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By Diane Middlebrook

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Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were husband and wife; they were also two of the most remarkable poets of the twentieth century. In this stunning new account of their marriage, Diane Middlebrook draws on a trove of newly available papers to craft a beautifully written portrait of Hughes as a man, as a poet, and as a husband haunted?and nourished?his entire life by his relationship to Sylvia Plath.

Her Husband is a triumph of the biographer?s art and an up-close look at a couple who saw each other as the means to becoming who they wanted to be: writers and mythic representations of a whole generation.

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Editorial Review

Review

Diane Middlebrook's shrewd and compelling biography . . . is a book of mysteries, delicately revealed. (*O Magazine*)

A deep, rich, and satisfying biography of a marriage—harrowing and ironic, playful and grave. (*The Washington Post Book World*)

Unquestionably the best book written thus far on these complicated geniuses. (*The Baltimore Sun*)

About the Author

Diane Middlebrook is the author of two highly praised, bestselling biographies, **Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton** and **Anne Sexton: A Biography**, which was a National Book Award and was a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist.

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Becoming Her Husband

Ted Hughes met Sylvia Plath at a wild party in February 1956 and married her four months later. He was English, twenty-five years old; she was twenty-three, an American. For six years they worked side by side at becoming artists. Then Hughes initiated an affair with another woman, and the marriage collapsed. Hughes moved out and, exactly four months later, Plath committed suicide, leaving behind their two very young children. One of the most mutually productive literary marriages of the twentieth century had lasted only about twenty-three hundred days. But until they uncoupled their lives in October 1962, each witnessed the creation of everything the other wrote, and engaged the other's work at the level of its artistic purposes, and recognized the ingenuity of solutions to artistic problems that they both understood very well. This kind of collaboration is quite uncommon between artists, especially if they are married to each other, and after the publication of Hughes's prizewinning first book, *The Hawk in the Rain*, the marriage began attracting the attention of journalists. In January 1961, Hughes and Plath were interviewed for a radio broadcast on the BBC, *Two of a Kind*, that displays them at the apex of their compatibility. The interviewer, Owen Leeming, asked whether theirs was "a marriage of opposites." As if in a movie by Woody Allen, Hughes said they were "very different" at the same moment Plath said they were "quite similar." Explaining "different," Hughes allowed that he and Plath had similar dispositions, and worked at the same pace—indeed, so deep were the similarities that he often felt he was drawing on "a single shared mind" that each accessed by telepathy. But he and Plath drew on this shared mind for quite different purposes, he said, and each of their imaginations led a thoroughly "secret life."

Explaining "similar," Plath said that though she and Hughes had very different backgrounds, she kept discovering unexpected likenesses. Hughes's fascination with animals, for example, had opened up for her

the subject of beekeeping, which was one of her father's scholarly pursuits. More of her own history had become available to her poetry because Hughes was so interested in it, she said: that was how the similarities were developing in their work—though the work itself was not at all similar, she insisted. Did she too believe they had a single shared mind? No, Plath laughed. “Actually, I think I'm a little more practical.”

Just such a dance through the minefield of their differences characterized their partnership at its best. It succeeded because each of them invested wholeheartedly in whatever the other was working on, even when the outcome was of dubious merit. In the late 1950s, Hughes helped Plath develop plots for stories she could publish in women's magazines, even though he regarded fiction-writing as a false direction for Plath. At the time, he saw, accurately, that only conventional plots in which people got born, married, or killed released her distinctive “demons,” so he encouraged her to invest in whatever mode was most productive of tapping these unique sources of energy. Plath, for her part, loyally defended the incoherent and unmarketable plays in which Hughes promoted the esoteric ideas he was hooked on, beginning in the early 1960s—she was as interested in his artistic strategies as she was in the results. Paradoxically, their intimate creative relationship enabled each of them to conduct better the “secret life” expressed in their art. The rupture in their marriage closed down this literary atelier. But poetry had brought Hughes and Plath together, and poetry kept them together until Hughes's death in 1998. Hughes inherited Plath's unpublished manuscripts, appointed himself her editor and made her famous. In 1965, when he brought out the volume titled *Ariel*, which contained Plath's last work, he said proudly, “This is just like her—but permanent.” By that year, the world was ready to agree with him about Plath's importance. Poets rarely become cultural icons, but Plath's suicide had occurred just when women's writing was beginning to stimulate the postwar women's movement. The posthumous publication of Plath's poetry, fiction, letters and journals added her voice to a swelling chorus of resistance to the traditional positions women occupied in social life. The more celebrated Sylvia Plath became, the more people wanted to know what role her marriage to Ted Hughes had played in the catastrophe of her decision to die—especially after it became widely known that the woman Hughes left her for, Assia Wevill, had also committed suicide and had killed the daughter she had borne to Hughes.

