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The Bell Jar

by Sylvia Plath



About the Book

"I was supposed to be having the time of my life."

As it turns out, Esther Greenwood--brilliant, talented, successful, and increasingly vulnerable and disturbed--does have an eventful summer. **The Bell Jar** follows Esther, step by painful step, from her New York City June as a guest editor at a fashion magazine through the following, snow-deluged January. Esther slides ever deeper into devastating depression, attempts suicide, undergoes bungled electroshock therapy, and enters a private hospital. In telling her own story--based on Plath's own summer, fall, and winter of 1953-1954--Esther introduces us to her mother, her boyfriend Buddy, her fellow student editors, college and home-town acquaintances, and fellow patients. She scrutinizes her increasingly strained relationships, her own thoughts and feelings, and society's hypocritical conventions, but is defenseless against the psychological wounds inflicted by others, by her world, and by herself. Pitting her own aspirations against the oppressive expectations of others, Esther cannot keep the airless bell jar of depression and despair from descending over her. Sylvia Plath's extraordinary novel ("witty and disturbing," said the New York Times) ends with the hope, if not the clear promise, of recovery.

Discussion Guide

1. What factors, components, and stages of Esther Greenwood's descent into depression and madness are specified? How inevitable is that descent?

2. In a letter while at college, Plath wrote that "I've gone around for most of my life as in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell jar." Is this the primary meaning of the novel's titular bell jar? What other meanings does "the bell jar" have?

3. What terms does Esther use to describe herself? How does she compare or contrast herself with Doreen and others in New York City, or with Joan and other patients in the hospital?

4. What instances and images of distortion occur in the novel? What are their contexts and significance? Does Esther achieve a clear, undistorted view of herself?

5. Are Esther's attitudes toward men, sex, and marriage peculiar to herself? What role do her attitudes play in her breakdown? What are we told about her society's expectations regarding men and women, sexuality, and relationships? Have those expectations changed since that time?

6. Esther more than once admits to feelings of inadequacy. Is Esther's sense of her own inadequacies consistent with reality? Against what standards does she judge herself?

7. With what specific setting, event, and person is Esther's first thought of suicide associated? Why? In what circumstances do subsequent thoughts and plans concerning suicide occur?

8. In addition to Deer Island Prison, what other images and conditions of physical and emotional imprisonment, enclosure, confinement, and punishment are presented?

9. What are the primary relationships in Esther's life? Is she consistent in her behavior and attitudes within these relationships?

10. Esther bluntly tells Doctor Nolan that she hates her mother. What is Mrs. Greenwood's role in Esther's life and in the novel? Is Esther just in her presentation of and attitude toward her mother?

Author Bio

Sylvia Plath was born in 1932 in Massachusetts. Her books include the poetry collections THE COLOSSUS, CROSSING THE WATER, WINTER TREES, ARIEL and COLLECTED POEMS, which won the Pulitzer Prize. A complete and uncut facsimile edition of ARIELwas published in 2004 with her original selection and arrangement of poems. She was married to the poet Ted Hughes, with whom she had a daughter, Frieda, and a son, Nicholas. She died in London in 1963.

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