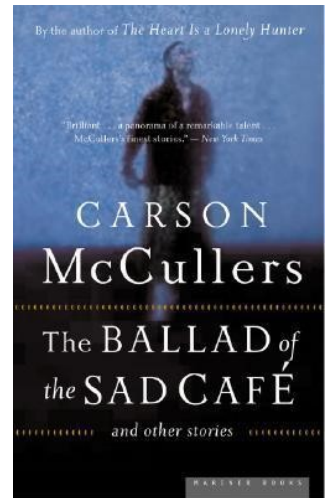


# *The Ballad of the Sad Café*

Carson McCullers

Few writers have expressed  
loneliness, the need for  
human understanding and  
the search for love with such  
power and poetic sensibility  
as the American writer  
Carson McCullers, and *The  
Ballad of the Sad Café*.



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## A Brief Author Biography



### Early Life

Originally Lula Carson Smith, Carson McCullers was born on February 19, 1917, in Columbus, Georgia. The daughter of a jewelry store owner, McCullers first aspired to be a musician and started taking piano lessons at age 10. Always sickly, McCullers fought a bout of rheumatic fever as a child, and it led her to move music to the back burner, a period during which she began exploring writing. Nonetheless, in 1934 she headed off to New York City, where she was to study at the famed Juilliard School of Music.

Once in New York, McCullers abandoned music to pursue her new literary passion. It's unclear if she actually intended to go to Juilliard or simply used the plan as an excuse to go to New York and pursue writing. Regardless, with music left behind, McCullers jumped in with both feet, taking creative writing classes at Columbia University and New York University while working odd jobs.

Success came early to this young writer. At the age of 19, McCullers had her first story,

“Wunderkind,” published in the December 1936 issue of *Story magazine*, which was edited by her former writing teacher, Whit Burnett. The story explored the painful revelation of a young girl who discovers that she is not a musical prodigy.

Around the time of the story's publication, McCullers was in her hometown recovering from an illness. She was in a relationship with James Reeves McCullers Jr., whom she had met through a friend. The following year, the two married in September—a union that would prove to be quite stormy over the years. There was some jealousy between the pair—her husband also wrote—and both were heavy drinkers.

### Big Break

In 1940, McCullers received an enormous amount of critical praise and commercial success with her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. The work centered on a deaf-mute who finds himself the sounding board for four members of a small Georgia town—a restaurant owner, a political activist, an African-American doctor and a

teenage girl. Through their stories, the characters reveal their frustrations, their loneliness and their isolation from those around them.

While her career was taking off, McCullers was going through a difficult time personally. Separated from her husband, she joined several other literary and artistic talents, such as author Richard Wright and composer Leonard Bernstein, to live in a house in Brooklyn Heights, New York. Called the February House by Anais Nin, the residence was owned by Harper's Bazaar editor George Davis.

Divorced from her husband in 1941, McCullers had mixed results with her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, which was published that same year. (It had appeared earlier in *Harper's Bazaar*.) It drew a number of negative reviews but had some commercial success. Continuing her exploration of loneliness and isolation, the work was more provocative than her first novel, tackling issues relating to impotency, bisexuality, infidelity, bestiality and murder. Some of elements of the tumultuous relationships depicted in this story may have been inspired by her own marriage—both she and her husband were bisexual and had affairs.

### The Ballad of the Sad Café

That same year, Carson grappled with some more health issues. But she also made her first visit to the Yaddo artists' colony in

Upstate New York, where she started her next major work, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, which was first published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1943. In this story, McCullers wrote about a love triangle in a small Southern town, and some consider this to be one of her best works.

While she had divorced her husband, McCullers remained close to Reeves and the pair decided to remarry in 1945. Her career continued to thrive with the publication of the novella *The Member of the Wedding* the following year. Also in 1946, McCullers met a young, gifted writer named Truman Capote through her sister Rita. The two became fast friends, and McCullers helped launch Capote's career. Unfortunately, the friendship later soured over McCullers' concerns that Capote may have used some of her material and that he was not properly grateful for her support.