Hughes spent the rest of his life quashing public discussion of these painful episodes in his private life. But shortly before his death in 1998, he released two books of poems that explore the subject of what it meant to have been the husband of Sylvia Plath. One was titled *Birthday Letters*. Speaking to Plath as if she were looking back with him from the vantage of their middle age, Hughes reflected on the array of circumstances that drove them together in 1956, and kept them together for six years; and he also proposed an explanation of the psychological issues behind her suicide.

Birthday Letters became a huge commercial success, but most people never even heard about the other book, *Howls and Whispers*, which was published in an expensive limited edition, and was never reviewed in the press. To make *Howls and Whispers* Hughes had reserved eleven poems from the manuscripts that became *Birthday Letters*, as a winemaker sets aside the choicest vintage for special labeling. In its keynote poem, “The Offers,” the ghost of Sylvia Plath appears to Ted Hughes three times. On each visit she tests him; on the last visit she warns, “This time don't fail me.”

That startling phrase sends a pulse of light back through every page Hughes had published since Plath's death. It points our attention to the theme in Hughes's work of how marriages fail, or how men fail in marriage. Sometimes his work contains a representation of himself as the character who fails, as in *Birthday Letters*. In other writings, such as the translations of the grand works of Western literature with which Hughes occupied himself toward the end of his life—Racine's *Phèdre*, *Tales from Ovid*, the *Alcestis* of Euripides—Hughes brings empathy to the theme of marriage under duress. His versions of these were all produced for the stage, and audiences were quick to intuit that a second passionate story—Hughes's own story—was being explored, inexactly, within the dynamics of a venerable classic.

Though only 110 copies of *Howls and Whispers* were printed, Hughes acquired a large audience for its most important poem, "The Offers," by releasing it in the *London Sunday Times* on October 18, 1998. Ten days later, Hughes died. Whether by accident or design, that sentence spoken by Sylvia Plath through the medium of Ted Hughes would be on record as his last words. *Birthday Letters* offers us a way to see Ted Hughes from inside his partnership with Plath; "The Offers" requires that we see them as inseparable, even in death. "This time, don't fail me" is the voice of poetry itself, which Plath embodied; the persona created in his work is her husband; and that persona is his contribution to the history of poetry.

Hughes began developing this autobiographical persona, her husband, when he was nearly fifty years old. After years of attempting to avoid autobiographical writing, Hughes had come to believe that the voice in poetry had to issue from a human being situated in historical time and place, engaged in attempting to "cure" a wounding blow to his psyche inflicted by an historically significant conflict. The struggle conducted in a poet's art was his way of participating in history. Hughes also saw that no single work of writing stood alone, that a strong writer's work proceeded by accretion over time. Hughes observed that the poetic DNA expressed itself in single, definitive images or a "knot of obsessions" produced early in the poet's career and repeated in variations thereafter. Like the cells of a developing foetus, each work contained the DNA of the whole man, that is, the whole image of the persona.

"The Offers" is the central poem in Hughes's work of self-mythologizing. It marks the turning point in his creative life, showing in a set of images how the poet's powers were summoned back to him following the two successive personal disasters of the suicides of women close to him. What would it mean not to fail the claims that Woman had made on his psyche from childhood on? How could he negotiate the urgency of contradictory needs for separation from her, and for dialogue with her? During the last two decades of his career, these questions informed works of lasting importance by Ted Hughes. These included *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, in which he investigated the conflicted "way of loving" to be found in Shakespeare's writing; and the autobiographical poems wherein Hughes provided himself with a mythical childhood, much in the manner of Wordsworth, setting forth an account of the growth of the poet's mind. But in Hughes's account, marriage was the culmination of that developmental path. And marriage forced a man into the underground of his own darkness. In "The Offers," he is stepping naked back into the world, no longer in the form of a man, but as a persona.

This is the myth that can be pieced together from its scattered manifestations in Hughes's published works and private papers; and Hughes made sure that it coul...

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