

"Of all the Southern writers, Carson McCullers is to endure." — GORE VIDAL

collected stories of
**CARSON
McCULLERS**

including
THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING
and
THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ



Collected Stories

Carson McCullers

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Collected Stories Carson McCullers

Carson McCullers--novelist, dramatist, poet--was at the peak of her powers as a writer of short fiction. Here are nineteen stories that explore her signature themes: wounded adolescence, loneliness in marriage, and the tragicomedy of life in the South. Here too are "The Member of the Wedding" and "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe," novellas that Tennessee Williams judged to be "assuredly among the masterpieces of our language." (A Mariner Reissue)

Collected Stories Details

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From Reader Review Collected Stories for online ebook

Larry Bassett says

I am one of those who enjoyed most of the short stories in this *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers* more than the longer "The Ballad of the Sad Café" and "The Member of the Wedding" the first time around. But now that I have spent more time with the longer stories (including watching each in its movie version) I have to admit that their complexity is growing on me.

I like short stories because, well, because they are short! I can keep the whole story in front of me at once, decide pretty quickly if I like it and know if I have a clue what it is all about. Then I can go on to the next story. I like that sometimes.

Now, with something longer I am apt to be liking some parts and not so much others. I wonder what is going on, how it goes together and what it means anyway. If I can watch the movie, get more ideas to help me replay it in my mind, so much the better.

Maybe it is just that at times I want to be lazy and entertained and sometimes I am more willing to dig a little and be challenged. So it is likely more about me than about the works of art.

****** In March, 2014 On the Southern Literary Trail (a GR online reading group) chose *The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories* to read. Although I did not have that particular book, all the stories in that book are also included in *Collected Stories*. The stories in *Sad Café* are marked within this review with the bold asterisks. ******

The sixteen year old boy shares a bedroom with his twelve year old boy cousin whom he calls *Sucker*. There is angst and anger and other feelings. If you already know McCullers, it seems like the perfect place to start her book. If you don't know McCullers, you get to know her right quick as these feelings are her bread and butter.

The *Court in the West Eighties* is a multistory apartment building in New York. She is an eighteen year old first year college student who watches her neighbors very carefully, voyeuristically, and tells us what she sees and feels.

In *Understanding Carson McCullers* Virginia Spencer Carr, McCullers' biographer, wrote:

Much of the author's best fiction was germinating during her first three years in New York City before she was married, but she made little attempt to publish what she was writing. In 1939, while living with her husband in Fayetteville, North Carolina, McCullers sent "Sucker" and "Court in the West Eighties" to Maxim Lieber, a New York literary agent who agreed to try to market them for her, and both pieces made the rounds quickly from magazine to magazine without success. Lieber's failure to place "Sucker" worked, eventually, to McCullers' advantage in that she received \$1,500 for its publication in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1963 (in contrast to the \$25 she received for her first published story, "Wunderkind").

The stories rush by, strange, sometimes eerie and sad. In *Poldi* is it the same cellist across the court as in the last story? Would that be too cute for Carson McCullers to do? She was just a kid when she started writing. *Breath from the Sky* is a short story about a young girl with pleurisy who is sad and has an unpleasant relationship with her mother. A girl shares her view of *The Orphanage* from when she was seven years old

and the Home had a “mysterious ugliness.” A very drunk couple shares the *Instant of the Hour After*, a very small party. A girl is thirteen years old and her sister is eighteen. She ends the story *Like That* saying, “I don’t want to grow up – if it’s like that.”

I hear the story of the conflicted fifteen year old pianist in ** *Wunderkind* and it is the life of the young Carson McCullers I am experiencing. I cannot separate the author from her work. It all seems so autobiographical and so sad and so hopeless.

Her biographer Virginia Spencer Carr says the “immense complexity of love” appears repeatedly in McCullers’ writing and it is not a successful love as far as I can tell. McCullers suffered her first serious stroke at the age of 30 and died when she was 50 in 1967. This made her a contemporary of my parents who were born in 1920.

The short stories continue with one titled *The Aliens* about a Jewish man traveling on a bus from New York City to a new home in the south. He encounters other travelers and thinks about his family and his life. This is a story that seems much different from the others in content but it is in the somber and thoughtful McCullers style common to her writing.

