short Story for her lifetime contributions to the American short story. *The Optimist's Daughter* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973. Eudora Welty died of pneumonia in Jackson, at the age of 92. (*From Wikipedia.*)

**Discussion Questions…**

*The Optimist’s Daughter* This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel draws upon the youthful experiences of Eudora Welty’s mother and upon her mother’s old age. Part 2, “Learning to See,” of Welty’s autobiography *One Writer’s Beginnings* provides a good deal of the background for this novel.

1. Welty reports that her father was an “optimist,” but that her mother was the more daring individual of the two. The critic Jay Tolson calls Welty a “necessary optimist,” one who has a tough-minded view of experience, but who also has a “credible optimism.” Does this biographical information shed any light on the novel? What does the term “optimist” mean in the novel? Does the novel ultimately have an “optimistic” vision or is the term ironic? What is Laurel’s vision of experience as the novel ends?
2. In Part 2 of One Writer’s Beginnings, Welty describes summer trips to West Virginia and discusses her mother’s youthful years there. To what extent does this autobiographical information inform *The Optimist’s Daughter*? To what extent has autobiography been altered to suit the needs of the novel?
3. Discuss the characterization of Fay, Judge McKelva’s new wife? What values does she represent? Why might the Judge have married her? Do her differences from Becky point to a key reason? Why has she married the Judge? Is she merely a gold digger? How does Laurel respond to Fay? How do other characters in the novel respond to her? Why?
4. What is the cause of the Judge’s death? Is Laurel right to hold Fay responsible? If so, why does she take so long to speak to Fay about the death?
5. The novel’s opening section is set during Mardi Gras in New Orleans. How important is this setting? How do Laurel and Fay respond to Mardi Gras and to the revelers costumed as Death and the Medusa?
6. The bridesmaids from Laurel’s wedding greet her at the Mt. Salus train station and still call themselves the bridesmaids. What does this title tell us about Mt. Salus and Laurel’s friends? How does Laurel seem to be different from her old friends?
7. Has Laurel throughout most of the novel kept the past in a silver frame, a set piece which does not threaten her? Does her night alone in her parents’ house bring her a
more complex vision of the past? Does she learn that the past is subject to our changing, evolving understanding of it?

8. Discuss Laurel’s memories of her husband Philip, of their wedding journey, of the breadboard he made for her mother. What is the significance of the confluence of rivers, birds, lives that she and Philip see from the train bound to Mt. Salus? Why is the breadboard important to Laurel, and why does she leave Mt. Salus without it? How do these memories fit into the thematic structure of the novel?

9. The episode with the bird in the house receives a great deal of emphasis in the novel. The bird drives Laurel into the room where her mother’s letters are stored; the bird remains in the house the next morning when Mr. Cheek arrives, and Missouri comments on the bird when Laurel finally manages to set it free outside. What seems to be the thematic import of this episode?

10. Chestina Welty was an ardent gardener and dearly loved her rose garden. The character Becky McKelva is like Chestina in this regard. And in the novel Laurel discusses a rose known as Becky’s Climber. Does that rose seem symbolic in any ways?

11. Discuss Welty’s portrait of Mt. Salus, Mississippi, of its class structure, its changes over time, and its racial dynamic. Who are the members of its white upper class? Of the white lower classes? What sort of relationship do they have with Missouri, the McKelva’s African American maid? How has Mt. Salus changed from the time of Laurel’s marriage to the time of her father’s death?

http://www.eudorawelty.org/bio.html