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Ann Petry: Biography

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The Literary Encyclopedia

Ann Petry (1911-1997)

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(Ann Lane)

Biographer, Children's/Young Adult writer, Essayist, Film Script-writer/ Screenwriter, Journalist, Literary Critic/ Historian, Novelist, Poet, Story-writer, Teacher/ Professor, Theatre Actor/ Actress.

Active 1939-1988 in United States

By birth Ann Lane Petry was a third generation New Englander, a Connecticut Yankee whose maternal grandmother, Anna Houston James, was born in New Haven and whose mother, Bertha James Lane, was born in Hartford. Petry also was the granddaughter of Willis Samuel James who escaped the shackles of human captivity in Virginia on the Underground Railroad and settled in

Connecticut where he married Anna Houston. Petry's father, Peter Lane, was a native of Germantown, New Jersey. Ann Lane Petry was the younger of Bertha James Lane and Peter Clark Lane Jr.'s two surviving children. Ann Lane was born 12 October 1908 in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, where she would reside for all except nine years of her life.

The Lane family owned drugstores in Old Saybrook and in Old Lyme, Connecticut, where Ann Lane worked until she married and moved to New York in 1938. Ann Lane Petry's father as well as one of her maternal aunts was a licensed pharmacist. Peter Lane opened his first drug store in Old Saybrook in 1902, and in 1931, Ann Lane also earned a degree in pharmacy from the Connecticut College of Pharmacy in New Haven, which is now the School of Pharmacy at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. Anna Louise James, Petry's aunt who received her degree from the Brooklyn College of Pharmacy the same year her niece was born, opened a drugstore in Hartford, Connecticut before assuming ownership of the pharmacy owned by her brother-in-law in Old Saybrook.

Throughout Ann Lane's childhood, the Lanes

were one of two black families in Old Saybrook. Helen Lane, the elder of the Lane daughters, who would attend Pembroke, the women's branch of Brown University, was two years older than her sister Ann. Yet they both entered Old Saybrook Elementary School in 1912, when Ann was four years of age. Their parents did not believe that the school officials would allow their younger daughter to remain at the school, but they did, as no one noticed that she was yet too young to attend school. The Lanes were a close-knit, middle-class black family, which provided the young Ann Lane with a strong sense of herself as well as with a level of confidence that would allow her to take her place in a world that she knew often would not be kind to her as a black woman. In an autobiographical essay, which was published in 1988, Petry states that Old Saybrook “provided an essentially hostile environment for a black family” (253-69).

Petry's best example for living in such a world was her mother, Bertha James Lane. Ann Lane Petry's mother along with her sisters, Petry's aunts – all of whom the writer refers to as “extraordinary women” whose lives were not centered on housewifery – provided her with examples of womanhood that never left Petry

with any doubt that she could attain accomplishments far beyond what was typical for her times. Bertha Lane was an independent-minded woman and an entrepreneur who employed Connecticut farmwomen to assist her with the elegant linens that she produced in her business. She called her successful company, which was the outlet for her hand-embroidered linens, Beautiful Linens for Beautiful Homes. Bertha James Lane also was a chiropodist (trained in non-surgical treatment of disorders affecting hands and feet), a hairdresser, and a licensed barber. And she manufactured hair tonic as well as a household cleaning product.

In 1938, shortly after her marriage to George Petry – a transplant to Connecticut from New Iberia, Louisiana – Ann Lane Petry and her husband moved to Harlem. Petry no longer wanted to work as a pharmacist and decided that she would seek employment that would allow her to have a connection to writing. Even though the nation was well into the difficult Depression era, Petry soon began work selling advertising space for the Harlem-based weekly newspaper the *Amsterdam News*. Then, in 1941, Petry became the editor of the women's page and a news reporter for the *People's*

Voice, a weekly that was owned by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. For a brief time Ann Petry wrote a weekly column, “The Lighter Side”, for Powell's paper. In a similar vein as the fictional persona Jesse B. Semple, created by Langston Hughes for the *Chicago Defender*, Petry created for her column in the *People's Voice* Miss Jones and Miss Smith.

While living in New York, Petry was actively engaged in artistic, literary, and community endeavors. Her work in the Harlem community was varied and included among other activities, teaching a course in basic business correspondence at the YWCA in Harlem; helping to create – through the educational office of the Laundry Workers Joint Board – dramatic programs for children of the laundry employees; developing programs for children who attended Public School number 10, located in the distressed, wartime era Harlem neighborhood; and co-founding Negro Women Incorporated, a women's consumer advocacy group. In 1946, one year before Petry returned to Old Saybrook, her numerous community endeavors in New York were recognized by the New York Women's City Club, which presented her with an award for the “exceptional contributions” that she had made to the city of

New York.

Ann Petry's New York years also included piano lessons; a course in drawing at the Harlem Art Center, where she honed her skills in observation; membership in the American Negro Theatre and her performance, at the Schomburg Center, of the role Tillie Petunia in Abe Hill's comedy production *On Striver's Row*. Petry associates her work in the theatre with helping her understand how dialogue operates in a narrative to move the action forward. An instrumental event in Petry's development as a writer was her work in a creative writing course that was taught by Mable Louise Robinson at Columbia University. Robinson told Petry that her future as a writer "is entirely up to you." Robinson's encouragement increased Petry's confidence. Now armed with newly acquired confidence, a strong understanding of her craft, and a wealth of stories – culled from the tales she heard from her father and maternal uncles when the now aspiring writer was a child – Ann Lane Petry's imagination took shape. Several of her short stories as well as her first novel, *The Street*, were influenced by a combination of the tales she had heard as a child and her observations while working as a reporter and

living in New York.

One year after she established her residence in New York, Ann Lane Petry's first published fiction appeared under the pseudonym Arnold Petri on 19 August 1939 in the Baltimore *Afro-American*; the piece was a short story titled “Marie of the Cabin Club”, for which she was paid five dollars. Petry, however, dates her writing career from her high school years when, after receiving five dollars for a slogan that she created for a perfume company, she realized that she could earn money for writing. In December 1943, while studying creative writing with Mable Louise Robinson, Petry published, under her own name, a short story in *Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The editors at *Crisis* paid Petry twenty dollars for “On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon”, the story which would bring her to the attention of an editor at the Boston-based publisher Houghton Mifflin and begin her literary career.

The period from December 1943 through to 1944 was a turning point in Petry's literary and personal life. She saw in print her first important literary publication, and, along with

it, she received encouragement from an editor at Houghton Mifflin to write a novel and to apply for a literary competition that was sponsored by the publisher. These literary boons allowed Petry to turn the temporary loss of her husband to the war effort in 1944, and the permanent loss of her job at the failing *People's Voice*, into financial and personal independence. This newly independent lifestyle would allow Petry to practice her skills in discipline and frugality and to write her first novel.

Ann Petry spent several months early in 1944 working part-time as a typist; later she worked for three weeks exclusively writing catalogue copy for a company that manufactured hairpieces: wigs, toupees, false beards, moustaches, and eyebrows. The money that Petry earned and saved along with the spouse's stipend that she received from her husband's military service funded her writing of *The Street* during the remaining months of that year. In December 1944, she submitted five chapters of the manuscript and a synopsis of the whole novel to Houghton Mifflin's literary competition. Her entry won the publisher's \$2,400 fellowship for a work in progress. Petry completed the manuscript for her first novel

while living on her fellowship funds, which she received in 1945. Petry's novel *The Street* was published January 1946. As a testament to her dedication as a writer and her love of the short story form, Petry, while working on her sizeable novel, also wrote three stories, which appeared in print in 1944 and 1945: "Doby's Gone", "Like a Winding Sheet", and "Olaf and His girlfriend". In 1971, Petry collected these stories along with ten others in her last published book, *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*.

