

Colette (1873–1954)

Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, known as **Colette**, who was born in Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye on 28 January 1873 and died on 3 August 1954, was a French author, actress and journalist.

She is one of the most famous novelists in French literature.

Colette was able to stand out from her contemporaries thanks to the subjects she tackled. Her style was understated yet elevated. She paid increasing attention to the precise meaning of words, particularly where they were expressing effusion in nature, an openly flourishing sensuality to claim the rights of the flesh over the mind and those of women over men.

Colette was promoted to the dignity of Grand Officer of the French Legion of Honour, and was the second woman to whom the Republic granted a state funeral.

Early career as a writer

In 1893, while still an adolescent, Colette married Henry Gauthier-Villars, nicknamed Willy, a hugely influential music critic and prolific author of popular novels. He introduced his young wife into the capital's literary and musical circles. Surprised by his young spouse's gift for writing, Willy also used her as a ghostwriter (Colette's first manuscript dates from 1893). As an unknown woman in the literary world of the time, she used the name Colette Willy until 1923.

To earn a living, from 1906 to 1912, she pursued a career in music hall, where she performed Oriental mime. She subsequently performed at the Marigny Theatre, the Moulin Rouge, the Bataclan and at provincial venues.

A single woman

Following her divorce in 1906, she had several lesbian relationships. Throughout this period, Colette also made progress in her vocation as a writer. She published works describing these years, including *La Vagabonde (The Vagabond)*, *L'Envers du music-hall (Colette's Music Hall)* and *En tournée (On Tour)*.

In late 1909, she met Henry de Jouvenel, a politician and journalist. She married him in 1912, and he also commissioned her to produce several articles and reports for *Le Matin*, the newspaper of which he was editor-in-chief.

In June 1919, Colette became the literary director for *Le Matin*, to which she contributed a new column titled *Mille et un Matins (A Thousand and One Mornings)*.

From its second year, Colette chaired the jury for the Renaissance literary prize created by Henry Lapauze in 1921 to determine "the author of the best work".

In 1945, Colette was unanimously elected to the Académie Goncourt, becoming president of the society in 1949.

Links with Monaco

In her youth, Colette performed in Monaco, notably in the mime show *La Chair (Flesh)* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in 1908, and in *Chéri (Darling)* in 1924. A friend of Prince Pierre of Monaco (1895–1964), the father of Prince Rainier III (1923–2005), she again visited the Principality during the final years of her life, beginning with the accession of Prince Rainier III. In 1951, she was appointed Honorary President of the Monaco Literary Prize.