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Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath on their honeymoon in Paris

TOM SHEEHAN/GETTY IMAGES

BOOK REVIEW

Red Comet by Heather Clark review — Sylvia's lightning was a match for Ted's thunder

Are you Team Plath or Team Hughes? This sympathetic, first-class biography has no heroes and no villains, says Laura Freeman

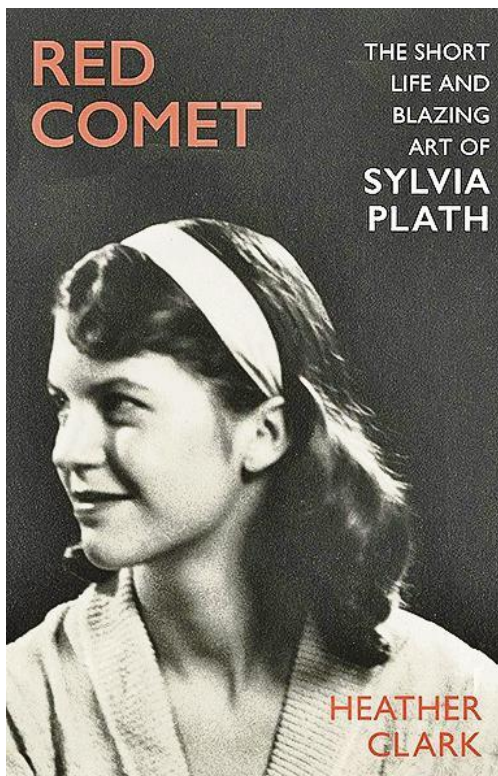
[Laura Freeman](#)

Thursday October 15 2020, 12.01am BST, The Times

When I was ten I went to tea with a schoolfriend who gave me a tour of her house. “This is my room,” she said. “And this is the bathroom. And this is the room where the poet Sylvia Plath killed herself.” It was the first time I had heard of Plath and the first thing I knew about her was that her death had been a suicide. The first many of us know of Plath is her last: dawn at

23 Fitzroy Road in Primrose Hill, north London, the house where WB Yeats had once lived, the children asleep, the door sealed with tape, the gas tap turned on. [✉](#) [🐦](#) [f](#) [🔗](#)

The American literary critic Elizabeth Hardwick wrote of Plath that “when the curtain goes down, it is her own dead body there on the stage, sacrificed to her own plot”. Her new biographer Heather Clark rejects the tragic “grand finale” telling of Plath’s life. “Previous biographies,” Clark writes in *Red Comet*, “have focused on the trajectory of Plath’s suicide, as if her every act, from childhood on, was predetermined to bring her closer to a fate she deserved for flying too close to the sun. This book will trace Plath’s literary and intellectual development rather than her undoing.”



Red Comet is a mighty achievement. Clark is compassionate, clear-eyed, sceptical. Each chapter reads with the ease of a novel. You feel the smart of every rejection letter, share Plath’s elation in each published poem, read the recreation of her first suicide attempt with a tightening chest and reel through the night when she met Ted Hughes with drunken exultance. I

couldn't put it down; I could hardly pick it up. The book is a whopper: 1,152 pages, 971 without notes.

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This is the first Plath biography to draw on all of Plath's surviving letters and on her unpublished diaries, calendars and writings. A Plath life comes with baggage. Since her death on Monday, February 11, in the merciless winter of 1963, her story has been fought over. Are you Team Sylvia or Team Ted?

Who was most to blame? Her husband Ted? Her Heathcliff, her brooding, handsome, "hunky" poet of the Yorkshire moors ("Ted Huge" was one nickname). The man for whom she typed submissions, entered prizes, acted as agent, whom she prodded, promoted and adored, and who then abandoned her and their children — toddler Frieda and baby Nicholas — to live with his married lover Assia Wevill, already pregnant with his child.

