

# CARSON McCULLERS: A Centenary Collection



Edited by Carlos Dews & Sue B. Walker



# CARSON McCULLERS: A Centenary Collection

Edited by  
**Carlos Dews & Sue B. Walker**

*Negative Capability*  
**PRESS**  
MOBILE ALABAMA



*Carson McCullers: A Centenary Collection*

Copyright © 2020, Negative Capability Press

**Editors**

Dr. Carlos L. Dews and Dr. Sue B. Walker

**Publisher and Founding Editor**

Dr. Sue B. Walker

**Assistant Editor**

Bailey Hammond Robertson

Book Design by Jenni Krchak

Cover image: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection, [reproduction number, e.g., LC-USZ62-54231]

ISBN: 978-0-9986777-5-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020933332

Negative Capability Press

150 Du Rhu Drive, # 2202

Mobile, Alabama 36608

(251) 591-2922

[www.negativecapabilitypress.org](http://www.negativecapabilitypress.org)

[facebook.com/negativecapabilitypress](https://facebook.com/negativecapabilitypress)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<p><b>SUE BRANNAN WALKER</b>          Conference. Correspondences.          Collaboration. Conjuring.</p>	<p><b>i</b></p>
<p><b>CARLOS DEWS</b>          Introduction</p>	<p><b>iii</b></p>
<p><b>ALESSANDRA GREGO</b>          The Spectacle of Monstrosity in <i>The Ballad of the Sad Café</i></p>	<p><b>1</b></p>
<p><b>SARAH-MARIE D. HORNING</b>          “Does Anyone Want Waiting On?": Love, Labor, Liquor          and the Utopian Function of Reproductive Work in  <i>The Ballad of the Sad Café</i>, an Ecofeminist Reading</p>	<p><b>17</b></p>
<p><b>WILL BRANTLEY</b>          Carson and Tennessee: The Politics of a Literary Friendship</p>	<p><b>27</b></p>
<p><b>KATALIN G. KÁLLAY</b>          The We of Me: Senses of Longing and Belonging in          Carson McCullers’s <i>The Member of the Wedding</i>,  <i>The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter</i>, and  <i>The Ballad of the Sad Café</i></p>	<p><b>39</b></p>
<p><b>ANNETTE RUNTE</b>          Angels, Tomboys, and Melancholy: Carson McCullers          and the Swiss Writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach</p>	<p><b>51</b></p>
<p><b>EMILIA SALOMONE</b>          The “Malady” Dr. Copeland Was Unable to Treat</p>	<p><b>89</b></p>

- GLENN WILLIS 99  
Privileged Isolation: Narrative Interiority and  
Prejudice in the Novels of Carson McCullers
- JAMES MAYO 127  
“Except for this Queer Marriage”: Taboo Pairings  
and Gender Restrictions in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*
- KEITH BYERMAN 135  
Blacks as Freaks in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*  
and *The Member of the Wedding*
- SHANNON RUSSELL 141  
Gothic Reverberations: Soundscapes in Ann Radcliffe  
and Carson McCullers’s *The Ballad of the Sad Café*
- KERRY MADDEN-LUNSFORD 155  
Finding Carson McCullers in China
- LAURA VIRGINIA GRAY 167  
What Should Be: McCullers’s Craft of Longing  
in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*
- LIZ MAYO 179  
“Some Unheard-Of Thing”: Performing Xenophobia and  
Gender Conformity in the Play *The Member of the Wedding*
- MARIAROSARIA SAVINO 193  
Reading Carson in Italy—“Carson McCullers  
at Scampia”: An Experience with Italy Reads
- SUN DANPING 201  
Why Amazon versus Blossomed Beauty?:  
On Different Fемinities in the Novellas  
of Carson McCullers and Mo Yan

## FINDING CARSON McCULLERS IN CHINA

Kerry Madden-Lunsford

"It was the year Frankie thought about the world. And she did not see it as a round school globe, with the countries neat and different-colored. She thought of the world as huge and cracked and loose and turning a thousand miles an hour."

