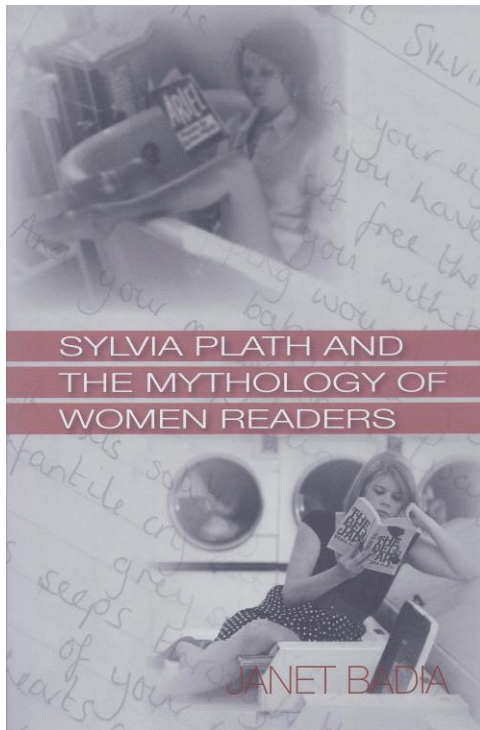


Review of Janet Badia, *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers* (Amherst and Boston: U of Massachusetts P, 2011). 202 pp. \$80.00 (cloth) \$25.00 (paper). ISBN 978-1-55849-896-9.

Anna Creadick, Hobart and William Smith Colleges



I approached Janet Badia's text not from the realm of "Plath Studies," but from reception studies, mid-century literary history, and U.S. literary criticism. I approach it as reader familiar with Sylvia Plath, well-versed in feminist theory, but mostly interested in a midcentury, middle-class reading practices. I soon discovered that the book's purported subjects, Plath's women readers, never actually appear. Rather, they are refracted through prismatic layers of re-presentation. The true subject of this study, as Badia takes pains to explain, is not Plath's actual readers, but the "mythology" of them: the charged and antifeminist fiction that has been constructed by fifty years of criticism, literature, and the homage and parody of popular culture.

Because Plath's explosive fame was post-mortem, the lack of an archive of original reader-response is inevitable: Plath's readers could not send fan mail to a ghost. What Badia *does* have to work with, then, is rhetoric. According to Badia, Plath's women readers have been produced, constructed, and reproduced in the American imaginary according to three basic tropes: as uncritical consumers, as Plath addicts, and even as literary cannibals" (2). *These* figures – the imagined readers – are to be found everywhere, from the dismissing gestures of snobby misogynist critics to late twentieth-century novels to films and television shows. The pattern Badia sees is consistent: "Whether the Plath reader is presented through an image in a film or an anecdote in a book review, the story that is told about her unfolds in much the same way and with similar effect" (63). While the vision of women readers as pathologized is an

ancient one, Badia finds that this particular vision of Plath's readers as obsessive, addicted, and pathological, dominates not only mass media, but also contemporary Plath scholarship.

The opening chapters consider the figure of the Plath reader as a convenient trope of both early reviews and contemporary literary criticism. Here Badia convincingly argues that the construct of Plath readers as "undiscriminating" is used to guard boundaries between proper and uncritical reading practices, a habit Badia casts as "literary bullying" (40, 1). She then moves on to the trope of the Plath reader in popular culture, and the examples are plentiful, from contemporary fiction to film to television sit-coms. (One of the more amusing and lasting examples being Meg from the hit animated television series *The Family Guy*, who, alienated from her collegiate peers, curls up with *The Bell Jar* in one episode: "Oh, you are dark," her father pronounces.) Badia devotes Chapter Three to Plath's "historical" readers, the "feminist" fans represented during such swirling public controversies as the public heckling of Ted Hughes and the hacking of his name from Plath's gravesite. Her final chapters drift more toward the Hughes family, as Badia uses Hughes's own correspondence and poetry to unpack his perceptions about "Plath readers," and concludes by discussing the reverberations of Frieda Hughes's attitude toward Plath readers.

Badia marshals interesting and original research, and engages the examples Plath scholars will be expecting to see. Her reconstructions of some of the more infamous controversies and claims about Plath's readers are painstaking, and her careful unraveling does lead to the discovery that quite minor moments have taken on mythic significance through the amplification of a common rhetoric. While her later chapters drift somewhat away from Plath and toward the Hughes family, they are also the most successful, as Badia seems most confident, direct, and deft when working with poetry as her evidence. In concluding her study, Badia addresses Frieda Hughes's practices as the poet-daughter and literary executor, positioned to guard the gates of future Plath studies. Badia sees Frieda Hughes's habit of "provocatively disparag[ing] readers" as a "lightning rod" for publicity, which both perpetuates the sense that Plath readers are somehow pathological, and contradicts Frieda Hughes's own insistence that "Poetry is for everyone" (164, 166). This latter commitment is one that Badia, in defending Plath's readers from such degradation, clearly shares.

Janet Badia's study opens, ironically enough, with a confession. She is chagrined to discover that in a line from her own early published criticism that she reproduces some of the

dominant tropes about Plath's readers. This new study, in setting up these dominant discourses as her subject, risks the same error. Badia does not set out to investigate the reception of Plath's work, nor to establish any truths about Plath's actual readership or fans, nor to assess the relationship of Plath's work to feminist theorists and critics. Rather, she takes as her subject the *imagined* reader of Plath, and sets out to do a rhetorical analysis of the ways in which these tropes circulate throughout culture and criticism. This approach may set readers up for frustration, since not only is the center of the study a kind of absence, but to give so much space to a "mythology" always threatens to reify it. By the end of the text, one has much evidence of the existence of a construct, but hardly any evidence at all of that subject which the myth distorts: Plath's *actual* women readers.

For me, then, this study begs a question: What is the significance of the way critics and popular culture imagined women readers? Badia's answer is that the mythology has shaped and continues to shape the way Plath is read by all constituents, including critics who should know better. She argues that "[b]eing more mindful of our rhetoric" will allow us to bring a critical awareness to "what is lost or gained, elided or privileged, when we choose to value one way of reading over another" (165). But this "discovery" of the polyvocality of texts is not news, as Badia notes: "It seems hardly worth saying, and yet the whole history of the discourse I've been tracking throughout this book demonstrates that it hasn't been said enough: Plath's readers are not a liability to her" (165). No, the clearest significance of the "mythology" of Plath's women readers emerges when Badia discusses the "Literary Bullying" that characterizes Plath criticism, and the silencing of "decades of feminist scholarship" investigating what Plath's work means, four decades of feminist readings of Plath (123). Such readers have played, as Badia notes, "a vital role" in promoting Plath's work, yet their voices have been regularly marginalized and diminished (123). (I was gob-smacked to learn that the major journal *American Literature* did not publish a scholarly essay on Plath until 1993). Unfortunately, such voices are slighted again by Badia's decision to focus her lens elsewhere. By continuing to engage figures like Robin Morgan, "the figure who has come to stand in for feminists in discussions of Plath's work" (161), Badia inevitably continues to spotlight their perspectives, even while critiquing them.

In the end, what we have in this study are close readings of readings of Plath's readers. While Badia's careful detanglings leave one with a clearer sense of how Plath's readers have been unfairly typecast, a study of the "historical" readers themselves -- whether they be Plath's critics,

fans, or family members -- remains to be written. In the end, I remain haunted by those real readers: the young 1960s and 1970s fans that appear so enticingly in the archival but "source unknown" photos and handwritten letters reproduced on the cover of Badia's book.

Works Cited

Badia, Janet. *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011. Print.