

The Literary Side of Julia Godman Ruuttila

Sandy Polishuk © 2003

Julia Godman [Ruuttila] became a published writer in high school when her story “The Agate Hunter” and her poem “Brotherhood” were printed in the 1924 *Eugenean*—the yearbook of Eugene High School. The anti-racist metaphor in “Brotherhood” of life being a patchwork quilt with many different patterns, “But all woven/ From the same spindle of yarn!” is a sentiment Julia would retain all her life. And depiction of factory work in the “The Agate Hunter” reflects the fear of being a wage slave Julia had learned from her father: “the memory of the subtle ugliness of the automobile factory filled him with horror...”

Around the same time, the *Extension Monitor*, a University of Oregon publication, published two of her answers to Entrance Literature 8 and noted,

“Her papers throughout the course have been some of the most interesting and unusual ever received on these lessons. Note the fine appreciation, originality, and keen analytical qualities displayed in the following answers to questions. Such a student may sometimes make mistakes in thinking and arrive at wrong conclusions, but these may be corrected and life is richer and the spirit freer for the adventure.”

In this lesson, in answering “Do you find Keats’s works too effeminate? Do you find Wordsworth’s poetry more masculine? Discuss fully with special reference to the poems read,” Julia wrote:

Do I find Keats’ work too effeminate? I suppose I am expected to answer yes... It is not effeminacy so much as sensuousness that pervades his poems... I usually associate Paganism with a man and Unitarianism with a woman. Keats preached the gospel of beauty; Wordsworth that of God. One gets as hungry for beauty as one does for bread. About God-hunger, I don’t know. It does not, somehow, seem so essential to be assured of the Divine Being as to watch the sun droop on the western hills like a tired dancer... If I could once decide whether my star hunger is after beauty or immortality, I could answer the original question...

To describe Keats she quotes (and deletes and paraphrases), without attribution, her favorite poem at the time, “Bondage” by Richard Aldington:

Like a bush or a sun insect—
Living sensuously and thoughtfully,
Loving the flesh and the beauty of this world—
He gathers sensations like ripe fruits
In a rich orchard.

**Julia in 1942 with a
bracelet made for her
by Ray Becker –
Photo Alda Jourdan**



In 1925, when her story “Shelling Peas” was printed in the *Monitor*, the note accompanying it said, “She has completed several courses with unusual [sic] satisfactory results...”

Julia attended the University of Oregon during the 1925-26 school year. She wrote “A Menace to Our Town” in her magazine writing class. It’s a child’s point of view of a Wobbly-led strike that results in the murder of the organizer and the blacklisting of the narrator’s father. Julia incorporated her memories of a childhood misadventure, political meetings, and soapbox speakers. Her instructor submitted it to a *Harper’s Magazine* contest for college students where it won first honorable mention.

Julia left the university to marry. It was the end of her formal education, a mere opening scene to her “unusual satisfactory” writing career and unyielding life as an activist. In 1936 she formed the Free Ray Becker Committee. Becker was the last Wobbly imprisoned following the 1919 Centralia “Massacre.” In the course of publicizing his case, she began writing for her husband’s union newspaper, the *Timber Worker*, and was, for a time, the Oregon editor. In the next year or so she expanded her outlets to include the *People’s World* (a paper associated with the Communist Party, though she was not a member of the Party herself), *The Dispatcher* (the ILWU’s paper) and Federated Press (a labor news service), among others. Because she took a job at State Public Welfare, she began using the name Kathleen Cronin as her by-line.

Though Julia valued her work as a journalist and was especially proud of her investigative reporting, she never abandoned her dream of publishing fiction. In 1929, she moved to Linnton with her husband Butch Bertram, who had found work at the West Oregon Mill. Nearly thirty years later she would write in a draft of an unfinished autobiography: [I]t took me two years to accumulate enough nickels, dimes and quarters to pay down on the Underwood—the dealer

threw in a ream of typing paper that was in the window so long it turned brown at the edges. I thought we could climb out of Milltown on my typewriter keys. During the next three years at West Oregon, I produced two novels, several dozen short stories...I hid the rejection slips ... because money to buy paper and postage was a sore issue between us.

