A Reader's Guide

The Member of the Wedding
by Carson McCullers

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About The Member of the Wedding

Carson McCullers's third novel, *The Member of the Wedding* was first published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1946. Set in a small southern town in the 1940s, the book examines a crucial turning point in adolescence. Many people consider it McCullers's masterpiece.

Twelve-year-old Frankie Addams is utterly, hopelessly bored with life until she hears about her older brother's wedding. Bolstered by lively conversations with the family's servant, Bernice, and her six-year-old cousin John Henry — not to mention her own unbridled imagination — Frankie takes an overly active role in the wedding, even hoping to go on the honeymoon, so deep is her desire to be a member of something larger, more accepting than herself.

McCullers's most autobiographical novel, *The Member of the Wedding* showcases the author at her most sensitive and astute as she delves into the lonely world of adolescence. McCullers's sister Margarita Smith once wrote: "Of all the characters in the work of Carson McCullers, the one who seemed to her family and friends most like the author herself was Frankie Addams: the vulnerable, exasperating, and endearing adolescent of *The Member of the Wedding* who was looking for the 'we of me'" (from the introduction to *The Mortgaged Heart*).

"A marvelous study of the agony of adolescence" (*Detroit Free Press*), *The Member of the Wedding* later became an award-winning play and a major motion picture.

"Rarely has emotional turbulence been so delicately conveyed. Carson McCullers's language has the freshness, quaintness, and gentleness of a sensitive child." — *New York Times*

"There is an almost perfect harmony between the theme of this book and the prose in which
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, at the age of 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 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.

Learn more about Carson McCullers

Questions for Discussion

We hope that the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of The Member of the Wedding for every reader.

1. At the beginning of the novel, McCullers writes: "Standing beside the arbor, with the dark coming on, Frankie was afraid. She did not know what caused this fear, but she was afraid" (6). What do you think Frankie is so afraid of? Does she overcome her fears in the novel, and if so, how?

2. Regarding The Member of the Wedding, McCullers told Tennessee Williams: "I was trying to recreate the poetry of my own childhood." Although the novel takes place in the 1940s, many of the emotions Frankie experiences are timeless. In what ways does McCullers present a universal portrait of adolescence? How does Frankie's discussion of the circus freaks in Part One relate to her own experiences?

3. Part Two begins: "The day before the wedding was not like any day that F. Jasmine had ever known" (44). How does Frankie's sudden feeling of belonging to something affect her
1. As a result of this feeling of belonging, Frankie's behavior and attitude significantly alter in the span of a day. How does McCullers make this rapid change and Frankie's reaction to the wedding believable?

2. Bernice states: "You have a name and one thing after another happens to you, and you behave in various ways and do things, so that soon the name begins to have meaning. Things have accumulated around the name" (108). What does Bernice mean by this? Do the names Frankie, F. Jasmine, and Frances have different meanings? If you could change your name, what name would you choose?

3. Frankie says about people, "People loose and at the same time caught. Caught and loose. All these people and you don't know what joins them up " (115). What is Frankie trying to convey to Bernice here? In what ways are people both caught and loose? In what ways is Frankie herself caught and loose?

4. Frankie states: "It was better to be in a jail where you could bang the walls than in a jail you could not see (148)." What is Frankie's jail? What jails surround Bernice and John Henry? Do you have such jails in your own life?

5. Carson McCullers is one of the twentieth century's most prominent southern writers. In what ways does McCullers evoke the South and its culture in her writing? How representative of the South do you think The Member of the Wedding is?

6. Although the wedding is a central focus in the novel, little is said about the actual event. Why do you think McCullers chose to limit the wedding scenes? How does this reflect on Frankie's obsession with the wedding?

7. Frankie frequently states that Jarvis and Janice are "the we of me." Why does Frankie have such a strong need to belong to something? What prompts her to decide that the wedding is what she most wants to be a part of?

8. Many characters who play very significant roles in Frankie's life are on the periphery of the novel, such as Mr. Addams, Jarvis, Janice, and the soldier. How does McCullers portray these characters adequately in a limited amount of space? What are the advantages of focusing the novel on just three main characters?

9. The Member of the Wedding has been made into a successful play and a major motion picture. Why do you think people are so drawn to this story?

Carson McCullers on The Member of the Wedding

"Any creative thing is so mysterious that it's impossible to remember the source — if there were a traceable source. But I do think the idea of wanting to belong haunts every child. And not only children. I think it is the primary question: 'Who am I? What am I? Or, where do I belong? and where can I belong?' But childhood or adolescence is a time of crisis, and such questions are more haunting, more immediate, then." From "Behind the Wedding," New York Times (January 1, 1950).
For Further Reading

The following books may be of interest to readers of *The Member of the Wedding*.

**The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter**

"A remarkable book that takes hold of the reader . . . brilliant . . . McCullers has an astounding perception of humanity." — *New York Times*

Carson McCullers's literary debut, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is a haunting, unforgettable story that gives voice to the rejected, the forgotten, and the mistreated in a small southern mill town in the 1930s.

**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 the passions and jealousies between them that ensue 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 Mortgaged Heart**

"Essential reading for any serious beginning writer . . . illuminating." — *San Francisco Chronicle*

An absorbing look at the early beginnings of one of America's finest writers, *The Mortgaged Heart* is an invaluable collection of McCullers's work, including stories, essays, articles, poems, and writing about writing.
The Ballad of the Sad Café


Showcasing McCullers's intricate world of alienation, heartache, and suffering, The Ballad of the Sad Café is a brilliant study of love and longing. The collection assembles McCullers's best stories, including the beloved novella "The Ballad of the Sad Café."