

Miami, and then Tucson, Arizona, they arrived in Los Angeles in 1945 when Mildred married army captain Nathan Sontag. Susan was never formally adopted, though she took his name.

She had a deeply solitary and precocious childhood. Intimacy was not the Sontag family style, and she grew up without a gift for small talk, and little gaiety. There was little encouragement to the life of the mind. At North Hollywood high, she was remembered for her style and self-confidence.

Sontag attended the University of California, Berkeley, for a semester, before in 1949, at the age of 16, she was admitted to the University of Chicago, where she formed strong bonds with teachers including critic Kenneth Burke and political philosopher Leo Strauss, intellectual father of the current neoconservatives. Sontag had a gift for cultivating men of influence and intellectual power. Later, at Harvard, Paul Tillich became her mentor.

But it was a younger teacher at the University of Chicago, sociologist Philip Rieff, whom she married. As a 17-year-old sophomore, she walked into his class on Kafka, late. He asked for her name when the class ended. Ten days they were married. Their son David, a writer, was born in 1952.

She moved with Rieff to Boston after graduating in 1951. Their marriage had intense conversations but little intimacy. Sontag took a master's degree in philosophy at Harvard, and in 1957 won a fellowship to study for a year at St Anne's College, Oxford. She hated Oxford's sexism, and by Christmas had relocated to Paris, falling in with the expatriate American community around the Paris Review. She met the writer Alfred Chester, who introduced her to Robert Silvers. He provided Sontag with an incomparable platform when the New York Review of Books was launched in 1963.

In Paris, Sontag made serious efforts to engage with French film-making, philosophy and writing. Returning to America in 1958 and met by Rieff at the airport, she told him before they got into the car that she wanted a divorce. Reclaiming her son, who had been living with Rieff's parents, she declined Rieff's offers of child support or alimony, moved into a small apartment, took an editorial job on *Commentary*, and wrote furiously. A self-conscious first novel, *The Benefactor* (1963) in the nouveau roman style, was accepted by Robert Giroux. Roger Straus, the senior partner of the publishers Farrar, Straus & Giroux, took her under his wing, kept her novels in print (The Death Kit appeared in 1967), and acted as literary impresario. She was invited to the important parties, and appeared regularly in leading literary journals.

In 1965, she remarked, in a Partisan Review symposium, that "the white race is the cancer of human history". The age of radical chic had arrived, and Sontag—serious, gorgeous, striding across New York intellectual life, was its most striking adornment. In 1968, indignant at the US role in Vietnam, she visited Hanoi, and published an account of it, *Trip to Hanoi*.

In the early 1970s, Sontag began to write about photography, in a series of essays in the New York Review of Books. She was gripped by the problems, principally aesthetic, of interpreting images. The further she explored, the stronger became her doubts about whether photographs gave what they seemed to be delivering a slice of truth, a piece of reality. In a gesture of immense self-confidence, her book, *On Photography* (1977) did not contain a single photograph as specimen or illustration.

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She later returned to many of its themes in *Regarding the Pain Of Others* (2003), a thinner book, perhaps more directly shaped by her life as a public person, giving learned lectures to large audiences. Many of the most provocative arguments of *On Photography* were abandoned in the later book.

Her studies of languages of illness, *Illness As Metaphor*, (1978) and *AIDS And Its Metaphors* (1989) were written under the shadow of her diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer, for which she sought experimental therapy in Paris. In 1998 she was diagnosed with a rare form of uterine cancer, from which she has died.

In her studies of language and illness, she sought to remove the second punishment, of blame, that the metaphors of illness sustain.

Her career as a novelist came full circle in 1992, when she published *Volcano Lover*, and *In America*, winner of the National Book award in 2000. Drawing on historical sources, and written with little of the spirit of her earlier novels, they brought her to a wider readership, but did not have much of the provocative rigour of her essays.

She caused outrage after the 9/11 attacks by writing in the New Yorker: "Where is the acknowledgement that this was not a 'cowardly' attack on 'civilisation' or 'liberty' or 'humanity' or 'the free world' but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?"

Her son survives her.

*Susan Sontag, writer, born January 16 1933; died December 28, 2004, This article was first published in the Guardian Unlimited.*