



# An Accident of Hope: The Therapy Tapes of Anne Sexton

By Dawn M. Skorczewski

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In 1956, Anne Sexton was admitted into a mental hospital for post-partum depression, where she met Dr. Martin Orne, a young psychiatrist who treated her for the next eight years. In that time Sexton would blossom into a world-famous poet, best known for her "confessional" poems dealing with personal subjects not often represented in poetry at that time: mental illness, depression, suicide, sex, abortion, women's bodies, and the ordinary lives of mothers and housewives. Orne audiotaped the last three years of her therapy to facilitate her ability to remember their sessions. The final six months of these tapes are the focus of this book.

In *An Accident of Hope*, Dawn Skorczewski links the content of the therapy with poetry excerpts, offering a rare perspective on the artist's experience and creative process. We can see Sexton attempting to make sense of her life and therapy and to sustain her confidence as a major poet, while struggling with the impending loss of Orne, who was moving elsewhere. Skorczewski's study provides an intimate, in-depth view of the therapy of a psychologically tortured yet immensely creative woman, during a period of emerging feminism and cultural change. Tracing the mutual development of the poet and the therapist during their years together, the author explores the tension between the classical therapeutic setting as practiced in the early 1960s and contemporary relational and developmental concepts in psychoanalysis, just then beginning to emerge.

*An Accident of Hope* also raises broader questions about the nature of healing in psychotherapy. The poet and therapist we encounter in these sessions present complex and conflicted images of the therapeutic and creative process. Orne, equal parts honesty and hesitancy, works to bolster Sexton's self-image and maintain that she is more than the sum of her poetry. Sexton, working against a tendency to hide from her most painful feelings, valiantly pushes to tell the truth in therapy, while her poems invite the readers to see another side of the story.

Just as Orne kept the audiotapes so that one day they might help others who suffer, *An Accident of Hope* tells the story of a therapy but moves beyond it. By offering a glimpse into the past, the present is open for reappraisal, both of Sexton herself and the legacy of psychoanalytic treatment.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

*"An Accident of Hope is a rich and far-ranging text that covers such diverse topics as creativity, identity, narrative, the history of psychiatry/psychology, and the history of feminism. Skorczewski's explorations touch upon very fundamental questions of identity and creativity."* –**PsycCRITIQUES**

*"Dawn Skorczewski explores this explosive material with delicacy and a sensitive hand. While An Accident of Hope limns the contours of Anne Sexton's deep-seated emotions – both the joy and the anguish – and the intertwined roots of her poetry, it simultaneously gives us a compelling read that never, ever, disappoints."* - **Linda Gray Sexton, author of Half in Love: Surviving the Legacy of Suicide and Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother: Anne Sexton**

*"By combining close readings of Anne Sexton's poems, mid-20th-century cultural history, and reflections on the development of psychoanalytic theory and technique, Dawn Skorczewski has produced a richly contextualized interpretive account of the audio recordings of the last six months of the poet's treatment with psychiatrist Martin Orne. An Accident of Hope amply demonstrates the mutually generative potential of literary and psychoanalytic texts and methodologies, while also reinforcing our sense of the propriety of Freud's oft-cited avowal that, wherever he went, he found that a poet had gotten there before him. Toggling back and forth between Sexton's poems and her taped conversations with Orne, Skorczewski reveals that, in certain ways, Sexton had a more forward-looking understanding than her doctor did of the psychotherapeutic relationship as a creative partnership."* - **Max Cavitch, University of Pennsylvania, USA**

*"In An Accident of Hope, worlds creatively collide. Skorczewski composes a contrapuntal work of great force that resonates on several levels at once. Poems comment on intimate therapy encounters, and the encounters themselves reveal a patient trying to teach her beloved therapist how to listen to her and a therapist teetering between sexist and rigid theoretical analytic paradigms and a desire to nurture the creative human being in his care. Masterfully?and lyrically?connecting Sexton's poems, therapy sessions, and the therapeutic and cultural norms of the time, Skorczewski tells the tale of a great poet, a traumatized and traumatizing woman, and a patient whose challenges to her therapist foreshadow relational understandings of what harms and what heals."* - **Lynne Layton, Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts, USA**

*"Dawn Skorczewski's responsiveness to the psychoanalytic narrative invites readers into an affecting study of the inner lives of men and women. With sophistication, care, and a literary style that makes for compelling reading, she draws readers into Dr. Martin Orne's tape recorded clinical treatment of the poet Anne Sexton. It is an unusual record of poetry and life woven from the fragility of creativity between the poet and the analyst. Nested in this commentary are the erotic tensions between North American psychoanalysis and the arts in the 1960s. Through the painful complications of childhood, adulthood, and illness, Skorczewski writes of love, hate, and sexuality; there is rare attunement to the backstage of lives in search of meaning. And new questions follow: Must one choose between art and life or between poetry and therapy? This book promises to open significant debate on the emotional conflicts of the imagination."* - **Deborah P. Britzman, York University, UK, and author of Freud and Education**

*"An Accident of Hope offers the reader insight into the workings of the mind of a patient who is fully aware of the importance of her relationship with her therapist, not only to free her from her demons but to give birth to her poetic creativity. Dawn Skorczewski succeeded in writing a book that is instructive, entertaining, and a captivating read. It is instructive because of the author's appreciation of how psychoanalytic theory of the 1960s had affected this treatment, and because in interpreting Sexton's poems she was able to establish the connection between Sexton's increasing insights into her turbulent inner world and what her poetry was successfully communicating. The easy, conversational style of writing is experienced as if the reader were a third person in Dr. Orne's consulting room. This is an extraordinary book that psychoanalysts and literary critics will find equally rewarding."* - **Anna Ornstein, University of Cincinnati, USA**

*"Skorczewski's work with the transcripts of Sexton's private therapy sessions refuses any prurient interest the reader may have in Sexton's flamboyant character or the melodramatic features of her suicide. With her extensive knowledge of psychoanalytic theory, Skorczewski is able to make lucid comparisons between Orne's clinical approach, which relied heavily on Freudian theory and its later expression as ego psychology, and contemporary theories of analysis that she argues provide superior modalities for treating mental illness and depression."* - **Judith Harris, DIVISION / REVIEW WINTER 2014**

#### About the Author

Dawn Skorczewski, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of English and Director of University Writing at Brandeis University. She is the author of *Teaching One Moment at a Time: Disruption and Repair in the Classroom* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2005) and co-editor of *Conflicts and Crises in the Composition Classroom* (NCTE, 2003). Her articles on the connections between psychoanalysis and pedagogy include "Analyst as Teacher/Teacher as Analyst: A Confusion of Tongues?" (*Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 2008) and "Questioning Authority in the Psychoanalytic Classroom" (*Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 2004). She was the 2009 recipient of the CORST Essay Prize in Psychoanalysis and Culture from the American Psychoanalytic Association and the 2007 recipient of the Gondor Award for Contributions to Psychoanalytic Education.

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