A few of Julia's fiction manuscripts survive. One of the novels she wrote while living at West Oregon, "The Wolf at the Door," was set in a mill town in the early thirties. FDR's election, the New Deal, the oppressive poverty of the mill town, and the first stirrings of mill union organizing are background, but basically it's a love story doomed by class differences.

Julia began "Joshua's Daughter; The Story of a Girl Who Passed for White," in Astoria in the 1950s. The novel opens with a story Julia attributed to her second marriage. Lois, the central character, notices a "white trade only" sign in a restaurant while eating dinner with her husband and his parents. Lois wants to leave immediately, but her husband wants dessert. She realizes that "in spite of the ring on my finger, he was a stranger; his mother too. And what was I doing here with them? They were *white people*." The novel then flashes back to Lois' teens when she learns from her dying father that he is black.

None of the novels were ever published, but some very short stories appeared in the *Timber Worker*—working class stories. Julia's motivation in writing them was clearly political.

"The Christmas Present," printed in the December 23, 1939 issue, is typical. Told from the point of view of an eight-year-old boy whose father scabbed during his union's strike, Julia shows us both father and son being shunned. The boy learned "being a scab was like old Mr. Phillips who fell under a carrier and had his leg 'took off'—*it was that way forever*."

Julia's excuse for writing stories for *True Story* magazine was poverty. Though she recalled selling at least one when she lived at the West Oregon mill in the 1930s, and from her son's letters to her during the '40s she seemed to be writing them then, the only stories it is possible to positively identify as hers are from the 1950s. "My Husband was Impotent" won her \$1000 in the 1958 *True Story* Contest and was published as "He's Perfect...Except..." in the issue dated May, 1959.

When Julia married Oscar Ruuttila in 1951 she moved to Astoria. She found it a colorful and eccentric setting for "true stories." "One Heck of a Honeymoon" is an account of a weekend when Janie, the narrator, stays with the landlady of her Finnish fiancé, Wilho, while they wait for their marriage license to become valid. In this scene Janie has just arrived in town and wants to wash up.

He stared at me in amazement. "You want a bath? But it is not Friday."

I stared back at him—and real shocked too. Imagine only bathing once a week. But how could you say that to a man—even the man you're going to marry.



**Simple pleasures –
Julia in the garden**

So I put it tactfully. I said, "I'm used to taking a bath every day, Wilho."

Now he looked at me like my friends looked when they said, "Crazy Finns." He said, "But we do not have bath. On Elderberry Avenue everybody goes Friday to the *sauna*. The steam bath..."

When Wilho saw how unhappy I looked, he finally let on that Mrs. Jarvinen, our landlady, actually did have a bathroom on her floor. But being a true Finn who went to the *sauna*, she never used it for bathing. Perhaps she wouldn't mind if I used the tub.

"Hadn't you better ask her first, Wilho?" I suggested.

"She not here," he said in his terse way. "She works by salmon cannery..."

In two minutes I was down again, real fast. I all but threw myself into his arms.

"The tub!" I wailed. "Wilho, *the tub is full of potatoes!*"

When Wilho and Janie go to a Finnish home for cards, the difficulty an outsider finds in trying to join the close-knit community emerges.

I wandered into the kitchen where Selma was washing up. I'd dry dishes and talk to her—a woman's way of getting to know another woman. But she snatched the towel out of my hands, called one of her friends in from the living room to dry, and spent the whole time talking to her, in Finnish.

Face flaming, I went back to the living room. I perched on the arm of Wilho's chair, watching him

play pinochle, and he put his arm around me. For the first time since we'd come to this house I felt a little more at ease. But the next second Selma came charging in, practically pushed me off the chair arm, and pointed to the davenport. "You're too heavy. You'll break the chair."...

