theories and methodologies

Remembering Anne Sexton: Maxine Kumin in Conversation with Diane Middlebrook

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY NANCY K. MILLER

WHEN DIANE MIDDLEBROOK BEGAN THE RESEARCH FOR HER BIOGRAPHY OF ANNE SEXTON (1928–74), SHE INTERVIEWED MAXINE KUMIN twice. Kumin and Sexton had been great friends and collaborators, and Kumin wrote the introduction to Sexton's *Complete Poems* (1981). The excerpt below is based on Middlebrook's typed transcript of a recording of a conversation that took place in Kumin's home on 9 October 1980. I abridged the transcript and submitted it to Kumin for her approval. The ellipses are part of the transcript, but the bracketed interpolations are mine. The complete interviews Middlebrook conducted for *Anne Sexton: A Biography* will be deposited in the Feminist Theory Archives of the Pembroke Center at Brown University.

MK: Of course, there's so much to say that it's very hard to know where to begin. Every publishing house in New York must have contacted me in the early years after Anne's death to ask me whether I would consider doing the biography, but I recoiled in horror. I'm pleased that you were chosen to do this.

DM: I myself was not really sure that I was the right person to do it, so I spent a lot of time thinking about whether I really wanted to, and worked on her poetry, and gave a lecture on "the body" in the poems, which is an unusually interesting subject to me. And that meant working through all the things in print, including the letters. I read the letters rapidly and then I started working through them slowly, and got a set of topics in my mind that I was interested in. But I haven't had any conversations with anybody, and I haven't looked at anything that isn't in print. So I have some quite specific concerns, but I'm rather ignorant about them at this point. I'd rather just follow your lead.

MK: Anne was a wonderfully funny person, very satirical and very quick. And no one was more fun to be with when she was "up"; we had some absolutely glorious good times together. It was a very enduring relationship, and obviously it was very nurturing for both of us, or it would not have lasted as long as it did. It made being a poet just so much more enjoyable, and less lonely for both of us.

Biographical notes about the contributors appear on page 300.

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DM: Yes, you were, of course, both friends for over fifteen years, weren't you? Isn't it true that the John Holmes workshop was the first criticism you'd had of work, and that was at the beginning for each other? I really envy that; I know what you mean, what it must have been like to have someone working as hard as you were on writing.

MK: And I miss that! I mean, I miss the companionship. I miss the instant criticism when we met. I miss the kind of ongoing complete encouragement of whatever piece I pick up, whatever comes to my hand. But I feel I was lucky to have her. It was a kind of . . . unbelievable friendship. I could show you, for example, every book that she wrote, which I now have, has an inscription that says something, speaks to our relationship. *All My Pretty Ones* is the book I like the very best . . .

DM: You know, that's true for me too.

MK: I think it reads the best.

DM: I do too. The confidence in the use of form is very powerful, and there is a genuine selectivity and crystalline quality to so much of it. It's surprising to read, in fact.

MK: When she was on, when she was right on target and writing at her best, she was fantastically good. Such an original! I think we won't see that again in this century; I truly believe that. We collaborated on four children's books, which I guess you also know, and those we wrote out of some zany, childlike other part of ourselves. They were just marvelous fun to collaborate on, gales of laughter, taking turns at the typewriter, arguing over every line, and just going into fits of girlish hysterics over and over. They were so much fun to write that I think we both felt guilty about being paid for them. They were just a joy to do . . . And we were very close with each other's kids; she did a lot of mothering of my daughters.

DM: She talked to you about everything, right?

MK: Yes, and that was a lot of the fun in the relationship. We had absolutely no secrets from each other. I never had a sister, so she was my sister in a wonderful way. It was such fun! I think we were never jealous of each other's careers; of course, we were careful not to compete. We were two very different poets. And we were very careful not to meddle with each other's psyche, but only to try to bring out the best, to be careful craftspeople.

