

Antonia White
1899-1980
by **L. Margaret Pomeroy**

The life of Antonia White, English novelist and translator, is hard to separate from her fiction. She was born March 31, 1899, in London, the daughter of a professor. When White was seven years old her parents converted to Catholicism, and she was educated at the Convent of The Sacred Heart in Roehampton, England. Although Antonia adored her father and wanted to please him by conforming to his religious ideals, she felt like "a middle-class convert among aristocratic 'born Catholics'" at the boarding school. When she was fifteen, sixteen by some accounts, she decided to surprise her father by writing a novel exemplary of his religious ideals. Her plan was to create terribly wicked characters that would undergo religious transformation. As she would later tell an *Observer* interviewer, "I made everybody as wicked as possible... As I couldn't think of anything bad enough for them to do, I said they were indulged in 'nameless vices.'" Unfortunately for Antonia, the nuns confiscated the manuscript only a few chapters into it, and expelled her from the convent. She was never allowed to explain to the nuns or to her raging father. It was an incident from which White probably never recovered. It is a fact that she did not resume writing fiction again until after her father's death, some twenty years later, years punctuated by two annulled marriages and a period of confinement in a mental institution.

In 1933 with encouragement from her husband, (second or third depending on which account one is reading) White completed her first novel, *Frost in May*, which was based on her experience at the Catholic boarding school and included the details of her expulsion, and began a second novel. However, as yet another marriage failed and was coupled with continuing bouts of mental illness, fifteen more years passed before White's second novel, *The Lost Traveller*, was published in 1950. After undergoing more psychoanalytical treatment, White reconverted to Catholicism and in the next five years completed the Clara Batchelor trilogy (*The Lost Traveller*, *Sugar House*, and *Beyond the Glass*), all autobiographical in nature. In 1966 White published a collection of letters titled *The Hound and the Falcon: The Story of a Reconversion to the Catholic Faith*.

In addition to writing fiction, Antonia White wrote *Three in a Room*, a three-act comedy, as well as short stories, poems, and juvenile fiction. She also worked as an actress, copywriter, free-lance journalist, theater critic, fashion editor, teacher, and translator. Notable writers she translated into English included Colette, Guy de Maupassant, Henry Bordeaux, Marguerite Duras, Fanny Rouget, and Alexis Carrel.

Sadly, White's writing efforts were haunted all her life by the experience of having her first attempt so misunderstood and judged. She even seemed to believe her marriage failures and battles with mental illness were connected to that harsh episode. Although she continued to write between personal crises, it seemed more an exercise in coping with her than life in joyful creating. In fact, referring to this very issue, Antonia White once stated, "Creative joy is something I haven't felt since I was fourteen and don't expect to feel again." Antonia White died April 10, 1980.

Sources used:

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Locher, Frances C., Editor. *Contemporary Authors, Vol. 104*. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1982.