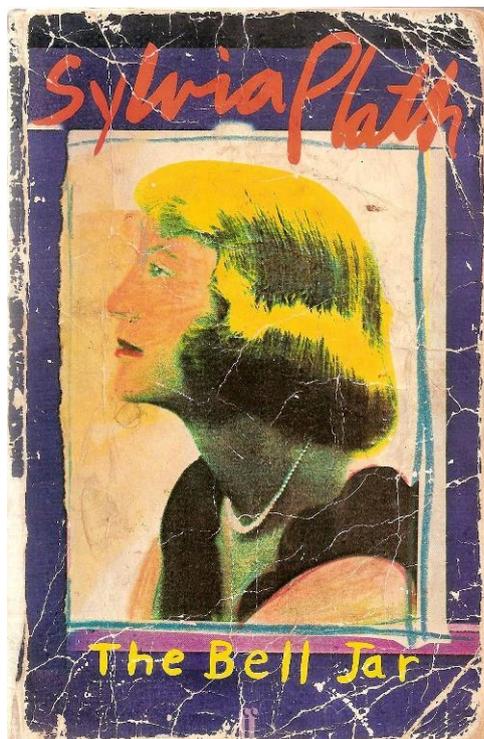


## "The books I carry wedge into my side": A British teenager discovers Sylvia Plath

Catherine Morgan

I was prompted to reflect on my ownership and reading of books by Sylvia Plath following an



email to Peter K. Steinberg commenting on some of the articles in the most recent edition of *Plath Profiles*. I had included a scan of the cover of my copy of *The Bell Jar* – to which he responded that it was "what a well-read copy should look like!" The majority of the books by or about Plath in my possession look like this and the reason is two-fold – I have owned many of them for a long while and throughout this time they have been read and re-read numerous times. This is particularly the case with her poems, which demand repeated scrutiny and reward it with previously unnoticed images, qualities and meanings coming to light (as demonstrated by the extensive community of professional and amateur Plath readers).

Thus, inspired by Peter's comment, I thought to myself: "How long have I owned some of these books and how did I "get into" Sylvia Plath?" This led to an (at times excruciatingly embarrassing) trawl through the diaries I have kept on and off for a number of years. I was an avid reader in the process of shifting from children's books to more adult fare, when introduced to Sylvia Plath's writing via an article in the *NME* in November 1986 at the age of 13. The article was on "youth suicide" and had some quotes from, and commentary on, Plath. I was a budding goth-girl and confess it was a fascination with suicide and madness intrinsic to this particular subculture that left me intrigued enough to follow this up (a fascination which I am glad to say passed over within a year or two along with the crimped hair and tassley skirts). So it was in April 1987 that my mother ordered a copy of the *The Bell Jar* for me at my local WH Smith in Dudley (as part of some buying spree to cheer me up – yes I was rather spoilt) and I collected it on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1987 – just two weeks shy of my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Did I record anything of note about my feelings about the book in my diary? That would be a "no." Unlike Sylvia Plath, the diaries I kept as a teenager were less an articulate

narrative filled with reflections on life, self, existence, writing, ambitions and the issues of the day, and more a short record of what I did at school (usually with some pejorative adjective attached), what was on TV, stuff I did with my friends, records I bought and boys I fancied (more often than not without reciprocation). Lyrical or eloquent, they ain't. So, in two diary entries which give considerably more attention to taping The Smiths off *Top of the Pops*, the following is the sum total of my impressions of *The Bell Jar*: "Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> April: Got up, went to Dudley...*Bell Jar* had arrived, read most of it in evening" and "Friday 24<sup>th</sup> April: Woke up, finished *Bell Jar*." Such comments reveal rather less than devastating levels of insight. However, I do go on to say that I subsequently "got up 8 a.m. Had argument with mom." I had typically fractious relations with my poor old mum during my teenage years, but I wonder if here the difficult mother-daughter relationship in *The Bell Jar* found some influence into my behaviour that day? I acquired my next Plath book, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* on October 10<sup>th</sup> 1987 during a shopping trip to the city of Birmingham with my mother after which, somewhat hilariously, I "came home, played records and radio, had tea and argued with Chris [my brother]." So, either, I was just an argumentative little brat or reading Plath brought the bolshy out in me.

