

## Recent Sylvia Plath Biographies

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- Andrew Wilson, *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (Simon & Schuster Ltd, 2013), 438pp., ISBN: 978-0-85720-588-9
- Elizabeth Winder, *Pain, Parties and Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953* (Chatto & Windus, 2013), 288pp., ISBN: 0062085492
- Carl Rollyson, *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2013), 300pp., ISBN: 978-0-312-64024-8.

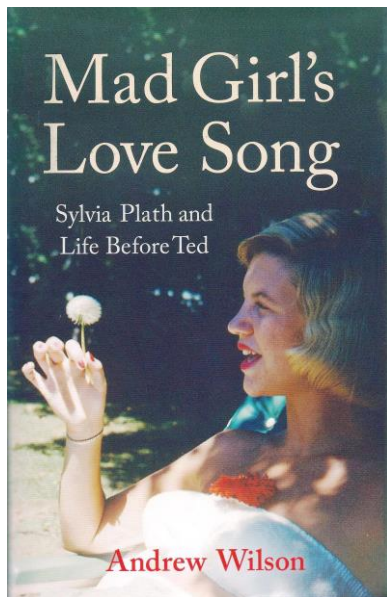
With 2013 marking the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Sylvia Plath, the avalanche of newspaper articles, exclusive opinion pieces and biographies that have been published so far this year clearly illustrate the poet's enduring position within public consciousness. Fifty years on, Plath's life and work still has the power to polarise critics, with recent interviews by Olywn Hughes and Elizabeth Sigmund perhaps best showing the fierce animosity – rooted in biography – that is still present within Plath studies.<sup>1</sup> Tracy Brain and Sally Bayley have commented: "Plath's image hovers around our contemporary imagination, perpetuating various forms of myth, some of which she may have intended, and others that she could never have predicted" (6). It is perhaps because Plath's life can be interpreted into "various forms of myth" that three biographical publications can be released within weeks of each other, yet contribute new perspectives to the ongoing dialogue that is Plath's life story. *Mad Girl's Love Song* by Andrew Wilson (January 31, 2013), *Pain, Parties and Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953* by Elizabeth Winder (April 16, 2013) and *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* by Carl Rollyson (January 29, 2013) all approach the image of Plath from different vantage points, and luxuriate within the space provided by the famous categorisation of Plath as a fragmented "person of many masks" (Hughes xiv).

The packaging of *Mad Girl's Love Song* is simply exquisite. Stunning, rare photographs, previously held in archives at Indiana University's Lilly Library adorn the cover, depicting a vivacious Plath smiling and sunbathing during her "platinum blonde" summer of 1954. The middle pages of the book include further exceptional images, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Olwyn Hughes and Elizabeth Sigmund both gave interviews to *The Guardian* newspaper, and these accounts were published as "flip-side" opinions on January 18, 2013. Their opposing views on Plath, her life, work and marriage to Ted Hughes illustrate the depth of fraught emotion that still exists within Plath studies today, with Olywn Hughes determined to see Plath labelled a "monster," and Elizabeth Sigmund offering a more sympathetic, kind, and compassionate view of the much-debated poet.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2013/jan/18/olwyn-hughes-sylvia-plath-literary-executor>  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2013/jan/18/elizabeth-sigmund-bell-jar-sylvia-plath>



Plath's 1956 trip to Venice and photographs of old boyfriends. The vibrant cover immediately suggests that this biography seeks to determine a fresh, original narrative of Plath's life story; and, coupled with the claim that the book, "concentrates exclusively on her life before she met Ted Hughes," Wilson's aim is ambitious (13). It is this focus on Plath's early years that gives *Mad Girl's Love Song* its unique merit and value. Throughout the biography, Wilson is at pains to document the many unpublished poems and short stories written by Plath in the pre-1956 period of her life. While his attention to Plath's written work wanes as the book

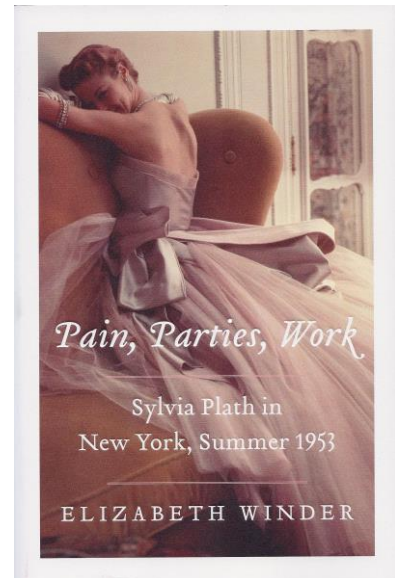
progresses, Wilson's examination of her pre-Smith College output is hugely valuable. He notes Plath's use of pseudonyms as early as 1949, describes her girlhood philosophical and literary influences in good detail and interestingly draws attention to Plath's subscription to *Writer's Year Book*, as a way of fostering her literary technique (92). In this regard, Wilson's book is reminiscent of Luke Ferretter's excellent 2012 study, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction*.

