



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter

by Carson McCullers



Table of Contents

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter

About the Book.....	3
About the Author	5
Historical and Literary Context	6
Other Works/Adaptations	7
Discussion Questions.....	9
Additional Resources.....	10
Credits.....	11

“The dimensions of a work of art are seldom realized by the author until the work is accomplished.”

Preface

It is hard to believe that *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* was the first book of a twenty-three-year-old author (who had started the novel at nineteen!). This tragic, small-town drama is so ambitious in its scope—presenting five radically different characters whose troubled lives intersect in the Depression-era South—it always seems like the work of a master storyteller.



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

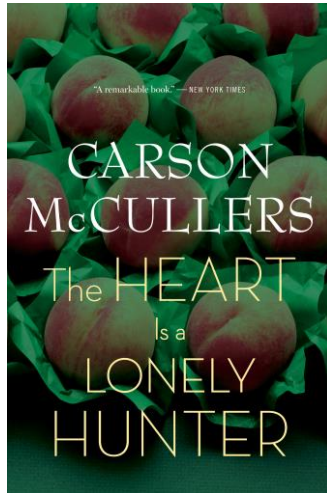
Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) is set in a small Georgia mill town in the late 1930s. At the center, like the hub of a wheel, is John Singer, who rents a room in the Kelly house after his fellow deaf companion, Spiros Antonapoulos, is sent away to an asylum. The amiable Singer is a confidant for four of the town's misfits—

Mick Kelly, a teenage girl who dreams of becoming a trained musician; Benedict Mady Copeland, the town's black doctor; Jake Blount, an alcoholic socialist; and Biff Brannon, the owner of the local café.

Each of these four characters regularly visits Singer, telling him about the injustices and pain in their lives. Each outcast believes that only Singer can understand his or her loneliness, although Singer reveals little of himself to them. He does, however, open himself to Antonapoulos through visits and letters. Singer even saves his hard-earned money to buy a movie projector for his friend.

Over the course of a year, the characters encounter difficult troubles and find solace in Singer. Mick drops out of school to help support her family after her younger brother accidentally shoots a little girl. Dr. Copeland has tuberculosis and his son, Willie, is sent to jail. New to town and friendless, Jake yearns to help the working class, but his alcoholism muddles his message and carries him toward self-destruction. Biff's wife dies, leaving him with a deeper longing to relate to his patrons, and sad that he doesn't have his own children. Not until the novel's startling climax do any of these lonely souls fully appreciate Singer's importance in their lives.

Whether quiet or roaring, deliberate or reckless, the five voices of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* unite in a common cry of isolation, a theme that reverberates through McCullers's other works. Yet, a glimmer of hope remains. "All is serene," McCullers writes toward the end of her story—life is an old whistled tune, water pitchers are full of zinnias, and the morning sun will come again.



Major Characters in the Book

John Singer

John Singer is a deaf man who boards with the Kelly family and earns his living as a silver engraver. Though he is a confidant and comfort to Mick, Jake, Biff, and Dr. Copeland, Singer's silent suffering and desolate loneliness are perhaps the most poignant of all. He generously devotes himself to his compulsive deaf friend, Spiros Antonapoulos.

Mick Kelly

Thirteen-year-old Mick's passionate obsession with music fuels her desires. She spends hours listening to Singer's radio. A lonely tomboy, her fascination with Singer helps her cope with her poverty-stricken family. A summer picnic excursion with her Jewish friend, Harry Minowitz, only heightens her isolation.

Jake Blount

An itinerant alcoholic vacillating between violent tirades and drunken stupors, Jake arrives in town with a disorganized plan to begin a socialist revolt among the working class. He lands a job as a mechanic at the traveling carnival and often delivers long speeches about social injustices.

Benedict Mady Copeland

Although Dr. Copeland has practiced medicine for twenty-five years, he feels his occupation has frustrated his ambition to change the problems between whites and blacks. He is ill with tuberculosis, and his son Willie is violently abused in prison. His daughter, Portia, works for the Kelly family.

Biff Brannon

Biff is the owner of the town's New York Café and is a quiet, contemplative man with a keen eye for detail. Despite his great consideration for all his customers, he lacks affection for his wife, Alice. Unable to resolve inner conflicts, Biff is haunted by his inability to understand Singer.

Music in the Book

Carson McCullers once compared *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* to a three-part fugue—a technique in musical composition that evolved during the seventeenth century. A fugue begins with a single voice expressing a theme, which other distinct voices restate as they enter one at a time. Like a skilled conductor, McCullers understood that each voice must define itself while simultaneously enhancing those around it.