Every book of short stories has to have at least one that you do not much like. *Untitled Piece* is that one for me in this book. Reminiscence while drunk is just not my thing. “Will you tell me the name of this place?”

** *The Jockey* is five pages long. It has problematic alcohol, a regular in the McCullers’ stable. It has tension and some unstated underlying story. Also common for McCullers. Men are called libertines. A lot is packed into one hotel dining room interaction between the all male cast of principals where violence is palpable.

** *Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland* is slightly longer, six pages, and, with the inclusion of a dog running backwards (or was it a god?), it is both stranger and more humorous. What can one believe when it comes from the mouth of Carson McCullers?

Correspondence is a juvenile look at an international pen pal experience. I suppose the idea is for the author to put herself in the place of a twelve year old but I don’t think it works.

Sometimes when I review a book of short stories, I pick out a sentence from each story. I did that with a Richard Brautigan book once. He wrote some weird stories too and died young. I picked this sentence for ** *A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud*: “He sure has done a lot of traveling” is the truth for a young boy at the end of his paper route after a man in a café tells him of a search for a lost love.

A working class guy who has worked himself into a higher class wife and culture, claps at the wrong time during a classical performance in *Art and Mr. Mahoney*, a very short story that made me cringe.

There are children in some of the short stories. For example, ** *The Sojourner* has children on both sides of the Atlantic. John Ferris meets the children of his ex-wife in New York City and returns to Paris to the young son of his current lover. The children are innocent, not yet exposed to the harshness of the world. Life is the moment and not the past or the future, the secret lives and broken promises of their parents.

** *A Domestic Dilemma* is the story of alcohol disrupting the life of a young father who fears for the safety of his children left with their drunken mother whose “full-bosomed, slender and undulant” body he still craves. McCullers tells a story well from the male point of view.

The Haunted Boy is about a child’s fear of re-experiencing the afternoon he found his mother’s bloody body

in the bathroom after school. His father comforts his fear by saying, “Nobody can be nervous before they are sixteen years old.”

I love it when a writer writes a story where the protagonist is a writer. Carson McCullers writes a short story about a writer lost in insanity in *Who Has Seen the Wind?* Could the story be autobiographical? Carson must have spent some of her time clinging to sanity and then writing about it.

**** *The Ballad of the Sad Café*** probably would have us focused on McCullers’ stroke-deformed body and bisexual leaning if we had ever known her in person. From the age of six she thought she was a man in a woman’s body and at the age of thirty she suffered a stroke that paralyzed her left side significantly. “The Ballad of the Sad Café” became a 1963 Broadway play adapted for the stage by no less than Edward Albee and then a 1991 movie long after McCullers’ death. The movie is available to stream for free online and is eerily faithful to the story.

Born in 1917 in Columbus, Georgia, Lula Smith lived most of her adult life in New York and Europe. Somehow she has maintained her notoriety as a Southern Gothic writer known by her married name of Carson McCullers but she made her money on best seller books in the 1940s and successful Broadway plays in the 1950s and 1960s. With debilitating health problems including alcoholism and enough money to live comfortably, her writing suffered.

**** *The Member of the Wedding*** was written in 1946 when Caron McCullers was in her late 20s. It is set in 1944 in a small southern town with WWII in the background. The main character is a twelve year old girl who is struggling with growing up. The story was made into a film in 1952 after it was an award winning Broadway play. Twelve year old Frankie was played in the movie by a 27 year old actress, Julie Harris, who was also the star of the play.

You ever think you have to read too many pages to find a paragraph that you already know and don’t need anyone else to put it into words? But, after you have read it, you are glad somebody else did?

“I never did say just what I was talking about,” she said finally. “But there’s this. I wonder if you have ever thought about this. Here we are – right now. This very minute. Now. But while we’re talking right now, this minute is passing. And it will never come again. Never in all the world. When it is gone it is gone. No power on earth could bring it back again. It is gone. Have you ever thought about that?”

I didn’t need Carson McCullers to have Frankie (or F. Jasmine) say that toward the end of *The Member of the Wedding*, but I am glad she did and I’m glad I read it. I did have to plod a little bit to get to it, but, isn’t that just like life – sometimes it takes some plodding to get to the good stuff. It was only the middle third of the story that I got bogged down and, considering I liked the beginning and the end, that might just have been me.

