



## Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet

*Elaine Feinstein*

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## **Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet** Elaine Feinstein

Although Ted Hughes's genius was recognized early and he ended his days as England's Poet Laureate, his life was dogged by tragedy and controversy. His marriage to the poet Sylvia Plath marked his whole life, and he never entirely recovered from her suicide in 1963. Many people have held his adultery responsible for Plath's death; in this insightful book, Elaine Feinstein explores an altogether more complex situation, and throws a sad new light on his relationship with his lover Assia Wevill, who also killed herself along with their young daughter. Drawing on extensive archival material and interviews with childhood friends, fellow undergraduates, poets, and critics, Feinstein gives a portrait of a large-spirited, magnetic personality intrigued by the forms of magical experience that preoccupied Shakespeare and Yeats, but who was nevertheless a down-to-earth Yorkshire man, whose poetic vision encompassed not only his love of the natural world but also all the evidence of human brutality in the past century.

## **Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet Details**

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Author : Elaine Feinstein

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## **From Reader Review Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet for online ebook**

### **Hugo says**

Not deep enough, provides some interesting notes but doesn't delve deep enough into his thought and intellectual development.

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### **Teresa Kinley says**

The bio is okay. It's not brilliantly written and it doesn't achieve what I hoped it would: more empathy for Hughes.

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### **Nikki says**

Having just read a Sylvia Plath biography I thought it only fair to redress the balance and read one on Ted Hughes. Given that this was written by someone who knew him I expected it to give a closer portrait of the man and the poet so I was somewhat disappointed by the book. It left me with the impression that the author didn't really know him at all or rather didn't understand him. I don't think he was the 'Heathcliff' character he is sometimes portrayed as and nor do I think he was responsible for Sylvia Plath's death ( although I'm still not sure I understand that fully..)but I couldn't get a sense of the man at all from the book. His 'friends remember him affectionately' isn't much of an analysis. The list of affairs he had during both his marriages could be due to arrogance or perhaps he didn't know what he was looking for- he remarked later in life that he had never gotten over Sylvia Plath. Either way he treated women terribly. His life seems to have been overshadowed by her death and this book certainly was and I hope future biographers leave the sensationalism and speculation out and concentrate more on his poetry.

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### **Liz Brown says**

A compulsive read. Could be titled Ted and "brain" as this book cleverly has a two prong approach. The first Ted as a poet with an "inner life"- fantasies/innermost spirits- that often seems/needs to function on its own. Second his "physical life" -everyday needs/trials and tribulations. Both need satisfying causing conflicts, even suffering to those around him. Continuing with this two prong approach this book explores his marriage to the poet Sylvia Plath with her competing innermost spirits/fantasies/and poems filled with images of death; his affair with Assia Weivell whose inner life was haunted by Sylvia and stolid with misery; his interim women -seemingly more grounded -as well as marrying Carol Orchard who loved the man and not the "brain." Fidelity was never Ted's strong point along side many men who were enjoying the new found sexual freedoms of the 60s.

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## **Rania Attafi says**

3.5 stars

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## **Laura says**

Some brief thoughts: this book makes a great accompaniment to Birthday Letters, Hughes' collection of poetry about his relationship with Plath. It struck me as quite obviously biased towards Hughes himself - but I suppose I sought it out in the first place because Plath's feminist following make such a song and dance about what a selfish bully Hughes was and it was time to redress the balance. I think he comes across even here, though, as a bit of a loafer, a selfish son (concerns re: his father's nursing home fees are a little crass) and a very distant father. We know how the Nick story turns out but, nevertheless, poor Nick. Feinstein comments on his 'need' to have more than one woman on the go, but doesn't even attempt to justify it. Fascinating read, though; not overly long and, as ever, proof that a writer needs time, cockiness and connections.

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## **Kate Sermon says**

I enjoyed this delve into Ted Hughes' life. I'm a Plath fan through and through and it was interesting to see the account of their marriage from Hughes' point of view. However, often this book read as an account of a fan wanting more than anything to raise her idol up in others' esteem. I would have liked a more balanced view, especially as a friend of mine who also 'knew' Hughes described him as arrogant and selfish. If this book is spin doctoring then it fails to convince me by its unbalanced viewpoint.

