



IN MEMORIAM

Carolyn See
Professor of English
UC Los Angeles
1934-2016

Author, critic and UCLA emerita English professor Carolyn See, 82, died July 13 in Santa Monica as a result of congestive heart failure. Among her 10 books are a critically acclaimed memoir, “Dreaming: Hard Luck and Good Times in America,” the nonfiction primer “Making a Literary Life” and the novels “There Will Never Be Another You,” “Golden Days” and “The Handyman.” A longtime book critic, she wrote regular reviews for the Los Angeles Times and New York Newsday. Her reviews appeared in the Washington Post every week for 27 years.

See was born in Pasadena, California, to Kate Louise Sullivan and George Laws on January 13, 1934. See's father was a would-be novelist and sometime journalist, who gave her the Horatio Hornblower books to read when she was 8 so that she wouldn't later get stuck in the nautical details of “Moby Dick.” She spent her early years in Eagle Rock, California. Her parents divorced when she was 11 and she was raised by her mother, whom See described as an alcoholic with an “even temper. Evenly bad.”

See earned an associate degree from Los Angeles City College. She married anthropologist Richard See and moved with him to Newfoundland, where he was mustered for the Korean War. The couple later traveled to Paris, France, as “starving students,” and, in 1955, she gave birth to her first daughter, Lisa. When they returned to L.A., See earned her B.A. from California State University, Los Angeles.

See was accepted into the graduate program in English at UCLA. In 1958, she won the Samuel Goldwyn Creative Writing Contest for an unpublished novel, “The Waiting Game,” and used the \$250 prize money to pay for a divorce from her first husband. Her dissertation was a thorough survey of the Hollywood novel, a subject that was virtually ignored by academia at the time. See married Tom Sturak and had her second daughter, Clara Sturak, in 1965.

After her divorce from Sturak, See began writing articles for the Los Angeles Times and celebrity profiles for TV Guide and other magazines to supplement her salary as an English professor at Loyola Marymount University. During this period, she worked out her writing habit — composing 1,000 words a day in felt pen on white unlined paper. Little, Brown published her first novel, “The Rest is Done with Mirrors,” in 1970. In pornography trials of the early 1970s, See testified for the defense — and the First Amendment — leading to the publication of her first nonfiction book, “Blue Money,” in 1973.

See also wrote thousands of book reviews over a period of more than 40 years. She was a strong supporter of a thriving “literary community in Los Angeles and the west.” A longtime member of the board of PEN Center USA, she served as its president for several years. She was also a member of the National Book Critics Circle and a judge in the fiction category for the National Book Awards in 2010. She served on the Board of the Modern Library until her death.

In addition to her own books, See wrote historical fiction under the pen name Monica Highland, with her daughter novelist Lisa See and her longtime companion, fellow UCLA professor of English John Espey.

See was known for her love of Los Angeles and contributed to projects that revolved around the city, including “L.A. Shorts.” She also wrote the introduction for two coffee-table tomes, “Santa Monica Bay: Paradise by the Sea” and “The California Pop-Up Book.”

See said her idea of a perfect day was to “write two hours, work in the yard for two hours and write 10 pieces of mail; that’s all I want to do. It never works out that way — or not often.” She believed in the power of the “charming note,” a letter or postcard sent to “someone you admire, a person who makes your hands sweat.” Following her own advice, she sent at least five charming notes a week for most of her writing life.

See lived in Topanga Canyon with Espey. Although they never married, the two were a close couple and lived together from 1974 until his death in 2000. In “Two Schools of Thought: Some Tales of Learning and Romance” (1991), See and Espey wrote of their formative university experiences — Espey at Merton College, Oxford and See at the graduate program in English at UCLA.

During her long career, she won a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Getty Center residence. In 1993, she was awarded the Robert Kirsch Award, given by the Los Angeles Times to an author who writes about or lives in the West. In 1998, she was presented with the PEN Center USA Lifetime Achievement Award.

See is survived by her stepmother, Lynda Laws; brother, Robert Laws; daughters Lisa See (Richard Kendall) and Clara Sturak (Chris Chandler), three grandsons and one great-grandson. She is predeceased by a sister, Maureen Daly.

In 1999, See established an endowment for the study of Southern California and Los Angeles literature. Each year, an award is made to a UCLA graduate student who writes a dissertation that focuses on Southern California.