

FORGING A NEW PLATH

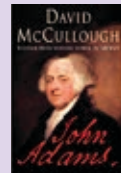
IN *RED COMET*, SYLVIA PLATH EXPERT **HEATHER CLARK** PRESENTS A DEFINITIVE BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET, OBSERVING HER OFT-EXAMINED LIFE THROUGH A NEW LENS

By **Mary Sollosi**



← “I was constantly intimidated by her brilliance,” Clark says of Sylvia Plath

THREE MORE WEIGHTY BIOGRAPHIES



John Adams
David McCullough
752 pages



Warhol
Blake Gopnik
976 pages



The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill
William Manchester and Paul Reid
3,008 pages

died when she was 8), identifying her mother as “the more pressing influence.” She also explores Plath’s complex dynamic with her husband, the poet Ted Hughes—with whom she shared an intense, creatively fruitful partnership before its disastrous dissolution—and looks at her friendships with benefactor Olive Higgins Prouty and the essayist Al Alvarez, who provided “a lot of the support that she needed in those last few weeks,” Clark says.

The author researched and wrote *Red Comet* over nine years, using existing letters and diaries, new interviews with about 50 of the poet’s contemporaries, and a “treasure trove” of interviews conducted in the 1970s (for an unfinished biography by Harriet Rosenstein), which Clark was among the first to access when a new archive opened at Emory University in early 2020.

What ultimately bursts off the page is Plath’s short, vibrant life, which is too often most remembered for the way it ended: “That’s the irony, isn’t it?” says Clark. “She’s so incredibly *alive*.” ●



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WITH *RED COMET*, **HEATHER CLARK** had a clear mission in mind: to “rewrite the script on Sylvia Plath.” A scholar who also wrote 2011’s *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes*, Clark, 46, felt that existing biographies “pathologized her too much” and wanted to correct the popular image of Plath as a dark figure synonymous with madness and tragedy.

“In reality, she was an enormously energetic and brave woman who broke barriers in a male-dominated literary world,” Clark says. “That’s the Sylvia Plath

that we need to know.” Doing justice to Plath’s legacy meant claiming space for her—literally. “She deserves this big, chunky book,” Clark says of her 1,152-page work. “I want a woman writer to have that three-inch spine. Not many of them get it, and if anyone deserves it, it’s Sylvia Plath.”

Readers won’t find bombshell revelations in *Red Comet*, but rather a retelling of her life in a highly empathetic light. Clark was shocked by what she learned about the “primitive nature” of the psychiatric treatment Plath received in the 1950s, an experience she famously fictionalized in *The Bell Jar*: “I believe she suffered lingering trauma from some of these botched shock-therapy sessions.”

Clark also wanted to avoid putting great emphasis, as others have done, on Plath’s “mythical relationship” with her father (who



OUR MAN FRIDAY

BIOGRAPHER **SCOTT EYMAN**, 69, PAINTS A COMPLEX PORTRAIT OF HOLLYWOOD’S ORIGINAL LEADING MAN IN *CARY GRANT: A BRILLIANT DISGUISE*

By **Maureen Lee Lenker**

Can you explain the book’s title? / Cary Grant was Archie Leach’s brilliant disguise. [Cary] was outwardly charming, never raised his voice or said a cross word, but you could not get beyond that practiced charm—it was how he made his living for 40 years. And you made a terrible mistake if you assumed that there was some sort of smooth segue from Archie Leach to Cary Grant.

Does a mysterious subject like this make your job as a biographer harder? / There’s always a gap between what a person plays and who they actually are, but I don’t know of anybody whose gap was greater. And by some weird metamorphosis, Archie Leach almost completely became Cary—he needed to be that person so badly.

Did anything surprise you in your research? / The diary he kept for some months when he was 14. You can already see how self-contained he is. There’s nothing about

his family, his friends. World War I is raging and there’s nothing about the outside world. It’s all about Archie and what Archie’s going to do that day. He’s so self-possessed and self-determined [already].

What would you say is the core of who Cary Grant was? / You go into show business thinking it will make your life better, and it doesn’t. What do you do then? You don’t want to go back to being poor and unknown. That was what led him to five wives, to therapy, to LSD. [His adolescence], the lack of any concrete emotional foundation—money doesn’t address that. You can run a long time, and you’ll still be dragging that behind you. Ultimately, he put the pieces together, but it was very painful for him.

What is the most misunderstood thing about him? / How hard he tried to be the person he played, and how, in a realer sense, he succeeded—at a terrible cost.



← “If you got past his surface charm he was afraid you’d be horrified,” Eyman says

The Essential Cary

PAIR THESE THREE CARY GRANT FILMS, WHICH EYMAN NOTES BOAST “A SENSE OF HIS PROTEAN ABILITIES AND RANGE,” WITH YOUR *BRILLIANT DISGUISE* READING.
By **Maureen Lee Lenker**



Bringing Up Baby • 1938
Screwball comedy at its finest. Grant is put-upon paleontologist David Huxley, pursued by an heiress (Katharine Hepburn) and her pet leopard: “It’s a physically brilliant performance. The character is so emotionally constrained—he even moves like it.”



None but the Lonely Heart • 1944
Grant plays near his real background as ne’er-do-well Cockney Ernie Mott. “It’s where he was exposing himself the most,” says Eyman. “He allows this anger to come through, this discontent with who he is. It moves from Archie into the character.”



Notorious • 1946
In his second collab with Alfred Hitchcock, Grant plays an agent who falls in love with a woman (Ingrid Bergman) he recruits to marry a suspected Nazi sympathizer. “He’s absolutely hard and unyielding and disturbed,” says Eyman. “I love that performance.”