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Review of *Katherine Anne Porter: The Life of an Artist* By Darlene Harbour Unrue

Thomas Austenfeld
University of Fribourg

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Katherine Anne Porter: The Life of an Artist. By Darlene Harbour Unrue. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. xxviii + 381 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.00.

In contradistinction to earlier biographies—Joan Givner's groundbreaking work (1982, second edition 1991), Thomas Walsh's narrowly focused book on Porter and Mexico (1992), and Janis Stout's account of Porter's intellectual growth (1995)—this book provides primarily a fact-filled narrative of an artist's life shaped into elegant prose. Engaging and readable, Unrue's book documents her subject's entire life, but it is exceptionally strong and informative on the early childhood years notoriously difficult to research. In particular, Porter's religious formation and the disaster of her first marriage have never before been so well documented. Her youth in Texas and her brief but important sojourn in Colorado during

the great influenza pandemic of 1918 will give readers glimpses of life in the Great Plains in the early portion of the last century.

Unrue's extraordinary access to sources is matched by her extraordinary tact, though she never shies away from full and honest accounts of Porter's love affairs and marriages, her disappointments in childbearing, and her struggles with her roles as artist and woman. The introductory chapter is an effective meditation on "Katherine Anne Porter and the Honest Biography," a kind of caveat more necessary with Porter the fabulist than with many other twentieth-century writers. Katherine Anne Porter's need for the fictive construction of an Old South heritage as part of her own biography becomes urgently comprehensible as readers recognize the rootlessness and homelessness of the Porter family during the first decade of the century.

While this biography consciously eschews long interpretive explanations of Porter's fiction in favor both of biographical detail and readability, the entire volume is informed by Unrue's intimate knowledge of Porter's work—published and unpublished—and by her previous, wide-ranging books on Porter's prose and poetry. Thus, in offering brief narrative summaries of some of Porter's stories, Unrue relates them to events in Porter's life at the time of their genesis. The supportive documentary details of the research are relegated to the rear of the book, resulting in a fluent narrative. When Unrue departs from this method and places a long, autobiographical, introspective passage by Porter into chapter 13, one realizes how deeply the author has felt her way into her subject: by this point in the book, Unrue writes effectively as Porter's *amanuensis*. Given the many things Porter is famous for, especially the thirty years of writer's block preceding her completion of *Ship of Fools*, one wishes she had had an assistant of Unrue's ability, patience, and scholarly care.

THOMAS AUSTENFELD
Department of English
University of Fribourg, Switzerland