Like Carl Rollyson in *American Isis*, Wilson has chosen to: "avoid relying on secondary sources, such as other Plath biographies ... drawing instead on primary materials and interviews with those who knew Plath" (13). This commitment to uncovering a fresh identity for Plath in her pre-1956 years is timely, although complete dedication to first-hand sources is perhaps a flawed strategy, with interviewee objectivity proving problematic in context with memory, hindsight and personal gripes carried throughout the years. Despite this, accounts of Plath's "eager enthusiasm, [her] absolute attentiveness to one, intelligence, [and] interest in all manner of things" are refreshing and help widen the narrow scope by which readers may have traditionally perceived the author (147).

While the title of Wilson's biography is taken from an uncollected Plath poem, the narrative is predominately driven by the "mad girl's love..." *affairs*. Such concentrated focus on Plath's romances is perhaps a bid to prove the uniqueness of the project – to categorically state that Plath was involved with other men prior to her famous relationship with Ted Hughes. However, Wilson's Plath is often depicted as man-obsessive, as someone whose life was solely dictated by romantic and sexual endeavours. As she matures into a young adult, Wilson's image of Plath moves further away from academic and creative writing achievements, tending rather to focus on salacious instances, such as the expansion of her "erotic repertoire" (317). As well as this, despite aiming to focus solely on Plath's life pre-

1956, Wilson often tries to justify his depictions by contextualising Plath's girlhood personality with events that occurred in her later life, or even after death. Passages detailing Plath's "imaginative vampirism," her obsession with doubles, and letters from old boyfriends all disconcertingly serve as pieces that connect to the dominant perception of Plath's "schizoid" tendencies, and dangerously render Wilson's original commentaries as ineffective (152, 391, Holbrook 121).

The same type of difficulty emerges in Elizabeth Winder's *Pain, Parties and Work: Sylvia Plath in New York, Summer 1953*. Concentrating on the summer internship that provided inspiration for *The Bell Jar*, the standout feature of this biography is the array of interviews conducted with Plath's fellow guest-editors at *Mademoiselle* magazine. Aside from a 2003 article, "After *The Bell Jar*, Life Went On" in *The New York Times*,<sup>2</sup> few biographers have offered such a thorough account of Plath's experiences in New York City during summer 1953. Owing to the slippery nature of biography, Winder's book runs into problems when it becomes evident that Plath's fellow interns often define their experiences of the poet within wider knowledge of her later life and death. For example, ex guest-editor Anne Shawber describes how, during the 1970s, she wrote (and left unsent) a letter "blaming" *Mademoiselle* and its editors for Plath's 1953 breakdown. Speaking to Winder, Shawber comments: "I had felt all along that Sylvia was in the wrong job, and that *Mlle* had contributed to her breakdown. She should have been fiction editor. And what she experienced in her job must have been very hard on her, especially when her fantasy mind had distorted the whole picture so much beforehand" (89). Shawber's admission raises difficult questions all biographers must surely face: does the passing of time influence how biographical subjects are perceived? Why did Shawber compose a letter rebuking *Mademoiselle* in the 1970s, when Plath's breakdown had been in 1953? Perhaps by the 1970s, Shawber had learned the details of Plath's life and death after her guest editorship; had read *The Bell Jar*, and therefore was more inclined to blame *Mademoiselle* for events that transpired. As well as this, Winder's interviewees also demonstrate an inability to consider *The Bell Jar* as a fictional work. For



<sup>2</sup> In 2003, *Mademoiselle*'s ex guest-editors attended a reunion to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1953 summer edition of the magazine they worked on. The *New York Times* published an article documenting the lives of the women who had been "immortalized" by Plath in her novel. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/22/style/after-the-bell-jar-life-went-on.html>

example, while Carol LeVarn (who allegedly provided the inspiration for Doreen) considered the novel "a thorough betrayal," she also attacks the disparity between her personal traits and those of "her character" (245). Doreen is rarely seen without a cigarette or a chain smoking reference in Plath's novel, yet LeVarn – a committed non-smoker – was outraged at this character defamation.<sup>3</sup> These interviews with the ex-guest editors demonstrate problems that arise in trying to ascertain an authentic and balanced perception of Plath unmarked by the celebrity of her life post-*Mademoiselle*.

