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Susan Sontag

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First published in 1967, *Death Kit*--Susan Sontag's second novel--is a classic of modern fiction. Blending realism and dream, it offers a passionate exploration of the recesses of the American conscience.

Death Kit Details

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From Reader Review *Death Kit* for online ebook

Jason Pettus says

(As of summer 2012, a first-edition copy of this book is being sold through the rare-book service at the arts organization I own, the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com/rarebooks]. Here below is the description I wrote for its listing.)

Known affectionately by her fans as "The Dark Lady of American Letters," like many writers the late Susan Sontag is almost equally known for her personality, celebrity and controversial views as for her varied body of work itself. A serious academe even at an early age, who had logged in time at the University of Chicago, University of Paris and Oxford all by 25, Sontag was known as a distinctly European-style intellectual who spent her life championing the challenging countercultural writers of that continent; celebrated mostly for her heady critical essays, among other achievements she was the person to coin the word "camp" as a positive term for "so bad it's good," a virtual pillar of the entire Postmodern era, plus came up with an entirely new way for us to envision the relationship between photography and us as its subjects and viewers, an obsession that even bled into Sontag's personal life, in that this notorious bisexual was romantically involved with famed photographer Annie Liebowitz for the entire last decade of her life.

But despite all this, interestingly Sontag primarily considered herself a novelist, odd to realize given that she only wrote four of them in her long career, two near the beginning and two near the end. 1967's experimental *Death Kit* was the second, and only the third book of her career overall, after 1963's similarly groundbreaking *The Benefactor* and the essay collection *Against Interpretation* in 1966, considered one of her most famous books because of containing the aforementioned "camp" essay. And indeed, there's a lot to be said for one online reviewer's sum-up of *Death Kit* as "what Kafka would've written if he had been a '60s hippie;" after all, Sontag always saw her formative years in continental Europe as the most important period of her life, the years when she first fell in love with Kafka himself and other cutting-edge Modernist European artists, a love that would not just stay with her the rest of her life but in many ways help define her in the eyes of American audiences. A sometimes nonsensical, dreamlike tale just dripping with symbolism throughout, it is perhaps the story of a pissy corporate executive who loses his temper one evening on a delayed commuter train, manages to sneak off the stopped train, in a fit of rage kills the wisecracking employee trying to clear the tracks, and sneaks back on board without anyone noticing, spending the rest of the story in an existential cloud of guilt and deep thoughts; or maybe none of this actually happened, and what we're really watching is our unreliable narrator experience a complete snap from reality "American Psycho" style. In any case, there is also Diddy's sexual obsession with an easy blind girl to contend with, the travails of his microscope-manufacturing job, and all kinds of tangents to be had about the nature of humanity, the slippery definition of "truth," and all kinds of other Big Issues. A book almost guaranteed to go up in value as the years continue, this a must-have for those interested in the history of countercultural intellectual thought, as well as Postmodernist literary history in general.

vi macdonald says

Susan Sontag: first rate essayist...third rate novelist...

Kate says

Not an enjoyable novel, perhaps, but a thought-provoking one. Sontag is known for her criticism and philosophy, and it would probably be fair to say that she has a certain cult appeal among adolescent literature students that's based more on a love of precocious grey-bestreaked intellectuals with exciting love lives as it is an interest in her actual criticism. I guess that probably includes me. Until picking this up in a charity shop over New Year I didn't even realise she had written novels, and the idea of something as potentially pulpy as a thriller (as this edition was classifying itself) was pretty intriguing. Unsurprisingly, this isn't your average high-octane Michael Crichton.

See the full review [here](#).

rachel misfiticus says

Rachel the curious picks up Death Kit.

Rachel the eager begins to read Death Kit.

Rachel the approving reads a few pages and enjoys the verbiage.

Rachel the intrigued expects to be charmed with mysterious scenarios.

Rachel the expectant.

Rachel the impatient reads another book to satiate feeling of accomplishment.

Rachel the rebounding resolves to finish this damn book by the end of the week.

Rachel the inattentive continues this perfunctory reading.

Rachel the redundant is bored.

