
The Heart is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers

Also known as: (Lula) Carson (Smith) McCullers, Lula Carson Smith McCullers, Lula Carson Smith, Carson Smith McCullers, Carson McCullers, Lula Carson McCullers

Birth: February 19, 1917 in Columbus, Georgia

Death: September 29, 1967 in Nyack, New York

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer

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Sidelights

A prominent member of the twentieth-century Southern gothic school, Carson McCullers wrote of lonely, alienated, and sometimes grotesque characters who symbolize individuals' essential isolation and the failure of interpersonal communication. As McCullers explained in an essay in *The Mortgaged Heart: The Previously Uncollected Writings of Carson McCullers*, "spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes." Much of McCullers's fiction is autobiographical, reflecting her Southern upbringing, her chronic ill health, and her troubled marriage. Though her work is filled with "conflict, frustration, grief, pain, and fear... , the mood is seldom morbid or bitterly melancholy," Louise Y. Gossett wrote in *Violence in Southern Fiction*. Gossett saw love as the primary motif in McCullers's writings and emphasized McCullers's compassion for her characters: "The author is charitable toward the violence and grotesqueness which develops when the impulse to love goes astray, and she treats deviation more with mercy than with horror."

In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, and *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers's unique and disturbing vision is most vividly expressed, and these works have assured her literary reputation as one of the outstanding Southern novelists of her century. Tennessee Williams once told the *New York Times*: "I regarded her as the greatest living prose writer and the greatest prose writer that the South produced." In his *Modern Novel*, Walter Allen said that "Faulkner apart, the most remarkable novelist the South has produced seems to me Carson McCullers."

Born and raised in Georgia, McCullers showed early promise as a pianist and, at the age of seventeen, went to the Juilliard School of Music in New York City. Because of poor health, she did not attend classes and instead studied writing at Columbia University, taking night classes while working a variety of jobs during the day. One of her teachers, Whit Burnett, arranged to have her first story published in *Story* magazine. An autobiographical work titled "Wunderkind," it tells of a fifteen-year old girl's realization that she is not, after all, a musical prodigy. When she subsequently drops her music lessons, she finds that she loses her circle of musical friends and the special parental treatment she had enjoyed. The story's sense of adolescent loss and insecurity prefigures such later works as *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*.

At the age of twenty-three, McCullers had her first book published, the novel *The Heart Is a Lonely*

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Hunter. Set in a small Southern town similar to the one in which its author was raised, the novel is “filled with impressions out of [McCullers’s] childhood,” as Richard M. Cook wrote in *Carson McCullers*. “It creates,” Cook continued, “a richly detailed, integrated vision of the private and public life of a small Georgian town.” The novel tells the story of deaf-mute John Singer, who finds himself the confidant of four disparate townspeople—a radical, a black doctor, a restaurant owner, and an adolescent girl. Each one is dissatisfied with small town life and yearns for escape. Each, too, is estranged from and unable to communicate with other people. Singer’s silence is reassuring to them. When they speak to him (Singer reads their lips), they believe that he understands and cares about them. But in truth Singer seldom understands what he is told. He listens to be polite. The four characters, Cook explained, are “desperate for understanding from those around them, and tragically incapable of rendering the kind of love and understanding each of the others need.”

The adolescent girl of the novel, Mick Kelly, is based on McCullers, and her story is “a fable about incapable loneliness,” Robert F. Kiernan wrote in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Mick has dreams of someday conducting an orchestra, but her family’s poverty limits her opportunity to achieve this goal. When, to help support her family, Mick is obliged to leave school to take a job in a dime store, she knows that this step means the end of her dreams. She will never be able to leave the dime store job. “One feels that Mick, once a fascinating, bright youngster, will grow up an unhappy, neurotic woman,” Cook commented, “and that the loss involved in such a growing up is tragic.”

