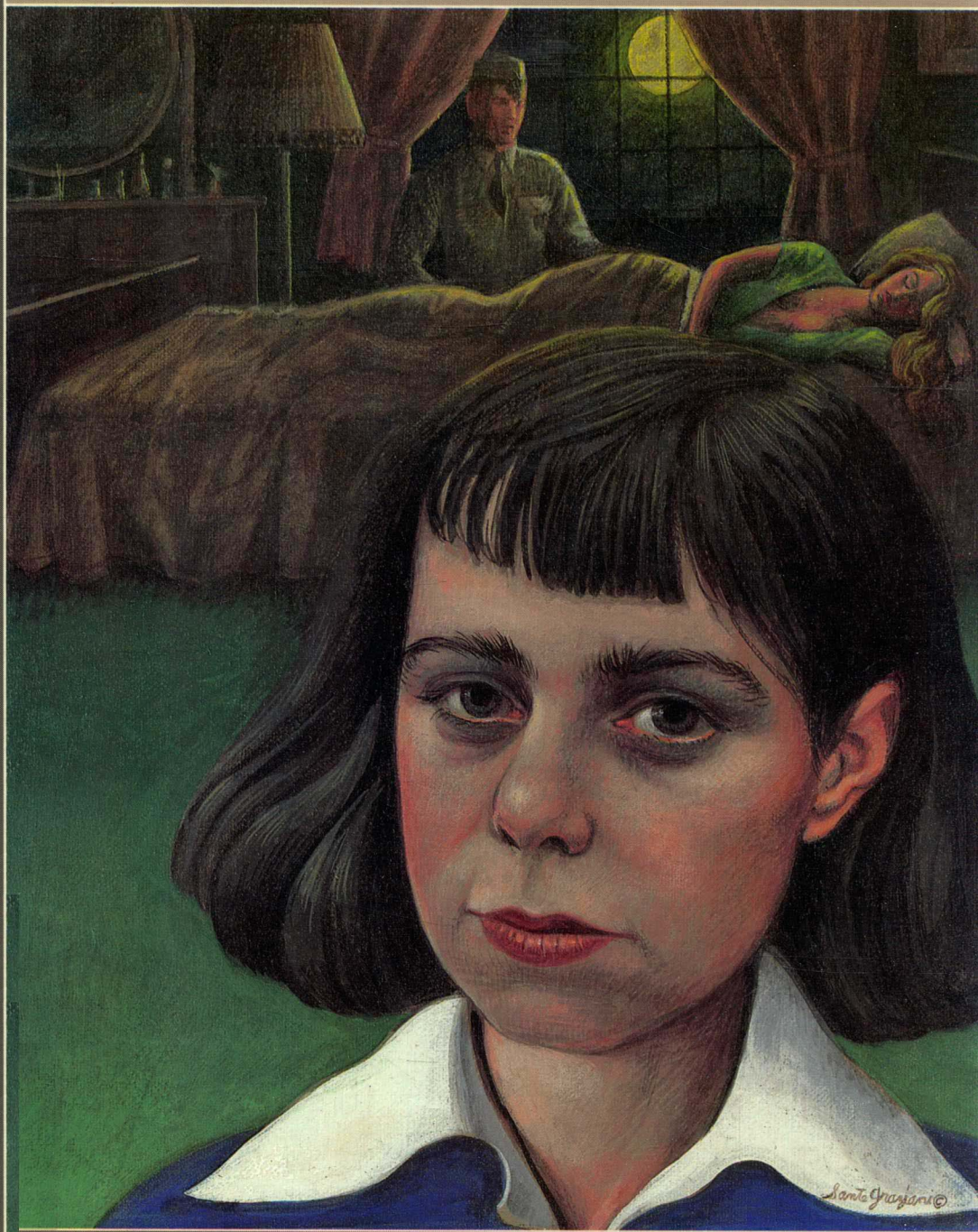


*Modern Critical Views*

CARSON  
**McCULLERS**

Edited and with an Introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



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CARSON McCULLERS

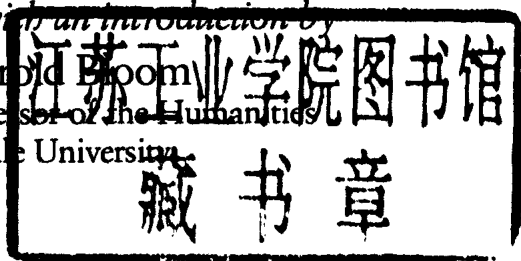
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*Edited and with an introduction by*

