

Large Print Exhibition Text

Her Story: A Century of Women Writers



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As the nation commemorates the centennial of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, *Her Story: A Century of Women Writers* celebrates some of the country's most influential authors. Represented here are twenty-four women from diverse backgrounds whose books have become classics and whose words are well known. Many of us grew up with their stories, poems, and essays and have since passed them on to friends and family.

Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* (1947) is among the first books introduced to young children. The characters in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918), Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) remain vivid long after our encounters with them in the classroom. Whether using their life experiences or powers of imagination, each of these women has contributed to the development of American literature in significant ways. Several of them have won Pulitzer Prizes, Nobel Prizes, or both, and as this exhibition reveals, their personal stories—in addition to those they have written—continue to offer insight and inspiration.

Willa Cather 1873–1947
Born Back Creek Valley (now Gore),
Virginia



At nine years old, Willa Cather moved from the rolling hills of Virginia to the flat expanses of Nebraska. She spent most of her adulthood in New York City but regularly returned to her home- town of Red Cloud. There, on the Great Plains, is where she sourced the subject matter for her novels. Following the publication of *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), Sinclair Lewis remarked: “The United States knows Nebraska because of Willa Cather’s books.” *One of Ours* (1922), her fifth of twelve novels, won the Pulitzer Prize. She also published six collections of short fiction, books of poetry, and nonfiction.

In this photograph by Edward Steichen, which ran in a 1927 issue of *Vanity Fair*, Cather is shown wearing her signature white shirt and tie. She eschewed traditional gender roles, and some scholars speculate that she wrote *My Ántonia* from a male perspective so that she could express her desire for women.

Edward Steichen (1879–1973)

Gelatin silver print, 1927

Acquired in memory of Agnes and Eugene Meyer through the generosity of Katharine Graham and the New York Community Trust, the Island Fund

Pearl S. Buck 1892–1973
Born Hillsboro, West Virginia



The American novelist Pearl S. Buck once said, “Nothing and no one can destroy the Chinese people. They are relentless survivors.” For more than thirty years, she lived in China, first in the city of Zhenjiang with her missionary parents and later in Nanjing with her husband, who was also a missionary. Her experiences there greatly influenced her writing. In 1932, Buck (known as Sai Zhenzhu in China) won the Pulitzer Prize for her second novel, *The Good Earth*. She then went on to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938 after writing two books about the lives of her parents: *The Exile* and *Fighting Angel* (both 1936).

Buck posed for this portrait in 1932, just before her break with the Presbyterian missionary groups in China. In a speech she made around this time, she welcomed the Chinese to share her Christian faith without interference from well-intentioned, yet culturally and historically uninformed, missionaries.

Edward Steichen (1879–1973)
Gelatin silver print, 1932

Frances Hodgson Burnett 1849–1924 ***Born Manchester, England***

A prolific novelist and playwright, Frances Hodgson Burnett is best remembered for three children's classics: *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886), *A Little Princess* (1905), and *The Secret Garden* (1911). Born in Manchester, England, she and her widowed mother immigrated to the United States in 1865 in hopes of finding support from relatives. Yet it would be several years before Burnett would become financially independent by publishing fiction in popular magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Scribner's Monthly*, and *Harper's*. The success of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* all but secured her fame and fortune. The book sold more than half a million copies, and her dramatized version was popular as well.



Samuel Johnson Woolf made this charcoal portrait of Burnett shortly before her death. It bears both of their signatures, as Woolf requested that his sitters sign their portraits as a mark of authenticity.

Samuel Johnson Woolf (1880–1948)

Charcoal and chalk on paper, 1924

Gift of the artist's daughters, Muriel Woolf Hobson and Dorothy Woolf Ahern

Dorothy Parker 1893–1967
Born Long Branch, New Jersey

“There’s a hell of a distance between wise-cracking and wit. Wit has truth in it; wise-cracking is simply calisthenics with words,” claimed writer and magazine editor Dorothy Parker. One of the most caustic literary figures of her age, Parker wrote for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* before becoming a founding editor of the *New Yorker* in 1925. She published three volumes of sarcastic poetry, including *Sunset Gun* (1928) and *Death and Taxes* (1931). Her most successful short story, “Big Blonde,” won the O. Henry Award in 1929. In the 1930s, Parker began writing screenplays, including the original version of *A Star Is Born* (1937), for which she and her co-writer received an Academy Award nomination.

