

Transcript of Kate Chopin, Godmother of Modern American Women's Lit. Part 1
Aired - March 3, 2010
Length - 23:40

DENNIS MILLER: In the late 1960s and early 70s, a young group of literary scholars discovered a writer named Kate Chopin. Chopin had been a popular short story writer in the late 19th century, but her second novel "The Awakening" was so controversial that she was banished to obscurity where she remained for most of the 20th century. The scholars believed passionately in Chopin and spent the next 40 years writing dissertations, essays and books promoting the author throughout the academic world. Their efforts were successful beyond their wildest dreams. Today Kate Chopin is taught in American literature and women's literature courses around the world.

One of the scholars responsible for Chopin's amazing revival is Dr. Bernard Koloski, Professor Emeritus at Mansfield University and author and editor of five books on Chopin. The most recent published in late 2009, is "Awakenings: The Story of the Kate Chopin Revival" edited by Dr. Koloski. The book is unique in its field, composed of essays of this same group of scholars who now reflect on their work and their brilliant writer who captured life in the 19th century and who preceded the women's rights movement by seven decades.

I talked with Dr. Koloski about Kate Chopin, her life, her works and his own work on this artist who is now recognized as one of the great American writers.

[music]

Bernie, thanks for joining me. I'm really looking forward to this. I've been thinking about it a long time. I want to hop right into it. Who was Kate Chopin?

DR. KOLOSKI: Kate Chopin was a writer who lived in the 19th century. She wrote all her works in the 1890s. She wrote two novels, about 100 short stories. Her first novel was early. Nobody paid much attention to it. But they paid attention to her short stories as they came out. She was very good at placing them in magazines where they got read. For example, she had stories in magazines that are still published today like The Atlantic Monthly. She had stories in The Atlantic Monthly. She had stories in Youths Companion, which was a big magazine at the time. In Harper's Young People. She had 19 stories in Vogue. She had a story in the first year that Vogue was published, the same magazine today. She had 19 stories in Vogue. So she became very well known. Then she had two books of her short stories published in the 1890s, one in 1894, one in 1897. They were very well received. The critics liked them.

Then in 1899 she published this book "The Awakening." The critics tore it to pieces. They called it vulgar and disagreeable and morbid. They just destroyed it. So she pretty much lost her audience after that. She was supposed to have one more book of short stories published. The publisher canceled it, for reasons we really don't understand.

Then she died in 1904. Pretty much for the next two or three generations, 70 years, she just wasn't known at all. A couple of her short stories were around. People didn't read the novel anymore. So we went to the 20s, the 30s, the 40s, the 50s. By the 50s a few people, after World War II, a few people began to read that book a little bit. But still nothing major happening in the 50s.

Then in the 1960s a guy from Norway, of all places, a guy named Persais [?], he collected all her short stories and her novels and put them into a single, big volume and did a biography of her. That made it possible for people like me and the other people who were working on Kate Chopin, to begin to try to promote her work a little bit. Now everything was available. Now everything was available in trustworthy editions.

So a group of us, maybe 20 of us across the country, started working on her, teaching her in our classes, writing books and articles about her, doing interviews like we're doing now about her, talking with

journalists. Little by little she just took off. Actually, rather explosively she took off. By 1975 there were paperback editions of her work. Over that next 10, 20 years she became one of the most widely-read writers in American literature. Right now I would say Kate Chopin is as well-read as almost any other 19th century American writer. She's in the same rank now with Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. Those were her contemporaries.

DENNIS MILLER: There's an anecdote on your website that some graduate student complained that she had to read "The Awakenings" three times but never had to read "Moby Dick." That's how popular she's become.

DR. KOLOSKI: That's right. Columbia University in New York. It's one of the most widely talked about anecdotes in American literary studies. It's true. The book is everywhere. I thought it was fascinating. Here at Mansfield last semester "The Awakening" was taught in American Literature course and at the same semester in a women's studies course. It's just, I guess the word is it's essential, at this point. There isn't anything out there that can replace it. It's like Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson or Mark Twain. These are essential writers. There is nobody that you can substitute for them. Kate Chopin has become, in our lifetime, an essential writer.

