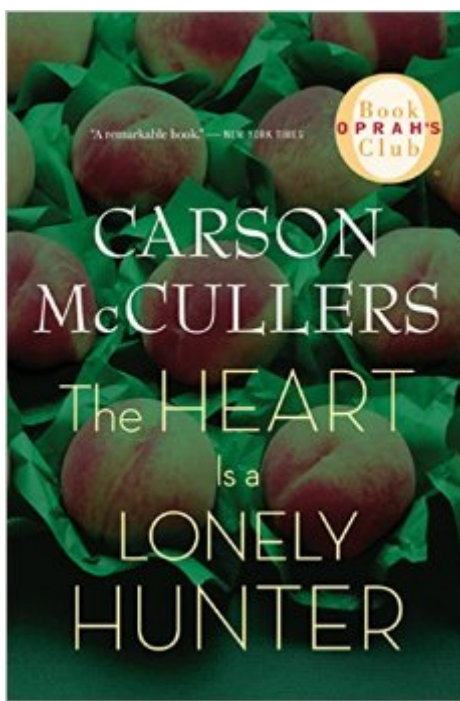


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# The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter



## Synopsis

With the publication of her first novel, *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER*, Carson McCullers, all of twenty-three, became a literary sensation. With its profound sense of moral isolation and its compassionate glimpses into its characters' inner lives, the novel is considered McCullers' finest work, an enduring masterpiece first published by Houghton Mifflin in 1940. At its center is the deaf-mute John Singer, who becomes the confidant for various types of misfits in a Georgia mill town during the 1930s. Each one yearns for escape from small town life. When Singer's mute companion goes insane, Singer moves into the Kelly house, where Mick Kelly, the book's heroine (and loosely based on McCullers), finds solace in her music. Wonderfully attuned to the spiritual isolation that underlies the human condition, and with a deft sense for racial tensions in the South, McCullers spins a haunting, unforgettable story that gives voice to the rejected, the forgotten, and the mistreated -- and, through Mick Kelly, gives voice to the quiet, intensely personal search for beauty. Richard Wright praised Carson 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." She writes "with a sweep and certainty that are overwhelming," said the *NEW YORK TIMES*. McCullers became an overnight literary sensation, but her novel has endured, just as timely and powerful today as when it was first published. *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER* is Carson McCullers at her most compassionate, endearing best.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This 1940 novel by Carson McCullers is set in a small southern town. It's about five different people

and their relationships to each other. There is surface structure inasmuch as the chapters move back and forth, focusing on one character and then another and moving the action forward. But there's an appealing off-center feeling to it all, as this study in what it means to be a human being reflects the human condition without having to tie it all up in a neat little package. Driving the story is John Singer, a deaf mute. When his friend Sprios, a fellow deaf mute, goes insane, John Singer attracts other alienated people, who pour their hearts out to him, believing that he understands everything. There's Jake, who drinks hard, requires constant stimulation of his senses to feel alive, and views the world through a communist philosophy. There's Dr. Copeland, a black physician, who so wants to improve the condition of his race, that he has driven his wife and children away because they never fit the picture of the way he wanted them to be. There's Mick, the adolescent girl, introspective and intuitive, who dreams of a future filled with music and travel. And then there is Biff, the owner of the Café, who collects old newspapers and tries to make sense out of what is going on around him. Everyone feels that the deaf-mute has some sort of magical presence. But yet, he too, proves to be very human. The town itself is important to the story, and Ms. McCullers' makes use of the rhythms of the seasons and of music to bring the reader right there. The coming-of-age of the adolescent made me sad and the realities of racism caused me to cringe in horror. The alienation is deeply frustrating. This is exemplified by one very moving scene where two men debate how to handle injustices. Both men want the same things, but yet they talk past each other, each demanding that the other must follow a certain prescribed ideology. Each character is restricted by limitations. Each one has desires. And each one has his or her desires crushed. How each one reacts and how this interaction affects everyone else is the essence of the story. The author's skill pulls it all together masterfully. It's a disturbing book as it tugs at that chord of isolation that exists in all of us. And yet, it is a wonderful read. I highly recommend it.

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers. Highly recommended. Only 23 when she wrote *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Carson McCullers captures the restless energy of adolescence and the loneliness and isolation of those who choose not to fit into their world-Mick Kelly, an artistic teenager whose titles and graffiti reveal a darker side to her personality; Jake Blount, an itinerant socialist; Benedict Mady Copeland, a consumptive black physician; and Biff Brannon, owner of the New York Café. Linking this disparate group of outsiders is the ironically named John Singer, a man who cannot talk (or sing). They are drawn to him, as lonely people are to someone they believe will listen and understand. They never step out of themselves to discover that Singer listens, but he doesn't understand, nor do they realise that he, too, is lonely and isolated-or why. Just as these four