“Friend of Dorothy,” gay slang for a fellow homosexual, is partly attributed to Parker’s cultivation of close friendships with openly gay men, including photographer George Platt Lynes, who made this portrait a year before *The Portable Dorothy Parker* was published.

George Platt Lynes (1907–1955)
Gelatin silver print, 1943



Margaret Wise Brown 1910–1952
Born Brooklyn, New York

Margaret Wise Brown once mused, “The first great wonder at the world is big in me. That is why I write.” Brown’s work at the Bureau of Educational



Experiments (now Bank Street College of Education) in New York City, an experimental academy dedicated to early childhood development, inspired her to write children’s books. Between 1937 and her death in 1952, she authored more than one hundred books, including such classics as *The Runaway Bunny* (1942), *The Little Island* (1946), and *Goodnight Moon* (1947). In her writings, which often use repetition of language, Brown evokes the poetry of Gertrude Stein, whom she greatly admired.

Philippe Halsman photographed Brown one year before *Goodnight Moon* was released and a few years after she began living with her life partner (playwright and actress Blanche Oelrichs). This portrait reveals Brown’s preference for handwriting her manuscripts using a quill pen.

Philippe Halsman (1906–1979)

Gelatin silver print, 1946

Gift of Steve Bello, in memory of Jane Halsman Bello

Katherine Anne Porter 1890–1980 ***Born Indian Creek, Texas***

Born Callie Russell Porter in rural Texas, Katherine Anne Porter later adopted her grandmother's name as a way to honor the woman who raised her. Having worked as a newspaper reporter, Porter cemented her literary reputation in 1930 with the short story collection *Flowering Judas*. The title story is set in post-revolutionary Mexico, where the author spent extended periods of time.



Porter's short fiction drew praise from her fellow literati: *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (1965) earned her both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Her most popular success, though, was her best-selling novel *Ship of Fools* (1962). Inspired by a sea voyage that she had taken from Mexico to Germany in 1931, the story focuses on a group of international travelers who are aboard a ship on the eve of Hitler's rise to power. In 1965, the book was made into a major motion picture starring Vivien Leigh.

Bernard Perlin (1918–2014)
Silver point on paper, 1946

Anne Sexton 1928–1974
Born Newton, Massachusetts

Anne Sexton's poetry took up highly personal issues of white middle-class womanhood in the 1950s and 1960s, an era when conventional gender roles were being re-evaluated. Raw and confessional, her poems addressed female sexuality, mental health, and other subjects that were thought of as taboo. Sexton received many honors, including the 1967 Pulitzer Prize for her poetry collection *Live or Die* (1966).



After spending much of her adulthood in and out of mental health treatment, by the 1970s, she began losing her fight against bipolar disorder. In 1974, Sexton died by suicide, her personal life echoing the last lines of "Her Kind," a poem that compares a contemporary woman's life to that of a witch: "A woman like that is not ashamed to die. / I have been her kind."

This photograph of Sexton at her home in suburban Newton, Massachusetts, shows her in the writing nook she kept just off of the kitchen.

Rollie McKenna (1918–2003)
Gelatin silver print, 1961 (printed later)
Gift of Rollie McKenna

Lorraine Hansberry 1930–1965 ***Born Chicago, Illinois***

In March 1959, Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway to glowing reviews. The twenty-nine-year-old writer became the first African American playwright to win the coveted New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Hansberry's story, which centers on a Black family's attempt to buy a house in a white Chicago neighborhood, drew on her family's experiences of racism.

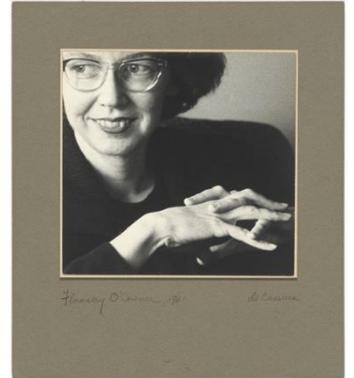


Hansberry was a civil rights activist who associated with the Communist Party of America and supported aggressive anti-racist action. When CBS correspondent Mike Wallace interviewed her during the run of *A Raisin in the Sun*, she asserted that Black people had “a great deal to be angry about ...they are still lynching Negroes in America. I feel, as our African friends do, that we need to point toward the total liberation of the African peoples all over the world.”