I all but ran to the apartment, crying the whole way.

Oscar Ruuttila became disabled by a heart condition around 1960 so Julia genuinely needed the easy money these stories brought. She said, "I supported us for a couple of years by selling 'true stories' to *True Story Magazine*. I never put anything in the 'true stories' that was against the working class and sometimes I could even put things in that I thought were pretty good ideas."

In "One Heck of a Honeymoon," the heroine meets a waitress, a non-Finn married to a Finn, who warns her against the marriage. The waitress' prejudice against Finns, her chauvinism—"This is the United States. They could learn English – only they're too stubborn – and dumb!"—alienates the heroine who understands the waitress "was the kind who'd be lonely and unhappy anywhere."

In "He's Perfect...Except..." the narrator realizes her poor but generous relatives, though not "uptown" and professional like her new husband's, are better people than her cruel and snobbish in-laws.

At fifty, during the height of "McCarthyism," Julia started an autobiography, "The Bridges of Cé," the title taken from a Louis Aragon poem: "I have crossed the bridges of Cé / It is there that everything began..." In her notes for the foreword she says, "It is very popular, these days, if one has been a radical, to repudiate one's faith.... It was not until I had set down my own testimonial that I knew what it was: and so these lines became a *confession in reverse*."

Julia never finished "The Bridges of Cé." There are other notes for memoirs in her files, sometimes typed on the backs of old press releases or drafts of "true stories." The undated "Eggs in Baskets" recounts her mother's birth control activism. "Only the Lonely," written in October 1970, is a melancholy few pages by a woman finally alone. Oscar is dead, Shane is married and Julia has the Sunday blues: "It is possible to live alone, but it takes doing."

She continued writing fiction. In the early '80s she set a mystery in a union retirement apartment house; she had moved to the Marshall Union Manor in 1976. The victim in "Murder in the High Rise" is none other than a 70-year-old labor journalist, the widow of a Finnish longshoreman, whose grandson is working in Alaska. The plot takes off from an incident that inflamed Portland in 1981: two Portland policemen dropped four dead possums in front of a black-owned restaurant.

In Julia's story, the victim, Kathleen Nikkola (who once wrote under the name Kathleen Cronin for Federated Press), is murdered by a racist policeman in an attempt to suppress the story she's been writing on police in the Ku Klux Klan and posse comitatus. The "good policeman" conducting the investigation—who even reads poetry and listens to classical music—moderates the anti-police strain.



Julia under attack – 1966



When Julia turned 80 in 1987, she retired from *The Dispatcher* and moved to Anchorage, Alaska, to live with her grandson Shane, his wife Betty and her great-grandsons Ryan and Jason [see family picture at left]. There, with the help of Shane and Betty, she self-published her only book, 120 plus poems in a spiral bound volume titled *This is My Shadow*.

Some of the above material appears (sometimes in slightly different form) in *Sticking to the Union: an Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.



