

Hellman, Lillian (1906-1984)

Encyclopedia Article

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One of the most daring and inventive playwrights of her generation, Lillian Hellman's own life was the stuff of drama. As Carl Rollyson has written, "The key to Lillian Hellman's character, to what made her a legend in her own time, was her sense of herself as a grande dame." Indeed, Hellman is not only remembered for her work—award-winning plays such as *The Children's Hour*, *The Little Foxes*, and *Watch on the Rhine*—but for her audacious persona. A tough-talking, cigarette-smoking Jewish woman from New Orleans, Lillian Hellman loved attention. She got it through her plays, through her difficult relationship with the brilliant writer Dashiell Hammett, and through her left-wing politics. When called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Hellman refused to be a friendly witness, uttering her most famous line: "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions." In her advancing years, Hellman wrote three extraordinary memoirs, making her very public life even more so. When a story from one of them was made into a major motion picture, *Julia* (1976), starring Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave, Hellman became a heroine to a new generation of women. Lillian Hellman liked money; she also liked fame. She got both, and became, in the process, a one-of-a kind American icon.

Further Reading:

Hellman, Lillian. *An Unfinished Woman*. Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1969.

———. *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits*. Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1973.

———. *Scoundrel Time*. Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1976.

Rollyson, Carl. *Lillian Hellman: Her Legend and Her Legacy*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Wright, William C. *Lillian Hellman: The Image, The Woman*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1986.