

# Katherine Anne Porter

**Katherine Anne Porter** (May 15, 1890 – September 18, 1980) was an American journalist, essayist, short story writer, novelist, and political activist. Her 1962 novel *Ship of Fools* was the best-selling novel in America that year, but her short stories received much more critical acclaim.

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## Biography

Katherine Anne Porter was born in Indian Creek, Texas as Callie Russel Porter to Harrison Boone Porter and Mary Alice (Jones) Porter. Her family tree can be traced back to American frontiersman Daniel Boone and the writer O. Henry (William Sydney Porter), her father's second cousin.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1892, when Porter was two years old, her mother died two months after giving birth to her last child. Porter's father took his four surviving children (an older brother had died in infancy) to live with his mother, Catherine Ann Porter, in Kyle, Texas. The depth of her grandmother's influence can be inferred from Porter's later adoption of her name. Her grandmother died while taking eleven-year-old Callie to visit relatives in Marfa, Texas.

After her grandmother's death, the family lived in several towns in Texas and Louisiana, staying with relatives or living in rented rooms. She was enrolled in free schools wherever the family was

## Katherine Anne Porter



Porter in 1930

<b>Born</b>	Callie Russell Porter May 15, 1890 Indian Creek, Texas, U.S.
<b>Died</b>	September 18, 1980 (aged 90) Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.
<b>Resting place</b>	Indian Creek Cemetery, Texas, U.S.
<b>Occupation</b>	Journalist · essayist · short story writer · novelist ·

living, and for a year in 1904 she attended the Thomas School, a private Methodist school in San Antonio, Texas. This was her only formal education beyond grammar school.

In 1906, at age sixteen, Porter left home and married John Henry Koontz in Lufkin, Texas. She subsequently converted to his religion, Roman Catholicism.<sup>[2]</sup> Koontz, the son of a wealthy Texas ranching family, was physically abusive; once while drunk, he threw her down the stairs, breaking her ankle. They divorced officially in 1915.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1914 she escaped to Chicago, where she worked briefly as an extra in movies. She then returned to Texas and worked the small-town entertainment circuit as an actress and singer. In 1915, she asked that her name be changed to Katherine Anne Porter as part of her divorce decree.

Also in 1915, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent the following two years in sanatoria, where she decided to become a writer. It was discovered during that time, however, that she had bronchitis, not TB. In 1917, she began writing for the Fort Worth Critic, critiquing dramas and writing society gossip. In 1918, she wrote for the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, Colorado. In the same year, Katherine almost died in Denver during the 1918 flu pandemic. When she was discharged from the hospital months later, she was frail and completely bald. When her hair finally grew back, it was white and remained that color for the rest of her life.<sup>[1]</sup> Her experience was reflected in her trilogy of short novels, *Pale Horse*, *Pale Rider* (1939), for which she received the first annual gold medal for literature in 1940 from the Society of Libraries of New York University.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 1919, Porter moved to Greenwich Village in New York City and made her living ghost writing, writing children's stories and doing publicity work for a motion picture company. The year in New York City had a politically radicalizing effect on her; and in 1920, she went to work for a magazine publisher in Mexico, where she became acquainted with members of the Mexican leftist movement, including Diego Rivera. Eventually, however, Porter became disillusioned with the revolutionary movement and its leaders. In the 1920s she also became intensely critical of religion, and remained so until the last decade of her life, when she again embraced the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>[4]</sup>

Between 1920 and 1930, Porter traveled back and forth between Mexico and New York City and began publishing short stories and essays.<sup>[5]</sup> Her first published story was "Maria Concepcion" in *The Century Magazine*. (In his 1960s novel *Providence Island*, Calder Willingham had the character Jim fantasize a perfect lover and he called her Maria Concepcion Diaz.)<sup>[1]</sup> In 1930, she published her first short-story collection, *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*. An expanded edition of this collection was published in 1935 and received such critical acclaim that it alone virtually assured her place in American literature.

political  
activist

**Years active** 1920–1977

**Spouse(s)** John Henry Koontz (1906-1915) (divorced)  
Ernest Stock (1926-1927) (divorced)  
Eugene Pressly (1930-1938) (divorced)  
Albert Russel Erskine, Jr. (1938-1942) (divorced)

**Awards** Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (1965)  
National Book Award (1965)



Porter's childhood home in Kyle was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2004.

