

Carson McCullers Biography

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Playwright, Author (1917–1967)

The work of Carson McCullers, author of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*, is must-read southern gothic fiction.

Synopsis

Born Lula Carson Smith on February 19, 1917, Carson McCullers gained early critical and commercial success with her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. During WWII, McCullers lived in the February House, a Brooklyn artist's commune, where freethinking voices such as W.H. Auden congregated, debated and composed iconic works. Although she comes from the Southern Gothic tradition, McCullers wrote all of her fiction after leaving the South. She died in Nyack, New York, at the age of 50.

Early Life

Originally Lula Carson Smith, Carson McCullers was born on February 19, 1917, in Columbus, Georgia. The daughter of a jewelry store owner, McCullers first aspired to be a musician and started taking piano lessons at age 10. Always sickly, McCullers fought a bout of rheumatic fever as a child, and it led her to move music to the back burner, a period during which she began exploring writing. Nonetheless, in 1934 she headed off to New York City, where she was to study at the famed Juilliard School of Music.

Once in New York, McCullers abandoned music to pursue her new literary passion. It's unclear if she actually intended to go to Juilliard or simply used the plan as an excuse to go to New York

and pursue writing. Regardless, with music left behind, McCullers jumped in with both feet, taking creative writing classes at Columbia University and New York University while working odd jobs.

Success came early to this young writer. At the age of 19, McCullers had her first story, “Wunderkind,” published in the December 1936 issue of *Story* magazine, which was edited by her former writing teacher, Whit Burnett. The story explored the painful revelation of a young girl who discovers that she is not a musical prodigy.

Around the time of the story’s publication, McCullers was in her hometown recovering from an illness. She was in a relationship with James Reeves McCullers Jr., whom she had met through a friend. The following year, the two married in September—a union that would prove to be quite stormy over the years. There was some jealousy between the pair—her husband also wrote—and both were heavy drinkers.

Big Break

In 1940, McCullers received an enormous amount of critical praise and commercial success with her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. The work centered on a deaf-mute who finds himself the sounding board for four members of a small Georgia town—a restaurant owner, a political activist, an African-American doctor and a teenage girl. Through their stories, the characters reveal their frustrations, their loneliness and their isolation from those around them.

While her career was taking off, McCullers was going through a difficult time personally. Separated from her husband, she joined several other literary and artistic talents, such as author Richard Wright and composer Leonard Bernstein, to live in a house in Brooklyn Heights, New York. Called the February House by Anais Nin, the residence was owned by *Harper’s Bazaar* editor George Davis.

Divorced from her husband in 1941, McCullers had mixed results with her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, which was published that same year. (It had appeared earlier in *Harper’s Bazaar*.) It drew a number of negative reviews but had some commercial success. Continuing her exploration of loneliness and isolation, the work was more provocative than her first novel, tackling issues relating to impotency, bisexuality, infidelity, bestiality and murder. Some of elements of the tumultuous relationships depicted in this story may have been inspired by her own marriage—both she and her husband were bisexual and had affairs.

The Ballad of the Sad Café

That same year, Carson grappled with some more health issues. But she also made her first visit to the Yaddo artists’ colony in Upstate New York, where she started her next major work, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, which was first published in *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1943. In this story,

McCullers wrote about a love triangle in a small Southern town, and some consider this to be one of her best works.

While she had divorced her husband, McCullers remained close to Reeves and the pair decided to remarry in 1945. Her career continued to thrive with the publication of the novella *The Member of the Wedding* the following year. Also in 1946, McCullers met a young, gifted writer named Truman Capote through her sister Rita. The two became fast friends, and McCullers helped launch Capote's career. Unfortunately, the friendship later soured over McCullers' concerns that Capote may have used some of her material and that he was not properly grateful for her support.

Health Concerns

Having struggled with health problems much of her life, McCullers was dealt a devastating blow in 1947 when she had two strokes—one in August and one in November—which left her paralyzed on one side. She grew increasingly despondent over her poor health, leading to a suicide attempt in 1948. Recovering physically and emotionally from the incident, McCullers spent much of the latter part of the year with Tennessee Williams, a close friend, working on a stage adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding*. In January 1950, her play opened on Broadway to strong reviews and won the Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play that year.

In the early 1950s, McCullers spent a lot of time in Europe with her husband and such literary friends as W. H. Auden, Gore Vidal and Tennessee Williams. Reeves McCullers was increasingly depressed and wanted the pair to commit suicide together. Fearing for her own well-being, McCullers returned to the United States in 1953, and Reeves ended his own life in a Paris hotel by taking an overdose of sleeping pills in November of that year.

In 1957, her play *The Square Root of Wonderful* opened on Broadway, but it closed after only 45 performances. Her final novel, *Clock Without Hands*, was published in 1961 without garnering much critical attention or commercial interest. The following year, McCullers had surgery to remove a cancerous breast and another surgery to repair her paralyzed left hand. Her final work, a collection of children's verse titled *Sweet as a Pickle, Clean as a Pig*, was published in 1964. Around this time, Edward Albee's adaptation of McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café* debuted on Broadway, earning six Tony Award nominations.

Legacy

McCullers suffered a final stroke on August 15, 1967, which left her in a coma for 46 days. She died on September 29 at Nyack Hospital and was later buried at the town's Oak Hill Cemetery. More than 200 people attended her funeral, including Capote, Williams and actresses Myrna Loy and Julie Harris.

Shortly after her death, the first film adaptation of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* was released, starring Marlon Brando and Elizabeth Taylor. The following year, the film version of *The Heart*

Is a Lonely Hunter (1968) appeared on the big screen and netted Academy Award nominations for two of its stars—Alan Arkin and Sondra Locke.

In recent years, there has been a revived interest in McCullers's work. Oprah Winfrey selected McCullers's first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, for her popular book club in 2004, sending paperback sales soaring. More than 60 years after its original publication, the novel's themes of loneliness and isolation still speak to today's readers.