

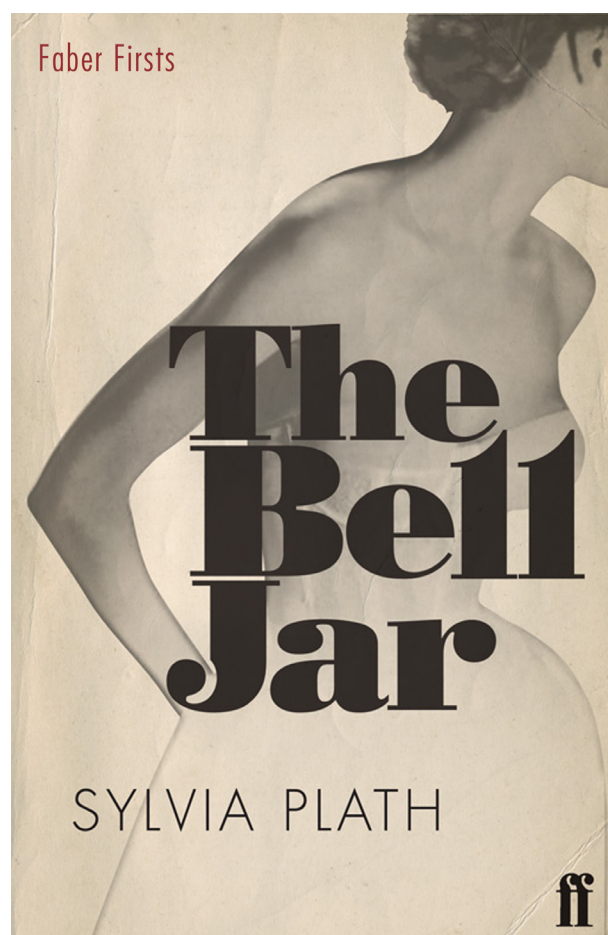
# Faber Firsts

## The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

80 ff

### The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath In brief

One long hot summer in the '50s Esther Greenwood takes the first step along the path to a seemingly bright future. She is one of twelve young women whose work has won them a month working in the office of a New York magazine. Caught up in a giddy round of parties, luncheons and fashion shows Esther finds herself distracted - the world a little too vivid, a little too wild and out of control. When she returns to disappointment in her small hometown, she slips into a breakdown. Getting up and getting dressed seem as impossible as her once-bright future. Dogged by suicidal thoughts and subjected to electric shock treatment that leaves her terrified after attempting to take her life, Esther eventually finds the help she needs and hope makes a frail return. Based on her own experience of mental breakdown, Sylvia Plath's celebrated novel is a clear-eyed dissection of descent into madness and the hopeful possibility of recovery.





## Background

Sylvia Plath's life, her troubled marriage to Ted Hughes and her eventual suicide have been the subject of an enormous body of work, from popular biography to academic study. *The Bell Jar* is Plath's only novel yet it is one of the twentieth century's best known works, a classic of its time which continues to fascinate readers with its unflinching description of the experience of losing one's mind. The novel has been described as loosely autobiographical, based on Plath's own experience of breakdown and attempted suicide in 1953.

