



## Anne Sexton: A Biography

By Diane Middlebrook

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## **Anne Sexton: A Biography** By Diane Middlebrook Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Middlebrook's balanced biography reconstructs the life of the late poet in extraordinary detail. Photos. New afterword. Author tour . ( Nov. )no mention of controversy over use of tapes, and ensuing bestsellerdom? surely this is what new afterword is about/we don't have information on this/also it never hit PW's bestseller list/pk

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From Library Journal

In this rich and enthralling biography of American confessional poet Sexton, Middlebrook (English, Stanford) approaches Sexton's life and work with a masterful balance of objectivity and empathy, weaving a compulsively readable tale of Sexton's transformation from housewife to award-winning poet while she battled severe mental illness. Middlebrook's analysis of the relationship of Sexton's illness to her art is rendered more immediate and more powerful by her skillful use of tapes of Sexton's psychotherapy sessions. Avoiding literary and psychoanalytical jargon, Middlebrook judiciously assesses Sexton's work and describes the familial, psychological, and sociological determinants of Sexton's illness, which finally drove her to suicide in 1974. Highly recommended for research collections in literature and women's studies, for collections in psychiatry, and for general readers, even if it were not the only biography of Sexton available. Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 4/1/91.

- *Ellen Finnie Duranceau, MIT Lib., Cambridge*

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From Kirkus Reviews

Frustrated as a housewife and mother in suburban Boston and plagued by mental problems including suicidal obsessions, Sexton, beautiful, intense, and gifted, began writing poetry at age 29 on the advice of her therapist. Within ten years she had won nearly every prize available to an American poet--and collected hundred of hours of tapes from her therapy sessions. Access to these tapes and the intimate revelations of Sexton's family have enabled Middlebrook (English/Stanford; Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens, 1974) to explore here some of the dynamics of creativity, and the relationship between art and mental disorder. Artful, oblique, confessional, Sexton's verse, as Middlebrook shows, is representative of her generation of emotionally distraught poets, nearly all addicted to booze, pills, sex, and to themselves: Anguished, broken, many ended up suicides. Robert Lowell, Roethke, Schwartz, Bishop, Rahv, Berryman, Rich, Jarrell, James Wright, Anthony Hecht, George Starbuck--they were a community of pain, friends or lovers, meeting at workshops, readings, or retreats. Their poetry is private, academic, and written to one another: Sexton wrote some of the best. But however much recognition Sexton received as a poet, her personal life remained at the edge, as the title of her first collection implies: *To Bedlam and Partway Back* (1960). And everyone was forced to share that space with her: Her husband adored, mothered, and finally beat her; her daughters, emotionally abandoned, finally rejected her, one confessing that her mother tried to seduce her; and her lovers--men, women, even her therapist--were unable to fulfill her demands. Before she finally succeeded in committing suicide, however, she claimed she had "lived to the hilt." Middlebrook is better at explicating the poems than she is at explaining the life. That remains, in spite of the tapes, a mystery, one of universal interest relevant to the large issues of poetry, madness, and suicide, but only tangentially related to the feminist thesis that Middlebrook prefers to associate with Sexton: a typical victim, she says, of society's repression of women. (Twenty-four b&w photographs--not seen.) -- *Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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