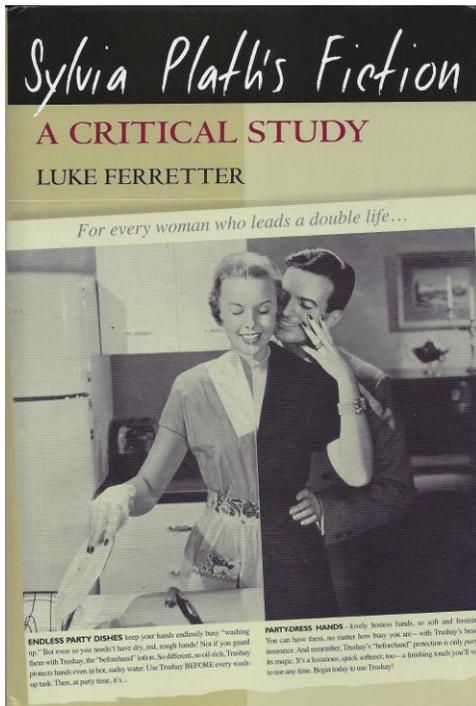


Review of Luke Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh UP, 2010), 213 pages. \$105.

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For Luke Ferretter, Sylvia Plath's negotiation of gender discourses was integral to her fiction writing.¹ In *Sylvia Plath's Fiction: A Critical Study*, he demonstrates the cultural, social, and political resources that her published and unpublished stories present. Ferretter not only adds to critics' understanding of Plath's skill in marketing her work, but he also illustrates that she did not compromise her views in order to publish it (166). In the first book length study of Plath's fiction, Ferretter updates feminist considerations of Plath's *oeuvre* for the twenty-first century.²

As Ferretter argues, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction* follows studies of Plath's work that have been "interested in her large and diverse body of work as a whole, and focus their attention on less frequently discussed texts within this body of work in order to build up a complete picture of the kind of thinker and writer that Plath was" (1). Departing from critics who have interpreted Plath's



writing as a progression to *Ariel* (1965), Ferretter's approach also differs from one of the few early treatments of Plath's short stories, Melody Zajdel's essay "Apprenticed in a Bible of Dreams" (1989).³ Zajdel illustrated the ways that Plath revised her short stories as she worked toward *The Bell Jar*. Over twenty years later, Ferretter's study takes into account the wealth of scholarship and primary sources that are now available.

Sylvia Plath's Fiction demonstrates skillful research with Plath's materials in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, the Lilly Library at Indiana University, and the Ted Hughes Papers at Emory

¹ I am grateful to the Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Poetics at Emory University's Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry for enabling my completion of this review. I also thank Peter K. Steinberg and Gillian Groszewski for their feedback.

² See Ferretter's introduction regarding his study's role in analyzing Plath's fiction (2).

³ See Ferretter 1.



University. Combining fragments from different archives, Ferretter reconstructs unpublished portions of Plath's fiction and addresses their relationship to what he calls "the cultural context of the gender discourses in which she lived, thought and wrote" (117).⁴ Ferretter considers well the pages of Plath's unfinished novel, *Falcon Yard*, at Emory, and a page entitled, "Venus in the Seventh" that was a part of this novel project and remains at Smith. In his treatment of these fragments, Ferretter also adds to the scholarship of Robin Peel, Diane Middlebrook, and Heather Clark.⁵ Ferretter's research with Emory's archival resources will be an asset to future researchers. He cites numerous significant details, such as a moment in Plath's "third and last novel" that Olwyn Hughes recalls when responding to Middlebrook's study *Her Husband* (2003) (Ferretter 13, 14).

Sylvia Plath's Fiction is accessible and will be useful to critics and students of twentieth century literature. Ferretter's introduction presents a valuable chronological catalogue of Plath's published and unpublished stories to which scholars will be able to refer. His contextualization of *The Bell Jar* and treatment of the Rosenberg Trial will be helpful for teaching the novel. He has also unearthed details that shed light on the relationship between *The Bell Jar* and Plath's earlier fiction. Her early story, "The Visitor" (1948), for example, contained a protagonist named Esther (163).

Ferretter also considers well the complexity of Plath's response to modernist women's writing. Reading Virginia Woolf's fiction in Elizabeth Drew's modern literature course as an undergraduate at Smith College, for instance, Plath would have encountered what Ferretter calls, "a consciously anti-feminist position in her criticism of women's writing" (17).⁶ He also suggests that Plath bought Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) with her other Woolf novels in 1957 (Ferretter 19, *UJ* 269). This is not necessarily the case, as Plath's copy of *Mrs. Dalloway* at Smith lacks an inscription or a blue label from the Cambridge bookstore Bowes and Bowes inside the back cover (*UJ* 269, 271). She may have purchased this book when she was attending David Daiches's lectures on Woolf and James Joyce at Cambridge University in February of 1956 (*LH* 213).

⁴ Ferretter also uses Plath's *Unabridged Journals* effectively to reconstruct the plots of such stories as "The Trouble-Making Mother" (1957), which are not available in archives (7).

⁵ See the review of Heather Clark's *The Grief of Influence* in this issue of *Plath Profiles* (Summer 2011).

⁶ See also Plath's *Unabridged Journals* regarding Elizabeth Drew.



Analyzing Plath's submissions to women's magazines, Ferretter also shows readers the ways that her stories demonstrated and departed from conventions for midcentury women's magazine stories.⁷ His conclusions will be useful to scholars' assessments of Plath's contemporaries' publications and of midcentury periodical culture. Following the example of such databases as the *Modernist Journals Project*, hopefully in time more fifties' women's magazines will be digitized and Ferretter's study will be a vital complement to this resource. Perhaps a future digital edition of *Sylvia Plath's Fiction* will also have links to these periodicals that will enable even further contemplation of magazines to which the book refers.

In the later chapters of *Sylvia Plath's Fiction*, Ferretter examines the complexity of Plath's characters, arguing for instance, that "[m]any of Plath's women are postmodern characters, whose identity endlessly recedes in layer after layer of image and identification, without a clearly distinguishable original over which these images are laid" (166). In his reading of Plath's unpublished story, "Platinum Blonde" (1955), for example, he observes "that the complex network of identities through which Lynn travels is initiated by the discourse of fashion magazines" (166).⁸

The organization of *Sylvia Plath's Fiction* is clear, and the final two chapters consider thoroughly the cultural and material contexts informing Plath's fiction. It is surprising that the study lacks a conclusion or a concluding paragraph. Instead, Ferretter closes with his readings of Plath's stories, "Sunday at the Mintons" (1952) and "The Fifty-Ninth Bear" (1959). Ending in this fashion, however, Ferretter underscores the strength of Plath's heroines, which his book argues were central to her fiction.

⁷ Ferretter also follows Tracy Brain and Marsha Bryant's consideration of Plath's publication in periodicals as well as the development of modernist periodical studies. See Brain's *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Bryant's "Ariel's Kitchen: Plath, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and the Domestic Surreal" and "Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising," and the *Modernist Journals Project*. <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/> Accessed 11 April, 2011.

⁸ The Plath's unfinished and finished story manuscripts that Ferretter cites are housed in the Lilly Library at Indiana University, Bloomington and Emory University. Photocopies are available for a fee. See both archives' online finding aids on their websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~liblilly/index.php> and <http://marbl.library.emory.edu/> Accessed 27 May, 2011.



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