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## Poet Sylvia Plath's son, Nicholas Hughes, commits suicide in Alaska

By HILLEL ITALIE , Associated Press

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When Nicholas Hughes was in his early 20s, his father, poet Ted Hughes, advised him on the importance of living bravely.

"The only calibration that counts is how much heart people invest, how much they ignore their fears of being hurt or caught out or humiliated," Hughes wrote to his son, who committed suicide at 47 last week at his home in Fairbanks, Alaska, 46 years after Nicholas' mother, poet Sylvia Plath, killed herself.

"And the only thing people regret is that they didn't live boldly enough, that they didn't invest enough heart, didn't love enough. Nothing else really counts at all."

From the time that Plath died, in 1963, Ted Hughes had tried to protect and strengthen their children, Frieda and Nicholas, from their mother's fate and fame. He burned the last volume of his wife's journals, a decision strongly criticized by scholars and fans, and waited years to tell his children the full details of Plath's suicide.

And only near the end of his own life, in his "Birthday Letters" poems, did he share his side of

modern poetry's most famous and ill-starred couple.

"What I've been hiding all my life, from myself and everybody else, is not terrible at all. Though you didn't want to read it," he wrote to Nicholas in 1998, months before Ted Hughes died of cancer.

"And the effect on me, Nicky, the sense of gigantic, upheaval transformation in my mind, is quite bewildering. It's as though I have completely new different brains. I can think thoughts I never could think. I have a freedom of imagination I've not felt since 1962. Just to have got rid of all that."

"But I tell you all this," Hughes added, "with a hope that it will let you understand a lot of things. ... Don't laugh it off. In 1963 you were hit even harder than me. But you will have to deal with it, just as I have had to."

Nicholas Hughes, who was not married and had no children, hanged himself March 16, Alaska State Troopers said. He was a man of science, not letters, the only member of his immediate family not to become a poet. A fisheries biologist, he spent nearly a decade on the faculty of the University of Alaska Fairbanks as a professor of fisheries and ocean sciences. He left in December 2006, according to the university's Web site.


Hughes' older sister, poet Frieda Hughes, issued a statement through the Times of London, expressing her "profound sorrow" and saying that

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he "had been battling depression for some time."

"His lifelong fascination with fish and fishing was a strong and shared bond with our father," Frieda Hughes wrote. "He was a loving brother, a loyal friend to those who knew him and, despite the vagaries that life threw at him, he maintained an almost childlike innocence and enthusiasm for the next project or plan."

Nicholas Hughes graduated from the University of Oxford in 1984, and received a master's of arts degree from Oxford, in 1990, before emigrating to the United States and getting a doctorate from the University of Alaska.

Hughes' family history was an "urban legend" that was passed around from student to student. But it was a subject no one discussed with him, said Kevin Schaberg, a former student in a fish ecology class taught by Hughes.

"It was obviously something he did not want to talk about," said Schaberg, who added that he knew Hughes struggled with depression. "I never brought it (his family) up. He never brought it up."

Mark Wipfli, an aquatic ecologist at the University of Alaska and a good friend of Hughes, said that Hughes never spoke of his mother to him, but he talked warmly of his father, who sometimes visited Hughes in Alaska. Even though he had left the university, Hughes remained active in research and was a key scientist in an ongoing

study of king salmon.

"I would really like to see him recognized in his own right, not just as the son of two famous people," Wipfli said. "In his own right, he was an incredibly wonderful person."

Hughes not only taught about fish, he also enjoyed fishing and other Alaska pursuits, such as skiing, boating and hunting moose and caribou. What stands out the most for Schaberg, however, is Hughes' vast knowledge of fish, his instant recall of authors, titles and journals on even the most obscure subjects.

"Nick was probably one of the smartest guys I've ever met," he said. "When it came to fish, he was a walking bibliography."

Hughes was only 9 months old when his parents separated and was still an infant when his mother died in February 1963, gassing herself in a London flat as her children slept. A few months earlier, she had written of Nicholas: "You are the one/Solid the spaces lean on, envious/You are the baby in the barn."


Not widely known when she died, Plath became a cult figure through the novel "The Bell Jar," which told of a suicidal young woman, and through the prophetic "Ariel" poems — "I shall never grow old," she wrote — she had been working on near the end of her life.

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The immediate cause of her breakup with Hughes was his affair with Assia Wevill. Plath's legacy haunted her husband, hounded for years by women who believed he was responsible for her suicide and by a procession of biographers and fans obsessed with the brief, impassioned and tragic marriage between the two poets.

Ted Hughes relived the tragedy not only through the constant reminders of Plath, but also through the suicide of Wevill, his second wife, who in March 1969 killed herself and their 4-year-old daughter.

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Associated Press writer Rachel D'Oro in Anchorage, Alaska, contributed to this report.

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