

## Anne Sexton: A Long Time Dying

It is indecent to attend the funeral of a stranger. There is little enough privacy left in the world that we must share our death with others, but we do — daily — on the evening news, on the front pages of newspapers, in weekly tabloids, and in letters to people we love.

Ann Sexton died on October 4, 1974, but her dying was a long, grim ritual acted out most of her forty-six years. In *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (Houghton Mifflin, \$15), the poet's daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, and confidante and biographer, Lois Ames, have made it possible for the voyeur to stand at the unshaded window and observe her manic struggle for survival. Sexton's letters are painful and bloody. It is not easy to read or accept them with the passivity of a stranger curled up with a book for a night's leisure. Like her poetry, Anne's letters plummet to abysmal depths, but offer the reader no way out, no catharsis — no excuse for continuing the struggle.

Living on the edge of sanity, Sexton admitted herself to mental hospitals as frequently as a woman visiting the beauty parlor. Poetry began as therapy and served as a lifeline until it played out. Again and again in her letters, especially to the poet, W.D. Snodgrass, Anne blessed poetry for giving her an alternative to the madness that awaits the flagging spirit.

Her letters also reveal her husband's valiant attempt to save their marriage; the awful ambivalence toward her parents; the grotesque spectacle of her mother dying, her father going to pieces, and his death soon after; Anne's discovery of poetry and her meteoric development as a writer leading to the publication of her first book in less than two years.

She wished she could write sweeter poetry, but it wasn't in her — it would have been dishonest, and she was seldom dishonest.

She was a member of a diminished school of writers that included Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell. They were a brilliant, doomed coterie of poets trying to exorcise real and imagined guilts through the medium of poetry.

*A Self-Portrait in Letters* will serve, no doubt, as a companion piece to Ms. Ames' soon-to-be-published biography of Sexton. I don't think I'll read it. A biography can only be more fleshy, more gritty, more harrowing.

Tom Martin

## Off & On Photography

Susan Sontag's new book, *On Photography* (Farrar Straus, \$7.95) — her first collection of essays since 1969 — offers the unusual experience of watching a massive amount of brains and erudition go into arguing some rather unbelievable points. It's like meeting a splendidly articulate, educated person who happens to represent the Flat Earth Society.

Like Marshall McLuhan, Sontag sets out to think about an entire medium, its peculiar

features, effect on consumers and its pluses and minuses. Photography, as Sontag sees it, is under suspicion in many areas. In particular, she worries that we are inundated in too many photographic reproductions, resulting in "image pollution." Also troublesome is the possibility that photographs may give us the feeling we are confronting reality (Vietnam, for instance) without really making us face much of anything — in fact, getting us off the hook. The photography fan seems an especially disturbing phenomenon. As Sontag views him, he is too often looking for easy effects, not critical enough about the ideas behind the images he collects, not willing to think out the implications of a Diane Arbus. In fact, Sontag grows so wary of the potentially attenuating effects of photographs that she doesn't allow any photo to enter her book, grimly determined to make the reader think very hard all the way through.

Sontag's own violent experience of photographed horror provides the most memorable part of the book. After twelve years lived as a "horror virgin," she discovered the world's foulness by leafing through a book of concentration-camp pictures. Now she claims that her life falls in two halves, Before and After. The obvious conclusion would be "photography can bring about illumination," but she's not ready to buy it. She notes that today, when gory or pain-filled images crowd the pages of newspapers and magazines, no child could duplicate her own searing awakening. For Sontag, this means that too frequent and too easy an exposure to horrible images has robbed us of a part of

## Let's Hear It For the Sixties

Peter Tauber's novel, *The Last Best Hope* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) is the story of a war baby, Tyler Bowen, and through him, the story of America in the sixties. It is a profoundly sad tale, punctuated with violent death and culminating in the ascension of the ultimate social villain, Richard Nixon. Nixon is, in a sense, the summing up of the sixties: cynicism and deceit enjoying the final victory over idealism. Woodstock becomes Altamont, the Jefferson Airplane makes Levis commercials, and there you have it, crappola grande.

As fiction, *The Last Best Hope* has many strengths, compelling characterization paramount among them. Tyler, the bright, gifted, likeable young man, is indeed the prototype of America's hope. His friend, St. Paul Hooper, is a wonderful incarnation of the wise fool, sixties-style, the doped up misfit who converses directly with God, and whose personal craziness paradoxically highlights the institutional craziness of a system into which he simply cannot fit. And Johanna, Tyler's lover, epitomizes the enigmatic heroine whose motives and needs elude equally her conservative, rationalist husband, and the liberal, emotional Tyler.

