

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Katherine Anne Porter, Author, 1890-1980

Ambitious and austere, Katherine Anne Porter was Texas's first novelist to win the Pulitzer Prize. Texas inspired the setting of much of her finest fiction, yet she maintained an uneasy relationship with her native state.

Born in Indian Creek, she lost her mother at age two and was raised largely by her grandmother in Kyle—a strong-willed woman who regaled the grandchildren with vivid tales of her plantation past. Katherine married at age 16—the first of four marriages—and embarked on what she termed a “nomadic life.”¹ She was a movie extra in Chicago, performed onstage in Texas and Louisiana, then left her first husband.² In 1918, while working as a journalist in Denver, she nearly died in the flu epidemic.

Katherine Anne characterized her endeavors during the 1920s as “running back and forth between Mexico City and Greenwich Village.”³ In Mexico she met leaders of the revolutionary government, immersed herself in that country's cultural renaissance, and began to write in earnest. Mexico, she asserted, “gave me back my Texas past.”⁴ She published several stories with nuanced settings in Mexico and Texas.

In 1931 a fellowship enabled her to make a long-desired trip to Europe. She set sail on a German ship, keeping notes of the voyage that would one day prove useful. After five years she returned to the U.S., shuffling residences among Pennsylvania, New York, Houston, and New Orleans. During this time she wrote long stories based on her own life and her grandmother's tales. Three of these were collected in her book *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, published in 1939 to critical acclaim. The book explores the conflicts between a romantic past and the harsh realities of the present.⁵

In later years Katherine traveled as a visiting professor and lived in an artists' colony in upstate New York before ultimately settling in Maryland. She spoke out against threats of totalitarianism and McCarthyism.⁶ Her masterpiece and only full-length novel, *Ship of Fools*, was released in 1962 after 25 years in progress. The book traces the origins of evil and rise of Nazism among allegorical characters aboard ship.⁷ Katherine based it on notes from her voyage to Germany in 1931. Her final publication in 1977 addressed the infamous Sacco-Vanzetti trial and executions.

Katherine bequeathed her personal papers and photos to the University of Maryland.⁸

Quotations

*I don't imagine I'll ever be a popular writer. I simply want to be free to say what I feel and think exactly as I am able—leave my testament, if you like, offer my evidence of what I found in this life and how it seemed to me, and what I was able to make of it.*⁹

*Human life itself may be almost pure chaos, but the work of the artist is to take these handfuls of confusion and disparate things, things that seem to be irreconcilable, and put them together in a frame to give them some kind of shape and meaning.*¹⁰

*Experience is what really happens to you in the long run, the truth that finally overtakes you.*¹¹

*Death cancels our engagements, but it does not affect the consequences of our acts in life.*¹²

Photo

George Platt Lynes.



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Endnotes

- ¹ Nomadic life from Sara E. Wilson, "A Writer's Writer: Preserving the Archives of Katherine Anne Porter," *Humanities* 19:5 (Sept./Oct. 1998), online at National Endowment for the Humanities, <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/1998-09/porter.html> (June 1, 2005). Other sources for biographical information are Darlene Harbour Unrue, "Porter, Katherine Anne," *Literary Encyclopedia*, <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=3608> (June 1, 2005); "Guide to the Papers of KAP: A Biography," University of Maryland Libraries, <http://www.lib.umd.edu/ARCV/kap/kapbio.html> (June 1, 2005); Petri Liukkonen, "Katherine Anne Porter," *Authors' Calendar: Books and Writers*, <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/kaporter.htm> (March 4, 2005); Joan Givner, "Porter, Katherine Anne," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/PP/fpo40.html> (April 15, 2005); "Katherine Anne Porter," *Famous Texans*, <http://www.famoustexans.com/katherineanneporter.htm> (March 3, 2005); and "Chap. 13: Southern Renaissance/Authors: Katherine Anne Porter," *American Passages: A Literary Survey*, <http://www.learner.org/ameripass/unit13/authors-4.html> (June 1, 2005).
- ² Darlene Harbour Unrue, "Porter, Katherine Anne," *Literary Encyclopedia*, <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=3608> (June 1, 2005).
- ³ "Porter, Katherine Anne," *Handbook of Texas Online*.
- ⁴ Petri Liukkonen, "Katherine Anne Porter," *Authors' Calendar: Books and Writers*, <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/kaporter.htm> (March 4, 2005).
- ⁵ Themes of her writing are discussed in Unrue, "Porter, Katherine Anne," *Literary Encyclopedia*, online.
- ⁶ Unrue, "Porter, Katherine Anne," *Literary Encyclopedia*, online.
- ⁷ *Ship of Fools* is discussed in Ibid. and more completely in Liukkonen, "Katherine Anne Porter," *Authors' Calendar: Books and Writers*, online.
- ⁸ "Porter, Katherine Anne," *Handbook of Texas Online*; "Katherine Anne Porter," *Famous Texans*, online.
- ⁹ Quoted in Wilson, "A Writer's Writer: Preserving the Archives of Katherine Anne Porter," online.
- ¹⁰ "Katherine Anne Porter Quotes," *Brainy Quote*, http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/k/katherine_anne_porter.html (June 1, 2005).
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Quoted in Susie Kelly Flatau and Lou Halsell Rodenberger, *Quotable Texas Women* (Abilene: State House Press, 2005), p. 39.