### Health Concerns

Having struggled with health problems much of her life, McCullers was dealt a devastating blow in 1947 when she had two strokes—one in August and one in November—which left her paralyzed on one side. She grew increasingly despondent over her poor health, leading to a suicide attempt in 1948. Recovering physically and emotionally from the incident, McCullers spent much of the latter part of the

year with Tennessee Williams, a close friend, working on a stage adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding*. In January 1950, her play opened on Broadway to strong reviews and won the Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play that year.

In the early 1950s, McCullers spent a lot of time in Europe with her husband and such literary friends as W. H. Auden, Gore Vidal and Tennessee Williams. Reeves McCullers was increasingly depressed and wanted the pair to commit suicide together. Fearing for her own well-being, McCullers returned to the United States in 1953, and Reeves ended his own life in a Paris hotel by taking an overdose of sleeping pills in November of that year.

In 1957, her play *The Square Root of Wonderful* opened on Broadway, but it closed after only 45 performances. Her final novel, *Clock Without Hands*, was published in 1961 without garnering much critical attention or commercial interest. The following year, McCullers had surgery to remove a cancerous breast and another surgery to repair her paralyzed left hand. Her final work, a collection of children's verse titled *Sweet as a Pickle, Clean as a Pig*, was published in 1964. Around this time, Edward Albee's adaptation of McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café* debuted on Broadway, earning six Tony Award nominations.

### Legacy

McCullers suffered a final stroke on August 15, 1967, which left her in a coma for 46 days. She died on September 29 at Nyack Hospital and was later buried at the town's Oak Hill Cemetery. More than 200 people attended her funeral, including Capote, Williams and actresses Myrna Loy and Julie Harris.

Shortly after her death, the first film adaptation of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* was released, starring Marlon Brando and Elizabeth Taylor. The following year, the film version of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1968) appeared on the big screen and netted Academy Award nominations for two of its stars—Alan Arkin and Sondra Locke.

In recent years, there has been a revived interest in McCullers's work. Oprah Winfrey selected McCullers's first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, for her popular book club in 2004, sending paperback sales soaring. More than 60 years after its original publication, the novel's themes of loneliness and isolation still speak to today's readers.

[<https://www.biography.com/people/carson-mccullers-9391402>]

## An introduction to *The Ballad of the Sad Café*

*The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943) is generally considered one of McCullers's best works of fiction and her most successful exploration of her signature themes: loneliness and the effects of unrequited love. McCullers was twenty-four-years-old when she began writing the novella during the winter of 1941. Citing her remark that "everything significant that has happened in my fiction has also happened to me," McCullers's biographer, Virginia Spencer Carr, noted that *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was most likely inspired by several events in her life at this time. For example, the story's depiction of unreciprocated love is often seen as a grotesque representation of her own one-sided infatuations with the Swiss journalist and novelist Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach and the American writer Katherine Anne Porter. Similarly, the motif of the romantic triangle is regarded as a distorted rendering of the situation between McCullers, her husband, and the American composer David Diamond.

### Plot and Major Characters

*The Ballad of the Sad Café* is set in a small mill town in Georgia, where Miss Amelia Evans lives alone in a boarded-up building. Most of the story is told in a flashback that explains how "Miss Amelia" came to her present situation. We learn that the building she lives in was a general store she inherited from her father. Miss Amelia is described as a tall, somewhat masculine woman who becomes the richest person in town from her earnings

with the store and a very prosperous still that produces the best liquor in the county. A grim and solitary person, Miss Amelia surprises the town when she agrees to marry Marvin Macy. A handsome and apparently industrious man, Macy has a history of nefarious and sadistic activities: he used to carry with him the ear of a man he killed in a razor fight; he has chopped off the heads of squirrels; and he has abused several young girls. His marriage to Miss Amelia lasts only ten days, mainly because, having married only to gain companionship, she refuses to consummate the marriage. Disgusted by his attempts to seduce her, Miss Amelia puts him out of the house. Macy leaves town vowing revenge and quickly returns to his old ways, robbing gas stations and supermarkets and becoming a suspect in a murder. He is eventually arrested and sentenced to serve time in a penitentiary near Atlanta.