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## Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best criticism yet published upon the fiction of Carson McCullers, arranged in the chronological order of its original publication. I am grateful to Susan Laity, Henry Finder, and Caroline Rebecca Rogers for their aid in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, emphasizing McCullers's curious strength in representing a universal hunger for love, however grotesquely that hunger manifests itself. Marguerite Young begins the chronological sequence of criticism with an appreciation of *The Member of the Wedding*, which is followed here by the enthusiastic tribute to *Reflections in a Golden Eye* by Tennessee Williams, and by Gore Vidal's genial but more reserved appraisal of *Clock Without Hands*.

Oliver Evans expounds the allegory of McCullers's drama *The Square Root of Wonderful*, while Klaus Lubbers provides a full-scale overview of McCullers's entire achievement. The three early novels—*Heart*, *Reflections*, *Ballad*—are unified in the analysis of Lawrence Graver, while Richard M. Cook devotes himself wholly to the problematic and disturbing *Reflections*. Another general estimate, but centered upon the *Ballad*, is given by Richard Gray, a learned student of southern American literature.

More recent criticism, reflecting the perspectives of the 1980s, begins here with Margaret B. McDowell's exegesis of the short stories and the poems, and continues with Louise Westling's and Mary Ann Dazey's reconsiderations of what may be McCullers's masterpiece, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. A final analysis, Barbara A. White's account of *The Member of the Wedding*, provides a fresh illumination upon the fate of the erotic self in McCullers, and seems to me a hopeful portent of directions in which the future criticism of McCullers's fiction may choose to move.

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## Introduction

### I

“I become the characters I write about and I bless the Latin poet Terence who said ‘Nothing human is alien to me.’” That was the aesthetic credo of Carson McCullers, and was her program for a limited yet astonishingly intense art of fiction. Rereading her after nearly twenty years away from her novels and stories, I discover that time has enhanced *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, and perhaps rendered less problematic *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. What time cannot do is alter the burden for critics that McCullers represents. Her fiction, like her person, risked that perpetual crisis of Eros of which D. H. Lawrence was the poet and Freud the theoretician. Call it the tendency to make false connections, as set forth by Freud with mordant accuracy in the second paragraph of his crucial paper of 1912, “The Dynamics of the Transference”:

Let us bear clearly in mind that every human being has acquired, by the combined operation of inherent disposition and of external influences in childhood, a special individuality in the exercise of his capacity to love—that is, in the conditions which he sets up for loving, in the impulses he gratifies by it, and in the aims he sets out to achieve in it. This forms a *cliché* or stereotype in him, so to speak (or even several), which perpetually repeats and reproduces itself as life goes on, in so far as external circumstances and the nature of the accessible love-objects permit, and is indeed itself to some extent modifiable by later impressions. Now our experience has shown that of these feelings which determine the capacity to love only a part has undergone full psychological development; this part is directed towards reality, and can be made use of by the conscious personality, of which it forms part. The other part of these libidinal impulses has been held up in development, withheld from the conscious personality and from reality, and may either expend itself only in phantasy, or may

remain completely buried in the unconscious so that the conscious personality is unaware of its existence. Expectant libidinal impulses will inevitably be roused, in anyone whose need for love is not being satisfactorily gratified in reality, by each new person coming upon the scene, and it is more than probable that both parts of the libido, the conscious and the unconscious, will participate in this attitude.

