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Afterword: Elizabeth Spencer: Mississippi Literary Trail Marker

Peggy Whitman Prenshaw

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- 1 I was pleased recently to participate in a special occasion that honored Elizabeth Spencer's major contribution to the literary legacy of Mississippi and to the national achievement in letters. She is a daughter of Carrollton, Mississippi, and one can say she has carried Carrollton in her imagination throughout her life. The early novels, *Fire in the Morning* and *This Crooked Way*, had southern settings that Spencer knew well, the South of her childhood and young adulthood. In 1953, with the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship, she set out for Italy, where she wrote her third novel, *The Voice at the Back Door*. I observed of those in attendance that day that some had lived in Carrollton then; some may even remember those years. By 1955, when she returned to Carrollton with her manuscript in hand, she thought she had a book that honestly explored southern racial troubles—and one that also offered the prospect of reconciliations.
- 2 But the temper of the times had sharply changed. She found that local and national events had outrun her optimism. The *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision had come from the Supreme Court in 1954, and, shortly before her return from Italy, the Emmett Till murder had taken place, as she writes, “only a few miles from my family home, over in the Delta.” In a 1965 introduction to a later edition of the novel, she remarks upon a painful irony: “that even while I wrote it down, the tenuous but vivid thread of hope that I thought to be there had been dissolving utterly” (xx). A few weeks after her visit with family, she left for New York. Spencer's growing estrangement from family, especially from her father, reflected the painful arguments that I know so often took place in southern white families of the 1950s and 60s. (One might note that several years later came the publication of *North toward Home* by fellow Mississippian Willie Morris.)
- 3 After *The Voice at the Back Door*, Elizabeth Spencer turned outward, writing fiction placed in large urban settings, in the North, in Italy, in Canada. “The Light in the

Piazza,” with its Italian setting, made into an MGM film, has had a wide audience; *No Place for an Angel* surveys the post-war ascendancy of U.S. power; *The Snare*, perhaps my favorite of the novels, and *The Salt Line* move among the many landscapes of the New Orleans and Gulf Coast area; and *The Night Travellers* unfolds during the Viet Nam era.

- 4 Alongside the novels, Spencer’s short fiction has been consistently praised by readers and critics, winning many major fiction awards, so impressive that the stories deserve a separate Literary Trail marker. (I could have added pages to my remarks just naming all the prizes they have garnered.) I have so many favorites to recommend: the Marilee stories, “Ship Island,” “First Dark,” “The Business Venture,” “The Cousins,” and forty or more others collected in *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* and *The Southern Woman*. Her widely diverse portrayals of women are especially notable—she has seen us, understood us, and she has told our stories.
- 5 Finally, I wanted to celebrate the 1998 memoir, *Landscapes of the Heart*, published fifty years after *Fire in the Morning*. Here an older Elizabeth Spencer revisits Carrollton and the Carrollton County of her birth, locating the experiences and relationships that would shape the woman and writer that she would become. At the opening of the memoir, the twelve-year-old Elizabeth, “enveloped in overalls, a long-sleeved white shirt, and a big straw hat” (3) set out on her horse for Teoc, her mother’s family plantation that lay thirteen miles away. It was a place where she would find bustling activity, including lively book talk by uncles who were great readers and talkers. Should she be questioned along her way, she was told to answer that she was Luther Spencer’s daughter and her uncle was Joe McCain. She was firmly situated within prominent families, protected, but also constrained to grow into a role expected of young white women like her in 1930s Mississippi.
- 6 Elizabeth Spencer traveled a different way. Family and neighbors in Carrollton, those family members at Teoc, her friends, her teachers, her passion for reading—all showed her that there were many ways she could live her life. But however distant and differently from her Carrollton youth that life would turn out to be, she would always hear Mississippi voices. Like the character in her recent story, “Return Trip,” she “knew she would hear them always, from now on” (35).
- 7 We Mississippians, along with a world of readers, are grateful for the choices Elizabeth Spencer made. Her memorable writings have enlarged our understanding of our own lives and have helped us interpret the continuing influence of our history. We will soon be able to read the collected works of Elizabeth Spencer in the prestigious Library of America series. Her words, her literary legacy, will enrich the future that lies ahead for us in this state—and for her wide world of readers.

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