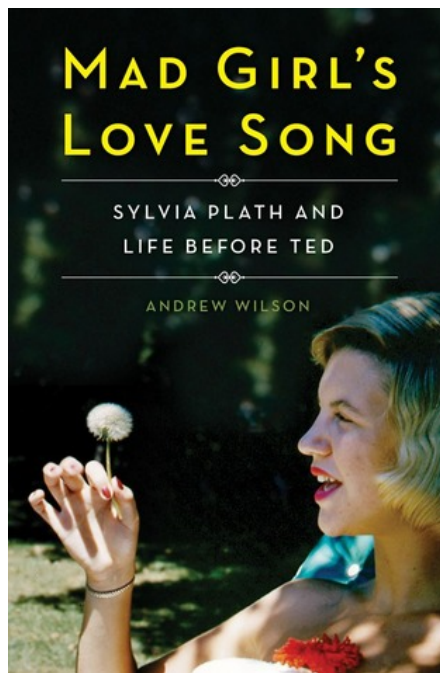




Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted

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A new biography of Sylvia Plath, a literary icon who continues to haunt, fascinate, and enthrall even now, fifty years after her death

On February 25 , 1956, twenty-three-year-old Sylvia Plath walked into a party and immediately spotted Ted Hughes. This encounter—now one of the most famous in all of literary history—was recorded by Plath in her journal, where she described Hughes as a “big, dark, hunky boy.” Sylvia viewed Ted as something of a colossus, and to this day his enormous shadow has obscured her life and work. The sensational aspects of the Plath-Hughes relationship have dominated the cultural landscape to such an extent that their story has taken on the resonance of a modern myth.

Before she met Ted, Plath had lived a complex, creative, and disturbing life. Her father had died when she was only eight; she had gone out with literally hundreds of men, had been unofficially engaged, had tried to commit suicide, and had written more than two hundred poems. *Mad Girl's Love Song* chronicles these early years, traces the sources of her mental instability, and examines how a range of personal, economic, and societal factors—the real disquieting muses— conspired against her.

Drawing on exclusive interviews with friends and lovers who have never spoken openly about Plath before and using previously unavailable archives and papers, this is the first book to focus on the early life of the twentieth century's most popular and enduring female poet. *Mad Girl's Love Song* reclaims Sylvia Plath from the tangle of emotions associated with her relationship with Ted Hughes and reveals the origins of her unsettled and unsettling voice.

Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted Details

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From Reader Review Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted for online ebook

Selina says

Sylvia Plath, 50 years on.

With this new biography I think she can be laid to rest, her suicide no longer a haunting mystery, for me anyway.

Was she mad? Unquestionably, but what drove her mad? Some are the clues examined in her life before Ted, come to light. She was an 'angry young woman' a scholarship student who needed to carve out a living so as not to be a burden to her widowed mother. With no father, she dated hundreds of men searching for something she never had. She was jealous, bitter and envious of well off girls around her, and often used people as characters for her stories - a vampiric tendency others noted. Nobody really knew the inner turmoil she concealed beneath a sunny exterior, but cracks soon began to show. Why did she marry Ted? To make another man she was dating jealous. It could not last, no relationship really did. And yet she was a genius wordsmith, casting spells with words.

How do we know all this? Thanks to her mother, every detail of her life, letters, journal entries, account books were preserved in archives and libraries. Plath's complex narcissistic personality and obsessive introspection created what in effect was her own fame. She gloried in herself, and wanted the world to know it. Today, she would have been tweeting and facebooking and blogging, probably having a huge following, and casting snide comments on everyone around her.

If this biography is to be believed...and it's actually a very good biography with interviews from people who thought they knew her. What people knew of her was a fragmented persona she cultivated that was different each time. Lady Lazarus indeed.

Moir Russell says

Damn this book is disappointing. It has a wonderful premise -- after all, Sylvia Plath met Ted Hughes in a famous collision in early 1956, when she was twenty-three, and the couple separated in the summer of 1962, after which Plath wrote most of the poems which made her famous, in a single autumn. As the jacket flap copy of this book says, "Before she met Ted....her father had died when she was only eight; she had....been unofficially engaged, had tried to commit suicide, and had written more than two hundred poems," as well as winning dozens of scholarships and awards, many for important publications.