impose their concept of Singer upon him, he has his own idol-his companion of 10 years, Spiros Antonapoulos. While Singer's lonely friends project upon him the character of a wise, knowing, understanding man, Singer in turn imposes a similar personality on Antonapoulos. His life revolves around his rare visits to the asylum to which Antonapoulos is eventually taken. As the reader's awareness of Antonapoulos as a childish, greedy, and lazy man grows, so grows Singer's faith in him as gentle and wise. As a fellow mute, Antonapoulos is all Singer has, so he both idealises and idolises him-in the same way that Mick, Blount, Copeland, and, to a lesser extent, Brannon idealise and idolise Singer. Rarely do any of the four interact, except when Blount and Dr. Copeland engage in a circular argument about how best to help their peoples-victims of capitalism in Blount's case, blacks in Dr. Copeland's. These two groups have much in common, but just as Blount and Dr. Copeland remain in bitter conflict, so do their peoples-a conflict which is alluded to throughout and which culminates in a brawl at the carnival grounds where Jake works. Dr. Copeland and Jake never find common ground, nor do the poor white laborers and oppressed blacks they wish to enlighten. Dr. Copeland's self-sacrificing but hopeless dedication and Jake's self-destructive brutality could be seen as representing their time and place, the 1930s South. Sexual ambiguity pervades the novel. It is never clear whether Singer and Antonapoulos are lovers, although it seems like that that is what lies behind Singer's uncritical devotion. Even when Antonapoulos's selfish, greedy, irrational behaviour drives away a third mute, Singer is merely disappointed at the loss of a potential friend-as long as he has Antonapoulos, he is content. After Antonapoulos leaves, ". . . in the spring a change came over Singer . . . his body was very restless . . . unable to work off a new feeling of energy." This sexual energy is shared by Mick, who is always restless. This isolates her even more from the rest of her family: her father, a disabled carpenter trying half-heartedly to make a living; her mother, for whom Mick acts as a substitute parent for her younger brothers Bubber (George) and Ralph; her older brother Bill, once close to her and now distant; and her older sisters Hazel and Etta, who have been forced from adolescence into adulthood through work and their own conventional interest in celebrity. (One could speculate about the nature of the "diseased ovary" Etta develops.) Mick lives in an "inside room," where she finds peace in music and in her perceptions of her friendship with Singer. Later, after her sexual initiation, she finds herself slyly manipulated into taking a job by her apparently solicitous family; at this point, she notices that, while the "inside room" is still important, she has less time and energy for it. McCullers' exposition of Mick's transition from inventive childhood to dulling adulthood is subtle and is one of the best aspects of the novel. Of the four, Brannon is the most enigmatic. After his wife dies, he redecorates in what seems a distinctly unmasculine way (in contrast to his heavy, black beard, the subject of many comments). Even more

interesting, he begins to wear his late wife's perfume. While he observes, defends, and supports Jake, his sexual feelings are focused on Mick, to whom he seems distant and cold (in her naivety, Mick attributes his attitude to the fact that she and Bubber shoplifted gum from the café). Not surprisingly, after Mick is sexually initiated, obtains a job, and begins to dress and behave more like a girl on the cusp of womanhood, Brannon loses interest and consequently warms up to her. She is now no more of a challenge to his impotence than his late wife was. McCullers weaves a dense cloth of themes. First, there is the inward and selfish nature of loneliness. No one ever truly reaches out; in fact, Mick's Jewish neighbor Harry, appalled by fascism and Hitler, and Brannon are the only characters who are interested in the greater world. The conditions of the working poor and the black experience are eloquently portrayed without much narrative or focus on details. By the end, everything and nothing has changed. Mick is determined to escape fate through music, unlikely as it seems; a weakened Dr. Copeland becomes unable to carry on his "strong, true purpose." Blount leaves town to find someone who will finally accept the basket of ideas that haunts his nightmares; Brannon, "suspended between bitter irony and faith," faces the dawn exactly as he has for years. McCullers' portrayal of these disparate characters are true to life and reveal a remarkable insight into people, no matter their age, gender, race, or background-an insight that is lacking in her self-absorbed characters. The heart is a lonely hunter, so it will find what it wishes to love in the most unlikely of places. It would take many re-readings to mine the richness here. Diane L. Schirf, 31 May 2004.

The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter is one of the best novels I've read in a while. I loved the way Carson McCullers develops the characters in this book. Loneliness and racial injustice are two timeless themes in this novel that McCullers presents so well. McCullers was a white woman writing about how black people were mistreated and felt oppressed in 1940. She was an author truly ahead of her time in that way. All the characters are so memorable in this book. Biff Brannon is a compassionate cafe owner. He helps anyone in need by giving them either food, money or a job. Brannon becomes a widower when his wife dies suddenly of a tumor. Mick Kelly is a lonely but intelligent 12 year old girl from a poor family with a passion for music. Doctor Copeland is a black physician. He becomes a crusader for racial justice when his son goes to jail. McCullers explains the basic principles of Karl Marx's economic theory in the novel by putting in a lecture by Copeland in the novel to show how society is divided between the rich and poor people. I knew nothing about Karl Marx's ideas, so I thought this part of the novel was very interesting. Another memorable character is John Singer. He is a man who does not have the ability to speak. However, he becomes the person all the

characters eventually confide all their problems to. Singer communicates with his long time room mate and only deaf friend by using sign language. The relationship and love between these two deaf friends is one of the best things about this novel. The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter is one of the best books Oprah has ever chosen for her book club. The themes of loneliness and racial injustice are timeless and universal. The characters are very memorable too. I loved reading this book.

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