

Doris Betts citation
Thomas Jefferson Award, 1999

In the inscription that Thomas Jefferson wrote shortly before his death -- that he requested to be placed over his grave -- he listed two of his top three virtues as being author of the Declaration and Father of the University of Virginia. Authorship and stewardship of education: these were contributions he considered most meritorious.

At 20, when he graduated from the College of William and Mary, he carried with him a working knowledge of Latin, Greek and French and a familiarity with natural science and mathematics which was extraordinary for one so young. He sang and danced well. Even as a boy he became an excellent violinist. It is well known that throughout his life he remained an eager seeker for knowledge. Later in his life, as a diplomat, his culture, his personal charm, his accessibility, his populist faith have been thoroughly documented by historians as doing much to set the United States in a more favorable light among Europeans.

I mean to tell you so much about Thomas Jefferson because the achievements of Doris Betts, although not political, bear a striking similarity. I would be hard-pressed to come up with a more deserving recipient of an award given to commemorate the humanitarian ideals of Thomas Jefferson.

Like Jefferson, she is an author and, through her teaching and service, a steward of this great University. Probably only through the accident of being born to parents residing in Statesville, NC and not Charlottesville, did she wind up teaching at Carolina and not at Jefferson's beloved UVA.

Like Jefferson, she has long been a champion of the common man and woman, as her fiction illustrates. The characters who populate her ten books of short stories and novels are ordinary clay-footed unglamorous souls -- highway patrolmen, soldiers, daughters of mill workers, librarians, preachers -- and the occasional befuddled academic. Her novel-in-progress is about an embezzler.

The writer Mary Lee Settle has declared that the greatest talent of a truly gifted author is *empathy*. If Thomas Jefferson had not had this gift he could not have produced a document that would have served the People of the United States for more than 200 years. Doris Betts has this gift or she could not possibly have garnered the praise both for her teaching and writing that have won her a landslide of prizes and accolades, including three Sir Walter Raleigh awards for the best book of fiction by a North Carolinian in any given year; a Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Writing; the North Carolina Award for Literature, presented by the state legislature; the Medal of Merit from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the John Dos Passos Award for Literary Achievement, three honorary degrees -- the most recent from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. She has served as Chair of the UNC faculty (the first woman to do so) and President of the Association of Women Faculty. Currently she presides over the Fellowship of Southern Writers as Chancellor. Long before it became a fashionable cultural mandate for women, Doris Betts was "doing it all." I do not exaggerate when I tell you that her vita is about as daunting in length and as profound in its content of life fully lived as *War And Peace*.

Since 1966 when she became a Lecturer in Creative Writing here, Doris has inspired students and faculty alike with her inexhaustible dedication, wisdom, and humanity. Writer and former student Jill McCorkel has said, "Not only is she a great teacher, but Doris is a great teacher of teachers." Bill Andrews, E. Maynard Adams Professor of English and Chair of the Department, considered her a mentor during his graduate student days at Chapel Hill. "Her encouragement and guidance," he wrote, "were my mainstay

that first semester and a foundation on which my subsequent teaching career has been built." Over the years, Doris has won major recognition for her superlative teaching, including UNC's prestigious Tanner award, the Catherine Carmichael Award, and the UNC Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching.

Like Thomas Jefferson, who extended himself beyond his obvious talents, who was compelled to serve, Doris's contributions beyond those to literature and the academy are extraordinarily diverse. She has chaired the central committee of the John M. Morehead Foundation, served on the Chatham County Arts Council, been a board member for the NC School of the Arts and the Center for the Book in the NC Dept. of Cultural Resources. She has served as trustee for Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia and the National Humanities Center. She has been a consultant to organizations as diverse as the editorial board of the Charlotte Observer and the Florida Forestry Commission.

In recent months, a major gift from Ben M. Jones III inaugurated a drive to create a \$1,000,000 Doris Betts Professorship in Creative Writing -- just one more testament to the high esteem in which Doris is held by her colleagues and the friends she has made wherever her extensive travels have taken her. In the words of former Chancellor Paul Hardin, Doris Betts "is one of the finest people anyone could know. Her generosity and help to colleagues, students, young writers and anyone in trouble have become legendary."

No one who knows her life's work and is familiar with the marvelous pantheon of living North Carolina writers would contest her place as First Lady if not President of them all. Yet despite these laudatory remarks and listings of Doris's triumphs I know I've failed in capturing her essence. Perhaps it can best be expressed by the following anecdote: Not long ago, I invited Doris to have lunch with a few of us who teach creative writing. Since her phased retirement, we see less of her, and we miss her. I could tell, when she declined the invitation that she was truly torn. "I'd love to see all of you," she told me, "but I'm having lunch that day with my hairshirt student."

"Your hairshirt student?" I asked. I'm not sure what I imagined except a student doing some sort of penance. Or maybe she'd said "hirsute."

"I'm the one wearing the hairshirt," she said. "I know this student isn't a particularly good writer. I'm not sure I can teach him one thing. I didn't want to work with him in the first place, but I took that as a sign that maybe I ought to, that I might learn something that will help to make me a better person."

Amid her loot of honors and distinctions, Doris Betts is still looking to improve, a virtue Thomas Jefferson practiced into his retirement as well. With greatest admiration and respect, and with love, too, I am honored to acknowledge Doris Betts, Alumni Distinguished Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, this year's recipient of the Thomas Jefferson Award.