Mick’s story is representative of the emptiness and failure of the novel’s other characters. Jake Blount, the political radical, is frustrated by his inability to relieve the poverty he sees around him; the black doctor, Benedict Copeland, is unable to fulfill his dream of leading the struggle for racial reform; and restaurant owner Biff Brannon has grown increasingly passive and withdrawn since the death of his wife. “Each character,” Kiernan observed, “is dominated by a fixed set of ideas that makes it impossible for them to reach communion with others. Indeed, the characters are convinced they are doomed to solitude, and, out of their frustration, they tend to make antisocial gestures that compound their isolation.”

Most critics saw the characters in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* as grotesques in the tradition of the Southern gothic school, “a school supposedly concerned with the grotesque and the abnormal [and] with an outlandish love for the morbid,” as Jane Hart explained in the *Georgia Review*. However, Hart emphasized the “tenderness” of McCullers’s presentation of her characters. “Her vision,” Hart believed, “is a clear, compassionate one of people spiritually isolated each from the other.... If she has used the grotesque it is because the loneliest of all human souls is found in the abnormal and deformed, the outward and manifest symbol of human separateness.” Louis D. Rubin, Jr., writing in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, also perceived the symbolic nature of McCullers’s characters. They are not meant to be, Rubin wrote, “a commentary upon the complacent ‘normality’ of the community which would term them freakish, but as exemplars of the wretchedness of the human condition.” Similarly, in his *The Ballad of Carson McCullers*, Oliver Evans held that McCullers makes Singer a deaf-mute “because of his symbolic value.” Through Singer, the critic added, McCullers suggests “that what men see in other men whom they admire or love is not what is ‘really’ there but what they wish to find.... It ought to be obvious that the more grotesque and repulsive a character is who is yet capable of inspiring love in another, the more



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forcefully he illustrates this thesis." In *The Mortgaged Heart* McCullers clarifies her symbolic intentions. "Love," she writes, "and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about--people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love--their spiritual isolation." W. P. Clancy in *Commonweal* saw McCullers as "the artist functioning at the very loftiest symbolic level, and if one must look for labels I should prefer to call her work 'metaphysical.' Behind the strange and horrible in her world there are layed out the most sombre tragedies of the human spirit."

An acclaimed best-seller, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* established McCullers's literary reputation. B. R. Redman in the *Saturday Review of Literature* thought it "an extraordinary novel to have been written by a young woman of twenty-two; but the more important fact is that it is an extraordinary novel in its own right." Another contemporary reviewer, Rose Feld, in the *New York Times* opined that McCullers writes "with a sweep and certainty that are overwhelming." More recent evaluations of the book have placed it among the most important works of its time. Writing in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Joseph R. Millichap called the novel "an impressive achievement" and believed that it "provides a critical perspective for viewing Mrs. McCullers' other works, and perhaps for the whole expanse of modern Southern fiction." At the time of McCullers's death in 1967, Eliot Fremont-Smith in the *New York Times* called *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* a "remarkable, still powerful book."

Reflections in a Golden Eye, McCullers's second novel, did not meet many of the critical expectations raised by *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. This disappointment was due in part to its scandalous subject matter; as Margaret Clark complained in the *Boston Transcript*, the book "is too preoccupied with the morbid and bizarre to be the important work everyone was expecting." The story is set on a Southern army base in the 1930s and concerns, as McCullers wrote in the book, "two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse." One officer, Captain Penderton, is impotent, bisexual, and a sadomasochist; the other, Major Langdon, is a charming womanizer who is having an affair with Penderton's wife. Langdon's own wife, so distraught over the death of their son that she has cut off her nipples with a garden shear, befriends the homosexual houseboy Anacleto. Private Williams, who takes his sexual pleasure with Mrs. Penderton's horse, Firebird, attracts the homosexual attention of Captain Penderton. But when Penderton finds that Williams spies on his wife as she sleeps, he murders Williams. "In almost any hands," a critic writing in *Time* commented, "such material would yield a rank fruitcake of mere arty melodrama. But Carson McCullers tells her tale with simplicity, insight, and a rare gift of phrase."

