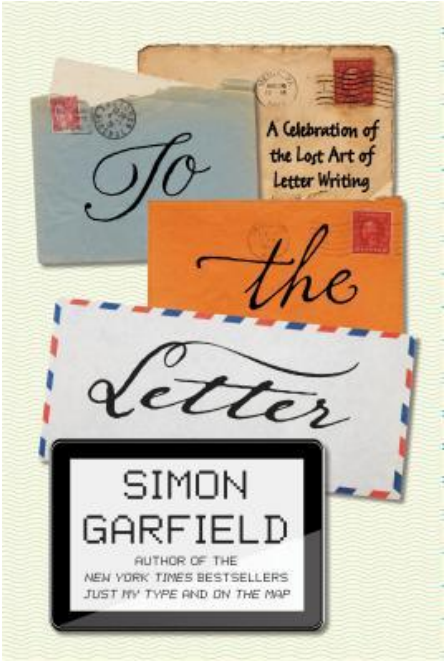

To the Letter: A Celebration of the Lost Art of Letter Writing

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The *New York Times* bestselling author of *Just My Type* and *On the Map* offers an ode to letter writing and its possible salvation in the digital age.

Few things are as exciting—and potentially life-changing—as discovering an old letter. And while etiquette books still extol the practice, letter writing seems to be disappearing amid a flurry of e-mails, texting, and tweeting. The recent decline in letter writing marks a cultural shift so vast that in the future historians may divide time not between BC and AD but between the eras when people wrote letters and when they did not. So *New York Times* bestselling author Simon Garfield asks: Can anything be done to revive a practice that has dictated and tracked the progress of civilization for more than five hundred years?

In *To the Letter*, Garfield traces the fascinating history of letter writing from the love letter and the business letter to the chain letter and the letter of recommendation. He provides a tender critique of early letter-writing manuals and analyzes celebrated correspondence from Erasmus to Princess Diana. He also considers the role that letters have played as a literary device from Shakespeare to the epistolary novel, all the rage in the eighteenth century and alive and well today with bestsellers like *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. At a time when the decline of letter writing appears to be irreversible, Garfield is the perfect candidate to inspire bibliophiles to put pen to paper and create “a form of expression, emotion, and tactile delight we may clasp to our heart.”

To the Letter: A Celebration of the Lost Art of Letter Writing Details

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From Reader Review To the Letter: A Celebration of the Lost Art of Letter Writing for online ebook

Kristi Thielen says

Easy to enjoy book for anyone - especially baby boomers like myself - who remember a time when people communicated largely by letter and receiving one was a delight.

Garfield discusses the letters of celebrated persons through history and how some of them now fetch extraordinary prices among collectors. He also explains why some great writers were also great letter writers (John Keats, Barrett and Browning) and also that some great writers weren't great letter writers and why they weren't. (Jane Austin.)

Nearly each century produced at least a handful of "How to Write the Perfect Letter" manuals and each is an encapsulation of the manners and mores of their time. And times have changed: the advice on how to address a letter to a royal or a slave is, thankfully, no longer something we need to internalize.

The evolution of the postal service; the mysteries of postage tamp tilting - "upside down, top right corner," meant, at one time, ""write no more"; the meaning behind crazy WW2 acronyms - MALAYA stood for MY Ardent Lips Await Your Arrival; and the invention of the typewriter and then the computer and email - it's all here. It's all both fun and funny to read about.

Woven like a ribbon through all this is the remarkably lovely WW2 correspondence from British soldier Chris Barker to his sweetheart Bessie Moore. (There are fewer letter from Bessie to Chris because as he progressed through Europe, he destroyed them so they'd never fall into unfriendly hands.) The couple wrote often, later married, lived long and happily and the letters they shared seem as vibrant today as when the passionate young couple wrote them.

Read this book! And then, go out and write a letter.