In the novel, Mick Kelly's voice most skillfully reflects McCullers's own passion for music. Mick's tenacious, yet failed attempt to construct a violin, and her determination to play piano despite "any amount of knocks and trouble" are apt symbols of McCullers's early, frustrated dreams of becoming a composer.

Mick's secret summertime pleasure is to find a house with a radio, tuned in to classical music, so she may sit below its open window and listen. On the evening of her ruined party, the program begins with Beethoven's *Symphony No. 3 (Eroica)*. Mick is spellbound: "She could not listen good enough to hear it all. The music boiled inside her." When the symphony finishes, Mick is left with only a throbbing heart and "terrible hurt."

The novel's rhythmic language is sometimes harmonious—as in the sweet, sad duets between Mick and Singer—and at other times cacophonous, as in Jake and Dr. Copeland's final argument. But McCullers's prose also gives us silence—in Singer, and in what she leaves to our imagination.

In addition to most pieces composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Franz Schubert, McCullers also loved:

- Franz Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*
- Frédéric Chopin's *12 Études, Op. 25*; particularly *No. 11, The Winter Wind*
- Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125*
- Gustav Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer* and *Symphony No. 2*

About the Author

Carson McCullers (1917-1967)

To know Mick Kelly—the precocious, dreamy heroine of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*—is to know a young Carson McCullers, born Lula Carson Smith on February 19, 1917, in Columbus, Georgia.

A gangly, sensitive child, McCullers was painfully aware of her unpopularity among her peers. Her father, Lamar Smith, was a watch repairman who raised his family on modest means. Parties were agonizing ordeals for her. She wore dirty sneakers while other girls wore dainty heels. She escaped into music, sometimes playing her piano four or five hours a day. She dreamt of becoming a concert pianist until she endured her first bout of rheumatic fever at fifteen, and her ambition turned to the more sedate art of writing.

At seventeen McCullers left Georgia for New York City, where she worked odd jobs and enrolled in writing classes. She was a restless, chronically ill young woman. During the Great Depression, her sympathies ran deep for the poor, the alienated, and the oppressed. More politically aware than politically active, McCullers expressed her views through her fiction.

She married James Reeves McCullers, a young, frustrated Marxist, at the age of twenty, and by twenty-three, she had completed her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Shortly after it was published to wide critical acclaim in 1940, she became New York's new literary star. That she could write a bestseller so young was feat enough, but to have such depth and insight at her age was extraordinary.

McCullers moved around for much of her life, living at various times in Georgia, North Carolina, New York, Paris, and at Yaddo, an artists' retreat in upstate New York. She won international fame and nurtured intimate friendships with such luminaries as the American playwright Tennessee Williams. But to most, she remained an outsider. She wore men's pants and white dress shirts. She smoked incessantly, drank sherry or bourbon day and night, loved passionately, and lived with disarming honesty.

Despite her literary fame, she endured many personal troubles. Though she adored Reeves and remarried him after their divorce, theirs was a tumultuous relationship that ended in his suicide in 1953. By that time, years of pleurisy,



Carson McCullers, 1955 (Bettmann/Corbis)

pneumonia, rheumatic fever, and strokes had caught up to her. For the last twenty years of her life, she was paralyzed on her left side. She died of a massive cerebral hemorrhage on August 15, 1967.

The February House

Located in Brooklyn Heights on a bluff overlooking the East River, New York Harbor, and the Brooklyn Bridge, the house at 7 Middagh Street was a social and intellectual mecca for artists in the early 1940s, many of whom had escaped the war in Europe. Drawn to the wharves and warehouses of the waterfront, McCullers became one of three original tenants along with George Davis, then the fiction editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, and the poet W.H. Auden.

Dubbed the February House by the French writer Anais Nin when she discovered how many of its residents had February birthdays, the \$75-a-month, ramshackle brownstone with the high-ceilinged parlor and marble fireplace garnered a reputation among the Manhattan elite for its brilliant dinner conversations and raucous parties. The days at the house were quiet, providing a sanctuary for those in need of literary inspiration and supportive company.

Frequent visitors to the house included the writer and musician Paul Bowles; dancer and choreographer George Balanchine; British composer and pianist Benjamin Britten; German author Klaus Mann, son of Thomas Mann; Russian surrealist painter Pavel Tchelitchew; and actress and theater producer Cheryl Crawford. McCullers, a great raconteur, entertained these and other houseguests with her descriptions of life in Georgia in a thick Southern drawl.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Carson McCullers

1920s

- 1927: Lula Carson Smith begins piano lessons at age ten.
- 1929: The stock market crash marks the start of the Great Depression.

