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## Howard, Maureen

DAVID W. MADDEN

Maureen Howard is an elegant stylist and incisive social critic. Each of her novels intricately explores post-World War II American life and represents a new fictional departure in terms of technique. Her works abound in various, competing voices with multiple first-person narrators, including the author herself, presenting and representing the narrative.

Maureen Kearns Howard was born June 28, 1930 in Bridgeport, Connecticut to William L. and Loretta (Burns) Kearns, and she graduated from Smith College in 1952. She has been married three times and has a daughter, Loretta Howard. In addition to being a novelist and critic, she is a professor of writing at Columbia University in New York.

Howard's major fictional concern is with the family, not simply the domestic particularity or the chains of heredity but also the thick web of devotion, obligation, and passion. The relationships between parents and children are fraught with deep love and equally deep dissatisfaction and friction. *Not a Word About Nightingales* (1961) deals with a family in which the husband rejects his loved ones for a life in Italy; the daughter, sent to retrieve him, becomes distracted with a new life; while the wife, suddenly freed of familial obligations, begins to enjoy her independence.

*Bridgeport Bus* (1966) focuses on the place of the Irish in America, a theme that reoccurs in most of Howard's other novels. Her Irish characters are lace-curtain figures, yearning for respectability but forever unsure of their place and alternately proud of and embarrassed by their heritage. Thirty-five-year-old Mary Agnes Keely escapes the stifling confines of her mother and Bridgeport, Connecticut for a life in New York with a troubled room-mate, eccentric friends, and an unwanted pregnancy. The quest for freedom is frustrated by a return home and the likelihood that Agnes will become her mother. *Before a Time* (1975) explores the unlikely friendship of a relatively content professional woman who takes a troubled teen into her home and finds herself sharing confidences about her life with the young man. In spite of their attempts to either reject or ignore their pasts, personal histories are seen through the warp and woof of identity despite generational differences.

*Grace Abounding* (1982) centers on a young widow and her teenage daughter, each of whom longs for escape and pageantry in her life. Eventually both mother and daughter reinvent their lives, marry, and have successful careers, but beneath the seemingly happy ending are many sorrows and unexpected tragedies. The novel marks Howard's growing experiments with temporal shifts and narrative dislocations, which continue in *Expensive Habits* (1986) with a series of flashbacks that underscore the episodic character of an ailing woman's life. Her loves are catalogued against the major social and political events of the postwar era as the protagonist seeks to control the meaning of her existence.

*Natural History* (1992) is Howard's most audacious, experimental fiction. Focusing

another family, the Brays, the novel actually presents Howard's home of Bridgeport as the true protagonist. The city's most illustrious citizen, P. T. Barnum, acts as a powerful metaphor for a culture constructed on lawdry appearances. With its double-column narrative and collage techniques, the novel is as self-consciously metafictional as any of its era. Beneath the puzzlingly fragmented structure is another family drama, drawn along the lines of Howard's own, which she detailed unsparingly in her autobiography, *Facts of Life* (1978). In *Natural History*, memory and history become so entangled that truth remains elusive, as a daughter struggles to discover her father's complicity in a crime.

With *A Lover's Almanac* (1998), Howard inaugurated a planned tetralogy based on the seasons of the year. This work opens in winter, with the dawn of the new millennium, and follows two sets of lovers. The younger ones fret and fight, and separate and unite, while the elders, one of whom is the grandfather of the younger male lover, reunite in old age after years apart. Constructed as sections of an almanac, the novel follows the stars in charting lives. *Big as Life: Three Tales for Spring* (2001) presents three novellas, in one of which the younger lovers reappear, a child in tow, still struggling with their relationship. In another James Audubon, another of Howard's studies in celebrity, is revealed to be less than honorable. *The Silver Screen* (2004) concentrates on a former silent screen starlet who rejected celebrity for domesticity, yet for all her seeming fulfillment creative urges are left unsatisfied. Again a son and daughter must struggle with personal and familial legacies.

In addition to various fellowships, among them a Guggenheim, Howard received a National Book Critics Circle Award for non-fiction in 1980 and American Book Award nomination for autobiography/biography in 1981 for *Facts of Life*, and PEN/Paulkner Award nominations for *Grace Abounding*, *Expensive Habits*, and *Natural History*. She has also been honored with a National Endowment for the Arts grant (1988) and a Literary Lion Award, New York Public Library (1993), and is a recipient of an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

**SEE ALSO:** Gender and the Novel (AF); Historiographic Metafiction (AF); Postmodernist Fiction (AF)

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## Hughes, Langston

MATTHEW HOFER

A populist and extraordinarily popular African American author, Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902 and died in New York City in 1967. His very first published poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," printed in the leading black journal *The Crisis* in 1921, helped to position him as a pivotal figure of the New Negro Renaissance of the later 1920s. Fueled by the prevalence of racial and class inequities in the US, Hughes's revolutionary tendencies intensified during the Depression, resulting in his persecution as a fellow traveler of the Communist Party by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953. However, despite any apparent inconsistencies in his beliefs or values, Hughes was a lifelong supporter of the ideals of American