

MISSISSIPPI BOOK FESTIVAL 2021

# Ralph Eubanks answers the age-old question: Why has Mississippi produced so many great writers?



by **Adam Ganucheau**  
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In a new book, W. Ralph Eubanks uses Mississippi's landscape — topographical, socioeconomic and spiritual — to

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Ahead of the 2021 Mississippi Book Festival, many of us are preparing our cocktail party answers to the age-old question: Why has our state produced so many great writers?

For your consideration as you study up: Mississippi native W. Ralph Eubanks has written an entire book, *A Place Like Mississippi: A Journey Through a Real and Imagined Literary Landscape*, framed around that question.

Eubanks expertly uses the state's landscape — topographical, socioeconomic and spiritual — to explore our literary lineage. That landscape, as we know, has not always been beautiful, but it does help answer that looming question in the most thorough way I've heard (including at those cocktail parties).

Ahead of his trip to Jackson for the Mississippi Book Festival on Aug. 21, Eubanks spent some time with Mississippi Today discussing his new book and his perspectives on the state.

**Mississippi Today:** What inspired you to write *A Place Like Mississippi*?

**Ralph Eubanks:** What is interesting about *A Place Like Mississippi* is that my editor, Will McKay at Timber Press, reached out to me to write the book. So, I have to give my editor credit where credit is due. The idea Will originally presented to me was a book that would introduce readers to the expanding Mississippi Writer's Trail, beginning in the Delta and fanning out to other sites from there. After some careful thought, I had the idea to write a book that looked at the entire literary landscape of the state region by region, beginning on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and moving northward from there, ending in the Delta.

The real inspiration for the book was the landscape of Mississippi itself. I spent a great deal of time driving around the state, moving from four-lane by-passes to two-lane blacktops (and occasionally unpaved roads). What captivated me was how aspects of the landscape seeped into the work of the state's writers. I thought of Richard Wright as I stood on the bluffs in

Natchez, looking down at the Mississippi River. In Greenville, I thought of Ellen Douglas's stunning short story "On the Lake" and the way that story's power lies not just in its narrative tension but also in the way Douglas uses people and place to explore hard truths about race. And in Jackson I thought of how the city's racial geography affected the writers who were born there, from Eudora Welty to Angie Thomas and Kiese Laymon.

**MT:** Are there a couple new things you learned about Mississippi during the writing process that stuck with you?

**Eubanks:** Perhaps rather than learning new things, I would say that I gained some new perspectives. While traveling through the Delta, I often drove past Parchman without thinking of its history or the people inside. Getting the opportunity to take part in classes for Louis Bougeouis's Prison Writing project made me look at the lives of Mississippi's incarcerated people in a new way. When I drive by Parchman—or any other prison in Mississippi or America, for that matter—I will not think merely of the punishment that takes place inside the prison walls and the crimes that placed the people there. Now I think of the inner lives of the men and women in prison who are seeking redemption through writing. And now the history of Parchman casts a shadow over how I look at the Delta itself.

I also gained a new perspective on the blues, which I have traditionally thought of as a musical form rather than a literary one, given my formalist education in British literature. Although I understood how the blues influenced poetry, I had never thought of how the blues as a musical form has its own poetic rhythm and meter. I came to see the blues as poetry wrapped in a struggle for survival. When you place the Delta blues together thematically, I realized that they form a Homeric, rhythmic epic poem. That's a new way of thinking for me.

**MT:** You're returning for the festival to Jackson, where you spent what, a couple years? What does Jackson mean to you?

**Eubanks:** Yes, I spent a year in Jackson as the Eudora Welty visiting scholar in Southern Studies at Millsaps College. Jackson and Millsaps are both special to me, since when I found myself unemployed and floundering, teaching at Millsaps and living in Jackson helped me find my footing again.

Jackson is a city that holds a special place in my heart because it not only took me in during a rough time but nurtured me while I was here. Jackson is key to Mississippi's future, since if its citizens are thoughtful about how it grows and develops, Jackson could become a city that is

an incubator of change in the state.

**MT:** Putting you on the spot a little bit here: Who is on your Mount Rushmore of Mississippi authors?

**Eubanks:** There is a statue called “The Storytellers” in downtown Jackson at the corner of Capitol and Lamar Streets that has already made that designation: it is Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, and William Faulkner. These three writers were recently the focus of the annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha conference at the University of Mississippi. Scholars see them as their own unique “Mississippi Confluence” and I am inclined to agree. Yes, Rushmore has four figures, but as someone brought up on “Schoolhouse Rock,” I believe that three is a magic number.

**MT:** What books are on your nightstand right now?

Eubanks: Oh, far too many. I’m balancing reading for my new writing project on the Delta as well as reading for pleasure. I’m reading Sven Beckert’s *The Empire of Cotton: A Global History* so that I can think about the Delta’s key crop from a more global perspective. I just finished Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a book that has made me think about how with images of poverty, like those documenting the Delta, heartlessness and amnesia seem to go together. Curtis Wilkie’s *When Evil Lived in Laurel* was a masterful piece of storytelling that filled in gaps to the story of Vernon Dahmer. I read Melissa Ginsburg’s *The House Uptown* in one sitting and loved the pacing of the story as well as the New Orleans setting. And I always have poetry by my side, so there is *Mister Toebones* by Brooks Haxton and Thomas Richardson’s *How to Read*. My nightstand is just like that old Betty Everett song: it’s getting mighty crowded.

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Adam Ganuchau, as Mississippi Today's editor-in-chief, oversees the newsroom and works with the editorial team to fulfill our mission of producing high-quality journalism in the public interest. Adam has covered politics and state government for Mississippi Today since February 2016. A native of Hazlehurst, Adam has worked as a staff reporter for AL.com, The Birmingham News and The Clarion-Ledger and his work has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post and Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Adam earned his bachelor's in journalism from the University of Mississippi.

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