



S.C. Hall of Fame Transcript

Julia Mood Peterkin

My first encounter with Julia Peterkin...

The Peterkin story is fascinating...

How did she become a writer?

Julia Mood was born in Laurens County on Halloween 1880... She would be blessed, or cursed, with the gift of second sight.

Her mother died when she was two years old.

Julia, as a teenager, attended Converse College and received a Masters degree at an early age.

Julia moved to Fort Motte in Calhoun County to become a teacher. In 1903, she married William George "Willy" Peterkin, who was a rich cotton planter.

Lang Syne Plantation employed 400 mostly African-American workers.

Voice of Julia:

I became interested in the people who worked the stubborn fields and forced them to make the good crops that provided my food and clothes and pleasures.

Julia began writing stories about life on the plantation, featuring realistic African-American characters...

which she sent to H.L. Mencken and Carl Sandburg.

The result in 1924 was her first book, *Green Thursday*.

The first story was "Ashes," about an attempt to remove an elderly woman from her home.

Man:



I'm gonna build a house here. And you gotta move.

Maum Hannah:

Yes sir.

Reviews were favorable.

"She is a Southern white woman, but she has the eye and the ear to see beauty and to know truth." -W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis*

The fledgling author made a visit to New York City.

Her next book, *Black April*, was the story of a plantation foreman, a powerful man taken down by the system .

Everybody respects him, everybody fears him, everybody loves him, i.e. the women.

But *Black April's* life ends sadly, and his last words are poignant.

Scarlet Sister Mary was her third published work, set on a rice plantation. It sold more than a million copies.

In the spring of 1929, *Scarlet Sister Mary* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction!

But at this high point, there was a growing disconnect between Julia's celebrity as an author and her life on the plantation.

On one hand, African Americans criticized her for writing about "people who can't escape her view," for "living a life she had no right to live."

A.J.:

She's got the view, she's got the paper and the pen. And she's got the words, which is the real wealth.

Bright Skin, in 1932, was Peterkin's last work of fiction.

The desire of Cricket, the lead character, was to get away from the plantation.



Unfortunately, there was no such escape for Julia Peterkin.

In her later years, Julia Peterkin collaborated with photographer Doris Ulmann in Roll, Jordan, Roll.

Theodore:

It was a paean to the Old South, to a way that is no more.

The Depression years found Peterkin collecting stories and folklore for the WPA...

and courted by Eleanor Roosevelt to help popularize the New Deal in the South.

At Bennington College in Vermont, Peterkin met actress Katharine Hepburn who visited her in South Carolina.

But these were long, silent years.

Julia Peterkin died in 1961...