

Countee Cullen

Poet, Novelist, Playwright



Countee Cullen was one of the best known poets to emerge during the Harlem Renaissance.

He was born Countee Leroy Porter on March 30, 1903 in Louisville, Kentucky. His mother died when he was a young boy and he was raised by his maternal grandmother, until her death in 1918. When his grandmother died he was taken in by Reverend Frederick Cullen, pastor of a Harlem church, and his wife.

Cullen attended New York University and while attending, wrote most of the material for his first two volumes of poetry. He graduated in 1925 and that same year *Color*, his book of poetry that addressed issues of racism, was published.

After New York University Cullen attended Harvard University and graduated in 1927 with a master's degree in English and French.

He returned to New York and became assistant editor at *Opportunity*, the publication of the National Urban League.

Cullen was educated in classical literary forms. He was influenced by the English poet John Keats and was often criticized because that influence was reflected in his work. He believed that poetry transcended race and wrote using "classical verse" rather than the "rhythms and idioms" of Black American heritage. He was well received and applauded by black and white audiences, and by the end of the 1920s was the most popular black poet in the United States.