

“Kicking Down the Door of Fame”: An Interview with Gail Crowther, Plath Scholar and Author of *Three Martini Afternoons at the Ritz*

by Catherine Rankovic

Catherine Rankovic (CR): I am interested in hearing about what seem to be the troves of new information you have found about Sexton and Plath; for example, the trove that yielded the 1963 photo of Court Green.

Gail Crowther (GC): I think the biggest treasure trove of material to arrive while I was writing *Three-Martinis* was the release of the Harriet Rosenstein papers at Emory. This was a massive thing and contained so much new information, new perspectives, new details that it took a long time to sift through while also trying to hit deadline. The beautiful photograph of Court Green in 1963 came from the Estate of Elizabeth Sigmund, along with an original picture of Plath and her children from 1962 (not included in the book) and photographs from Heptonstall taken in the 1970s. In terms of Sexton material, I spent a very intense week in her archive at the Harry Ransome Center which is wonderful, but I have to say I think my best insight into her came from invaluable exchanges with her daughter, Linda, who was so supportive of my book and was able to share some stories (good and bad) about her mother. The other trove that I am proud of are the professional photographs taken of

significant places connected to Plath and Sexton – the poetry workshop classroom in Boston University and the building at Bay State Road. But also really beautiful photographs of their two graves; Plath’s in rambling, wild Heptonstall, and Sexton’s under snow in Jamaica Plain.

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CR: From all the material you must have had to gather in order to write *Three-Martinis*, even going so far as to read and comment on Plath’s and Sexton’s address books, you must have left out some utterly fascinating information that you dearly wanted to explore further. What was left out? Will we ever hear about it?

GC: Yes, there is always so much that either never makes it into the book or gets edited out at some stage. I started writing about some of these things on my blog which you can read

about at <https://gailcrowther.com/> and I will probably continue to publish the odd piece on there about it. Some of the most frustrating things I had to leave out were photographs, just because it was impossible to either clear copyright, or because they were way too expensive to include. Other bits of information I suspect will form future papers and articles. But I also Tweet and Instagram quite a few archive treasures as well. The only things that will likely never see the light of day are the stories told to me off the record with a promise to never publish them. Some of these are rather eyebrow raising, but I like to think I'm an ethical researcher and if someone asks for my confidence they will get it. Though I suppose these stories now form part of my archive, so in the future if anyone ever wants that...

CR: Both Plath and Sexton left behind thousands of pages of writing and numerous recordings. So you had to be very selective when choosing which of their works most illuminated the points you were making. You did an amazing job of selecting. What was your thinking as you chose and wrote?

GC: I think because I was trained to write a PhD, I always set off a project whether that's a paper or a book with concrete research questions – usually no more than about two. What are my main aims and what do I want to explore? This tends to keep research within fairly strict boundaries and with a clear focus. This doesn't mean I'm not flexible because obviously certain information can come to light that throws a whole new perspective on things. But even so, having a clear idea of what is being explored helps this selection process immensely, like training a finely tuned lens. In the case of *Three-Martinis*, it was very much all about how rebellious Plath and Sexton were for their cultural moment (and ways in which they were not). I also wanted a contemporary angle to this as well, though – how does it compare to

today? What role did they play, as Sexton put it, in kicking down the door of fame for the rest of us?

CR: I am sure that these two poets haunted (or maybe consumed!) your imagination during the years that you worked on the book. If you could have tea or a martini with Sylvia Plath, what would you want to ask her? What do you think she might say about the pandemic?

GC: Plath has pretty much haunted my imagination since I was 13 years old, so writing about her always feels like pulling on an exceptionally welcome and comfortable old coat that you love. Sexton was new to me, so there was the excitement of getting to know her. I'd love to have had martinis with both of them, though I expect I'd have been slightly in awe and a little bit scared of Plath and just got very drunk and rowdy with Sexton. There are so many things I would like to ask Plath, not just about her actual writing, but her writing day, how she managed to organize her professional and personal lives. I loved her fashion, so I'd have liked for her to show me the inside of her closet. I would like to have picked daffodils and apples with her in Court Green and gone to the Everyman Cinema in Hampstead to watch Bergman films and talked about them afterwards. But, of course, in my mind she's perpetually young. If she were alive today, she'd be in her late 80s, so I'd like to think I could have the life-changing sort of friendship with her that I had with Elizabeth Sigmund where you can listen to stories and soak up their warmth and wisdom. Had Plath still lived in England during the pandemic I would have been obsessed with the undoubted pithy and devastating tweets she'd have fired out about the incompetent handling of it all.

CR: Is there anything else you wish to tell our audience?

GC: I think my main aim in writing *Three-Martinis*, in fact all of my books, is to highlight how Plath (and Sexton) were exceptional but relatable women. It always really pleases me when someone contacts me to say my book has sent them back to Plath's or Sexton's poems. That is the gift they have left us, and it excites me that they are so firmly cemented in our contemporary cultural consciousness surrounded by vibrant scholarship, a keen interest that shows no sign of waning, and a lot of professional love that perhaps in some ways they lacked in their lifetimes. Now I am writing a new book about another complex woman writer, but Plath and Sexton sit in my writer's foundations, pretty much informing everything that I do, like friendly guides. Who could ask for better comrades?

Interview conducted via email.





Photography by Kevin Cummins