

# Searching for Sylvia

Facebook and an unopened box of treasures helped Andrew Wilson shed new light on the young Sylvia Plath

*Andrew Wilson* Published: 17 February 2013



'Vibrant': one of a series of pictures Gordon Lameyer took of Plath during their time together in the 1950s (Simon & Schuster)

The day I arrived in Boston, at the end of January 2011, the city was hit by a snowstorm. I had flown in from London to start work on *Mad Girl's Love Song*, my new biography of the American poet Sylvia Plath. The next day, the blizzard raged with such intensity that the authorities closed the airport and the streets became impassable. Stuck in my hotel room, I was reminded of a line from Plath's 1961 poem *Tulips*: "Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in."

Unable to venture out, I turned on my computer and started to make a list of the families who had lived on the same street as Plath when she was growing up in Wellesley, a suburb just outside the city. One name — Cruickshank — stood out because of its unusual nature. This was a name one could trace. I got to work on the internet, and within a couple of minutes had found a Facebook page for a daughter of William and

Dorinda Pell Cruickshank, who had lived next door to the Plaths on Elmwood Road. I checked Blair's entry in the phone book and discovered she was living in Natick, just outside Boston. I sent her a message and received a reply within the hour. Indeed she was the same person who had lived next door to Sylvia Plath, and although she was, she told me, too young ever to have met Plath, she would be happy to meet me for a chat.

At this point, many biographers would have sent back an email and politely declined. But an irrational hunch, a feeling that you learn to trust as a biographer, compelled me to schedule an appointment for the next day.

In the middle of the interview at her home, Blair, a handsome blonde woman in her fifties, disappeared from the kitchen for a couple of minutes and returned with a large box containing a number of plastic bags. What she told me next astounded me. The container was stuffed with hundreds of letters, masses of documents that Sylvia's mother, Aurelia, had given to Blair's mother, Dorinda. After the death of Aurelia, in 1994, then Dorinda, in 2007, Blair had been at a loss about what to do with the makeshift archive. A brief perusal showed the documents were a biographer's dream, a treasure trove of unpublished, unseen material.

Most intimate was a series of letters Aurelia had written to her grandchildren, Frieda and Nicholas — born to Plath and Ted Hughes — between 1971 and 1979, and their letters back across the Atlantic. These documents provided me not only with an unprecedented insight into Plath's childhood, but with a number of revelations about the state of Aurelia's marriage to Otto Plath, who died in 1940, when his daughter was only eight years old, and whose shadowy figure haunts much of her work. "At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to you," Plath wrote in her poem *Daddy*, referring to her suicide attempt in the summer of 1953.

Armed with this mass of material (which was eventually sent on to Frieda Hughes), I travelled to Smith, in Northampton, Massachusetts, the elite women-only university where the poet spent her college years, and which now holds a vast Plath archive. In addition to reading all her letters, many of which remain unpublished, I worked my way through her library of books, some of which contain fascinating marginal annotations, as well as many of the 200 or so early poems that are missing from the Pulitzer-prize winning *Collected Poems*, published in 1981 and edited by Hughes.

Although Plath was estranged from Hughes at the time of her suicide, aged 30, in February 1963, the two writers were not divorced, and on her death he inherited her literary estate and became responsible for how her work was perceived. He believed Plath's "mature" poetry dated from 1956, the year in which the couple met at a boozy party in Cambridge to celebrate the launch of the student-made literary journal *St Botolph's Review*. Plath regarded Hughes, whom she described at that first meeting as a "big, dark, hunky boy", as something of a colossus; his shadow has obscured many

aspects of her life and work. Yet she had already gone out with dozens of other men, some of whom were just dates, some more serious.

During my research, I tried to track down as many of these boyfriends as possible. One of my most significant discoveries was unearthing Richard Sassoon, the man described by *The New Yorker's* Janet Malcolm as “the most elusive, and, in many ways, the most beguiling” of Plath’s lovers. “The habit of longing for him has passed from Plath to the community of her biographers,” she writes. “Not one of them has been able to find him; he has disappeared without a trace.”

Although Sassoon, whom Plath met while she was at Smith, refused to grant me an interview — he told me he would never speak publicly about Plath — he did give me permission to publish extracts from his letters for the first time. He also sent me a number of intriguing emails that enabled me to piece together the story of how his rejection of Plath led her into the arms of Hughes.

