



The Woman in the Sun Hat

a Novel by
Daniel Damiano

*She couldn't go home
again, but she could
visit...for as long as
she could stand it.*

From the Creator of the Acclaimed DAY OF THE DOG

The Woman in the Sun Hat

Daniel Damiano



"Daniel Damiano has written an extraordinary novel. *The Woman in the Sun Hat* takes us on a journey from start to finish that not only invites us into the world of the protagonist Peggy Bumbone, but helps us to inhabit that world with her in all its sometimes uncomfortable, emotionally challenging, earthy and ultimately invigorating glory. At times so deeply moving in its depiction of Peggy's life that continuing to read felt like a personal excavation. This is a novel that begins far away from where it ends and yet somehow brings together the strands of a woman's life in a way that is both breathtakingly beautiful and heart-wrenchingly painful."

– *Notes from the City*

"Daniel Damiano's stirring first novel not only creates a gripping tale of family disaster and deception, but he also takes on many myths of our modern life. - *The Woman in the Sun Hat* is a novel imprinted by a distinguished voice and led by a heroine memorable for both the ordinariness and super strength of her resolve."

– *Sunday's Mail*

"While Daniel Damiano could have turned Peggy's tale into one of misery and desperation, he has instead crafted a humorous and uplifting story of perseverance and struggle against the odds."

- *Seattle Book Review*

(2021 Beach Read Recommendation)

The Woman in the Sun Hat
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To Ma and Gram

Special Thanks

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She then started typing:

Chapter 1 – Mrs. Prager died earlier this week. I never thought she would play much of a significant role in my life, other than the woman who sold me 7-Up and Bubble Yum as a kid. Yet somehow, when I returned to Kelp Stream, she would end up being the only presence that made me feel at all like I was missed. I never really felt like I was returning home in any sort of storybook, Wizard of Oz-like way. It was more as if I were sucked into my past like a merciless vacuum and amidst the kaleidoscope memories that I had preferred to forget was this kind woman who simply remembered me as a nice girl. She knew nothing of my adult life. Only what I chose to tell her or lie about, as we reacquainted. She told me her husband died a few years earlier. She had kids, grandkids. Now she was dead. As I write this, I'm still wondering why I can't seem to get over it. It feels like all the good that there was in this oppressive town has died with her, and left me alone with the yellowed photo of Sylvia Plath on my childhood ceiling; her eyes still there looking down at my twin bed like an eccentric aunt. Even she must be saying "Why haven't you killed yourself, like I did?"

I had everything once. That is to say that I thought I did. Now it all feels like a ruse intended to lead me back here, at least for a time. Perhaps to see Mrs. Prager before she left the earth.

Or, perhaps, to see my mother before she does.

About 3 months prior, Peggy was speaking before her final period Literature class at Cold River High School; the most elite high school in central Long Island, and one that was not easy to be on staff at, especially for someone like her, who had been exclusively a housewife and mother for much of the last decade and a half. Nevertheless, she felt she earned her way in, having an impressive Princeton education and having taught literature and creative writing previously before becoming pregnant with Nicky and, two years later, with Luna. And the timing was right, if even overdue in Peggy's eyes. It was also a booming financial period for them due to the enormous success of Mike's dermatology practice – to the extent that a local periodical once referred to him as “One Man You *Want* Under Your Skin”. Plus the kids were a bit older now, which allowed for a bit more parental flexibility. Above all, she was quite simply itching to pick up where she left off. She had accumulated vague story ideas for novels over the years, but it seemed that as soon as there was a prime moment to sit down and type “Chapter 1”, a peanut butter handprint on a cabinet would appear or a knee scrape or any in a myriad of adolescent distractions courtesy of either Nicky or Luna, leaving her creative momentum to soon fade into chicken marinade preparations for an evening's dinner party.

But while writing beyond a grocery list would prove challenging, teaching was something that she was always eager to return to and knew that once she got over the initial butterflies of speaking before a class for the first time in years, she would seize it with abandon.

For her, literature was a warm afghan in which she could drape herself, and she took great joy in sharing her personal feelings on material with others, conveying what moved her about a particular work – what it made her feel, any catharsis she may have gleaned. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* was one of those books, which she had to assert to make a part of her curriculum. Back when she was in high school, this novel had a sort of engagingly dark reputation that preceded itself, not unlike Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Of course, this largely

came from the obvious parallels between Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, with Plath herself. “*Why such a choice?*” she would be asked by school administration, which, for a self-proclaimed progressive school, was somewhat surprising. There was a consensus that it was too bleak, too dark, too depressing, even too “existential”; all of which were accurate enough for a book about a young woman’s nervous breakdown. However, in Peggy’s mind, they were neglecting the fact that the best of art was not easy to take and should prove challenging – like the paintings of Rene Magritte or Francis Bacon, the poetry of Plath or Anne Sexton, the photography of Diane Arbus, and so on.