DENNIS MILLER: The reason we're here in the first place, and I should have mentioned it right up front, is to talk a little bit about the publication of the book "Awakenings: The Story of the Kate Chopin Revival" of which you are the editor.

DR. KOLOSKI: Yes.

DENNIS MILLER: This came out late in 2009.

DR. KOLOSKI: Just before Christmas.

DENNIS MILLER: I want to get back to that later, but first I want to ask you, the one thing that has really been a burning question for me is, you picked up on Kate Chopin early in your career. Early 60s?

DR. KOLOSKI: 1969, 70. Yes, very early. Right. Before I had my PhD.

DENNIS MILLER: Before the women's movement really took off. What did you read it to, Kate Chopin? At that time this obscure writer?

DR. KOLOSKI: More than obscure. If you do a PhD in English, at least in those days and I assume today, you specialize in an area. I had been specializing in 19th century American, rather than British, literature. Mostly I was concentrating on literature in the second half of the 19th century. At the time when Mark Twain was writing and Emily Dickinson was writing, Steven Crane, Jack London, people like that. Before you can write a thesis you have to take comprehensive exams. In other words, you go into a room with a bunch of professors, open to anybody at the university who wants to come in and throw you questions. You're supposed to be able to answer questions about anybody who wrote in that period. So you prepare by doing what I did. You go over to the library, you sit and you read. You look through all the shelves where the books are kept, by anybody who wrote literature in that period. I had been doing that all summer. I had been reading. I was just maybe a couple weeks before my exam.

I was doing one last alphabetical check through all the books to make sure I didn't miss anything so that I could say I read some of the books by each of these authors who was published in that period. I was just doing a final check on things. I discovered that there was, under the C's, under Chopin, three new books that I had not seen before. They had just come out. These books had just been published in 1969. There was 1,000 pages of this woman's writing, plus a biography. My initial reaction was, I don't need this. This is not a good time for me to be taking on something.

I started reading them and I just was blown away with it. I thought, why isn't this woman known? Where has she been? Why isn't she read the way Steven Crane is read or Mark Twain is read? There wasn't

anything else like that out there. It was kind of like going to see Avatar and saying, "Wow, where did this come from? I've never seen anything like this before." It was a revelation. It was that kind of a discovery.

At any rate, I took my exams. Nobody asked me a question about her, because nobody on the committee knew her. Scholars didn't know her at the time. Nobody on my faculty knew her. When the time came to write dissertation I went to my advisor, who I had picked not because he knew anything about Kate Chopin but because he wrote beautifully. I wanted to write like him. He wrote for ordinary people. He didn't write for specialists. I told him this is what I'd like to write about and he said, "This is a bad idea. You shouldn't chose a writer like this to do your dissertation about because if she's not known, it's because she's not very good. If you write about her you're not going to find anybody to publish what you write. You're going to damage your career this way." He wanted me to write about F. Scott Fitzgerald, who everybody knew. He was a little later writer, early 20th century. We went back and forth on this for weeks, my saying to him I could do something with Kate Chopin and him saying to me, "This is a bad idea."

Finally I remember going into his office one Friday afternoon with a little copy of "The Awakening." A little orange paperback copy of "The Awakening." It was the only one in print at that time. I said to him, "Look, could we have a bargain? You take this book home over the weekend. If you tell me on Monday morning that this woman isn't worth writing about, I'll begin on Fitzgerald Monday afternoon." He agreed to do that.

I will remember forever going into his office Monday morning. He's sitting behind his desk. He was chair of the department so he had a big office with a desk that had no papers on it, just the shiny walnut surface. That little orange paperback was sitting on the surface in front of him. He was sitting in his chair. I walked into his office and looked at him. He looked up at me and he just held my gaze for what felt like minutes, as if he was struggling with his emotions. Then he leaned forward, put his hand on the book, slid it across the table to me and said, "Do it." He said, "You're right. This woman deserves to be known. I don't understand how we missed her. I don't know how this happened. You're right. She absolutely should be known. So get to work."