In 1926, Porter married Ernest Stock and lived briefly in Connecticut before divorcing him in 1927. Some biographers suggest that Porter suffered several miscarriages, at least one stillbirth between 1910 and 1926, and an abortion; and after contracting gonorrhoea from Stock, that she had a hysterectomy in 1927, ending her hopes of ever having a child. Yet Porter's letters to her lovers suggest that she still intimated her menstruation after this alleged hysterectomy. She once confided to a friend that "I have lost children in all the ways one can."<sup>[6]</sup>

During the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, Porter enjoyed a prominent reputation as one of America's most distinguished writers, but her limited output and equally-limited sales had her living on grants and advances for most of the era.<sup>[7]</sup>

During the 1930s, she spent several years in Europe during which she continued to publish short stories. She married Eugene Pressly, a writer, in 1930. In 1938, upon returning from Europe, she divorced Pressly and married Albert Russel Erskine, Jr., a graduate student. He reportedly divorced her in 1942, after discovering her real age and that she was 20 years his senior.<sup>[N 1]</sup>

Porter became an elected member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1943, and was a writer-in-residence at several colleges and universities, including the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, and the University of Virginia.<sup>[8]</sup>

Between 1948 and 1958, she taught at Stanford University, the University of Michigan, Washington and Lee University, and the University of Texas, where her unconventional manner of teaching made her popular with students.

Three of Porter's stories were adapted into radio dramas on the program *NBC University Theatre*. "Noon Wine" was made into an hour drama in early 1948, and two years later "Flowering Judas" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" each were produced in half-hour dramas on an episode of the hour-long program. Porter herself made two appearances on the radio series giving critical commentary on works by Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf. In the 1950s and 1960s she occasionally appeared on television in programs discussing literature.

Porter published her only novel, *Ship of Fools*, in 1962; it was based on her reminiscences of a 1931 ocean cruise she had taken from Vera Cruz, Mexico, to Germany. The novel's success finally gave her financial security (she reportedly sold the film rights for *Ship of Fools* for \$500,000). Producer David O. Selznick was after the film rights; but United Artists who owned the property, demanded \$400,000. The novel was adapted for film by Abby Mann; producer and director Stanley Kramer featured Vivien Leigh in her final film performance.<sup>[N 2]</sup>

Despite Porter's claim that after the publication of *Ship of Fools* she would not win any more prizes in America, in 1966 she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize<sup>[10]</sup> and the U.S. National Book Award<sup>[11]</sup> for *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*. That year she was also appointed to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In 1977, she published *The Never-Ending Wrong*, an account of the notorious trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, which she had protested 50 years earlier.

Porter died in Silver Spring, Maryland, on September 18, 1980, at the age of 90, and her ashes were buried next to her mother at Indian Creek Cemetery in Texas. In 1990, Recorded Texas Historic Landmark number 2905 was placed in Brown County, Texas, to honor the life and career of Porter.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Awards and honors

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- 1966 – Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Collected Stories* (1965)<sup>[10]</sup>
- 1966 – National Book Award for *The Collected Stories* (1965)<sup>[11]</sup>
- 1967 – Gold Medal Award for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters
- Three nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature
- 2006 – Porter was featured on a United States postage stamp issued May 15, 2006. She was the 22nd person featured in the *Literary Arts* commemorative stamp series.<sup>[13][14]</sup>

## Works

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### Short story collections

- *Flowering Judas* (Harcourt, Brace: 1930). Includes eight of Porter's earliest short stories.
- *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (Harcourt, Brace: 1935). Includes the contents of the earlier edition as well as four additional stories.
- *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (Harcourt, Brace: 1939). Includes the three stories Porter referred to as short novels: "Old Mortality", "Noon Wine" (American radio, 1948; American TV, 1966; American TV, 1985), and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (American radio, 1950; Canadian TV, 1963 & British TV, 1964).
- *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (Harcourt, Brace: 1944). Includes nine of Porter's short stories.
- *The Old Order: Stories of the South* (Harcourt, Brace: 1955). Includes ten of Porter's previously published short stories, all of which take place in the American South.
- *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (Harcourt, Brace: 1964). Includes all twenty-six of Porter's previously published short stories, including the three she preferred to call short novels.