All of McCullers's characters share a particular quirk in the exercise of their capacity to love—they exist, and eventually expire, by falling in love with a hopeless hope. Their authentic literary ancestor is Wordsworth's poignant Margaret, in *The Ruined Cottage*, and like his Margaret they are destroyed, not by despair, but by the extravagance of erotic hope. It is no accident that McCullers's first and best book should bear, as title, her most impressive, indeed unforgettable metaphor: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.

McCullers's few ventures into literary criticism, whether of Gogol, Faulkner, or herself, were not very illuminating, except in their obsession with loneliness. Her notes on writing, "The Flowering Dream," record her violent, physical response to reading Anne Frank's diary, which caused a rash to break out on her hands and feet. The fear of insulation clearly was the enabling power of McCullers's imagination. When she cited Faulkner and Eugene O'Neill as her major influences, she surprisingly added the Flaubert of *Madame Bovary*, where we might have expected the Lawrence of *The Rainbow* and "The Prussian Officer." But it was Emma's *situation* rather than Flaubert's stance or style that engrossed her.

Mick Kelly, McCullers's surrogate in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, remains her absolute achievement at representing a personality, presumably a vision of her own personality at the age of twelve. Vivid as the other lonely hunters are—the deaf mute John Singer; Biff Brannon, the café proprietor; Jake Blount, alcoholic revolutionary; Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, black liberal and reformer—the book still lives in the tormented intensity of Mick Kelly, who knows early to be "grieved to think how power and will / In opposition rule our mortal day, / And why God made irreconcilable / Good and the means of Good." That is the dark wisdom of Shelley in *The Triumph of Life*, but it is also a wisdom realized perfectly and independently by Mick Kelly, who rightly fears the triumph of life over her own integrity, her own hope, her own sense of potential for achievement or for love. The Shelleyan passage becomes pure McCullers if we transpose it to: "And why God made irreconcilable / Love and the means of Love."

## II

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* would not maintain its force if its only final vision were to be the triumph of life, in Shelley's ironic sense. McCullers gives us



a tough-grained, last sense of Mick Kelly, bereaved, thrown back into an absolute loneliness, but ongoing nevertheless:

But now no music was in her mind. That was a funny thing. It was like she was shut out from the inside room. Sometimes a quick little tune would come and go—but she never went into the inside room with music like she used to do. It was like she was too tense. Or maybe because it was like the store took all her energy and time. Woolworth's wasn't the same as school. When she used to come home from school she felt good and was ready to start working on the music. But now she was always tired. At home she just ate supper and slept and then ate breakfast and went off to the store again. A song she had started in her private notebook two months before was still not finished. And she wanted to stay in the inside room but she didn't know how. It was like the inside room was locked somewhere away from her. A very hard thing to understand.

Mick pushed her broken front tooth with her thumb. But she did have Mister Singer's radio. All the installments hadn't been paid and she took on the responsibility. It was good to have something that had belonged to him. And maybe one of these days she might be able to set aside a little for a second-hand piano. Say two bucks a week. And she wouldn't let anybody touch this private piano but her—only she might teach George little pieces. She would keep it in the back room and play on it every night. And all day Sunday. But then suppose some week she couldn't make a payment. So then would they come to take it away like the little red bicycle? And suppose like she wouldn't let them. Suppose she hid the piano under the house. Or else she would meet them at the front door. And fight. She would knock down both the two men so they would have shiners and broke noses and would be passed out on the hall floor.

Mick frowned and rubbed her fist hard across her forehead. That was the way things were. It was like she was mad all the time. Not how a kid gets mad quick so that soon it is all over—but in another way. Only there was nothing to be mad at. Unless the store. But the store hadn't asked her to take the job. So there was nothing to be mad at. It was like she was cheated. Only nobody had cheated her. So there was nobody to take it out on. However, just the same she had that feeling. Cheated.

But maybe it would be true about the piano and turn out O.K. Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been—the way she felt about music and the plans she had made

in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good.

All right!

O.K!

Some good.

