

Ardyth Kennelly (1912–2005)

By Nancy Trotic

Novelist and artist Ardyth Kennelly was “one of the last of a celebrated group of Pacific Northwest writers with national reputations in the 1940s and 1950s,” literary historian Brian Booth noted at her death in 2005. The author of two successful Literary Guild books, she became an artist late in life, creating large collages and mixed-media pieces and exhibiting in venues such as the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland. “The work is so extraordinary that I can’t imagine cutting anything out,” Leach wrote the artist when choosing pieces for Kennelly’s first exhibit; “the amazing thing is that the work is really about us—all of us human beings here on this planet.”

Ardyth Matilda Kennelly was born on April 15, 1912, in Glenada, Oregon, a small town near Florence on the lower Siuslaw River. That year, her parents—James D. Kennelly, an Irish Catholic, and Lulu Olsen, a Norwegian-Swedish member of the LDS Church (known as Mormons)—moved to North Albany in the mid-Willamette Valley, where Lulu’s brother, George R. Olsen, lived. When Ardyth was three years old, the family moved to Salt Lake City, her parents’ hometown and a place she developed a deep attachment to during her early years. Her father died in 1921, and the next year Ardyth, her mother, and a younger sister moved back to North Albany, where they lived with Olsen. In 1923, her mother married Hiram Parker, a neighbor.

When she was fifteen years old, Ardyth Kennelly published her first poems, under the initials A.M.K., in the *Albany Democrat-Herald*. She graduated from Albany High School in 1929 and attended Oregon State Agricultural College (now Oregon State University) from 1929 to 1932. Her stories and poems were published in *The Manuscript*, OSAC’s student literary magazine, and in the 1930s her work appeared in *The Improvement Era* (an LDS Church magazine) and in pulp magazines such as *All-Story Love Stories*.

In 1935, Kennelly moved to Portland, where she attended Reed College for a few weeks before marrying Howard Scott Gibbs on December 11. The couple decided to marry to allow them to share expenses and to protect both Gibbs, who was gay, and Kennelly, who was having an affair with Egon Victor Ullman, her doctor in Corvallis who was married. During the late 1930s, she worked for a time on the WPA Federal Writers’ Project, submitting a sketch of the ghost town of Ellendale in Polk County under the name Ardyth Gibbs.

After divorcing their respective spouses, Kennelly and Ullman married on October 29, 1940. During World War II, Ullman served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps in Salt Lake City and on the East Coast. The couple returned to Portland after the war, and Kennelly began writing her first novel. She had taken her husband’s surname when they married, but she wrote under the name Ardyth Kennelly.

Kennelly published her first and best-known work, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, in 1949. The novel was based on the life of her maternal grandmother, the second wife in a Mormon polygamous marriage. The Literary Guild book club chose the novel as its December 1949 selection, and playwright Mary Drayton adapted it for *Salt of the Earth*, a play that had several East Coast performances in 1952–1953. Scholars of Mormon literature, including Edward Geary, placed Kennelly among the “lost generation” of LDS writers who published novels during the mid-twentieth century. In their work, those writers stepped outside the didactic and moralistic tradition of late-nineteenth-century Mormon “home literature” to provide an ambivalent portrayal of the religious tradition and culture in which they were rooted.

During the 1950s, Kennelly also wrote three additional novels set in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Utah: *Good Morning, Young Lady* (1953; a Literary Guild selection), about a young heroine who meets the outlaw Butch Cassidy; *Up Home* (1955), a sequel to *The Peaceable Kingdom*; and *Marry Me, Carry Me* (1956), probably based on the early years of her parents’ marriage. She also published *The Spur* (1951), a fictionalized account of the last days of John Wilkes Booth, which was adapted for NBC’s Philco Television Playhouse that year. A section of the novel was included in the 1953 anthology *Abe Lincoln*, compiled by Hilah Paulmier. By 1955, Kennelly had sold nearly 800,000 copies of the Literary Guild editions of her books.

After her husband died in 1962, Kennelly moved to New York City to pursue her writing career, but she was unable to find a publisher for her new manuscripts. She returned to Oregon in 1965. As early as 1969, she began making large collages and mixed-media pieces, first in her Polk County farmhouse near Buena Vista and beginning in 1973 in her downtown Portland apartment, where she would live for three decades. Her work was on exhibit at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in 1996 and the Mark Woolley Gallery in 2000. She became known in Portland for giving elaborate themed parties for an eclectic selection of guests, where the entertainment might include fortune-telling, poetry writing, or a scavenger hunt.

Late in life, Kennelly developed macular degeneration, but she determinedly kept writing and creating art until her death on January 19, 2005. She died in Vancouver, Washington, where she had moved in the early 2000s to be near her sister. Kennelly was buried at Willamette Memorial Park in Albany. *Variation West*, a novel that Kennelly called her magnum opus, was published in 2014, and two memoirs were published in the 2020s—*Bodies Adjacent: Ardyth's Memoir & Egon's Journal* (2023) and *New York on \$5 a Day* (2024).

Sources

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