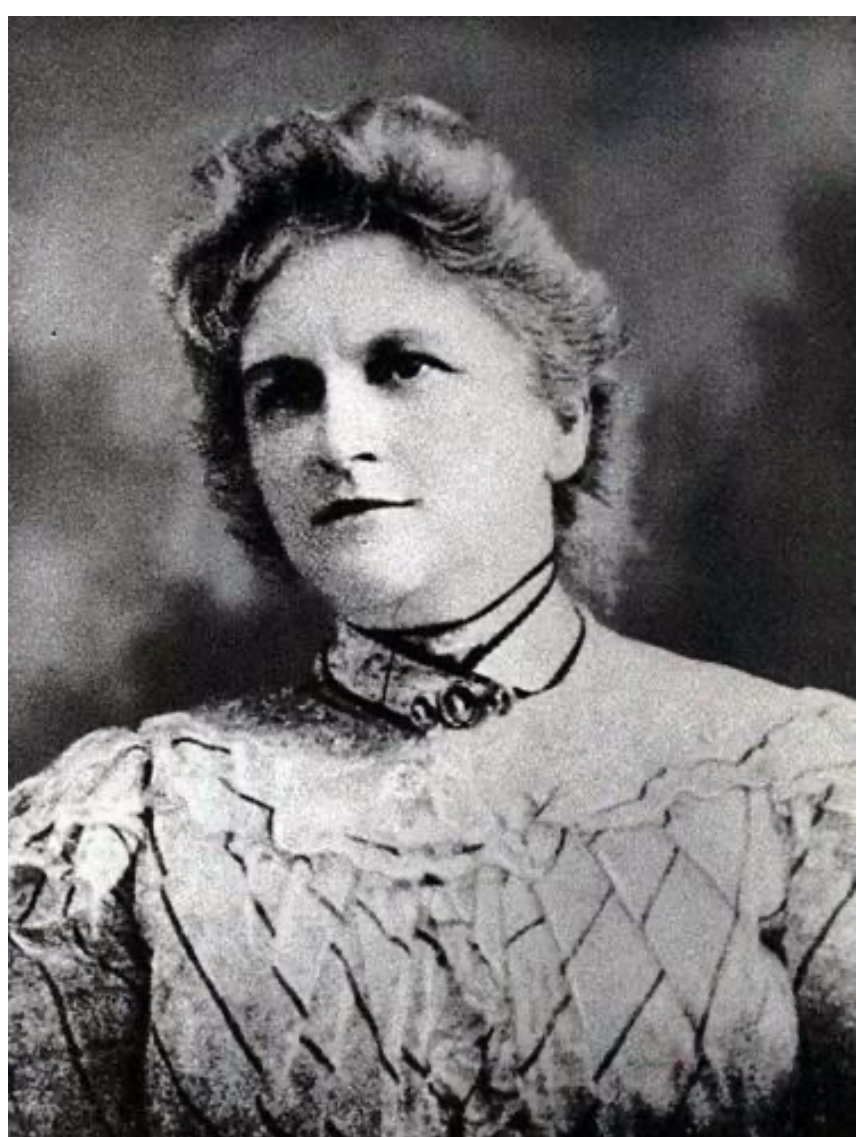


THE ADVOCATE

An enduring appeal in Louisiana and beyond: Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening' marks 125 years

BY JACK BARLOW | Staff writer Mar 28, 2024 2 min to read



Though it didn't excel on publication, Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" is now recognized as a classic of American literature.



Sometimes, books emerge and are immediately recognized as landmark texts, selling hundreds of thousands of copies and catapulting their authors to the "voice of a generation" fame.

Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" certainly wasn't that. Upon release, it caused an immediate outcry, and just as quickly, it vanished. It would be decades before Chopin's Louisiana-set saga was rediscovered and recognized for what it was — a beautifully written exploration of a woman's interior world with themes that endure to this day.