*The Member of the Wedding*

**C is for China.** It is 1987 in the emerald rice fields in Ningbo, China where I teach English with my husband, Kiffen. We are newly married, teaching at a university eclipsed by rice fields where the Number One Teaching Building rises up against a slate sky like a Salvador Dali painting. I sometimes hold classes by the river where a ship sails by each night on its way to Shanghai. We wave to the passengers, but I secretly long to sail away too. *Wait for me!* A water buffalo frolics in a rice paddy when not tethered to its farmer. My goal has been to come to China to have an adventure before real life had to begin and not be encumbered with a lot of history or information—I would make up my own mind about China—in other words, ignorant.

There are few books here except for what we've brought. I have the letters of Isak Dineson and some short story collections, but the university is so new there is no library yet.

Then a miracle—the university purchases the entire Penguin Paperback Collection. One title catches my eye called *The Member of the Wedding*. I know Carson McCullers was a Southern writer, but I have worked so hard to escape the South. Yet, annoyingly, I remain homesick. So I pick up the novel, and soon realize I am Frankie Addams wandering around Ningbo's green rice fields the way she wandered around her hot Georgia town.

But I don't see the irony of having escaped the South to teach English in China while finding solace in the words of Carson

McCullers. Kiffen reads me her stories aloud at night under our mosquito net, since the television only plays old episodes of *Columbo* and *Mickey Mouse* dubbed in Chinese. BBC Radio and Voice of America only air once a day. Carson escaped Georgia for New York, but we've escaped Georgia for China, and now we are caught.

"I know, but what is it all about? People loose and at the same time caught. Caught and loose. All these people and you don't know what joins them up."

*The Member of the Wedding*

§

I, too, am not connected to anything except for being different and foreign, but Kiffen doesn't worry about such things and finds each day full of possibility. He brings home wire and sculpts it into flowers. He teaches the engineering students and names them Lincoln and Washington, Picasso and Van Gogh. He studies Chinese and picks up the Ningbo dialect, which comes in handy when we ride our bikes into town on Saturdays to the market where they sell live eel, chickens, and crickets.

**E is for English.** We have no idea how to teach English and no one tells us. We are given a thin boot-leg textbook of English readings and exercises, and after weeks of slogging through an abridged version of *Kon-Tiki*, I decide that my three classes of twenty-five English majors will write their own plays in groups of five. One student will direct the play, and they will all write it together and create as many characters as there are students in the group. So during the first hour of class, we read the boring text and do grammar, and in the second hour of the class, we write plays.

While they write their plays, I orbit from group to group to help them shape the plots and characters. If they can't think of another character for a student to be, I tell them to make a narrator or maybe a stage manager like in *Our Town*. We talk about *Our Town*, and I try to not speak too fast in my nervousness. After all, I have an MFA in Playwriting. It is my specialty.

But one day, Ms. Xing, our colleague, who is clearly the boss of the English faculty, comes to see me in our room at the Foreign Guest

House. She wants to have a “lively conversation” about my responsibilities teaching “Extensive and Intensive English.” At first, I am excited to talk to her about the progress the students are making, and then she says, “Perhaps, you are too tired, Mrs. Kerry. Perhaps the students are too tired. It is your responsibility only to teach English. Extensive English and Intensive English—not to make the theatrical plays.”

“I am not too tired,” I tell Ms. Xing. “They are learning English by writing plays. They are writing dialogue. They are learning about heroes and villains and conflicts and survival. One play is set at the North Pole.”

“Yes, I see,” Ms. Xing smiles. “But it is your job to teach extensive and intensive English.”

“Look, they are writing stage directions and memorizing lines. They write everything longhand and they type up the plays.” I get carried away when it’s clear she’s not actually listening. “Carson McCullers wrote plays. Tennessee Williams wrote plays. I am teaching them about the world through theatre and film.”

“But perhaps it is not extensive and intensive English.”

“But what does that even mean?”