David Attie (1920–1982)
Gelatin silver print, 1959

Flannery O'Connor 1925–1964
Born Savannah, Georgia

Mary Flannery O'Connor dropped her first name when she published *Wise Blood* (1952). Shortly thereafter, she earned her master's degree in creative writing at the University of Iowa. Her first collection of stories was *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955); her second, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, was published posthumously in 1965. Most of O'Connor's novels and short stories focused on spiritual and religious journeys taken by morally compromised individuals placed in unsettling scenarios. "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace," she once explained. "Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will work."



This portrait of the author by the Atlanta-based photographer Joseph Reshower appeared on the book jacket for O'Connor's *The Complete Stories*. Published several years after her death, the anthology received the National Book Award in 1972.

Joseph Reshower (1921–2006)

Gelatin silver print, 1961

Acquired through a partial gift by John Daniel Reaves

Jean Kerr 1922–2003

Born Scranton, Pennsylvania

Upon receiving her master's degree from Catholic University in 1945, the playwright Jean Kerr moved from Washington, D.C., to New York City.



By the 1950s, her humorous takes on American middle-class angst were starting to earn recognition. Her script for *King of Hearts* (1954), co-written with Eleanor Brooke, received rave reviews, and she had further success with *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (1957).

Mary, Mary (1961), a comedic play about sex, marriage, infidelity, weight loss, and divorce, became one of the longest-running plays on Broadway, and it was subsequently made into a major motion picture. Kerr lived to be eighty and is often remembered for her ability to find “the comic in the commonplace anxieties of suburbia and married life.”

Time magazine featured Kerr on its cover when she was promoting *Mary, Mary*. This painting, by René Bouché, was based on lengthy portrait sittings in the Kerr household.

René Robert Bouché (1905–1963)

Oil on canvas, 1961

Time cover, April 14, 1961

Gift of *Time* magazine

Ayn Rand 1905–1982 **Born St. Petersburg, Russia**

An ardent defender of unfettered capitalism, Ayn Rand preached a philosophical doctrine of “objectivism” that saw selfishness as a virtue. Born Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum in Czarist Russia, she immigrated to the United States in 1926 after overstaying a tourist visa. Rand began in Hollywood, writing anti-Soviet screenplays, but is best remembered for her fiction. *The Fountainhead* (1943), her debut novel, tells the story of an architect, who must overcome the threat of collectivism to his individual creativity. The theme of individualism continued in her second novel, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), a dystopian fantasy, where productive citizens withdraw their labor and society grinds to a halt. Despite poor reviews, both books earned a broad readership, and by the time of her death, Rand had become a cult figure.



In this photograph, the author wears a pin made in the shape of a dollar sign, a wry emblem for this celebrant of private initiative and free enterprise.

Arnold Newman (1918–2006)
Gelatin silver print, 1964

Ruth Praver Jhabvala 1927–2013
Born Cologne, Germany



Born in Germany to Jewish parents, Ruth Praver Jhabvala became a British citizen in 1948 and later moved to India with her husband, where she lived for over two decades. Recognized for her fiction about life there, she adapted her novel *The Householder* (1960) to the screen for Merchant Ivory Productions in the early 1960s. She won England's prestigious Booker Prize for *Heat and Dust* in 1975 and shortly thereafter moved to New York City, where she continued to write novels and screenplays as a way to examine individual identity in a fluid, polyglot world.

In 1986, Praver Jhabvala became a naturalized U.S. citizen, and the following year she received an Academy Award for her screen adaptation of E. M. Forster's novel, *A Room with a View*. She garnered a second Academy Award for her original screenplay *Howard's End* (1992).

Bernard Gotfryd (1924–2016)
Gelatin silver print, c.1975

Alice Walker born 1944
Born Eatonton, Georgia

Alice Walker is a model of the engaged intellectual: her fiction is infused with the sense of righteous purpose that drove her early involvement in the civil rights movement of the 1960s when she was a college student. In the 1980s, she helped popularize the term “womanist” as a way to recognize the diverging priorities of women of color from those of their white feminist counterparts.



As the daughter of sharecroppers from rural Georgia, Walker has maintained an interest in vernacular Southern Black culture, working to revive the work of Zora Neale Hurston and other African American women writers who focused on folk life. In addition to writing poetry and criticism, Walker has published several novels, including *The Color Purple* (1982), which won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The book quickly rose to the top of the best-seller list, and its film adaptation was nominated for eleven Academy Awards.

