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Ann Petry: Miss Muriel and Other Stories

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The Literary Encyclopedia

Miss Muriel and other Stories

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Petry, Ann
(1971)

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Genre: Story Collection. Country: United States.

Ann Lane Petry's chosen career as a short fiction writer was interrupted when an editor from the publishing house Houghton-Mifflin asked her to submit a novel for consideration in their literary fellowship award. That editor's request came after Petry's first important short story, "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon" was published in the December 1943 edition of *Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored

People (NAACP). While Petry's Publication of her story in the *Crisis* was significant, it was not her first time in print. Ann Lane Petry's first published short story, "Marie of the Cabin Club", had already appeared in the *Baltimore Afro-American* in 1939. With the publication of her first story, Petry not only disguised her name but also her gender when she selected the pen name Arnold Petri.

From 1943 to 1947, the year following the publication of Ann Lane Petry's first novel, *The Street*, she published eight short stories. Six of those eight stories Petry would later collect in her last book, a volume of thirteen short narratives titled *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*. Along with her six stories from the 1940s, Petry would add five stories that had been published in the 1950s and 1960s and one story, "The Witness", slightly revised, which had been published in *Redbook* in 1971 the same year that Petry's short story collection was released. One story in *Miss Muriel*, "Mother Africa", was original to the volume. In this book, Petry collects all of her previously published short fiction except "Marie of the Cabin Club" and "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon", her first pieces of published fiction. Twelve stories in *Miss Muriel* initially

were published in anthologies such as *Cross Section* and *Soon One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes, 1940-1962* as well as in magazines and journals such as *Crisis*, *The New Yorker*, *Redbook*, *Phylon*, *Magazine of the Year*, and *Opportunity*, the official publication of the National Urban League.

Upon publication of *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* in 1971, Petry became the second black woman to publish a collection of short stories, having done so one hundred and twelve years after Frances Watkins (later Harper) published the first short story by an African American writer in 1859. In 1899, Alice Dunbar's *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories*, was the first collection of short stories by an African American woman. Her husband Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1898 had published the first collection of short stories by a black writer in the United States.

Most of the stories in *Miss Muriel* are set in New York, either in the fictional town of Wheeling, New York or in New York City. Two stories are set in New York and Connecticut, "Doby's Gone" and "Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?" Two stories are set in Massachusetts: "The Necessary Knocking at

the Door”, which takes place at a conference site in the Berkshires and addresses the internal conflicts that arise when a black woman – without knowing it – fails to save the life of a white woman who has used racial epithets and disparaged her because she is black; and “The Bones of Louella Brown”, set in Boston, which is a satire on pseudo-scientific theories of racial difference and on Boston elitism. Petry's love story, “Olaf and His Girl Friend”, is set in Barbados and in New York and addresses the issue of love across class barriers.

Ann Lane Petry has willingly acknowledged that she fictionalized her life as well as the world in which she lived and the people that she found in that world. She uses in her stories the slightest details from events she has experienced or observed. In “The Witness”, for instance, Petry describes the crew-cut that she observed on a congregational minister who told her about delinquent boys that he was unable to reach. In this story, Petry's character, Charles Woodruff, is a retired English professor and widower from Virginia who has moved to Petry's fictional town of Wheeling, New York and now teaches high school English. He has been asked to help Dr. Shipley,

a minister at the Congregational church, with some young men who have been assigned to the church by the juvenile court. Charles Woodruff finds himself in a moral quandary following his session with the boys and the minister when the boys kidnap Charles and a young woman whom they rape while he is blindfolded. The English professor considers reporting the boys' crimes to the police, but his knowledge of his own position as a black man in the small, predominately white town could place him under suspicion. He decides to leave town instead.

Petry also fictionalized significant events such as the civil upheaval in Harlem that occurred while she lived there in 1943. This historical event is the source for Petry's story, which some would describe as a short novel, "In Darkness and Confusion". In this piece, Petry brings together several issues that were prevalent in the 1940s when "In Darkness and Confusion" was published: unfair treatment of black soldiers, employment discrimination, the Jim Crow segregation laws, shifts in the construction of womanhood, black youth's rejection of the prevalent racialized narratives for their lives, and housing discrimination. In "Mother Africa", the only story in *Miss*

Muriel that had not been published previously, Petry demonstrates the problematical issues of establishing idealized concepts of beauty and conveys something of the spirit of cultural awareness and heritage that informed African American life during the Black Aesthetic and Arts Movement and Black Power/Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Through her depiction of the junk and second-hand clothing dealer Emanuel “Man” Turner, Petry provides readers with an African American everyman of the 1960s. This character's consciousness is so strongly influenced by the dominant ideals of beauty as well as a sexualized view of women that he fails to realize that the ideal representation of beauty that he locates in a giant-sized bronze statue – which he obsessively cherishes and names Mother Africa – is a white woman.