This book has a wonderfully wide range of McCullers stories including some of her earliest short stories and the novellas that sprung her full bloom into the public eye when she was in her twenties. The introduction by her biographer, Virginia Spencer Carr, is an added plus. I expect that I may come back to this book if I ever manage to read her long biography *The Lonely Hunter*.

I am giving *The Collected Stories of Carson McCullers* a weak four stars. Weak based on the length of time it took this book to get under my skin. If I would have rushed through it, as some of the short stories allowed me to do, I would have given it three stars. But the two novellas at the end of the book *Sad Café* and *Wedding* combined with watching their movie versions, slowed me down enough to let their potential power sink in. If you are sharp enough and determined enough, these are probably five star stories that are pulled

down only by the brevity of the stories accompanying them.

David says

I bought this to keep in my car, remembering "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter" from high school.

Carson McCullers breaks every one of Strunk & White's rules. And she demonstrates how there are exceptions to every rule. I envy, sit in awe, and wish I could write so beautifully.

Cynthia Paschen says

This is not the edition I read--mine is a 700-page chunk of delicious reading, published by Quality Paperback Books in 1991.

My favorite was the first short story in the collection, "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe."

"The Heart is a Lonely Hunter" made me wonder if Carson McCullers and Harper Lee knew each other. The young Mick Kelly reminded me a bit of Scout in "To Kill A Mockingbird." Mick spends a lot of time thinking, about a million things. "Some kind of music was too private to sing in a house cram full of people. It was funny, too, how lonesome a person could be in a crowded house. Mick tried to think of some good private place where she could go and be by herself and study about this music. But though she thought about this a long time she knew in the beginning that there was no good place."

It's easy to find pieces of yourself in McCullers' characters. We've dreamed dreams like theirs and felt similar longings. McCullers is quite a contrast to another southern writer I love, Flannery O'Connor. O'Connor's characters are larger than life, stranger than all get out, someone you might never meet in real life. McCullers writes with more kindness about everyday folks.

Shannon says

Worth the price of admission for "Ballad of the Sad Cafe" and "A Member of the Wedding" alone.

Doug H says

I'm only reviewing the short stories here and not The Member of the Wedding, which I loved. Overall, McCullers' novels are her strong suit. Aside from two or three, her short stories are not. Not for me, anyway.

Hannah Garden says

Why is it that the more I love Flannery the less I love Carson? They are pitted against one another, somehow. It's not just me, either--I mentioned Carson to Tedd and he said, "I like Flannery O'Connor." Somehow Flannery O'Connor is a miracle, while McCullers is a fascination. I will keep reading, though.

Constance says

This book has ignited a full-blown Carson McCullers obsession in me. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* was a phenomenal book but these stories (short stories and two novellas) actually took my breath away. They also made my heart flutter and my stomach go all swoopy, which confirms that I'm hopelessly crushing on the work of a dead author. Is that even possible?

It's amazing how believable these bizarre, sad, lonely characters are--maybe because she poured so much of herself into so many of them. I'm invariably hooked two or three sentences into every story. *The Member of the Wedding*, one of the included novellas, is actually painful to read because it perfectly captures the haunting loneliness of a girl on the cusp of adolescence in a small town. Very little happens in actual fact in the story, but the emotional journey seems epic. McCullers has an amazing ability to make you really care about her characters and it's almost like she's excited just to share them with you.

Revisiting "The Haunted Boy", which we studied in (I think) ninth grade English, was pretty awesome since it came back to me as I read it. Amazing how in such a short story McCullers can tackle so much painful thematic material and treat it in such a careful, sensitive way. In the hands of another author, this story could easily have been way too depressing to read, but as it stands it's beautifully balanced.

The Ballad of the Sad Cafe made me cry and laugh really, really hard. I'd never really gotten that whole "grotesque" thing until I read this story, but I think I get it now. It's absolutely wonderful.

Anyway, great collection. Five stars.

Eldonfoil TH*E Whatever Champion says

ballad of sad cafe 2 stars/remainder 1

Corinne Wasilewski says

"*The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*" is my favourite of the collection and deserves a five star rating. Its writing is indolent but not overdone and oh so satisfying. The characters are bigger than life, but, believable all the same and the dialogue is perfect.

