Katherine Anne Porter Papers

Scope and Content Note

This collection consists of nine typed letters (signed, several with hand-written insertions/corrections and postscripts), three autograph notes (signed), five dictated autograph letters (three signed with initials) from Katherine Anne Porter to a bookselling couple, Vearl and Linda Moody, between 1974 and 1978. In total, there are 17 letters and associated matter.

The correspondence primarily focuses on business transactions and the exchange of autographed editions. Often, however, Porter’s letters contain personal opinions or they address personal matters. She discusses topics ranging from her genuine interest in the well-being of the Moody’s Magic Lantern Bookstore to the nature of modern readership. The letters especially illuminate her final years after her stroke in 1978 as her health weakens and her assistant, Bill Wilkins, takes up her correspondence.

Linda and Vearl “Gill” Moody operated Magic Lantern bookshop in Kosciusko, Mississippi until they moved to their home town in Johnson City, Tennessee in the early 1980s and opened a brick and mortar, Moody Books. During a phone conversation in 2013, Vearl said that he often wrote to authors like Henry Miller, Robert Penn Warren, and Katherine Anne Porter, all of whom were very willing to autograph books and provide manuscripts for The Magic Lantern. Vearl reflected that Porter in particular was “magnificent” in her charity to the store and was a pleasure to correspond with, as this set of letters displays. On the subject of the letters, Vearl remembers being surprised to hear that Porter was ill when her assistant took up writing, as Porter had been generous and forthcoming until the last. As a letter from her assistant Bill Wilkins verifies, Katherine became somewhat paranoid and resistant to her nursing. Vearl remembers she wrote once asking him to come and bring her to Mississippi because, as he put it, she was being “held prisoner.”

While Porter’s letters are mostly about particular signed editions of The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter, three interesting letters concern an issue with her publisher and an auto-pen forgery of a limited edition of A Christmas Story allegedly signed by both Porter and the illustrator, Ben Shahn. She frantically writes with many corrections, “I am horrified…I never heard of a ‘limited edition’ and I never signed one that was already signed by Ben Shahn.” Much of the correspondence like this is very candid and reflective of her personal connection to Magic Lantern books. She says at one point, “I wish you to know and remember that I have a very personal and serious interest in you and your wife and your Magic Lantern Book Store.”

Though the incentive for Porter’s correspondence concerns shipments of autographed books, she often speaks her mind and provides fluent opinions on the book trade or events in her life. Early in her letters she writes, “Please do believe how concerned I am with your brave attack on apathy, the terrible inertia of the human mass towards the arts, all the arts; they are blinded and deafened and benumbed by the savage noise they call music, the beastliness of foul moving pictures…” continuing to encourage Magic Lantern books to endure any lulls in readership, for true book lovers will always find them. She admires and references other literary figures like Sylvia Beach, saying in a letter from 1975, “The name of your
shop is attractive. I was a friend of Sylvia Beach in Paris, and knew the whole story of her life in ‘Shakespeare & Company’—take heart from her history—it wasn’t easy…” Throughout the correspondence, Porter also displays a characteristic wit and sharpness, as she writes, “Do you know your wonderful Mississippi writer, Eudora Welty? If you know her, you know she has a wonderful humor and a kind of merriment…If they can’t read Eudora, I advise you to erase them from your list of prospective customers; you would be wasting your energy on them.”