DM: Well, that's a fantastic thing. In fact, as I understood the essay you wrote about her, about the phone conversations, that you would leave the phone open and talk to each other while you were writing, and try things out . . . Well it must have been tremendously difficult to keep from writing her poem, and vice versa.

MK: I don't know that it was, because temperamentally we were very different. I was a much more reserved person than Anne, and Anne, of course, was very flamboyant and exhibitionistic.

DM: And you knew what she was after pretty much—that is, if she asked you questions like "Does this sound good?" and she was saying, "Does this sound like me?"

MK: Yes. "Does this image work? Does this poem end here? Where should this poem end? Can I begin like this? What about these rhymes?" And so on.

DM: You said something really interesting about the impact of listening to that on the phone, and then seeing that later, worked out. I bet that was a very interesting thing.

MK: It was a revelation.

DM: And it must have had something really to do with the way that her things do sound. I mean there is an internal sound system in her poems.

MK: And I'm sure that's partly because our ears were trained . . .

DM: I bet it was . . .

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MK: It's almost like two blind people writing poems. We got into this pattern where Anne would come to my house after her shrink twice a week. That was usually in time for lunch, and she would have several drinks and I would have tea. I never could drink in the middle of the day because it just zonked me for the rest of the day, but we would sit in the breakfast room in the house in Newton Highlands and just go over the poems, and talk shop, and then gossip, and talk about our kids, and then talk about the poems, and then talk about fellow poets, and around and around and around we went.

DM: And drinking didn't affect her, her ability to work?

MK: I think she was so . . . anxious all the time that she needed the liquor in her system just to make anything go.

DM: It was like a medication?

MK: It *was* like a medication, very much so. We did share just, I would say, every detail of our lives. We didn't share a social life because as a foursome we were simply not compatible, but we did share our kids a lot.

DM: And you started this as soon as you met?

MK: I think it was the first Sunday after we had met in Holmes's workshop and discovered that we lived quite near each other, and that perhaps we ought to take turns driving into the city. She called me up on a Sunday and said, "Could I come down and see you? I have something I need to show you." And she drove over and very shyly showed me this piece of paper, and said, "This is a poem, I mean it's something . . . but can I turn it in to class? Is it a poem?" And it was "Music Swims Back to Me."

DM: Really. Ahh!

MK: And it had just occurred on the page, and there it was, still quivering. It was just wonderful, brilliant. And Anne was good for me too because she pulled me out of my shell. I am very contained and very reticent, although over the years I've gotten more and more daring, and confident and reckless. She made me see that the cerebral really needed a strong admixture of the visceral.

DM: I take it that she didn't maintain a relationship with her sisters, is that right?

MK: No. My theory, and it's only a theory, but probably a good one, was that she was a hyperkinetic child, and that the only way they had of dealing with her was to put a gate on her room. She spent an awful lot of time behind that gate, and from that she took refuge in the closet, talking to the shoes, and playing among the skirts and petticoats, as she has written. There was some question that she had a cyst or tumor on the vulva, and this was her mother spreading her out nightly on the bathroom floor to see if it had grown. Imagine doing that to a small child!

DM: Oh my goodness, no.

MK: Terrible. All the things that were done, I'm sure, not out of malice, but out of ignorance or indifference, but the scars were just immense. Her mother was the family intellectual, as Anne told it at least to me, but her mother never wrote anything other than letters and did the crossword puzzle, but her mother was the one with the desk; it was her mother who was writing, and it was her mother who convinced her she was too stupid, and could never write or do anything but ride around Wellesley in her convertible and flirt with boys—and she did a lot of that.

DM: There was a letter or two written when she's saying, "Mother is upstairs."

MK: I think that's in the summer house; that's where "The Double Image" takes place.

DM: Yes, yes . . . a very powerful poem. God, that's a good poem! It's so shocking

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too; it's a stunning poem to come on in that book [*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*] because you're not prepared for it.

MK: It's preparation for everything in *All My Pretty Ones*. It almost belongs there chronologically, because all those poems, "The Operation," "The House," and all those, were written immediately after it.

DM: "The Operation" is also a wonderful poem.

MK: Isn't it?

DM: I wonder, could she have seen any of Plath's poetry about being in the hospital when she wrote "The Operation"?

MK: It's entirely possible. She was a great devotee of Plath's and they were friends that one year that Sylvia and Ted were in Cambridge. And she and Sylvia and George Starbuck all went to Cal [Robert] Lowell's class.

DM: You didn't go?

MK: I chose not to. I was too private and I didn't want to be in that atmosphere of adulation and sycophancy.

DM: Was it already like that around him?

MK: Oh, like flies to honey.

DM: Was it? Because I thought that that was a little too early in his reputation for that; it was just after *Life Studies*, wasn't it?

MK: He was writing *Life Studies* at that time. There was some question about who was imitating whom. You know Anne has raised this question, and I think it's a valid one. I don't have the exact chronology, but if you could see the worksheets of her poems and his poems, it would be an interesting and constructive exercise.

DM: I certainly do intend to. I've never found Lowell attractive, and never really wanted to pursue him very far. This is something that is really going to have to be looked at.

MK: This is a reputation, I think, that is really going to have to be sifted down in the next fifty or sixty years. It was one of those invented reputations.

DM: In *To Make a Prairie*, you referred to Holmes's letters to you, and I gathered from what the published letters of Anne Sexton show that she and he were not very friendly.

MK: It wasn't so much that they were not friendly—it's just that he disapproved totally of the confessional mode, and he said to me, "Don't become involved with her. She will be bad for you. She will poison your work." The reason is that his first wife is said to have committed suicide by slashing her wrists and bleeding to death over all of his papers, which she had assembled for that purpose on his desk.

DM: Oh, my God.

MK: In the basement of their home in Medford, and John never got over that. He saw this and feared this in Anne, and he really couldn't blink away her talent—it was so evident—but he had as little to do with her as possible. And here she was desperately trying to make him into her Christian academic Daddy, and he would have none of that . . . Anne had such a thing about authority figures; that was a terrible rejection for her and for which reason she wrote "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further," which is a lovely poem.

DM: It *is* a lovely poem, wonderful—and she also wrote a couple of letters to him, which are very moving.

MK: He was wonderful to me; it was he who got me my job at Tufts. He did a lot of nice things. He took Anne and me—we were invited to New York. Annie and I were both getting little awards. He took us to *Harper's Magazine* and introduced us to Bob Silvers,

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who was the poetry editor then. That was an enormous event in our lives!

MK: We were more or less the same dress size, and one of the joys of our relationship was the ease with which we traded dresses back and forth, and shoes, and pocketbooks, and coats—you know, we really only needed one outfit between the two of us, but Anne was very stylish, and I was very dowdy.

DM: You're the same height, really?

MK: And essentially the same body build, although I weighed a lot more than she did. She had broad shoulders and she probably weighed fifteen pounds less than I, ten anyway . . . But when she was on Thorazine and started gaining weight, she had no notion of herself as heavy. She was still . . . we used to just howl about this—that she was always the thin girl inside the fat girl and I was always the fat child inside the thin adult. I mean, when I looked in the mirror, I saw another outline. Mine was a balloon, and when she looked in the mirror, she didn't see the balloon she had become. She still saw the slim outline of her former self.

DM: I don't think I've seen any pictures of her when she was heavier.

MK: I probably have some . . .

DM: I mean, did she look quite heavy?

MK: Oh yes, she would have to get a whole other wardrobe. She went up to a size fourteen.

DM: And you could never wear the same clothes now, I see . . .

MK: But we had dresses that we practically fought over: "It's my turn." "No, it's *my* turn." We had a red and white polyester dress back when drip-drys were just coming into style that we both adored, that we traded—and then at one point we both had the same dress and we wore them together like little Bobbsey twins . . . It was ridiculous! I remember a navy and white striped wool that I just loved, and so did Anne, and we had to take turns with that . . .

DM: That's a great story!