Or was Wevill more to blame? A femme fatale, a Scheherazade, an Aphrodite. "A Black Forest wolf,/ a witch's daughter" in Hughes's telling; the "Weavy Asshole" in Plath's. Or Plath's mother, Aurelia: a widow, a single American mom, a remorseless Medusa, ambitious for her elder daughter, pushing, pushing, pushing Sylvia to succeed? Aurelia, who doctored her daughter's letters after her death and published a sunny selection without the wildness, the coldness, the madness. Or Ted's elder sister, Olywn, whom Plath couldn't stand, and whom Hughes let handle Plath's estate. (Olywn called Plath a "nasty selfish bitch"; Plath thought Olywn's resentment a "pure and sweeping and peculiarly desperate hatred".)

In Clark's telling there are no heroes, no villains. All are flawed. Aurelia and Ted do their best, inflict their worst. If Plath had enemies, they were inner ones: creativity, ambition, the pressure to be the perfect poet, scholar, wife, mother, daughter, homemaker. Never a hair, never a crumb, never a syllable out of

place. One of the images that will stay with me is Plath baking a strawberry chiffon pie while Hughes types a letter to TS Eliot.

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Plath in Venice in 1956

This is more than a life of Plath. It is a social history too: of women's education and opportunity, of psychiatric care, of McCarthyism, of the American dream and the white-picket nightmare, of class and the US east coast, of Ivy League boys and Phi Beta Kappa girls, of pitched poetry battles and rivalrous small magazines.

I had always been misled by photographs of a blonde Sylvia on the beach at Cape Cod during her "Platinum Summer". I'd thought she was Wasp-y, wealthy, spoilt. But Plath was a hardscrabble scraper, a scholarship girl who waited tables, nannied in vacations, picked radishes to put herself through college. All the while reading, writing, sending "trite" and "syrupy" stories to Seventeen magazine in the hope of a cheque and acceptance.

She was eight when her first poem was published in the Sunday Boston Herald. "I just can't stand the idea of being mediocre,"

she admitted to her mother in October 1950, a few days after her 18th birthday. “I am driving myself rather hard.” Manic creation led to exhausted depressions. To    Plath described her make-up as “ice cream and pickles”. When a boyfriend asked if she could make a living as a writer she answered: “It’s a hellish craft. Beautiful and bitchy.”

Chapters about teenage dating — the sorority-girl round of “parking” and “necking” (although never heavy petting) — start to drag. Get to Ted! Yet to understand Ted you have to endure all the before-Teds, the not-Teds. A friend remembered that on the night of February 25, 1956, at the launch party for the Saint Botolph’s Review poetry journal in Cambridge, Ted looked like “an eagle in a pet shop . . . bored, melancholy, discontent”. Sylvia was “pretty sloshed” and “gunning” for the “top poet”. Above the jazz band, Sylvia began quoting his Fallgrief’s Girlfriends. Ted joined in, shouting “as if in a high wind”. Ted kissed Sylvia “bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off”. He kissed her neck. She bit him hard on the cheek. Over the following chapters Clark quotes up a storm from their diaries, letters and poems, Hughes’s thunder answering Plath’s lightning.

Clark, the Harvard and Oxford-educated professor of contemporary poetry at the University of Huddersfield, is scrupulous about fact and fiction. Plath wrote that “art was a rearrangement of truth”. Her poems are not confessions and Sylvia is not Esther Greenwood, the heroine of Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*. Clark notes where life and lines of verse diverge.

Plath’s resilience, genius and insight blaze through the book. Where Clark fails in her stated intent is in separating her subject from her suicide. The end is foreshadowed for hundreds of pages. Reading *Red Comet* I had a similar feeling as with Hermione Lee’s biography of Virginia Woolf. At the telltale compression of the pages, I found myself pleading: don’t end, don’t die. The life and the writing are too good not to go on. This

is a vast and heartbreaking book. I would not have wished it shorter.

Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Age of Sylvia Plath by Heather Clark, Jonathan Cape, 1152pp; £30

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