

Five Best: Literary Portraits

Selected by Jean Strouse, the author, most recently, of ‘Family Romance: John Singer Sargent and the Wertheimers.’

By Jean Strouse

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A visitor views the painting ‘Sylvia Plath’ by the painter Chechu Alava, at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, Spain. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

The Portrait of a Lady

By Henry James (1881)

1. Only a few books, in my view, merit re-reading every few years. Henry James’s novel “The Portrait of a Lady” is one. James later wrote that the germ of his idea was not a plot but a single character—“the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl.” When his young American, Isabel Archer, arrives at the English estate of some relatives, she meets their immensely attractive friend, Lord Warburton. With youth, beauty, wealth and grand notions of freedom, Isabel declines to marry Warburton as she sets out on her European adventure, and is unwittingly coerced by a pair of malign actors into making a terrible choice. James’s great theme was the growth of imagination and knowledge, as his

innocent Americans abroad learn to see—matters usually having to do with betrayal, and with sex. In the novel's central scene, Isabel sits up one night and slowly takes in all that has happened and where she is. That stream-of-consciousness passage led later writers to dispense with linear time and conventional plot, capturing the flow and tumbling associations of their characters' minds. "Portrait" changed literary culture. It is also pure pleasure to read.

The Silent Woman

By Janet Malcolm (1993)

2. The silent woman at the center of Janet Malcolm's book is the American poet and novelist Sylvia Plath, who killed herself in 1963, at age 30, by putting her head in the oven of her London flat while her young children slept nearby. She was estranged from her husband, the British poet Ted Hughes; the nanny found her body the next morning. The story of Plath's tempestuous life, poetic gifts, marriage, death and posthumous reputation has fascinated readers and writers ever since. Malcolm, with inimitable literary acumen, examines not only the complex Plath (her work, like her life, "is full of threatening silences. It is beautiful and severe and very cold") but also the people around her, the books about her and the enterprise of biographical portraiture itself. Compelling narratives derive their power from writers' antipathies and sympathies, Malcolm claims, and while most previous studies of Plath have vilified Hughes, Malcolm sides with that reclusive, "electrically attractive man," whom she never meets. Her bracing perceptions animate this vivid, disquieting portrait.

A Sense of Where You Are

By John McPhee (1965)

3. John McPhee's "A Sense of Where You Are" begins in 1962, when the author finds in a college freshman "the most graceful and classical basketball player who had ever been near Princeton"—William Warren Bradley. Deeply impressed not only by Mr. Bradley's extraordinary skill at all aspects of the game but also by his phenomenal self-discipline, accuracy, analytic rigor and excellence off court, Mr. McPhee decided to write about him for the New Yorker. One day as they talked, Mr. Bradley tossed a ball backward over his shoulder into the basket and said: "When you have played basketball for a while, you don't need to look at the basket when you are in close like this." He threw the ball over his shoulder again, right through the hoop. "You develop a sense of where you are." By the time Mr. McPhee's New Yorker profile was expanded into a book in 1965, Mr. Bradley had played as the youngest member of the U.S. team at the Tokyo Olympics, written a senior thesis on Russian history and been named a Rhodes Scholar. Still ahead were his professional careers with the New York Knicks and in the U.S. Senate. A sense of where you are indeed.

Eminent Victorians

By Lytton Strachey (1918)

4. “The history of the Victorian age will never be written,” declares Lytton Strachey in the preface to his “Eminent Victorians”; “we know too much about it.” He goes on to dismiss the reverential tomes with which his predecessors, whom he compares to undertakers, had honored the dead, and to write a manifesto for the art of modern biography. Among its gems: “Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past.” And “it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as to live one.” In irreverent portrait sketches, Strachey deflates the moral rectitude of four prominent Victorians: Cardinal Henry Edward Manning, an Anglican prelate who converted to Catholicism; Florence Nightingale, at once more interesting and less agreeable than the saintly figure of legend; Thomas Arnold, the influential headmaster of Rugby School and father of the poet Matthew Arnold; and Gen. Charles Gordon, the British governor-general of the Sudan. These essays, and especially the preface, effectively liberated life-writing from its Victorian corset, for good and, occasionally, ill—as when a “faults and all” approach leads to a focus only on faults.

No Second Troy

By William Butler Yeats (1911)

5. William Butler Yeats wrote the poem “No Second Troy” about Maud Gonne, the beautiful Anglo-Irish actress and republican revolutionary with whom he was in love for decades. He proposed to her repeatedly, but in 1903 she married the Boer war hero Maj. John MacBride. Several years later, Yeats composed the exquisite (if idealizing) “No Second Troy.” It begins with Gonne’s rejection of him and her destructive political force, then indicts the age as unsuited to her moral and physical grandeur, and finally invokes Helen of Troy:

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*“Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?
What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern?
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?”*