Read the rest of my review at my bookblog.

Ellen says

First off, I must admit that I have been both a student and teacher of Plath's poetry since the 1970s, and I have read most biographies and a number of critical studies regarding her work. In fact, when I emigrated to Britain from the US, I actually moved a number of said books with me at a time when I was whittling down my overall collection to save on shipping. In other words, I'm a fan and a scholar of sorts.

When I first saw this book last weekend, I was intrigued. New books on Plath are to be expected this year, the 50th anniversary of both *The Bell Jar*'s publication and Plath's suicide. However, what makes this one stand out from even some of the previous biographies is that this one focuses on Plath pre-Ted Hughes and doesn't spend a lot of time analysing their relationship, which, to some extent, is kind of refreshing.

Wilson has done his research. He has trawled through the collections at Smith College, the Lilly Library, Cambridge University and various other sources, many of which are private. Previous interviews completed by other journalists and biographers are referenced, as some of the sources, such as Aurelia Plath, are deceased. (Really, this is the time to get in those last interviews with Plath's contemporaries, considering their advanced ages. Has it really been 50 years? Did Eddie Cohen really die in 2008? *sigh*) However, he also has completed extensive new interviews with various people close to Plath (or even people who simply knew her) to try to write as complete an account as possible of her life up to meeting Hughes at the St. Botolph's launch party. (And, yes, I've had students analysing and writing about that particular Hughes poem.)

Basically, I give this book a very positive review because, although I thought I'd read and studied a lot about Plath's 'early' years, I learned new information this time around, which is quite pleasing. This book isn't merely another recount of the 1953 suicide attempt, and I recommend it.

Andie says

In the 50 years since Sylvia Plath's suicide, her biographic legacy has been controlled by people who had much to lose by an honest interpretation of her life - namely her mother and her ex-husband. Now, however, with those parties dead, a more honest assessment of Plath, both as an artist and as a woman can be made. The first step in the process, perhaps, was the publication in 2000 of Plath's unabridged journals. But Andrew Wilson's look at her life up until her marriage to Ted Hughes is much, much more.

Drawing on her journals, letters and exhaustive interviews with her contemporaries from childhood through her college years, Wilson paints the portrait of a young woman who felt confined by the stultifying society of the 1950's as well as her smothering mother. The result was a that Plath was consumed with rage: against society, her self-sacrificing mother, her lack of money and social standing and a perpetual fear of not being good enough in her chosen vocation as a writer.

That she was talented, there is no doubt. Would I have liked to have been her friend? I doubt that too.

Roman Clodia says

Life before Ted Hughes

There are many biographies of Plath, and they frequently take issue with each other. What makes this one different is that Wilson de-centres the more usual arc of her life and focuses on Sylvia's life before she met Ted Hughes.

Taking her from childhood till she came to study at Cambridge where, of course, she met Hughes and married him within four months, this gives us a slightly different Plath. Wilson has interviewed many people who knew Sylvia in her school and student days, and has tried to work from her journals and letters rather than previous biographies. This gives a freshness to the narrative though, inevitably, biographical readings of

Plath's own fiction lead us into some familiar territory.

What we can know about Plath and her inner life is always partial and compromised, and it's interesting to ponder what was unique to Plath in this story of adolescence and young womanhood in the repressive 1950s, and what was, in fact, the story of a generation. Precisely because she is Sylvia Plath there is an urge to make her experiences uniquely her own, and there is an inevitable hindsight, given her end, in reading back through her life: it all seems to point inevitably and teleologically to that kitchen in Primrose Hill when in reality, Plath could have had a very different life had she so chosen.

Plath herself comes over as a strange and compelling mix of arrogance and insecurity, an acutely narcissistic personality whose only subject of all her writings was herself. So this is a very good biography of a troubled woman which adds to the mythology – and it's nice that that mythology can, for once, be Plath's alone rather than one shared with Hughes.

Anna Maria Ballester Bohn says

I agree with other reviewers, this was quite disappointing. Not only is it sloppily written, the insights are also sloppy. Wilson peppers his text with insinuations and questions that are barely backed by evidence and abound in infuriating formulations like "Was it possible that...?" If you are going to speculate, at least have the honesty and courage of going all the way, put yourself out there and say: "This is what I think happened."

