A Reader's Guide

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter
by Carson McCullers

- About The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter
- About Carson McCullers
- Questions for Discussion
- Carson McCullers on Writing, Writers, and Herself
- For Further Reading

About The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter

When The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Carson McCullers's literary debut, was first published by Houghton Mifflin, on June 4, 1940, the twenty-three-year-old author became a literary sensation virtually overnight. The novel is considered McCullers's finest work, an enduring masterpiece that was chosen by the Modern Library as one of the top one hundred works of fiction published in the twentieth century.

Set in a small Southern mill town in the 1930s, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is a haunting, unforgettable story that gives voice to the rejected, the forgotten, and the mistreated. At the novel's center is the deaf-mute John Singer, who is left alone after his friend and roommate, Antonapoulos, is sent away to an asylum. Singer moves into a boarding house and begins taking his meals at the local diner, and in this new setting he becomes the confidant of several social outcasts and misfits. Drawn to Singer's kind eyes and attentive demeanor are Mick Kelly, a spirited young teenager with dreams greater than her economic means; Jake Blount, an itinerant social reformer with a penchant for drink and violence; Biff Brannon, the childless proprietor of the local café; and Dr. Copeland, a proud black intellectual whose unwavering ideals have left him alienated from those who love him.

With its profound sense of moral isolation, compassionate glimpses into its characters' inner lives, and deft portrayal of racial tensions in the South, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is considered one of the most extraordinary debuts in modern American literature. Richard Wright praised McCullers for her ability "to rise above the pressures of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness." The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is Carson McCullers at her endearing best, and just as timely and powerful today as when it was first published.

"When one puts [this book] down, it is with . . . a feeling of having been nourished by the truth." — May Sarton

"McCullers's gift was to evoke, through an accumulation of images and musically repeated phrases, the singularity of experience, not to pass judgment on it." — Joyce Carol Oates

"McCullers leaves her characters hauntingly engraved in the reader's memory." — The Nation

About Carson McCullers

"The greatest prose writer that the South produced." — Tennessee Williams

Carson McCullers was born Lula Carson Smith on February 19, 1917, in Columbus, Georgia. A promising pianist, McCullers enrolled in the Juilliard School of Music in New York when she was seventeen, but lacking the money for tuition, she did not attend classes. Eventually she studied writing at New York University and Columbia University, which ultimately led to the publication of her first short story, "Wunderkind," in Story magazine. In 1937, Carson married fellow writer James Reeves McCullers. Less than three years later, when she was twenty-three, she published her first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. She went on to write Reflections in a Golden Eye, The Member of the Wedding, The Ballad of the Sad Café, and Clock Without Hands, among other works. The recipient of two Guggenheim fellowships, McCullers also won awards for her Broadway stage adaptation of The Member of the Wedding. Plagued by a series of strokes, attributed to a misdiagnosed and untreated case of childhood rheumatic fever, Carson McCullers died in Nyack, New York, at age fifty.

With a body of work including five novels, two plays, twenty short stories, more than two dozen nonfiction pieces, a book of verse for children, a small number of poems, and an unfinished autobiography, McCullers is considered among the most significant American writers of the twentieth century.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter for every reader.

1. The title of the book comes from a poem by William Sharp, with the lines "But my heart is a lonely hunter that hunts / On a lonely hill." What is the significance of the title? Is each character in the novel hunting the same thing, or is each in search of something different? McCullers's original title for the book was The Mute. Why do you suppose the change was made?

2. McCullers describes John Singer as "an emotional catalyst for all the other characters." What does his presence inspire in others? Do you believe that he remains inert, as a catalyst by definition should, or is he himself affected by his interactions with the others? Why or why not?
3. McCullers once described the central characters in the novel as "heroic, though ordinary." How does each character show elements of heroism? Is there a character you find more heroic than the rest?

4. In the book's first section, Biff's wife, Alice, quotes Mark 1:16–18: "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." How does this quote resonate throughout the novel? What role does spirituality play in the novel? Do the characters strive for communion with a higher spiritual force or unifying principle, something greater than themselves?

5. Music has great importance in the book, from Mick's aspirations to become a pianist to Willie's ever-present harmonica. McCullers, who had once hoped to study music at Juilliard, even described the structure of the novel as a three-part fugue, and explained, "Like a voice in a fugue, each one of the main characters is an entity in himself — but his personality takes on a new richness when contrasted and woven in with the other characters in the book." In what other ways does this musicality assert itself in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*? What does music symbolize in the novel? How, too, is silence used?

6. The novel has been widely praised for its ability to illustrate how social, economic, and racial factors serve to isolate people from one another. In what way is each character isolated? What efforts does each make to overcome this alienation? Are the efforts successful or ultimately futile?

7. John Singer dreams he is kneeling before Antonapoulos, who stands at the head of a set of stairs. Behind Singer kneel the four other main characters: Mick, Biff, Jake, and Copeland. How does Singer's dream reflect the relationships among the main characters? To what extent is Singer's love of Antonapoulos similar to the attention paid to Singer by Mick, Biff, Jake, and Copeland? Are these characters capable of loving one another? Of receiving love? Are some characters better emotionally equipped than others? Why or why not?

8. Mick Kelly is considered the most autobiographical character McCullers ever created. Mick's tomboyishness, her musical aspirations, and her dream to escape small-town life parallel the author's own. When Mick realizes she cannot afford a violin, she tries to build her own. What does the violin symbolize? What does this act tell you about Mick's character? Do you have sympathy for her when she fails? Do you feel closer to Mick than you do to the other narrators?

9. Mick compartmentalizes her thoughts into what she calls an inner room and an outer room. Why does she do this? Do other characters show this same type of duality? How does it manifest itself?

10. When Jake Blount finds a Bible passage written on a wall, he responds with his own message and then searches for the person who wrote the original message. Why is it important to him to find that person?

11. Dr. Copeland has great dreams for his family and for his community, but he is unable to gain much support for his ideas. Do you think Copeland's self-perception that he is a failure is valid? How many of his frustrations are a result of racial bias in society? Why do you suppose his relationships with his children are fraught?
12. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* has been praised for its sensitive and realistic portrayal of racial tensions in the Depression-era South. What relevance does the novel have today? How much has changed since the 1930s?

**Carson McCullers on Writing, Writers, and Herself**

**On writing:**

"It must be that one writes from some subconscious need for communication, for self-expression. Writing is a wandering, dreaming occupation. . . The writer by nature of his profession is a dreamer and a conscious dreamer. How, without love and the intuition that comes from love, can a human being place himself in the situation of another human being? He must imagine, and imagination takes humility, love and great courage." From "The Flowering Dream," *Esquire* (December 1959)

"Writing, for me, is a search for God."


**On *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter***:

"For a whole year I worked on *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* without understanding it at all. Each character was talking to a central character, but why, I didn't know. I'd almost decided that the book was no novel, that I should chop it up into short stories. But I could feel the mutilation in my body when I had that idea, and I was in despair. I had been working for five hours and I went outside. Suddenly, as I walked across a road, it occurred to me that Harry Minovitz, the character all the other characters were talking to, was a different man, a deaf-mute, and immediately the name was changed to John Singer. The whole focus of the novel was fixed and I was for the first time committed with my whole soul to *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*."

From "The Flowering Dream," *Esquire* (December 1959)

**On loneliness:**

"All men are lonely. But sometimes it seems to me that we Americans are the loneliest of all. Our hunger for foreign places and new ways has been with us almost like a national disease. Our literature is stamped with a quality of longing and unrest, and our writers have been great wanderers."

From "Look Homeward, Americans," *Vogue* (December 1, 1940)

"It is a curious emotion, this certain homesickness I have in mind. With Americans, it is a national trait, as native to us as the rollercoaster or the jukebox. It is no simple longing for the home town or country of our birth. The emotion is Janus-faced: we are torn between a nostalgia for the familiar and an urge for the foreign and strange. As often as not, we are homesick most for the places we have never known."

From "Look Homeward, Americans," *Vogue* (December 1, 1940)
"I do believe that anybody who makes his own life is to be lonely, and I think this loneliness implies a condition of moral isolation."

From an interview with Hans de Vaal, Litterair Paspoort (April 1953)

**For Further Reading**

The following books may be of interest to readers of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.

**Reflections in a Golden Eye**

"McCullers tells her tale with simplicity, insight, and a rare gift of phrase." — *Time*

Set on an army base in the South of the 1930s, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* tells the story of Captain Penderton, his tempestuous and flirtatious wife, Leonora, and of the passions and jealousies that ensue between them with the arrival of a new couple.

**Clock Without Hands**

"Impeccable. The most impressive of her novels." — *Atlantic Monthly*

Set in small-town Georgia on the eve of court-ordered integration, *Clock Without Hands* is Carson McCullers's final masterpiece as well as her most poignant statement on race, class, and individual responsibility.

**Collected Stories of Carson McCullers**

"Of all the Southern writers, [McCullers] is the most apt to endure." — Gore Vidal

The novellas and stories collected here span Carson McCullers's entire career and explore her signature themes of wounded adolescence, loneliness in marriage, and the human comedy as played out in the American South.

**The Member of the Wedding** (forthcoming)

"Rarely has emotional turbulence been so delicately conveyed." — *New York Times*

First published in 1946, Carson McCullers's classic tale about Frankie Addams, a bored twelve-year-old madly jealous of her brother's impending marriage, continues to capture new generations of readers with its take on adolescent yearning for escape and belonging.