Key Events in the Life of Julia Godman Ruuttila

- April 26, 1907** Born in Eugene to Ella Blossom Padan & John Burwell Godman
- March 13, 1924** Marries William Clayton Bowen
- January 30, 1925** Marriage dissolved
- 1925-1926** Attends University of Oregon
- July 6, 1926** Marries Maurice “Butch” Bertram, in Fresno, California
- August, 1926** Wins honorable mention in the first *Harper [Monthly Magazine]* Intercollegiate Literary Contest
- 1927** Julia and Butch move to Chicago
- June 4, 1928** Son Michael Jack born in the Cook County Hospital, Chicago
- 1929** Returns to Oregon
- 1935** Julia and Butch help organize a union at the West Oregon Mill (United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, AFL); Julia organizes a ladies auxiliary and is elected president
- 1936** Organizes the Free Ray Becker Committee to free the last Wobbly imprisoned as a result of the Centralia “Massacre” (the confrontation between the American Legion and the Industrial Workers of the World—IWW—in Centralia, Washington on November 11, 1919)
- 1936** Begins writing for the *Timber Worker*, the newspaper of the woodworkers union
- September 18, 1936** Federation of Woodworkers formed, an unaffiliated organization superimposed over the Carpenters and Joiners structure
- July, 1937** Federation of Woodworkers leaves the AFL to become the International Woodworkers of America, CIO. They are immediately locked out; under Julia’s leadership, the auxiliary keeps the families fed and sheltered for eight and a half months so the men can hold out until the National Labor Relations Board hands them a victory
- 1937-1940** Runs the Oregon office of the *Timber Worker*. Delegate to the Portland CIO Industrial Council
- 1938** Begins writing for the *Peoples World*
- September 20, 1939** Ray Becker released from prison
- 1940** Leaves Butch
- May 3, 1943** Divorces Butch. Marries Ben Eaton May 6. Works as a stenographer at Oregon Shipyards but later in the year hired as a clerical at the State Public Welfare Commission. Takes the pen name Kathleen Cronin.
- 1946** Begins writing Oregon news for the *Dispatcher*, the newspaper of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU)
- November 27, 1946** Divorces Ben Eaton
- July 26, 1948** Fired from State Public Welfare Commission for political activities and for writing stories critical of Public Welfare and the Portland Housing Authority’s handling of the Vanport Flood. Becomes secretary to Matt Meehan, ILWU International Representative in the Northwest
- May 7, 1949** Grandson Shane born
- November 5, 1950** Attempts suicide
- Jan 3, 1951** Marries Oscar Ruuttila and moves to Astoria
- 1953** Shane comes to live with Julia and Oscar. Her mother, Ella, has a stroke and moves in with them
- December 14, 1956** Testifies under subpoena at House Un-American Activities Committee hearing in Seattle into *Communist Political Subversion*
- November 1959** Son Mike kills himself in Denver
- December 1962** Oscar dies suddenly of heart attack
- November 29, 1963** Adopts Shane
- 1965** Returns to Portland with Shane and Ella
- October 31, 1969** Ella dies
- February 27, 1975** Arrested with Martina Gangle Curl for sitting in at the Pacific Power & Light office in a protest over high electric rates
- May 22, 1976** Moves to Marshall Union Manor following hospitalization for flu
- April, 1987** Retires from the *Dispatcher*
- May 15, 1987** Moves to Anchorage to live with Shane and his family
- December 1990** Testifies at Anchorage Gulf War forum
- February 5, 1991** Major heart attack
- April 5, 1991** Dies in Anchorage



Julia Eaton of Federated Press tried to get through state police line in “The Dalles Pineapple Beef” – 1949

Books That Influenced and Reflect Julia

Julia's father raised her on these two:

Morgan, Lewis Henry. *Ancient Society: or, Researches in the line of human progress from savagery through barbarism to civilization*. Chicago, Charles H. Kerr, 1877.

Ward, C. Osborne. *The Ancient Lowly: A History of the Ancient Working People from the Earliest Known Period to the Adoption of Christianity by Constantine*. 2 vols. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1888-1900.

In *Sticking to the Union* she says, "I was brought up on two volumes that my father possessed that tell about the struggles of the working class before the time of Christ, *The Ancient Lowly*. (152)

"You can imagine the kinds of things he had me read. I remember a long series of lectures he delivered on the subject of the history of monogamy and what they had before they had monogamy and what brought monogamy in is when private property came into existence. And then he told me about the different forms of the family. It's in Morgan's *Ancient Society*." (Interview)

Poetry by Julia:

Ruuttila, Julia. *This Is My Shadow*. [Anchorage]: Privately printed, n.d.

In the collection of both Multnomah County and Oregon Historical Society Libraries

A book Julia appears in:

Churchill, Thomas. *Centralia Dead March*. Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1980.

