



## S.C. Hall of Fame Transcript

### *Elizabeth Boatwright Coker*

I've always loved stories, and I've always loved telling stories, and hearing stories, and once I learned to write, and hold a pencil in my hand, that was just wonderful, it was like a magic wand. I've always written! I loved it!

Elizabeth Boatwright Coker of Hartsville, South Carolina, was an author, poet, and lecturer, born April 21st, 1909.

She earned a B.A. degree from Converse College in 1929.

I was editor of *The Concept*, and at that time *The Concept* won all the prizes of the colleges, and I won the Carroll Prize, and the Skylark Prize of the Charleston Poetry Society, and well, I just wrote and won prizes.

When I graduated from Converse, all of us in those days went to New York to work. Everybody went. And you either worked at Childs, or at Saks Fifth Avenue, but I wanted to work at the *New York Times*, so I went and took my brochure and told how I must have a job at the *Times*. And they read my qualifications, and then they listened to me, and then they laughed and said Why don't you go and get a model's job. But we'll keep your brochure. Well, they did, and this was in 1929. And I worked as a model all summer long, and then came autumn, and then came the stock market crash. And in the middle of October, I got two letters one day. And one was from the *New York Times*, saying they had reconsidered, and they had read my brochure, and they thought they had just the job for me, and to come in for an interview. I also got a letter from my father, who was President of the Carolina National Bank in Darlington, saying his bank had failed and would I come home. So you can guess what I did. I came home, and I married James Coker in 1930. His father died in 1931, and he was made President of Sonoco when he was 27 and I was 22. So I had to stop writing for a while.

Elizabeth and James Lide Coker the Third had two children, Penelope and James the Fourth.

I worked in the hospitals all during World War Two, and I found I just was crazy about everybody that nursed, and I loved it, and I found out I had the gift of touch. And they put me



to quiet people who had been operated on and had ether. Because in those days they didn't have recovery rooms you know and all these fancy drugs. So I found that I could quiet people.

Her interest in writing never waned. In 1950, her first novel was published.

That I wrote as a short story first. And then I went to Middlebury, to the writers' conference that they had there, at Bread Loaf. And Robert Frost read it, and he said This is too good for a short story. I want you to make it into a novel.

Daughter of Strangers was the ante-bellum story of Charlotte Lejeune, a woman of mixed blood, caught between the worlds of masters and slaves.

"Today I keep wondering, where am I going? Will the rest of my life be spent hidden in this cultivated garden? I feel like twirling in a dance. I will pick both my arms full of sweet flowers and mass them everywhere, so that the whole drawing room will be fragrant and full of beauty."

Coker College had a literary festival in those days—it was very interesting. And James Michener was to be the speaker that year—this was October of 1950. South Pacific had just come out. So I had never made a speech in my life. And James Michener introduced me. My first speech! And I looked back at a picture of that time, and it just seemed so wonderful.

Thus began Coker's prolific career as a writer of historical "romances."

- India Allan, 1953
- The Big Drum, 1957
- La Belle, 1959
- Lady Rich, 1963
- The Bees, 1968
- This is Billie Boy, 1973
- Blood Red Roses, 1977
- The Grasshopper King, 1981



Oh I've always loved history, and especially the South's history, better than anything. And in *Daughter of Strangers* I used a lot of Gullah. Now you know—they went through a period where Gullah was off the scene. But Gullah is the deepest link between the black African American heritage and native Africa and America. And now there's a great fashion to bring Gullah back...

“ -'Is dis de new gal?' -'Dis she. Pompey hopes yunnuh gits along. She's good for de eyes but powerful quiet on de years. Charlotte, dis is Chloe. Chloe will tell yunnuh where yunnuh is to sleep.' -' Sho, gal, step right ober de door. Yunnuh gots sky eyes, gal; kin yunnuh read de future?

Coker's fourth novel was based on the apocryphal stories of Marie Boozer, captured by the Yankees near the end of the Civil War.

Well, she was the most beautiful girl that ever grew up in Columbia. She rode away, and nobody really knew what happened to her.

Europe, 1872. -As February turned into March and tulips blossomed in the Tuileries gardens, Marie knew she was the happiest woman in the world. She was the center of admiration— dancing with Phoenix and gathering more spectators to watch them waltz than the velvet-eyed English beauty, Mabel Gray, and her Russian duke.

The heroine of *Blood Red Roses*, published in 1977, is Angelica, who lived on Hilton Head Island during the war.

She was the only one that was left behind when the Yankees occupied the island. And so I tell about her living there under the Yankee occupation, you see.

Beside the gold sofa, on which I had sat so often in Beau's arms, I knelt. And it was Beau, not God, I sought. God seemed too far away. Beau had been here in this very room. It was I, Beau's wife, who was left behind in the midst of the enemy. It was Beau I needed, not God.

Elizabeth Boatwright Coker continued to receive awards and honors until her death, September 1st, 1993. She was active in literary organizations, served on many boards, and taught the next generation of writers.

- Academy of American Poets



- American Association of University Women
- Appalachian state university guest lecturer
- Authors Guild
- Caroliniana Society Board of Directors
- Coker college honorary degree
- Coker College, Elizabeth Boatwright Coker Performing Arts Center
- Converse College honorary doctorate
- Converse College lifetime trustee
- P.E.N. Awards
- Poetry Society of South Carolina
- South Carolina Academy of Authors
- South Carolina Museum Board of Directors
- South Caroliniana Society
- Who's Who in America
- Who's Who in the World

Her advice to a young author was to “believe in your ultimate triumph, develop and cultivate, make a commitment,...”

...use your mind but never, never sacrifice your heart.”