

## Katherine Mansfield

New Zealand's most famous writer, a master of the short story, and well known for her technique of montage writing. Her name was Katherine Mansfield, another unique New Zealand woman, haunted by her own contradictions and destined for tragedy. She was a bohemian, a rebel in a time that wasn't kind to those who didn't conform, and she stalked the fringes of London's Bloomsbury group while pining a little for the green shores of New Zealand. She was described by her friend and rival Virginia Woolf as "of the cat kind, alien, composed, always solitary & observant."

Even after over a hundred years since her birth, Mansfield is still the pinnacle of New Zealand literary achievement. She was born in the capital Wellington in 1888, Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp, the daughter of socially ambitious parents. Her father was a successful local businessman, and their house in Thorndon showed their affluence. When she was about five they moved to the suburb of Karori nestled in green hills, but later when Katherine was eleven they returned to Thorndon, where she went to attend Miss Swainson's private school.

But when Katherine was a teenager she went as many young wealthy New Zealanders did to a finishing school in Europe. Her father, now a director of the Bank of New Zealand, sent her to Queen's College in London, which had a good reputation for the liberal education of women.. Katherine showed considerable talent at languages, music and writing, and had her first story published in the college magazine.

In 1906 she returned to Wellington, but the town has become too small. She railed against all the social conventions, having romantic infatuations with both men and women. It was during this time that Katherine went on a journey into the Urewera country in the north of New Zealand, a area of thick bush and legend. What she saw there she liked, but it was not enough to make her stay.

After nearly two years of struggle with her parents, Katherine was allowed to return to London to study music, but life was not ever going to be simple. She had an affair with the son of her cello teacher in Wellington, Garnet Trowell, but when that broke up, she impulsively married GC Bowden a singing teacher. The day after the marriage realizing her mistake, she left him. Reuniting with Trowell, she worked in his opera company for a while, became pregnant, and abandoned him again.

All this must have deeply shocked her mother, as she traveled out from New Zealand, and booked her daughter into Wörishofen in Bavaria to take their famous water cure. What exactly this was supposed to do is an interesting question, but perhaps she hoped her daughter would some become more 'normal'. During her time in Germany Katherine miscarried, but remained there for some months recovering. It was here that she had an affair with Polish translator, journalist and con-man, Floryan Wyspiansky. Katherine wrote him impassioned letters, which he later tried to blackmail her with.

But she also wrote satirical and candid stories, which were later collected as "In a German Pension" (1911). This was the year where Katherine met her husband John Middleton Murray. He was her match in many ways, being literary, intelligent and dedicated to the spirit of modernism. They quickly set up house together. When John's journal Rhythm folded in 1913, together they edited the Blue Review.

They also became friends with DH Lawrence and Frieda Weekley, a relationship that was to be tested at various times throughout their lives. This year was very tough for Katherine and John, with the collapse of his second attempt at journals, they were left in poor financial shape. They changed houses frequently, but soon after the beginning of the First World War, moved to Great Missenden close to Lawrence and his wife.

By 1915 Katherine and Murray's relationship seemed to be doomed to failure, so she retreated to Paris, where she had an affair. But she also wrote, including the Aloe. She might have left New Zealand at nineteen, but Katherine always seemed to return to it in her writing. This was especially true after the death of her brother Leslie in military training.

In 1916 despite the waning friendship with DH Lawrence Katherine and John were mingling with all types of artists and writers, such as Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley and T S Eliot. But by 1918 tuberculosis had reared its head, and she was forced to split her time between London and the Riviera. But she managed to marry John in that year, even while he was working for MI5. It was to be the pattern between them for a long time, Katherine traveling for her health, John working tirelessly at his journalism. But between them flowed a river of correspondence.

In 1920 she was renting the Villa Isola Bella in Menton France, and it was here that she had her most creative period. Then in May 1921 John must have realized how sick she was, he resigned from his latest journal, and together they took a chalet in Montana-sur-Sierre. But she got worse, the couple moved to Paris seeking more treatment, but it was no good. Convinced she needed a spiritual cure as well as a physical one, she tried the Gurdjieff Institute for Harmonious Development at Fontainebleau.

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But it was there she died 9 January 1923, just before the publication of the Garden Party and other stories assured her of her place among the Modernists.

As with many other artists her real worth was only realized after her death. She used stream of consciousness in her short stories, and could sketch character accurately and yet briefly. She wasn't afraid to show loneliness and bitterness in marriage and family life. Perhaps because she was very familiar with it herself. The title of this essay was perhaps a cry from her deepest self.

If you are in Wellington, New Zealand you may want to visit the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace, an award winning tourism destination. Check out their website <http://www.tinakorilodge.co.nz/kmb/>



*Originally published at suite101.com 1 December 2000*