



The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End

Katie Roiphe

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From one of our most perceptive and provocative voices comes a deeply researched account of the last days of Susan Sontag, Sigmund Freud, John Updike, Dylan Thomas, Maurice Sendak, and James Salter—an arresting and wholly original meditation on mortality.

In *The Violet Hour*, Katie Roiphe takes an unexpected and liberating approach to the most unavoidable of subjects. She investigates the last days of six great thinkers, writers, and artists as they come to terms with the reality of approaching death, or what T. S. Eliot called “the evening hour that strives Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea.”

Roiphe draws on her own extraordinary research and access to the family, friends, and caretakers of her subjects. Here is Susan Sontag, the consummate public intellectual, who finds her commitment to rational thinking tested during her third bout with cancer. Roiphe takes us to the hospital room where, after receiving the worst possible diagnosis, seventy-six-year-old John Updike begins writing a poem. She vividly re-creates the fortnight of almost suicidal excess that culminated in Dylan Thomas’s fatal collapse at the Chelsea Hotel. She gives us a bracing portrait of Sigmund Freud fleeing Nazi-occupied Vienna only to continue in his London exile the compulsive cigar smoking that he knows will hasten his decline. And she shows us how Maurice Sendak’s beloved books for children are infused with his lifelong obsession with death, if you know where to look.

The Violet Hour is a book filled with intimate and surprising revelations. In the final acts of each of these creative geniuses are examples of courage, passion, self-delusion, pointless suffering, and superb devotion. There are also moments of sublime insight and understanding where the mind creates its own comfort. As the author writes, “If it’s nearly impossible to capture the approach of death in words, who would have the most hope of doing it?” By bringing these great writers’ final days to urgent, unsentimental life, Katie Roiphe helps us to look boldly in the face of death and be less afraid.

Praise for *The Violet Hour*

“A beautiful book . . . The intensity of these passages—the depth of research, the acute sensitivity for declarative moments—is deeply beguiling.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Profound, poetic and—yes—comforting.”—*People*

“Unconventional, engaging . . . [*The Violet Hour*] is at once scholarly, literary, juicy—and unabashedly personal.”—*Los Angeles Times*

“Enveloping . . . I read it in bed, at the kitchen table, while walking down the street. . . . ‘What normal person wants to blunder into this hushed and sacred space?’ she asks. But the answer is all of us, and Ms. Roiphe does it with grace.”—**Jennifer Senior**, *The New York Times*

“A beautiful and provocative meditation on mortality.”—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“A tender yet penetrating look at the final days . . . 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.”—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Here is a critic in supreme control of her gifts, whose gift to us is the observant vigor that refuses to flinch before the Reaper. . . . She knows that true criticism does not bother with the mollification of delicate sensibilities, only with the intellect as it roils and rollicks through language.”—**William Girdi**, *The New Republic*

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