**Warner, Sylvia Townsend (1893-1978)**

Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote novels, short stories, poetry, journalistic non-fiction, and literary criticism. Her works often inhabit settings at opposite ends of the modernist-era spectrum: on one hand, fantasy and fable worlds, and on the other, detailed contemporary domestic and historical settings incorporating themes of war, revolution, and class struggle. Warner is regarded as a pioneer of anti-colonial, queer, Marxist, and anti-fascist narrative, particularly in her novels of the 1920s and 1930s.

Born and raised in Harrow, in Middlesex, England, where her father was schoolmaster at the boys’ public school, Warner moved to London from 1917 to 1927 to work as a musicologist and editor on the Carnegie UK Trust’s Tudor Church Music Research Project. In 1926, she met her lifelong partner, Valentine Ackland, a poet and writer in her own right, and in 1930, they moved in with each other in Dorset. Both women were committed leftist activists who joined the Communist Party in 1935. That same year, Warner joined the Executive Committee of the International Association of Writers for the Defence of Culture (IAWDC), and in 1936, she served as Secretary of the Association of Writers for Intellectual Liberty (AWIL), both anti-fascist organizations. During the war, Warner wrote anti-fascist and Marxist articles for leftist newspapers and magazines, including *Time and Tide*, the *Left Review*, the *Daily Worker*, and *Our Time.*

*Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* (1927) interrupts the colonial narrative of native conversion as its protagonist, the Reverend Timothy Fortune, travels to the fictional island of Fanua, only to fail in his mission. His only convert, Lueli, a beautiful young man, never actually capitulates to Christianity, and inspires an erotic attachment in Fortune. The reverend leaves Fanua after three years, disillusioned of his own religious convictions. *Summer Will Show* (1936) is a historical novel set in rural England and revolutionary Paris in 1848. Again, Warner’s framework is a conventional narrative that is interrupted and ends in intertwined political and erotic liberation. In this case, that framework is a domestic plot that begins with the restoration of marriage and family and ends in revolution. The aristocratic English protagonist, Sophia Willoughby, loses her children to smallpox and travels to Paris to convince her estranged husband to impregnate her again. She falls in love with his mistress, Minna Lemuel, a Jewish socialist and they become revolutionaries together.

*After the Death of Don Juan* (1939) combines the fable quality of *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* with the realistic historical detail of *Summer Will Show*. A version of the Don Juan legend set in eighteenth-century rural Spain, this novel exposes the material forces behind the struggle of communism and fascism in Warner’s time. The landowners’ rapacity, embodied by Don Juan, stifles the peasants and keeps them in a condition of dire poverty. Warner had visited Spain twice during the Spanish Civil War, and the setting of Spain lent a poignancy to this political allegory. *After the Death of Don Juan* and Warner’s postwar novel, *The Corner That Held Them*, set in a fourteenth-century English convent, are remarkable for their ensemble characterizations. In both novels, there are no truly individual protagonists and little plotting; the narrative emphasis is on large-scale historical forces and the relationship between humanity and the material world.

Warner’s unique ironic and feminist approach to the pastoral mode is especially apparent in her long narrative poem, *Opus 7* (1931), and in her popular first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), both of which feature single women living in the countryside. In *Lolly Willowes*, the protagonist rejects her insignificant, marginalized life as a maiden aunt who lives with her brother and his family in London. In the rural village of Great Mop, she makes a new life as a witch and eventually makes a contract with the devil to fend off the presence of her nephew. The playful combination of pastoral and supernatural fantasy was a great success for the Book-of-the-Month Club in the US, for which it was the inaugural selection.

Warner wrote over 150 short stories for the *New Yorker* magazine starting in 1936, and these along with others have comprised many book-length story collections. The wartime collection, *Garland of Straw* features stories centering on refugees, artists, and servants across Europe and North America. Connections between class hierarchy, capital, and war emerge in inconclusive narratives that offer glimpses of casual cruelty and xenophobia, as well as survival strategies of the working class.The very different collection, *The Cat’s Cradle-Book*, uses the framing conceit of an ethnographer who having learned the language of cats, has collected the stories—many of which are fables and fairy tales—that mother cats tell their kittens.

