

This Day in History... May 15, 1890

Birth of Katherine Anne Porter

Katherine Anne Porter was born Callie Russell Porter on May 15, 1890, in Indian Creek, Texas. Porter was best known for her long short stories written in flawless prose, which have a texture and complexity usually found only in novels.

Porter's family claimed to be descended from frontiersman Daniel Boone or his brother, though there is no verification of this. As an adult, Porter extensively researched her family's genealogy and made several unsubstantiated claims, including a relation to O. Henry (William Sydney Porter) and William the Conqueror. Interestingly, she never made the connection that she was in fact related to Lyndon B. Johnson, whose grandmother was her uncle's sister by marriage.

After Porter's mother died, her father moved the family to Kyle, Texas to live with his mother. Porter's grandmother, Catherine Ann, was a major influence on her, and she would later adopt a variation of her name to honor her. Following her grandmother's death, the family moved several times throughout Texas and Louisiana. Porter attended free schools when they were available and studied for one year at a private Methodist school, which was her only formal education outside of grammar school.

Porter left home when she was 16 and got married, but her husband was abusive, and they divorced in 1915. It was at this time that she took the name Katherine Anne. She spent time in Chicago working as a movie extra, performer, and singer. After being diagnosed with tuberculosis (later re-diagnosed as bronchitis) in 1915, she spent two years in the hospital, during which time she decided to become a writer. Porter started out writing for the Fort Worth Critic, covering dramas and society stories. She then wrote for the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver, Colorado.



Some of Porter's stories were adapted into radio dramas.

Porter moved to New York City's Greenwich Village in 1919, where she wrote children's stories and did publicity work for a movie company. Throughout the 1920s, Porter repeatedly traveled between New York and Mexico and started publishing her short stories and essays. She published her first story, "Maria Concepcion" in 1922 in *The Century Magazine*. She then published her first short story collection, *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, in 1930. This collection was expanded and re-released in 1935 to wide critical acclaim, establishing Porter as a major figure in the American literary world. However, despite being considered one of the era's most distinguished writers, she released few works, and her sales were stagnant, leading her to search out grants and advances.

Porter received national acclaim for her collection, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939). It is a tale of youthful romance cut short by the young man's death. Miranda, the heroine, is much like Porter herself – a spirited and independent woman. The story was in part influenced by her experiences during the 1918 flu pandemic in which she nearly died and lost all of her hair. In 1940, Porter received the inaugural gold medal for literature from the Society of Libraries of New York University for this work.

Porter was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1943. She was also a writer-in-residence and professor at several colleges including the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, Washington and Lee University, and the University of Texas.

Some of Porter's works were adapted for radio dramas and film. The NBC University Theatre produced episodes based on three of her short stories – "Noon Wine," "Flowering Judas," and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." Porter was a guest on radio and television programs, giving commentary and discussing literature. In 1962, she published her only novel, *Ship of Fools*, inspired by a 1931 cruise from Mexico to Germany. The best-seller tells of the lazy, foolish, and irresponsible people who made the rise of fascism possible. The novel finally provided Porter with significant financial success and was later made into a film featuring Vivien Leigh.

Porter's book, *Collected Short Stories* (1965), won Porter the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and a National Book Award. She was made a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1966 and the following year received the organization's Gold Medal Award for Fiction. Her final work, *The Never-Ending Wrong* (1977), deals with the Sacco-Vanzetti case of the 1920s, which she had protested during her time in Mexico decades earlier. Porter died on September 18, 1980, in Silver Spring, Maryland.



Porter was the 22nd honoree in the Literary Arts Series.

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