1930s

- 1931-37: Racial tension rises in the South when nine black teenagers (the "Scottsboro Boys") are charged with raping a white woman.
- 1934: The textile workers strike sweeps through southern cotton mills but fails to improve conditions for overworked, underpaid employees.
- 1937: Lula Carson Smith marries Reeves McCullers.
- 1939: Germany invades Poland beginning World War II.

1940s

- 1940: Richard Wright's *Native Son* is published in March.
- 1940: McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is published in June.
- 1941: Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, America enters World War II.
- McCullers divorces Reeves in 1941; remarries him in 1945.
- 1949: An FBI report names numerous artists as Communist Party members, posing a threat to their employment.

1950s

- The Cold War intensifies; artists are accused of communist ties.
- 1951: *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the first anthology of McCullers's stories, is published.
- McCullers and Reeves buy a house in Paris in 1951; Reeves commits suicide in 1953.

1960s

- 1963: President John F. Kennedy assassinated.
- 1963: McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, adapted by Edward Albee, opens on Broadway.

The Depression-Era South

The 1930s were a turbulent time for the South. A decade earlier, the boll weevil wrecked the cotton crops—a major part of the South's fragile economy. As prices for cotton and other agricultural goods fell, so did the farm workers' ability to earn a living wage. Tenant farming and sharecropping were common. The collapse of the stock market in 1929 and falling prices of farm products signaled a death knell for the "Old South."

People flocked to cities, hoping for steady wages as laborers in the textile mills. Though the industry had once been located mostly in northern states, by the mid 1930s southern mills produced more than 70 percent of cotton and woolen textiles. Dispossessed Southern farmers earned roughly 40 percent less than workers in the North. Many mills in the South were owned by northern corporations. As the economy slowed, mill owners cut employees' hours and decreased production, angering workers who were already living near the poverty line.

Some workers, enraged by reductions in wages, turned to a form of Marxism that embraced working-class emancipation. In the opening of *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx writes, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." Marxist theory addressed a wide range of social issues, including the alienation and exploitation of the workforce, capitalism, and materialism.

While the South wrestled with its economic challenges, it was also battling the devastating effects of racism. Racial segregation and discrimination were prevalent throughout the South. For example, blacks were not allowed to eat in the same restaurants, drink from the same water fountains, or attend the same schools with whites.

By the late 1930s, blacks began to protest against discrimination. President Roosevelt shepherded in a new era when he appointed Hugo Black—a U.S. Senator from Alabama and eventual proponent of racial equality—to the Supreme Court in 1937. As early as 1938, courts began to display a new attitude toward minority rights, and the seeds of the Civil Rights Movement were sown.

Other Works/Adaptations

McCullers and Her Other Works

McCullers's works are strikingly consistent in their themes and moods. Her bibliography includes five novels, two plays, twenty short stories, poetry, and more than two dozen nonfiction pieces. In all these works there is an element of autobiography. They waded in the waters of rejection and unrequited love, of loneliness and alienation, but often, too, of sympathy for a world in search of beauty, as in the music that pervades her fiction.

All five novels are set in the South with the common undercurrent of the insularity of small-town life. Her second book, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), was published—like the two novels that followed—first as installments in *Harper's Bazaar*, then as a book by Houghton Mifflin. As the novel that followed *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), it is a darker, more terrifying drama of isolation and despair. The story is set in a stark Army post in peacetime where the hidden desires of its soldiers and their wives and lovers collide.

The novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was selected for The Best American Short Stories of 1944. Inspired by a hunchbacked dwarf who frequented a bar in her Brooklyn neighborhood, the story tells of the relationship between a dwarf and a tall, mannish woman, which ends tragically after the woman's ex-husband gets out of prison.

Perhaps her most autobiographical work, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) features a preadolescent girl not unlike Mick Kelly. Whereas *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* explores the effects of isolation on relationships and societal issues of class and race, *The Member of the Wedding* turns inward to show the effects on just one individual, a twelve-year-old who wants desperately to be part of her brother's wedding. This story is "one of those works that the least slip can ruin," McCullers wrote in a letter to her husband. "Some parts I have worked over and over as many as twenty times." The novel was an instant critical and popular success.

McCullers arduously wrote her last novel, *Clock Without Hands* (1961), over a ten-year period, as her disabilities had made the act of writing physically painful. The novel returns to another portrait of several characters coping with loneliness, this time in the New South of the 1950s.

McCullers's works will not be remembered for intellectual philosophizing, but rather for her understanding of the human heart. Few American writers have expressed the ubiquitous theme of loneliness so empathetically, and for that her works will surely endure.

