



ELMER ADLER UNDERGRADUATE BOOK  
COLLECTING PRIZE

The winners of the 2013 Elmer Adler Undergraduate Book Collecting Prize were announced at the Friends of the Princeton University Library's winter dinner on March 17, 2013. The jury awarded first and second prizes.

First prize went to Natasha Japanwala, Class of 2014, for the essay "Conversation Among the Ruins: Collecting Books by and about Sylvia Plath," in which Natasha compares her inquiry into the multitude of representations of Plath to "an excavation site where I tried to unearth the narrative of Plath's life." Natasha received a prize of \$2,000 and Helen Vendler's book *Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill*.

Second prize was awarded to Amanda Devine, Class of 2015, for the essay "A Clothes Reading: Finding Meaning in Fashion's Past," in which she frames her interest in books about the history of fashion as an interest in "the evolution of society and ... what our fashions today say about us." Amanda received a prize of \$1,500 and Philippe Perrot's book *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*.

Each of the winners also received a certificate from the Dean of the College. The book prizes, chosen to complement each student's collecting focus, were donated by Princeton University Press. The first-place essay will be submitted as Princeton's entry in the National Collegiate Book Collecting Competition, which is sponsored by the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America.

My sincere thanks to this year's Adler Prize jury for their dedicated and ever-cheerful service: John Delaney, Curator of Historic Maps and Leader of the Manuscripts Cataloging Team; Richard J. Levine, member of the Friends of the Princeton University Library; John

Logan, Literature Bibliographer; Louise Marshall, member of the Friends; Julie Mellby, Curator of Graphic Arts; and Paul Needham, Scheide Librarian.

—REGINE I. HEBERLEIN  
*Processing Archivist*

CONVERSATION AMONG THE RUINS:  
COLLECTING BOOKS  
BY AND ABOUT SYLVIA PLATH

I remember the day I first met Sylvia Plath. There was only one bookstore in Karachi where you could go to find poets, and even then, they lived on just a single shelf. It was a humid afternoon, made more so by the smoke from meat grilling in the open-air tandoori shop next door. I had been through Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Keats, all of whom had alienated me from the terse, broken lines of my own voice. Plath's *Collected Poems* had a dusty spine and a cover stained with fingerprints. I cracked open the volume and read "The Applicant," a poem Plath had written in October 1962. She was cold and depressed. Her husband had just left her for another woman. In three months she would warm a bowl of milk and leave it for her sleeping children, lock the kitchen door, and gas herself.

Of course, I didn't know any of this that first day. I read and re-read the poem, devouring its hard rhythm, marveling at its bold diction. I stuck my finger in between the pages halfway through and flipped to the front cover. I stared at the black-and-white photograph of Plath, at her wavy blonde hair pinned back. She had lived decades before me, on the opposite side of the world, but she understood and expressed exactly the condition of being stifled. I was sixteen and could not take two steps outside the front door of my house alone, for fear of being kidnapped. The Taliban had started bombing girls' schools in Pakistan's northern valleys and were slowly making their way down to my overcrowded, beloved city by the sea. I wanted to be a poet, but not the iambic pentameter kind. Plath showed me immediately that I could set my story to a music that matched its agony.

I bought the *Collected Poems*. I read them by flashlight when the power would go out at night, and I read them in the third-floor stairwell during recess at school. Like most love stories, this one begins with infatuation. I was far too engrossed in reading the poems out loud to myself—snaps of verse that used and abused the female body to illustrate the struggle of being a young woman—to pay attention to the foreword or the footnotes. When I finally did get around to Googling Plath, the shock of discovering her lifelong struggle with depression and her eventual suicide resulted in an obsession. I have

since bought and devoured books written by Plath or about Plath in the hope of uncovering the complete narrative of her life and the life of her legacy. I was, and am, trying to find closure.



I started with Plath's journals. Though I am now used to clicking and ordering almost any book I can dream of, knowing it will arrive in my Princeton mailbox within two days, I remember clearly that on-line shopping was once quite an ordeal. I used all my savings, not only to afford the book itself, but also to pay triple the purchase price to have it shipped to Karachi. It was almost like waiting for a pigeon to bring a letter; it took months, and there was always the fear that the customs officials at the post office would confiscate the book and that it would never get to me at all.