In New York, the Georgian aristocrat and environmental advocate Constantine Sidamon-Eristoff — whom Plath met at a Smith student’s lavish coming-out party in October 1951 — handed over a photocopied batch of unpublished Plath letters that no other biographer or scholar had seen. “I knew a few people, but not many, but then I saw this absolutely gorgeous girl,” Constantine told me about that first meeting. “As soon as I found somebody who could dance, and who could dance well — she waltzed beautifully — I don’t think I let her alone. That was the start of whatever romance there was.”

I tracked down her old friend Philip McCurdy, who said Plath had told him she had first tried to cut her throat at the age of 10, and her face at 14. He related how, when Plath was in McLean, an exclusive psychiatric hospital in Belmont, outside Boston, recovering from her mental breakdown and suicide attempt, he had driven her to the local dance hall, the Totem Pole. (“We referred to it as the Scrotum Pole,” he laughs.) Afterwards, Plath made it clear she wanted the evening to go on. “Our relationship had been getting a little warmer each time I saw her,” he says. “I don’t know whether that was because she was lonely, or that she was man-hungry.”

Philip found himself unable to match Sylvia’s passionate nature. “Either because of nerves or lack of experience, I did not perform very well,” he says.

In Bloomington, Indiana, at the Lilly Library — which holds another enormous Plath archive — I found an unpublished memoir written by Gordon Lameyer, the inspiration for her poem *Sonnet for a Green-Eyed Sailor*. She and Lameyer, who had the good looks of a Hollywood actor, became unofficially engaged in 1954, and during their time together he took a number of stunning colour photographs, many of which had never been published before. These images, showing a vibrant, exuberant, blonde Technicolor Sylvia, literally took my breath away. The one that was finally chosen for the cover of the

book shows her in a bikini, her skin sun-kissed, with a red flower at her bosom. She is holding a dandelion clock, a symbol of birth, death and the fragility of life.

One of Lameyer's friends described Plath as "a time bomb that seemed always about to explode", an observation I heard several times during the course of my research. I came to the same conclusion after working my way through the unseen archive of Jane Anderson, one of Plath's contemporaries at Smith and a fellow inmate of McLean. Plath used Anderson as the basis for the character of Joan Gilling in her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, published only a couple of weeks before her death in early 1963. In the 1980s, Anderson, who worked as a psychiatrist, sued the makers of the 1979 film and the Plath estate for \$6m for libel. (The case was settled before it went before a jury, in Anderson's favour; she won \$150,000 in damages.) She believed that Plath's portrayal of Joan, a lesbian who kills herself at the end of the book, was "a very hostile thing to do and an angry thing to do".

Following Anderson's death, the trial documents were deposited with Smith, and I was lucky enough to be the first biographer or journalist to have access to them. The contents were astonishing — thousands of pages of transcripts and depositions, not only from Anderson, Hughes and the film-makers, but from the psychiatrist Francis de Marneffe, who joined McLean in 1953 and became its psychiatrist-in-chief.

For years, biographers had asked McLean to release its files on Plath. I had done the same, but received the same reply: that patients' files, even after their death, remained confidential. Now, for the first time, here was hard evidence from a mental-health practitioner who had observed Plath at close quarters. In de Marneffe's opinion, Plath — who left McLean at the beginning of 1954, after a short series of electroshock therapy sessions — was not as well as she pretended to be. Whereas Anderson stayed on at McLean and worked hard with a psychotherapist to deal with the origins of her problems, Plath, in the words of de Marneffe, continued to suffer from an "unresolved illness" and, instead of being cured of her mental-health issues, as she claimed, had "escaped into some kind of pseudo-health".

According to Anderson, had Plath tackled the source of her psychological problems through therapy, she would have stood a better chance of battling the depression that would ultimately claim her life. "I did exhort her to put more effort into therapy, and Sylvia derided my efforts to recover by therapy alone, without shock treatments."

Fifty years on from Plath's suicide in her Primrose Hill flat on February 11, 1963, her appeal shows no sign of fading. Faber & Faber has just released a 50th anniversary edition of *The Bell Jar*, while later in the year there are plans to publish a new book of her sketches, selected by her daughter, Frieda, and a re-edited version of her journals. The poet is the archetypal Lady Lazarus, constantly rising from the dead to shock, unsettle and disturb. As she wrote in that poem: "Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air."

*Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* by Andrew Wilson (Simon & Schuster £20). To buy it for £16, inc p&p, call 0845 271 2135 or visit [thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop)