

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

**With Robert Lowell and His Circle:
Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop,
Stanley Kunitz & Others**

By Kathleen Spivack

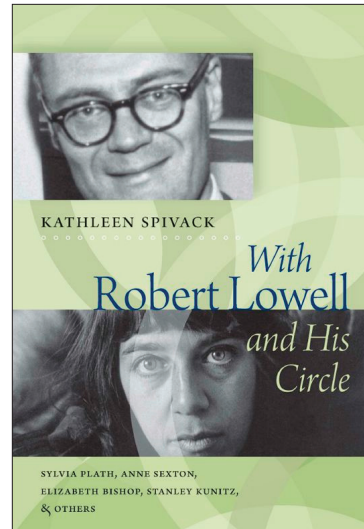
Northeastern (November 13, 2012)

Paperback, 256 pages, ISBN 978-1555537883,
\$19.95

review by Irene Koronas

Dear reader:

I will review this book, initially, by addressing it to the author, Kathleen Spivack. Please be reminded that it is a review and I bring the review back to you as a reader.



Dear Kathleen:

Last night, I first made my way to the bookstore, and with some effort the young sales person helped me find your new book, "With Robert Lowell and His Circle," on the shelf under the L's. Then I traipsed off to a poetry reading with the book in my mind, anxious for its story. I had to separate myself from seeing your image as we greeted each other at the Saturday morning Bagel Bard gathering. Once I left my own images and concentrated on the words on the page and when much later I was open to the newness of this book, I found myself engrossed with the historical, instead of "an invert" relationships a new book might offer.

By the time I left the poetry reading, with your book still in a plastic bag begging me to open to the clean pages, anxious to read about what I perceived as a glamorous time, (from all the talk about Lowell and Plath and Sexton), and the supposed glamour of suicide, depicted in other books. I was interested in your writing, your participation during those times.

Waiting down under in the subway, for the 77 bus, I opened the book and read the introduction. Realizing we are from similar circumstances, how we relate to the immigrant way, the accented language, the need to be an American success story, brought me closer to understanding the way the book is written. I read the beginning of the first chapter, "Family" and then slipped the book back into my bag. When I have more time I will read more. The book mark is on page twenty.

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Dear Kathleen:

"If pulled into the sexual orbit of this extremely attractive person, one would be burnt to cinder. Lowell, with all his genius and madness, would make sure to survive. A girl would not."

Kathleen, your intellectual life was on its way to maturity, the beginning of the 60's was, and probably, still is a time of inequality of circumstances, which lent to your feminine innocence. Lowell seemed entitled, (or what I perceive as entitlement) juxtaposed with your young student's innocence, became a recipe for disastrous consequences. Your writing presents this focused and broad understanding about Lowell, out of context, or in context with the times:

"at that time Millay was out of favor. She was considered too romantic, too direct and "out there" - a girl might have a passion for her poetry. But I was in the land of oblique, incomprehensible words, words one had to struggle to understand. I was in Boston, the Land of Harvard, with sophisticates who spoke of poets I had never heard of."

Lowell, being a multilayer character and teacher, with his approach to teaching, dogmatic and gentle, lends to an interesting read. This is so clearly shown in the way you depict his everyday posture and presentation.. Your portrayal of the great poet Lowell is masterful. Your book is written to be understood. (I thank you for that)

The poets become real and not a romantic rendition of who the reader might want to think they are. This then gives the reader real understanding. Poetry is also the way a poet lives and thinks and all the different ways a life may lead to writing poems. Your writing captures the nuances in the details. Their lives are perceived by your discerning eye:

"On a particularly lucid day, Lowell passed out copies of Sylvia's poem "sow." I can still recall his somewhat nasal Southern-Virginian- New England voice, oddly pitched, as if starting to ask a question, saying to Sylvia and to the class "This poem is perfect, almost." A slight breath-gasp, nasal and out-ward, as if clearing his sinuses silently, "There really is not much to say." A kindly but bewildered look. Long, struggling silence. Lowell looks down at the poem, brow furrowed. The class waits. Sylvia, in a cardigan, does not move. She listens. No one else moves either. "it appears finished." Long silence. Lowell looks agonized, but then he always does. Anne fidgets. Realizing that her arms draped with charm bracelets are making noise, she stops. Sylvia leans forward, dutiful, expressionless, intense, intelligent."

