



South by Southwest: Katherine Anne Porter and the Burden of Texas History

Janis P. Stout

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An interdisciplinary study of Katherine Anne Porter's troubled relationship to her Texas origins and southern roots, *South by Southwest* offers a fresh look at this ever-relevant author.

Today, more than thirty years after her death, Katherine Anne Porter remains a fascinating figure. Critics and biographers have portrayed her as a strikingly glamorous woman whose photographs appeared in society magazines. They have emphasized, of course, her writing— particularly the novel *Ship of Fools*, which was made into an award-winning film, and her collection *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, which cemented her role as a significant and original literary modernist. They have highlighted her dramatic, sad, and fragmented personal life. Few, however, have addressed her uneasy relationship to her childhood in rural Texas.

Janis P. Stout argues that throughout Porter's life she remained preoccupied with the twin conundrums of how she felt about being a woman and how she felt about her Texas origins. Her construction of herself as a beautiful but unhappy southerner sprung from a plantation aristocracy of reduced fortunes meant she construed Texas as the Old South. The Texas Porter knew and re-created in her fiction had been settled by southerners like her grandparents, who brought slaves with them. As she wrote of this Texas, she also enhanced and mythologized it, exaggerating its beauty, fertility, and gracious ways as much as the disaffection that drove her to leave. Her feelings toward Texas ran to both extremes, and she was never able to reconcile them.

Stout examines the author and her works within the historical and cultural context from which she emerged. In particular, Stout emphasizes four main themes in the history of Texas that she believes are of the greatest importance in understanding Porter: its geography and border location (expressed in Porter's lifelong fascination with marginality, indeterminacy, and escape); its violence (the brutality of her first marriage as well as the lawlessness that pervaded her hometown); its racism (lynchings were prevalent throughout her upbringing); and its marginalization of women (Stout draws a connection between Porter's references to the burning sun and oppressive heat of Texas and her life with her first husband).

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