

Sylvia Plath in Context
edited by Tracy Brain
Cambridge University Press, 419 pp
review by Erica Wagner

As the poet Fiona Sampson writes in her essay, “After Plath: The Legacy of Influence”, Sylvia Plath is one of the most widely read of 20th-century poets. “Substantial editions of her work have been published in thirty languages, from Arabic to Vietnamese. She has been cited by figures as diverse as Lemony Snicket (there’s a ‘Plath Pass’ in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*) and Lady Gaga (in her 2009 track ‘Dance in the Dark’).” [350] But as Sampson rightly notes, it is not just the breadth of her popularity that makes her such a significant figure in the cultural landscape. Plath “stands both as a kind of gatekeeper and as a permission giver, [sic] particularly for women writing poetry in Britain today.” [355]

The question – which this whole volume addresses in a variety of ways – is whether it is Plath’s life or Plath’s work which is gatekeeper and permission-giver. Such is the fascination with her life story that the two are, more often than not, conflated, as Sampson acknowledges when she states that “The Romanticisation of Plath’s literary work as spontaneous creation poses a number of difficulties for the poet’s literary legacy.” [351] And Sampson herself seems to fall into the trap, at least grammatically. “A poet who is so widely read as to become pretty much universally known among Anglophone poets becomes part of the toolbox of contemporary poetics.” [355] I would argue that a poet cannot become part of a toolbox; poetry, or poetic effect, can. A minor slip, perhaps: but one that seems more significant, in Plath’s case, than it might in the case of another writer.

Sampson is certainly correct to acknowledge that it is almost impossible to imagine the poetry of the late 20th and early 21st centuries without the influence of Sylvia Plath. This is something many readers and poets would take for granted, and yet it is, in fact, extraordinary. [The New York Times published her obituary](#) not when she died, in 1963, but in the spring of last year, as part of their “Overlooked” series, which sets out to rectify the obituary section’s historic bias in favour of white men. Yet – unlike many of the other people whose lives have been belatedly marked by this fine project -- there would have been no reason for the *New York Times* to have noted Plath’s life or work at the time she died, at 30. She had published a single book of poems, *The Colossus*; her novel, *The Bell Jar*, appeared in Britain the month before her death under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. It was Ted Hughes – from whom she had separated but from whom she was not divorced – who ensured that the manuscript she left on her desk before she committed suicide saw the light of day. *Ariel*, published in 1965 in the UK and 1966 in the US, made her name – as she had known it would.

In Brain's book more than thirty contributors – poets, academics, novelists – present their individual visions of Plath's work, their essays arranged into eight groups, ranging from "Literary Contexts" to "Sexual and Gender Contexts", from "Biographical Contexts" to "Plath and Place". "Situating Plath's writing within a wide frame of references that reach beyond any single notion of self," Brain writes in her introduction, "*Sylvia Plath in Context* will be a vital resource for students, teachers, scholars and general readers."

Brain's confidence is well-founded: these contributions remind the reader of why Plath is worthy of such close attention. Jonathan Ellis, Reader in American Literature at Sheffield University, quotes from her journals in considering her place in the American poetry scene. "Nothing is real except the present, and already, I feel the weight of centuries smothering me," she wrote in 1950, the summer before she left for Smith College. "Some girl a hundred years ago lived as I do. And she is dead. I am the present, but I know I, too, will pass." [13] Her vivid written voice, her apparently preternatural understanding of her place in the continuum of life and in the poetic canon leap off the page: and one of the reasons her poetry endures, I would argue, is because "I am the present" rings in every line she wrote.

Ellis, drawing on the work of Peter K. Steinberg -- co-editor of the two-volume *Letters of Sylvia Plath* -- usefully uses *American Poetry Now*, a pamphlet anthology edited by Plath and published in 1961, to illustrate the way she might have been thinking about her own poetic practice; this essay is useful in broadening the usual discourse around Plath's ideas and influences, which so often focuses on the work of Ted Hughes, and that of Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell. [20-21]

But one of the most interesting aspects of this volume is the way in which it highlights Plath's deep engagement not only with literature but with the physical world. Reading her letters and journals, and of course her poetry, it swiftly becomes apparent how much pleasure she took in *being*: in the clothes she wore, the food she ate, the way she looked at her surroundings, the way she felt the sun on her skin. Yes, there is darkness in her work and in her life, but more often there is joy and relish. Novelist Gerard Woodward takes on the delicious subject of Sylvia Plath's relationship with food to mostly fine effect; one of the pleasures of reading some of the early missives in the first volume of her *Collected Letters*, as Woodward notes, is the blissful greediness in her accounts of life at summer camp in the 1940s. "How're these menus: Lunch – two bowls of vegetable soup, loads of peanut butter, four pieces of coffee cake, chocolate cake and marsh mellow sauce, three cups of milk..." [120] [NB "marsh mellow" is correct]

But perhaps Woodward does not make enough of how this appetite – only one of her powerful appetites, for her romantic and sexual appetites were clearly as strong – went against the grain of what was, and still is, perceived as acceptable for women. As feminist scholar Kate Harding notes in "Women-haters Were Like Gods: *The Bell Jar* and Violence Against Women in 1950s America" Esther Greenwood's metaphor for the dieting culture as prevalent then as it is now amounts to a kind of "spiritual self-annihilation": "Almost everybody I met in New York was trying to

reduce,” Esther says. [181] Woodward does remark on the way in which Elizabeth Winder, one of Plath’s biographers, wrote that her appetite for food was an act of social courage and gender non-conformity; [125] it would have been possible, however, to draw out this thread to greater effect.

That said, one must always be careful in drawing any firm conclusions about the nature of this quicksilver woman, this wondrous artist, who left such a mark on the world in the brief time she was in it. The variety of Tracy Brain’s *Sylvia Plath in Context* is a fine tribute to both her skill and to her elusiveness. This is eloquently captured by Peter K. Steinberg in an essay towards the end of the book: he looks in detail at Plath’s scrapbooks, poignant, fragile artefacts which “have a relatively low profile on ‘critical radar screens’.” [276] Made while she was in high school and at Smith College, the scrapbooks are a “hybrid” of her private and public selves, a record made with clippings, photographs and notes of her activities, her dating life, and testaments to the beginning of a writing career. They are especially valuable, he writes, for the period between July 1953 and June 1954: in the wake of her suicide attempt in the summer of 1953, she kept no journal. The scrapbooks offer “Plath’s view of herself in a different yet complementary way to her diaries, journals, pocket calendars and letters.” [282]

And the scrapbooks too give evidence that she knew, from quite early on, what kind of artist she might be. Into her high school scrapbook she pasted a writing aptitude review, dated 27 October, 1948 – her sixteenth birthday. Although “Miss Plath muffed the peak of drama” she “is an interesting person with real possibilities. She thinks straight. Chooses words skillfully [*sic.*] from good vocabulary. Writes with pleasing touch that a little well-directed practice would shape into rigorous finished style.” [279-80]

Brain’s rich collection of essays on Plath’s work shows just how seriously she took that advice to heart.

Erica Wagner’s most recent book is *Chief Engineer: Washington Roebling, The Man Who Built the Brooklyn Bridge* (Bloomsbury). She is Lecturer in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths College, London.