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## **Mark says**

I came to this biography knowing only two facts about Ted Hughes: that he was a poet, and that he was Sylvia Plath's husband. I came away profoundly relieved to be in a stable marriage, inspired to read and write more poetry, and confident that Ted Hughes was not someone I would be likely to count as a friend. This is an excellent portrait of the man, touching and rich, and it made me curious to read other books by Elaine Feinstein, especially her biography of D.H. Lawrence. This would have been a four-star book, in my opinion, had it not been for the feeling that it is two parts biography, one part defense: Feinstein, who was a friend of Ted's, clearly wanted to show the world that he doesn't deserve to be cast as the villain who drove Sylvia Plath to suicide.

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## **Ingrid Lola says**

Elaine Feinstein, British poet and writer, herself an acquaintance of Hughes, succeeded in writing a fine and clear account of Hughes' prolific career as a poet. This book is very non-biased, well researched, and expertly written. Feinstein taps into Hughes' unique and artistic interpretation of the world, and examines how his poetry reflects that. Feinstein writes that Hughes himself "was not writing to stun or to startle, but to

understand," and Feinstein achieves as well a clear understanding of Hughes in his own right, not as the murderous mysogynist some may believe him to be. She focuses on Hughes' interest in mysticism, folk tales, the occult, British as well as world literature, and his strong sense of individualism. Brilliant book, I'd recommend it strongly to any interested in Hughes, Plath, or poetry in general.

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## Steve says

Ugh.

To be honest, my expectations for Elaine Feinstein's biography, *Ted Hughes, The Life of a Poet*, were, from the start, low. That's not a knock against Feinstein, but against the familiar formula of cranking out a quick "biography" when someone famous dies. Hughes died October 29, 1998. Feinstein, an acquaintance of Hughes, attended the funeral, and was contacted by W.W. Norton in early November about commissioning a biography. Feinstein started work in February 1999. The book was published in 2001.

On surface, it's an impressive marshalling of facts, which will no doubt provide future biographers with a good chronological framework from which to work. On top of that, Feinstein writes well. Feinstein is well aware of the controversies surrounding Hughes, and doesn't, to her credit, duck them. She's clearly sympathetic to Hughes, but also to Plath, and to a lesser extent the main "other woman," Assia Weevil. Still, as the book went on, I found myself liking Hughes less and less. "Liking" isn't a necessity here, but since so much of this book is centered on the tragedies of Hughes' life, and not the poetry, it's hard not to hit a wall. Especially so when late in the book Hughes suggests that Assia (and Plath's) suicides were inevitable. Meanwhile Hughes continues to cheat on his current wife. Feinstein at this point gets particularly annoying, because we are constantly reminded of Ted's fine reputation in England. It's as if being a serial adulterer one can still truly exist within a vacuum where no human cost occurs. Feinstein, as the book progresses, skates very lightly over this point.

The book opens traditionally enough with a brief recitation of Hughes' beginnings in small town on the Yorkshire moors (Bronte's moors). It's a fact that Hughes was well aware of as he, and others, would mention that he was a "Heathcliff" type. Brooding, romantic. etc. Hughes, a middle class product, was soon tagged as gifted and talented, which was quite an accomplishment in class conscious England. However, early on in college (1954-55), Hughes, in a red flag conversation regarding family problems, told a friend:

*"You must be cruel," he said, his voice rising. "One must cultivate the practice of deceit." He asked if I was the oldest in the family and I said I was. "The eldest in the family must be the executioner . . . You must emulate the actions of the weasel," he said, leaving me stumped for a reply and wondering what my mother would do if I tried it. (page 37)*

Weasel. Indeed. What's stunning about this (well, there's a lot things, given what's to unfold), is that up to this point, Hughes has been, according to Feinstein, some sort of big, easy going lug, who has a love of poetry, and likes to drink and sing in bars. (Weirdly, he would also dabble (and would for the rest of his life) in the occult, astrology, Ouija boards, and Tarot cards.) One can't help but feel the mask has slipped for a moment, and the real Ted has been revealed. Such "Ted" nuggets are rare early on, but start to accumulate (as do the contradictions) quickly after the death of Plath. To her credit, Feinstein reports them. In an earlier time, when Ted and his bitchy and controlling New Age sister, Olwyn, would no doubt have tried to sanitize such Ted stories ("for the children").

