

## Kathy Acker

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### Kathy Acker



Acker in 1984

<b>Born</b>	Karen Lehman <sup>[1]</sup> April 18, 1947 <sup>[1][2]</sup> New York City, New York, U.S.
<b>Died</b>	November 30, 1997 (aged 50) <a href="#">Tijuana</a> , Mexico
<b>Occupation</b>	Novelist, playwright, essayist, poet
<b>Citizenship</b>	United States
<b>Notable works</b>	<i><a href="#">Blood and Guts in High School</a></i> (novel) <i>Great Expectations</i> <i>New York</i> (short story)
<b>Notable awards</b>	<a href="#">Pushcart Prize</a> (1979)
<b>Spouse</b>	Robert Acker (1966–?) <a href="#">Peter Gordon</a> (1976; annulled)

**Kathy Acker** (April 18, 1947<sup>[1][3]</sup> – November 30, 1997) was an American [experimental](#) novelist, playwright, essayist, [postmodernist](#) and [sex-positive feminist](#) writer. She was influenced by the [Black Mountain School](#) poets, the writer [William S. Burroughs](#), the artist and theoretician [David Antin](#), French [critical theory](#), feminist artists [Carolee Schneeman](#) and [Eleanor Antin](#), and by philosophy, mysticism, and [pornography](#).<sup>[4]</sup>

□

## Biography

The sole biological daughter of Donald and Claire (née Weill) Lehman, Kathy Acker was born Karen Lehman in New York City, in 1947,<sup>[5][6]</sup> although the [Library of Congress](#) gives her birth year as 1948, while The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica gave her birth year as April 18, 1948, New York, New York, U.S. and died Nov. 30, 1997, Tijuana, Mexico.)<sup>[7]</sup> and most obituaries, including [The New York Times](#), cited the year as 1944.<sup>[8]</sup> Her family was from a wealthy, assimilated, [German-Jewish](#) background that was [culturally](#), but not [religiously](#) Jewish. Her paternal grandmother, Florence Weill, was an [Austrian Jew](#) who had inherited a small fortune from the glove-making business.<sup>[9]</sup> Acker's grandparents went into political exile from [Alsace-Lorraine](#) prior to World War I due to the rising [nationalism](#) of pre-Nazi Germany, moving to Paris and then to the United States. According to Acker, her grandparents were "first generation French-German Jews" whose ancestors originally hailed from the [Pale of Settlement](#). In an interview with the magazine *Tattoo Jew*, Acker stated that religious Judaism "means nothing to me. I don't run away from it, it just means nothing to me" and elaborated that her parents were "high-German Jews" who held cultural prejudices against [Yiddish-speaking](#) Eastern European Jews ("I was trained to run away from Polish Jews.").<sup>[10]</sup>

The pregnancy was unplanned; Donald Lehman abandoned the family before Karen's birth. Her stepfather's name, Albert Alexander, appears on the birth certificate but not on the April 18, 1947 registry of births in NYC (New York, New York, Birth Index, 1910-1965), which clearly states Karen Lehman.<sup>[11]</sup> Her relationship with her domineering mother even into adulthood was fraught with hostility and anxiety because Acker felt unloved and unwanted. Her mother soon remarried, to Albert Alexander, whose surname Kathy was given, although the writer later described her mother's union with Alexander as a passionless marriage to an ineffectual man. Karen (later Kathy) had a half-sister, Wendy, by her mother's second marriage, but the two women were never close and long estranged. By the time of Kathy's death, she had requested that her friends not contact Wendy, as some had suggested.<sup>[11]</sup> Acker was raised in her mother and stepfather's home on New York's prosperous [Upper East Side](#). In 1978, Claire Alexander, Karen's mother, committed suicide.<sup>[12][13]</sup> As an adult, Acker tried to track down her father, but abandoned her search after she discovered that her father had killed a trespasser on his yacht and spent six months in a psychiatric asylum until the state excused him of murder charges.<sup>[14]</sup>

In 1966, she married Robert Acker, and changed her last name from Alexander to Acker. Robert Acker was the son of lower-middle-class Polish-Jewish immigrants. Kathy's parents had held hopes that their daughter would marry a wealthy man and did not expect the marriage to last long.<sup>[15]</sup> Although her birth name was Karen, she was known as Kathy by her friends and family. Her first work appeared in print as part of the burgeoning New York City [literary](#) underground of the mid-1970s. Like other young women struggling to be writers and artists, she worked for a few months as a [stripper](#), and listening to the stories of women so different from those she had known before profoundly influenced her early work, and changed her understanding of gender and power relationships.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

