



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, and Maurice Sendak—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 five 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 on the floor of a Greenwich Village tavern. 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.

Advance praise for *The Violet Hour*

“Katie Roiphe’s *The Violet Hour* is ambitious and tender. Her subject is urgent and so is her prose—pressurized, curious, vibrating. Death in these pages is also an account of how gravity takes up residence in pragmatics: edits from a hospital bed, wanting a certain kind of pie, what to do with the dog. The book is not simply an account of facing death—imagining it, fearing it, fighting it, craving it—but a sensitive exploration of caregiving: the labor it demands, psychic and otherwise, and the deep intimacy it permits.”—**Leslie Jamison, author of *The Empathy Exams***

“Beautiful and haunting . . . Never overly sentimental, this is a poignant and elegant inquiry into mortality.”—**Kirkus Reviews (starred review)**

Praise for Katie Roiphe’s *In Praise of Messy Lives*

“[A] devastatingly good new book . . . Ms. Roiphe’s are how you want your essays to sound: lean and literate, not unlike Orwell’s, with a frightening ratio of velocity to torque.”—**Dwight Garner, *The New York Times***

“Daring, vivid, combative . . . The refreshing irreverence of her book might well be unique among writers of her generation.”—**Francine du Plessix Gray**, *The Wall Street Journal*

“The ten literary essays at the heart of *In Praise of Messy Lives* are wicked and endearing; the language is conversational and burnished to a hard shine.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

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