Several of Petry's stories in *Miss Muriel* fictionalize details or experiences from her own life. In “Doby's Gone”, Petry clearly fictionalizes an experience that she and her sister had when they first entered primary school in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, the small New England town where they were reared. In this story, Petry's young character Sue Johnson has recently moved to Wessex, Connecticut from

New York and finds that the children in her new town reject her because she is different from them. The feelings of isolation that Sue feels as the alienated outsider are assuaged through her creation of an invisible playmate, Doby. Sue is able to gain a friend from among her classmates and eliminate Doby after she responds to the children's taunting by fighting back rather than relying on her imaginary friend.

Ann Lane Petry ends her collection with the story "Doby's Gone". In this story, Petry's third-person narrator presents her story from the perspective of a child. In the first three stories in her collection, however, Petry presents three seemingly connected fictional pieces that are told by the same nameless narrator who lives in Wheeling, New York and is the daughter of a pharmacist. In two of the stories, "Miss Muriel" and "The New Mirror", Petry's narrator again is youthful. Readers first encounter this young narrator at the age of twelve in "Miss Muriel", a story that is constructed from entries in the narrator's diary. Through her narrator's diary entries, Petry incisively depicts the insularity – often self-imposed – of life for the sole black family in a small town. In many of her stories,

including “Miss Muriel”, Petry frequently brings the South into the North in order to illustrate the absurdities and horrors of skin-color privilege and racialized social and political policies. One such absurdity Petry presents through a story, told by the narrator's uncle and his friend Dottle, about a white southern store owner who insists, because a certain brand of cigars comes in a box with a picture of a white woman, that his black customers request “Miss Muriel” cigars. Petry focuses the most probing aspect of this story, however, on her presentation of the narrator's loss of innocence through her recognition of the barriers to love across ethnic lines.

In “The New Mirror”, Petry's narrator appears to be the same character that we met in “Miss Muriel”; now she is fifteen and the only child of the Layen family. The Layens, as the only “admittedly” black family in Wheeling (the Granites are passing as Mohawk Indians) find themselves on the verge of violating their self-imposed insularity after Mr. Layen does not return home one day. The final story that Petry narrates through this narrator is “Has Anybody Seen Miss Dora Dean?” It is 1957; the narrator is now thirty-two, and has been called from Wheeling to the house of an elderly, widowed –

as a result of her husband's strange suicide – family friend Sarah Trumbull Forbes who lives in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Mrs. Forbes entrusts the narrator with a set of heirloom cups and saucers that she refuses to give her son or grandsons, as she believes they are just like her deceased husband and not worthy of carrying forward the proud inheritance.

An interesting aspect of Ann Lane Petry's short fiction in *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* is that she frequently presents her stories from the point-of-view of her male characters. This is the case in “The Bones of Louella Brown”, “The Witness”, “In Darkness and Confusion”, “Mother Africa”, “The Migraine Workers”, “Like a Winding Sheet”, and “Solo on Drums”. Petry's central male character, Johnson, in the story “Like a Winding Sheet” finds that the pressures of his daily life slowly kill what is compassionate and kind in him, as he comes home on the evening of Friday the thirteenth and beats his wife. Petry's story presents domestic abuse from the perspective of a black man living in the pressure cooker of a color-conscious society. Her presentation, however, is controversial, as it presents a sympathetic portrait of this wife-beating husband.

Throughout her fiction Ann Lane Petry frequently employs African American cultural motifs such as blues and jazz music – “Solo on Drums”, “In Darkness and Confusion”, “Has Anyone Seen Miss Dora Dean?” – and oral storytelling, which is an important element in “Miss Muriel”. Her short stories also consistently demonstrate her concern with issues of gender, color, class, and social as well as political injustice. Petry's approach to these issues is frequently unconventional, as is clearly the case in several of the pieces in *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*.

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