Tauber's interplay of themes is complex and provocative — science and politics, the quest for truth and the quest for power, and the subversion of the former in service of the latter. This last is central to Tauber's view of the sixties and it is developed through the lives of his characters. Tyler works as an information officer for a government project, but his role is to disseminate, not information, but system-serving lies. Willie, Tyler's brother and a reluctant soldier, is given the Congressional Medal of Honor, but the reasons for the award are reconstructed to serve propaganda purposes. Even heroism is de-

success, and a serious contribution to our evolving conception of the Viet Nam war and the social chaos it engendered. It is a depressing book and a very good one. Read it.

J.C. Norton

## Oscar Trivia

There have been surprisingly few books dealing exclusively with the Academy Awards, so *The Oscar Movies From A-Z* (Tapplinger) by Roy Pickard is probably the best reference book on the subject — but it should have been better. Every film that has ever won an Oscar in any category (with the exception of documentaries and short films) is listed in alphabetical order. Under each entry is the year of release, the number of Oscars won and in which category, a brief synopsis, the production company, director, cast, technical process, and running time. Following the alphabetical listing are five appendices — including a partial year-by-year list of both winners and nominees and a list of honorary winners — and an index of winning films and people. There are also 48 pages of pictures.

Unusual aspects of some of the Oscar-winning films are included. Imagine what a smash you can be at your next cocktail party when you alone know that *The Adventures of Robin Hood* is the only swashbuckler to have ever been nominated for a best picture Oscar and that *The Exorcist* is the only horror film to have been so nominated. If you've been losing sleep because you couldn't remember why Elmer Bernstein didn't win an Oscar for the musical score of *The Magnificent Seven*, you can now rest easy. It's because Ernest Gold won that year for *Exodus*.

Still, *The Oscar Movies* is not the definitive work it should have been. There are errors and inconsistencies that leave the book less than complete. To not include at least a list of documentary and short film winners is inexcusable. Nor is there any reason to note



MICHAEL WARD

our ability to shudder, to recoil. She goes on to relate this desensitization to Viet Nam; in fact, she argues this notion of photography-as-anaesthetic so insistently, so passionately and so intelligently that I feel ignoble saying "Well, how can you prove there's less sensitivity? How can you show that photography is to blame?"

Nobody could dispute Sontag's complaints against Us in General: that we let ourselves off too easily, that we don't make ourselves think critically enough of the time, that we like facile ironies better than great complex profundities. Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa! But I still can't believe that the first step toward redemption is to crack down on the image pollution currently imbalancing the ecology of our photo-filled society. To use an utterly Sontagian comeback: that's too simple.

Naomi Lindstrom

based.

The novel's weakness, if indeed there be one, lies in the *Ragtime*-like mix of fiction and fact. There are hazards in setting a story in recent history, using specific events as a frame for fiction: if a writer cannot generate a powerful image of his own, he can always pull one out of the newspaper. I found myself waiting for Bobby Kennedy to be shot, and not much caring how Tyler felt about it, since the event has such immediate and potent connections in my own experience.

This is perhaps a stylistic quibble — I just don't like novels written this close to fact. That aside, Tauber has given us believable and moving characters, and has painted a grim and valid portrait of what was, in retrospect, an essentially tragic era. If you believe, as I do, that the role of fiction is not simply to divert, but to illuminate, then *The Last Best Hope* must be counted as a major

George C. Scott's refusal of his Oscar but not Marlon Brando's refusal of *his*. George Burns is credited with being the oldest acting winner, but Tatum O'Neal isn't cited as the youngest. Walter and John Huston are credited with being the only father and son to have both won Oscars in the same year for the same film (*Treasure of the Sierra Madre*), yet father and son Coppola did the same thing for *The Godfather Part II*. In *Old Arizona* is, at one point, called *In Old Oklahoma*, James Gleason gets a credit for Jackie, Paul Williams loses his "Evergreen" lyric writing to John Williams, and so on.

As the best of the Oscar reference books and a boon to movie trivia buffs, *The Oscar Movies* is recommended, but be warned: When showing off your Oscar knowledge, check at least one other reference before making any heavy bets.

Paul Helford