The marriage to Plath is given a lot of space, but how can it not? In Feinstein's hands she comes across as enormously gifted, high strung, but also a good mother. If anything, upon entering marriage with Hughes, she was the more published poet. But she recognized Hughes as a great poet, and did the grunt work as far as typing up his poems and sending them out. This necessary process, which most poets hate, was engineered by Plath. Hughes, in contrast, seems kind of lazy about this end of things. But to do this, Plath had to sacrifice something of her self, her own creative life, – which she did willingly. She also comes across as more dimensional and real than Hughes, who up to now sounds like a collection biographical newspaper clippings. Hughes only really comes to life when the cheating becomes obvious. At one point, while Plath's mother is visiting, Hughes gets a call (which Plath witnesses) from Assia to meet her for a night of champagne and peaches and etc. There is a level of cruel (and arranged?) calculation here on Hughes' part that Feinstein seems unwilling to acknowledge. There is even, later, a suggestion that Ted might (though Feinstein doubts it -- but why?) have told Plath, on the eve of her suicide, that Assia was pregnant.

At this point more and more Ted nuggets start showing up. The loving father, for example, refusing to even touch the baby Nicholas. This is particularly chilling when one considers Nicholas' own suicide in 2009, as well as Hughes' later admission to Plath's mother that he never really wanted children anyway. After Plath's death, Hughes was constantly farming them out to Olywn or boarding school. And then there's Assia, the other woman. Good looking (at least before she got fat), exotic, a home wrecker. The literary critic Al Alvarez, and friend to both Plath and Hughes, pegged her as predatory. It's hard to like her. She even stole part of Plath's journals as a potential nest egg when she sensed things were heading south with Ted. But you can pity her, and her young child Shura. Ted Froze her out and she committed suicide, taking her child with her. What are the odds of that happening anywhere? Twice? With the same guy?

But this cold behavior just didn't extend to the women in Hughes' life, but even to his parents. Once, while attending to his sick mother (this was while he was seeing Assia), he asked his mother "What are you going to do when you're dead?" When it comes to Hughes' family, I felt I was just getting the tip of (appropriately) an iceberg.

Next to come is the management of the (goldmine) Plath estate. Much has been made of Hughes' dedication to the art of poetry, of his willingness to publish *Ariel*, even though it's poetry that rips him apart. Don't take that but so far. A great number of these poems had already been circulated by Plath, so what was Hughes to do? Sit on them and thus damage his reputation among his poetic peers? What Hughes did do, and I commented on this recently in reviewing the restored version of *Ariel*, is monkey with Plath's arrangement, and in such a way as to mute the poetic attack on him as well as destroy the intended arc of the collection. If you doubt this, read them and compare. And then read this self serving bullshit interview he gave the Paris Review, back in 1995:

*INTERVIEWER: Would you talk about burning Plath's journals?*

*HUGHES: What I actually destroyed was one journal which covered maybe two or three months, the last months. And it was just sad. I just didn't want her children to see it, no. Particularly her last days.*

*INTERVIEWER: What about Ariel? Did you reorder the poems there?*

*HUGHES: Well, nobody in the U.S. wanted to publish the collection as she left it. The one publisher over there who was interested wanted to cut it to twenty poems. The fear seemed to be that the whole lot might provoke some sore of backlash - some revulsion. And at the time, you know, few magazine editors would publish the Ariel poems, few liked them. The qualities weren't so obvious in those days. So right from the start there was a question over just how the book was to be presented. I wanted the book that would display*

