

## ARTS & LETTERS

### CARSON MCCULLERS:

#### *A Life.*

By Josyane Savigneau; transl. by Joan E. Howard. Houghton Mifflin. 370 pp. \$30

I once heard Eudora Welty quote some advice Willa Cather had given her: “Let your fiction grow out of the land beneath your feet.” It is advice southern writers have traditionally taken to heart, creating from their regional postage stamps of America our nation’s literary landscape. On that fictional map is a small, hot, dreary Georgia mill town where during the Great Depression a girl named Lula Carson Smith (known as Sister) grew into a tall, gangly misfit who fled from loneliness by playing Bach and reading Flaubert and making up stories. At 20, she married another would-be writer, the charming Reeves McCullers, a serviceman at Fort Benning, the first boy who ever kissed her.

Carson McCullers (1917–67) was 23 when her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), made her famous overnight. Like *This Side of Paradise* before it and *The Catcher in the Rye* for a later generation, McCullers’s novel depicted a character—awkward, androgynous, swaggering adolescent Mick—in whom young rebels, with or without causes, saw themselves. She wrote another novel, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), and then adapted it for the stage. Starring Ethel Waters and Julie Harris, her first play became a huge hit on Broadway.

Where could so fast a comet go but down? And down she went, into alcoholism, romantic despair, critical failures, debilitating illness. Like her fellow Georgian Flannery O’Connor (who didn’t think much of her), McCullers died fairly young. Unlike O’Connor, she is occasionally dismissed as a

“minor” writer. But since her death in 1967, there have been half a dozen McCullers biographies, including several by French admirers such as Savigneau. (McCullers lived for a while in France, although she never spoke the language.)

No novelist could have a more passionate advocate than Savigneau, the author of a highly praised study of the French novelist Marguerite Yourcenar. *Carson McCullers: A Life* offers a critically persuasive and deeply sympathetic portrait of this troubled, shy, grandiose, and extraordinarily talented woman. While acknowledging a debt to the voluminous biography by Virginia Spencer Carr, *The Lonely Hunter* (1975), Savigneau offers a corrective to what she perceives to be Carr’s subliminally hostile and moralistic attitude and her refusal to grant McCullers the license of her genius and her unique childlike intensity of emotion.

Savigneau subtitled her book in the original French edition *Un coeur de jeune fille*, “a young girl’s heart,” for out of that lonely heart, those “torments of the body and the heart,” were born, she thinks, the novelist’s most memorable fiction. Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding* says, “I feel just exactly like somebody has peeled all the skin off me.” It is in that raw sensibility, that luminous, eerie candor shared by

Frankie’s creator, that Savigneau locates the peculiar genius of Carson McCullers.

A star from an early age, McCullers traveled the celebrity circuit—hopping from London to Paris to Rome—and we are as likely to find her in Ireland with John Huston, or in Key West with Tennessee Williams and Françoise Sagan, as we are to find her sitting at home on the porch with her housekeeper. A lasting place in American letters was vitally important to her, and she



Carson McCullers, by H. V. Poor

fought to hold onto hers. Despite shyness, illness, and at times suicidal depression, she committed herself to her public presence as a writer. International literary festivals and writers' retreats such as Breadloaf and Yaddo were second homes. Wherever she went, she was greatly beloved—and greatly disliked. Gore Vidal once said, "An hour with a dentist without Novacaine was like a minute with Carson McCullers."

Undiagnosed rheumatic fever led to a series of strokes beginning in her twenties that took her in and out of operating rooms dozens of times. She had surgery to reconstruct a hand, so she could use at least one to type, and to replace tendons in a leg, so she could walk with a cane. Her drinking didn't help, nor did smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. But through years of physical and emotional pain, as friends and family fell away (her caretaking mother died, her husband killed himself, allies such as Truman Capote became enemies), McCullers's indomitable will kept her alive and writing. It took her 15 years to finish her final book, *Clock without Hands* (1961), but she did finish it.

Although she left behind only a few plays, stories, poems, and essays, and the four novels, they are legacy enough to ensure her home in the modern canon. To McCullers, moral isolation was the normative human experience, and the desperate longing to connect, to find "the we of me," was the strongest human desire. In her fiction, she found it for herself—and gave it to a world of readers.

—MICHAEL MALONE

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*THE VIRGIN OF BENNINGTON.*

By Kathleen Norris. Riverhead. 240 pp. \$24.95

"My story . . . begins with an untidy but cheerful job interview on a snowy day in early December 1968," writes Norris. A senior at Bennington College in Vermont, and an aspiring poet, Norris had gone down to New York to apply for an assistant's job at the Academy of American Poets. The director of the Academy, Elizabeth Kray, then in her mid-fifties, was friendly with one of Norris's professors at Bennington (a poet with whom Norris was about to lose her virginity). Norris was nervous

about her lack of sophistication and East Coast credentials—her family was from South Dakota and Hawaii, where her father played in the Honolulu Symphony. Precisely for those deficiencies, the woman gave Norris the job.

Betty Kray, as Norris discovered, was that rare soul, a true appreciator of poetry without ambition to be a poet herself. Kray sent poets out to talk in ghetto high schools. She mixed readings by established poets such as Auden and Eliot with appearances by young talents—the then unknown Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Kenneth Koch, and Donald Hall. In the days before the academization of everything, she created the poetry circuit, on which poets could support themselves by going from college to college. In exchange for a reading, the poet got \$100, a wine and cheese reception, and, often as not, an overnight stay in a student's bed.

At work, Norris learned from Kray; outside of work, Norris learned from New York, that hard-edged teacher. She looked at porno magazines in Times Square with the poet James Tate. She wore "a tight lacy blouse, scarlet velvet hot pants, and turquoise panty hose" to a party given by Erica Jong, with the result that a drunken Gregory Corso chased her around the room, and her ex-lover, the professor—who had come with a younger Bennington girl—snubbed her. Norris frequented Max's Kansas City at the dawn of celebrity culture. She remembers the night one of Andy Warhol's beautiful boys asked her, "Would you have my baby? . . . I have such pretty ones . . . all over the world." "My God," the young woman thought to herself, "I have met Narcissus."

Norris got out early. In 1973 she met her future husband, and the following year the couple took over the farm she had inherited in South Dakota. Many years, several books, and one religious conversion later, Norris describes serving a funeral lunch with ladies from her church: "slapping butter and ham onto sliced buns; setting out a variety of donated salads (heavy on the Jell-o)"—details that stand in stark opposition to life in New York.

So far, so good. The memoir has a gentle rhythm, a pleasing way of looping through time without losing momentum. Then, on page 161, we return to Betty Kray, and never leave. We learn about her family, her marriage, her background, her relationships with other poets, her death in 1978. This is where the