Petry's first novel received wide critical acclaim and sold over one million copies. That *The Street* – a novel focusing on a black, single parent in Harlem who struggles against difficult social forces and finds that her efforts ultimately are quashed, though she is not entirely defeated – was so well received proved an additional accomplishment for this writer. For Petry and other black writers, the 1940s and 1950s were decades in which they were encouraged to write what some refer to as "raceless" literature. So-called raceless writers refocused their narratives and turned away from a concern with the problematics of race. For some writers this meant removing black characters from the center of their novels; for

other writers this meant eliminating black characters altogether. Major writers such as Richard Wright, to whose novel *Native Son* Petry's *The Street* often is compared, Zora Neale Hurston, Chester Himes, and James Baldwin all wrote novels of this type in the 1940s and 1950s. Petry's second novel, *Country Place* (1947) received glowing reviews for its seeming emphasis on racelessness, though later she would say that the concept of racelessness had nothing to do with her writing of that novel. In 1953 Petry's third and last novel, *The Narrows*, includes a multi-ethnic mix of characters and again centers on black characters.

The publication of Petry's best-selling first novel and the acclaim which followed the publication of her second novel brought the writer a level of celebrity that she found unbearable and in 1947, following the publication of *Country Place*, prompted her to return to Old Saybrook, where she and her husband soon purchased a house and started a family. In 1949, their only child, Elisabeth Ann, was born.

Petry provides all of her novels with geographical titles: *The Street*, in general

terms, refers to oppressed and neglected neighborhoods, though specifically Harlem; *Country Place*, a transparent, though ultimately ironic, reference to small-town, wholesome and healthy USA, yet specifically Petry's fictional Lennox, Connecticut; *The Narrows*, a small town version of Harlem's Street, this time located in Petry's fictional Monmouth, Connecticut. Such titles along with Petry's characterization of each of the respective neighborhoods in her novels have led many commentators on her writing to refer positively to the power of her ability to bring to life not only a broad range of characters but also the places in which they are located and from which they have been shaped. Equally important, though, is Ann Lane Petry's ability to debunk received myths, such as the American Dream, small-town innocence, and society's construction of the feminine, that permeate the culture of the United States.

Not only a novelist and short story writer, Petry also distinguished herself as a writer of children's literature as well as youth literature. Her youth and children's books, *The Drugstore Cat* (1949), *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955), *Legends of the Saints* (1964), and *Tituba of Salem*

Village (1964), emphasize surviving difficult odds. Throughout her life, Ann Lane Petry continued to write short stories, and occasionally she contributed articles and literary criticism to various publications, which include *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *The New Yorker*, *The Negro Digest*, *Holiday*, *Redbook*, and the *New York Times Book Review*. Two of Petry's notable essays are "The Novel as Social Criticism" and "Harlem". In "The Novel as Social Criticism", Petry defends the value of problem or social novels by advising writers that such novels should critique society without abolishing individual, personal responsibility. In "Harlem" Petry presents an overview of the various faces of Harlem and decries the "ghetto" state into which Harlem had fallen following the Depression and the war in the 1930s and 1940s.

Also included among Petry's many writing credits is a script, "That Hill Girl", written for Columbia Pictures in 1958; the film was never produced. In 1976, Ann Lane Petry's first poems appeared in print. When these poems were published, Petry's literary reputation resided primarily in her strength as a novelist and short story writer. She would publish two additional poems in 1981. All of Petry's

published poems, “3 Poems: Noo York City 1, 2, and 3”, “A Purely Black Stone”, and “A Real Boss Black Cat”, reflect the influence on her of the Black Arts Aesthetics Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Before Ann Petry's death in 1997, she had been a writer for over fifty years. During that time she received numerous honors in addition to honorary degrees from Suffolk University, Mt. Holyoke College, and the University of Connecticut. Petry spent seventy-nine of her eighty-nine years in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, yet she persisted in the belief that, even with all of her success, she was not a New England insider. Ann Lane Petry saw herself as a woman whose identity included her great-great-aunt, a conjure woman; her grandfather, a fugitive from slavery; her father, who faced threats as he opened his drugstore in New England; her sister who was refused a room in the dormitory of New England's Brown University. She also includes as part of her identity the black woman buried without respect in the Old Saybrook burial grounds; the man on the chain-gang in Georgia; and the old black woman who held-off a gang of white men

during a riot in Chicago. According to Petry, these incidents are not her direct experiences primarily because her “family used their small savings to buy [her] out.”

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