A reply to “Sylvia Plath is hardly present: a review of Sylvia, directed by Christine Jeffs”

4 December 2003

To the editor:

Sylvia Plath 1932-1963

Sylvia Plath’s extremely inward looking poetry can only be judged objectively in the context of her prose. *The Bell Jar* is one of the novels that blazed the way for a new genre—post-World War II teenage fiction. Understood in this light, it stands the test of time. Its adoption by the feminist fraternity cannot take away from its ground-breaking contribution in making adolescent angst part of the literary landscape. Roughly at the same time as *Catcher in the Rye*, Plath created a protagonist—Esther—who is just as torn as Holden Caulfield by the agonising choice between rebellion and conformity. And Plath reflects the uneasy mood of postwar United States through her character’s observations more sharply even than J.D. Salinger does through Holden and Phoebe.

The first sentence of *The Bell Jar*, in Esther’s voice, sets one’s teeth on edge. “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.” A scholarship winner from a small town, feted with 11 other girls chosen to work as journalist cadets, and completely uncertain of her social and sexual identity, Esther affects a flippant attitude towards the impending execution.

But after a bout of food poisoning, sitting in the cafeteria with another girl, Esther asks her opinion.

“I said, ‘Isn’t it awful about the Rosenbergs?’

“The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted late that night.

“‘Yes!’ Hilda said, and at last I felt I had touched a human string in the cat’s cradle of her heart. It was only as the two of us waited for the others in the tomb-like morning gloom of the conference room that Hilda amplified that Yes of hers.

“‘It’s awful such people should be alive.’

“She yawned then, and her pale orange mouth opened on a large darkness. Fascinated, I stared at the blind cave behind her face until the two lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding place, ‘I’m so glad they’re going to die.’”

Esther careers between the ridiculous and the tragic. Plath counterposes Esther’s suicide attempt that inspires the title of the book with the most comic loss of virginity in modern English fiction.

It is interesting to compare Plath’s innovations in fiction with those of her husband, Ted Hughes, for there was undoubtedly a jagged edge of rivalry between them as writers. His prose ventures were a reworking of fantasy and ancient history within the fantasy fiction genre Tolkien opened up with spectacular success when *Lord of the Rings* found an audience of both children and adults.

But Plath sailed into the relatively uncharted waters of the modern world seen through the eyes of young people—teenagers—and helped begin a literary trend that has exploded since, commensurate with the expansion of secondary education internationally.

Over the last four or five decades a differentiation has taken place—and teenage fiction writers have staked out their own territory completely independent from children’s’ literature, that obviously has a much older pedigree.

But by the second half of the twentieth century, mass education systems were educating millions of potential readers in all the advanced industrialised nations.

Plath describes this process in a wry 1963 essay entitled “America! America!”

Literature had to adapt itself to this new pool of potential readers if it was to survive.

This was not necessarily a development that was consciously planned by the writers. J.R.R. Tolkien was completely nonplussed by his enormous sales and huge

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popularity. J.D. Salinger had to wall himself away from the world and refuse to play the literary lion that the sales figures of his books easily enabled him to become. As for Plath, she dismissed her novel completely, telling her mother to mention it to no one. “It’s a potboiler and just practice.”

Finding it impossible in 1960s society as a single mother with children to live and work as a writer, Plath succumbed to prevailing social mores that demanded conformism. Compare her attempts to battle on alone with the efforts of J.R. Rawlings in recent years in producing *Harry Potter.*

Plath’s mother wrote in editing a posthumous edition of her letters, that by the time the novel, under a pseudonym, appeared in the London bookstores, Plath was “ill, exhausted, and overwhelmed by the responsibilities she had to shoulder alone—the care of the children, the bitter cold and darkness of the winter, and the terrible solitude she faced nightly.”

Obviously had Plath lived she would have been strengthened by the emergence of a plethora of writers who sought to bridge the literary gap between childhood and adulthood, and thus have the opportunity to reflect on the importance of her own novel.

To name only a few in English and not in chronological order—in America, *Bless the Beasts and Children* by Glendon Swarthout, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, as well as *My Darling, My Hamburger* et al by Paul Zindel. In England *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* by Alan Sillitoe and *Kestrel for a knave* by Barry Hines, and in Ireland *Borstal Boy* by Brendan Behan as well as Edna O’ Brien’s *The Country Girls* trilogy.

Writers of teenage fiction today have a platform provided for them by earlier writers, which in Plath’s day was barely discernible. For all the literary faults, and it has many, her novel opened a new road that can only be properly appreciated in hindsight.

In a 1962 essay entitled “Context” she wrote a moving plea for the relevance of her poetry and that of her contemporaries as well. “I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far—among strangers, around the world, even. Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescriptions of a doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime.”

Margaret Rees

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