The only reason I gave this two stars is because I did get interesting information I didn't have before about periods of time that are not covered in the published journals, and other points of view about her, including her many affairs, especially Gordon Lameyer and Richard Sassoon (and also the awful incident in Harvard Summer School). It also raised the interesting question about the appropriateness of her psychological treatment. Would her life have been different if she hadn't been released so soon from the mental hospital?

There was so much potential in this book, but it's superficial at best. Not recommended unless you are VERY interested in Sylvia Plath and you just need to know.

Aniko Carmean says

I have a bookshelf dedicated to my Plath studies. In addition to Plath's published works, the shelf holds works of her major influencers (Hughes, Roethke, Woolf), the works of contemporary poets Plath knew (Lowell, Sexton) and several biographies. MAD GIRL'S LOVE SONG: SYLVIA PLATH AND LIFE BEFORE TED by Andrew Wilson is the latest addition to my collection. My interest in Plath borders on mystical fascination. I am attracted to the mystery of a human touching, conducting, and embodying the incandescence Plath channeled. I read her poetry, and taste the saffron and wine counterpart to Whitman's "tasteless water of Souls." In short: I read all about Plath because I want to understand. I want to understand even though I intuit that there can be no true "understanding" inspiration, but like any devoted mystic, I keep trying to reach that place beyond rational understanding, a kind of otherworldly participation. That's why I picked up MAD GIRL'S LOVE SONG, which promised a new perspective on Plath's life. Plus: the elusive Sassoon speaks! That alone was worth the price of admission.

Sheer titillation drew me through MAD GIRL'S LOVE SONG, which was replete with breathy "confessions" from Plath's ex-lovers. Most of her exes offered plenty of non-medical opinions tinged with the salacious nature of a jilted Lothario's revisionism. Plath is pronounced: schizophrenic, manic, depressed, sexually

repressed, pathologically perfectionist, and as having borderline personality disorder. The overall picture of Plath is unstable and entirely unlikeable. This is the nasty effluvia of long-festering romantic wounds, not a realistic picture of Plath as an individual. MAD GIRL'S LOVE SONG traces the trajectory of a sexually repressed woman, who is reborn into a rapacious sexuality. If even half of the recounted jilts are true, Plath was unkind to the men in her life. She liked having a steady, husband-in-waiting even as she experimented with kinky math profs and the enigmatic Sassoon.

The only portion of the biography that rises above lurid post-mortem examination of Plath's sexual proclivities is the viewpoint provided by Eddie Cohen. Eddie is a thoughtful, well-spoken writer. His words, unlike the rest of what is presented from Plath's exes, were written when he was in a long-term (Platonic) relationship with Plath. There is an immediacy to Eddie's missives; they are not shaped by Plath's fame, nor are they tainted by decades of resentment against an inaccessible target (a dead woman). Eddie may have wanted Plath, but was enough of a friend to keep writing even after she was horrifically rude to him when he paid her a surprise visit. Eddie enjoyed his discourse with Plath because of who she was and who she could choose to become. He may have been Plath's best friend, and it is a shame that none of Plath's correspondence to Eddie was available for the book.

Plath had female friends... kind of. Wilson refers to them as Plath's "doubles." The women are pale, barely mentioned, and basically empty. Perhaps none of them knew her well, although a few are happy enough to dwell on Plath's "bad" behavior. MAD GIRL'S LOVE SONG gives a picture of Plath as a woman who spent her time in the company of men, and had few and tenuous relationships with other women. This is not all that different from many of the other biographies or, indeed, Plath's own journals. She was a woman who felt her power and her potential in the company of men, and MAD GIRL'S LOVE SONG is happy to produce the annotated F*ck-A-Log of Plath's every sexual encounter.

Wilson proposes that in addition to her voracious sexuality, Plath's economic insecurity, perfectionism, and lack of fixed identity precipitated her suicide. It's an interesting set of premises that are sadly lost in the static of WSD (Who Sylvia Did). Wilson never considers that the existence of a "fixed self" is not something that is whole and complete in a person under thirty. Trying on different personas is not inherently a sign of mental illness, but rather the way in which a girl learns what kind of woman she will be. It is a shame Plath never got to enjoy the fullness of self that comes with age. This sense of something incomplete, of something interrupted mid-thought: this is what MAD GIRL'S LOVE SONG has in common with Plath.

Petra says

An interesting, detailed account on Sylvia Plath's life before she met her husband Ted. It is based on primary sources, such as Plath's letters and diaries and interviews of people that knew Plath. It is very well written but very heavy on psychological details which makes it sometimes very hard to get through. It is hard to see how much Plath struggled in her life but I thought that her mental health was a bit too heavily highlighted.

Petra X says

I've just read this and her largely autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, both of which changed my opinion of Plath. I don't like her any better but I have a better understanding of who she was. She was without doubt a very talented writer. But as well as her desire to write, she was equally motivated in her life by her great bitterness at not having been born into the moneyed classes with the consequent entre to a glittering social

life of foreign travel, shopping and rich young men. Her talent was recognised at an early age and rather than pursuing it with how she presented herself to the world, she appeared happy to look fey and neurasthenic and a bit strange for the sake of being strange. But then, perhaps that choice of style was to do with her age, wanting to stand out as teenagers often do, rather than with her madness.

Madness and it's treatment are always interesting, I think. Just how someone's thought processes change and the sometimes medieval-sounding ways doctors and other charlatans attempt to restore the troubled mind back to where it can function in a 'normal' world. It is especially interesting, to me, in authors and artists where the products of a very different mindset and frame of reference add another dimension to their work.

To me the best chronicler of her own madness was the New Zealand author Janet Frame. Plath wasn't spectacularly mad like Frame, but more deeply disordered in a quiet and depressive fashion. Her experiences in the mental hospital weren't as frighteningly horrible as Frame's either. Or perhaps they were, involving involuntary shock therapy, but the author, Andrew Wilson, is not a writer of the calibre of Frame.

I couldn't find anything in *The Bell Jar* that seemed a product of a disordered mind but maybe it is more apparent in her poems, which I haven't read, not much liking poetry these days. Maybe I should read it again in the light of this biography.

The book wasn't a bad read at all, I did like it, but Plath did not have an attractive personality (to me) and that influences me as much as the writing and content of the book. Perhaps it shouldn't, but it is hard to divorce the subject of a biography from the writing about it.

I may change my opinion of this book, and consequently this review, on thinking about *The Bell Jar*. But for now, 3.5 stars, rounded down because it wasn't quite a gripping 4-star book.

J.S. Watts says

I've read many books on Plath, as part of my degree and after, and while this book is a fresh take on parts of her life not fully covered elsewhere, it is a bit of a disappointment. It is sloppily written and edited (the quantity of typos in my Simon and Shuster edition were surprising for a quality hardback) and is fundamentally a superficial journalistic, rather than an in-depth academic, piece.

Wilson has apparently done his research in the Smith archives and elsewhere, but he has a tendency to report opinion as fact and make dramatic assertions without corroborating evidence.

This is an okay read if you've already read around the topic and can sort fact from soap-drama opinion, but if you're new to the story of Plath's life, you could well have trouble sorting evidenced fact from speculative fiction.

There was a good book waiting to be written on this period of Plath's development and its impact on her writing, but this isn't it.

Bettie? says

BOTW R4

BBC Blurb: On 25 February 1956, 23 year-old Sylvia Plath walked into a party and immediately spotted Ted Hughes. This encounter was recorded by Plath in her journal and has fed into the mythology of the Plath-Hughes relationship, which has arguably cast a long shadow over Plath's life and work. In this new biography of Plath's early life, which considers the years before the meeting with Hughes, Andrew Wilson explores the childhood and young womanhood of one of the twentieth century's most influential and best-loved poets. Plath's early years were complex, creative and high-achieving. Her father had died when she was only eight, she had watched her mother struggle to put her children through college, had dated a large number of men, had been unofficially engaged, had tried to commit suicide and had written over 200 poems. Drawing on exclusive interviews with friends and lovers who have never spoken openly about Plath before, and using previously unavailable archives and papers, this new book traces the early literary and emotional development of the author of *'The Bell Jar'* (this week's Radio 4 Book at Bedtime).

Read by Hayley Atwell Sylvia Plath is read by Sasha Pick, Eddie Cohen by Ben Crowe, Richard Sassoon by Will Howard and Aurelia Plath by Hannah Wood Abridged by Miranda Davies Produced by Emma Harding.

12/02/2013 - two out of five episodes aired and I am finding it entirely pedestrian.

Holly says

I've been looking at Plath as part of my extra English studies and as such, this book seemed like a good place to begin. There are a plethora of biographies which focus on Plath after meeting Ted Hughes, it is truly refreshing to read Wilson's account of Plath growing up.

Perhaps it is simply my adoration of Plath's work that compels me to rate this as highly as I have, however, it is so well sourced and populated with primary sources of information that I think it is deserving. It is obviously advisable to read another biography in addition, this one ends quite abruptly before her story is finished - shortly after meeting Ted Hughes.

I read *'The Bell Jar'* both before and after reading this. It is amazing how biographical knowledge of Plath changed my response to her novel. It is almost impossible to view her work completely objectively and I do not claim to try. Knowing more of the person has inspired my readings of her novel and poetry, *'Mad Girl's Love Song'* has been a constant reference point for me during my studies.

I have little skill in reviews so I'll stop here. I can honestly say it was a joy to read Wilson's work, he has benefited my own work more than he can know. I would recommend this to anyone interested in Plath, either academically or casually (if interest in Plath can ever be casual), it is certainly one of the better biographies I have read.

Kirsty says

I shall begin this review by saying that I am an enormous admirer of Sylvia Plath's work. I was utterly spellbound by *The Bell Jar* and her poetry as a teenager, and never wanted her diaries and *Letters Home* to end. I have read a fair amount of biographical criticism relating to Plath, but interestingly, *Mad Girl's Love Song* is the only one which I have come across that deals solely with her early life; as Plath deemed it, 'the complex mosaic of my childhood'. A wealth of information has been contained here about her childhood, some from 'previously unavailable archives'. Wilson has chosen to draw on primary materials rather than other biographies; thus, any conclusions which he draws are essentially his own.

Wilson has linked almost every single one of Plath's childhood memories to one or more of her poems; here, he writes particularly intelligently. Throughout, his prose style is enjoyable. A strength in *Mad Girl's Love Song* lies in the psychological standpoint, which is both strong and fascinating. I loved reading about the effects which certain books had upon Plath, and the criticism of *The Bell Jar*, much of which I hadn't come across before. As always, I very much enjoyed the accounts of Plath's life in Cambridge, my home city.

I have a slight issue with the way in which Wilson categorically states that he will take no other Plath biographies into account. Surely to create a full picture of the author in his mind, he must have read at least a handful of her biographies in the past, and one surely cannot part with the conclusions of other experts so easily as he claims to do. In terms of Plath scholarship, I do not feel as though the book adds a great deal of new or previously unknown information. There are many anecdotes included within the pages of *Mad Girl's Love Song* which I have read before, which takes a certain freshness away from his endeavour.

Still, one cannot argue with the fact that the scope here is vast, and that Wilson has been respectful in his handling of the material. Ultimately, Plath was a fascinating woman, and no account of her could really be dull. I cannot help but compare it to my favourite Plath biography to date, *Bitter Fame* by Anne Stevenson, which I feel is incredibly thorough and invigorating, and also takes the whole of Plath's life into account. Whilst Wilson's approach is interesting, I do not feel as though the sheer depth of Plath has been reached. I must take issue with the afterword though; at only two pages long, I honestly feel as though the book would have been far better had Wilson not skipped over so many important details and 'neatly' summed up her suicide.

Christina says

Quite possibly the best Plath biography ever, without taking sides. Sylvia was, after all, only human, and some people loved her, some people hated her, and some really didn't understand her - we get testimonies from all camps in this book. Even the ever evasive Richard Sassoon makes an appearance! Shoots Anne Stevenson's book out of the water. If only we had a sequel with life after Ted... hear that, Mr Wilson?

Amber Vrenna says

I absolutely loved this book!
