

Carson McCullers

Carson McCullers (February 19, 1917 – September 29, 1967) was an American novelist, short story writer, playwright, essayist, and poet. Her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, explores the spiritual isolation of misfits and outcasts in a small town of the Southern United States. Her other novels have similar themes and most are set in the deep South.

McCullers' work is often described as Southern Gothic and indicative of her southern roots. Critics also describe her writing and eccentric characters as universal in scope. Her stories have been adapted to stage and film. A stage adaptation of her novel *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), which captures a young girl's feelings at her brother's wedding, made a successful Broadway run in 1950–51.

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Early life

McCullers was born **Lula Carson Smith** in Columbus, Georgia, in 1917 to Lamar Smith, a jeweler, and Marguerite Waters.^[1] She was named after her maternal grandmother,

Carson McCullers



McCullers, photographed by Carl Van Vechten, 1959

Born	Lula Carson Smith February 19, 1917 Columbus, Georgia, U.S.
Died	September 29, 1967 (aged 50) Nyack, New York, U.S.
Occupation	Novelist
Education	Columbus High School, New York University, Columbia University, Juilliard School of Music
Genre	Southern Gothic
Notable works	Novels: <i>The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter</i>

Lula Carson Waters.^[1] She had a younger brother, Lamar, Jr.^[1] and a younger sister, Marguerite.^[2] Her mother's grandfather was a planter and Confederate soldier. Her father was a watchmaker and jeweler of French Huguenot descent. From the age of ten she took piano lessons; when she was fifteen her father gave her a typewriter to encourage her story writing.

The Ballad of the Sad Café
The Member of the Wedding

Signature



Smith graduated from Columbus High School. In September 1934, at age 17, she left home on a steamship bound for New York City, planning to study piano at the Juilliard School of Music. After losing the money she was going to use to study at Juilliard on the subway, she decided instead to work, take night classes, and write. She worked several odd jobs, including as a waitress and a dog walker.^[3] After falling ill with rheumatic fever she returned to Columbus to recuperate, and she changed her mind about studying music.^[4] Returning to New York, she worked in menial jobs while pursuing a writing career; she attended night classes at Columbia University and studied creative writing under Texas writer Dorothy Scarborough and with Sylvia Chatfield Bates at Washington Square College of New York University. In 1936 she published her first work. "Wunderkind", an autobiographical piece that Bates admired, depicted a music prodigy's adolescent insecurity and losses. It first appeared in Story magazine and is collected in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*.^[5]

From 1935 to 1937, as her studies and health dictated, she divided her time between Columbus and New York. In September 1937, aged 20, she married an ex-soldier and aspiring writer, Reeves McCullers. A *New Yorker* profile described her husband as "...a dreamer attracted to big, capable women."^[6] They began their married life in Charlotte, North Carolina, where Reeves had found work. The couple made a pact to take alternating turns as writer then breadwinner, starting with Reeves's taking a salaried position while McCullers wrote. Her eventual success as a writer precluded his literary ambitions.^[6]

Career

Maxim Lieber was McCullers' literary agent in 1938 and intermittently thereafter. In 1940, at the age of 23, writing in the Southern Gothic or perhaps Southern realist traditions, McCullers completed her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.^{[7][8]} (The title was suggested by her editor and was taken from a Fiona MacLeod poem, "The Lonely Hunter"). At the time the novel was thought to suggest an anti-Fascist message.^[9]

After completing "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter" in 1939 (then titled "The Mute") McCullers and her husband moved to Fayetteville, NC, where she completed "Reflections in a Golden Eye" (then titled "Army Post") in the span of two months. She sold the book to *Harper's Bazaar* for five hundred dollars in August 1940. It was published in two parts in the magazine in October and November.^[10]

With influences such as Isak Dinesen, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, and Tolstoy she published eight books; the best known are *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). The novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951) depicts loneliness and the pain of unrequited love; at the time of its writing, McCullers was a resident at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga, New York.

