



1988 Inductee
to the
South Carolina
Academy of Authors

Julia Peterkin was born Julia Mood on October 31, 1880, in Laurens County, SC. At the age of sixteen, she graduated from Converse College in Spartanburg where she also received her master's degree a year later. Peterkin then applied her education by becoming a teacher at the school in Forte Motte, SC, near Lang Syne Plantation, which her future husband, William George Peterkin, owned and worked.

Influenced by the setting and people of this cotton plantation, her prized stories reflected the life and daily struggles of average Southerners no matter the color of their skin. For instance, she won the O. Henry Award for Best Short Story in 1925 with "Maum Lou," a story inspired by the actions of a former slave at Lang Syne Plantation who had stolen and sold her own daughter's chickens. Peterkin admitted to Henry Louis Mencken, her literary agent, that she was able to identify with the character due to the effects of her own postpartum depression, which made her feel like a captive of her own mind.

Due to the unexpected death of her mother, Peterkin had been raised as a child by her black nurse, who taught her the Gullah dialect. This early experience helped to fuel Peterkin's connection to African-American culture. In 1929, she became the first Southern novelist to win a Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Scarlet Sister Mary*, which describes a young black woman's challenges as she tries to find a balance between her culture's conventional values and her own rebellious desires. Many readers celebrated Peterkin and this novel due to the latter's sympathetic and realistic representation of the Gullah people; however, others condemned it as an obscene piece of literature. She continued to receive controversial recognition as a white plantation mistress writing about African-Americans by collaborating with photographer Doris Ulmann for *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. This book captures through photography and text the lives of former slaves and their descendants living in the coastal region of South Carolina. Other notable works by the author include *Black April*, *Green Thursday: Stories*, *Bright Skin*, and *A Plantation Christmas*.

Julia Peterkin died at the plantation on August 10, 1961, but her legacy continues. Over thirty years after her death, the Department of English and Creative Writing at Converse College established The Julia Peterkin Award, which honors established and emerging writers.

-Sarah Marie Williamson



Image Courtesy Library of Congress

Julia Peterkin