



# Letters of Katherine Anne Porter

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## **Letters of Katherine Anne Porter** Katherine Anne Porter

Novelist, short-story writer, winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, Katherine Anne Porter is one of America's most respected and enduring literary figures. Upon her death in 1980 at the age of ninety, she left behind thousands of letters, from which Isabel Bayley, Porter's close friend for over twenty-five years and her literary archivist, selected the best. "The book was conceived as a whole," Bayley explains. "The letters will carry you, if you wish to read in sequence, from point to point during her major working years, 1930 to 1963. Little bridges form from idea to idea, from theme to theme." One of Porter's themes was an outrage born of unfair politics, and her words are as fresh today as when they were written: "What has discouraged me," she writes in 1957, "is simply the fact that from Mussolini on—Franco, Hitler, Tito, Peron, Batista, Trujillo, in a rapidly descending scale to Nasser, our government has without fail backed and supported, in completely criminal collusion, every foul and stinking political dictator in turn as they rise, with the hypocritical excuse that these are all 'anti-Communist.'" And in 1947 she asks the kind of question that underlies the finest of her writing: "Man cannot—oh why can he not? This to me is the riddle of the universe—face the truth of his own motives."

The list of Porter's correspondents reads like a Who's Who of twentieth-century letters: Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, Eleanor Clark, James Stern, Cleanth Brooks, Malcolm Cowley, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, Josephine Herbst, Hart Crane, Monroe Wheeler, Glenway Wescott, Eudora Welty, John Malcolm Brinnin. She tells Edith Sitwel she treasures her anthology of poetry as "something to take to Heaven with me if I ever get there; or maybe to bootleg into Hell to soften the penalty of having to read the Beat Generation." In a 1935 letter to Robert Penn Warren, one of her closest friends, she writes, "I have on hand, trying to finish it, a fairly long story which I call 'Pale Horse and Pale Rider' though I may find another title. What are your limits as to space for a short story?" For Porter her letters—to friends, family, publishers, editors, lovers—were vital links between the past and the present, a validation of time spent and an inspiration for the future: her twelve-page ship's journal, written in the form of a letter on a voyage from Mexico to Germany in 1931, became the basis for *Ship of Fools*, completed thirty years later.

Katherine Anne Porter saw letters as continuity, a story that no longer belonged to the teller: ". . . mss. and notes and journals and letters arrived from Saratoga Springs the other day, and reading some of it over I find the past much more continuous, which I had begun to doubt. . . . Things just accumulated, and behold, it had become history . . . to be sorted and used as part of a story. I don't know that story any more than you do, especially not the end, and we will never see it, and I think it not very important whether we do or don't. . . . It doesn't belong to us anyway."

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