In *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers describes the feelings of a young girl at her brother's wedding. The Broadway stage adaptation of the novel had a successful run in 1950–51 and was produced by the Young Vic in London in September 2007. The original production won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best play of the season.^[11]

Many know her works largely by their film adaptations. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* was adapted as a film with the same title in 1968, with Alan Arkin in the lead role. *Reflections in a Golden Eye* was directed by John Huston (1967) and starred Marlon Brando and Elizabeth Taylor. Huston, in his autobiography, *An Open Book* (1980), said:

I first met Carson McCullers during the war when I was visiting Paulette Goddard and Burgess Meredith in upstate New York. Carson lived nearby, and one day when Buzz and I were out for a walk she hailed us from her doorway. She was then in her early 20s, and had already suffered the first of a series of strokes. I remember her as a fragile thing with great shining eyes, and a tremor in her hand as she placed it in mine. It wasn't palsy, rather a quiver of animal timidity. But there was nothing timid or frail about the manner in which Carson McCullers faced life. And as her afflictions multiplied, she only grew stronger.

Richard Wright, the author of *Black Boy*, reviewed her first novel, published in 1940 at the age of 22, and said she was the first white writer to create fully human black characters. In his review 'Hugo: Secrets Of The Inner Landscape,' he stated:

To me the most impressive aspect of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race. This cannot be accounted for stylistically or politically; it seems to stem from an attitude toward life which enables Miss McCullers to rise above the pressures of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness.^[12]

Later life

Carson and Reeves McCullers divorced in 1941. After separating from Reeves she moved to New York to live with George Davis, the editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. She became a member of February House, an art commune in Brooklyn.^[13] Among her friends were W. H. Auden, Benjamin Britten, Gypsy Rose Lee and the writer couple Paul Bowles and Jane Bowles. After World War II McCullers lived mostly in Paris. Her close friends during these years included Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams. During this period of separation, Reeves had a love relationship with the composer David Diamond, and the two lived together in Rochester, NY.^[14]

McCullers fell in love with a number of women and pursued them sexually with great determination, but seems not to have succeeded in finding mutual attraction. Her most documented and extended love obsession was with Annemarie Schwarzenbach, of whom she once wrote "She had a face that I knew would haunt me for the rest of my life." In her autobiography, McCullers reports that the two shared one kiss. McCullers' passion, however, was not reciprocated, and the two remained friends with McCullers dedicating her next novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, to her.^{[14][15]} Sarah Schulman writes:

There is the infamous obsession with Katherine Anne Porter and a much-implied ongoing "friendship" with Gypsy Rose Lee. But if Carson ever actually had sex with a woman, even Tennessee [Williams] didn't hear of it. According to McCullers's brilliant biographer, Virginia Spencer Carr, Carson did brag to her male cousin that she'd had sex with Gypsy once. But if that was the case, she never mentioned it to any of her gay friends. In the absence of

reciprocated lesbian love and the inability to consummate lesbian sex, McCullers still wore a lesbian persona in literature and in life. She clearly wrote against the grain of heterosexual convention, wore men's clothes, was outrageously aggressive in her consistently failed search for sex and love with another woman, and formed primary friendships with other gay people.^[14]

In 1945, Carson and Reeves McCullers remarried. Three years later, while severely depressed, she attempted suicide. In 1953 Reeves tried to persuade her to commit suicide with him, but she fled and Reeves killed himself in their Paris hotel with an overdose of sleeping pills.^[16] Her bittersweet play *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1957) drew upon these traumatic experiences. The potential suicide of Carson's father may have foreshadowed if not influenced these events. This break from the reported story of his sudden death by heart attack was first published in 2003 by Virginia Spencer Carr in the preface to her updated biography, *The Lonely Hunter*.^[17] The suggestion was further explored in "A Member of the Family," an article on Lamar Smith, by Daniel Bellware in the Fall 2017 issue of *Muscogiana* published by Columbus State University.^[18]

McCullers dictated her unfinished autobiography, *Illumination and Night Glare* (1999), during the final months of her life. Her home from 1945 to 1967 in South Nyack, New York, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2006.^{[19][20]}

Death

McCullers suffered throughout her life from several illnesses and from alcoholism. She had rheumatic fever at the age of 15 and suffered from strokes that began in her youth. By the age of 31 her left side was entirely paralyzed. She lived the last twenty years of her life in Nyack, New York, where she died on September 29, 1967, at the age of 50, after a brain hemorrhage. She is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery.^[21]

Criticism

McCullers's style is often described as Southern Gothic, though she lived in New York later in life. Her eccentric characters suffer from loneliness that is interpreted with deep empathy. In a discussion with the Irish critic and writer Terence de Vere White she said, "Writing, for me, is a search for God". Other critics have variously detected tragicomic or political elements in her writing.

The most recent scholarly collection of commentaries on her work is "Carson McCullers in the Twenty-First Century" (2016), edited by Graham-Bertolini and Kayser.

