

KFBK (*Known for Being Known*)

Richard Kostelanetz

*SUSAN SONTAG: THE MAKING OF AN
ICON*

Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock

W.W. Norton
370 pages; cloth, \$29.95

“Writers who are famous advocates of freedom of expression are the first ones to pounce, the first one to sue, the first ones to scream when something is written about them.”—David Leavitt

The first measure to make is that little of her work is particularly good—to be more precise, little is strongly admired. Though she has done various things—essays, films, fictions—in no genre is she regarded as a primary, influential, or even innovative figure. Though I’ve read many critical books about contemporary fiction, I don’t remember any mentioning her name. It is likewise absent from books about contemporary film, her celebrity notwithstanding. (Readers of this will surely let me know if I’m wrong in these countings.) She wrote some essays that got attention when they first appeared but seem less distinguished now, because their outlook was essentially journalistic. Though she is sometimes identified as avant-garde, nothing about her work is radically unacceptable. Her name represents the achievement not of major work but a kind of public career based in literature, rather than other mass media; so that she has for over 35 years been KFBK—known for being known, to recall Daniel Boorstin’s classic phrase.

What kind of career has she had? Though working, to her credit, independently of institutions, any number of which could have captured her, she has actually been enslaved to her celebrity, or her sense

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of herself as a cultural celebrity whose moves reflect not artistic principles or intellectual ambitions but the need to sustain that celebrity. The subtitle of Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock’s biography is *The Making of an Icon*. If the former means, to cite my *Oxford American Dictionary* (1980), just “an image or likewise,” it is too modest. If meant to suggest the second definition of a person “regarded as sacred,” it is too pretentious. “Celebrity” would be quite sufficient.

What these biographers discover is a history of calculation, so that their book becomes a guide to sustaining celebrity without ever doing major work. Here are some strategies: Look good-looking, especially in mug-shot photographs that are distributed widely. (Conversely, prevent the publication of unflattering photographs.) Publish books at “respectable” intervals—neither rush nor take too long. Find a loyal publisher who broadcasts praises relentlessly and makes business arrangements beyond books, such as lecture appearances, becoming perhaps an unprecedented figure in writing history, perhaps the first cut-rate, non-familial de facto Personal Manager. (Can anyone think of a precursor for such a literary Svengali? Maxwell Perkins wasn’t so intrusive.)

In the current biographical style, Rollyson and Paddock investigate Sontag’s personal life, uncovering some truths that have been suppressed, even at the threat of legal action, because, one assumes, they would jeopardize the requirements of celebrity. The first is that Sontag’s erotic life has

been predominantly lesbian. One recent frequent companion is, indicatively, Anne Leibovitz, a portrait photographer known for compositionally audacious but ultimately flattering pictures and, needless to say, a celebrity in her own right. Coming from a generation that feared revelation of such bias (and advised by a Svengali yet a generation older), she has never admitted this bias in print.

Speaking of legal action, let me suggest some principles for future reference. It is not only unacceptable but loathsome for a professional writer to censor another writer. The mere act of hiring lawyers to “put our publisher on notice,” as happened here, lends to my mind validity to any substantial suspicions about the litigious writer. “Notice” should be considered comparable to declaring “open season” on oneself. Remember, conversely, people with nothing to hide don’t need to hire thugs.

That principle established, let me suggest that greater peculiarities of Sontag’s personal life are not passing affairs with women but two extended relationships with men: first, with her publisher/manager, Roger Straus, and then with her son, the writer David Reiff, born when she was still a teenager married to the sociologist Phillip Rieff.

For the first, the current biographers quote often from the publisher’s files on deposit in the archives at the New York Public Library. They quote people who received promotional letters from the pub-

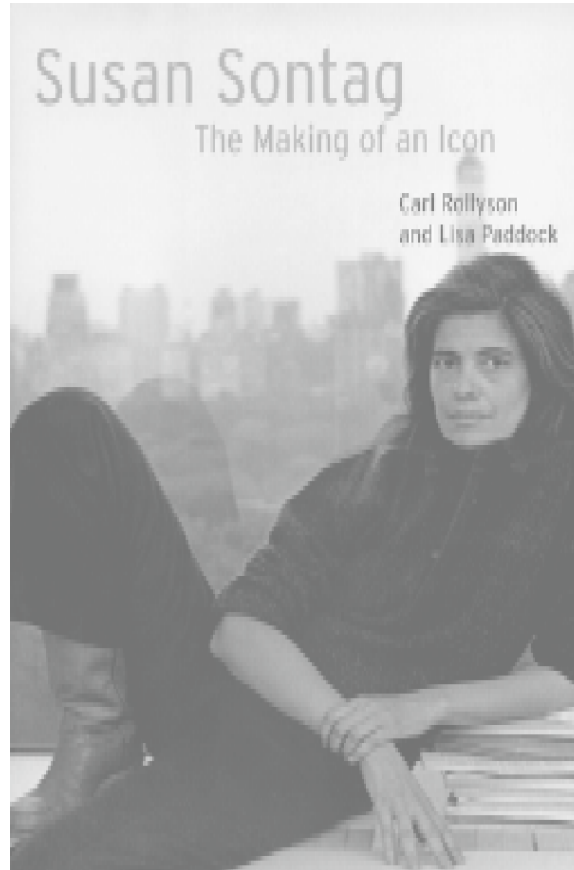
lisher and people who were surprised to find themselves dealing with him instead of her. My suspicion is that this remarkably rich and long relationship alone could be the subject of a later book.

It becomes quite clear that Sontag raised her son to be not only her literary executor but the principal man in her life—her “best friend,” as she says. He became

her designated editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux in the 1980s. May I predict, knowing a precedent, that the son will so restrictively control access to his mother’s estate that scholarly enthusiasm will dissipate.

Were a novelist to deal with Sontag’s life, he or she would necessarily explore a lesbian’s passion for her never-married middle-aged son and then her lovers’ interaction with him. If only because the principals are still alive and Rollyson and Paddock do not transcend current biographical limitations (where lovers

are acknowledged, but other unconventional departures not), the depths of this unusual relationship are hardly broached in this book. Rest assured it will be. With secretive subjects, such as the musician Leonard Bernstein, subsequent biographers justify their project by revealing more. Joan Peyser once told me of her reluctance to include in her 1987 biography her discovery that both Bernstein and his daughter slept with the same man, only to discover its appearance in a subsequent book. That’s the bio biz.



Can I be alone in thinking someone, somewhere, perhaps Sontag herself, has a manuscript kept unpublished? My prediction is that when her writings are consigned to the trashbasket marked Once-KFBK, this is the Sontag story that, perhaps told by someone else, will survive.

Richard Kostelanetz recently completed a book of literary essays titled Person of Letters in the Contemporary World.