Some of the final letters, beginning in early 1977 are from Porter’s assistant, Bill Wilkins, detailing Porter’s stroke, final business transactions, and his unhappy departure from his role as Porter’s assistant. Three letters are dictated by Porter to Wilkins, and although initialed in painful hand by Porter, remain fluent and well-thought underneath the dejected tone. She dictates in 1978, “Please remember who I am and how I worked. Take my word for it now that only now you can have something that you’ll never have again…so get yourself some money and show yourself up.” The final note, cleanly written from Wilkins on May 10, 1978, is a poignant goodbye, as he explains that Porter’s stroke has made her paranoid, and “since I’m [Wilkins] am closest right now, I’m where it hit and will not be with her any longer. No regrets- it was a wonderful year and perhaps I accomplished what I meant to.” Wilkins finished her final work on the Sacco-Vanzetti executions earlier that year, and Porter died two years later on September 18, 1980.
Katherine Anne Porter Biography

Katherine Anne Porter was born on May 15, 1890 in Indian Creek, Texas. Katherine had a tenuous childhood as her mother passed away young and the care of herself and her four siblings was shared between her nurturing grandmother and her absent father. Porter reflects her father was often the source of conflicts, but her grandmother sparked her love for family history and storytelling in general.

After her grandmother’s death, Porter attended a convent school until she married John Henry Koontz at age 16 to eschew her family and gain some financial security. She reported his abusive tendencies, however, and filed for divorce nine years later in 1915, after which she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. While she spent the two years battling the illness and going in and out of sanatoriums, she wrote on drama and social life for a local journal in Fort Worth, Texas, The Critic.

This opportunity excited Porter’s interest in writing and film critique, and inspired her to move to New York City, where she associated with influential Southern writers like Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren. Porter continuously moved, however, leaving New York for a teaching job in Mexico, and then a marriage in Connecticut, and the subsequent divorce which pushed her to Bermuda. In total should would be married and divorced four times in her life, her last marriage ending in 1942. In 1930, she returned to Mexico, remarried, and received a Guggenheim fellowship. Her travels that year inspired her most famous work, Ship of Fools, thirty years later.

Over the next decade, Porter firmly established her reputation as a great American writer, producing infrequent but prodigious works as she continued to travel around the world. In 1943, Porter became the first Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress after years of rave reviews comparing her to the likes of Ernest Hemingway.

In 1948, after a bad affair in Washington D.C. pushed her to Hollywood she spent time screenwriting and, teaching at Stanford University. For the next ten years she would teach at the University of Michigan, Washington and Lee, and University of Texas. Although she lacked a college degree herself and often was unorganized, she was a popular professor.

In 1962, she finally released Ship of Fools to critical acclaim at home and some harsh criticism abroad. None the less, Porter received the Pulitzer Prize in 1966 and United Artists bought the right produce the film, released in 1965. That same year she won the National Book Award for The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter.

Over the next decade Porter continued to write, speak publicly, and teach periodically. In 1977, Porter suffered a stroke and her final book on the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, The Never-Ending Wrong was finished by her assistant Bill Wilkins. She passed away in Silver Springs, Maryland on September 18, 1980 at the age of 90 after leaving her literary material to the University of Maryland Library.
1. February 1, 1974
   a. Handwritten note from Porter to Mr. Moody on canary yellow stationary saying how she is flattered he likes her poetry. She claims she is a “Sunday poet,” meaning she never “wrote out of the feeling of the moment—but real feelings, in a real moment”

2. November 22, 1974
   a. Handwritten note from Porter to Linda Moody on pale blue stationary, wishing Linda well on her “tough road.” She encourages her to read about Sylvia Beach, likening her story to the Moody’s (Porter makes this comparison again in her next note on January 1, 1975). Porter also inquires whether Magic Lantern books has received her new paperback copies of her book, *Collected Essays*.

3. January 1, 1975
   a. Typed letter with hand corrections and signature from Porter to Miss Moody, informing that ten copies of *A Christmas Story* and one signed paperback of *Collected Essays* has been boxed and is ready to be sent. She also mentions her health struggles that she has been dealing with for five years, and that her assistant will begin to help by handling the postage. She also eloquently provide support for the bookstore’s “brave attack on apathy,” claiming that “the human mass...are blinded and deafened and benumbed,” by music, film, and poor language. Porter glorifies the Moodys fortitude in the midst of such an environment, and encourages them to take heed of the story of Sylvia Beach, whom she met during her time in Paris.