As in her first novel, McCullers wrote in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* of "the utter alienation of individual nature and the absence of reciprocity in human relationships," Kiernan believed. McCullers's effort was met with a mixed critical reception, however. Basil Davenport, writing in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, for example, found the novel to be a "'vipers'-nest of neurasthenic relationships among characters whom the author seems hardly to comprehend, and of whose perversions she can create nothing." In his review for the *New Yorker*, Clifton Fadiman also found shortcomings. "McCullers was herself in her first novel," Fadiman wrote. "In her second effort she seems to be borrowing from her reading of others. This mimicry gives an effect of falseness which is further strengthened by her too obvious desire to create people and situations that are strange and startling." However, Dayton Kohler pointed out in *College*

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English that the novel is more “restricted and intense” than its predecessor. This quality results in “speed and concentration, and the reader has a feeling of powerlessness before this swift unfolding of physical violence and psychological horrors.” Reflections in a Golden Eye is “more than a simple chronicle of violence,” Kohler added, calling the work “an example of the planned novel, with every detail and symbol deliberately created and plotted. Story, character, and setting exist as one great metaphor.”

Reflections in a Golden Eye was written during a troubled period in McCullers’s life. Her marriage to Reeves McCullers was on the brink of collapse: Reeves had taken a male lover, and McCullers responded by finding a female lover. The book, Kiernan observed, is perhaps “McCullers’ imaginative response to [the] disintegration” of her marriage. The hopelessness of the novel, the feeling that the characters are “beyond redemption as valuable, living personalities,” as Cook described it, comes from McCullers’s own sense of despair at this time. In 1940, shortly after finishing the book, she divorced her husband and moved to Brooklyn to live with George Davis, the editor of Harper’s Bazaar.

In 1943 McCullers completed her long novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, which was published serially in Harper’s Bazaar that year and was published in book form in the 1951 omnibus volume *The Ballad of the Sad Café: The Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers*. Described by Irving Howe in the *New York Times Book Review* as “one of the finest novels ever written by an American,” *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is regarded by many as McCullers’s most accomplished work. Evans maintained that it alone justified McCullers’s “position among the half dozen or so who comprise the highest echelon of living American writers.”

The Ballad of the Sad Café is the story of Amelia Evans, who falls in love with the hunchback Lymon and, inspired by this love, opens a café in her Southern town. The small restaurant flourishes, providing a much-needed meeting place for the townspeople. But when Amelia’s husband, Marvin Macy, is released from prison and returns home, Lymon falls in love with him. This love triangle leads to a fist fight between Amelia and Marvin that only ends when Lymon joins in and the two men best Amelia. They then tear up her café before leaving town together. The loss of her lover and the destruction of the café cause Amelia to withdraw from the world.

Critics have pointed out that it is McCullers’s style that allows *The Ballad of the Sad Café* to transcend its violent and sometimes bizarre story. “The bare incidents, stripped of the narrator’s poetic presentation, are ugly, ludicrous, even repulsive; no paraphrase could ever begin to convey their significance, much less their beauty,” Albert J. Griffith wrote in the *Georgia Review*. Griffith concluded that, “in context, the grotesqueness remains but is turned towards a purpose, becomes part of a whole which is not grotesque, transcends the human and moves into the numinous.” McCullers’s use of a nameless narrator, Kiernan believed, “casts the aura of folklore over the tale: the characters become archetypes... rather than grotesques, and their story becomes something elemental, mysterious, and suggestive.” Robert Phillips, writing in the *Southwest Review*, maintained that McCullers’s writing style, “lyrical and colloquial, lucid and enigmatic, at one and the same time,” presents the character of Amelia “like an image seen in a carnival mirror... an exaggerated, comically distorted, and yet somehow sadly accurate reflection of ourselves.” This presentation, distancing and intimate at the same time, creates “an extraordinarily subtle

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relationship... between character and reader," Phillips concluded. Griffith continued his analysis of the book by saying that McCullers had successfully "elevated her primitive characters and their grotesque actions to the wild, extravagant, and beautiful level of myth." John McNally, writing in the *South Atlantic Bulletin*, judged the book to be "a beautifully sculptured piece of writing" and "a song of the human spirit."

