



# Ann Petry

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*The women work because the white folks give them jobs -washing dishes and clothes and floors and windows. The women work because for years now the white folks haven't liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families. And finally it gets to be too late for some of them. Even wars don't change it. The men get out of the habit of working and the houses are old and gloomy and the walls press in. And the men go off, move on, slip away, find new women. Find younger women.*

— The Street

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## Quick Facts

- \* 1908-1997
- \* African-American short story writer, journalist, and novelist
- \* First published novel is *The Street*

## Biography

Ann Lane Petry was born on October 12, 1908 in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. She was the second daughter of Peter C. Lane and Bertha James Lane. She grew up middle class in a predominantly white community. Her parents both had a professional status in the community. Her father owned the local drugstore and worked as a pharmacist. Her mother was a licensed chiropractist, and worked also in many other occupations such as a hairdresser, a barber, a manufacturer, and an entrepreneur. This status helped to shield her from a somewhat hostile community environment.

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## Biography continued

Petry first encountered racial prejudice when she was on a Sunday school outing at the age of seven. This, along with other experiences of racial prejudice and oppression, brought about a feeling of outrage within her. This outrage remained with her for many years. The memories that Petry holds of her family are those of a caring and protective environment. Her parents created an environment that enabled her to survive against the effects of bigotry and isolation.

Petry is proud of her family heritage which includes four generations of African American New Englanders who were born in Connecticut. Hearing the accounts of ancestors struggling against racial oppression introduced her to the power of the word to transport the listener beyond time and place. These stories, and listening to her mother read her stories, inspired her with a love for narrative and reading.

Petry first began writing while in high school. She started out with creating a slogan for a perfume company. From this she went on to writing one-act plays and short stories. When she graduated from Old Saybrook High School in 1929, she had not yet chosen writing as a career. Instead, she went on to graduate from Connecticut College of Pharmacy in 1931 with a Ph.D. With this she returned home to work in the family drugstore for a period of five years. Then for two years she managed the other family drugstore in Old Lyme. During her time as a pharmacist she observed the customers who she later included in her writing.

Petry left her career in pharmacy to marry George D. Petry, a New York mystery writer, in 1938. They moved to New York and here she decided that she wanted to pursue a career in writing. She started out working for the Amsterdam News selling ad space until 1941. On August 19, 1939, her first story, "Marie of the Cabin Club," was published in the Afro-American under the pseudonym Arnold Petry. She had decided to save her own name for her more "serious" work.

In 1941, she began working as a reporter for the *People's Voice*. She credits her five years as a journalist, working in almost every aspect of the newspaper business, as the most influential on her writing. She then shifted her objective from observation to direct interaction with the people of Harlem by founding Negro Women, Inc., and then in 1944 becoming a recreational specialist at P.S. 10, a Harlem elementary school. Here she designed programs for problem children.



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## Biography continued

She also took up an active civic and social life. She studied painting, took piano lessons, acted in *Striver's Row*, an American Negro Theater production, and taught a business letter-writing course at the Harlem Branch of the NAACP.

She kept up her writing among her many other endeavors. In the 1940s she appeared in many literary magazines. It wasn't until 1943 that her career finally took off though. Her story "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon," was published by *Crisis* magazine. This is when Houghton Mifflin discovered her and encouraged her to write a novel. When she began her novel she was living off her husband's allotment check from the armed forces because writing had become her career. After she applied for a literary fellowship, Houghton Mifflin granted her \$2400.00 in 1945. In 1946, they published her first novel, *The Street*. Her second novel, *Country Place*, was published in 1947. In 1948, she and her husband decided to move back to Old Saybrook. By this time, she had already established herself as an independent writer. After moving, she only wrote one more novel, *The Narrows*, which was published in 1953. She decided to devote her time to raising her daughter, Elisabeth Ann, and writing a collection of short stories.

Ann Petry died on April 28, 1997 near her old home in Old Saybrook, Connecticut after a brief illness.

As a writer, Petry revealed her knowledge of how the interconnections of race, gender, and class can shape tragic experiences for both blacks and whites, and showed her desire to represent blacks in all of their humanity and complexity. Critics have attempted however, to enclose her in the narrow space of the naturalistic tradition. She has overcome this through her writing, exposing the limits of naturalism by creating a narrative space to fit her unique perspective of telling not only one story of black oppression, but telling many stories of black survival.



# Ann Petry

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