One April evening eleven years later, Miss Amelia and several townspeople are sitting on her porch when a hunchbacked stranger named Lymon Willis shows up. Claiming to be a distant relation of Miss Amelia, "Cousin Lymon," as he comes to be known, is a sociable if somewhat shallow character who has "an instinct which is usually only found in small children, an instinct to establish immediate and vital contact between himself and all things in the world." Miss Amelia takes him in. The next day, however, Cousin Lymon is

nowhere to be seen. The third day after his arrival, Miss Amelia stays holed up inside her house, leading one of the townspeople to speculate that she has murdered Lymon for something he had in his suitcase. By nightfall, with the rumor having spread throughout the town, a number of men come to Miss Amelia's house and watch from the porch as she writes at the desk in her office. When she gets up to close her office door, the men sense that the moment has come for action and walk into the store. At that point Cousin Lymon emerges from the top of the stairs and begins chatting with everyone. Miss Amelia comes out of her office and asks if anyone needs anything. She then breaks her rule against liquor being consumed in the building and brings out some bottles and glasses and serves the men drinks. This is how the café starts. Over the course of the following four years it gradually expands: tables and chairs are brought in and meals are served. The café's growth is due largely to Miss Amelia's compassion for Cousin Lymon's fear of the night: the company and pleasure the customers bring help him pass the hours. Six years later Macy returns to town. Cousin Lymon, hearing that he has been to Atlanta and been in jail, becomes infatuated with this dangerous character and follows him around. For his part, Macy shows nothing but contempt and disgust for Lymon. Miss Amelia endures Cousin Lymon's refocused affection, tolerates his giving Macy

liquor, puts up with his making fun of her gangly walk, and even bears with his asking Macy to live with them, because she knows that if she were to drive Macy away, she would lose Cousin Lymon. The climax of the story occurs when the hatred between Miss Amelia and Macy explodes in a fist fight. After thirty minutes or so of struggling, Miss Amelia is about to win the fight when Lymon suddenly leaps onto her back and claws at her throat, enabling Macy to get the upper hand. During the night Macy and Lymon destroy the café, steal Miss Amelia's belongings, and break her still; by morning, they have left town. For three years Miss Amelia waits for Cousin Lymon to return. Eventually giving up hope, Amelia boards up the house and locks herself in.

### Major Themes

As many critics have pointed out, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* reflects McCullers's fascination with freaks, misfits, and grotesques. For her, such characters best embodied the loneliness and isolation that she regarded as the basic condition of human existence. Other themes—all of which bear on the novella's central concern with loneliness—include the failure of communication, the anguish of unrequited love, the psychological phenomenon that causes human beings who are worshiped to despise the worshiper, and the redemptive and transformative effects that even transitory and ultimately doomed love can have

on an individual and his or her community. Critics note that McCullers was particularly interested in the paradox of shared isolation, a term that describes the relationships among the three main characters and between the three and their community as well.

### Critical Reception

On the initial publication of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Tennessee Williams wrote that it is "assuredly among the masterpieces of our language in the form of the novella." V. S. Pritchett considered it evidence that McCullers was "the most remarkable novelist... to come out of America for a generation." William Clancy stated that the work's "metaphysical fusion of horror and compassion" represented "an achievement equaled by few other contemporary American writers." The critical reaction has not been unanimously favorable, however. Robert Drake has called *The Ballad of the Sad Café* "ridiculous . . . with its fabricated primitivistic folkishness." Lawrence Graver has argued that while the novella is "by far the best of Mrs. McCullers's excursions into the grotesque . . . it is not without reminders of the penumbral insistence that mars her worst work," namely the sense that "too much is made of dark nights of the soul and of things going on there that only God can understand."

Nonetheless, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is generally regarded as one of her best works of fiction. The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s saw renewed interest in McCullers's body of work. During these decades numerous studies appeared on the novella that focused on issues such as the role of the narrator, the nature of love, the relationship between the text and the traditional ballad form, its mythical qualities, its connection to the Southern Gothic tradition, and its representation of sexuality and gender.

[<https://www.enotes.com/topics/ballad-sad-cafe/critical-essays>]

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