Bernard Gotfryd (1924–2016)

Gelatin silver print, 1976

***Maya Angelou, Algonquin Hotel,
New York City
Born St. Louis, Missouri***

With the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1969, Maya Angelou (1928–2014) launched a series of seven remarkable autobiographical novels. The books span several years, shedding light on her difficult childhood, when she shuttled back and forth between relatives in the North and South; her starring role in *Porgy and Bess* during its extended international tour in the 1950s; and her tireless work in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.



Born Marguerite Annie Johnson, Angelou renamed herself in adulthood. A politically engaged writer, she was also a widely published poet, whose work was most powerful when recited by its author. This was certainly the case when she read her poem “On the Pulse of the Morning” for an audience of millions at President Bill Clinton’s 1993 inauguration. In 2011, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama.

Brigitte Lacombe (born 1950)
Inkjet print, 1987 (printed 2012)

Susan Sontag 1933–2004

Born New York City

Susan Sontag's desire to accomplish what she termed "self-transcendence" coincided with the emergence of a 1960s counterculture. She became an international icon after the 1964 publication of her essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" a study of the aesthetics of artifice and popular culture. Soon thereafter, *Against Interpretation* (1966), a volume of her critical writings, reinforced her status.



During the 1980s, Sontag chronicled the impact of the AIDS epidemic on artists and intellectuals in such pieces as "The Way We Live Now" (1986), which she penned for the *New Yorker*. In a later work, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), she explored the disconnect between images of war, the experiences they represent, and the audiences that consume those images. The book was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Throughout Sontag's life, she was dedicated to freedom of expression and the advancement of literature, which she declared "the passport to enter a larger life; that is, the zone of freedom."

Peter Hujar (1934–1987)
Gelatin silver print, 1975

Maxine Hong Kingston born 1940
Born Stockton, California

Maxine Hong Kingston's parents immigrated to the United States from China shortly before she was born. As a writer of both fiction and nonfiction, she has consistently turned to experiences of immigration and conveyed a sense of living between two distinct worlds.



In *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), she observes: "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America." Responding to this idea, the book weaves folk tales through the lives of several generations of women in a Chinese American family. *The Woman Warrior* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction as Kingston relied heavily on autobiographical elements. Shortly thereafter, she won the National Book Award for *China Men* (1980), a collection of vignettes focused on her male family members, whom she also featured in *The Woman Warrior*.

Anthony Barboza (born 1944)
Chromogenic print, 1989

Sandra Cisneros born 1954
Born Chicago, Illinois



While writing *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Sandra Cisneros drew upon her experience as the daughter of a working-class Mexican American family in Chicago. The book earned her the American Book Award and was later translated into more than twenty languages. Cisneros has been named a MacArthur Fellow (1995), and in 2002, the *New York Times* and other national newspapers selected her novel *Caramelo* as a notable book of the year. In 2016, she was awarded the National Medal of the Arts by President Barack Obama.

This portrait is by Al Rendon, who is renowned for his photographs of Latinx leaders in his hometown of San Antonio, Texas. He portrays Cisneros with her dog on the porch of her former house, smiling at the viewer and wearing a traditional Mexican folk dress. The author currently lives in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, taking advantage of her dual U.S. and Mexican citizenship.

Al Rendon (born 1957)

Inkjet print, 1998 (printed 2014)

Acquisition made possible through the Smithsonian Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center

Toni Morrison 1931–2019

Born Lorain, Ohio

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison used multiple perspectives and a splintered narrative to examine the subjectivities of Black girls who struggle against, and sometimes submit to, the self-loathing that white beauty ideals would have them internalize. Morrison won the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Song of Solomon* (1977) and the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* (1987). In 1993, when she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the committee described her as an author “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.”



This photograph of Morrison appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine on January 19, 1998, following the release of her novel *Paradise*. The book is the final installment of her highly acclaimed trilogy examining post-Civil War Black life, which also includes *Beloved* and *Jazz* (1992). In 2012, President Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Deborah Feingold (born 1951)
Chromogenic print, 1998
Time cover, January 19, 1998
Gift of *Time* magazine

Marilynne Robinson born 1943
Born Sandpoint, Idaho

Acclaimed author Marilynne Robinson first appeared on the literary scene in 1980 with her novel *Housekeeping*.

The book went on to win the prestigious PEN/Hemingway Award, and Robinson spent the following two decades teaching and writing nonfiction for publications such as *Harper's* and the *New York Times Book Review*.

Gilead (2004), which examines the role of faith in rural American life, garnered the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Robinson is regarded as one of the nation's most important contemporary writers and distinguishes herself through her nuanced and thoughtful engagement with themes of family and Christianity.