Despite these difficulties, Winder's *Pain, Parties and Work* is a hugely enjoyable read. Interviews with the ex-guest editors are fascinating, lively, and finding out information about their individual lives adds colour and depth to Plath's summer experience in New York, as well as scenes within *The Bell Jar*. Narrowing the focus of the biography to predominately concentrate on Plath's experience as an intern gives a real sense of the chaos, excitement, disappointments, adventures, and stresses that Plath and her peers experienced in the summer of 1953. Winder emphasizes the vulnerability, faux bravado, and evolving identities of all the women interning for *Mademoiselle* at this time and refreshingly, Winder's Plath does not emerge as a hungry man-eater, supreme perfectionist, or manic-depressive any more than the next young guest editor. The biography itself is written in a glossy, fashionable style with short chapters and large quotable catchphrases printed in a tabloid layout. This textual layout emphasizes the fashionable, commercial work and social environment Plath inhabited during her month in New York City. *Pain, Parties and Work* is unabashedly pop-culture conscious, detailing Plath's keen interest in clothes and make-up without dumbing her down. Imagining Plath as a stylish young woman whose complicated identity mirrored that of her peers is refreshing, youthful and captures a cosmopolitan, adventurous and inquisitive side of her persona: "She bought kitten heels in black patent leather. Then she walked – she loved walking. Alone, chicly – her fresh pumps wrapped and boxed in plain paper" (104).

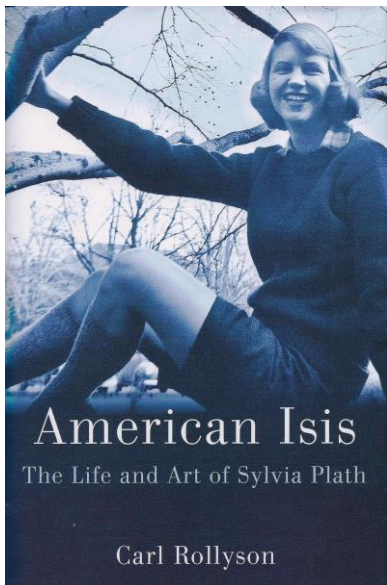
Linda Wagner-Martin has commented that: "most biographies of women are a blend of external and interior, and it is often the inclusion of women's private lives that creates the biographer's problems" (11). Certainly the struggle between Plath's external successes at *Mademoiselle* and interior personal struggles create difficult terrain for Winder to accurately

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<sup>3</sup> The unfavourable comments made by LeVarn echo the 1987 defamation of character dispute between Dr. Jane Anderson and the Sylvia Plath Estate. Dr. Anderson, who claimed to have been the inspiration for *The Bell Jar* character, Joan Gilling contested the depiction of the character in the 1979 film based on the novel. Accepting that Dr. Anderson had been "unintentionally defamed," Victor A. Kovner, attorney for the Plath Estate commented: "Until the courts recognize that fiction is entitled to a special measure of constitutional protection, claims by people who identify themselves with one character or another will continue to threaten expression by authors of fiction" (Witchel).

summarise. While Plath did enjoy elements of editorship life, fashion and being social, *Pain, Parties and Work* also competently documents her inability to cope with her stressful workload within a sweltering and often frightening cityscape. Neva Nelson Sachar chillingly recounts her standout memory of Plath – upset and disorientated on a subway platform in the wake of the Rosenberg's execution: "...standing there with her goose-bump-like welts all over her arms that were raised across her forehead, terrified by the scream of the subway and the sparks flying, as if she, too, were about to be electrocuted" (146). It is these intense glimpses of the young, politically aware Plath, slowly losing her grip on reality that give *Pain, Parties and Work* its depth and emotional draw. Winder's series of chapters on the "Aftermath" of Plath's summer in New York attempt to resolve the difficulties between Plath's external and internal struggles. Post-breakdown, Winder suggests that Plath indulged in both her "clean" and "filthy" selves with a "sly, calm sophistication," which she would also harness in the composition of her greatest works (240). Winder's biography offers an intriguing and thorough insight into Plath's youth, and presents a fuller image of the months that would later come to inspire *The Bell Jar*.

Winder concludes her book with a quotation likening Plath to Marilyn Monroe, having declared similarities between the two women occasionally throughout her biography such as, the "mixed messages" of their society and personalities; their willingness to pose in photographs, as well as more trivial elements like shared dietary aspirations (153, 240, 103).