In 1946 *The Member of the Wedding* was published. It concerns Frankie Addams, an adolescent girl in a small Southern town who feels acutely isolated from other people. "Doesn't it strike you as strange that I am I, and you are you?" Frankie asks the black maid Berenice at one point in the novel. "We can look at each other, and touch each other, and stay together year in and year out in the same room. Yet always I am I, and you are you. And I can't ever be anything else but me, and you can't ever be anything else but you." This feeling of isolation moves Frankie to fantasize that her older brother's upcoming wedding will also include her, joining her with the married couple, whom she calls "the we of me." But her attempt at the wedding to ride along in the newlyweds' car is stopped by her father, who pulls her away, and Frankie comes to realize that to be human is to be forever alone. *The Member of the Wedding*, Jerry Bryant wrote in *The Open Decision*, "is descriptive, showing what occurs to people who happen to be born into life. There is nothing we can 'do' to modify that life in its basic characteristics and hence we must content ourselves with separateness and the peculiar freedom that accompanies that separateness."

In this novel, McCullers handles the question of loneliness, George Dangerfield noted in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, "in its most undifferentiated form; places it in this light and in that; looks at it savagely, gleefully, tenderly; seems almost to taste it and to roll it round her tongue; but never attempts to find an answer." This analysis of loneliness takes place during the extended kitchen conversations between Frankie, the black maid Berenice, and the sickly six-year-old boy John Henry. As Berenice tries to dissuade Frankie from joining the married couple, the three characters discuss the loneliness that is the nature of life. "And this," Marguerite Young observed in the *Kenyon Review*, "is almost all that ever happens in the book but enough to keep the sensitive reader appalled to hear meaning after meaning dissolve, while the old problems continue." Their discussion ends with the three of them crying together, each for his own private reasons: Frankie because she cannot join her brother and his wife; Berenice because she has no husband; and John Henry because he is soon to die. "The scene dramatizes the sad fact of human existence--the impossibility of ever filling up consciousness without turning it into something else, the necessity of remaining separate, and most important, the beauty of sharing these human deprivations," Bryant wrote. Although Frankie is not able to achieve the union she imagined, she has found in Berenice a friend who understands her problems and so the novel offers some hope for her future.

The Member of the Wedding has been compared to *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* because both novels are chiefly concerned with human isolation and the efforts to overcome it. Whereas *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* relates this problem to the larger issues of politics and race, *The Member of the Wedding* "dramatizes the more personal, private problems arising out of isolation by examining its effect on the consciousness of a single individual," Cook stated. Because of this narrowed focus of concern, some critics have found the novel less satisfying than its predecessor and a retreat from the larger issues previ-

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ously raised. But Frederic Carpenter, writing in *English Journal*, thought that *The Member of the Wedding* provides a better insight into its adolescent character than does *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and relates Frankie's pain to that of the other characters in a more effective manner. Carpenter stated that "by contrast, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* seems hardly to describe adolescence at all. The youthful Mick Kelly appears a background figure, observing and partly sharing the tragedies of the deaf-mutes, the Negroes, and the labor agitators."

The Member of the Wedding received critical and popular acclaim. Rumer Godden, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, called it "a masterpiece" and pointed out that it has become "universally popular." Unfortunately, *The Member of the Wedding* proved to be McCullers's last critically acclaimed novel. After its publication in 1946, only her omnibus volume *The Ballad of the Sad Café: The Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers* and her stage adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding*, produced on Broadway in 1950, were successful. The stage play ran for 501 performances and won several prestigious drama awards, including the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and two Donaldson Awards. It also was included in *Best Plays of 1949-1950*. It is, Kiernan wrote, "one of the outstanding adaptations of a novel in the history of the American theatre." Although this stage adaptation "established her reputation as a playwright," Sara Nalley noted in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, McCullers wrote only one other play: *The Square Root of Wonderful*, produced in New York in 1957 and published in 1958, was a failure. Her last novel, *Clock without Hands*, received few favorable reviews when it appeared in 1961.