She has written about literature as a basis for empathy: "I think fiction may be, whatever else, an exercise in the capacity for imaginative love, or sympathy, or identification." In 2012, Robinson was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama.

Alec Soth (born 1969)
Inkjet print, 2014 (printed 2015)



Jhumpa Lahiri born 1967
Born London, England

Born in London to Bengali parents, Jhumpa Lahiri moved to Rhode Island at age two. She has said that while growing up, she did not feel fully at home in the United States or in

India: "At many times in my life, I wished I could be like any other American . . . feel really a part of it, really woven into it. I couldn't. I just couldn't do it. And all of my writing has come out of that."

As an adult, Lahiri earned three master's degrees and a doctorate before pursuing a literary career. Shortly thereafter, she became a signal voice of the South Asian immigrant experience in the United States and won the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Hemingway Award for her debut short-story collection, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Lahiri's novel *The Lowlands* (2013) was a bestseller and finalist for the National Book Award.

In David Levine's caricature of Lahiri, which first accompanied a review of *The Namesake* (2003), he portrayed her in a traditional Indian sari, seated on the floor with a computer.

David Levine (1926–2009)
Ink over graphite on paper, 2003



Joyce Carol Oates born 1938
Born Lockport, New York

A prolific, award-winning author, Joyce Carol Oates has published more than one hundred books, approximately sixty of them novels. She also writes poetry, short stories, essays, and criticism, and for a number of years, she taught creative writing at Princeton University.



Oates won the National Book Award in 1969 for her novel *them*, and she has since been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Many of her short stories and novels feature fictionalized versions of real people and situations. *Blonde* (2000), for example, is a historical novel that imagines the inner life of movie star Marilyn Monroe. Oates often places her work on the fringes of science fiction and fantasy, and frequently explores Gothic themes.

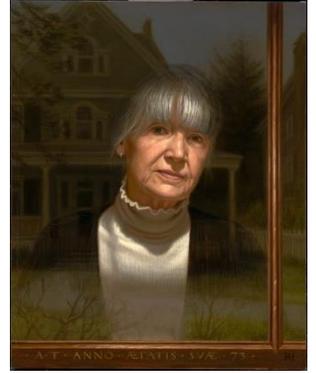
In 2010, Oates received a National Humanities Medal, and some critics predict that she will be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in the future.

Dan Winters (born 1962)
Inkjet print, 2007 (printed 2010)
Gift of Bill and Sally Wittliff

Anne Tyler: "Sit by my side and let the world slip . . ."

Born Minneapolis, Minnesota

Anne Tyler (born 1941) moved to Baltimore in the late 1960s, where much of her writing is set. Her novels often evoke the dislocations and misconceptions of modern American life in a way that is affectionate and merciless at the same time. In a rare interview, she explained why she writes: "It seems to me often that I'm sort of looking from a window at something at a great distance and wondering what it is. But I'm not willing to actually go into it. I would rather sit behind the windowsill and write about it."



Tyler's vast body of work encompasses short stories and novels as well as literary criticism. In 1989, she won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Breathing Lessons* (1988), and two of her other books were nominated for the prize. *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), which was made into an Academy Award-nominated film, remains her most popular.

Ralph Heimans (born 1970)

Oil on canvas, 2015

Acquisition made possible through the generosity of David Kowitz

Gwendolyn Brooks 1917–2000

Born Topeka, Kansas



“Blackness is what I know best. I want to talk about it, with definitive illustration,” remarked the poet Gwendolyn Brooks. From her sensitive autobiographical novella *Maud Martha* (1953) to her popular rhythmic poem “We Real Cool” (1959), she poignantly portrayed Black urban working-class life in Chicago. Her first collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), presents complex Black characters who are both limited by their circumstances and are active agents of their own destiny. Brooks became the first African American writer to receive the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950 and went on to earn election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1976.

Sara S. Miller (1924–2016)
Bronze, 1994

Marianne Moore 1887–1972
Born St. Louis, Missouri

Poet Marianne Moore's manifesto "Poetry" (1919) begins: "I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle." Moore's keenly observed descriptions of humans and animals appear in early poems such as "A Jelly-Fish," published in 1909, when she was an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College.



Moore was among the few early twentieth-century women poets to gain popular acceptance—a testament both to the precise dynamism of her modernist verse as well as to her male peers' bias. In 1952, her *Collected Poems* (1951) won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

Gaston Lachaise (1882–1935)
Bronze, 1974, cast after 1924 original