During the 1970s Acker often moved back and forth between San Diego, San Francisco and New York. She married composer and experimental musician [Peter Gordon](#) shortly before the end of their seven-year relationship.<sup>[16]</sup> Later, she had relationships with theorist, publisher, and critic [Sylvère Lotringer](#) and then with filmmaker and film theorist [Peter Wollen](#).<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

In 1996, Acker left San Francisco and moved to London to live with writer and music critic [Charles Shaar Murray](#).<sup>[5]</sup>

She married twice. While most of her relationships were with men she was openly [bisexual](#). In 1979, she won the [Pushcart Prize](#) for her short story "New York City in 1979". During the early 1980s she lived in London, where she wrote several of her most critically acclaimed works. After returning to the United States in the late 1980s she worked as an adjunct professor at the [San Francisco Art Institute](#) for about six years and as a visiting professor at several universities,

including the [University of Idaho](#), the [University of California, San Diego](#), [University of California, Santa Barbara](#), the [California Institute of Arts](#), and [Roanoke College](#).<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

## Health and death

In April 1996 Acker was diagnosed with [breast cancer](#) and she elected to have a double mastectomy. In January 1997 she wrote about her loss of faith in conventional medicine in a *Guardian* article, "The Gift of Disease".<sup>[17]</sup>

In the article, she explains that after unsuccessful surgery, which left her feeling physically mutilated and emotionally debilitated, she rejected the passivity of the patient in the medical mainstream and began to seek out the advice of nutritionists, acupuncturists, psychic healers, and Chinese herbalists. She found appealing the claim that instead of being an object of knowledge, as in Western medicine, the patient becomes a seer, a seeker of wisdom, that illness becomes the teacher and the patient the student. However, after pursuing several forms of [alternative medicine](#) in England and the United States, Acker died a year and a half later, on November 30, 1997, aged 50, from complications of cancer in a [Tijuana, Mexico](#) alternative cancer clinic, the only alternative-treatment facility that accepted her with her advanced stage of cancer.<sup>[6]</sup> She died in what was called "Room 101", to which her friend [Alan Moore](#) quipped, "There's nothing that woman can't turn into a literary reference". (Room 101, in the climax of [George Orwell's](#) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is the basement torture chamber in which the Party attempts to subject a prisoner to his or her own worst fears.)<sup>[18]</sup>

## Education

At [Brandeis University](#) she engaged in undergraduate coursework in Classics at a time when [Angela Davis](#) was also at the university. She became interested in writing novels, and moved to California to attend [University of California, San Diego](#) where [David Antin](#), [Eleanor Antin](#), and [Jerome Rothenberg](#) were among her teachers. She received her bachelor's degree in 1968. After moving to New York, she attended two years of graduate school at the [City University of New York](#) in [Classics](#), specializing in Greek. She did not earn a graduate degree. During her time in New York she was employed as a file clerk, secretary, stripper, and porn performer.<sup>[4]</sup>

Acker was associated with the New York [punk](#) movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The punk aesthetic influenced her literary style.<sup>[19]</sup>

In the 1970s, before the term "postmodernism" was popular, Acker began writing her books. These books contain features that would eventually be considered postmodernist work.<sup>[20]</sup> Her controversial body of work borrows heavily from the experimental styles of [William S. Burroughs](#) and [Marguerite Duras](#). Her writing strategies at times used forms of [pastiche](#) and deployed Burroughs's [cut-up technique](#), involving cutting-up and scrambling passages and sentences into a somewhat random remix. Acker defined her writing as existing post-[nouveau roman](#) European tradition.<sup>[21]</sup>

In her texts, she combines biographical elements, power, sex and violence. Indeed, critics often compare her writing to that of [Alain Robbe-Grillet](#) and [Jean Genet](#). Critics have noticed links to [Gertrude Stein](#) and photographers [Cindy Sherman](#) and [Sherrie Levine](#). Acker's novels also exhibit a fascination with and an indebtedness to tattoos.<sup>[22]</sup> She dedicated *Empire of the Senseless* to her tattooist.