Paul says

The letter has been a method of communication that has been in existence for thousands of years. In the book Garfield takes us from the utterances of Pliny, the wooden cards found preserved in the waterlogged ground at the town of Vindolanda next to Hadrian's Wall, the methods you need to to write the perfect letter and the art of the love letter.

There is a brief history of the postal service, after all you cannot send letters without it, and a couple of chapters on the growing market for correspondence to and from famous people and one one the advent of email and the subsequent fall in letter sending.

Interspersed throughout the book are a series of letters from a couple called Chris and Bessie. Thee were written during the war whilst Chris was based in North Africa, and Bessie was back in the UK. They are s series of raw. open and intimate love letters that reveal their growing love for each other and their fears of

what might be during the war. It is a lovely way to add a change of pace to the book.

Garfield is a fine writer who manages to tease the most fascinating of details from the most mundane of subjects. He has a fine eye for detail and manages to keep the narrative moving swiftly on. More 3.5 stars, as it is not quite as good as Just My Type: A Book about Fonts, but well worth reading though.

Anna says

Only after finishing ‘To the Letter’ did I realise that I’d already read another book edited by the same author: Our Hidden Lives: The Remarkable Diaries of Post-War Britain, an anthology of diaries written for the Mass Observation Project. That was a charming and fascinating insight into the daily lives of ordinary people in the past, and so is this. Garfield recounts the history of popular letter writing, sprinkling the narrative with plenty of applicable examples as well as an ongoing exchange between a courting couple during the Second World War. I found the whole thing to be a lovely diversion during two more long train journeys. The author laments the decline of letter-writing as a consequence of email and I have sympathy with this. I still write the occasional letter and also have an email correspondence that is consciously structured after letter writing (emails of around 1,500 words every month or so). Garfield is right that browsing through old emails cannot replicate the charm of reading through a box of old letters, though browsing old emails can still be lovely. The extracts from letters by Napoleon, Ted Hughes, the late Queen Mother, and so on are a real highlight, often illustrated so that you can admire the handwriting. My favourite period covered was the somewhat chaotic development of postal systems and invention of stamps and post boxes. Less exciting were sections on the sale of famous people’s letters and archives.

I am too tired at the moment to have any further thoughts or feelings about this book, the latter 160 pages of which I read after five hours sleep. It was enjoyable and informative, without providing me with fundamentally new insights into the world. The kind of book that would make an excellent present for someone that you don’t want to scare by giving them Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future.

Dorothy Weigand says

Review Pending

Andy says

I quite enjoyed On the Map and was looking for Just my Type but they had this instead. It looked interesting and appealed, as I used to be an avid letter writer (I used to have shoe-boxes of letters from my first serious girlfriend - we had continuous ongoing conversations in print for years before email took over).

Despite all that I didn't enjoy the book that much. Partly perhaps because I had a deadline to get it back to the library (though I read fast I never like having to) but mostly because of the scatter-shot approach he takes. I didn't mind that in On the Map but here it comes across as vague and ill structured. He doesn't have much of a point other than we should write more letters. I agree but it's not a book.

There are plenty of interesting anecdotes, letters (obviously) and insights in the lives of the famous and the

more mundane. Plus, there are a few authors out there I need to look up and it made me want to find a good book on the history of the postal service. I also made me want to pick up my fountain pen, refill the ink and write a letter. Maybe I shall. If I do, the purpose of the book will be fulfilled.

I think an anthology of letters would probably be a better bet than this book. I'm still keen on Just my Type though. For fans.

Lisa Cotton says

Thought this was lovely - a warm and nostalgic look at the history of the letter and what it has meant over the years. Primarily this book is really about love - the love of words and the bit of paper that holds them, of course, but more so about the love that is carried in those words and bits of paper.

Some chapters are a little on the dry side but overall it's fascinating and nicely illuminated by an excellent selection of letters - so many vivid, juicy letters - it's almost voyeuristic reading them at times. And the running thread of Chris & Bessie's fiery wartime correspondence is delicious.

