

Mary Renault (Eileen Mary Challans) (English Language and Literature, 1925)

1905-1983



Eileen Mary Challans, who wrote under the pseudonym Mary Renault, was a writer best known for her historical novels set in ancient Greece which bring to life the worlds of Theseus, Socrates, Plato and Alexander the Great. She was elected an Honorary Fellow of St Hugh's College in 1982. In 2016, the College held a lecture and panel event to explore her life and work. To watch the recording of that event, please [click here](#).

She was born in 1905 and came up to St Hugh's to read English in 1925. She is particularly remembered by her contemporaries at St Hugh's for her talent and enthusiasm for acting. It was during her time at St Hugh's that she developed a love of ancient Greece, Crete and Macedon. She also made her first tentative steps as a novelist, starting on what she later described as a 'very terrible novel about the middle ages'.

She was always keen to pursue a career as a writer, but she was also determined to pave her own way, to avoid dependence on her family, and to earn her own living. In 1933, five years after her graduation, she returned to Oxford to train as a nurse at the Radcliffe Infirmary, and she went on to become a state registered nurse four years later. It was during her training that she met her lifelong partner, Julie Mullard, a fellow student.

Although nursing became the theme for her early books, Mary did not turn her hand to novel writing until after she had completed her training. Her first novel, *Purposes of Love*, was released in 1939, the year in which she was called up by the Emergency Medical Service and assigned to Winford Hospital in Bristol to work with evacuees from Dunkirk. In 1940 she moved to the Radcliffe Infirmary to become a nurse in the brain surgery ward, working there until 1945.

Mary went on to write five more novels with contemporary settings before turning to writing historical novels set in ancient Greece. Her fourth novel, *Return to Night*, won her the award of \$150,000 which transformed her prospects and opened up life-changing opportunities. Two years after MGM film studios purchased the rights to the novel, she left England permanently to live in South Africa with Julie, and to dedicate herself to her writing. They settled first in Durban and moved a decade later to Cape Town.

Mary and Julie both became South African citizens and were involved in the early anti-apartheid movement. Mary also became an active member of the PEN association of writers in Cape Town, and president of the local branch of this international organisation in 1961. In this capacity, she became embroiled in controversy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when she was accused by Nadine Gordimer and Mothobi Mutloatse, among others, of not doing enough to support black writers and live up to PEN's anti-racist ideals. For more on this, see Peter McDonald's *The Literature Police* (2009, also <https://theliteraturepolice.com/>).

Mary published her final novel, *Funeral Games*, in 1981. She died of cancer in Cape Town in 1983.

Funded by the royalties from Mary Renault's novels, St Hugh's offers the Mary Renault prize, a Classical Reception essay prize for sixth form pupils. For further information on the prize, please [click here](#).

Sources

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Zilboorg, Caroline 'Challans, (Eileen) Mary [pseud. Mary Renault]', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004)

The Daily Telegraph obituary for Mary Renault reprinted in the *St Hugh's College Chronicle 1983-84*, no. 56, pp.53-55

Papers relating to Mary Renault in the College Archive