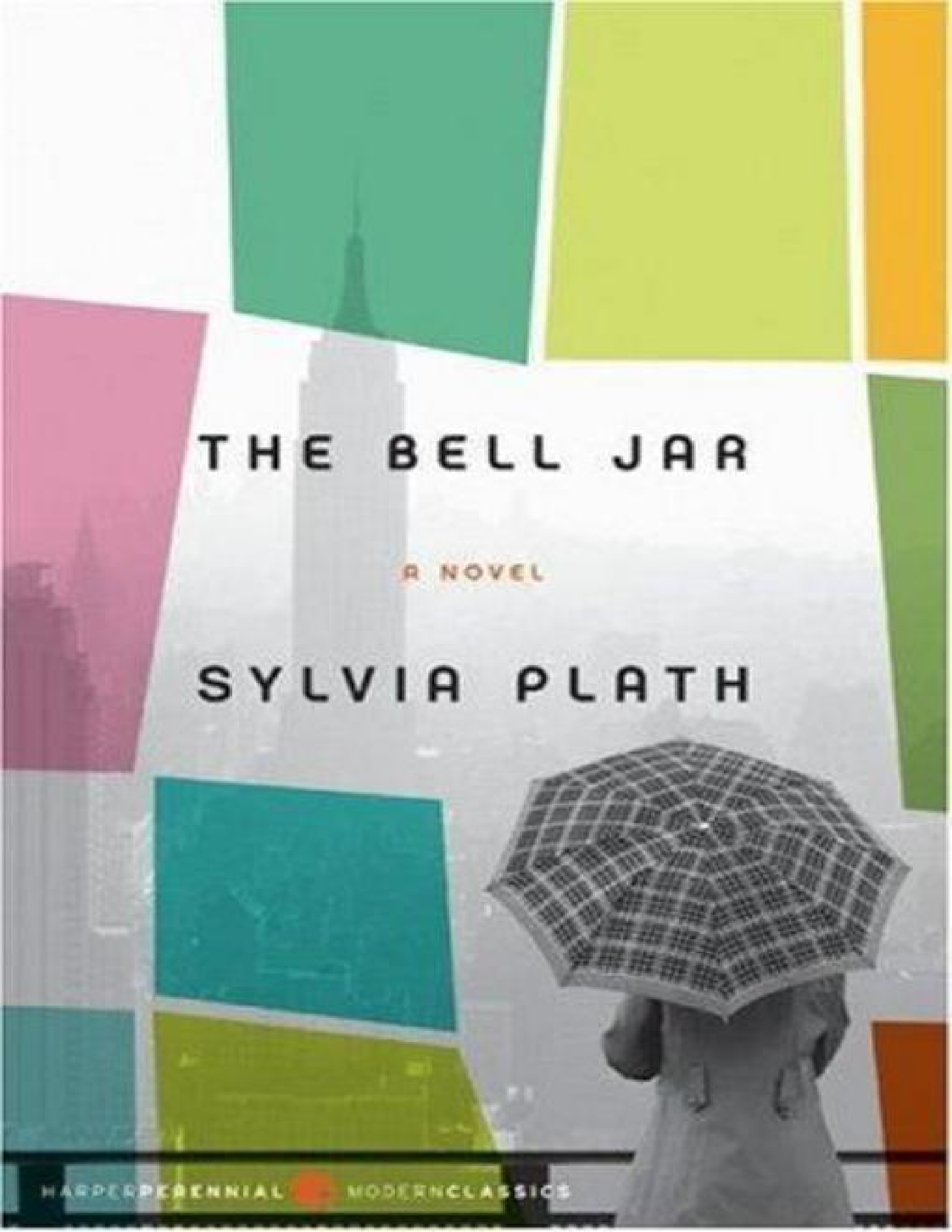
THE BELL JAR
A NOVEL
SYLVIA PLATH
HARPERPERENNIAL MODERNCLASSICS

THE
BELL JAR

Sylvia Plath

for Elizabeth and David

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Foreword

by Frances McCullough

You might think that classics like The Bell Jar *are immediately rec*ognized the moment they reach a publisher's office. But publishing history is rife with stories about classic novels that barely squeaked into print, from *Nightwood* to *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and *The Bell jar* is one of them. It's hard to say whether, if Sylvia Plath had lived--she'd be a senior citizen on her sixty-fifth birthday, October 27th, 1997--the novel would ever have been published in this country: Certainly it would not have been published until her mother died, which would have kept it from our shores until the early '90s. And by that time, Plath might have become a major novelist who might see her first book in a quite different light.