### Novel

- *Ship of Fools*, (Little, Brown, & Co.: 1962; American film, 1965).

### Nonfiction

- *The Days Before* (Harcourt, Brace: 1952). Includes many of Porter's book reviews, critical essays, memoirs, etc.
- *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (Delacorte: 1970).

### Posthumous publications

- *Letters of Katherine Anne Porter* (Atlantic Monthly Press: 1990), edited by Isabel Bayley. Includes portions of over 250 letters Porter wrote to over sixty correspondents between 1930 and 1966.
- *"This Strange, Old World" and Other Book Reviews Written by Katherine Anne Porter* (University of Georgia Press, 1991), edited by Darlene Harbour Unrue. Includes almost 50 of the book reviews Porter published in various periodicals during her lifetime.
- *Uncollected Early Prose of Katherine Anne Porter* (University of Texas Press: 1993), edited by Ruth M. Alvarez and Thomas F. Walsh. Includes twenty-nine of Porter's prose works of fiction and nonfiction, not included in earlier published editions.
- *Katherine Anne Porter's Poetry* (University of South Carolina Press: 1996), edited by Darlene Harbour Unrue. Includes all thirty-two of the poems Porter published in periodicals during her

lifetime.

- *Porter: Collected Stories and Other Writings* (Library of America: 2008). Includes the full text of "The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter" (Harcourt, Brace 1964) as well as many of the pieces that were included in her two previous collections of nonfiction.
- *Selected Letters of Katherine Anne Porter: Chronicles of a Modern Woman* (University Press of Mississippi: 2012), edited by Darlene Harbour Unrue. Includes over 130 complete letters Porter wrote to over seventy correspondents between 1916 and 1979.

## Other publications

- *My Chinese Marriage* by Mae Franking, ghostwritten by Porter (Duffield & Co: 1921).
- *Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts* (Young & McCallister: 1922).
- *Katherine Anne Porter's French Song Book* (Harrison of Paris: 1933). Includes seventeen French songs and Porter's English translations.
- *A Christmas Story* (Delacorte: 1967). Porter's story, previously published, about her niece Mary Alice Hillendahl.
- *The Never-Ending Wrong* (Little, Brown, & Co.: 1977). Porter's reflections upon the 1927 executions of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

## Notes

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1. Brewster Ghiselin wrote a poem called "The Ring" that is an allusion to the marriage-suicide.
2. The ensemble cast of *Ship of Fools* (1965) included Simone Signoret, José Ferrer, Lee Marvin, Oskar Werner, Michael Dunn, Elizabeth Ashley, George Segal, José Greco and Heinz Rühmann.<sup>[9]</sup>

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1. Johnston, Laurie. "Katherine Anne Porter Dies at 90; Won a Pulitzer for Short Stories". (<https://www.nytimes.com/1980/09/19/archives/katherine-anne-porter-dies-at-90-won-a-pulitzer-for-short-stories-a.html>) *The New York Times*, September 19, 1980. (subscription required)
2. Unrue 2005, p. 45.
3. Lavers, Norman. "Katherine Anne Porter." *Critical Survey Of Long Fiction, Fourth Edition* (2010): 1. Biography Reference Center. Web. 4 Apr. 2014.
4. Unrue 2005, pp.xv-xx (contains a Katherine Anne Porter chronology).
5. Stout, Janis P. (1995). *Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times - Minds of the new South*. University of Virginia Press. ISBN 978-0-813915685.
6. Unrue 2005, pp. 14, 86.
7. "Obituary: Katherine Anne Porter." *Variety*, September 24, 1980.
8. Hathcock, Barrett. "Katherine Anne Porter." *Katherine Anne Porter* (2005): 1. Biography Reference Center. Web. 4 Apr. 2014.
9. Steinberg, Jay. "Articles: Ship of Fools." (<http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/27532/Ship-of-Fools/articles.html>) *Turner Classic Movies*. Retrieved: October 11, 2013.
10. "Fiction." (<http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/Fiction>) *The Pulitzer Prizes: Past winners & finalists by category*. Retrieved: March 30, 2012.