We go round and round. I try to not to cry. Ms. Xing never stops smiling. She doesn’t back down. I don’t back down. She does not care that I intend to make the students see a world beyond Ningbo even while the Bourgeois Liberalism campaign is all the rage and students are forced to attend military classes. I never do learn the difference between either one.

In the end, we have a night of fifteen one-act plays in the spring on the Chemistry Lab Stage with windows wide open, but there are no screens in the windows, so giant lunar moths and buzzing cicadas flutter in from the rice fields to watch the performances too, floating like fairies above the heads of the audience. For the finale, the students gather together and sing, “Imagine” which Kiffen blasts on the boom box.

### §

But I am still lost on the other side of the world. Everywhere we go people approach, “May I practice my English with you?” I



begin writing desperately to graduate theatre departments at NYU, Northwestern, and UCLA—places I hope will save us and give us a plan post-China. I can't eavesdrop here. I'm too big, too noticed and famous.

**I is for interesting.** My Chinese students, English majors, love the word "interesting." One student even names herself—"Interesting." Helen names herself after the brave girl, Helen Burns, from *Jane Eyre*. Her best friend, Jenny, names herself after the brave girl from *Love Story*. They both say, "It would be *interesting* to create a student newspaper. We could fill it with *interesting* stories." And so we do that too.

Ms. Xing often says, "It is very *interesting* how you teach the class." I regularly show films in the computer lab. We have exactly TWO FILMS that play all the way through: *Kramer Vs. Kramer* and *Amadeus*. Another colleague, Mr. Fang, says, "I do not find Mr. and Mrs. Kramer *interesting*. I prefer the mystery books."

Ms. Xing says, "Mrs. Kramer is *interesting* like all American women. Perhaps, Mrs. Kerry, you will get the divorce in five years like Mrs. Kramer. Do you think so?"

I do not appreciate Ms. Xing's prediction but Kiffen finds it hilarious.

Everybody says, "Oh, perhaps China is very *interesting* for you."

When I began to hate the word I say, "How else could we say *interesting*?" and my students come up with all kinds of words: compelling, fascinating, intriguing...So we ban the word "interesting" from the classroom. We play vocabulary games. One game is called "Granny's Fat Cat" and we work our way alphabetically through the game—Granny's *astonishing* cat, Granny's *beautiful* cat, Granny's *courteous* cat, and so on. When it came to "I," they know to avoid "interesting," so one student cries out Granny's "intellectual" cat.

The students are my sister's age, and we make each other laugh. They are eager to learn everything—music, conversation, poetry and theatre. They memorize Emily Dickinson's poem, "I'm Nobody," and they insist that it is perhaps better to BE a "nobody" than a "somebody" because a nobody attracts less attention. And then class is over. I move to the window and look out at the green rice fields and wonder how to fill the rest of the day. The water buffalo and farmer have jobs to do. The construction workers are doing their jobs. Am

I doing enough? Have I run to China to avoid competing with playwrights and actors? So I can say I've done something "interesting" all the way across the world? I hear my father, a football coach, in my ear—*Got a game plan yet? What's after China, Aunt Gertrude?* He nicknamed me Aunt Gertrude as a child because I was a nervous kid who fretted about tornadoes, the end of the world, and going blind like Helen Keller.

## §

**M is for Money.** As the school year ends, the administration asks us to stay—they like our teaching. But teach another year. What? They get us drunk on rice wine and we say yes and then we waffle once sober in the gray Ningbo light of day. *Another year? Are you kidding me?* They offer us more money, but we are paid in Chinese money, and they deny my request for FEC—Foreign Exchange Currency, which can be exchanged into dollars. Chinese money must be spent in China.

The two other foreign teachers are leaving too. We will be the only two foreigners in a city of one million Chinese. I've seen the other occasional westerner pass through town, and I've skulked along behind them like we're somehow related. I'm going crazy. I listen to Laurie Anderson on my Walkman. What would Carson do here? What about Isak Dineson? We've climbed three of the five holy mountains in China and rubbed the heads of Buddha and lit incense for good luck and tied rocks in trees. But I don't know how to live in the rice fields for another year.