But of course Plath did die a tragic death at the age of thirty, and the book's subsequent history has everything to do with that fact. The first time her manuscript came into the offices at Harper and Row in late 1962 it was under the auspices of the Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship, a grant affiliated with the publishing house that supported the writing of the book. The grant required Plath to submit the final manuscript to the Saxton committee. Two Harper editors, both older women with a special interest in poetry, read the novel in hopes of getting first crack at a new voice in the literary world--but both of them found it disappointing, juvenile and overwrought. In effect, they rejected the book, though it hadn't been offered to them officially, and in fact Plath was quite insistent that it shouldn't be published in America because its roman-à-clef elements would be so hurtful to her family and their friends.

Actually, Plath already had an American publisher. Knopf had bought her first book of poems, The *Colossus* (1962), an event that triggered the first outpouring of prose that became *The Bell jar.* For a long time Plath had been thinking about writing a novel; her ambitions to break into “the slicks,” especially the *Ladies Home journal)* were constantly on the back burner as she concentrated on her poems. Addressing her as “Dear Mrs. Hughes,” the Saxton Fellowship had turned down her poetry manuscript, the one that became *The Colossus)* so it must have been a particular point of pride when they later accepted *The Bell jar* project.

She also had a British publisher: William Heinemann Limited had published *The Colossus* in the fall of 1960, and agreed to publish *The Bell jar)* under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas (though everyone in literary London knew Plath was the author), in January 1963--which turned out to be just a few weeks before Plath’s death. Reviews were lukewarm, and Plath was deeply stung by them. But she had already begun another novel the previous spring, and by her mother’s account, there was yet another finished one that went up in a bonfire one day when Plath was in a rage. Although she wasn’t as surefooted in her fiction as she was in poetry, she planned to write “novel after novel” once her book of poems *(Ariel)* was finished.

But by the time *The Bell Jar* came out in London, Plath was in extremis; her marriage to poet Ted Hughes was over, she was in a panic about money, and had moved to a bare flat in London with her two small children in the coldest British winter in a hundred years. All three of them had the flu, there was no phone, and there was no help with child care. She was well aware of the brilliance of the poems she was writing--and in fact A. Alvarez, the leading critic of the day, had told her they deserved a Pulitzer. But even that knowledge didn’t save her from the dreaded bell jar experience, the sudden descent into deep depression that had triggered her first suicide attempt in the summer described in the novel. A number of the same elements were in place this time: the abrupt departure of the central male figure in her life, critical rejection (Plath had not been accepted for Frank O’Connor’s writing class at Harvard that *Bell Jar* summer), isolation in new surroundings, complete exhaustion.

Plath's suicide on February 11, 1963 brought her instant fame in England, where she had made occasional appearances on the BBC and was beginning to be known through her publications. But she was still not well known here in her native land, and there was no sign that she would become not only the last of the major poets read widely, but also a feminist heroine whose single published novel had spoken directly to the hearts of more than one generation.

When I first arrived at Harper in the summer of 1964, there was no actual job for me--I'd been reading for the Saxton Prize novel contest, the latest incarnation of the Fellowship, on a temporary basis, and I'd been put on staff simply because, as my new boss put it, "If you're as good as we think you are, you'll figure out something to do." I looked around; the poetry editor, who was one of the readers of *The Bell Jar* who hadn't liked it, was retiring. I did a little checking and discovered that virtually every poet in America was unhappy with his or her publisher. This seemed to me a good opportunity to attract some stars to our list, so I proposed hiring a poetry scout--my candidate was Donald Hall. I sent off a memo to Cass Canfield, the publisher, who thought this was a fine idea.