Rachel the relieved has finished this fucking book (now) after having read two books in between. Finally.

Eve Kay says

The darkness.

It's beautiful in its stillness, in its silence.

This book holds that darkness, it spoke to me, not the writer, the darkness.

I did let it, though. So, I would guess, it needs a receiver.

Someone who is in desperate need of stories just like this.

Please, let there be more stories like this.

More darkness.

Dusty says

Death Kit by Sontag.

Not to be read by people like me - clinically depressed and have a difficult time fitting in or getting some love in life.

Uh, I think I may have enjoyed this if I had been on some sort of mood stabilizing meds or a somewhat "normal" person - who could look into Diddy's world as if it were "strange", "new", or "titillating" even.

It's pretty somber read.

Diddy (the main character) is always banging this scrawny, pale, blind chick. He is - if I remember - a handsome, well-dressed university student or young professional who turns his back on everything except this blind girl who he sleeps with all of the time. His clean bachelor pad becomes a segment of Hoarders within no time. He could care less about anything but this blind girl. It's pretty sad and twisted.

I smelled the end of the book before I got to the end of chapter one.

Death Kit is well written but will take you into the toilet if you are already a sad sack to begin with and lonely for "company".

Zöe Yu says

All her novels are dreams, illusion, and despair! It's a dying dream of an overdosed man named Dalton. Those cliché Freudian family issues are actually Susan Sontag's own reflection from her rootless Childhood. I don't agree with those critics that Death Kit is not a successful novel. It's an experimental novel, some parts it went too free, and readers just way too impatient to digest it and feel it. Sontag suggests "we need to see more, to hear more, to feel more" in Against Interpretation essay, but in the reception of Death Kit, people don't feel it.

Against Interpretation is not a slogan to prevent novel from being deeply dug, instead, it is a gesture to keep critics from over-interpreting any novel in political, moral or social meanings. Even without too much interpretation, we could understand that Death Kit is a conduit of French thoughts and German psychological theories which Sontag was too familiar with.

Death Kit might be a little bit like Kafka's Das Schloß, esp. Sontag herself is a big fan of Kafka. Also more important is, it is about Death, we only can try to feel it.

Phil says

I would have to say that one of the most interesting aspects of Sontag's novel is her persistent use of the third

person personal. Very rarely does she employ a third person pronoun and so we achieve a level with her main character (Diddy) that is close to being analogous to the relationship he holds to himself. That is, one of detachment. The present is always second guessed in her repetition of the “(now)” which, though seemingly tired after the first quarter, continues its significance throughout, with its culmination coinciding with Diddy himself in the end.

I will say that her ‘surreal’ surrenders of her character begin to lose focus towards the end. But, they are also what bring the ‘plot’ together. The denouement in and of itself becomes as mundane as the revelation we have of Diddy himself. In this sense one can consider Sontag’s style in this novel as equally lackluster as inevitable. The end is virtually prefigured in the beginning, and one is only duped by succumbing to the standard conception of plot narrative. Her ability to ply that without being overt thus places her in an uncomfortable position between the modernist and postmodernist text. The modern is used, with only minor hints toward the contrary, all the way towards the end in which the reader, not just the character, is thwarted. Most distaste towards this novel I imagine will come from just that.

All I can say is that what captivated me the most is her being able to create a first person narrative through a third person narration. It was downright hypnotizing, dare be it, mesmerizing. One can hardly help but relate more to Diddy (however one may actually differ from him) than most intimate first person narratives such as the Kafka which she is compared to. The first person alienates as much as it communes with the reader; as opposed to her communal use of the one step removed for both reader and character alike but separate. Granted, very few characters can exist in the way that Sontag’s Diddy does, but she uncovers in an extended way another intimacy between reader and narrator. That of the readers detachment from the character, and the character’s equal detachment from him/herself. Which at time speaks an honesty hitherto unexplored at such a level.

Kinga says

Susan Sontag was more of a figure than a person. Intimidatingly intelligent and self-assured, she was an embodiment of an intellectual. Suffice to say there is only one woman Hitchens talks in any length about in his memoir (other than his mother) and it’s Susan Sontag. Even Hitchens, the notorious woman-ignorant (if not necessarily a woman-hater) couldn’t ignore Sontag.