Reading Plath's journals contextualized her poems in a way the brief biographies I had found online could not. I put the poems and the journals side by side, not only to understand the state Plath was in when she wrote her poems, but also to see precisely which images she began with, how she developed them, and where she decided to conclude their lifespan. It was the only peek into a writer's process I have ever had; I was left unable ever to read the poems again without referring to the journals to match them to the day Plath may have written them. Going through the journals was a process of examining what Plath had left behind of herself, her reactions to the everyday, and details of what she felt as she felt it. I often felt like a trespasser, transgressing territory that had never been intended for me to explore. I felt guilty for combing through Plath's journal to find clues that would help me understand her poems better, for analyzing her poems to figure out how she dealt with her depression, or how she felt after her husband's betrayal, or why she decided to take her own life. I felt like I was using one genre to help clarify my understanding of the other instead of appreciating each one for its own aesthetic achievements.

Plath's journal inspired me to keep my own. I bought a notebook with a thick spine and filled its pages with details of everything I did over the course of a single day. Once my initial enthusiasm waned and the practice of journaling settled into the routine of my life, I realized that I often waited a day or two before scribbling down the details of something I had seen or of something that had happened. I re-read Plath's journals a few months after I started my own and

questioned how far I could really trust their authenticity. I would often alter slight details of what happened to me, just to make the sentences flow better. What if Plath had done the same? The first time I read Plath's journals, I stopped at sentences to appreciate the relevance of their imagery or the musicality of their alliteration. But keeping my own journal alerted me to the fact that the written records we produce are not necessarily accurate pictures of our lives, and I began stopping at passages to question whether details had been subject to the fallacy of memory or if they had been altered or fabricated for the sake of better writing.

The doubts I was beginning to have about the authenticity of Plath's own account of her life were confirmed and deepened by the third book in my collection, Plath's first, only, and semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*. I wondered if she had always had the intention of using her life as a cultivating ground for fiction, if her journals were filled with exercises that were always meant to be part-accounts, part-stories. The novel tells the story of Esther Greenwood, who works for a magazine in New York City, and her development of depression and subsequent treatment at a psychiatric hospital—the exact experiences that are missing from Plath's journals. I ended up reading *The Bell Jar* as Plath's late attempt to recollect a period in her life that she had not had a chance to journal about. I was daunted by the task of determining what was meant to be real and what was meant to be fiction.

The Sylvia Plath I had known from the *Collected Poems*—a bright, sharp woman who used words with spearlike precision—was gone, replaced by the unstable women of *The Bell Jar*, the depressive Esther Greenwood, Plath's autobiographical protagonist, and the mysterious Victoria Lucas, the pseudonym under which Plath published *The Bell Jar*. I realized that my desire to unearth the real Plath was similar to her own desire, whether conscious or not, to unearth her real self. Just as I was reading her poems, journals, and novel line-by-line to discover who Plath really was, she had written those poems, journals, and novel line-by-line to understand who she really was.



When I left Karachi for Princeton in the fall of 2010, my “collection” consisted of the three books I have so far described. I didn't think of these books as a collection then, even though any two books

connected in theme to each other can technically be considered so. I unpacked them in my dorm, set them on the wooden mantelpiece above the defunct brick fireplace. I had a job washing dishes in the dining hall and a student account on Amazon that meant any book I ordered would be in my hands within two days. Forget extra shipping costs. The liberty of having my own, though meager, income coupled with the easy access I had to any book I wanted fueled my Plath obsession. The mantelpiece in my dorm became a little Plath library, and I quickly learned to think of and call it a collection.

The fourth book I bought, an expanded version of the second, found me. After I set up a student account with Amazon, I would receive regular e-mail recommendations based on my buying and browsing history. It took a few e-mails urging me to buy the unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath before I realized that these were not the journals that I owned and had read cover to cover a couple dozen times.

The poet Ted Hughes, Plath's husband, had edited the journals I read. When I started reading the unabridged journals, transcribed from the original manuscripts at Smith College and edited by Karen Kukil, I realized how much had been omitted from the earlier version. It wasn't a mystery why Hughes had left out certain phrases and sections; it was clear that he had been trying to protect a number of people (Plath's mother, her children, himself). But the differences between the abridged and unabridged journals opened the floodgates to the rest of my collection. In Karachi, I had been concerned solely with how Plath represented herself, but in Princeton, where my critical faculties were being discovered, developed, and exercised, I quickly became curious about how other people represented Plath.

Out of my obsession with Plath grew a little, sidekick obsession with Ted Hughes. I read the last collection he published before he died in 1998, poems dedicated to his life with Plath, titled *Birthday Letters*. The accounts of their life together that I had read in Plath's journal were retold in Hughes's poems, and then retold again in Hughes's letters. It wasn't just that Plath had left behind multiple versions of her own life; reading Hughes taught me that everything we experience has multiple existences. Hughes's representation of Plath was not limited to what he wrote about her in his poems and letters, but extended to the way he chose to edit and publish her work after her death, including almost all her poetry collections, baring *The Colossus*. From *Winter Trees* to *Crossing the Water* to her final collection,

*Ariel*, Hughes was responsible for selecting, arranging, and presenting Plath's work to the public. I found the collection on my mantelpiece growing—the more editions I collected of Plath's poems, the more I realized just how many versions of her existed.



