McCarthy, Mary Therese (1912 - 1989)

Summary Article: McCarthy, Mary
from Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction

During her lifetime, Mary McCarthy was known first as a public intellectual, the “First Lady of American Letters” (Newsweek 1963), and second as a novelist. Since her death in 1989, McCarthy’s critical reputation has largely been based on her memoirs, particularly Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (1957), as well as her novel The Group (1963a) and several much-anthologized stories.

Mary Therese McCarthy was born on June 21, 1912 in Seattle, Washington. The circumstances of her difficult childhood, recounted in Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (1957), Cast a Cold Eye (1950), and How I Grew (1987), include the deaths of both of her beloved and doting parents in the influenza epidemic of 1918 and the placing of Mary and her three brothers into the foster care of a relative and her abusive husband in Minneapolis, who provided no emotional warmth and only the barest of physical necessities to the children. This was her Irish Catholic girlhood. When she was 11, Mary was rescued by her Anglo-Protestant maternal grandfather and taken to live with him and her Jewish grandmother in Seattle. She completed her education at Vassar.

McCarthy wrote about Vassar, and its importance in shaping her intellectually, in her memoirs and essays. Most significantly, McCarthy’s bestselling novel, The Group, is based on her experiences and those of some classmates in the Vassar class of 1933. The novel covers eight years, from 1933 to 1941, and its detailed, satiric portrait of this group of privileged female college graduates chronicles what she saw as the failure of the progressive ideology of the New Deal to change the lives of these idealistic but spoiled and naive young liberals in any fundamental way.

Several other novels helped to establish McCarthy’s reputation as a brilliant stylist, known for her wit and comedic talents as well as her incisive social commentary. The Company She Keeps (1942), originally published as six short stories which share a protagonist, broke new ground with its episodic but carefully crafted structure and the unflinching honesty with which it treated the social, romantic, and sexual relationships in the young New York intellectual milieu in which McCarthy moved. In The Oasis (1949), she satirized the utopian socialism of her Partisan Review colleagues, and in The Groves of Academe (1952), she produced both a memorable academic novel and a satiric exposure of the cynical manipulation of McCarthyism by both Left and Right. A Charmed Life (1955) took aim at the self-involved and irresponsible lives of artists and intellectuals who believe they are exempt from the morality that applies to those who are less talented than they. Her later novels, Birds of America (1971) and Cannibals and Missionaries (1979), examine the psychology of the younger generation dominated by the Vietnam War and of terrorists who hijacked airplanes during the 1970s.

While McCarthy’s sharp critical mind is evident in her fiction, it emerged most tellingly in her literary and cultural criticism and her political writing. A five-part series in The Nation when she was 23, “Our Critics, Right or Wrong” (McCarthy & Marshall 1935), established her credentials as what Life magazine was to call the “Lady With a Switchblade” (Life 1964). At the Partisan Review, she was given the seemingly innocuous assignment of theater reviewer, but her acute and acerbic “theatre chronicles” soon became

Mary McCarthy, who lived in many houses in her lifetime, never really found a home until she and her fourth husband, James West, settled into a life that moved between their apartment in Paris and their house in Castine, Maine. McCarthy loved travel, and throughout her life was never stationary for long. Her peripatetic life fed her fiction as well as her vivid travel writing, most notably in *Venice Observed* (1956) and *The Stones of Florence* (1959).

**SEE ALSO:** The City in Fiction (AF); Gender and the Novel (AF); Modernist Fiction (AF); Social-Realist Fiction (AF)

**REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS**


BRENDA MURPHY

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA


https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/mccarthy_mary_1912_1989
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA