

hoopla digital: What was the inspiration behind the book?

Lee Kravetz: Before I wrote my first book, I was a licensed psychotherapist. I wound up doing some postgraduate work at a Northern California mental hospital. (Coincidentally, it was the same mental hospital where Ken Kesey worked when the experience inspired him to write *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.) When you walked into the mental ward, there was a waiting room and a little kiosk with used books. I noticed one day that *The Bell Jar* was in it. I'd read the novel by Sylvia Plath when I was younger. I can't exactly remember when I read it—I guess in some ways it's always just been there in my psyche. But this time, as I reread it, I realized that this semi-autobiographical novel was so much more than just the story of a young girl hospitalized for manic depression; it was also telling a parallel story of the birth of a radical literary movement known as Confessional Poetry. Like Sylvia, the mainstays of this poetry movement—poets like Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton—were diagnosed with manic depression and subsequently hospitalized. In the late '50s and early '60s, they all found themselves in Boston, writing poetry that was raw and honest about subjects that were, at that time, totally taboo. I wanted to tell this story.

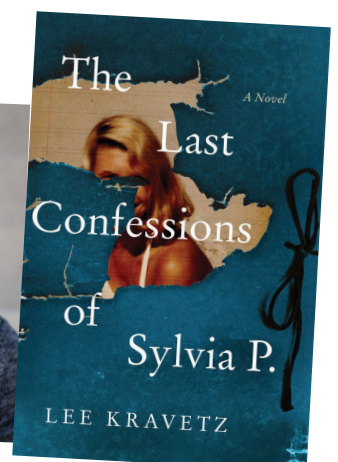
hd: What research went into this book? What background knowledge did you already have?

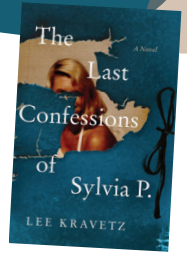
LK: I knew going in that Sylvia Plath was obviously a real person, and that she was hospitalized for manic depression, or what's now called bipolar disorder, at McLean Hospital. I could have told the story of Sylvia Plath and how she came to write *The Bell Jar* as nonfiction. I read every word that Sylvia wrote in her journals, her letters, her poetry, and her novel. I also read all the works of her contemporaries. There's so much information to draw from, and many biographers already have. But I knew early on that the book was only *in part* about Sylvia. It was really going to be about the way Sylvia Plath influenced the people around her, and continued to do so through the eras.

We can actually see hints of this transformation in the letters Sylvia wrote and the journal entries she kept. Sylvia did have a psychiatrist who treated her at McLean Hospital named Ruth Barnhouse, a real person who remained very close with Sylvia until the end. We do know that Dr. Barnhouse played a role in Sylvia's life, so much so that she actually appears as a character in *The Bell Jar*. Sylvia calls her Dr. Nolan. And some of the patients that were really hospitalized with Plath at McLean, like Ms. Drake, also appear in *The Bell Jar*, under the name Ms. Norris. (Drake/Norris also appears in Sylvia's poem "Mrs. Drake Proceeds to Supper.")

hd: What were the most surprising details you uncovered in your research process? Was there anything you found particularly fascinating that didn't make it into the book?

LK: The fact that Sylvia started writing poetry at age 8, and was published by age 12 in major papers, really speaks to the natural talent she possessed. I was blown away by the prose in her early poems that I would have loved to somehow fit into the novel. I learned that, even if she had no training, no mentorship, no internships, and no poetry workshops to shape her, Sylvia Plath still would have been a poet without rival. She was that good!





- hd:** How did your background working in a mental hospital shape your writing?
- LK:** When I was in training, I saw quite a few cases of bipolar disorder. In treating the mania and the depression, you'd remind yourself that, at the heart of these conditions lies a human being with the same hopes and ambitions we all have. While writing this novel, I thought a lot about this, and also about the transition that psychiatry saw in the early 1950s from a traditional view of Freudian psychiatry to a more human-centered approach to treatment. Some techniques were fairly radical at the time, including new forms of medication that revolutionized how psychiatry cares for people. Beekeeping would have absolutely been a viable form of experiential treatment, the same way practitioners use art and play therapy to treat people today. As far as whether there's a link between art and madness, all the literature shows that there's no link at all...except in the case of one diagnosis: bipolar disorder! It's no coincidence that a majority of the Confessional Poets, including Sylvia, shared this diagnosis.
- hd:** This is your debut novel, though you've written nonfiction in the past. How different was that experience for you?
- LK:** After writing two narrative nonfiction books, I remember telling my agent for the first time that I was writing fiction, and before I could finish my sentence, he joked, "Please don't tell me you're writing a novel!" I think it's because every nonfiction writer secretly wants to become a novelist. Or at least that's how I always felt. The thing is, my nonfiction work has always been narrative driven. I found that, when I was writing nonfiction books, I was really leaning hard into the principles of fiction storytelling, everything from grounding every beat in scene to infusing each moment with tension and subtext. And yes, thematically, there is some overlap between my fiction and nonfiction, probably because I always come at storytelling from a place of psychology. I'm deeply interested in the ways that art, science, and environment affect the way people think, feel, and behave.
- hd:** How did you navigate the three timelines and narrative points of view? Was it difficult to write from three different perspectives?
- LK:** I always knew that this story was going to be told from the perspectives of three different people. What I didn't know was exactly who those three people were going to be. I set out to tell the story of those who influenced Sylvia Plath on her way to becoming the author of *The Bell Jar*. In turn, I wanted to show how Sylvia affected these people. Then I foolishly set out to make every single storyline connect and also rely on one another such that, if I didn't get this exactly right, the novel would fail instantly! Sylvia's psychiatrist, Dr. Barnhouse, was an obvious conduit of inspiration for Sylvia in her early years. A literary rival who would also push Sylvia toward her destiny came to me fairly quickly as well. It was actually the modern storyline that was the toughest to crack. At some point I recognized that the third narrative needed to be a version of me, somebody who was a novice about Sylvia Plath and who came to learn all the intricate details of her life and found himself dropping down a rabbit hole as mystery upon mystery revealed itself.
- While the three-storyline structure was something I knew I was going to do from the start, what I didn't know was exactly *how* I was going to order each scene in such a way that the narrative thrust was continuous across three intertwined narratives. It was complicated math and a delicate tightrope to walk. With each draft, I played with the structure, moving it from past to present, and then present to past, until, like a Rubik's cube, everything clicked into place.

- hd:** Why tell the stories from the perspective of people around Sylvia and not Sylvia directly?
- LK:** From the onset, I knew I wanted to tell the stories of people *affected* by Sylvia Plath, and in turn the people who affected and influenced her. As endlessly interesting as Sylvia is, I thought it would be far more interesting to understand the lives of the people her words changed, and through multiple eras: a grieving mother, a suburban housewife, and an art historian became the conduits.
- hd:** This novel blurs the lines between fact and fiction. How did you balance the drive to tell a good story against the historical record in terms of character development?
- LK:** In the early drafts, I found myself hewing very closely to the historical record. The lives of Plath, Robert Lowell, Ruth Barnhouse, and others are fascinating in their own rights, but quickly I realized their real lives were boxing this story in, and at the same time, keeping the story I wanted to tell out. At some point, I came to understand that this novel wasn't going to be about accuracy, but *truth*. The beauty of fiction is our ability to show the essence and soul of a person, not a perfect reflection.
- hd:** Readers of the book may be surprised to learn that the author is a man. How did you approach writing from the female perspective with sensitivity?
- LK:** I recognize the complexity of writing outside your own personal experience. It's not easy, and rife with problems if you don't do it right. (I hope I did.) Aside from reading the journals and memoirs of some of the most indelible female confessional poets of all time, I also found that I really related to the female characters in terms of their needs—which is the trick with getting into the heads of any character. I have to think there was a bit of my psychology training in here, too, which focused on deep empathy and emotional attunement of others that I transferred to these characters on the page.
- hd:** How would you describe Sylvia Plath's legacy, both for her contemporaries and for readers today?
- LK:** I can sum up her legacy, I think, fairly easily. The immediacy of, and observation she displays in, her poetry—both of her internal and external worlds—make her one of the most relatable poets of all time, while her deep sadness, elevated joys, and elusive core make her one the most unknowable poets of all time.
- hd:** What is Sylvia's best work in your opinion?
- LK:** I can pick up and read her collection *Ariel* right now (most pieces written 60-some years ago), and they could have been written today. Her observations on gender roles, motherhood, marriage, and nature cut to the marrow of who we are in our worst moments, and struggle to be in our best moments.