I also enjoyed "*The Member of the Wedding*" and think McCullers did an excellent job at nailing those feelings of loneliness and the need to belong to something bigger than oneself ("the we of me") that overwhelm in adolescence. These feelings build in 12 year old Frankie over three quarters of the story to a desperation that is palpable. Unfortunately, I found the ending anti-climax. I didn't like the way those feelings were so easily pushed beneath the surface once "the weathers had turned" and the older Frances finds another, willing subject for her affection.

"Who Has Seen the Wind" deserves at least a four star rating as the reader watches in horror as a middle-aged writer has-been descends into madness.
The rest of the collection, in my opinion, takes a back seat to these three stories.

Lucia Fonseca says

Wunderkind - 5??
Uma árvore, uma rocha, uma nuvem - 3,5??
Um dilema doméstico - 5??
O rapazinho assombrado - 5??
Quem viu o vento? - 4??
Sucker - 3??
Um pátio em West Eighties - 3??
Um sopro vindo do céu - 3??
Um instante da hora seguinte - 5??
Se é assim - 5??
Os estranhos - 3,5??
Fragmento sem título - 3??

Bastante interessante de forma geral. Gostei bastante da escrita da autora. Sem duvida que vou querer ler mais.

M. Sarki says

Though I enjoy much of McCuller's writing, I prefer her novels more and consider them far-surpassing her shorter works. I felt I was running out of time and therefore had to abandon what still remains in this book for me unread.

Amy says

These "short stories" are more like vignettes. It's like getting a small peek into someone's living room one afternoon and seeing how empty everyone's life is. She showcases child prodigies who just want to be normal, stay-at-home-wives that drink themselves silly out of boredom, suicidal stay-at-home-wives, and bored musicians and writers.

I first discovered McCullers in reading her short story, "The Sojourner". And, frankly, that's the best of all of the short stories in this book. It took me forever to force myself to read the last 3 stories.

Her novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, is a wonderful book. I hope the novellas included in this book match it in some way, but I'm saving them for later and considering them books unto themselves because feel they need to be judged as individual works and not as a part of these boring, boring short stories.

Hanna says

I fell in love with McCullers writing while reading „The heart is a lonely hunter“, which moved me deeply. Her short stories and novellas also show her incredible talent to make the reader connect with the protagonists on a very deep and emotional level. I could relate to so many of her characters and was intrigued how easy McCullers made it for me to evoke certain feelings.

Here's a quick overview of thoughts/ratings on each story as I took them down in my notebook after reading:

Sucker 5*

I recognized my teenage self a lot in the protagonist. So much internalized feelings that suddenly explode in one big BOOOOM.

Court in the West Eighties 5*

Brilliant mood, would work perfectly as a play. Favorite quote: „*And there is one point in a thing like this - as long as I feel this way, in a sense it is true.*“

Poldi 5*

Perfect summary of unrequited love. So true and sad, but very beautiful.

Breath from the sky 4*

Sad and slightly confusing story of a sick mother and her emotionally estranged mother.

The Orphanage 5*

McCullers was gifted with the ability to write with an honesty and truthfulness that is incredible. Amazing how she was able to transport you back to childlike thinking.

Instant of the hour after 4*

Even though the story is somewhat confusing in the beginning it does make a lot of sense in the moment you realize that it is told out of the perspective of a drunk person.

Like this 5*

I cannot put into words how much I love this story. McCullers was an absolute genius for being able to transport you back into the mindset of a 13 year old girl.

Wunderkind 5*

I wish I was able to recreate feelings and moods like McCullers does in her writing. It's as if you become the protagonist and you can't help feel what she feels. MASTERPIECE!

The Aliens 5*

With subtlety McCullers paints a perfect picture of what it must be like to be a refugee. She doesn't need

many words to be able to describe the feelings of loss and hope, of being (as the title says) an Alien. Very moving.

Untitled Piece 5*

It's quite amazing how McCullers recreates feelings in me that seem to be the protagonists. I've not even remotely had a similar youth and still it's as if I perfectly know how her character feels.

The Jockey 4*

Feels a bit unfinished, I'd have loved to have known more about the jockeys story, everything stays a bit vague.

