



# ATLANTA: THEN & NOW

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## Margaret Mitchell & Southern Literature

Reception at the Margaret Mitchell House and Museum—Thurs., Sept. 6

This article about Margaret Mitchell, the museum, and Southern literature offers historical background prior to attending the Thursday evening reception at the Margaret Mitchell House and Museum.

If you research the term “Southern literature” on [www.Wikipedia.org](http://www.Wikipedia.org), you will find several themes listed as being characteristic of works both about the South and by Southern authors. These themes—listed below—are also intrinsic to the Southern culture in general, and they shape the lives of those living within that culture:

- the significance of family above all else;
- land and the opportunities that it provides;
- use of the Southern dialect;
- common Southern history, especially the Civil War and Reconstruction;
- issues of racial tension, including slavery; and
- a sense of community and social class as well as a person's place within that community.

Nearly all these themes are present in Margaret Mitchell's classic Civil War novel. Part historical fiction, part romance, *Gone With the Wind* tells a story that carries a hefty warning to future generations, ultimately painting a portrait of the downfall of a civilization and the determination of those who must try to rebuild it. Wrapped up in this downfall are the heartbreaking losses of loved ones, changing race relations, and the struggle to hold on to a way of life that is no longer possible. Mitchell described her novel in the simplest terms:

If the novel has a theme it is that of survival. What makes some people able to come through catastrophes and others, apparently just as able, strong and brave, go under? It happens in every upheaval. Some people survive; others don't. What qualities are in

those who fight their way through triumphantly that are lacking in those who go under? ... I only know that the survivors used to call that quality “gumption.” So I wrote about the people who had gumption and the people who didn't.

Mitchell wrote *Gone With the Wind* during what developed into a renaissance of Southern literature in the 1920s and 1930s. During this time, Tennessee Williams began writing, Eudora Welty began exhibiting photographs and writing short stories, and William Faulkner was well on his way to becoming one of the most famous authors of the 20th century. These authors were somewhat distanced from the Civil War, having not lived through it, and, even though they were shaped by stories told by elders, they were capable of analyzing their culture and being more objective in their views of the South. Within the pages of *Gone With the Wind*, Mitchell describes a lost culture without adding her own commentary or perspective, but by incorporating human elements from her own life she makes the characters relatable, the history easily comprehended, and the lifestyle of the time vivid. Mitchell pulled bits and pieces of the story from all around her, took pieces of personalities she encountered during her lifetime, and combined all these elements—at the same time maintaining that none of the characters in her book were real people.

Margaret Mitchell experienced the hustle and bustle of Atlanta while growing up in the city that was built from railroad junctions and sprung up with the growth of commerce. She heard stories about the Civil War told by her elder family members in the rural town of Jonesboro. This familiarity with both rural Clayton County and Atlanta, which

was never as calm as the antebellum cities of Savannah and Charleston, allowed her to write in detail about Tara and its neighbors as well as the railroads and their importance to Atlanta and its surrounding counties. The stories she heard, along with research that she would later do for profiles of prominent Civil War generals from Georgia during her time at the *Atlanta Journal*, would allow her to paint a portrait of the fall of Atlanta in 1864 and the vital ties that were cut when Sherman blocked all rail lines during the siege.

Mitchell began writing *Gone With the Wind* while convalescing from a broken ankle, one of many accidents that occurred throughout her life. Her husband, newspaperman John Marsh, was said to have brought armloads of library books home for her to read while she was stuck in bed. Marsh eventually encouraged his wife to write her own book and constantly proofread and helped edit her ongoing project. Over the course of 10 years, Mitchell allowed only her husband to read her manuscripts, and she even hid the fact that she was writing a book from others. This was no easy task, however, because their apartment at 979 Crescent Avenue (nicknamed “the Dump” by Mitchell) was a literary salon of sorts for their friends, an eclectic group of aspiring authors and literature lovers in Atlanta’s free-spirited 1930s. She stashed envelopes and pages of manuscripts under the bed and in the linen closet, and she even used pages of the manuscript to steady a wobbly table leg. After the teasing of her friends and inquiries from publisher Harold Latham of New York City, she finally let an outsider read her work. On June 10, 1936, *Gone With the Wind* was published; it has gone on to be one of the best-selling novels of all time, having sold more than 28 million copies worldwide.

