



# In Praise of Messy Lives: Famous Writers Who Divorced

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You could do a lot worse than to find yourself  
in the company of these twelve women.

Can you name each of these writers?  
Scroll down to read their stories.

Note : If you don't want to join their ranks,  
you might want cancel any upcoming trips to Paris.



In 1929, a 23 year old **Hannah Arendt** married the philosopher-journalist Günther Anders in Berlin. When her political work during the rise of Nazism got her in trouble with the authorities, she escaped a prison sentence by fleeing to (guess where?) Paris. And you know how it goes from there. She met the members of the modernist art crowd, including Walter Benjamin and a guy named Heinrich Blücher. Blücher, a former communist party member and protégé of Rosa Luxemburg became Arendt's lover. She and Günther divorced in 1937. In 1940, she and Blücher married. After a close call with the German Authorities, they were eventually able to slip out of Europe to arrive in New York City.



**Maya Angelou** has led one of the fullest and most adventurous lives of any writer around, so it's no great surprise that beneath that august stature, lies, ahem, an eventful matrimonial history. The record isn't clear about whether she has married twice or thrice. Her first marriage to a Greek sailor in 1951, ended after three years. Her most recent marriage to a British carpenter/poet Paul de Feu lasted seven years.

"Stepping onto a brand-new path is difficult, but not more difficult than remaining in a situation that does not nurture the whole woman."



**Edith Wharton**, born Edith Newbold Jones was the youngest of three children. Coming from a family of prestige - the saying "keeping up with the Joneses" refers to her father's family - Edith was forced to conform to the expectations of women at that time and married Teddy Wharton in 1885. Shortly after the marriage, Teddy sunk into a deep depression, which in combination with his alcoholism made him mentally unstable. Despite this, Edith had to prove infidelity to divorce Teddy Wharton after 28 years of marriage. Edith never experienced true love until she was in her forties when she fell in love with Paris and with the journalist Morton Fullerton whom she met there. She lived and worked in Paris on and off until her death at the age of 75.



**Susan Sontag** was married for eight years to Phillip Rieff before divorcing at 25 with a seven year old son. Like Edith Wharton, Sontag went to Paris and experienced an intellectual and romantic awakening. There she met her next great love, the writer Maria Irene Fournes. Sontag once said she had been in love nine times “five women, four men,” of these, the photographer Annie Liebovitz became her steady partner for the last decade of Sontag’s life.



At 19, **Grace Paley** left Hunter College to marry Jess Paley, a successful cinematographer. They had two children. Grace raised them while her husband traveled for work most of the time. The marriage fizzled, but she found her voice as a writer and at 37 published her first collection of stories. She did not formally divorce until she married again - this time to fellow writer, landscape architect and poet Robert Nichols in 1971. “If I hadn’t spent that time in the playground, I wouldn’t have written a lot of those stories. That’s pretty much how I lived. And then we had our normal family life—struggles and hard times. That takes up a lot of time, hard times. Uses up whole days.”



**Tony Morrison** married at 27 to a Jamaican architect she met while she was a student at Howard University, and divorced at 33 with one young son and another on the way. “He didn’t need someone judging him all the time,” she once said. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970, when she was 39 years old and at the time, working at Random House as an editor to support herself and her two boys. Her perspective on divorce: “To think of something that we normally think of as failing, as useful information.”



**Nadine Gordimer**, born in a small mining town outside of Johannesburg, South African. Gordimer was largely home-bound as a child because her mother feared that she had a weak heart. Because of this, Gordimer often found herself isolated and so she began writing at an early age. By the age of 15, she had published her first works and later was the recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1948, she married a South African dentist, but divorced him within three years. Six years later, she met and married the love of her life, an art dealer named Reinhold Cassirer, with whom she lived until his death in 2001.



If, as she famously said, “we are the hero of our own story,” then **Mary McCarthy** was a very busy one in the relationship realm. She was married four times in her 77 years, most famously to the historian Edmund Wilson (her second marriage, his third) with whom she had a son, Reuel. Her final marriage, to dashing diplomat James West, landed her a house in Maine and another in (where else?) Paris. As a friend and reviewer said of her, “she was forever a survivor rather than a victim.”



**Anais Nin** first married at age 20 to a banker with artistic ambitions named Hugo Guiler. The following year they moved to Paris where Nin’s world expanded exponentially. She had a passionate affair with Henry Miller, but perhaps because it was France, this didn’t seem to cause many waves in her marriage. Things did get more complicated when they returned to the US, however, where at age 44, she met and married Rupert Pole. It might be said that Nin doesn’t even belong in this group, since she was never actually divorces. Instead, she kept two husbands. This necessitated an elaborate charade that she called “her bi-coastal trapeze,” in which she shuttled back and forth between Pole in Los Angeles and Guiler in New York City. She avoided confrontation through a wildly complicated system of untruths that she managed to keep up for almost three decades before tax laws finally outed her and she was forced to annul her marriage to Pole.



**Pearl Sydenstricker** married missionary John Buck when she was 25. Apart from a superior pen name, she also gained two daughters (one adopted and one severely disabled). The marriage, much of it lonely, officially lasted eighteen years, but in 1935, at forty-three, she married the man who was her publisher and literary champion. She left China to settle with him in, Pennsylvania and together they adopted six more children. "Growth itself contains the germ of happiness."



**Annie Proulx** first married around the time she first dropped out of college. She eventually finished her degree, and then studied toward a PhD, but ended her academic career at the same time that she ended her third marriage. She raised her three sons on her own, and it wasn't until she was in her 50's that she published her first short story collection. "You know, one of the tragedies of real life is that there is no background music."



The first important divorce in **Djuna Barnes'** life was her parents'. When her mother finally left her father, she brought Djuna to live with her in New York City. It was just when Greenwich Village was getting really interesting. Djuna fell right in with the glamorous, the oddballs and the rich eccentrics. Her own marriage (to her the brother of her father's mistress) was forced upon her at 17 and she ran from it in a matter of months. Like many famous artists, early modernists and divorcees, Djuna jumpstarted her creative journey into fiction with a trip to -- you guessed it-- Paris.