

The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath, edited by Anita Helle, Amanda Golden, and Maeve O'Brien

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Reviewed by Georg Nöffke

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4030-1268>
University of Pretoria, South Africa
georg.noffke@up.ac.za

The opening sentence of *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath* is a triumph of understatement, and a testament to the cross-cultural reach of the writer under discussion. Asserts Anita Helle (2022, 1), author of the introduction, and one of the editors of this substantial contribution to scholarship on Sylvia Plath: “An introduction to *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath* in this century need not make the case for Plath as a writer of global stature and lasting importance.” Indeed, Plath’s sheer visibility—as an eminently referenceable artist too often reduced to an avatar of suffering in popular media, as a figure whose life and art have been examined and re-examined without cease since her death in 1963—may lead a reader only casually aware of her to regard a book like this with a measure of misplaced reservation. The feeling may be that the collection of essays could only traverse well-trodden territory. On the contrary, *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath* demonstrates the ways in which Plath is a site of vital, ongoing scholarly debate and reassessment.

The project comes in the wake, and takes full advantage, of the landmark publication of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume I: 1940–56* (2017) and *Volume II: 1956–63* (2018). It is divided into four parts: “New Cultural and Historical Contexts” (the longest section), “Influences, Affiliations, and Intertextualities,” “Media and Pedagogy,” and “Editing the Archives.” The timely and exciting interventions offered by this *Bloomsbury Handbook* are manifold. It sheds light on underexamined facets of Plath’s work, and re-evaluates Plath’s various socio-historical and literary-critical contexts. Exemplary contributions of this kind include: Jonathan Ellis on Plath as pop cultural punchline; Christine Walde on the marginalia offered by “citizen critics” (Eberly cited

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in Walde 2022, 85) in library copies of Plath books; Rebecca Tuite on sleepwear and its significations in Plath's letters and journals; Elizabeth J. Donaldson on experiences of "madness" in *The Bell Jar* (1963), experiences read within the framework of current disability studies; Tim Hancock on imagery of space exploration in Plath's late poems; Jerome Ellison Murphy on Plath's depictions of the feminine and of Blackness; and Maeve O'Brien on race and whiteness in Plath's literary apprenticeship. (Murphy's and O'Brien's essays are especially welcome, given that research on Plath and racism constitutes a growing and much-needed field of inquiry.) The *Handbook* also deepens our understanding of some of Plath's literary and personal affiliations. See, for instance, Heather Clark on Plath's heretofore understudied association with Ruth Fainlight, a friend and fellow poet who aided Plath's own poetic examinations of taboo female topics such as abortion and miscarriage; or chapters by Catherine Rankovic and Janet Badia, both of which contemplate and consider more fully Aurelia Plath's curatorial role(s) as a key early commentator on, and creator of, her daughter's archive. Then there are the reports on what teaching Plath in contemporary educational spaces, spaces in which interdisciplinarity and the digital humanities are emphasised, entails: in separate contributions, Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick and Amanda Golden supply piquant descriptions and analyses of Plath's continuing but evolving presence in classrooms today. Finally, the *Handbook* also ponders the processes attendant upon, and challenges posed by, demarcating and curating an archive. Gail Crowther theorises "living archives," non-institutional places with strong and abiding connections to prominent figures or events, looking at how these change over time, and Di Beddow maps the psychogeography of Plath's perambulations as a student at Cambridge. The final two chapters of the volume offer compelling, first-person accounts by Karen V. Kukil and Peter K. Steinberg, the editors of Plath's *Letters*. Kukil, who also edited the *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950–1962* (2000) and is curator of the Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College, describes decades of fastidious and perspicacious oversight, while Steinberg details the laudable and Herculean efforts that tracking down, collecting, and transcribing Plath's letters required.

"If there is a single underlying thread to essays in this collection," Helle (2022, 12) concludes, "it is the excitement of an era in which Plath studies is once again revealing its protean shapes and regenerative capacities." *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath* is proof of the scope and scale of present-day Plath studies, of the various, energising, intellectual avidities that shape and reshape thinking about a poet, novelist, and short story writer who, as Jacqueline Rose (2013 [1991], 1) phrased it in 1991, "haunts," who "is—for many—a shadowy figure whose presence draws on and compels." What multivalent meaning may be wrought from such spectrality is readily apparent in these pages.

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