Parallels between Plath and Monroe take a more central role in Carl Rollyson's *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath*. Rollyson is adamant that his pairing of Plath and Monroe is significant to the field and stresses commonalities between the two women often in his biography. Of the marriages between Plath and Hughes and Monroe and Arthur Miller, he writes: "Both men glommed onto wives who would extend their ranges by expanding their audiences... both men shrank from their wives' devouring aspirations" (5). Rollyson also places great emphasis on the importance of Plath's 1959 dream, where Monroe acts as a "fairy godmother" and administers an "expert manicure" to the poet (4). Throughout *American Isis*, Rollyson argues that the two women shared similar feelings of frustration brought on by restrictive societal norms as well as sexual, aesthetic and career-driven ambitions – so much so that Plath can be seen to represent the "Marilyn Monroe of the literati" (287). While it is certainly true that

aspects of Plath and Monroe's lives resemble one another, Rollyson's constant comparisons between the two women make it difficult to consider Plath in her own right. The biographical narrative is often so entwined with Monroe's own buxom story; the overall vision of *American Isis* is sometimes clouded. Further comparisons that liken Plath to Susan Sontag and Vivien Leigh also serve to complicate the biography.

However, what *American Isis* does offer with these comparisons is a new way of considering Sylvia Plath's image. Situating Plath's biography in context with film stars of her era and hip literary critics moves the poet away from darker poetic comparisons like that of Anne Sexton or John Keats. So, in the same way that Elizabeth Winder minimizes Plath's neurotic tendencies by noting that her fellow *Mlle* guest-editors demonstrated the same type of behaviour; Rollyson's creation of peers from Monroe, Sontag and Leigh suggest that Plath's positive and negative personality traits were not out of the ordinary. This approach creates space for new interpretation within the already crowded realm of Plath biographies. As a book, *American Isis* is exceptionally well-researched and admirably skews away from blame or supposition. Rollyson's Plath is complicated, fragmented, likeable, and very human. Ted Hughes and the various players in Plath's posthumous legacy are described without judgement – perhaps signifying a progressive and positive change within Plath studies as a whole. Rollyson offers a comprehensive examination of Plath's life, yet writes in a casual and often informal manner. This technique gives the biography a "light" feel, but the adept critical eye and the nuanced archival work conducted offers fascinating new insights to Plath's friendships, romances, opinions, and correspondences. Perhaps the most valuable aspects of this biography are the thorough dissection of Plath's girlhood correspondences, particularly with pen-pal Eddie Cohen who had detected "something was seriously amiss" with Plath more than a year before her 1953 breakdown (65). Rollyson's thoughtful interpretations of these letters reveal him to be an extremely sensitive biographer, with a keen awareness of his subject. While other Plath biographers (such as Andrew Wilson) have also examined Plath's correspondence with Eddie Cohen, it is *American Isis* that fully unearths their important relevance.

*American Isis* is an especially strong book in terms of first-person source documents. Appendixes located at the end of the biography include interviews and correspondence from Elizabeth Sigmund and David Wevill – these sources provide absorbing and emotional reading. Commenting on events in the aftermath of Plath's death, Sigmund emotively recounts: "So my first impression was here was a man absolutely destroyed by what had happened. He said, 'I hear the wolves howling.' [They were near the Regent's Park Zoo.] It

seems appropriate" (292). Rollyson's inclusion of these first-person sources adds new information to Plath's life story and provides an intimacy that many previous biographies have failed to produce. *American Isis* also benefits from the newly-released Ted Hughes archives, housed at the British Library. These documents, letters and diary entries provide a wealth of information in the chapters that deal with Plath's posthumous legacy, and indeed the complicated relationship between Plath and Olywn Hughes. *American Isis* is a worthwhile biography because it suggests that a new type of critical attitude can be achieved in regards to Plath's life story. In this book, Sylvia Plath is unclenched from catty memoirs and supposed death drives. Rollyson successfully marries Plath's life with her era, and his casual but precise narrative voice begins the process of removing age-old constrictions from this biographical oeuvre.

*Mad Girl's Love Song* by Andrew Wilson, *Pain Parties and Work* by Elizabeth Winder and *American Isis* by Carl Rollyson all contribute new findings and ask fresh questions of Plath scholarship. These biographies are a further testimony to the varied ways that Plath's image is represented in our contemporary consciousness. In 1993, Janet Malcolm wrote: "The many voices in which the dead girl spoke – the voices of the journals, of her letters, of *The Bell Jar*, of the short stories, of the early poems, of the *Ariel* poems – mocked the whole idea of a biographical narrative" (17). It is upon this backdrop that biographers try to navigate some thread of narrative to define who Sylvia Plath was. What these three biographies show is that there is still much to be written about Plath, and there are still many more masks and selves that can be appropriated onto her life and work.

The wide variation of Plath biographies demonstrated in these three texts illustrate how fluid identity can be, but by focusing on lesser-known aspects of Plath's life, or interpreting her life story differently, we, as critics, may be better equipped to interpret her writing in a more informed and varied manner.

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