Such cultural acuity belied everything that Peggy came from, especially in the small working-class, boondock town of her youth, where *Interview with a Vampire* would equate to fine literature – provided anyone knew it was a book before the movie.

In the end, administration yielded to Peggy’s preferences and allowed Plath to be included, trusting the results she would render from the wealthy if jaded students she would be teaching and, potentially, influencing.

A student read the last line:

*The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me,
and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped
into the room.*

Peggy would take a satiated moment, as this was their first completed book of the semester, before gradually going around the room and inviting the students’ assessments as to what the book was about. “*Depression*”, “*Death*”, “*Madness*” were the rote responses, while others gave more rambling explanations. Peggy would not disagree with any of what was said, but was certainly hoping for more profound feedback.

The spoiled and advantaged made up no small part of her classes, though she also felt that there were at least a few who had the potential to make their own significant contributions to the world, outside of the ridiculously affluent environs they may have been born into. In particular, there was Tricia Wentworth; certainly not the prettiest or the most popular in a room that con-

sisted of all but herself and a mop, whom Peggy felt had great promise based on previous papers she'd written. However, she was almost catatonically shy about speaking in class, to the point where Peggy feared this could be an impediment for her later in life.

She had seen a lot of herself in Tricia. Though, as a girl, Peggy was more attractive in the traditional sense, she didn't seem to know it back then and had a relative shyness when it came to speaking publicly, which she eventually grew out of by her last year of high school. She did not foresee this level of extroversion in Tricia, necessarily, but had on more than one occasion kept Tricia a bit later, if just to gently convey that she knew Tricia was smart and that others could be inspired by her, as opposed to degrading her for her intellect.

Peggy posed another question to possibly generate a more stimulating discussion, "What would you say contributed to Esther feeling the way she did? Do you feel she was just sick?"

Some blind gazes, followed by some inaudible murmurings pushed out like a slow wave...

"I think she was," exclaimed Mark, another one of Peggy's kind-of-hopefuls. "She... It seemed like she just felt...numb. Like life wasn't really that interesting for her."

"And you think being numb to life is a sickness?" Peggy asked, with a half-smile.

"Well..." Mark stammered a bit, and tried to think a bit more on it before, "I mean, she...yeah, I think if you just, like, don't know how to really function, there's something wrong. Right?"

"But is having a disconnect from life a justification for what Esther experiences? Shock therapy? I mean, we can't fathom it now because we don't really use such methods anymore, but back in the 1950s, this was still deemed a very serious form of treatment. Do you think what she felt or what she was experiencing warranted that?"

She wanted to move on from Mark, and looked at Tricia, somehow believing that she would have an interesting observation about this, but noticed a shifting in her eyes for fear of

attention being drawn to her pale un-rouged skin and straight dirty blonde hair, before the ever-dutiful and knowingly-glamorous Susan Floss chimed in, “I think it’s barbaric. I agree, she was disturbed, but there should’ve been something else offered to her.”

“Like what? Medication?” Peggy asked.

“Right.”

“So you think Esther was ill and this wasn’t something she could’ve worked out herself somehow?”

“I...” Susan buckled, then thought, “Well,... not really.”

Peggy took a beat, attempting to mask her feeling that this was a rash analysis, especially from a born *richie* who couldn’t have less identifiability with the character of Esther Greenwood. Susan was beautiful, and Peggy never saw her alone in the hallways or at lunch, and was certain that at least three boys carried her books and that she was allowed parties every Saturday, and was probably never admonished by her parents. She heard through the grapevine-of-varying-accuracy that her father owned a professional hockey team, was on the board of the National Rifle Association and had residences in at least 3 states. Even if some of this was speculative, Peggy would prefer that the last response not be from Susan Floss,...but the bell ring would make this a certainty.

Peggy stopped Tricia discreetly as the other students hurriedly filed out, “Hey, I’d like you to have a nice answer to that question tomorrow, okay? You think you can give me something?”

Tricia was likely more comfortable with Peggy than any teacher she had ever had, and even still had a hard time looking her in the eyes, intimidated by her seeming confidence and natural beauty.

“How about it, kiddo?” she continued with a reassuring smile. “No pressure, but think about it. Hey, I get nervous up here too, but if I don’t say something, we’ll all just be staring at each other.” Tricia appeasingly nodded and tried to smile, almost leading Peggy to think that the poor thing might give herself the plague just to avoid having to fulfill such a request,...as she ambled off into the hallway.

Regardless, this was another good day, the kind that Peggy would savor, especially when she could challenge a student whom she saw aspects of herself in, whom she believed in. The only thing more invigorating were the possibilities of tomorrow.

For now, however, there was a joy in the unknown.