Legacy

McCullers's childhood home in Columbus, Georgia, is now owned by Columbus State University and is the central location of the university's Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians.^[22] The center is dedicated to preserving the legacy of McCullers; to nurturing American writers and musicians; to educating young people; and to fostering the literary and musical life of Columbus, the state of Georgia, and the American South. To that end, the center operates a museum in the Smith-McCullers' home, presents extensive educational and cultural programs for the community, maintains an ever-growing archive of materials related to the life and work of McCullers, and offers fellowships for writers and composers who live for periods of time in the Smith-McCullers home in Columbus.

While the center operates out of the Smith–McCullers house, the writer's childhood home and museum is open to the public.

In 1944, when McCullers's father died, her mother left Columbus and moved to Nyack, New York, where she bought her daughter's famed Nyack home. McCullers lived with her mother and sister off and on in this house for a number of years, eventually buying the house from her mother. McCullers was living in this house when she died in 1967. In December 2006 the house in Nyack was added to the National Register of Historic Places.^[23]

McCullers's physician and longtime friend, Dr Mary E. Mercer, bequeathed the house in Nyack to Columbus State University's Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians, the same center that owns and operates out of McCullers's childhood home in Columbus, Georgia.^[24] At Dr Mercer's death in late April 2013, the McCullers Center inherited not only the house but also many artifacts and documents that shed light on the last ten years of McCullers's life.

The two former McCullers houses now owned by Columbus State University together contain the world's most extensive research collection on the author.

The Rainey-McCullers School of the Arts in Columbus, Georgia, is named in honor of McCullers and fellow Columbus native Ma Rainey.

Charles Bukowski wrote a poem about Carson McCullers.^[25]

She influenced Edward Albee who adapted one of her stories as a play.

Works

Novels

- *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1940. LCCN 40010298 (<https://lcn.loc.gov/40010298>).
- *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1941. LCCN 41002706 (<https://lcn.loc.gov/41002706>).
- *The Member of the Wedding*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1946. LCCN 46002022 (<https://lcn.loc.gov/46002022>).
- *Clock Without Hands*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1961. LCCN 61010351 (<https://lcn.loc.gov/61010351>).

Other works

- *The Ballad of the Sad Café: The Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1951. LCCN 51010969 (<https://lcn.loc.gov/51010969>). A collection comprising:
 - a novella of the same title, later made into a Merchant Ivory film
 - six short stories:
 - "Wunderkind" (*Story*, 1936)
 - "The Jockey" (*The New Yorker*, 1941)
 - "Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland" (*The New Yorker*, 1941)
 - "The Sojourner" (*Mademoiselle*, 1950)

- "A Domestic Dilemma" (*New York Post* magazine section, September 16, 1951)
- "A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud" (*Harper's Bazaar*, 1942)
- *The Member of the Wedding* (<https://archive.org/details/memberofweddingp0000mccu>). New York: New Directions. 1951. [LCCN 51010532](https://lccn.loc.gov/51010532) (<https://lccn.loc.gov/51010532>). A 1950 play adapted from the 1946 novel
- *The Square Root of Wonderful, A Play in Three Acts*. New York: French. 1958. [LCCN 59001296](https://lccn.loc.gov/59001296) (<https://lccn.loc.gov/59001296>).
- *Sweet as a Pickle and Clean as a Pig*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1964. [LCCN 64020538](https://lccn.loc.gov/64020538) (<https://lccn.loc.gov/64020538>). A collection of poems illustrated by Rolf Gérard.
- *The Mortgaged Heart* (1972), a posthumous collection of writings, edited by her sister Rita
- *Illumination and Night Glare* (1999), her unfinished autobiography, published more than 30 years after her death
- "Sucker", a short story

Collections

- [Dews, Carlos L.](#), ed. (2001). *Complete Novels*. New York: [Library of America](#). ISBN 978-1-931082-03-7.
- [Dews, Carlos L.](#), ed. (2017). *Stories, Plays, & Other Writings*. New York: [Library of America](#). ISBN 978-1-59853-511-2.
- [Graham-Bertolini, Alison L.](#) and [Casey Kayser](#), ed. (2016). *Carson McCullers in the Twenty-first Century*. New York: [Palgrave](#). ISBN 978-3319820705.

Recording

- *Carson McCullers Reads from The Member of the Wedding and Other of her Works*. New York: MGM Records. 1958. [LCCN 89741503](https://lccn.loc.gov/89741503) (<https://lccn.loc.gov/89741503>).