When Don went to London later that year, *Ariel* had just been published and Don was elated; he bought a copy of the book and sent a cable urging us to publish it. Knopf was of course interested too, but they'd quickly hit a sticking point. None of their poets--and they had a fine list--had ever been paid over $250 as an advance against royalties for a book of poems, and it was unthinkably unfair, they felt, to make an exception for Plath. Meantime, Don pointed out to Plath's husband and executor Ted Hughes that it would make perfect sense to publish *Ariel* with Harper since Hughes himself was published there, so the nod was going in our direction.

I knew about Plath; her odd name had been ringing in my head ever since I'd first heard it from A. Alvarez, who'd been teaching at Brandeis in my graduate school days. But these poems profoundly affected me as none of her *New Yorker* poems or *Colossus* poems had. Although there was opposition inside the house from some quarters, who felt the poems were too sensational, eventually Roger Klein, a young editor, and I

were allowed to buy the book for $750--a small sum, noted editor in chief Evan Thomas--to give the young people their head.

From the moment *Ariel* appeared in print, it was a sensation, with a double-page spread in *Time* magazine setting off a frenzy. Women were joining consciousness-raising groups, and Plath was often the center of the discussion. After her death, Ted Hughes, who inherited the copyright on all her work, published and unpublished, had assured her mother that *The Bell Jar* would not be published in America during Mrs. Plath's lifetime. But the demand for more Plath had led to bootleg copies of the novel coming in from England; at least two bookstores in New York carried the book and sold it briskly.

There was yet another quirk in the publishing history of *The Bell Jar,* a copyright snag. Because it had been published abroad originally by an American citizen, and had not been published in America within six months of foreign publication or registered for copyright in the United States, it fell under a provision (since nullified) called Ad Interim, which mean it was no longer eligible for copyright protection in America. This had been a closely guarded secret, but one day in 1970 I had a phone call from Juris Jurjevics, an old friend at another publishing house, alerting me that John Simon at Random House was aware of the copyright situation and was planning to publish the book. This was horrifying; I called Simon and explained to him that the only reason the book hadn't been published was out of respect for Mrs. Plath's feelings, that we had an agreement to publish it if she changed her mind or if she died, and that it was unconscionable for him to steal this book. To my utter astonishment, he agreed, and said he would cancel the publication.

Obviously we had to publish the novel immediately. I called Ted Hughes and his sister Olwyn, who was the literary agent for the Estate, and we undertook the delicate business of telling Mrs. Plath--who later told her side of the story in *Letters Home* (1975), a selection of Sylvia's letters to her.

But again there was internal opposition to the project, from the remaining original reader of *The Bell Jar,* who didn't like it any better the second time around. Despite the success of *Ariel,* the house was concerned about publishing posthumous work that wasn't up to snuff. I turned to Frank Scioscia, a brilliant Harper sales manager with a legendary book nose, and asked if he could read the novel overnight and give me a reaction the next day. He did; Frank loved the book and thought it would have extraordinary sales. That saved the book for Harper, and nearly three million paperback copies have been sold since 1972.

The eight-year wait between the novel's original publication in England and its American appearance had only increased its audience. Plath was nearly a household name by 1971, there were Plath groupies, and the women's movement was in full bloom, with recent books from Germaine Greer and Robin Morgan. Confessional literature was in vogue. And there was a new fascination with death; Elisabeth Kubler-Ross had burst on the scene and Erich Segal's tearjerker, *Love Story,* seemed to have a permanent place on the bestseller list. Depression and mental illness were subjects much on people's minds as well; they were reading R. D. Laing. A. Alvarez, the critic who so admired Plath, had written a highly romantic book about suicide featuring Plath as Exhibit A. A timely excerpt from the British edition appeared in the *New American Review* around the time of publication and became the topic of the moment.

The Bell Jar sailed right onto the bestseller list and despite some complaining reviews, it quickly established itself as a female rite-of-passage novel, a twin to *Catcher in the Rye*--a comparison first noted by one of the original British reviewers. In fact *The Bell jar* was published on the twentieth anniversary of Salinger's classic and Sylvia Plath herself was just two years older than the fictional hero, Holden Caulfield.

To Molly O'Neill, a seventeen-year-old lifeguard in Ohio who would grow up to become a food writer for the *New York Times* and a novelist herself, reading *The Bell Jar* that summer was nothing short of astonishing. Above all she was amazed by the possibility of madness descending like a tornado into a typical bright young woman's life out of