One can call this "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl," and see Mick as a visionary of "the way things were." She has the strength of McCullers's endings that are not wholly negations:

Biff wet his handkerchief beneath the water tap and patted his drawn, tense face. Somehow he remembered that the awning had not yet been raised. As he went to the door his walk gained steadiness. And when at last he was inside again he composed himself soberly to await the morning sun.

*(The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter)*

Even in death the body of the soldier still had the look of warm, animal comfort. His grave face was unchanged, and his sun-browned hands lay palm upwards on the carpet as though in sleep.

*(Reflections in a Golden Eye)*

The most remarkable of these conclusions is the vignette called "The Twelve Mortal Men" that serves as epilogue or coda to *The Ballad of the Sad Café*:

### THE TWELVE MORTAL MEN

The Forks Falls highway is three miles from the town, and it is here the chain gang has been working. The road is of macadam, and the county decided to patch up the rough places and widen it at a certain dangerous place. The gang is made up of twelve men, all wearing black and white striped prison suits, and chained at the ankles. There is a guard, with a gun, his eyes drawn to red slits by the glare. The gang works all the day long, arriving huddled in the prison cart soon after daybreak, and being driven off again in the gray August twilight. All day there is the sound of the picks striking into the clay earth, hard sunlight, the smell of sweat. And every day there is music. One dark voice will start a phrase, half-sung, and like a question. And after a moment another voice will join in, soon the whole gang will be singing. The voices are dark in the golden glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful. The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from

the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright. Then slowly the music will sink down until at last there remains one lonely voice, then a great hoarse breath, the sun, the sound of the picks in the silence.

And what kind of gang is this that can make such music? Just twelve mortal men, seven of them black and five of them white boys from this county. Just twelve mortal men who are together.

The rhetorical stance or tone of this is wholly McCullers's, and is rather difficult to characterize. In context, its reverberation is extraordinary, working as it does against our incapacity to judge or even comprehend the grotesque tragedy of the doomed love between Miss Amelia Evans and Cousin Lymon, with its consequence in the curious flowering and subsequent demise of the sad café. We, as readers, also would rather love than be loved, a preference that, in the aesthetic register, becomes the defense of reading more intensely lest we ourselves be read, whether by ourselves or by others. The emotion released by the juxtaposition between the music and its origin in the chain gang is precisely akin to the affect arising from McCullers's vision of the tragic dignity of the death of love arising so incongruously from the story of Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and the hideous Marvin Macy.

### III

Rendering a canonical judgment upon the fiction of Carson McCullers is a problematical procedure for even the most generous of critics, could she or he be uncovered among the best informed students of American and of modern literature. The common reader has accepted McCullers rather more exuberantly than the recent critical tradition tends to do, and for the right reasons, so far as I can surmise. Few writers have expressed so vibrantly, and economically, a universal yearning for love, and simultaneously acknowledged the reality that such yearning almost inevitably wanes into the morasses of what Freud called the "erotic illusion." McCullers, by a discipline both subtle and open, confers an absolute aesthetic dignity upon even the most grotesque of our own desires and our ongoing illusions. That aesthetic dignity, sometimes precarious but always sustained, perhaps justifies her own yearning to claim Flaubert as one of her literary ancestors.



MARGUERITE YOUNG

## *Metaphysical Fiction*

Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*, astutely and frugally designed, is a deceptive piece of writing, and its candor may betray the unwary reader into accepting it as what it first seems, a study of turbulent adolescence. Indeed, as such a study it has been most often reviewed, often by worldly reviewers who confess their weariness with the problems of a growing childhood, even though such a childhood may be, as in this case, a complexus of unreal, real, and surreal events, in a pattern which is itself as delusive as the dream of a total happiness. Merely by thinking in terms of the individual childhood here presented rather than in terms of the many and carefully erected symbols employed by the author in an argument concerned with man in his relation to various kinds of reality, the reader may miss the importance of this curiously spiritual book. Or he may wonder, especially if he is a parent, why Mrs. McCullers chose as her heroine a child who was more an individual than a type, a child who was herself split into two warring beings though she sought for an eternal harmony. Mrs. McCullers, sometimes depicted as a sensationalist revelling in the grotesque, is more than that because she is first of all the poetic symbolist, a seeker after those luminous meanings which always do transcend the boundaries of the stereotyped, the conventional, and the so-called normal. Here, then, is a fairly clear, explicit writing—explicit even in its use of the anomalous, the paradoxical, the amorphous—the confusions of life. Though its themes are romantic, their working out is classically controlled. There is no wilderness for the reader to get lost in, and if he is lost, it is perhaps because this writing does not weep, gnash, wail, shout, wear its heart on its sleeve. It is rather like a chess game,