**Timeline of Life**

1893 birth

1917 moves to London, works as a musicologist and editor on the Tudor Church Music Research Project

1930 moves to Dorset with her lifelong partner, Valentine Ackland

1935 joins the Communist Party and the Executive Committee of the International Association of Writers for the Defence of Culture (IAWDC)

1936 joins the Executive Committee of the Association of Writers for Intellectual Liberty (AWIL); visits Barcelona to witness the Spanish Civil War

1937 visits Madrid for IAWDC

1938 organizes the conference, “In Defence of Freedom—Writers Declare against Fascism” for AWIL

1969 death of Valentine Ackland

1978 death

Selected references and further reading:

Poetry

*The Espalier* (1925)

*Time Importuned* (1928)

*Opus 7* (1931)

*Rainbow* (1932)

*Whether a Dove, or Seagull* (with Valentine Ackland) (1933)

*Boxwood* (1960)

*Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman (1983)

Novels

*Lolly Willowes; or, The Loving Huntsman* (1926)

*Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* (1927)

*The True Heart* (1929)

*Summer Will Show* (1936)

*After the Death of Don Juan* (1939)

*The Corner That Held Them* (1948)

*The Flint Anchor* (1954)

Novellas (Limited Editions)

*The Maze: A Story to be Read Aloud* (1928)

*Some World Far from Ours; and ‘Stay, Corydon, Thou Swain’* (1929)

*Elinor Barley* (1930)

Short Story Collections

*A Moral Ending and Other Stories* (1931)

*The Salutation* (includes *The Maze: A Story to be Read Aloud*; *Elinor Barley*; and *A Moral Ending*) (1932)

*More Joy in Heaven, and Other Stories* (1935)

*The Cat’s Cradle-Book* (1940)

*A Garland of Straw and Other Stories* (1943)

*The Museum of Cheats* (1947)

*Winter in the Air, and Other Stories* (1955)

*A Spirit Rises* (1962)

*A Stranger with a Bag, and Other Stories* (published in the US as *Swans on an Autumn River*) (1966)

*The Innocent and the Guilty* (1971)

*Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977)

*One Thing Leading to Another, and Other Stories*, ed. Susanna Pinney (1984)

*Selected Stories of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, eds. Susanna Pinney and William Maxwell (1988)

*The Music at Long Verney: Twenty Stories*, ed. Michael Steinman (2001)

Autobiographical Writings and Diaries

*Scenes of Childhood* (1982)

*The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner.* Ed. Claire Harman. (1994) London: Virago.

Letters

*Letters.* Ed. William Maxwell. (1982) London: Chatto & Windus.

*Sylvia and David:* *The Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters.* Ed. Richard Garnett. (1995) London: Sinclair-Stevenson.

*I’ll Stand By You: The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland.* Ed. Susanna Pinney. (1999) London: Pimlico.

*The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell, 1938-1978.* Ed. Michael Steinman. (2001) Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint. (letters between Warner and her editor at the *New Yorker*)

Other

*Somerset* (travel guide) (1949)

*Jane Austen, 1775-1817* (critical essay on Austen for The British Council) (1951)

Translation of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* by Marcel Proust. *By Way of Saint-Beuve.* (1958)

Translation of *La Côte Sauvage.* by Jean René Huguenin. *A Place of Shipwreck.* (1963)

*T.H. White: A Biography* (1967)

Key Biographies of Sylvia Townsend Warner:

Ackland, Valentine*. For Sylvia: An Honest Account.* (1985) New York: Norton.

Harman, Claire. *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (1989)London: Chatto & Windus, 1989.

Mulford, Wendy. *This Narrow Place: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Life, Letters and Politics, 1930-1951* (1988) London: Pandora, 1988.

Useful links

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Archive: <http://www.sylviatownsendwarner.com/>

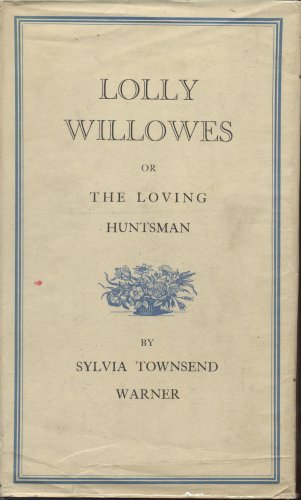
The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society: <http://www.townsendwarner.com/>



National Portrait Gallery

Photographer: Howard Coster, 1934

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