

Famous New Yorker Gore Vidal

Gore Vidal grew up in an environment of wealth and privilege but earned his place in American history as a social critic and a popular writer of historical fiction.

Eugene Louis Vidal was born at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point on October 3, 1925. His father was an aeronautics instructor at the Academy, while his maternal grandfather was U.S. Senator Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma. Eugene received the “Gore” name in a belated christening ceremony in 1939. After his father joined the Commerce Department in Washington, Eugene often acted as Senator Gore’s guide and reader. From his grandfather Eugene acquired a lifelong interest in politics. As an author, he used Gore as his first name to honor the Senator. It also made his name more distinctive.

Vidal attended elite prep schools in Washington and became a skilled writer and debater. Rather than attend college he joined the Army in 1943. After serving in the Aleutian Islands, he became one of many young authors competing to write the best novel about World War II. His first novel, *Williwaw*, was a war story set in the Aleutians. It earned great reviews when he published it in 1946. In 1948 his third novel, *The City and the Pillar*, shocked readers with its portrayal of homosexuality. For the next decade, his novels received little attention and sold poorly. Vidal suspected that powerful reviewers were out to destroy his career.

In the 1950s Vidal found other ways to earn a living by writing. He published mystery novels under the pen-name Edgar Box. Under his own name he wrote scripts for movies and TV. He wrote two hit plays that were made into movies, the comedy *Visit to a Small Planet* and the political drama *The Best Man*. He also followed his grandfather’s example by entering politics. He ran for Congress as a Democrat in New York’s 29th district in 1960. He lost but won more votes in the strongly Republican district than any Democrat in generations.

Vidal merged his interests in history, politics and literature by becoming a historical novelist. He became popular again with *Julian*, a 1964 novel about the last pagan emperor of Rome. His 1967 bestseller *Washington D.C.* began a series of novels about American history, including books about Aaron Burr (1973) and Abraham Lincoln (1984). Vidal continued to write provocative novels about modern America like *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) and *Duluth* (1983). He also became one of the nation’s most respected essayists and literary critics.

Vidal’s ambitions and opinions made many enemies. His sharp tongue provoked threats from some and actual physical attacks from others. Politics proved a more peaceful occupation. Vidal ran for a U.S. Senate seat in California in 1982 but lost the Democratic primary. All these activities made him a bigger celebrity. In later life his distinctive voice and patrician manner inspired filmmakers to hire him as an actor. He also became a cartoon character on the *Simpsons* and *Family Guy* shows.

Gore Vidal made no apologies for his lifestyle or his sometimes-harsh criticisms of American politics and culture, which continued until his death on July 31, 2012. While he never succeeded in politics, he did succeed, in a way, in shaping American history.



Photo courtesy of David Shankbone



West Point sits on scenic high ground overlooking the Hudson River, approximately 50 miles north of New York City.

Visit the library to read one of Gore Vidal’s many novels. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2014.