And we'll be twenty-six soon. Impossibly old. "Should we go?" I ask Kiffen.

"We can stay or go. What do you want to do?"

"Maybe we should stay. The students are so sweet and good. But I can't take it."

"Then let's go. We'll have another adventure."

Round and round. How does he stand me? Finally, we decide to go home, which will be either to my parents' basement or his mother's farmhouse, because we will go home broke because of the Chinese money thing.

It's called Renmenbi—and we've been paid lots of it—so we buy

beautiful pieces of silk—red, gold, lime, purple—with roosters and rabbits and dragons. The rest we spend for tickets on the Trans-Siberian Railroad where we take a train from Beijing to Berlin where the train wheels get changed at each new border. I bring *A Member of the Wedding* and Isak Dineson's *Letters from Africa* on the Trans-Siberian. They are my touchstones on the train across China, Russia, Poland, and Germany for ten days. I do not yet know that once upon a time Carson McCullers invited Isak Dineson to lunch, along with Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller.

Something terrible and irreparable *almost* happens in West Berlin for it is still West Berlin then—on a train platform—and I will wonder for decades to come if I made some kind of Faustian bargain during those dark and furious seconds.

Back in the United States we must get jobs fast, so we move into my parents' Atlanta basement where we lived pre-China. We give away the pieces of Chinese silk as gifts. I'm trying to be a playwright like Lillian Hellman or Beth Henley. I've read everything by Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and Edward Albee, but I land a job as office assistant for architects who need their blue prints and coffee NOW.

I am invisible to them. The head secretary offers me hair and make-up tips. She makes me feel like Miss Amelia stomping around this boutique agency of glass brick and designer building plans. I think of hog-killing time and crossed eyes "exchanging one long and secret gaze of grief."

My football coach dad is a little lost too, but I don't see that. He has been fired by the Atlanta Falcons so he's now working with a commercial sports guy doing something that could lead to something, so sometimes he and I take MARTA together to our respective jobs downtown, so Kiffen can use his car to go to his temporary job at Gulf Oil or some other awful place.

Kiffen and I are also trying to decide whether to move to New York or LA or Chicago. I am determined not to stay in Atlanta. That equals failure for me. But the NYU and UCLA graduate programs won't save us. They tell us no.

Northwestern says to try again next year.

One morning while on MARTA with my dad, I complain to him about the monstrous egos of the men in the architecture firm where

I'm sent to make coffee or get coffee or file while getting yelled at, which makes me drop the blue prints like a frazzled Vera in *Alice's Restaurant*. Dad is reading the sports page and says without looking up, "Well, honey, you gotta understand when men are at work they don't have time to be polite or sensitive. They're getting the job done, my dear."

Could he or would he have said that very thing about women at work? *Well, honey, you gotta understand that when women are at work*. No he would not have said that. My life is a time bomb, ticking away.

**S is for Symposium.** And then I see it. A miracle! A Carson McCullers Symposium announcement in the newspaper to take place in her hometown of Columbus, Georgia—it's the first one of its kind! Edward Albee, the playwright, will be there. David Diamond, the composer, too! Leonard Cohen said, "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." That's how it feels seeing the announcement for the symposium.

There will be screenings of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*. As if we are citizens of the literary world, this Carson McCullers Symposium is a gift. Carson's words saved me in the rice fields of Ningbo, and now she is beckoning us to her hometown a few hours south of Atlanta. I will call in sick the day of the symposium. The architects need their files and blue prints, but I have no blue print for my life. Carson gave me one and made me pay attention to where I was living in Ningbo, China.

She also said... "we are homesick most for the places we have never known." We leave early on Friday morning for Columbus State University. I have never been to a symposium. I don't even know such things exist. We may even meet Edward Albee. Kiffen and I have performed the first scene from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at "All Night Theatre" in Knoxville a few years earlier, but I will not tell Edward Albee this—I will do something even more annoying.