After the book was published, Mitchell’s life became a whirlwind of publicity and acclaim. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism in May 1937. On Dec. 15, 1939, the movie adaptation of *Gone With the Wind* premiered at the Loew’s Grand Theater in Atlanta, with Mitchell in attendance alongside Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, the stars of the movie. The film went on to receive eight Oscars and was nominated for five others; it ranks number six on the American Film Institute’s list of the “100 Greatest American Films of All Time.” In 1949, Mitchell was hit by a car just a few blocks away from her apartment. She died five days later.

Because Margaret Mitchell was such a well-known and highly regarded novelist as well as one of Atlanta’s true celebrities, in 1989 her apartment—indeed, the entire building—was declared a city landmark. It was the first building in Atlanta to achieve this status, and, despite several fires due to arson in the mid-1990s, the house opened to the public as a historic site in 1997. Continuing the spirit of the literary salon that Mitchell’s apartment had become among her circle of friends, the house is now the home of the Center for Southern Literature. According to its Web site, the center “preserves the legacy of Margaret Mitchell through weekly literary events, creative writing classes for adults and youth, and the facilitation of Poetry Out Loud in Georgia.”

The events at the center follow many of the same

themes that are found in Southern literature as well as in *Gone With the Wind*. Visitors can feel a sense of community at discussions with Southern authors, at which there is a strong emphasis on question-and-answer sessions to allow the audience to interact with the authors and learn the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the authors’ motivations and inspirations. The common Southern history is celebrated and discussed in presentations of works about the South and Southern themes.

The significance of the family and the use of the Southern dialect are themes often discussed and developed through writing classes for adults that are held year-round and include course offerings by published authors, interactive short lectures, and, almost always, critiques of the participant’s work. Writing workshops and camps for youth employ techniques such as stream of consciousness writing, journaling, and free verse poetry while developing the writer’s ability to compose prose, increasing his or her vocabulary, bringing out detail, and adding twists and turns. The upcoming season includes workshops on playwriting and creative writing.

The Poetry Out Loud program, which is held in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation, is similar to a spelling bee. High school students learn about poetry by memorizing and reciting poems, and competitions are held based on a pyramid structure with statewide competitions hosted at the Center for Southern Literature.

Of course, there are also highlights of the now famous house that visitors can enjoy—including tours of Mitchell’s apartment, decorated with period furniture to evoke the image of her typing on her Remington typewriter; letters on display from both Mitchell and her husband to relatives in different parts of the United States, which tell about the whirlwind events between the initial publication of the book and the release of the movie; a *Gone With the Wind* movie museum, which includes, among other items, the front door of Tara from the movie set and the portrait of Scarlett O’Hara that hangs in the Butler house.

Margaret Mitchell’s classic novel has become a worldwide classic because of the author’s ability to convey the thoughts and feelings of the time, bringing the characters’ thoughts and feelings to life and describing a world in which later generations cannot begin to imagine living. From the typed pages of the manuscript hidden in her literary salon of the 1930s to the inspirational lectures and workshops educating aspiring writers at the Center for Southern Literature, Margaret Mitchell’s legacy lives on through literary education and achievement. **TFL**

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*Sarah Kemerling is the communications coordinator for the Federal Bar Association. Research for this article was gathered from the following Web sites: Margaret Mitchell House and Museum Center for Southern Literature ([www.gwtw.org](http://www.gwtw.org)); Wikipedia ([wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)); The Mississippi Writers Page ([www.olemiss.edu/mwp](http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp)); The Pulitzer Prizes ([www.pulitzer.org](http://www.pulitzer.org)); and the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)).*