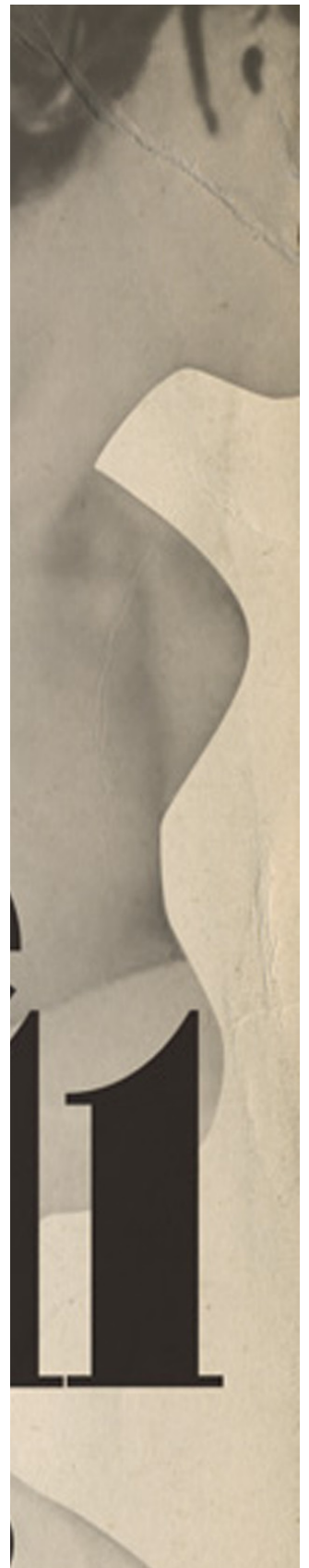
Plath and her narrator, Esther, share many characteristics. Plath lost her father just after her eighth birthday and went on to become a brilliant student, winning a scholarship to Smith College where she began to perfect her craft as a poet. She won an internship as Guest Editor of *Mademoiselle* with her short story 'Sunday at the Mintons' and spent a month working on the magazine in New York. Downcast on her return home by her rejection from a Harvard summer school writing course, she spent the summer of 1953 wrestling with suicidal thoughts. On 24 August she left a note saying, 'Have gone for a long walk. Will be home tomorrow.' Two days later she was found unconscious having taken an overdose of sleeping pills. She was hospitalised and although her recovery was far from easy she was readmitted to Smith for the spring term of 1954. This marked the beginning of a golden time: she achieved excellent marks in her work, she was accepted onto the coveted Harvard writing course that summer and graduated from Smith with honours in 1955, winning a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Newnham College, Cambridge University. It was here that she met Ted Hughes whose poems she very much admired. They began a passionate affair and married on 16th June 1956, a union which was to become one of the most analysed of any marriage between two writers.

In 1960 Plath published *The Colossus*, her first book of poetry. She and Hughes moved to a small village in Devon. Always passionate, their relationship was also stormy and less than two years after the birth of their first child they separated. In the bitterly cold winter of 1962-63, the impoverished Plath was living in a small London flat with her two young children. Despite her hardship she continued to write, often working before the children were awake.

On February 11th 1963, after ensuring that both her children were safe, Sylvia Plath killed herself by putting her head in a gas oven. She was 30 years of age.

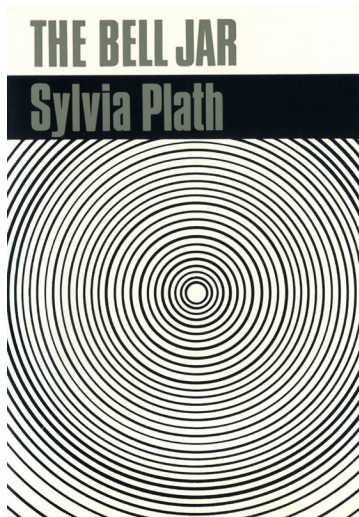
## For discussion

- 'I thought what a long way I had come' (page 37). What kind of background does Esther come from? What are the expectations and pressures she must cope with during her time at the magazine? How different are they from the expectations placed upon young women today?
- 'This Constantin won't mind if I'm too tall and don't know enough languages and haven't been to Europe, he'll see through all that stuff to what I really am.' (page 70) How does Esther see herself? How does that view change over the course of the novel? How does she compare herself with other characters in the novel such as Doreen, Betsy or Joan?
- During her therapy Esther admits to Dr Nolan that she hates her mother. How important is her relationship with her mother to Esther? How has it effected her idea of herself and of what she wants from life?
- How would you describe Esther's relationship with Buddy Willard? What did you think of her assessment of Buddy as a hypocrite? How do her attitudes towards sex and marriage differ from those of the other female characters and from our own preconceptions about 1950s sexual mores?
- 'The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters.' (page 72) Would you describe Esther as a feminist? How does she feel towards men?
- There are warnings throughout the first part of the novel pointing to Esther's confusion and unhappiness. What has contributed to her fragile mental state? What is it that brings about her breakdown?
- 'In spite of my profound reservations, I thought I would always treasure Joan. It was as if we had been forced together by some overwhelming circumstances, like war or plague, and shared a world of our own.' (page 215). How would you describe the relationship between Esther and Joan? What is it that each wants, or needs, from the other? Were you surprised by Joan's final decision?
- 'Doctor Nolan had said, quite bluntly, that a lot of people would treat me gingerly, or even avoid me, like a leper with a warning bell.' (page 226). How have attitudes towards mental illness changed since the 1950s? How different is Esther's treatment from the way a breakdown would be treated today?
- What did you make of the novel's ending? Do you think Esther is ready to go back into the world outside?
- How appropriate did you find the novel's title? What does the image of the bell jar convey to you?
- To what extent do you think that the style of the novel reflects Sylvia Plath's craft as a poet? Were there particular examples of language, imagery and metaphor that struck you?
- If you had already read one of the many books about Plath, her troubled marriage and her eventual suicide, how did this effect your reading of *The Bell Jar*? To what extent does knowledge of a writer's life illuminate their fiction?