It felt good to be reading Susan Sontag. Also I sure looked good reading Sontag, walking around with black and white Penguin Modern Classic that just spelled class. I milked it, taking the Circle line and going in circles for hours basking in my intellectual superiority, looking down on my fellow commuters reading Fifty Shades of Horsecrap or some hyped thriller of the day. (I didn’t really do that. That would be crazy. I’m not crazy.) I even took a photo, so that I could post it on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and let everyone know just how smart I was. (But for some reason I decided against brushing my hair that day - you can see it on my blog)

Of course, if I were taking this intellectual adventure seriously, I’d be reading Sontag’s essays, not novels, and they obviously are on my four or five thousand items strong to-read list but meanwhile let’s have a quick look at this (post)modernist trip.

Sontag was not a great novelist, mostly because she was a great critic and it seems you can’t be both. (I really hope that means I will be a great novelist). But that is not to say that this ‘Death Kit’ is completely without its merit – even though the book seems too calculated and self-aware, there passages of unexceptional brilliance.

Diddy, the protagonist, barely deserves to be called the hero of the novel because he is just so unmemorable and pedestrian. If I were to compare him to a famous figure, it would be Nick Clegg. I don't know about you but I have to Google him every time to remind myself what his face looks like (I just did it again).

So we have Diddy: *"Diddy, not really alive, had a life. Hardly the same. Some people are their lives. Others, like Diddy, merely inhabit their lives."* Diddy, who tried to take his non-life but failed and after having been released from hospital embarks on a non-adventure, where things might or might not have happened. He might have killed a railway worker and might have started an affair with a blind girl. But of course the air of 'is this all a dream' pervades the novel and causes a mild frustration to the reader (or at least it did to this particular reader). It's all very Kafkaesque, and now that I've actually read Kafka, I can say it with some authority.

As many critics writing novels Sontag uses this rather poor excuse of a plot to continue writing essays about art and philosophy and what's real and what's not real, and how real is real anyway, but really these ruminations should have never happened in the mind of her 'Diddy the bland' protagonist. He's just really not that kind of guy. As a result we have embryos here – an embryo of a novel and an embryo of a collection of essays. And they could potentially grow into something fabulous but they just never have the chance. So sad.

In her Paris Review interview Sontag says:

"Oddly enough, the plot is what seems to come all of a piece—like a gift. It's very mysterious. Something I hear or see or read conjures up a whole story in all its concreteness—scenes, characters, landscapes, catastrophes. With Death Kit, it was hearing someone utter the childhood nickname of a mutual friend named Richard—just the hearing of the name Diddy."

I know we shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth but, Susan, some gifts are just not that great. However, having read this entire interview with Sontag (<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1505/the-art-of-fiction-no-143-susan-sontag>), I am now convinced she is my spirit animal. (Although you can see how she is better at talking about her novels than writing them.)

S.D. Johnson says

While it was my impression that Sontag's first novel *The Benefactor* was most influenced in tone by the works of Hermann Hesse, *Death Kit* in its premise and themes seems to me more in conversation with Albert Camus, especially his works *L'Étranger* and *Le mythe de Sisyphe*.

Death Kit is a veritable chimera of schools of prose. The scientific imagery of the protagonist's profession as a marketer of microscopes as well as the provocative use of the images of trains and their tunnels owe a debt to modernism. The form however in its bold experiments is post-modern. Segments of text justified in a narrower margin from the bulk of most of the novel act as a platform for anything as banal as lists of objects to a more profound meta-text adding a provocative philosophical gloss to the narrative. One is not always sure where this new narrative voice comes from, and yet it is somehow convincing. It seems to differ from the third person narrative of the rest of the novel and in its polyphony also reflects the layered overall structure. At one point in one of these meta-texts where the narrator Diddy has just described his attempts at

retelling the world to his blind love Hester, we are reminded that in fact these texts act as a blind in the other sense of the word. As Hester helps Diddy to approach the world as though seeing for the first time, this novel manipulation of form is another way of becoming blind - or at least restricting and altering viewpoint, in order to see the world anew. Diddy is like Beckett's child in the dark, multiplying himself out of necessity.