McCullers's deteriorating health and personal difficulties hampered her later career and contributed to the decline of her writing. Because of a series of strokes in 1947, she lost the vision in her right eye and became partially paralyzed. She had great difficulty walking and could type only with one hand, averaging one page per day. In 1948, despondent over her health, she attempted suicide; the failure of this attempt cured her from ever trying again. However, her husband, Reeves, whom she had divorced in 1940 and remarried in 1945, became increasingly suicidal. Upset by their unstable marriage and his inability to find a suitable career, Reeves began suggesting a double suicide to McCullers. While they were living in Europe in 1953, McCullers became so frightened by her husband's insistence on suicide that she fled back to the United States alone. A few weeks later Reeves killed himself in a Paris hotel with an overdose of sleeping pills. McCullers's life continued to be plagued by tragedy. Her mother, with whom she lived after her return to the United States, died in 1955; and in 1961, McCullers underwent surgery for breast cancer. Following another stroke in 1967 she died in Nyack, New York, at the age of fifty.

In 1999 *Illumination and Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers* was published after the writer's papers were released by McCullers's estate. The book includes a series of vignettes, a segment containing correspondence between the author and her husband during World War II, and an original outline for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, which McCullers called "The Mute." Writing in *Library Journal*, Jeris Cassel maintained, "Readers will find themselves as easily immersed in this work as in McCullers's fiction and will feel sad and rudely shaken when it ends abruptly."

Rubin pointed out that *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, *The Ballad of the Sad*

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Café, and *The Member of the Wedding* --all written when the author was in her twenties--comprise McCullers's major works, and "a very impressive body of fiction indeed.... Nothing that she wrote in the remaining two decades of her life adds much to her achievement." Writing in *Critical Occasions*, Julian Symons noted McCullers's interest in the symbolic and wrote: "It is her triumph that from her preoccupation with freaks and with human loneliness she makes fictions which touch and illuminate at many points the world to which all art makes, however obliquely, its final reference: the world of literal reality." Perhaps the most flattering evaluations of McCullers's work have come from other writers. Gore Vidal, writing in the *Reporter*, concluded that McCullers's "genius for prose remains one of the few satisfying achievements of our second-rate culture."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born February 19, 1917, in Columbus, GA; died September 29, 1967, in Nyack, NY; daughter of Lamar (a jeweler) and Marguerite (Waters) Smith; married Reeves McCullers, September 20, 1937 (divorced, 1940); remarried March 19, 1945 (committed suicide, 1953). Education: Attended Columbia University and New York University, 1935- 36. Memberships: American Academy of Arts and Letters (fellow).

AWARDS

Fiction fellowship, Houghton Mifflin, 1939; Guggenheim fellow, 1942, 1946; National Institute of Arts and Letters grant in literature, 1943; New York Drama Critics Circle Award, two Donaldson Awards, and Theatre Club gold medal, all 1950, all for stage adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding*; prize of the younger generation from *Die Welt*, 1965, for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.

CAREER : Writer; also held various jobs.

WRITINGS

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- *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe: The Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers* (includes *The Ballad of the Sad Café* [also see below; first published serially in *Harper's Bazaar*, 1943], *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and *The Member of the Wedding*), Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1951, published as *The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories*, Bantam (New York, NY), 1967, published as *The Shorter Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers*, Barrie & Jenkins (London, England), 1972.
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 - *Illumination and Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers*, edited and with an introduction by Carlos L. Dews, University of Wisconsin Press (Madison, WI), 1999.
 - *Complete Novels*, Library of America (New York, NY), 2001.
- Contributor to O. Henry Memorial Prize Stories of 1942 and Best Plays of 1949-1950.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

The Member of the Wedding was filmed by Columbia in 1952, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* by Seven Arts in 1967, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Warner-Seven Arts in 1968, and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* in 1991. *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was adapted for the stage by Edward Albee and produced on Broadway in 1963. "Carson McCullers (Historically Inaccurate)," a fictional play about the author's life written by Sarah Schulman, was produced in New York in 2002. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* was adapted for the stage by playwright Rebecca Gilman. The play, directed by Doug Hughes, opened March 23, 2005, at the Alliance Theater in Atlanta, Georgia, and was set to travel to several other southern towns. *The Member of the Wedding* (L.A. Theatre Works, 2001) and other novels have been adapted as audio books.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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