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Dear Reader:

The descriptions of Lowell as teacher send goose bumps. I think about my own reactions if I'd of been there. My youth and inexperience would've caused my shyness to take a seat in the back of the room. If I'd been an older student I would scream obscenities and been thrown out of class. Spivack has an acceptance. She has the vocabulary which enables the reader to experience what she experienced, an acceptance in being able to be herself even if it is shyness, she will take her seat and observe. It is remarkable how the reader will be able to relate to this book because of Kathleen's observations and note taking. She is able to bring the events to life. Chapter after chapter we read from this awesome book:

"How did Lowell manage to train so many poets? perhaps it was the fact that if one survived those classes, one felt tough enough to survive the outside world, even as a writer. these classes were more in the nature of an ordeal, a fascinating one, to be sure, than in the nature of entertainment."

This book needs to be in every classroom of higher learning:

"Poems were often submitted to Lowell without names on them; most of us preferred to remain anonymous as much as possible. but of course, being slyly, Lowell would flush out the unfortunate author. passing out those smeary carbon copies with a seemingly tentative bend of the head, a kindly smile, he would somehow get the author to confess ownership."

The writing pulls me into, each page until I'm lost in Lowell's circle. The sentences carry me beyond myself. I feel the intensity of being in this poetry class:

"While many of Lowell's women-writer friends were kind, if slightly patronizing, Anne Sexton, irrepressibly exuberant, was genuinely warm. She had a way of drawing me right in."

Spivack has the capacity to write about Plath, Sexton and Lowell and all those people in the circle friends and family come to life; the way a good novel has the ability to bring them into our life. "Her (Sexton) hands shook when she read her poems aloud." Sexton was a formidable person in writing as in her life, she was immediate, present, seemingly self assured, perfect in manner, open to friendships and dedicated to her poetry and poetic friends. "Don't let the bastards get you" was her refrain about rejection notices and she had a drawer full of them. This was her refrain to her close poetic friends, Kathleen, Kumin and Lois Ames. Plath had a magnificent attitude, supportive to the women poets, writers in a world where women were still trying to please their male teachers/partners/editors, yet both Sylvia and Anne were focused on themselves, in an (almost) pornographic sense, meaning, not minding being public, being able to do what was wanted and also, taking advantage behind closed doors or in the open class room:

"But Anne was something of a renegade. She broadcast her messy personal life, rather than hiding it beneath a veneer of polite and tightened fury. So Anne, by virtue of her lack of formal education and by her "excessive" emotionality and obvious vulnerability was a lightning rod for criticisms. She inspired controversy."

The focus of the book remains centered on those poets who were in Lowell's class. Kathleen seems destined to write about Lowell. I came to this conclusion by the references Kathleen makes about how she came from her fellowship at Oberlin and was "chosen" by Lowell for private study with him, and later attending a class with so many soon to be famous poets:

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"After my initial few months of terror, I relaxed. It seemed, once I settled in to the armchair across from Lowell, surrounded by books and words, that I belonged there, had always lived in that world where poetry had such power. I had been waiting all my life for these conversations. Now they were upon me, in that Lowell read and led me to read and inquired into my thoughts on what I read..."

The reading moves quickly, not too quickly, yet, in an absorbing manner. I move from one page to another with great interest. I'm beginning to find it difficult to continue reviewing, when all I want is to sink into the pages without the distraction of having to stop and write about what I'm reading. There are so many phrases I want to capture, to quote that even if I'm not writing this review, I would be slipping the note paper out and jotting down passages for my own future reference.

Dear Kathleen:

you have written an important book. Your writing has opened a door into the world where many great writers and personalities, live. Your writing opens as a great novel opens, with a mind to history as well as imagination and a sense of place that will remain eternal because, "With Robert Lowell and His Circle" we come to see clearly through a dark glass.