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Facing Up to Death

Writers who didn't go gentle into that good night.



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By **DANIEL AKST**

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On television once, Bill Moyers earnestly guaranteed Maurice Sendak immortality. “Most of us will live only as long as our grandchildren remember us,” he told the children’s-book writer and illustrator. “But you will never die.”

“I got news for you,” Sendak calmly reassured him. “I am going to croak.”

THE VIOLET HOUR

By Katie Roiphe
Dial, 306 pages, \$28

Genius is a gift, of course, but how, after a lifetime of specialness, can genius cope with the great leveler who is sure to arrive sooner or later? And what can we learn about coping with death from a particular kind of genius—the literary kind, to which many of us turn so

compulsively for insights into all the problems that beset human beings this side of the grave?

Those are the questions at the heart of Katie Roiphe’s “The Violet Hour,” a tender yet penetrating look at the final days of Susan Sontag, Sigmund Freud, John Updike and Dylan Thomas, in addition to Sendak, all of whom wrestled in their work with the problem of mortality. There is also a prologue dealing with Ms. Roiphe’s own near-fatal childhood illness and a coda concerning the novelist James Salter, who surprises the author by dying while she is still editing her manuscript.

Ms. Roiphe has always seemed to me a writer to envy. No matter what the occasion, she can be counted on to marry ferocity and erudition in ways that nearly always make her interesting, even when one reads in wide-eyed dissent, and her gifts are on full display in “The Violet Hour.” The title, incidentally, is from T.S. Eliot, chosen because “it evokes the mood of the elusive period I am describing: melancholy, expectant, laden.”

In structure and approach, “The Violet Hour” is not unlike Ms. Roiphe’s immensely readable “Uncommon Arrangements” (2007), which recounted seven unconventional Bloomsbury marriages. Like that book, her new one offers a series of brief, deeply researched biographies concerning how famous writers coped with an essential aspect of life and how their choices affected their work, their children and the strangely selfless acolytes they often seemed to draw to themselves. Both studies teach us that life as a literary lion offers no exemption from reality’s intransigence. “The beauty I found in these deaths was what surprised me,” Ms. Roiphe writes this time around, “the life rushing in, the vastness of the work, the great, sometimes deranged seeming courage, the mad love in the last moments.”

“The Violet Hour” is the sadder and more intimate of the two books, and its author, her mind perhaps concentrated by immersion in her funereal topic, seems less inclined to give her subjects the benefit of the doubt. By the time Ms. Roiphe cites Graham Greene’s comment that “the writer must have a tiny sliver of ice in his heart,” there is little doubt that she has hers.

Her treatment of Sontag in particular is ruthless. Ms. Roiphe portrays the dying intellectual, determined against all odds not to give in to her third bout with cancer, as a dishonest, self-mythologizing prima donna whose delusional refusal to accept death is indulged by high-powered doctors and wealthy friends ever ready to arrange a private plane. No one, including her adult son, has the nerve to tell her not to spend her last days on earth vainly—in every sense of that word—trying to perpetuate herself.

Yet having just been told that an agonizing bone-marrow transplant had failed, Sontag responds with something like hard-bitten self-awareness. Physician’s assistant: “You might want to take this time to concentrate on your spiritual values.” Sontag: “I have no spiritual values!” PA: “You might want to take this time to be with your friends.” Sontag: “I have no friends!”

The tragedy, beyond Sontag’s needless suffering, was that her denial kept those who loved her in denial as well. Her son, the writer David Rieff (who “has the slight air of being crown prince to a country that has suddenly and inexplicably gone democratic”), thus was unable to ask her nagging questions about his upbringing or even express how he felt about her: “He can’t tell her he loves her, as things stand,” Ms. Roiphe writes, recounting Sontag’s final days, “because this would mean admitting that she is dying.”

The other writers in “The Violet Hour” come in for kinder treatment, although in every case Ms. Roiphe is unsentimental about their failings. She reserves her most unalloyed esteem for Freud, who earns the author’s admiration for facing death with the independence and lack of self-indulgence that, in her view, characterized his life. He insisted on his cigars despite knowing their role in the cancer that was killing him, and he refused any painkillers that might cloud his mind, doggedly preferring lucidity over relief. He held out with dignity and, aided by his physician (legislatures, take note), chose how and when to die.

As in her earlier book, Ms. Roiphe is an especially insightful observer of writers in their search for love as well as a domestic structure that accommodates their work. She is sensitive, for example, to the unusual household arrangements of Sendak. A closeted gay man for most of his life, he shared his home in Ridgefield, Conn., on weekends with his longstanding partner, a psychiatrist in New York City. Early on, a 16-year-old neighbor girl had moved in, and, except for the seven years of her marriage, she remained there for the rest of his life, a combination major-domo, best friend and surrogate daughter.

Freud relied somewhat guiltily on his actual daughter, Anna, to keep his life running smoothly, while Sontag had an unusually close relationship with her housekeeper. Dylan Thomas, whose mad profligacy gives recklessness a bad name, sorely lacked a comparably steadying companion, no doubt one reason he didn’t live past 39. By that time he was, in his own words, just “peddling and bawling to adolescents the romantic agonies of the dead” rather than writing much new poetry. “Thank God,” he wrote, “I don’t have to meet myself socially, listen to myself, or except when reluctantly shaving, see that red, blubbery circle, mounted on ballooning body.”

Updike, by contrast, had a ferocious defender. His second wife functioned as his “lion at the gate,” reacting in fury at correspondents—even Nadine Gordimer!—who would presume upon the great man’s time. When I encountered him once in a museum cafeteria, her seething glance shot death rays at me while I briefly conveyed my admiration. She was also vigilant about keeping the children of Updike’s first marriage at bay, a project in which Updike was surely complicit. His solemn attention to each of his grandchildren in his dying days is all the more heartbreaking when at last he grants it.

The intimacy and precision of Ms. Roiphe’s accounts, which move fluidly back and forth in time, are so remarkable that one wonders how she could possibly know so much about these private events, even with the benefit of, say, Mark Edmundson’s book on Freud’s death or Mr. Rieff’s on that of his mother. As if on demand, the author provides an afterword on sourcing that makes clear the years of interviews and reading she poured into this work.

For all their wisdom, the final days of these writers offer us mostly cautionary tales: It would be better to pay more attention to your

family, to be less egotistical and to listen when your doctor tells you to quit smoking. As for the work, well, it may or may not produce deathless prose, but it can't solve the problem of dying, as one aging writer knows all too well. "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work," Woody Allen has said. "I want to achieve it by not dying."

—*Mr. Akst writes the Journal's weekly news quiz.*

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