

TILLIE OLSEN (b. 1913) was born in Omaha, Nebraska, the daughter of political refugees from the Russian Czarist repression after the revolution of 1905. At the age of sixteen, Olsen dropped out of high school to help support her family during the Depression.

At age nineteen she began her first novel, *Yonnondio*. Four chapters of this book about a poverty-stricken working-class family were completed in the next four years, during which time she married, gave birth to her first child, and was left with the baby by her husband because, as she later wrote in her autobiographical story "I Stand Here Ironing," he "could no longer endure sharing want" with them.

In 1934 a section of the first chapter of her novel was published in *The Partisan Review*, but she abandoned the unfinished book in 1937. The year before she had married Jack Olsen, with whom she had three more children; raising the children and working for political causes took up all her time. In the 1940s she was a factory worker; in the 1950s, a secretary and not until 1953, when her youngest daughter started school, could she begin writing again.

That year Olsen enrolled in a class in fiction writing at San Francisco State College. She was awarded a Stanford University creative writing fellowship for 1955 and 1956. During the 1950s she wrote the four stories collected in *Tell Me a Riddle*, which established her reputation when the book was published as a paperback in 1961.

Identified as a champion of the reemerging feminist movement, Olsen wrote a biographical introduction to Rebecca Harding Davis's nineteenth-century proletarian novel, *Life in the Iron Mills*, published by the Feminist Press in 1972. It is a moving account of her commitment to labor issues and feminist values. Two years later, after several grants and creative writing fellowships, she published the still-unfinished *Yonnondio*. *Silences*, a collection of essays exploring the different circumstances that obstruct or silence literary creation, appeared in 1978.

Among the colleges where she has taught or been writer-in-residence are Amherst College, Stanford University, MIT, and Kenyon College. She is the recipient of five honorary degrees, National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, the O Henry Award for best short story, and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Regarded as one of the earliest spokesperson's for the women's movement, she has said, "Be critical. Women have the right to say: This is surface, this falsifies reality, this degrades." She lived in Berkeley until her death 1/1/07.