Acker published her first book, *Politics*, in 1972. Although the collection of poems and essays did not garner much critical or public attention, it did establish her reputation within the New York punk scene. In 1973, she published her first novel (under the pseudonym **Black Tarantula**), *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula: Some Lives of Murderesses*. The following year she published

her second novel, *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining*. Both works are reprinted in *Portrait of an Eye*.<sup>[23]</sup>

In 1979, she received popular attention when she won a [Pushcart Prize](#) for her short story "New York City in 1979". She did not receive critical attention, however, until she published *Great Expectations* in 1982. The opening of *Great Expectations* is an obvious re-writing of [Charles Dickens's work of the same name](#). It features her usual subject matter, including a semi-autobiographical account of her mother's suicide and the appropriation of several other texts, including [Pierre Guyotat's](#) violent and sexually explicit "Eden Eden Eden". That same year, Acker published a [chapbook](#), entitled *Hello, I'm Erica Jong*.<sup>[21]</sup> She appropriated from a number of influential writers. These writers include Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Keats, William Faulkner, T.S Eliot, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille, and Arthur Rimbaud.<sup>[24]</sup>

Acker wrote the script for the 1983 film [Variety](#).<sup>[25]</sup> Acker wrote a text on the photographer [Marcus Leatherdale](#) that was published in 1983, in an art catalogue for the [Molotov Gallery](#) in [Vienna](#).<sup>[26]</sup>

In 1984, Acker's first British publication, the novel [Blood and Guts in High School](#) was published soon after its publication by Grove Press in New York.<sup>[27]</sup>

That same year, she was signed by [Grove Press](#), one of the legendary independent publishers committed to controversial and avant-garde writing; she was one of the last writers taken on by [Barney Rosset](#) before the end of his tenure there. Most of her work was published by them, including re-issues of important earlier work. She wrote for several magazines and [anthologies](#), including the periodicals [RE/Search](#), [Angel Exhaust](#), [monochrom](#) and *Rapid Eye*. As she neared the end of her life, her work was more well received by the conventional press; for example, [The Guardian](#) published a number of her essays, interviews and articles, among them was an interview with the [Spice Girls](#).<sup>[4]</sup>

*In Memoriam to Identity* draws attention to popular analyses of [Rimbaud's](#) life and [The Sound and the Fury](#), constructing or revealing social and literary identity. Although known in the [literary](#) world for creating a whole new style of [feminist prose](#) and for her [transgressive fiction](#), she was also a [punk](#) and feminist icon for her devoted portrayals of [subcultures](#), strong-willed women, and violence.<sup>[21]</sup>

Notwithstanding the increased recognition she got for *Great Expectations*, [Blood and Guts in High School](#) is often considered Acker's breakthrough work. Published in 1984, it is one of her most extreme explorations of sexuality and violence. Borrowing from, among other texts, [Nathaniel Hawthorne's](#) *The Scarlet Letter*, *Blood and Guts* details the experiences of Janey Smith, a sex addicted and [pelvic inflammatory disease](#)-ridden urbanite who is in love with a father who sells her into slavery. Many critics criticized it for being demeaning toward women, and Germany banned it completely. Acker published the German court judgment against [Blood and Guts in High School](#) in [Hannibal Lecter, My Father](#).

Acker published *Empire of the Senseless* in 1988 and considered it a turning point in her writing. While she still borrows from other texts, including [Mark Twain's](#) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the appropriation is less obvious. However, one of Acker's more controversial appropriations is from [William Gibson's](#) 1984 text, *Neuromancer*, in which Acker equates code with the female body and its militaristic implications. In 1988, she published *Literal Madness: Three Novels*, which included three previously published works: *Florida* deconstructs and reduces [John Huston's](#) 1948 [film noir](#) *Key Largo* into its base sexual politics, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* details a young woman's relationship and sexual exploits while on vacation, and *My Death My Life* by [Pier Paolo Pasolini](#) provides a fictional *autobiography* of the Italian filmmaker in which he solves his own murder.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

Between 1990-93, she published four more books: *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990); *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* (1991); *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels* (1992), also composed of already published works; and *My Mother: Demonology* (1992). Her last novel, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, was published in 1996.<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup>

In 2007, Amandla Publishing re-published Acker's articles that she wrote for the *New Statesman* from 1989–91.<sup>[[28](#)]</sup> [Grove Press](#) published two unpublished early novellas in the volume *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective and The Burning Bombing of America*, and a collection of selected work, *Essential Acker*, edited by Amy Scholder and [Dennis Cooper](#) in 2002.<sup>[[29](#)][[30](#)]</sup>

