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Tillie Olsen: One Woman, Many Riddles

Professor Panthea Reid

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In *Tillie Olsen: One Woman, Many Riddles*, Panthea Reid examines the complex life of this iconic feminist hero and twentieth-century literary giant.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, Tillie Olsen spent her young adulthood there, in Kansas City, and in Faribault, Minnesota. She relocated to California in 1933 and lived most of her life in San Francisco. From 1962 on, she sojourned frequently in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Santa Cruz, and Soquel, California. She was a 1920s "hell-cat"; a 1930s revolutionary; an early 1940s crusader for equal pay for equal work and a war-relief patriot; an ex-GI's ideal wife in the later 1940s; a victim of FBI surveillance in the 1950s;a civil rights and antiwar advocate during the 1960s and 1970s; and a life-long orator for universal human rights.

The enigma of Tillie Olsen is intertwined with that of the twentieth century. From the rebellions in Czarist Russia, through the terrors of the Depression and the hopes of the New Deal, to World War II, the Nuremberg Trials, and the United Nations' founding, to the cold war and House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, to later progressive and repressive movements, the story of Olsen's life brings remote events into focus.

In her classic short story "I Stand Here Ironing" and her groundbreaking *Tell Me a Riddle, Yonnondido, and Silences*, Olsen scripted powerful, moving prose about ordinary people's lives, exposing the pervasive effects of sexism, racism, and classism and elevating motherhood and women's creativity into topics of study. Popularly referred to as "Saint Tillie," Olsen was hailed by many as the mother of modern feminism.

Based on diaries, letters, manuscripts, private documents, resurrected public records, and countless interviews, Reid's artfully crafted biography untangles some of the puzzling knots of the last century's triumphs and failures and speaks truth to legend, correcting fabrications and myths about and also by *Tillie Olsen.*

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