*the whole range and variety. I remember writing to the man who suggested cutting it to twenty - a longish intemperate letter, as I recall - and saying I felt that was simply impossible. I was torn between cutting some things out and putting some more things in. I was keen to get some of the last poems in. But the real problem was, as I've said, that the U.S. publishers I approached did not want Sylvia's collection as it stood. Faber in England were happy to publish the book in any form. Finally, it was a compromise - I cut some things out and I put others in. As a result I have been mightily accused of disordering her intentions and even suppressing part of her work. But those charges have evolved twenty, thirty years after the event. They are based on simple ignorance of how it all happened. Within six years of that first publication all her late poems were published in collections - all that she'd put in her own Ariel, and those she'd kept out. It was her growing fame, of course, that made it possible to publish them. And years ago, for anybody who was curious, I published the contents and order of her own typescript - so if anybody wants to see what her Ariel was it's quite easy. On the other hand, how final was her order? She was forever shuffling the poems in her typescripts - looking for different connections, better sequences. She knew there were always new possibilities, all fluid.*

Infuriatingly, one good thing Hughes did, in promoting the translations of poets from Eastern Europe, was to muck it up by equating himself with those suffering poets. Facism vs the narrow confines of married monogamy. Right. You see, Ted was a survivor too. Ultimately, what comes out of Feinstein's book is that it was all about Ted. It always was. Even a friendly biographer can't hide that fact.

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### **Kim Bolton says**

i enjoyed this bio much more than I thought I would. I began reading it with a preconcieved idea of who Ted Hughes was: the lying, cheating, husband of poet Sylvia Plath. BUT you get a different persepective of Hughes after reading Feinstein's book as the husband of neurotic woman who was constantly suspicious of him. He spent their married life encouraging Plath to write, but because of Plath's mental/emotional instability and Hughes's propensity to seek comfort from younger women their marriage was anything but wedded bliss.

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### **Ilze says**

Hughes was a born writer. You can see it in his work (and his unceasing need to write) as well as his studies. He couldn't stick out his original course of study because it was interfering with his writing. So anthropology and history it was, and you can follow the traces of these studies in his poetry (and other work). He absolutely loved Shakespeare ... and women! My theory is that he would always have hankered after Plath (as he did anyway) should they merely have divorced and she had lived to see it through. As it was, his sister ended up with the children after Assia died until he did find a wife (Carol) willing to stand by him. But even then he still followed other women. He seemed to have quite an admiration for Robert Graves' idea of the White Goddess, which could well have justified his conquests in that realm. I find it tragic that he spent the rest of his life hunting the one woman he loved, only to discover, too late, that writing about her would free him. It was only once he managed to put pen to paper for *Birthday Letters* that Plath's spell had less of a hold on him.

I admire this poet for his amazing work and his amazing ability to keep writing even in adversity.

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### **Larry says**

I do have some sympathy for the author and a certain respect at least for her attempt to write "The Life of a Poet" that poet being the daunting on so many levels Ted Hughes. I must admit I have not completed the book as I wish to begin Jonathan Bate's bio of this poet. I recognise in some fashion the shortcomings of this work in that it was produced a mere three years after Ted's passing, and therein possibly lies the major challenge: a Biography with the title "The Life of the Poet" must carry weight, insight and at least some thorough analysis of the intersection of the subject's life and art. One reviewer called this volume "Ted Light" and I find I am unfortunately coming to the same conclusion thereby my decision to stop and commence Prof. Bate's much talked about biography. This bio may have been well received in the immediate glow of the comet that was Ted but I am afraid it just doesn't read well in 2018.

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### **Chris says**

The great biography is yet to be written. This is a readable introduction of sorts.

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### **Anna Graham says**

After a deep breath taken, I feel grateful for Hughes' poetry, sadness for the course of his life which revealed such depths. The book was full of interesting nuances, from Hughes' childhood through his later years. It felt thin at times, but his relationship and marriage to Sylvia Plath was well documented, as was his affair with Assia Wevill, which to many might be the biggest draw. I would have loved more background with his children, and his wife Carol. Still an excellent read for anyone curious to Hughes' life, or that of the women he loved and lost.

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