Three volumes of her non-fiction have been published and re-published since her death. In 2002, [New York University](#) staged *Discipline and Anarchy*, a retrospective exhibition of her works,<sup>[[31](#)]</sup> while in 2008 London's [Institute of Contemporary Arts](#) screened an evening of films influenced by Acker.<sup>[[32](#)]</sup>

### Posthumous reputation

A collection of essays on Acker's work, *Lust For Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker*, edited by Carla Harryman, Avital Ronell, and Amy Scholder, was published by [Verso](#) in 2006 and includes essays by [Nayland Blake](#), [Leslie Dick](#), [Robert Glück](#), [Carla Harryman](#), [Laurence Rickels](#), [Avital Ronell](#), [Barrett Watten](#), and [Peter Wollen](#).<sup>[[33](#)]</sup> In 2009, the first collection of essays to focus on academic study of Acker, *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism* was published. In 2015, [Semiotext\(e\)](#) published *I'm Very Into You*, a book of Acker's email correspondence with media theorist [McKenzie Wark](#), edited by Matias Viegner, her executor and head of the Kathy Acker Literary Trust.<sup>[[34](#)]</sup> Her personal library is housed in a reading room at the [University of Cologne](#) in Germany, and her papers are divided between NYU's [Fales Library](#) and the Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at [Duke University](#). A limited body of her recorded readings and discussions of her works exists in the special collections archive of [University of California, San Diego](#).

In 2013, the Acker Award was launched and named for Kathy Acker. Awarded to living and deceased members of the San Francisco or New York avant-garde art scene, the award is financed by Alan Kaufman and [Clayton Patterson](#).<sup>[[35](#)]</sup>

In 2017, American writer and artist [Chris Kraus](#) published *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography*, the first book-length biography of Acker's life experiences and literary strategies.<sup>[[12](#)][[36](#)][[37](#)]</sup>

In 2018, British writer [Olivia Laing](#) published *Crudo*, a fictional text covered by references to Acker's texts and whose main character is a woman called Kathy, suffering double breast cancer; yet book's events are situated in August–September 2017.<sup>[[38](#)]</sup>

In 2019, [Amy Scholder](#) and [Douglas A. Martin](#) co-edited *Kathy Acker: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*.<sup>[[39](#)]</sup>

### Published works

- *Politics* (1972)
- *Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula By the Black Tarantula* (1973)
- *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining* (1974)
- *Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (1978)
- *Florida* (1978)
- *Kathy Goes To Haiti* (1978)
- *N.Y.C. in 1979* (1981)
- *Great Expectations* (1983)
- *Algeria : A Series of Invocations Because Nothing Else Works* (1984)
- *[Blood and Guts in High School](#)* (1984)
- *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream* (1986)

- *Literal Madness: Three Novels* (Reprinted 1987)
- *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini
- *Wordplays 5 : An Anthology of New American Drama* (1987)
- *Empire of the Senseless* (1988)
- *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990)
- *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* (1991)
- *My Mother: Demonology* (1994)
- *The Stabbing Hand* – spoken word guest appearance on alternate mix of song by [Oxbow](#) included on reissues of album [Let Me Be a Woman](#) (1995)<sup>[40]</sup>
- *Pussycat Fever* (1995)
- *Dust. Essays* (1995)
- *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996)
- *Bodies of Work : Essays* (1997)
- *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels* (Reprinted 1998)
- *Redoing Childhood* (2000) spoken word CD, [KRS](#) 349.
- *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective* (pub. 2002 from manuscript of 1973)
- *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker* (Acker, Kathy) Sep 12, 2002<sup>[41]</sup>
- *New York City in 1979* (Penguin Modern) Feb 22, 2018
- *Kathy Acker (1971-1975)*, ed. Justin Gajoux and Claire Finch, critical edition of unpublished early writings from 1971-1975 (Éditions Ismael, 2019, 656p.)

### See also

- [Delirium](#), a comic book character created by [Neil Gaiman](#) based on his friend Kathy Acker.
- [Postmodern feminism](#)

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## Further reading

- "no one can find little girls any more: Kathy Acker in Australia" (1997). Documentary film by Jonathan and Felicity Dawson. Griffith University, 90 minutes. Footage from this film is included in [Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker? A documentary by Barbara Caspar](#)
- *Devouring Institutions: The Life Work of Kathy Acker*, ed. Michael Hardin (Hyperbole/San Diego State University Press: 2004). [DEVOURING INSTITUTIONS](#)

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## External links

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- "[Kathy Acker Papers, 1972–1997 and undated](#)", at [Duke University](#)

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