See also

- [Lover, Beloved: Songs from an Evening with Carson McCullers](#) - an album by American singer/songwriter [Suzanne Vega](#).

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Relevant literature

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External links

- [Works by Carson McCullers \(https://fadedpage.com/csearch.php?author=McCullers%2C%20Carson\)](https://fadedpage.com/csearch.php?author=McCullers%2C%20Carson) at [Faded Page](https://fadedpage.com/) (Canada)
- [Works by Carson McCullers \(https://openlibrary.org/authors/OL22420A\)](https://openlibrary.org/authors/OL22420A) at [Open Library](https://openlibrary.org/) 
- [Works by or about Carson McCullers \(https://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n79-59038\)](https://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n79-59038) in libraries ([WorldCat](https://worldcat.org/) catalog)
- [The Carson McCullers Center for Writers and Musicians \(http://www.mccullerscenter.org/\)](http://www.mccullerscenter.org/)
- [The Carson McCullers Project \(http://www.carson-mccullers.com/\)](http://www.carson-mccullers.com/)
- Two different critical views of McCullers:
 - [The Tragicomic Vision in the Novels of Carson McCullers \(https://web.archive.org/web/20040803132537/http://www.compedit.com/clark1.htm\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20040803132537/http://www.compedit.com/clark1.htm)
 - [Marxism in Carson McCullers' *Strangled South* \(https://web.archive.org/web/20040813075000/http://www.woonsockethigh.org/faculty/rnordin/themember/Literary%20Criticism.htm\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20040813075000/http://www.woonsockethigh.org/faculty/rnordin/themember/Literary%20Criticism.htm)
- [Carson McCullers: A Life \(https://books.google.com/books?id=15v9sJJQYwgC\)](https://books.google.com/books?id=15v9sJJQYwgC) (limited preview)
- [Online text of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* \(https://books.google.com/books?id=z_Pvxz9iRJ0C&dq=the+heart+is+a+lonely+hunter&pg=PP1&ots=fH0-XbVOo_&sig=vJeAWxSmdec1kHVWuwA7xRJQTH0&prev=http://www.google.com/search%3Fhl%3Den%26q%3DThe%2BHeart%2Bis%2Ba%2BLonely%2BHunter%26btnG%3DGoogle%2BSearch&sa=X&oi=print&ct=title&cad=one-book-with-thumbnail\)](https://books.google.com/books?id=z_Pvxz9iRJ0C&dq=the+heart+is+a+lonely+hunter&pg=PP1&ots=fH0-XbVOo_&sig=vJeAWxSmdec1kHVWuwA7xRJQTH0&prev=http://www.google.com/search%3Fhl%3Den%26q%3DThe%2BHeart%2Bis%2Ba%2BLonely%2BHunter%26btnG%3DGoogle%2BSearch&sa=X&oi=print&ct=title&cad=one-book-with-thumbnail) (limited preview)
- [Entry in the New Georgia Encyclopedia \(http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-557\)](http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-557)
- [Online text of *The Member of the Wedding* \(https://books.google.com/books?id=2LGGiOFdcdQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Member+of+the+Wedding&psp=1\)](https://books.google.com/books?id=2LGGiOFdcdQC&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Member+of+the+Wedding&psp=1) (limited preview)
- [Online text of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* \(https://books.google.com/books?id=1uoo9v-aV84C&printsec=frontcover&dq=Carson+McCullers&psp=1\)](https://books.google.com/books?id=1uoo9v-aV84C&printsec=frontcover&dq=Carson+McCullers&psp=1) (limited preview)
- [McCullers' Papers \(http://research.hrc.utexas.edu:8080/hrcxtf/view?docId=ead/00089.xml&query=carson%20mccullers&query-join=and/\)](http://research.hrc.utexas.edu:8080/hrcxtf/view?docId=ead/00089.xml&query=carson%20mccullers&query-join=and/) at the [Harry Ransom Center \(http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/\)](http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/) at [The University of Texas at Austin](https://www.utexas.edu/)
- [Carson McCullers \(https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/696\)](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/696) at [Find a Grave](https://www.findagrave.com/)
- [Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library \(https://rose.library.emory.edu/\)](https://rose.library.emory.edu/), [Emory University: Carson McCullers collection, 1941-1975 \(http://pid.emory.edu/ark:/25593/8zmvh\)](https://www.emory.edu/)

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