When my collection started out, I was merely curious. As it grew, however, I began to fancy myself an archaeologist. The mantelpiece was more than just a shelf—it was an excavation site. I worked my way through Plath's poems and journals to arrive at Hughes's poems and letters, only to work myself back to Plath and her poems, which existed in more forms than I had previously assumed. Digging through the layers of Plath's life and work had initially been a process intended to uncover. I am no longer sure exactly what it was I was trying to pull from the dirt and debris. But I do know that somewhere along the way I realized that the dirt and debris were the treasure I had been trying to find.

Regardless of whether I framed my collection as a treasure trove or an excavation site, I was motivated to add to it. I read *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, a compilation of stories Plath had written and published, along with prose fragments from her notebooks. I read her children's stories, *The Bed Book* and the *It-Doesn't-Matter-Suit*. Compared with the oeuvre of most writers, Plath's is not terribly large. But because so many people have been fascinated with her life and work, which are impossible to separate from each other, my collection of her canon has grown to include multiple versions and representations of the works she did leave behind.

Once I had collected as many versions as I could find of Plath's own work, I turned my attention to works about her. The many biographies of Plath revealed to me that I was not alone in my obsession with her work and life. I collected the biographies because I was addicted, because I lived to slot another book to the end of the line on my mantelpiece. I would be lying if I said I actually read most of the biographies I acquired. I skimmed them, at best. I knew, completely and entirely, the narrative of Plath's life, and I didn't need other people to retell it to me. I looked at most of the biographies that were lining up on my bookshelf as money-making gimmicks, intended precisely for people like me to collect.

This attitude changed when I read Janet Malcolm's biography,

which is really a biography of the biographies written about Plath. Malcolm's careful research taught me that biographies are not intended to be retellings. Instead, they are an interesting way to look at the looker. I became fascinated with the biographies I had previously ignored, curious about the biographers. I read their narratives of Plath and wondered why they had taken certain approaches to her life or chosen to represent one aspect of her life over another. It was interesting to see what about Plath fascinated other people, and in so doing, I learned to see her work from new perspectives and angles.



In the spring of my sophomore year at Princeton, I declared my major and signed into the English department. Believe it or not, I had been on the fence about this for a while. I figured that it would be indulgent to study English, something that would always be a profound part of my life. When I started collecting and reading texts published by scholars who studied Plath's work formally, I realized that being an English major would teach me to look at texts in a way that I could not do on my own. I had always known that Plath's works were important feminist texts, but I began to learn more about how to contextualize them in the time and place she lived in and how to compare her writing to what feminist critics had been saying and were saying.

I remember spending crisp fall afternoons curled on the window seat of my dorm room, re-reading Plath's poems with a book of criticism by my side. In the same way that I had turned to Plath to help me with my poetry, I turned to her critics to teach me how to go about being an English major, how best to read texts and write about them critically. My collection has been an integral part of my educational journey, both as a writer and as a student. I look at it not only as an excavation site where I tried to unearth the narrative of Plath's life, but also as a scrapbook of how that process has helped me grow.



I am constantly learning more about Plath. My most recent addition to the collection was *Letters Home*, a compilation of the letters Plath wrote to her mother. Reading these has taken me back to the early days of reading her poems and journals, back in Karachi. I find myself moving back through the layers of criticism and biography, returning to just Plath, myself, and the questions of how she chose to



represent herself. Her letters to her mother are not unlike the e-mails I send to mine: they are filled with optimism and hope, and they are, I think, where Plath becomes the person she would most like to have been.

I am currently studying abroad in London, not far from the apartment where Plath spent her last days. She is buried in West Yorkshire, and I would like to see her grave before I leave England. The name on the gravestone says Sylvia Plath Hughes, but the “Hughes” has been scratched off many times by Plath fans who blame Hughes for her suicide. The story of her gravestone is symbolic, of course, of the multiple versions of herself she created and destroyed, of the multiple versions of herself that others have created and re-created. I don’t think Plath is the kind of figure that can ever be at rest. I wrote at the beginning of this essay that this was a love story that began with infatuation. Well, I will end by returning to that analogy: most love stories end with death, but the beautiful thing about this one is that though Plath is gone, the story is far from finished.

—NATASHA JAPANWALA  
*Class of 2014*