We drive the 108 miles south as the sun rises the over city. We slip into the darkened auditorium where Virginia Spencer Carr, David Diamond, and Edward Albee sit at a table on the stage discussing Carson McCullers. I see "The Twisted Trinity" in my program and I'm in awe that someone was so clever to think of that. Edward Albee is talking about the time Tennessee Williams and Carson McCullers

both revised their plays at the kitchen table.

I love imagining that table where they wrote together in comfort, Carson and Tennessee. I think of how writers help each other along the road. I don't know then that Carson helped Truman Capote when he moved to New York and then ended up furious with him. Truman then helped his childhood best friend, Nelle Harper Lee, when she moved to New York. And he grew jealous of her success and floated the idiotic rumor that he wrote *Mockingbird*.

But I love all of them. Weren't they all in that lonely world together facing a blank page...the fear and loneliness.

This is what I remember of the Symposium.

The room is blue and quiet as the experts hold court on stage.

I buy *The Lonely Hunter*, and Virginia Spencer Carr signs it. I have never had a book signed by an author. She thanks me for the letter I sent her and says, "Yes, you're the one who went to China. How interesting."

On Saturday afternoon, Carr leads a tour through Columbus to Carson's home where a plaque is dedicated to her, but a family lives in the home so we don't go inside. Carr describes the time the town held a celebration for Carson's success, but when Carson came to the party, she didn't talk to anyone. I try to imagine being a famous writer and coming back to a tiny Southern town not speaking to anyone.

But here is my moment of embarrassment. This is how I remember it.

I have my play with me. My first play—the one that sent my mother into a "how dare you missy" raging fit followed by silent treatment. It is my MFA thesis. It is a great Catholic snore of a play of living rooms and monologues and the friendly neighbor with a sunny outlook on life—its own terrible twisted trinity. Lessons learned, blech. But somehow we figure out where Edward Albee will be on campus late on Saturday after the tour to Carson's home, and we wait for him.

Kiffen had said, "Give him your play. Maybe he'll say no, but we're here, and he's Edward Albee." So we approach him, I ask, and Edward Albee is gracious.

He says, "I'd love to read your play. I'll read it on the plane tomorrow."

He could have said so many things—like—"Are you kidding?" or "Go away."

But in that moment, Edward Albee is amused and kind. Did he read the play on the plane? I don't know. I never hear from him but it was enough for him to say, "I would love to read your play" because he made me feel like a member of something in the world.

The next day is Sunday and Atlanta and the architects loom, but I want to cross the river into Phenix City, Alabama to trace Carson's path. I am on high alert for Carson McCullers's characters. We find one. As we drive through a neighborhood, a woman is placing large ceramic pigs in her yard. There are probably thirty or so ceramic pigs on blankets. We stop to talk to her. She says, "I've loved pigs my whole life. So I've started a business. Dot's Pigs."

We admire the range of pigs lined up. They are artistic renderings of pigs of all shapes, pink, about the size of a newborn painted with different flower designs.

"Here," she says, "Take my business card."

The card says, "Dot's Pigs. Lay-away plan available."

We thank Dot, who shouts, "Come back! Christmas is coming."

We promise to come back, but we never do. Instead we save our money, get pregnant, move to Hollywood, teach and write and raise three kids. We name our first child—not Carson—but Flannery. I write my first novel about a coach's daughter. I write some Smoky Mountain novels for kids. I write a biography of Harper Lee, which brings me back to live in the South after twenty years on the West Coast.