4. January 31, 1975
   a. Typed letter with hand corrections and signature from Porter to Miss Moody. Porter sympathizes with Miss Moody’s apparent lamentation of the poor quality of literature she is able to sell. Porter, however, urges Moody to read a fellow Mississippi writer, Eudora Welty, saying “it has been at least 36 years ago since I met [Eudora] in Louisiana. If [your customers] can’t read Eudora, I advise you to erase them from your list of prospective customers; you would be wasting your energies on them.”

5. April 22, 1975
   a. Typed letter with hand corrections and signature from Porter to Miss Moody. Porter writes with many corrections about a debacle with her publisher over forged copies of *A Christmas Story* that appeared on the market. She expresses her outrage, saying, “I am horrified...I never heard of a ‘limited edition’ and I never signed one that was already signed by Ben Shahn (Illustrator), and I have never received a copy of our book”

6. June 13, 1975
   a. Typed letter, hand signed, from Porter to Mr. Moody. Porter apologizes for responding so late regarding a copy of *A Christmas Story*. She promises to inscribe it and send it soon.

7. July 8, 1975
   a. Typed letter, with hand postscripts and signature from Porter to Linda. Porter apologizes for an oversight in signing a book and promises to correct it and send it back.
immediately. She is glad to hear the store is doing well. The post script says Porter is willing to sign as many books as Linda chooses.

8. August 8, 1975
   a. Hand written note from Porter to the “Magic Lanterners.” Appears to be a receipt for a recent exchange of books that Porter is sending to the store. She mentions a “marbro sale” of which she hopes the Moodys took advantage.

9. August 22, 1975
   a. Three page typed letter with hand corrections and signature from Porter to Mr. Moody.
      i. Page One: Letter details time Porter spent in New York in 1920 and a story she remembers about a Chinese marriage she became involved with through editing for a magazine on the “oriental east.” Porter reminisces about how she followed Miss Emerson one of the editors at the magazine to Ann Arbor, Michigan and worked as a freelance writer taking her memoirs.
      ii. Page Two: Porter explains how she wrote the memoirs for Miss Emerson, but they were falsely published under Porter’s name. Porter explains how she refuses to take credit for the words that were not hers and urges Mr. Moody not to purchase the story or repeat it, because Porter herself is working on her own memoirs.
      iii. Page Three: Signature

10. January 20, 1976
   a. Typed letter with hand corrections and signature from Porter to Vearl. Porter apologizes for an apparent loss of an order, regretting that she and Vearl did not think to insure the books first. Porter makes several vague comments about her deteriorating health and how that has prevented her from keeping in touch.

11. May 23, 1976
   a. Typed letter printed on blue carbon paper with hand corrections, initials, and message on the bottom from Porter to Vearl. Letter addresses a “correction to be made to all copies possible of Porter’s Collected Essays.” Contains quote of Porter’s outrage at the publishers for printing against her knowledge with a note from the publishers crossed out. Note at the bottom corroborates Porter’s anger at the publishers and she promises to write the quote in each signed copy of the book.

12. June 29, 1976
   a. Typed letter printed on blue paper with signature from Porter to Vearl. Porter informs that a shipment of signed books has been sent out. She indicates that she will not write for a while as she is finishing her new book and has canceled all engagements.

13. September 2, 1976
   a. Two page typed letter with hand corrections and signature from Porter to Vearl.
      i. Page one: Encourages Vearl to continue sending books to be signed, and thank him for letting her know about positive reception of her Collected Essays amongst his customers.
      ii. Page two: Alludes to her health preventing her from finishing her books, and talks about learning to accept and adapt to life of professional writer. Asks
Vearl to pass his regards to his wife and again praises the work the store is doing for encouraging readership in the area.

14. September 30, 1976
   a. Typed letter with signature from Bill [Wilkins], Porter’s assistant, to Vearl. Bill apologizes for an oversight with the order of two books, but reminds that it is a pleasure to help getting the books signed. Bill mentions a speech Porter plans to give at the Poetry Center on October 18, in New York City.