MK: I've never told that to anyone . . .

DM: That's wonderful!

MK: But I don't really care who knows . . .

DM: You know, one of the things that I really wondered when I was reading the letters is if you felt intruded on by her because she must have been a very powerful character, and she's described as demanding.

MK: Very demanding.

DM: And manipulative.

MK: She was very demanding, but I never felt manipulated by her . . . I guess that I loved her so much I couldn't have felt any manipulation . . . There were times that I felt the pressures of the demands, but, you know, Annie gave as good as she got. She was extremely generous and giving, loving . . . she gave my daughter Judy an immense amount of time, affection, and caring . . . and those are the things . . . I don't know—I don't think I ever felt manipulated. The thing that was the hardest was the dichotomy between the city life and the country life, and you notice that we didn't move here until after she killed herself. I didn't put that together for a long time.

DM: You stayed in the city because of your friendship?

MK: Yes, and she needed me there, and I knew she needed me. It was a terrible responsibility, and I felt the awesomeness of the responsibility, but I had taken it on.

DM: Did you find it the same responsibility from the beginning, that is?

MK: Very shortly after it began . . . It didn't take us very long to become very intimate.

DM: And you felt that you had to play a role in keeping her alive? I'm putting those

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words in your mouth, which I don't mean to do . . .

MK: No, that's exactly where they belong; that's exactly what it was . . . I was keeping her alive. Poetry was keeping her alive. The one thing that I've done in the introduction [to Sexton's *Complete Poems*] was to make this point. You know in the public view, in the public prurient view of the creative artist who commits suicide, it's the art that's responsible.

DM: Yes.

MK: But in truth she would have died so many times if it weren't for her poetry. It was poetry that kept her going. And when she felt the poetic vein had run out, that was when she took her own life. She was just struggling so hard at the end. She was literally getting up in the morning at ten, wooly and sad and staggering through the morning until lunchtime. She didn't start to drink until lunch. Then there would be three or four huge water glasses of vodka for lunch, and then she would take two chloral hydrates, so she could take a nap. And then around four, she would get up and grope her way toward evening, so she could start drinking again; and then she would drink again until she was just sodden, and she would take probably eight sleeping pills.

DM: God.

MK: And she was just no longer living . . .

DM: And she did the *Awful Rowing* poems.

MK: She did them *before*. She did them when she was feeling very suicidal; she was writing those in January and February of . . . 1972, '73? I'm not sure which.

DM: It's OK; I can look it up. I had made a connection in my mind after you spoke of the deterioration that took place when she went off Thorazine . . . I had assumed that she became a different person for *you* then, too. Is that true? No?

MK: Never, never. You know there's a line in a Sexton poem, "even crazy, I'm as nice as a chocolate bar," and even psychotic, in many ways, Anne was saner than most people. She was terribly rational about other people's lives and other people's decisions. She was terribly rational about her own. It was just that she couldn't control her responses. Rationally, she could see what she should do, but she just couldn't resist, and nobody fought harder to stay alive and to act sane than she did. I mean it was a terrible curse to her to be crazy. She didn't enjoy it at all.

DM: Yes, she said something so interesting in a letter she wrote to a poet who's given a false name in the letters. It's a wonderful letter, and she talks about the uselessness of madness, and saying, "it's such a waste of time."

MK: She did see it as a waste of time, and it *was*. It impeded her all the time. The last period of her life, I would say the whole last year, was just the pits for her. It was a living hell. And it was a living hell for all of us . . .

DM: And it wasn't productive?

MK: No, and then you know there was a very serious attempt the March before the final, successful attempt—

DM: There's just a reference to it.

MK: Well, I can tell you exactly what happened; I remember it very vividly . . . It was just about 5 o'clock or 5:30 on a March afternoon. I remember that it was twilight, just getting dark. I got a phone call, I don't remember from whom, and I jumped in my car, and raced out there . . . She had let the dogs loose; she had turned the music up high; she was sitting at her desk with a drink taking the pills—with a glass of milk: that was the way she always took the pills; she could only get them down with milk. And I don't know how many she had taken, but there was not an awful lot left in that bottle. And I took her off to get her stomach pumped out. And she was very bitter with me.