11. "National Book Awards, 1966." (<https://www.nationalbook.org/awards-prizes/national-book-awards-1966>) *National Book Foundation*. Retrieved: March 30, 2012.  
(With acceptance speech by Porter and essays by Mary Gaitskill and H.L. Hix from the Awards 60-year anniversary blog.)
12. "THC-Katherine Anne Porter". ([http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/viewform.asp?atlas\\_num=5049002905&site\\_name=Porter,+Katherine+Anne&class=5000](http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/viewform.asp?atlas_num=5049002905&site_name=Porter,+Katherine+Anne&class=5000)) Archived ([https://web.archive.org/web/20160304125517/http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/viewform.asp?atlas\\_num=5049002905&site\\_name=Porter,+Katherine+Anne&class=5000](https://web.archive.org/web/20160304125517/http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/viewform.asp?atlas_num=5049002905&site_name=Porter,+Katherine+Anne&class=5000)) 2016-03-04 at the *Wayback Machine Recorded Texas Historic Landmark (Texas Historical Commission)*. Retrieved: February 22, 2011.
13. "Katherine Anne Porter Stamp Sails Into Post Offices". ([http://www.usps.com/communications/news/stamps/2006/sr06\\_023.htm](http://www.usps.com/communications/news/stamps/2006/sr06_023.htm)) Archived ([https://web.archive.org/web/20080515214635/http://www.usps.com/communications/news/stamps/2006/sr06\\_023.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20080515214635/http://www.usps.com/communications/news/stamps/2006/sr06_023.htm)) 2008-05-15 at the *Wayback Machine United States Postal Service*, May 15, 2006. Retrieved: July 10, 2008.
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## External links

- *Papers of Katherine Anne Porter* (<http://hdl.handle.net/1903.1/1532>) housed at *Hornbake Library, University of Maryland Libraries*
- *Works by or about Katherine Anne Porter* (<https://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n79-38436>) in libraries (*WorldCat* catalog)
- Barbara Thompson Davis (Winter–Spring 1963). "Katherine Anne Porter, The Art of Fiction No. 29" (<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4569/the-art-of-fiction-no-29-katherine-anne-porter>). *The Paris Review*.
- Petri Liukkonen. "Katherine Anne Porter" (<http://authorscalendar.info/kaporter.htm>). *Books and Writers*
- Brief biography at *Perspectives in American Literature* (<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/c/hap7/porter.html>)
- Katherine Anne Porter at *American Masters* (PBS) ([https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/porter\\_k.html](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/porter_k.html))
- Photos of the first edition of Porter's Pulitzer Prize winning book (<http://www.pprize.com/BookDetail.php?bk=48>)
- Official site of Porter's childhood home in Kyle, TX (<https://web.archive.org/web/20120227141505/http://www.english.txstate.edu/KAP/index>)

- [Stuart Wright Collection: Katherine Anne Porter Papers \(#1169-009\), East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University \(https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/special/ead/findingaids/1169-009\)](https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/special/ead/findingaids/1169-009)
  - [Works by or about Katherine Anne Porter \(https://archive.org/search.php?query=%28+%22Katherine+Anne+Porter%22+%29\)](https://archive.org/search.php?query=%28+%22Katherine+Anne+Porter%22+%29) at [Internet Archive](https://www.archive.org/)
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