

**Regarding Susan Sontag: Film Review**

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Tribeca Film Festival - Doc does justice to a hard-to-pigeonhole intellectual.

Tribeca Film Festival, World Documentary Competition

Director Nancy Kates recounts the life and work of Susan Sontag.



*Tribeca Film Festival*

NEW YORK — An intimate tribute to a woman who was "constantly being reborn" in her public assessment of the world around her, Nancy Kates's *Regarding Susan Sontag* clearly admires its subject but is willing to acknowledge her weaknesses and to admit that not everything she did lived up to the standard of groundbreaking work like *On Photography*. Serious-minded and aesthetically ambitious, it should please fest-circuit auds on its way to wider small-screen exposure.

Kates maintains a satisfying balance between personal biography and an assessment of Sontag's wide-ranging professional output, stretching back to the late 1940s, when a 15 year-old "Sue Sontag" wrote impressively smart editorials in her school paper. (Patricia Clarkson reads them.) The film's tour through her post-high school educational career is brisk, in keeping with her all-encompassing curiosity; at one of these academic berths, she met a professor so intellectually stimulating that she married him ten days later.

Despite having a son with that husband (David Rieff, who appears here briefly), Sontag was incapable of settling into a conventional life. She left her child in the US while studying in England and Paris; after divorcing David's father, she would have relationships mostly with women. (The cover photo for one of her books is described as a pinup for every grad-school lesbian in the US.) A number of former partners appear here, and while all seem to still hold her in esteem, some describe an egotist who could be insensitive to loved ones.

Kates recounts both the highlights of Sontag's writing career — "Notes on Camp," *Illness as Metaphor*, *Against Interpretation* and others — and other efforts that drew more dismissive reviews. Her novels, particularly early in her career, are described even by friends as "awful"; the films she directed fare little better. "I read the reviews; I think they're wrong" we see her tell an interviewer.

Though Kates grows more interested in the details of Sontag's relationships and her bouts of cancer than in later output like the best-selling novel *The Volcano Lover*, the picture makes sense of her evolving intellectual approach to the world and of the ways in which she came eventually to feel "a sense of failure." The doc overreaches a bit in its effort to enliven talking-head footage with artsy imagery: It returns too often to effects shots like one in which a photo of Sontag is swallowed by sand pouring into a glass bottle. The score by Laura Karpman and Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum, while hardly unobtrusive, fares better.



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