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Book Review - Understanding the Short Fiction of Carson McCullers

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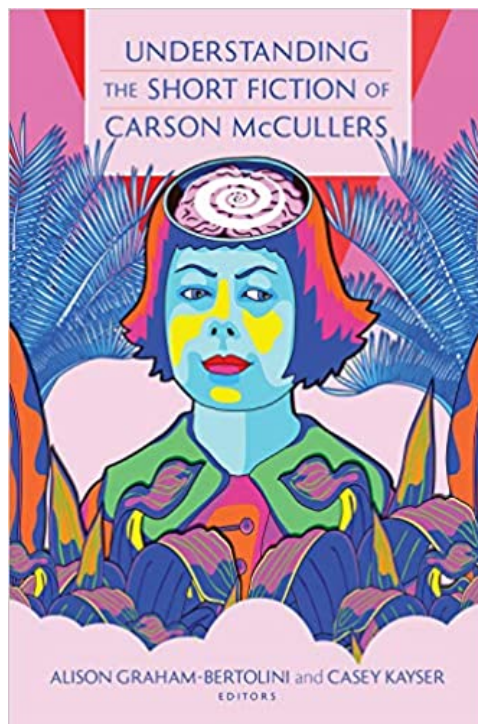
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Off the SHELF

Understanding the Short Fiction of Carson McCullers edited by Alison Graham-Bertolini and Casey Kayser (Mercer University Press, 2020: ISBN 9780881467420, \$35.00)

Carson McCullers has long been considered an exemplary figure of the southern Gothic genre, with her focus on the strangeness and grotesqueness of mid-century southern life. Her novels, such as *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, *The Member of the Wedding*, and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, have received much critical attention at the time of their respective publications as well as today. The novels tend to be preoccupied with alienation and queerness of various types—disfigurement, disability, illness, addiction, sexuality, abandonment. In this new edited collection from Graham-Bertolini and Kayser, however, it is McCullers's short fiction that takes center stage. This collection seeks to re-envision McCullers as not only a novelist, but a short story writer as well, by taking on what some see as her neglected work in that genre. Additionally, the editors seek to expand the understanding of McCullers as a writer preoccupied with alienation and queerness into a broader understanding of her as a "writer politically ahead of her time, concerned not just with the failures of the human connection, but intent on critiquing oppressive sociopolitical mores and institutions that may have prevented such relationships."



Readers familiar with McCullers's novels will find this exploration of her short stories through the lens of her as a novelist worthwhile. Two stories seem to dominate many of the chapters in this book: "The Haunted Boy" and "Untitled Piece." As with most of her writing, these stories also deal with the alienated, the abnormal, and the queer. In "The Haunted Boy," a teenage boy slowly unravels after the trauma of witnessing his mother's suicide attempt and the rejection of his affection by his best friend. In "Untitled Piece," a young man travels home, drunk, and encounters a Jewish man on the bus. He reveals information about his past, including a sexual experience he had with his Black nanny as a youth. In both, the specters of mental illness and sexual transgression linger—both themes common in much of McCullers's fiction. Some authors in this volume (e.g., Horning, Willis, Byerman) have read this preoccupation as semi-autobiographical. McCullers herself struggled with mental illness, alcoholism, and her own gender and sexuality. In this way, much of her short fiction deals with the themes seen elsewhere in her work and for which she is best known. The explication of these themes through her short fiction is worthwhile in expanding general critical attention to these works.

In the attempt to expand the understanding of McCullers beyond these themes, the writers rely mostly on McCullers as a political figure. In many of the chapters, it is noted how she

engaged with politics—particularly anti-fascist and Marxist politics—as a combatant to the realities of the mid-20th century South. For example, Matsui’s chapter on fascism in McCullers and Welles is an exemplary look at how the politics of the 1930s and 1940s affected diverse artistic outputs. Others also deal with the political nature of McCullers’s writing in their chapters, most notably Graham-Bertolini and Magome. However, Marxist readings of McCullers’s work are not new, as her novels, particularly *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, have been getting such treatment since at least the 1990s. As McCullers often used her

short fiction as a place to work out thematic concepts for her novels, the expansion of understanding of McCullers as a political writer—particularly as an anti-fascist writer—is solidified by exploring these themes in her short fiction, as well as how they interact with her broader themes of alienation and Otherness.

This book is recommended for academic libraries that collect in the area of southern literature and 20th century literature.

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