

Book Review

Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Celebrating the joys of letter writing

Nina Sankovitch; New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.

A letter is a joy of earth – it is denied the Gods.
Emily Dickinson

Nina Sankovitch, novelist and journalist, was compelled to write this historical account of letter writing by two life events. Years before she had found, and thoroughly enjoyed, a trove of letters hidden in a long-abandoned steamer trunk. Saved almost 100 years, the letters featured an almost daily correspondence between a woman and her son at Princeton beginning in 1912. Closer to hand, her own oldest child was heading off to college. She wanted desperately for him to write letters from away – and wanted to understand why exchanging letters was so important to her, and to others through the ages.

In addition to highlighting the author's deepening appreciation of her own personal letters, the compilation presents intriguing anecdotes that highlight famous exchanges and the types of letters which have contributed to central human connections for everyday people like ourselves.

We learn of letters of famous writers. The recluse Emily Dickinson corresponded over many years with the elusive T. W. Higginson who encouraged her to keep writing poems, not to bother with publishing. Reviewing the letters offers poetry readers a chance to see other sides to the poet's personality, such as a sense of humour and everyday concerns. The late Canadian Carol Shields exchanged letters with Blanche Howard, mutually supporting their separate writing careers for more than thirty years.

Love letters show the power of the pen to initiate and maintain romance. Heloise and Abelard corresponded for years after their brief twelfth-century love affair was broken up. These letters prove a useful corrective to the patriarchal official history of their relationship. James Joyce and his partner Nora Barnacle wrote to each other over decades of their relationship, when apart and also when together. It is startling to learn that Georgia O'Keefe and Alfred Stieglitz exchanged 25,000 pages of letters.

You in the lake – You in the trees – You in the smell of the soil – You in the windstorm – You in the most vivid lightening – You too in the crashes of thunder – You in the marvelous colors of daybreak – You everywhere – Every moment – Giving me strength – Great – Great quick strength.

~ Alfred Stieglitz to Georgia O'Keefe

A special chapter on Tender Offerings illustrates the time-honoured roles of letters for expressions of thanks, requests, apology, and especially condolence.

Writing a letter of condolence is an example of the two-way street of altruism, where in the giving there is as much benefit as in the receiving.

Letters of condolence were especially eloquent from the grief-stricken Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln who, having lost their young son Willie, could speak from the heart to parents losing their boys in the Civil War. Thomas Merton wrote to the father of a child killed in the 1963 Birmingham church bombing, writing that the child "remains as a witness to innocence and to love, and inspiration to all of us who remain to face the labor, the difficulty, and the heart-break of the struggle for human rights and dignity."

Important for North America, land of immigrants, letters have been written across the seas, sometimes the only means to keep in touch with family – parents and children separated by school, work, or emigration. These letters sometimes included apologies for the long gap: e.g., "I guess the ink is blushing because I've neglected my favorite correspondent for so long!"

Letters offer opportunities for solicited or unsolicited advice. Advice received in a letter can be taken more easily without losing face and can be re-read on different occasions.

An example of shared conversation through letters is the correspondence between writer V. S. Naipaul and his father when Naipaul left his native Trinidad for Oxford.

Do not say you resign yourself to obscurity, Or if you do, say that in obscurity you will do your work. Let it be a shield to you from the noise and inanities of the rest.
[father]

You say I should write at least 500 words a day. Well, I have started to do so, but cannot say much just now. Let me first see how well the resolve works out. [son]

That rejection [of a manuscript] gave you, as it would have me, a nasty jolt. But people such as you do not remain submerged for long. People like us are like corks thrown on water: we may go down momentarily; but we simply must pop up again. [father]

We can hold on to moments, and to dear family and friends through letters, as in these examples from letters written before dying:

It is raining faintly to-day, with a soft southerly wind which will prevail with the few leaves left on my trees to let go their hold and join their fellows on the ground. I have forbidden them to be raked away, fore the rustle of them stirs my earliest

memories, and when the wind blows they pirouette so gaily as to give me cheerful thoughts of death.

~ James Russell Lowell, poet

I read a few pages ... of Flaubert. I found the same solitude and sadness that I have, and even the same sickness.

~ Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, Brazilian writer

As older adults, we can maintain the tradition of correspondence through the post, despite instant modes of digital communication, to foster longterm relationships, build confidence by writing to one specific person, choosing words carefully to express feelings, and slipping in a bit of advice.