Madame Zilensky and the king of Finland 5*

Is there importance in truth if the untrue doesn't hurt anyone and makes one person feel better?

Correspondence 5*

Great! Funny and sincere at the same time. And absolutely believable that it might have been written by a teenager.

A tree - a rock - a cloud 5*

„There were these beautiful feelings and loose little pleasures inside me. And this woman was something like an assembly line for my soul. I run these little pieces of myself through her and I come out complete.“
This sentence alone deserves 5 stars.

Art and Mr. Mahoney 4*

Who hasn't experience Mr. Mahoney's mishap? Nice ending, nice story.

The Sojourner 5*

Among my favorite stories so far. McCullers immaculately captures the passing of the time and the feelings of loss and regret that sometimes come with it.

A domestic dilemma 5*

I had goosebumps at the end of this story. So sad, so beautiful, so depressing, so real. I've been Martin, I've been Emily. I can relate so much that it hurts.

The haunted boy 5*

I guess if you ever had to deal with a suicidal person, this is how you feel. Especially if you're related and you're a minor. Haunting is the word that describes it best hence the title.

Who has seen the wind 5*

Every time I think McCullers has written the saddest story, there's another one that tops it. I could relate so much with Marian and even a little with Ken Harris. Alcoholism has been haunting me as a theme since my

youth and it scares the hell out of me. Stories like these are the reason why I tend to be concerned with my own drinking habits from time to time and worried about friends who tend to drink too much.

The ballad of the sad cafe 5*

„First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons - but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the people involved.“

Like a sad fairy tale set in the American South instead of some german woods.

Miss Amelia is probably one of the greatest female characters in literature.

The member of the wedding 5*

Awesome coming of age story, perfectly captures the uncertainty of that age and the longing for „more“ without being able to pinpoint what this „more“ means.

Very sad ending.

Andrew says

Many of these stories are actually vignettes and brief character sketches that don't do much. McCullers is one of those authors whose prose seems strangely genderless, neither quite masculine nor feminine, who is neither ostentatious or austere. In fact, some of these 'stories' (McCullers may have been at the forefront of the Fast Fiction movement and not even known it) remind me of John Cheever - the same frankness, the same sorrow, the same pointlessness. An old Jew rides on a bus with a young hick who talks to him, before getting off the bus, no different than before. Some kids make a model airplane that doesn't fly. A boy walks into a dinner and an old man tells him how love works. These are folk tales of the real sense - real people, real events that don't signify if they don't signify.

However, the gems of this book are the two longer pieces - The Ballad of the Sad Cafe and The Member of the Wedding. The Ballad of the Sad Cafe had strong characters and a folksy twang of a fabricator sitting by the fire and telling you the *real* story behind this town. It's a funn story with all the exaggerations and hopelessness you would expect from a southern writer discussing how love works regardless of its reciprocation, and the dreadful beauty and power of emotions. You expect every paragraph to begin with "Whell, it was the hottest summah we'd evah seen and the corn was popping itself in Old Smith's farmyard when Josie first came to town with a suitcase made of purple leathah like sunset over the Louisiana itself ayup." But in a good way, somehow.

Where McCullers truly shines, however, is "The Member of the Wedding." An examination of expectations, loneliness and rages in a young girl's mind in the south, the novella spins several threads around sexuality, race, love and most of all, a dreadful restlessness. McCullers deftly inhabits the twelve-year-old mind of Frankie Addams, straddling the age between childhood and adulthood. But what is perhaps the strength of the book is that McCullers' resisted the standard navelgazing that often epitomizes this type of novel. Frankie is looking out as much as looking in, which lets this book be far more than a coming of age story about flowering pear trees, and allows the story to encompass politics, gender studies, identity and, since this is a McCullers story, the very nature of love and fetish.

Deborah Sheldon says

The more I read of Carson McCullers, the more she reminds me of Flannery O'Connor, another of my all-time favourite authors. They both have the uncanny ability to nail down a distinct time and place with such veracity that you can almost smell the air. "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe" and "Who Has Seen the Wind?" were stand-outs for me. McCullers' central theme seems to be, "Love hurts", and she shows us just how much it can, in all manner of wrenching and beautifully written ways.