Nowadays I wander the landscapes of Alabama and California with Kiffen tenured on the West Coast and me in the Deep South. Our three children grew up. One wanders the streets of Los Angeles, chasing pigeons and talking to the ghost of Jean Harlow. He tells me to write a play called "Lunch in Nyack" about the famous lunch with Carson McCullers, Isak Dineson, Marilyn Monroe, and Arthur Miller—I tell him there was reported dancing on the table after lunch, which is what I want in my play whether there was or wasn't. Arthur Miller denied there was any dancing but he would say that. My son and I have this conversation over pizza, because we are trying hard to talk about something creative but we are both crying because he struggles with the darkness of addiction. I tell him about Isak's diet of champagne and oysters, and he tells me Marilyn wanted to make a movie about Jean Harlow. I foolishly plead and beg and bargain with him to go into treatment and he says, "You know nothing of my life"

and he gets up and walks away.

Our middle child, Lucy, lives in Chicago and paints pictures and studies art therapy in order to work with children and autism. The youngest, Norah, will begin college this year and study public health in Alabama.

But our three children almost never were—not any of them.

It is 1987 again on that train platform in Berlin when I make that Faustian bargain. We are with people we'd collected on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. We wear backpacks and carry our bulging netbags from China. I hold a portable typewriter. Kiffen announces, "The train is coming! Hurry." We are a large slow-moving group, six or seven, and he gets on the train first. But the rest of us can't make it, so he gets off—or tries to—the door closes on his foot leaving it inside the train while the rest of his body is on the outside of the train. How funny to leave your foot behind along with a backpack, and the train begins to move forward. He or rather his foot is inside the first car moving toward the tunnel. And he flips into the air like a rag doll—higher—I scream and throw my typewriter over my head and jump at the train. And in the moment of seeing my young husband suspended in a midair cartwheel I plead and beg and bargain for him to live no matter what. Make me suffer anything else—I can take it—give me any amount of pain but not this—don't let him die. And the train miraculously shuts down, and he's on the ground. The conductors come over to yell at us in German—and Kiffen leaps up, foot still attached, no blood, not a scratch, laughing, "I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine."

Was it a Faustian bargain at the train in Berlin? Did some kind of evil spirit hear my scream to save my husband but make our beautiful boy a drug addict? Are there such things? Has my grief made me crazy? Will our lonely raging boy ever find peace or "the we of me?" I'm told not to ask those questions. I'm told not to ask why but just to live in the moment and find gratitude. So I remember a young couple, who read each other *The Member of the Wedding* at night under a mosquito net, made plans for a future, and a marriage began in the green rice fields of Ningbo long ago.

"The whole world was this symphony, and there was not enough of her to listen."

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

JOHN CAROL UNIVERSITY

## Works Cited

- McCullers, Carson. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. 1940. *Carson McCullers: Complete Novels*. Ed. Carlos L. Dews. New York: Library of America, 2001. Print.
- . *The Member of the Wedding*. 1946. *The Collected Works of Carson McCullers*. Ed. Carlos L. Dews. New York: Library of American, 2001. Print.

The unique way Carson McCullers crafts a collective narrative in this story both emphasizes and incorporates readers into the deep sense of loneliness in our experiences with this work. In this sense, as between knowing and her characters, McCullers makes readers complicit in the telling to further themes of division and barriers to intimacy in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. While some important work focuses on determinations of the narration, ultimately, a reading of the novella does not lack (for me) from the narration being any relation to the chain gang specifically or race generally, even from labeling the narration into specific parts or voices. The great value in these kinds of considerations, such as those posited by post-scholar, Edward Hirsch, about American work songs and as further examination, the chain gang songs that he directly to this novel, by Darren Millar, wherein he looks specifically to the call and response patterns within the form are useful in looking at the structure of the article, "And Every Day There Is Music: Folk-song Form and the Highway Chain Gang in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*" by Patrick Barlow, he explores how the use of musicality links back to that of a ballad and this work. While there is debate about the chain gang as the defining narrative device, that which links to the call and response patterns. In this regard, what the structure of the narration into what the device is, even, as in the case of Ann Dacey offers a close reading that the narrative is a form of narrative attention and design within this story, however, it is at the end of the metaphor of a chain gang or being taken away from the world, symbolically, this liberates the story from a simple, historical, or historical hyperbole and an allegorical tale. It is a story that is about the holdy grotesque and perhaps a song of the people.