



Dr. Marie Jeanne Petrone Kilker

July 26, 1933 - June 2, 2026

Dr. Marie Jeanne Petrone Kilker, 92, passed away peacefully on June 2, 2026. Born in Chicago, Illinois, on July 26, 1933, she lived a rich and accomplished life that spanned nearly 93 years and touched countless students, colleagues, artists, and readers. A distinguished educator, scholar, writer, editor, theatre critic, and lifelong advocate for the arts, her career spanned more than seven decades.

Born Marie Jeanne Petrone, she was the beloved daughter of Jennie S. Petrone (1903–1984) and "Doc," Dr. Marco S. Petrone (1901–1966). Raised on Chicago's West Side, she grew up above her father's medical office. As one of few children in the immediate neighborhood, she became affectionately known as "The Kid," a nickname given to her by local saloon owner Johnny Roncolli, who always welcomed her with free popcorn and pretzels while she waited for shows and sometimes autographs. The experience of growing up largely without other children nearby fostered an independence and imagination that would shape her lifelong love of literature, storytelling, and theatre. She was especially proud of her Slovenian and Italian heritage, which remained an important part of her identity throughout her life.

She graduated from Mundelein Cathedral High School in 1950 and earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1954. Even as an undergraduate, her talent for writing was already being recognized; she

won a national magazine-writing contest for her short story "The Pink Shirt," an early sign of her lifelong dedication to writing and literary criticism. She completed graduate studies at Loyola University Chicago while teaching second grade at Holy Rosary School and working as a correspondent for the Container Corporation of America. She went on to teach English, journalism, and drama at Mount Aloysius Junior College in Pennsylvania, and in 1958 joined the Department of English at St. Xavier College in Chicago, beginning a lifelong career in higher education.

In 1959, she completed her master's thesis, "The Wreck of the Deutschland": Seed Poem in the Flowering of Gerard Manley Hopkins' Poetry, reflecting her early scholarly focus on poetry, literary criticism, and interpretive analysis. She later earned her Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University–Carbondale in 1972. Her interdisciplinary doctorate combined Speech-Theatre and English, emphasizing dramatic literature in the Western world, supported by theatre theory, history, criticism, and literary oral interpretation. She taught at all levels of education—from elementary school through graduate and adult education—and was widely recognized as an award-winning academic adviser and administrator of nontraditional degree programs.

Beloved wife of the late James A. Kilker, Professor Emeritus of French Studies at Southern Illinois University–Carbondale, she is survived by her daughters, Kristin Kilker (Robert Cote) of Woodstock, Georgia, and Ondine Kilker of Petaluma, California; and her grandchildren, Matthew B. Vaughn, Storm Vaughn, Bristol and Forrest Kilker. She is also remembered by extended family members, former students, colleagues, artists, and many dear friends.

Throughout her professional life, Dr. Kilker developed funded grant proposals and research projects, held editorships, moderated and contributed to college publications, founded a literary magazine, directed theatre productions and

educational television programs, and published extensively in both academic and popular outlets. She was a frequent presenter, panelist, moderator, and contributor whose work influenced students, colleagues, and audiences across multiple disciplines.

Since the late 80's, Dr. Kilker was an active member of the American Theatre Critics Association and became one of Florida's most respected theatre critics and reviewers. For more than 30 years in South Florida, she covered the region's performing arts community, including Florida Studio Theatre, Asolo Repertory Theatre, and numerous other professional and community theatres. Hundreds of her reviews, interviews, feature stories, and critical essays appeared in Sarasota and national publications, as well as online outlets including TotalTheater, Aisle Say, and Don411. Her informed and insightful criticism, grounded in deep knowledge of theatre history and dramatic literature, earned her respect throughout the arts community.

Beyond her professional achievements, Dr. Kilker was known for her intellectual curiosity, generosity, wit, and lifelong love of storytelling. As a child, she spent countless hours in neighborhood movie houses and Chicago's great downtown theaters, experiences that ignited a fascination with performance and dramatic art that would guide much of her life's work. Her passion for theatre took her far beyond the classroom; while studying Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, she frequented the famed Dirty Duck pub, a gathering place for actors and artists. There she met a young Peter O'Toole before his international breakthrough in *Lawrence of Arabia*, one of many treasured encounters from a lifetime immersed in the performing arts.

She maintained enduring interests in literature, theatre, education, travel, and the arts, and delighted friends and family with stories drawn from a lifetime among writers, performers, scholars, and cultural figures. She also took

special joy in her remarkable collection of autographs gathered over decades of engagement with the arts, a passion highlighted in a recorded conversation available here: [YouTube interview about her autograph collection](#).

Dr. Kilker's legacy lives on through the generations of students she taught, the artists she championed, the publications she shaped, and the many readers who benefited from her thoughtful and perceptive voice. Her life reflected a deep and enduring commitment to education, scholarship, creativity, and the humanities.

Memorial contributions may be made to organizations supporting theatre or arts like <https://www.floridastudiotheatre.org/support-us>

Funeral will be held Saturday, June 13th at 10 am at Saint Martha Catholic at 200 N Orange Ave, Sarasota, FL 34236 with another mass later in the summer in Chicago.

Previous Events

Funeral Service

JUN 13. 10:00 AM (ET)

Saint Martha Catholic Church
200 N Orange Ave
Sarasota, FL 34236-8518
(941) 366-4210