
Biography of Robert Warren

An influential Southern poet, novelist, literary critic, and multiple winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Robert Penn Warren was recognized throughout his career as one of the foremost men of letters in American literature. Along with contemporaries including William Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter, Warren is credited with helping activate a modernistic Southern literary renaissance in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Later Southern writers, such as fellow Pulitzer Prize winners Harper Lee (To Kill A Mockingbird, in 1961), Eudora Welty (The Optimist's Daughter, in 1973), and John Kennedy Toole (A Confederacy of Dunces, in 1981), were influenced by the works of Warren and others.

Robert Penn Warren was born into a middle-class family in Guthrie, Kentucky, on April 24, 1905. The South remembered that it was merely forty years since the conclusion of the Civil War. As a child, Warren was exceptionally intelligent, and he grew up with a fond appreciation for literature and a vivid knowledge of Southern history.

At 16, Warren enrolled in Vanderbilt University, where he met and befriended a group of highly influential young Southern writers, including Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and John Crowe Ransom. He and his colleagues founded a literary group called "The Fugitives," which published a small academic magazine called The Fugitive. The magazine became highly influential in its brief period of publication, and the group helped to usher in what would become known as the "New Criticism" mode of literary analysis, which advocated close reading and criticism of only the texts themselves, as opposed to consulting outside sources beyond the poetic whole of a text. Warren and his group went on to found the "Southern Agrarians," a broader organization opposed to the effects of modernism, industrialization, and certain technologies, which they thought were destroying the heritage and values of the South. Warren later attended the University of California, Yale University, and ultimately Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, receiving his Bachelor of Letters degree in 1930.

In 1934, at the height of the Great Depression, Warren took a position at Louisiana State University, where he observed firsthand the rise of Huey P. Long in Louisiana. After Long's assassination in 1936, Warren began writing "Proud Flesh," a verse drama about a politician who becomes corrupted by that which he set out to eliminate. In the 1940s, Warren reworked the themes of this piece into the novel All the King's Men, which was published in 1946. The novel was extremely well received, and Warren won the Pulitzer Prize the following year. The first film version of the book came out in 1949, winning several Academy Awards including Best Picture.

Warren continued writing about the South throughout his career, yet no work of his has been quite so popular, enduring, or influential as All the King's Men. He died on September 15, 1989 of cancer.

Accolades

Robert Penn Warren won three Pulitzer Prizes, one in Fiction in 1947 for All the King's Men and the others in Poetry in 1958 for Promises: Poems 1954-1956 and in 1979 for Now and Then. Warren also served as the United States Poet Laureate twice, first in 1944-45 (when the title was known as "Consultant in Poetry"), then again in 1986-87 (as the first person to serve after the title was changed). In 1980, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and in 2005, a commemorative stamp featuring his portrait and imagery from All the King's Men was released by the U.S. Postal Service.