



• *Author*

TIMELINE

1926 – Begins piano lessons (age ten)

1932 – Announces decision to become a writer instead of a concert pianist

1933 – Writes first short story called "Sucker," which she tries unsuccessfully to sell

1934 – At age 17 travels to New York City where she enrolls in creative writing courses at Columbia University.

Carson McCullers

1917–1967

Inducted 1994

Lula Carson Smith was born in 1917 in Columbus, Georgia. At age 15 she suffered a nearly fatal attack of rheumatic fever. The illness caused chronic health problems and ultimately influenced who she would become: It was during her long confinement with the illness that she gave up dreams of being a pianist and resolved to become a writer.

Upon graduating from Columbus High School in 1933, Carson—as she was called—plunged herself into reading, studying Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov and other great Russian writers of pre-Revolutionary times. At the age of 17 she sold a valuable piece of family jewelry to move to New York from Savannah. Losing her money shortly after arriving in New York, she worked odd jobs to afford writing classes at Columbia. For the next three years she worked diligently at writing and became acquainted with New York's literary community.

Recurring illness afflicted Carson, and when she became ill she would return to Columbus to recuperate. It was during one of these return trips that she met John Reeves McCullers, Jr., whom she

married in

1937 at the age of 20. In their early years the couple moved to Charlotte and then to Fayetteville, North

"It is like a flowering dream. Ideas grow, budding silently, and there are a thousand illuminations coming day by day as the work progresses. ... I understand only particles. I understand the characters, but the novel itself is not in focus. The focus comes at random moments which no one can understand, least of all the author. For me, they usually follow great effort. To me, these illuminations are the grace of labor. All of my work has happened this way. It is at once the hazard and the beauty that a writer has to depend on these illuminations. After months of confusion and labor, when the idea has flowered, the collusion is Divine."

– Carson McCullers

1935 – Meets James Reeves McCullers, Jr

1936 – First story—“Wunderkind”—is published; develops idea for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

1937 – Marries James Reeves; moves to Charlotte, N.C. and begins work on first novel

1939 – Finishes first novel in April; writes a second novel entitled *Reflections in a Golden Eye*; begins conceiving plot for *The Member of the Wedding*

1940 – *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is published

1941 – Stricken with impaired vision, stabbing head pains, and partial paralysis; visits Yaddo Artists' Colony in Saratoga Springs where she writes *The Ballad of the Sad Café*; initiates divorce proceedings against Reeves; suffers from illness

1942 – Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship

1944 – Suffers severe nervous attack in addition to influenza and pleurisy; father dies of heart attack

1945 – Remarries Reeves

1946 – *The Member of the Wedding* is published; receives her second Guggenheim Fellowship

1947 – Suffers serious strokes, leaving her left side paralyzed

1948 – Attempts suicide and is hospitalized

1950 – *The Member of the Wedding* opens on Broadway, wins the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play

Carolina. The marriage was strained, but in these years Carson wrote two novels: *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *Reflections in a Golden Eye*.

Carson's relationship with John was marked by separations, reunions, a divorce and remarriage. Eventually, Carson moved to New York and supported herself with Guggenheim Fellowships and publication of her stories and essays in magazines. With the death of her father, Carson's mother and sister came to live with her in Nyack, New York.

The rest of Carson's life was a mixture of literary success, personal unhappiness, and unrelenting bad health. The *Ballad of the Sad Cafe* and *Member of the Wedding* appeared in 1943 and 1946. She turned *Member of the Wedding* into a play which opened on Broadway in 1950 and won several awards. With age, Carson faced compounding health problems. After a final stroke and a long comatose period, she died in October 1967.

Additional Resources

Special Collections

William Perkins Library
Duke University
(919) 660-5820

1951 – *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is published

1953 – Husband Reeves commits suicide after trying to convince Carson to do so with him

1955 – Travels with Tennessee Williams to Key West in April to work on three manuscripts; mother dies unexpectedly

1957 – *The Square Root of Wonderful* opens on Broadway, closes prematurely

1961 – *Clock Without Hands* is published

1962 – Undergoes operation to remove cancerous right breast; also has surgery on every major joint of paralyzed left hand

1964 – Breaks right hip and shatters left elbow; collection of children's verses *Sweet as a Pickle and Clean as a Pig* is published

1967 – Named winner of the 1966 Henry Bellamann Award; in August suffers final stroke, dies 47 days later

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