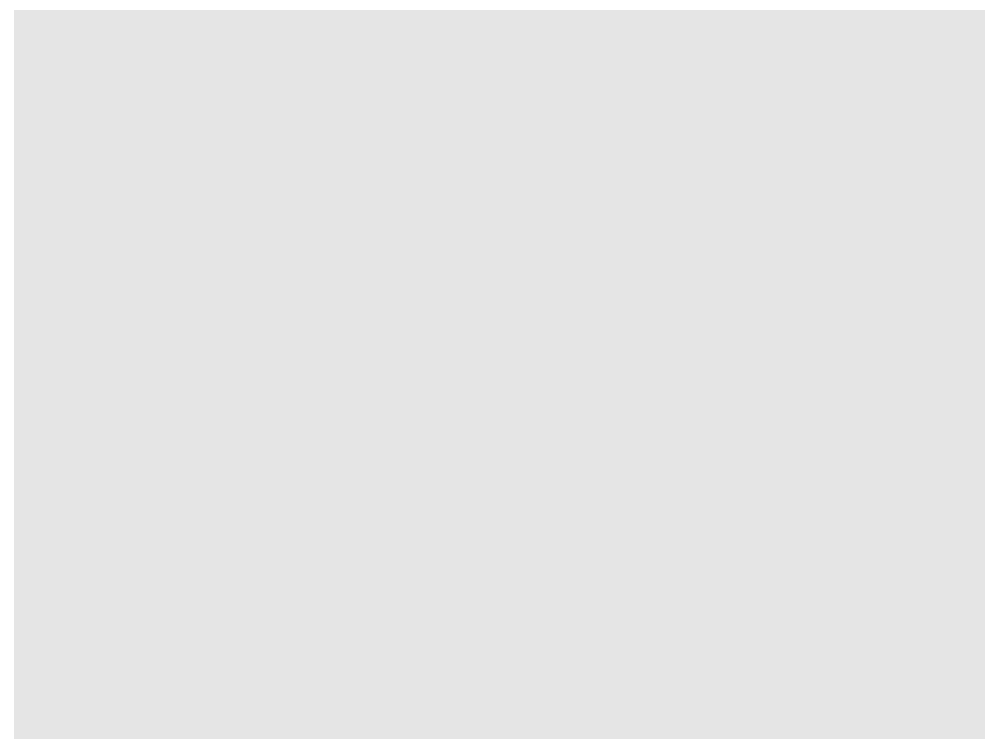
Published in 1899, "The Awakening" follows Edna Pontellier on a journey of self-discovery as she breaks free from an unfulfilled marriage and the equally suffocating life it entails. Beginning and ending on Grand Isle, the book about a woman determined to take control of her romantic life — and, especially, one that didn't exactly condemn her infidelity — proved shocking at the time.

As the novelist Barbara Kingsolver wrote in The Guardian, "The heart of this tale is as timeless as marriage itself ... the husband and wife who share a bed but inhabit different lives: these couples are still keeping marriage counselors in business."

Yet, unlike many of its (initially more celebrated) contemporaries, Chopin's book endures. Chopin's biographer Emily Toth, whose 1990 biography of the writer, "Kate Chopin" was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, said the lasting appeal of "The Awakening" comes largely down to the book's themes.

"I think it survived because it's about a woman trying to find her own way in life, trying to find herself," Toth said. "To find out (as Chopin writes) 'What manner of woman you are.' I think it's something that occupies women a lot: Being torn between a career and marriage and sex. How do you combine them?"

The book is primarily set in New Orleans and Grand Isle. While the New Orleans scenes retain aspects that would be familiar to anyone spending time in the city today — streetcars, grand homes and more — the book's version of Grand Isle is radically different. Chopin's Grand Isle is an idyllic playground for the rich, with fancy hotels that are the preserve of wealthy New Orleans businessmen and their families. Climate change and sinking are far from anyone's radar.



125 years after Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" was published, it continues to fascinate.

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The area's propensity for destructive weather does come in up other ways. One particularly powerful part of the book is set on Cheniere Caminada, an isolated fishing village with a little gothic church and gray, weather-beaten houses nestled among orange trees. By the time the book was published, it was already gone, having been wiped out by a major hurricane in 1893.

It's emblematic of the book as a whole: Just like its themes and morals, some of its physical settings remain the same, while others belong to a vanished world.

After publication, the book quickly went out of print and remained forgotten until it was rediscovered, and finally elevated to its deserved status as a classic, during the second-wave feminism movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Initial reception to the book is usually described as being uniformly hostile, torpedoing Chopin's career and helping contribute to her death five years after its publication.

There was, as Toth notes, a bit more to it than that.

"That's the story — that "The Awakening" was banned and condemned and she died of a broken heart," she said. "But, of course, life is more complex. It was not totally condemned. It was liked a lot by the women of St. Louis (where Chopin lived), though the men condemned it."

As for it causing the end of her writing career, that wasn't quite so simple either. Chopin was a lifelong heavy smoker who developed symptoms of diabetes late in life, dying after suffering a brain hemorrhage.

"I think she died more of diseases than heartbreak," as Toth wryly put it.

A subsequent volume of stories was canceled, though more because of its publisher running out of money than an aversion to her perceived feminist leanings (that volume, "A Vocation and A Voice," was finally published in 1991).

Though Chopin's career was brief, her work endures.

"I think 'The Awakening' appeals to people because, among other things, it has her ponder her place in the universe," Toth said. "She doesn't come up with an answer because there were no answers, or not many answers that really applied at that time."

Although things perhaps didn't work out for Edna Pontellier, her search for answers, and the lessons she learned, resonate.

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