Works by Carson McCullers

- *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 1940
- *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, 1941
- *The Member of the Wedding*, 1946
- *The Member of the Wedding*, play, 1951
- *The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories*, 1951
- *The Square Root of Wonderful*, 1958 (play)
- *Clock Without Hands*, 1961
- *Sweet As a Pickle, Clean As a Pig*, 1964 (poems)
- *The Mortgaged Heart*, edited by Margarita G. Smith, 1971
- *Illumination and Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers*, edited by Carlos L. Dews, 1999

McCullers on Screen

Unlike the woman herself, who in many portraits looks unforgettably intense, the fiction of Carson McCullers rarely photographs well. The movies adapted from her work make fascinating viewing for those who know the material, less so for anyone coming to them cold.

After Alistair Cooke's unsubtle 1952 TV version of her haunting short story "The Sojourner," the film version of *The Member of the Wedding* that same year became the first McCullers adaptation to reach a screen. Rarely shown today, it preserves well the now legendary stage performances of Ethel Waters, Brandon De Wilde, and Julie Harris. (A later TV version adapted by David Rintels starred the hard-working Anna Paquin as Frankie and, as her maid and confidant, a thrillingly natural Alfre Woodard.)

Fifteen years later, McCullers's friend the writer-director John Huston and his co-screenwriters Gladys Hill and Chapman Mortimer adapted her 1941 novel *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. The movie's gold-tinted cinematography eerily catches the book's gothic fog of frustrated desire, and Elizabeth Taylor, Marlon Brando, and Julie Harris (again) each give an enthralling—if, in Brando's case, baroque—performance.

As with *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), McCullers approved the screenplay of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1968) but didn't live to see the finished film. The resulting movie is an odd, uneven affair. Alan Arkin deserved and received an Oscar nomination as John Singer. Sondra Locke was nominated too, in her first role as Mick. Percy Rodriguez as Dr. Copeland, Cicely Tyson as his daughter, and Stacy Keach as Jake Blount each make memorable impressions in smaller turns. The best scene comes when Mick tries to act out for Singer how a symphony sounds. It's a moment later borrowed by William Hurt and Marlee Matlin in *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), but the lonely longing of Locke's pantomime is pure McCullers.

Discussion Questions

1. Carson McCullers took her novel's title from a poem by William Sharp. How does this title relate to the novel's five main characters? Why might McCullers have changed it from her original title, "The Mute"?
2. Isolation and loneliness are key themes in the novel. How are they different? What are some of the ways the characters seek to alleviate their feelings of isolation and loneliness?
3. The narrator describes the main characters as both ordinary and heroic. Do you agree?
4. What fuels John Singer's devotion to his companion, Spiros Antonapoulos? How does Singer feel after Antonapoulos is sent to the asylum?
5. Why would McCullers choose to tell us so little about Singer's past?
6. Mick Kelly has an "inside room" and an "outside room." What does this mean? Is this true for the other characters as well?
7. How different is Dr. Copeland's view of the world from his daughter's? What does he want for Portia? Why does she reject her father's ideal?
8. Why does Jake Blount try to find the person who wrote a Bible passage he saw on a wall? Is this passage significant in any way to Blount's socialist message?
9. Why can't Biff Brannon confide in Singer? How does he feel after his wife's death?
10. What is the role of religion in the novel? How does this affect the actions and beliefs of the characters, especially Jake and Dr. Copeland?
11. How and to whom does each of the characters in the novel express love?
12. Do you find the ending of the novel disheartening or hopeful?
13. In what ways do the themes of the novel resonate with issues of class and race today?

Additional Resources

Other Books about McCullers

- Carr, Virginia Spencer. *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*. 1975. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1985.
- Savigneau, Josyane. *Carson McCullers: A Life*. 1995. Trans. Joan E. Howard. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- Tippins, Sherill. *February House*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

If you liked *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, you might also enjoy:

- Katharine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, 1939
- Richard Wright's *Native Son*, 1940
- Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, 1948
- Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, 1992

If you'd like to read other works of Southern fiction, you might enjoy:

- William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, 1929
- Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960
- Flannery O'Connor's *The Complete Stories*, 1971
- Olive Ann Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree*, 1984

Website

- [The Carson McCullers Project](http://www.carson-mccullers.com/)
An extensive collection of information, criticism, and links about Carson McCullers and her life's work.

<http://www.carson-mccullers.com/>

Credits

Works Cited

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McCullers, Carson, "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing," *Esquire*, LII. (December 1959), pp. 162-64. See also Margarita G. Smith, ed. *The Mortgaged Heart*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.

Wright, Richard, "Review: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*." *New Republic* (August 5, 1940), p. 195.

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Cook, Richard M. *Carson McCullers*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1975.

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