## About the author

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, the daughter of Otto Emil Plath and Aurelia Schober Plath. She studied at the prestigious Smith College and in 1955 went to Cambridge University on a Fulbright scholarship. She published one collection of poems in her lifetime, *The Colossus* and one novel, *The Bell Jar*, which appeared in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lewis. Her *Collected Poems*, which contains her poetry written from 1956 until her death, was published in 1981 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Sylvia Plath died on February 11th 1963.



## Resources

[www.sylviaplath.de](http://www.sylviaplath.de)

One of many sites dedicated to Sylvia Plath, this is a particularly good one (run by Anja Beckmann) which includes a transcript of an interview with Plath

[www.sylviaplath.info/index2.html](http://www.sylviaplath.info/index2.html)

Peter Keating Steinburg's very detailed site devoted to Plath

[www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n16/rose01.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n16/rose01.html)

An article by Jacqueline Rose on the difficulties of writing a biography of Plath

## Suggested further reading

### Fiction

Sights Unseen by Kaye Gibbons

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey

Wintering by Kate Moses

### Poetry

Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes

### Non-Fiction

Virginia Woolf: The Marriage of Heaven and Hell by Peter Dally

Skating to Antarctica by Jenny Diski

Girl, Interrupted by Susanna Kaysen

Darkness Visible by William Styron

The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

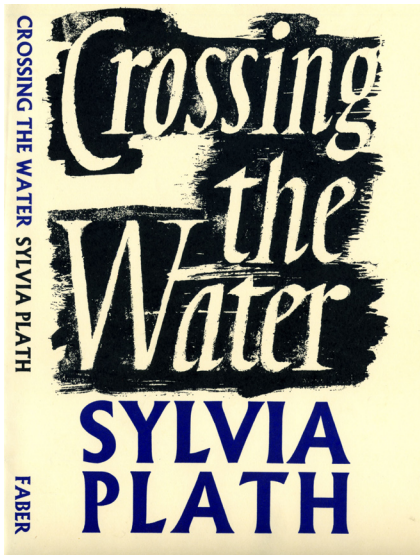
Mouthing the Words by Camilla Gibb

Last Things by Jenny Offill

An Unquiet Mind by Kay Redfield Jamison

The Female Malady by Elaine Showalter

Prozac Generation by Elizabeth Wurtzel



### Other books by Sylvia Plath

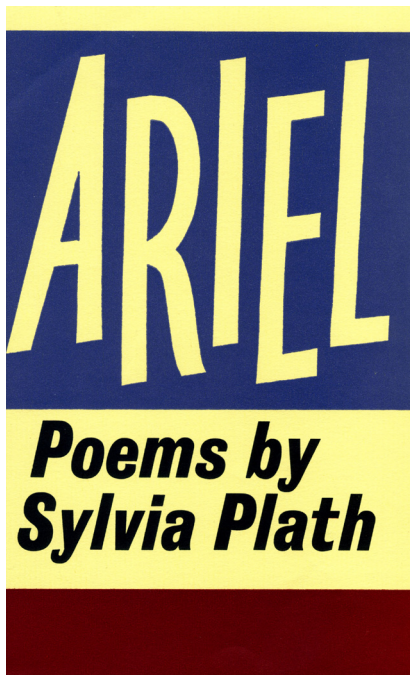
Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams  
The Journals of Sylvia Plath (edited by Karen V. Kukil)  
Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963 (selected and edited by Aurelia Schober Plath)

### Poetry

The Colossus  
Ariel  
Winter Trees  
Crossing the Water  
Collected Poems

### Children's Literature

The It-Doesn't-Matter Suit



### A small selection of Sylvia Plath biographies

The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath by Ronald Hayman  
Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage by Diane Wood Middlebrook  
The Haunting of Sylvia Plath by Jacqueline Rose  
Bitter Fame by Anne Stevenson

