

ON NOT FORGETTING

by Edward P. Jones



Edward P. Jones,
guest editor of
New Stories from
the South

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In the second year of having guest editors to select the best stories for New Stories from the South, we're pleased to announce that Edward P. Jones*

has agreed to do the choosing this year. In this excerpt from his preface, he explains what this collection means to him and talks about his southern roots.

When, in the late afternoon of life, you go off onto a path never imagined—if raised by people who know the true value of things—you do not forget those who gave bread and sustenance.

Being on this unexpected path has proven to be a busy thing, but we should never discard our good raising; doing so puts you in risk of becoming one of those creatures slithering through life without values. So when Kathy Pories asked if I would choose the stories for 2007, the busy me initially said no, but the other me remembered that, back in 1993, no other annual anthology but *New Stories from the South* reprinted my story from the *Paris Review*. The story was about a fairly uneducated old woman who, even after many decades of life in a city, still could not forget the southern values of right and wrong

she had inherited as a child. I am here now because it meant something to have that story anthologized.

Hither and yon, they still debate whether Washington, D.C.—where I was born and came to know what is true and what is not so true—is a part of the South. It might well be that that debate is why I have never stood up straight and asserted that I was a bona fide son of the South. I'm in the room, but I'll stand in the corner for the evening, if it's all the same to you.

Still, so much is about the heart, wherein the soul dwells, and so maybe my heart doesn't care if Washington is north or south of the Mason-Dixon line. The heart knows that just about every adult—starting with my mother—who had an important part in my life before I turned eighteen was born and raised in

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the South. They—the great majority of them black and the descendants of slaves—came to Washington with a culture that I did not appreciate until I went out into the world and looked back to see what went into making me a full human being. A culture defined by big things, by small things. By food (from pigs’ feet to black-eyed peas on New Year’s Day). By superstition (resting your clasped hands on the top of your head shortens your mother’s days on this earth). By speech (“yonder”; “a month of Sundays”; and a phrase my mother was particularly fond of using: There were, she would say, so many awful problems in the world that could be cured by people simply doing the correct and proper thing, “but that would be too much like right”).

Black people passed this culture on to me, but once I discovered southern literature, I learned that much of it was shared by whites, whether they wanted to admit it or not; I came upon white people who, in their way, were also just trying to make it to the next day. Those fictional white people lived in a world that was not alien to me. Yet growing up in D.C., I had known no southern whites, except for the ones on television. As I read, I felt I knew far more about that world of people than I did about those people who lived in cities in the North, who lived, as I did, in D.C., with concrete and noisy neighbors above and below and a sense that the horizon stopped at the top of the tallest building. It does not matter where Washington fits on

the map; I was of the South because that was what I inherited.

None of that afforded me anything special in choosing the stories in this book. What did help me, ultimately, is what I learned early in life about the artistry of storytelling, often from people who could not read or write. They hadn’t read James Baldwin or Anton Chekhov, but they knew, as those writers knew, how to entertain on the way to their point. I should confess that I did not feel I could choose any story that seemed to have been built around

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some anecdote. To be sure, I grew up appreciating the momentary entertainment. But for something to claim me long after the last sentence, I need a sense that the world, for even one character, has shifted, whether to a large or a tiny degree, as I do when I read Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* or Capote’s “A Tree of Night.”

Volumes like this one are of course always subjective. (I am now far more sympathetic to those who did not publish or reprint me long ago.) But I have tried to do my best to pick stories that are, to use some of William Faulkner’s words, not about the glands, but about the human heart. What helped me most, in the end, was whatever I have accumulated over the years of reading and taking to heart the stories written by people whose work will last. It could be that I read them and learned it all wrong, but I think my heart was in the right place. ■