where every move is a symbol and requires the reader's countermove. Many modern poems are of this order.

At first level, it is the story of a boy girl Frankie who, during a torrid summer, plans to join her brother's wedding, to get married to the two who are getting married, to belong, to be a member of something, to break down all barriers of atomic individualism, to be somehow intimately involved with all the intimate concerns of the happy human race. If Frankie can only crash in on this wedding of two other people to each other, being the third member, loving both, loved by both, even though she is excessive, why, then, there will be the kind of perfect happiness which man has always dreamed of, like a union of all the nations. Good-natured, proverb-haunted Berenice, the Negro cook who has brought up this semi-orphaned child, assures her that her expectations can never be realized in actuality, that if they were realized, they would not be right, for her or the human race. What Frankie is dreaming of is possible only inside her own creative head, is nowhere else, is very far from possible. The purely imaginary goal is still a goal for Frankie, who cannot easily give up. She and Berenice sit discussing these crucial matters in endless, capacious luxury, capacious for them and for the reader, who can ponder as they ponder, think backward and forward. Then there is an audience, John Henry, aged six, who chimes in every once in a while and provides, in the drama, his own special, peculiar insights. He is beautifully described, once as a little blackbird running against the light. In fact, all three characters, all major, are treated with dignity and revealing tenderness, especially Berenice, whose blue glass eye is like Frankie's dream of the impossible wedding, a dream of almost heavenly harmony on earth. Berenice does not precisely dream of turning white, but her blue glass eye is a terrible commentary on the color line and the arbitrary divisions which shut off people from each other. All this book is a discussion of happiness, done as quietly as *Rasselas* by Dr. Johnson, and the conclusion is faintly similar to his. There are minor characters moving back and forth like the minor figures on a chessboard, in this case both cosmic and human. Nobody is ever disparaged. The Negro people are always people, thoughtful, mature, at home with Frankie who wants to belong to the human race, at home with John Henry, who is very soon to leave it and won't have much use for his little walking cane, a gift given to him most ironically on his death bed, given to him by optimistic Frankie, in fact.

By the above paragraph, I see the impossibility of describing the book without describing it in terms of its intricate symbols. Indeed, narrative and allegory are the two-headed flower growing from one stem, and if this is a "Pilgrim's Progress" backward to the cold and unintelligent and unintelligible universe suggested in Matthew Arnold's popular poem, it is still a pilgrim's progress, modernistic, aware of no simple definition of good and evil. One thing is always

described in terms of another. The argument, though veiled by diverse imagery, is never lost. The imagery is functional. In fact, if there is any one statement to define Mrs. McCullers's position as a writer, it is not that she is merely the sensationist but that she is also, like Sterne, the preacher, concerned with theories of knowledge—though the byplay of wit does not entice her away from the main themes. There is no lush undergrowth. Control is never absent. The framework is always visible.

People want to be told what they already believe, and Mrs. McCullers, in this case, is not telling most people what they already believe. Rather, she is continually questioning a great many complacent assumptions as to what is what, for she is too closely skeptical and analytical a writer to suppose that in the accepted platitudes lies truth. She weighs, she measures. Wild idealism does not carry her beyond the boundaries of a rigorous common sense world, partly for the reason that she finds the given world itself a sufficient phantasmagoria of lost events. Her attitude toward human nature is patient, behaviorist, clinical. Her writing, brooding and exploratory though it is, remains for these reasons as formal as a problem in geometry, though the perspectives bewilderingly and constantly shift. She sees life as impressionistic, but she herself is not the impressionist. She is a logician in an illogical realm.

