

Review

Diane Middlebrook: *Her Husband. Hughes and Plath – A Marriage.* Viking, 2003

Diane Middlebrook's *Her Husband* is not so much a biography as an examination of the emergence and development of a specific autobiographical persona in Ted Hughes's work. This is the persona which Hughes elaborated over more than 30 years in literary presentations of his marriage to Sylvia Plath, and the poems of *Birthday Letters*, *Howls and Whispers* and *Capriccio* are as much part of this as are his essays on Plath life and work [for a selection, see "further reading", below].

Unlike many others who wrote about the marriage of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, Diane Middlebrook's refuses to reduce their relationship to questions of fault and blame or mere voyeuristic detail. Instead, she bases her argument on the literary evidence currently available from published works and in letters and other writings from the Ted Hughes Archives at Emory University. Contradictions which she encounters in the works and self-stylings of both poets are left to exist side by side. As a result, this book comes with refreshingly little speculation on whys and wherefores of this exceptionally creative relationship. Moreover, by refusing to adopt the condescending moralist attitude of other writers, Middlebrook is able to go much deeper into questions of what made this relationship work and fail.

At the beginning of the book Middlebrook lays the foundations for her argument by investigating Hughes's and Plath's family backgrounds and their emergence as young promising writers. Right from the start she weaves poetry, essays, letters and diary entries into her narrative, including plenty of previously inaccessible material. Middlebrook is a sharp observer and her conclusions are often striking, so that the book is bound to reveal interesting details even to readers who are well familiar with the the life and work of the two poets.

Following up the story of their first meeting and the ensuing relationship, Middlebrook focuses on the years between 1956 and 1963. Convincingly she reconstructs the late fifties' early sixties' British and American contexts which both poets found themselves in. Particularly interesting is her reconstruction of cross-pollinations in the works of Plath and Hughes, suggesting the vital role each played in the development of the others' writing. Middlebrook shows how Plath and Hughes became poets *together*, how they influenced and

inspired each other. Other issues discussed include questions of sexuality/fertility and creativity, or gender-related issues, commitment to career vs. family, and other questions which the young couple had to grapple with.

The later part of the book focuses on the role of the marriage to Plath and of Plath's writings in Hughes' life after her death, his continuing attempts at coming to terms with, or revisiting and reassessing the consequences and repercussions of his and her decisions. Here, Middlebrook also explores his self-stylings and/or the presentation of Hughes earlier self in his writing right up to *Birthday Letters* and its sibling publications.

Middlebrook's overall approach is thorough and scholarly. Yet the book is uncluttered and utterly readable, which is an achievement in itself. Her sure style is not only likely to elicit a response from the reader, allowing us to enter into a dialogue with her, but also makes it possible to disagree with certain points of her argument without losing the desire to read on.

Claas Kazzer

Further reading:

Winter Pollen collects the following essays by Ted Hughes on Sylvia Plath:

»Sylvia Plath: Ariel«, »Publishing Sylvia Plath«, »Collecting Sylvia Plath«, »Sylvia Plath and Her Journals«, »Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of ›Sheep in Fog‹«,

The literary magazine *Thumbscrew*, No. 2, 1995 contains the essay: »Sylvia Plath: *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*«

Further essays are published in several books by Sylvia Plath, the editing of which Ted Hughes has been involved in.