

Review of Elizabeth Winder, *Pain, Parties, Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013). 265 pp. \$25.99 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-06-208549-8.

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A coltish model looks coyly over her shoulder on the cover of *Pain, Parties, Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953*, evoking a vintage Christian Dior ad. She is clad in a lavender satin gown with a bouffant skirt, characteristic of Dior's New Look circa 1950. Her blonde hair is cropped short and is reminiscent of Kim Novak.¹ Embodying the feminine ideal of the 1950s, the cover serves as an example of the type of fashion ad Sylvia Plath would have encountered as a twenty-year-old *Mademoiselle* guest editor.

The new biography by Elizabeth Winder is a refreshing take on Plath's story, casting a new light on the poet. It replaces the typewriter and oven, which have become so stereotypically synonymous with her name, with a tube of Revlon Cherries in the Snow lipstick, black patent leather kitten heels, and pristine white kid gloves. As Winder explains in her introduction, her biography is about a different Sylvia, who "has blonde hair, a deep tan, one suitcase, several boyfriends, two black sheaths, and a ticket to New York City"(14). But *Pain, Parties, Work* is more than just a Plath biography; it is snapshot in time and gives insight into what it must have been like to be an intelligent young woman amidst the milieu of gender constraints of the early 1950s and concrete jungle that was New York City. It is one of the two new biographies² published this year that focus on Plath before her marriage to poet Ted Hughes and that brutally cold winter in London. Instead, it focuses on the period of her life that led up to the "Beautiful Smith Girl Missing" headlines, and on which *The Bell Jar* is based. Fittingly, Winder's work comes on the heels of *The Bell Jar*'s 50th anniversary.³

"The stark facts of Sylvia Plath's suicide have led to decades of reductionist writing about

¹ Kim Novak was a popular film actress who began her career in the early 1950s and often wore her blonde hair short. See the *LIFE* magazine online article, "I Was in *LIFE*: Kim Novak Remembers."

² Please see *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* by Andrew Wilson, which was released on February 5, 2013.

³ *The Bell Jar* was first published January 14, 1963, with this January 2013 marking the 50th Anniversary. Please see page eight of Frances McCullough's "Foreword" to the 25th Anniversary edition of *The Bell Jar*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1996.

her person and her writing," states Winder in the book's introduction. "*Pain, Parties, Work* is an attempt to undo the cliché of Plath as the demon-plagued artist" (xiii). Winder effectively accomplishes her endeavor through the efficacious use of interviews with fifteen of the other guest editors who lived with Plath, at the Barbizon, during *Mademoiselle's* guest editorship program. By juxtaposing their perspectives with Plath's as she expressed through her letters home, Winder helps to recreate the month the poet spent on Madison Avenue, clacking away at a typewriter as well as attending fashion shows, ballets, and decadent parties. She also conjures up a new image of Plath as seen through the eyes of the other guest editors.

The book is broken up into the sections, each detailing one of the four weeks Plath spent in New York. Winder explores how the disappointment Plath felt towards her *Mademoiselle* experience could have been a trigger in her nervous breakdown and suicide attempt later that summer. In addition, Winder draws on the cultural materials of the period, such as fashion ads, magazine articles, makeup, and clothing that Plath would have encountered and would have been immersed. Through this, Winder illustrates how much Plath was a product of her culture as well as someone who actively partook in that culture. While very much the cerebral Ivy League co-ed, Plath also possessed a girlish nature and a love of the aesthetic, which spilled over from art and literature into fashion made out of lush fabrics, such as cashmere and shantung, and a fondness for crimson lipstick that would become her signature look. As Winder notes:

Above all, Sylvia prized beauty and form. She was addicted to beauty, devoted to beauty—she worshipped Beauty. She often bought books for their color and texture. Even her boyfriends were classically handsome. She cut away at her life until it fit the gorgeous blueprint she made for it. (94)

Winder's *Pain, Parties, Work* exhibits proficient research and utilization of Plath's materials in the Lilly Library at Indiana University. It also contains thorough interviews with fifteen of the other nineteen *Mademoiselle* guest editors, including the two women who inspired the characters of Doreen and Betsy in *The Bell Jar*.⁴

The work is accessible, clearly written, and is superb supplemental reading material to *The Bell Jar*. Because of this, it is especially useful to teachers who include Plath's novel in their curriculum, since it can enrich student reading while providing insight into the novel's background. In addition to Plath scholars, the book would also be of great interest to students and

⁴ Please page seven of *The Bell Jar* for descriptions of the characters of Doreen and Betsy.

teachers of women's studies, as well as to those interested in popular culture and fashion in 1950s America.

Winder's style of writing is intoxicating; readers can almost smell Plath's freshly Halo shampooed hair and feel the sweltering heat of that summer in New York City.⁵ This, coupled with the way Winder weaves together fragments of interviews, Plath's letters and journal entries, and anecdotes about the material culture of the early 1950's, makes this book a fascinating read.

⁵ According to Winder, Plath favored Halo shampoo, which had a fresh, "piney" scent to it (95).

Works Cited

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