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DM: Was she?

MK: It was the one time in our whole relationship in which she just . . . was furious with me: Why did I do this? And how she really wanted to die . . . She sobbed over and over and I said, "Well, Annie, if you're going to telegraph your intentions, you don't give me any choice: I have to rescue you." And then when she was ready, she kept it a dark secret. I think she was quite ambivalent about it to the very end . . . Anyway, there it is . . . But you know, of course, as grieving as we all were, I would have to say in retrospect that there was no other way for her in that circumstance . . . unless some wonderful, interventionist shrink had come along, and put her back on Thorazine, and put her back together. Really, there was no other avenue for her; she had exhausted everything . . . and she had exhausted her friends pretty clearly.

DM: But not you?

MK: No, not me. We were still very close, but she felt, I think, very much that I had pulled back from her. And you must remember that by then, you see, I had a little fame to deal with in my own life: I had won the Pulitzer; I was doing a lot more readings; I was in a lot more demand; I was traveling a lot more, and I was not just physically as available to her as I had been. And I think although she certainly did not take it as a betrayal on my part, she certainly felt some small alienation.

DM: Was she worried about being able to remain productive herself?

MK: She felt that the poems had fallen, and they had. I remember her saying that day when we looked at that last poem, "The Green Room," "I don't know about this poem. Sometimes I think I write the same thing over and over. I think this is just a therapeutic poem." And I remember saying, "Well, it's not a great poem, Anne, but what the hell, there are things in it that are valuable. You don't know what you'll end up doing with this; it's just a worksheet." Because I couldn't lie and say, "Oh, you're wrong, this is . . ." I couldn't. We didn't have that kind of relationship.

DM: Right. She showed it to you the day that she died? She actually was still working on things, and you still had these transactions to the very end?

MK: Yes, to the very end. We certainly saw each other at least twice a week, and there was never a day that we didn't talk on the phone unless one of us was in Europe. November was her terrible month, and I was going to be gone for three weeks. And that was going to be very hard on her; I was going to be gone over her birthday . . . Yes, retrospectively I see all these things; I can't say that I blame myself that she killed herself, because if she hadn't done it then, she would have done it a month later. She was in agony, I mean, she was in acute pain.

DM: Yes, it sounds like it. It's truly horrifying to think that those things *are* chemical; I mean that's the most attractive rationale, isn't it, because you know, it's pretty plausible . . . and the idea that it's genetic and chemical too, as if it's just around the corner, at some point like next year, somebody could find out what makes people suffer that way, and give them a little molecule, and it would change that.

MK: That's right.

DM: You have indicated that you don't want to talk about the marriage.

MK: I don't think I really should . . . I would feel traitorous. I think you should find out how the marriage went from [her daughter] Linda *first*, at least.

DM: Yes. Also I know it's an important issue because a woman's marriage is an important issue, and I don't know what to do with . . . just the little things that have seeped out from Linda that she was telling me before she had decided she would ask me to do this.

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MK: Very hard when you're this close to the events. You see, I don't know what a biographer does in a situation like this.

DM: I'm not sure myself. But my sense is that my first interest will be in events that illuminate the poetry, because that will be the use of this. But I haven't even begun to think about how to avoid giving people pain.

MK: Well, you can't really avoid it. I mean you can't avoid the fact that obviously she had love affairs.

DM: Well, that is *so* obvious. I mean . . .

MK: Her poetry is full of it. I mean, who are we fooling? If she had been perhaps totally happily married, she might not have had to look for these gratifications on the outside. And they were not necessarily *sexual* gratifications. What she was looking for was a kind of physical tenderness that was absent in the marriage.

DM: That was another thing I wanted to ask you about: what her love affairs meant to her, as far as you can tell.