15. January 18, 1977
   a. Typed letter with signature from Bill [Wilkins] to Vearl. Bill informs of Porter’s recent hospitalization at Johns Hopkins on December 19, but urges not to worry as she entered at her own request. He sounds positive about her status but regrets that she will have to stay longer. He provides an address for notes to be sent and says he will try to continue getting books signed.

16. February 22, 1977
   a. Typed letter with hand corrections and signature from Bill [Wilkins] to Vearl and Linda. Bill regrets to inform that Porter suffered a stroke the Friday before. He says she is in a stable condition but has lost control of her right hand. Bill promises to try and get a few more books signed, but warns that it will take time. He says he will be spending part of every day with her, and ends on a positive note that Porters memoir on Sacco and Vanzetti was purchased by Atlantic Monthly.

17. June 2, 1977
   a. Two page typed letter with hand corrections and signature from Bill [Wilkins] to Linda and Vearl.
      i. Page one: Bill asks the Moodys to understand that he did not pass along their latest request for signatures, as Porter’s health is weakening and Bill did not want Porter to become angry or have to “go through the disappointment of having to say she can’t do it.” He mentions that he is working to finish Porter’s book on Cotton Mather. He says that her state is not improving and that she enjoys moments of lucidity, but they are fleeting.
      ii. Page two: Bill asks that the Moodys write again without the mention of books and to continue praying for her, signed “Hastily, Bill.”

18. September 17, 1977
   a. Hand written letter with rough initials by Porter dictated from Porter to “D.M.M.,” addressed to Lantern Books. Porter apologizes for not being able to sign her name or write, for she has been ill for a year. She asks the Moodys to write and that a friend of hers will write and mail her responses. Initials are scribbled and appear “RAR.”

   a. Handwritten letter, back and front on blue paper, with rough initials by Porter dictated from Porter to “T.J. (nurse),” addressed to Vearl and Emily. Porter urges the Moodys to come see her, for “with all the things I have to give you and show to you, you must come to see me.” She speaks about their apparent desire to open [another?] bookstore, and urges them to take out a loan. Porter wishes that they can see her
situation and asks them to come see her and “remember who I am and how I worked.” She urges them to take advantage of what they have now and not to “fail this chance to let your little boy have everything possible”

20. March 21, 1978
   a. Handwritten letter on torn, blue paper from Porter (dictated) to Mr. and Mrs. Vearl Moody. Porter asks for their telephone number so that they may discuss important matters, because they are “the important place to find [her] books.”

   a. Handwritten letter on blue stationary from Porter with rough initials dictated to LR. Porter informs that she has many more pictures and clippings to pass along once they are organized and wishes that the Moodys could visit so that she may have them look at her things.

22. March 29, 1978
   a. Handwritten letter on blue stationary from Porter (dictated) to Mr. and Mrs. Moody. Porter mentions sending 14 copies of *Never Ending Wrong* and a few photographs in a First Class, insured package.

23. May 10, [1978]
   a. Handwritten letter with signature from Bill [Wilkins] to Vearl and Linda. Bill opens, “this is a short note to tell you goodbye,” because Porter’s stroke has rendered her paranoid and suspicious of everyone, especially him since he is closest. He says while he will not be with her anymore, he has no regrets for he “accomplished what [he] meant to do.” He promises to get the last shipment of books sent and wishes them well.

25. May 11, 1977 Envelope
27. February 1, 1975 Envelope
28. July 8, 1975 Envelope
29. August 24, 1975 Envelope
30. Envelope
31. August 8, 1975 Envelope
32. February 23, 1977 Envelope
33. May 9-11, 1991
   a. Invitation pamphlet to “A Centennial Celebration of the One-Hundredth Birthday of Katherine Anne Porter” celebrated at University of Maryland at College Park, entitled “Katherine Anne Porter at One Hundred: New Perspectives.”