So I started writing about her. I did my dissertation on her. I finished it in '71. It was then accepted in '72. I've been at it ever since. I've written about other people, mostly women writers, because once I started on Kate Chopin it was easier to stick with women writers.

DENNIS MILLER: Pretty much you've devoted your career to her.

DR. KOLOSKI: Pretty much. I've written about some other people, but mostly her. Yeah, you're right. I have a colleague down at Louisiana State University, LSU, who said she and I have both done five books about Kate Chopin. She looked at me one day and said, "Do you realize that both of us have spent twice as much time writing about Kate Chopin as she spent writing those books?" Which is true. Although I don't think that's unusual.

DENNIS MILLER: One of the things you talk about in the introduction to "Awakenings" is that the timing was pretty much perfect. I think it was your colleague, Emily Toth, who tells the story about being in a protest against the Vietnam War and screaming, "Make love, not war" and a colleague of hers sticks this book in her pocket and says, "You need to read this," which I thought was a beautiful story because it just summed up the times. It was just the right time for this female writing pioneer to be appreciated, I guess.

DR. KOLOSKI: That's right. Emily's a wonderful writer. She said that exactly right. She nailed that.

DENNIS MILLER: So there's a band of young, kind of rebellious scholars like yourself, in the 70s, promoting her. How did you get publishers to take notice of her?

DR. KOLOSKI: Well, I don't know how other people did it. For me, it came from Mansfield students. It's a strange thing.

DENNIS MILLER: Really?

DR. KOLOSKI: Absolutely. I was teaching “The Awakening” and I was struggling with it because I knew a lot about it, I had written a dissertation about it, but there were so many other things coming out. Articles were appearing. The Modern Language Association is the largest scholarly organization. They were putting out a series of books on teaching. They had done one on Chaucer and maybe two others. They said, “If you think there’s an author that should have a book on how to approach that person in a classroom, write to us.” So I wrote to them and said, “How about a book about teaching ‘The Awakening’? This is a book that is widely-known now. It’s popping up everywhere. People don’t know how to teach it. They don’t know what to do with it in a classroom.” I said, “I’ll gather together people who have had some experience in teaching that book and we’ll put together a book of essays.” They accepted that. So I did that. There’s 21 different essays in that book, by scholars from all over the United States, from everywhere, from UCLA and the south and the Midwest. We put together a book of essays on different approaches. It’s called, “Approaches to Teaching ‘The Awakening.’”

DENNIS MILLER: I’ve seen it.

DR. KOLOSKI: That book is still in print, actually. All these five books.

DENNIS MILLER: It is?

DR. KOLOSKI: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. All five of these books are in print. It’s interesting. I’ve been blessed with good publishers. MLA was a wonderful publisher to work with. They’re sticklers for details. But they’re also smart and they keep all their books in print.

DENNIS MILLER: I didn’t realize all your books--and you’ve done five, correct?

DR. KOLOSKI: I’ve done five. Well, the two Penguin--Penguin Classics, they never take anything out. Once they print it, that’s it. It stays in print. The other one was a Simon and Schuster book by Twain, about the short stories. That’s available. If you go on Barnes and Noble you can order it. You know how books in print means these days. I think it means that they’ll do a print run. They’ll print on demand. Although, MLA just keeps that book in stock. If you go to conventions you’ll see that they keep it. There’s a lot of them now on teaching different books. Teachers share with each other, what works and they talk about what works with students and what doesn’t.

DENNIS MILLER: So while there were a lot of scholars out there working on this relatively unknown writer, you were the guy who came along and kind of pulled everybody together, through some of these books?

DR. KOLOSKI: Yes. Actually, it’s interesting because that first book, which was in 1988, has many of the same people in it that is in this new book that came out a month or so ago.

DENNIS MILLER: Really?