MK: I have this theory about Anne that the whole hang-up—it's much too simplistic, and I am after all a layperson, but my instinct is that over and over again she was playing out the failed, unresolved relationship with her father. And that over and over she could only feel whole, womanly, feminine, female, defined, by offering up her body to some man. It begins with being a model, and having to put that face on yourself when you go out into the world, and always loving clothes, and loving jewelry, and perfume when those things are fine in and of themselves . . . I mean, I don't say it pejoratively, but not having a sense of *self*, without seeing that self in its relationship with a *male*, and most of them undeserving . . . particularly toward the end when she was so desperate for male companionship . . . I mean, God, they were pretty unspeakable companions . . . That's so sad . . .

DM: Isn't it.

MK: . . . that she never got past that; she couldn't get past it with the men psychiatrists . . .

DM: As I said, I felt reluctant to even call you, and I wouldn't have done so until I'd done more reading, partly because I didn't know how you'd feel about talking about Sexton. I didn't want to come as ignorant as I really am about everything, but I decided to seize the moment, and come up, and I've appreciated getting this kind of start.

MK: I want to see an honest, good biography written, and I think that is what you'll do . . . so therefore I'm willing to aid any way I can.

DM: It's just breathtaking to see what she did! You know that's one of the amazing things because she didn't have anyone pulling the strings for her in the academic sense; she just had this courage, really—you see that—demonic energy, willingness to pursue people, to pretty much insist that they take her seriously, and that was before women were getting things right. And I hope that I can talk about how much money she made, because I think that's an important thing.

MK: Yes, she was supporting that whole household.

DM: And to be able to insist on being paid the way men were; it's pretty amazing. One of the "attractivenesses" of the project for me is thinking about women's careers, and how she did it.

MK: And all the animosity she aroused in women is fascinating to me. I have never forgotten, nor will I ever *forgive* Elizabeth Hardwick for saying to me, "Well, of course, she was *so* stagey, she had to kill herself, there was nothing else left for her to do." I was so taken aback by that; I couldn't believe it had come out of her mouth, and I'll never forget it.

DM: At the end of your introduction, you describe women's poetry in the twentieth century. Before the women's movement, you

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write, "the underground river was already flowing, carrying such diverse cargoes as the poems of Bogan, Levertov, Rukeyser, Swenson, Plath, Rich, and Sexton." That's lovely, the metaphor of the river. I'm glad you took a reference from me here too . . .

MK: Yes, I'd meant to tell you that I quoted you. I loved what you said: it was so apt.

DM: It's funny, I found myself agreeing with you, and then I looked down and saw my name. That's called the shock of recognition.

Contributors

MAXINE KUMIN's seventeenth poetry collection, *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems 1990–2010* (Norton), was published in 2010, as was *The Roots of Things: Essays* (Northwestern UP). Candlewick Press brought out her children's book *What Color Is Caesar?* in the same year. Her awards include the Pulitzer and Ruth Lilly Poetry Prizes, the Aiken Taylor Award, the Poets' Prize, and the Harvard Arts and Robert Frost Medals. A former United States poet laureate, she lives with her husband on a farm in central New Hampshire with three rescued dogs and two old horses.

DIANE MIDDLEBROOK's *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Houghton, 1991) was a finalist for the National Book Award and for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her biography of the cross-dressing musician Billy Tipton, *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (Houghton, 1998), was a finalist for the Lambda Foundation literary award. Her last published biography was *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath, a Marriage* (Viking, 2003). Beginning in 1966, she taught in the English department at Stanford University. "Young Ovid," a biography of the Roman poet Ovid, was left unfinished at her death in 2007.

NANCY K. MILLER is distinguished professor of English and comparative literature at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her books include *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death* (Oxford UP, 1996) and *But Enough about Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* (Columbia UP, 2002). She is a coeditor of the volumes *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* (U of Illinois P, 2002), *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (Columbia UP, 2011), and *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (Reaktion, 2012). Her most recent book is a family memoir, *What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past* (U of Nebraska P, 2011).

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