Is there a given pattern in the nature of things, a music of the spheres, or was it all, as Mrs. McCullers implies, accident and chaos and fragment to begin with? Mrs. McCullers, speculative like her characters, dreams of an omniscient pattern but finds that such a pattern is rather more man's project than God's and that its realization may comprise another chaos. Then, too, there is the problem of how to make the inner world and the outer world conjoin, the problem immediately faced by Frankie, an anarchist in an old baseball cap. These three people, Frankie, John Henry, and Berenice sit around the kitchen table talking most musically while the green summer heat grows more and more oppressive around them. The focal subject is the impossible wedding, the illusory goal, out of which grow other illusory subjects, all related. John Henry draws crazy pictures on the wall. The piano tuner comes to tune the piano (perhaps next door), and the notes become a visible music climbing to the ceiling. And this is almost all that ever happens in the book but enough to keep the sensitive reader appalled to hear meaning after meaning dissolve, while the old problems continue. Is even green a color that can be said to be green to everybody? The metaphysical grows out of the immediate and returns to it, made no less rich because its origin is known. One of the most compelling passages is that in which Berenice tells of her search for happiness, which is exemplified to her in the person of her dead first husband. Berenice has been married three times, looking for him, three times unsatisfactorily. She married a man because he had a thumb like that of her dead first

husband, another because he wore the coat which her dead first husband had worn and which she had pawned after his death and failed to claim, another because of a physical reason, her loneliness. Berenice says that her ideal world will be a world in which the blacks associate equally and freely with the whites and which will also include her dead first husband—though resurrection is not possible and might not even be feasible. Frankie's ideal world will be one where the wars are restricted to only an island for habitual warriors. It may even be a world made up of flickering cinematic figures. Berenice, Frankie, and John Henry, many-dimensioned, talking about what it means to be human, play in an alien system, all the while at a three-handed bridge game, emblematic of their plight. Some of the cards are, though they do not know it, missing from the beginning, maybe like those cards which God threw down at creation—and maybe that is why nothing ever turns out right, why there are expectation and disappointment. John Henry expresses his desire for an angular vision with which to read through and around the cards, a vision that can bend at will, for John Henry is of a philosophic turn of mind besides being a painter of crazy pictures.

At the end of the book, when the strange trilogy is broken up by death and moving away, it seems, in retrospect, a pattern as illusive and perfect as the wedding of three. It can never be recovered. The enchantment is implied in the writing but is not expressed by Frankie, who has come to the banal point of declaring that she just loves Michelangelo. Uncertainty seems to be her future. Either she will grow up, or she will not grow up.



TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

*This Book: Reflections  
in a Golden Eye*

This book, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, is a second novel, and although its appreciation has steadily risen during the eight or nine years since its first appearance, it was then regarded as somewhat disappointing in the way that second novels usually are. When the book preceding a second novel has been very highly acclaimed, as was *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, there is an inclination on the part of critics to retrench their favor, so nearly automatic and invariable a tendency that it can almost be set down as a physical law. But the reasons for failure to justly evaluate this second novel go beyond the common, temporal disadvantage that all second novels must suffer, and I feel that an examination of these reasons may be of considerably greater pertinence to our aim of suggesting a fresh evaluation.

To quote directly from book-notices that came out over a decade ago is virtually impossible, here in Rome where I am writing these comments, but I believe that I am safe in assuming that it was their identification of the author with a certain school of American writers, mostly of southern origin, that made her subject to a particular and powerful line of attack.

Even in the preceding book some readers must undoubtedly have detected a warning predisposition toward certain elements which are popularly known as "morbid." Doubtless there were some critics, as well as readers, who did not understand why Carson McCullers had elected to deal with a matter so unwholesome as the spiritual but passionate attachment that existed between a deaf-mute and a half-wit. But the tenderness of the book disarmed them. The depth and

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From *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. © 1941 by Carson McCullers. New Directions, 1950. Originally entitled "This Book" (Introduction).