

## **OBITUARY: Tillie Olsen; her fiction explored fraying seams of blue-collar life**

Tillie Olsen published "Tell Me a Riddle" when she was 49. (associated press file/2001)

By Joe Holley, Washington Post | January 5, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Tillie Olsen, a chronicler of the working class whose few published works included some of the most critically acclaimed stories in modern American literature, died Monday of complications of Alzheimer's disease at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland, Calif. She was 94 and lived in Berkeley, Calif.

Ms. Olsen was nearly 50 years old when her first book, the short story collection "Tell Me a Riddle," was published in 1961. She had been writing for years, but sporadic Depression-era jobs, her political activism, and demands of motherhood took precedence. She wrote at night after her children were asleep or while riding a bus to work, as a waitress, a capper of mayonnaise jars, a Kelly Girl temp, among many other jobs.

In 1934, when an excerpt of her novel-in-progress about the Depression was published in Partisan Review, she listed in an author's note additional jobs: tie presser, hack writer, model, housemaid, ice cream packer, book clerk. The novel, "Yonnonidio: From the Thirties," was published nearly four decades after the Partisan Review excerpt, and only after bits and pieces of it were discovered among old papers.

"Tell Me a Riddle" and "Yonnonidio" (1973) were her only published works of fiction. Both met with critical acclaim, as did "Silences" (1978), a memoir of her years as a struggling writer and an exploration of the forces that silence "those whose working hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women."

"Few writers have gained such wide respect on such a small body of published work," the novelist Margaret Atwood wrote in the New York Times Book Review, adding that for female writers reverence for Ms. Olsen was an apter word. "This is presumably because women writers, even more than their male counterparts, recognize what a heroic feat it is to have held down a job, raised four children, and still somehow managed to become and to remain a writer."

Tillie Lerner was born Jan. 14, 1912, on a tenant farm near Wahoo, Neb., the second of six children of Russian-Jewish immigrants who had fled their homeland after being involved in a failed 1905 revolution. Ms. Olsen was strongly influenced by her parents' radical leanings and by Midwestern farm life. "I learned a lot being around cows," she recalled in 2002. "It seemed to me they were so damned patient."

She dropped out of high school in Omaha and began her long succession of dead-end jobs. "Public libraries were my sustenance and my college," she wrote.

An activist and a member of the Young Communist League, she went to jail for organizing packinghouse workers in the Midwest. She began "Yonnonidio" while recovering from pleurisy and tuberculosis contracted because of poor ventilation in the tie factory where she worked.

In San Francisco, in the 1934 West Coast longshoremen's strike, she was jailed along with Jack Olsen, a union organizer who became her lifelong partner. They were married from 1944 until his death in 1989.

She leaves three daughters from her marriage, Julie Olsen Edwards of Santa Cruz, Calif., Kathie of Jacksonville, Ore., and Laurie of Berkeley; a daughter from a previous relationship, Karla Lutz of Larkspur, Calif.; a sister; eight grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Although she wasn't being published, she continued to write in her notebooks or on slips of paper, "capturing voices, words, thoughts." In addition to her "everyday jobs," she lobbied for neighborhood parks and helped found San Francisco's first parent cooperative nursery school.

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[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/obituaries/articles/2007/01/05/tillie\\_olsen\\_her\\_fiction\\_explored\\_fraying\\_seams\\_of\\_blue\\_collar\\_life/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/obituaries/articles/2007/01/05/tillie_olsen_her_fiction_explored_fraying_seams_of_blue_collar_life/)

During the McCarthy era, her opposition to civil defense "duck-and-cover" drills in the public schools aroused the ire of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Accused of being an "agent of Stalin working to infiltrate the city's schools through the PTA," she was never charged, although the committee subpoenaed her husband. He lost his job.

Her breakthrough as a writer came in 1955, when she received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Creative Writing at Stanford University. Since the call from Stegner himself came on April Fool's Day, she was suspicious of her fortune.

Her work at Stanford led to her first published short story, "As I Stand Here Ironing," a fictional rumination about mothers and daughters and the vicissitudes of parenthood and poverty. The story became one of the four collected in "Tell Me a Riddle." The title story of the collection received the prestigious O. Henry Award as the best American short story of 1961.

Few writers who wrote so little were as admired as she was. As Harvard professor and author Robert Coles once noted, "Everything she wrote became almost immediately a classic."

"There is no more powerfully moving a piece of fiction in recent years," novelist Joyce Carol Oates wrote of "Riddle" some years later, calling it "supremely beautiful in its nuances, its voices and small perfect details."

It might have been her last major published work. But in 1972, her husband made a discovery while sifting through old papers. Recovered were four chapters and dozens of typed and scrawled fragments of "Yonnonadio," the novel she began in 1932 about a family imprisoned by Depression-era poverty. In the solitude of the MacDowell Colony for writers in New Hampshire, Ms. Olsen pieced together the manuscript based on her memories of who she was and what her goals were four decades earlier. She wrote no new sections and did not revise the existing ones.

Annie Gottlieb, writing in The New York Times Book Review, said the result was "no less than a saved life: a never-to-be-finished work that nonetheless lives with great depth and vibrancy."

Between 1969 and 1974, Ms. Olsen taught at Stanford, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Massachusetts, Kenyon College, and Amherst College. San Francisco, however, remained her home.

A daughter recalled that she was a familiar presence at community meetings, on picket lines, and at demonstrations. Until just a few years ago, she took walks through the city's Tenderloin District and handed out folded dollar bills to homeless people. Her response to their "Bless you!" was invariably, "Don't bless me; curse the system!" -- punctuated by a kiss.