But of course the influence of Hesse and Kafka is still here as well (in the surreal and absurd aspects of this very multi-faceted work), and what are perceived to be modernist images in the first two-thirds of the work transform later into traditional kabbalistic themes which act as metaphors of the soul. While Sontag was an atheist, she was still extremely well-versed in religion and taught classes in it. If not a believer in the soul after death, at the very least it's apparent from *Death Kit* that Sontag was a believer in the soul and its struggle *in life*. While many dismiss Sontag's prose I found this novel to be one of the greatest I've read, and I was particularly moved by these echoes from Jewish mystical tradition. She is the true successor of Hesse, Camus, Sartre, Beckett, Woolf, Eliot and Kafka, and should be regarded as such. I can't wait to read her other prose. I can only think that people have dismissed her novels out of misogyny, anti-intellectualism and because of her sympathetic political views.

Ugh says

I started out thinking I was really going to like this, finding the writing excitingly unusual:

"Diddy, not really alive, had a life. Hadly the same. Some people are their lives. Others, like Diddy, merely inhabit their lives. ... Eventually, for such a person, everything is bound to run down. The walls sag. Empty spaces bulge between objects. The surfaces of objects sweat, thin out, buckle. The hysterical fluids of fear deposited at the core of objects ooze out along the seams."

But as it progressed it became more normal and very slow for large stretches, and I found the end utterly unrewarding.

I folded down the corners of three pages for later reference, but having gone back to them now I don't feel that they make this experience worthwhile. I'm looking forward to hearing what the other members of my book club think.

El says

El the Victorious finished this book (now).

It's becoming very evident to me that Susan Sontag is one of those authors that is meant to be *experienced*, not *discussed*. But that's really pretentious, so let's see what happens as I try to review this completely cerebral book.

Very similar to Sontag's first book, *The Benefactor: A Novel*, in that the protagonist (Dalton "Diddy" Harron in this book) has trouble discerning between dream and reality. During a train trip he vividly recalls killing a railroad worker, though the woman in the cabin with him (albeit she's blind) is adamant that he never left the room the entire trip. It begins there, and then there's a crazy relationship between Diddy and the blind woman, Hester. He becomes obsessed with her visual disability, and sight becomes symbol and metaphor

throughout the story for so much more.

Better than *The Benefactor* as far as I'm concerned but, like I said, similar in structure. We see Sontag begin to flex her writing muscles a bit more here, and in some way manages to ground her nightmarish world - drawing focus where *The Benefactor* lacked. It's not easy to sit down and plow through either of these books - for an easier read one might want to consider Kafka (this would be like his brain on drugs).

Zaftig says

this book has no division and that is fucking hard to take some times.

Sheila says

Susan Sontag's *Death Kit* opens as the story of a man who, in the course of a train journey, becomes convinced he has recently killed someone. The fact that he tried to kill himself only a short time ago gives the reader a clue; perhaps Diddy's version of events is not entirely reliable. And as the story progresses, the varied characters flitting in and out of his life begin to take on an image more symbolic than personal. The dead railwayman, the blind lover, the jovial fellow employee...

As Diddy drifts into dreams and memories, the feeling of unreality grows. How much of this is present, how much past, how much just dreamed? But the truth has a way of revealing itself. Even as Diddy grows more unhinged, the reader begins to grasp where his tale will end up.

Death Kit is an oddly intriguing, absorbing tale, not entirely satisfying or dissatisfying, but hard to put down, with some beautiful images and haunting turns of phrase. It's a long, slow, sad, literary read, and an interesting introduction to the concept of the unreliable narrator.

Disclosure: I borrowed this book from a friend.

LINDA says

I just started this book, and I have been reading it for the last few nights before felling asleep. Each morning I wake up wondering if what I read was just a strange dream, or if I had indeed read it. The author creates a very intangible, but vivid depiction of the events as they unfold in the mind of the main character.