DR. KOLOSKI: Yeah. Emily Toth, for example, was in that book. I think it was a little easier for me because I wasn’t a threat, I don’t think, to some other people. Most scholarship on Kate Chopin is done by women. As a sort of a semi-insider and semi-outsider I think people maybe had a little easier time accepting me as someone who would give them a fair chance to make their argument. Often time it’s a little easier to be the person who is not one of the strongest forces in the field, to be able to pull together people with different points of view. So I could promise each of these people I am not tinker with what you say, you argue your thing and I’ll edit it carefully. Make your argument and then I’ll try my best to get you the best audience that I can. I think that worked in both books.

DENNIS MILLER: What’s different with this new book? What makes it different from the other collections of essays?

DR. KOLOSKI: I don't think there is another book like this out there for any writer that I know of. It's a unique book. The people at LSU press, which is the same publisher that published the original Kate Chopin volumes, I think they knew. If there is any other group of scholars who have done this, I'm not aware of it. It's a book by 12 of us who did this work 30 years ago and who are now looking back on what we did and trying to put that into context, trying to explain how we managed to bring about this thing.

Of course, as we explain in the book, there's a lot of reasons why Kate Chopin is popular. One of them, as you said, is perfect timing. The women's movement was just getting started. Her complete works came out the same summer as the year that people landed on the moon. It was an exciting time. All kinds of things were possible. The timing was perfect.

It's also true we had the advantage of having accurate copies of everything she had written. That's very difficult to work with. People don't understand, but it's important if you're going to be a scholar that the words that you're working with you know are the words that she wrote. It's very easy to mess things up. So there are a lot of other people working on her, but I think what we did was remarkable because there's just never been another writer who was accepted in her own time, as Kate Chopin was, and then violently rejected and then neglected for 60-70 years. And then embraced so quickly with such enthusiasm.

DENNIS MILLER: Fervor.

DR. KOLOSKI: Fervor, exactly. As Kate Chopin was. So it was a unique story. I think the book is unique in the sense that we've gathered together, we've put together this book, these 12 of us, looking back and trying to write for a broad audience. This is readable by other Kate Chopin specialists. There are hundreds of them now, all around the world. Kate Chopin is known in many different countries. We basically were writing for ordinary people. We're not writing for one another. We're trying to explain how this sort of cultural, literary phenomenon came about, how that happened and why it happened and why it worked. At the same time that we were trying to promote Kate Chopin's work in the 1970s and 80s, there were lots of scholars trying to promote the work of lots of other writers. But those writers are not widely-read today as Kate Chopin. There are other writers, of course, who have made it into the curriculum, into what we call the cannon. Sojourner Truth is one. Frederick Douglass, the man you worked with with Lynn Pifer on, is one. There are others but none were quite so well known, quite so rejected, waited quite so long and had such enthusiasm.

So I think the book is unique in the sense that it's a group of scholars looking back on what they did decades ago.

DENNIS MILLER: It reminds me of a band of old wizards looking back at your alchemy.

DR. KOLOSKI: That's right.

DENNIS MILLER: How did we do this?

DR. KOLOSKI: How did we do this? Yeah. We all look at each other and we say, I don't think any of us had a clue that this was going to go this way. It was one of those things that you work on without knowing that it's going to work. You can't tell that.

DENNIS MILLER: It's obvious all of you approached it with not only scholarship, but passion.

DR. KOLOSKI: Yeah. But again, so did a lot of other people with a lot of other writers' works. Kate Chopin is unique. It's not we who made her revival possible, it's her who made it possible. We could guide people to the work, we could offer them tools for understanding. But at that point it's up to the writer. It's like a teacher. You can offer a student a book. You can give the student ideas on how to approach the book. But then it's up to the student and if the book works, it works. If it doesn't, nothing you're going to do is going to make it work.

DENNIS MILLER: That's all for Part 1 of Kate Chopin: Godmother of Modern American Women's

Literature. In Part 2 Dr. Koloski talks about Kate Chopin's influences, her relevance to today's readers and writers, as well as the next generation of scholars and critics. Transcripts of the interviews are available for download on podcast.Mansfield.edu. Use of both the audio interviews and transcripts in the classroom or other teaching environments is encouraged. Other podcasts on dozens of subjects are also available. I'm your host, Dennis Miller.