

Kate Wilhelm (1928-2018)

By Maureen Flanagan Battistella

Kate Wilhelm was a prolific and award-winning author best known for her science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction and her mystery and suspense writing. She is considered a master of psychological fiction. Wilhelm was the first recipient of the Solstice Award, presented to her in 2009 by the Science Fiction Writers of America, and she was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2003.

Katie Gertrude Meredith was born in Toledo, Ohio, on June 8, 1928, and grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. Her first marriage, in 1947 to Joseph Wilhelm, produced two children and ended in divorce in 1962. She worked at a variety of clerical jobs until 1956, when she published her first short story, "The Pint-Sized Genie," in the October 1956 issue of *Fantastic*. Wilhelm told Ashland Mystery RVTV noir host Paul Collins in a 1977 interview that she had little exposure to popular fiction when she was growing up. Pulp magazines were sold in a downtown store where women were not allowed because the store doubled as a bookie joint. The Louisville Public Library, though, was transformative, giving Wilhelm access to the world of science writing and Groff Conklin's science fiction anthologies, which were known for including thoughtful authors and literary writing.

Instead of the monsters and heroes of the early formulaic pulps, Wilhelm's work is characterized by well-drawn characters, coherent plots, and psychological, moral, and philosophical tension. She was an early female science fiction writer at a time when the genre was dominated by white male writers, and her work helped reshape the genre, bringing humanity, family relationships, and psychological motivation into focus. Her early works were published in science fiction magazines and earned readers' respect, if not awards, allowing her to hone her craft and gain an understanding of the publishing world.

Wilhelm married science fiction writer Damon Knight in 1963; the couple had one child. Together with Knight, who died in 2002, she helped to found the Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conference in Pennsylvania and the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Workshop. The couple mentored scores of writers over the years and were known for encouraging peer review and critical appraisal. Wilhelm's book, *Storyteller: Writing Lessons and More from 27 Years of the Clarion Writers' Workshop* (2005), describes those experiences.

Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, Wilhelm's breakthrough science fiction work, was published in 1976 by Harper & Row, gaining her significant critical acclaim, public attention, and press coverage. A frightening tale of post-apocalyptic survival, the novel contrasts the strength and importance of the individual and the danger of groupthink. *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* earned the Hugo Award for Best Novel, the Locus Award for Best Novel, and the Jupiter Award; it also placed third for the John W. Campbell Memorial Award and received a Nebula Award nomination.

Wilhelm has written several mystery and suspense novels and series, including the Charlie Meiklejohn and Constance Leidl series and the Barbara Holloway series set in Eugene. Both series are characterized by psychological insight and tension. The fourteenth book in the Barbara Holloway series, *Mirror Mirror* (2017), was published by InfinityBox Press in Portland, an imprint Wilhelm established with her sons to keep her works and Damon Knight's in print.

In 1985, Wilhelm, together with authors Ursula LeGuin and Dean Ing, wrote and performed a radio play, *The Hindenburg Effect*, on Jefferson Public Radio KSOR in Ashland. A collaboration of three remarkable Oregon writers, the recording has been lost to history. In 2016, the Science Fiction Writers of America changed the name of the Solstice Award to the Kate Wilhelm Solstice Award in recognition of her lifelong contribution to and impact on the science fiction and fantasy landscape. Wilhelm died on March 8, 2018 in Eugene.

Sources

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