



Lorine Niedecker: A Poet's Life

Margot Peters

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Lorine Niedecker (1903–70) was a poet of extraordinary talent whose life and work were long enveloped in obscurity. After her death in 1970, poet Basil Bunting wrote that she was “the most interesting woman poet America has yet produced . . . only beginning to be appreciated when she died.” Her poverty and arduous family life, the isolated home in Wisconsin that provided rich imagery for her work, and her unusual acquaintances have all contributed to Niedecker’s enigmatic reputation.

Margot Peters brings Lorine Niedecker’s life out of the shadows in this first full biography of the poet. She depicts Niedecker’s watery world on Blackhawk Island (near Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin), where she was born and spent most of her life. A brief college career cut short by family obligations and an equally brief marriage were followed in 1931 by the start of a life-changing correspondence and complicated thirty-five-year friendship with modernist poet Louis Zukofsky, who connected Niedecker to a literary lifeline of distant poets and magazines. Supporting herself by turns as a hospital scrubwoman and proofreader for a dairy journal, Niedecker made a late marriage to an industrial painter, which gave her time to write and publish her work in the final decades of her life.

During her lifetime, Niedecker’s poetry was praised by a relatively small literary circle, including Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, Denise Levetov, and Allen Ginsberg. Since her death much more of her surviving writings have been published, including a comprehensive edition of collected works and two volumes of correspondence. Through Margot Peters’s compelling biography, readers will discover Lorine Niedecker as a poet of spare and brilliant verse and a woman whose talent and grit carried her through periods of desperation and despair.

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