A novel inspired by the events in Centralia, Washington on November 11, 1919 when the IWW defended its hall from an assault by the American Legion during the first Armistice Day Parade. Pp 184-202 are based on an interview with Julia who is called Julia Bertram in the book, her name in the late '30s when she founded the Free Ray Becker Committee to (successfully) free the last Wobbly imprisoned following the Centralia "Massacre."



Julia with her son

Michael Jack – 1959

Book on the IWA:

Lembcke, Jerry, and William M. Tattam. *One Union in Wood: A Political History of the International Woodworkers of America*. Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing; New York: International, 1984.

The story of Julia's first union, her first true love.

Reed College Theses on the 1934 Longshore Strike:

Egan, Michael. "That's Why Organizing Was So Good,' The Portland Longshoremen, 1934: An Oral History." Bachelor's dissertation, Reed College, 1975.

Geiger, Robert. "Solidarity in the 1934 Portland Waterfront Strike." Bachelor's dissertation, Reed College, 1984.

Hardy, David Robert. "The 1934 Portland Longshoremen's Strike." Bachelor's dissertation, Reed College, 1971.

One day in 1934 during the Portland longshore strike, Julia went to see what was going on following the police shooting of four men on the railroad tracks leading into Terminal 4. She said, "What I saw over there changed the entire course of my life." These theses provide excellent background and accounts, including oral history interviews, on the strike and the origins of the union Julia was associated with for over fifty years, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).



Julia cited these books as important in overcoming the melancholia that led her to attempt suicide in 1950:

Liebman, Joshua Loth. *Peace of Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1946.

Menninger, Karl. *Man Against Himself*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938.

Julia scarcely slowed down despite all those active years – photo Barbara Gundle

One can only wonder what she would think:

Polishuk, Sandy. *Sticking to the Union: An Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

If you like *Sticking to the Union* you will like:

Starbuck, Susan. *Hazel Wolf: Fighting the Establishment*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002.

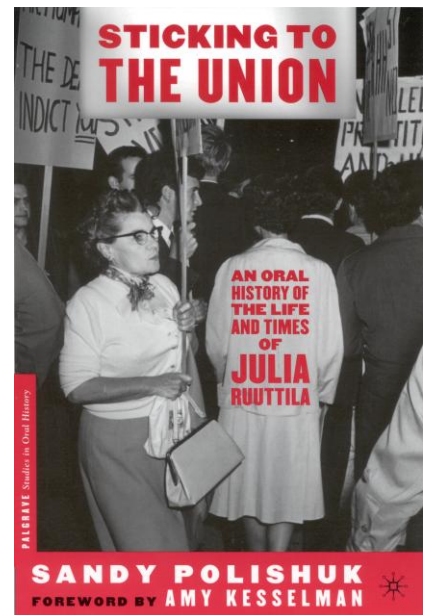
An oral history of one of Seattle’s fabulous activists who began her career with the Communist Party and ended it with the Audubon Society.

Genealogies:

Cone, William Whitney. *Some Account of the Cone Family in America, Principally of the Descendants of Daniel Cone, Who Settled in Haddam, Connecticut, in 1662*. Topeka, Kansas: Crane & Co., 1903.

Godman, John Robert. *Some Account of the Godman Family in America and Their Connections, v. 1, The Descendents of Zachariah B. Godman of Pendleton County, Kentucky*. Huntsville, Alabama: Privately published, 1998.

The first is of her mother’s family and the second her father’s. Julia’s brother John compiled the Godman account.



Julia and her friend, artist Martina Gangle Curl, protest rates at PPL in 1975 – photo Dorreen (Labby) Carey

For Kathleen Cronin

She had outlived her protest and her time,
Struggling to find in each new cause
Some personal stake.
Now in old age
She sat, tethered to a cane
In a confusion of yellow clippings,
Old meeting notices and books.

Julia Ruuttila, This is My Shadow

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Produced for Discovering Oregon Originals Presentations:
Thursday January 15, 2004 – 7 pm, U.S. Bank Room, Central Library
Friday January 16, 2004 – noon, Madison Room, Oregon Historical Society