Next up, was *Ariel*, purchased on a trip to Birmingham with my new boyfriend Stefon, on 25 June 1988 – notably I didn't argue with anyone that day and have nothing else to say about the book, apart from misspelling it "Aerial." I had first encountered Plath's poetry earlier that year, borrowing her *Collected Poems* from the local library – I recall very little about my attempts to read this book, aside from reading it in a bus stop whilst waiting to meet my previous boyfriend Jason for a date. Probably not the best environment for a 14-year-old-girl to get to grips with such material – no doubt I was just showing off by pretending to be erudite and cultured (Look at me! I read poetry in bus stops! How deep am I?) I bought a further volume of verse on November 12<sup>th</sup> 1988 – *Winter Trees*, with Stefon in Birmingham, but by this time as "just friends" (i.e., he had dumped me for someone else and I was utterly heartbroken). This created perfect conditions for reading Plath's own account of having her heart trampled on in *Letters Home*, which I was given as a Christmas present in December 1988, along with a copy of the *Collected Poems*. My interest in Plath's life as well as her work began to grow and in the next few years, I began to pick up biographies and studies about Plath.

The final piece of Plath's core output that I acquired was a copy of the American edition of the *Journals* – bought just shy of my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday on 28 April 1993, nearly six years to the day of my first Plath purchase. By this time I was living in Hebden Bridge in

Yorkshire and attending the University of Leeds, where I was in my first year of a BA in English & Sociology. I spotted the *Journals* whilst browsing in a Leeds bookshop: I suspect that as it was not generally available in the UK at the time, it was a copy someone had ordered but not collected and then put on the shelves for general sale. Again, I don't have much to say about Plath in my own diary, which had by this time had become a litany of "kidult" angst, but I very specifically recall reading Plath's *Journals* guiltily when I should have been writing an essay on Jonson's *Alchemist*. The release of the *Unabridged Journals* in 2000 caused a similar distraction from writing up my PhD thesis.



Some of these books are no longer in my possession. Whilst *The Bell Jar* was passed around several friends in my teens, I always got it back but I no longer own my original copies of *Winter Trees* and *Johnny Panic* which were lent to friends and not returned. I replaced *JP* with a more recent edition and my husband bought me a first hardback edition of *WT* as a surprise Christmas present a few years ago. Much of my Plath collection bears the mark of a long and active ownership – both in their crumpled covers and the untidy markings within. Though I did not have much to say about Plath in my diaries, I have had a lot to say in the margins of her books.

Over the years, my interest (and understanding, hopefully) of Plath's poetry has taken over my initial interest in her prose, and as such it is the *Collected Poems* which has taken the brunt: my first copy from 1988 is in two pieces as the spine wore through and I have a second battered copy of it, bought for me by my first husband as a Valentine's gift in 1994. I suspect that if I hadn't shifted to that copy and other books, such as the *Restored Ariel*, my copy from 1988 would have fallen to bits by now.

Arguably, the stereotypical Plath reader is often portrayed as a highly-strung romantic

adolescent, for whom Plath is a mere adjunct to youthful tussles with the world and Plath herself reduced to some figurehead for manic depression. Being a Plathophile is thus regarded as something you usually grow out of – like knowing how to solve a quadratic equation or caring what people think about the size of your butt. Speaking as a more or less mature, prosaic 39-year-old Plath reader, I have come to appreciate Plath more and more over the years as the "genius of a writer" she became; in other words Plath is something that you grow into (like worrying what the snails are doing to your dahlias or waging increasingly internecine battles against unwanted facial hair). I remain greedy for whatever is published by Plath, about Plath or by people related to Plath and that is because reading Plath generates profound and seemingly unlimited rewards. I continue to be captivated by her talent and overawed by how, through poetry, Plath transforms the world around her into something "rich and strange." Though other books may come and go, I will hold on to Plath's books until the day either they or I fall into dust.