

# Poets in Suicide Sex Shocker!

Janet Malcolm explores the lurid obsession with Sylvia Plath

By ANDREA SACHS

JUST BECAUSE CONNOISSEURS OF poetry rarely read the *National Enquirer* doesn't mean they don't crave sensationalism. Witness the enduring legend of Sylvia Plath more than three decades after the writer's death. Certainly Plath's reputation as a fierce, accomplished poet has endured, but it is the shocking story of her life that really fascinates the literary public.

The details of Plath's suicide have assumed totemic significance for a cult of followers who regard her as St. Sylvia, the high priestess of suffering. On Feb. 11, 1963, she put her head in a gas oven in her London apartment as her two children, for whom she had left glasses of milk and a plate of bread and butter, slept in a nearby bedroom. Plath's husband Ted Hughes, a great poet who is now England's poet laureate, had left her months earlier for another woman. Before her death, few had ever heard of the 30-year-old American expatriate. But with the posthumous publication of *Ariel*, the bleak, violent yet beautiful volume of poetry she produced in the last months of her life, Plath's legend was born. In 1971 *The Bell Jar*, Plath's novel about her nervous breakdown during college, was published in America and became wildly popular.

If Sylvia Plath were alive today, she would be a venerable 61 years old. (Given the shift in the times, she also might be on Prozac.) But the poet who dies young is remembered in her youthful glory, a literary James Dean. Attention to Plath's life has been paid in inverse proportion to its brevity: five exhaustive biographies have been written about her. In addition, everyone who ever had lunch with Plath has seemingly felt compelled to write a memoir.

Unlike Plath, who found eternal youth, those who shared her life have had to weather the ravages of time, not to mention public opprobrium. Janet Malcolm, the latest writer to mine the Plath myth, compares the spread of gossip about the poet to "an oil spill in the devastation it wreaked among Plath's survivors, who to this day are like birds cov-

ered with black ooze." No one has been more fouled by the Plath oobleck than Hughes. In *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Knopf; 208 pages; \$23), Malcolm chronicles how generations of feminist writers have reviled Hughes for abandoning Plath and for tampering with and even destroying her work. (Hughes' reputation has not been helped by the fact that the woman for whom he left Plath, in a macabre déjà vu, also gassed herself to death.)

Malcolm is sympathetic to Hughes, although he nonetheless comes off poorly in her book, willing to sell the American rights to *The Bell Jar*, which Plath had published under a pseudonym in England and which her mother did not want to be published in the U.S., in order to buy a third home. Where Plath is concerned, Hughes plays two roles that are hopelessly in conflict: he is both Plath's faithless

for her absent brother. Malcolm gets no closer to the poet than the other Plathian detectives who have stalked him. She is reduced to lurking around the outside of his British home, uninvited.

The tug-of-war between the Hugheses and the Plath scholars gives Malcolm the opportunity to explore the biographer's craft, which she likens to the work of "the professional burglar, breaking into a house." The

book also represents Malcolm's answer to her own critics. Last June a jury in a widely publicized libel suit by psychoanalyst Jeffrey Masson found that Malcolm had fabricated quotations in a series of articles about him for the *New Yorker*. Despite her setback in court, Malcolm remains undeterred; *The Silent Woman* appeared in the *New Yorker* shortly after the trial, and Malcolm has not muted her in-

tense, opinionated style.

Malcolm has a tendency to hog the stage; her sense of identification with Plath as another literary young lady of the 1950s is so often trumpeted that readers not interested in purchasing an autobiography of Janet Malcolm should

consider themselves forewarned. But when Malcolm remembers her subject, she is insightful. Plath's appeal, suggests Malcolm, lies in her "not-niceness," her willingness to say what many feel but dare not articulate. Plath "was able—she had been elected—to confront what most of the rest of us fearfully shrank from," writes Malcolm. Furthermore, Plath gave voice to feminism before its time, instinctively distrusting the domestic limitations imposed on women of her generation.

Too many biographies later, the memory of Sylvia Plath has worn thin, like a game of telephone where the original message has been lost in the retelling. When an acquaintance of

Plath's confides in *The Silent Woman* that she has gone to a hypnotist to retrieve further memories of the poet, the reader understands that it is time to go back to the source. The true, meaningful record of this poet is near at hand—in her writings. It is there that Sylvia Plath—harsh, brilliant, astonishing—may be found.



MALCOLM: Parallels between herself and Plath



LITERARY JAMES DEAN: Hughes and Plath in 1956; he endures the trials of age, while her tragic death preserved her youth and beauty

husband and also her literary executor, so whenever a writer is denied access to Plath's papers, he or she can accuse Hughes of trying to cover up his own guilt. He grants no interviews and has written no memoir. Instead of Hughes, Plath's biographers have had to deal with Olwyn, Hughes' cranky older sister, who has served as a combative intermediary