(In the spirit of celebrating the physical paper form of things, I read this entirely in various libraries)

Madeline Roberts says

This book, about the lost art of letter writing, is more than just a non-fiction book describing letters. To the Letter is about romance, about history, and it's like an anthology of memoirs or biographies; it's about human lives and relationships. It's about the interconnectedness that we all share.

Garfield writes about the history of letter writing, the history of letter sending (the postal service, etc.) and about the fascinating people who wrote and left a legacy of letters.

As I read, each chapter brought out more and more of my curiosity about the lives and relationships described and defined in this tome. I now want to search out and read the letters of Seneca, and those of Madam DeSevigne. I want to read the letters of Ted Hughes & Sylvia Plath, and the other letters and letter-writers that Garfield so aptly wrote about in this book.

Garfield has a smooth and friendly style of writing which flows fast.

I recommend this book highly to anyone who is interested in reading about the lives of others.

Sarah Coller says

Overall, I enjoyed this fun and very thorough look into the history of letter writing. It's definitely a book that got better as it went along. Surprisingly, some of the historical bits got a little dry. The more ancient examples bored me but as the letter writing history became more modern, I became more intrigued.

The history of letter writing manuals was interesting, though I tend to agree with Montaigne that copying a prescribed style seems inauthentic. I also found it so interesting that people used to write on different parts of the paper, depending on their social status---or use crosshatches around their notes to make sure they weren't added to nefariously. Brilliant.

I thinks it's neat that finding letters can confirm history; such as the one confirming the 1914 Christmas truce football game. I'd read somewhere in the last few years that it was thought to have been legend---yet here we have a letter discussing it.

Naturally, in a book this long, I took offense at several parts. I disagree that the New Testament letters were merely "open letters" to a vague public. Each NT letter was written by someone who knew his recipients personally and felt a moral responsibility to them, as well as a deep friendship. These were letters from ones in relationships---much more than "unperformed speeches". Just because these are now used in sermons doesn't meant that was the original intent.

I also didn't appreciate his (seemingly ignorant) remarks against Jane Austen---for her sake, of course. She spent most of her time at home and interacted with the same people from week to week. What does he expect from her but "dull" notes about daily life? Also there is nothing wrong with crossed letters. I've written and received them on more than one occasion and they're not as difficult to read as one might assume. In fact, the middle and lower middle classes who were likely the main groups writing these probably thought them as fun and challenging to read as I do.

I thought it must have been quite fun deciphering mail at the Dead Letter Office... I wonder when and if this has stopped being a thing?

The correspondence between Chris and Bessie sprinkled throughout was a great addition. I was hoping for a happy ending.

All in all, I'm glad I read this quite exhaustive tome. I love writing and receiving handwritten letters and keep correspondence with quite a few fellow letter-writers. In fact, I even run a letter writing group called The Victorian Letter Writers Guild---but you'll have to look me up by 21st century means to find out more!

Algernon says

The premise of this delightful book is rather contradictory. The author and many of the interview subjects within the book insist that the art of a well-written letter and the practice of sending letters by post is dead. Yet it lives despite changes in technology and habits of writing and communication generally (which are interrelated), and the privatization of postal services worldwide. (As I write, Royal Mail has been converted to a for-profit corporation, and the USPS is under attack in America.) And yet the book demonstrates (1) people have been declaring the letter dead for centuries and (2) the writing of letters survives in practice, there is an avid audience for reading them, their value as autobiographical material stands undenied, and several decades after the birth of email our relationship with letters has changed but not died.

Citing statistics compiled by the UK's Royal Mail, author Garfield notes that the number of non-parcel, personally addressed mail pieces (which it counts as letters) peaked in 2004-5 at over 20 billion. It has declined from then to some 13 or 14 billion in 2013. Certainly a decline, but hardly nothing.

This chit aside, it's a lovely book and a tribute to the personal letter as an art practiced by historical figures and ordinary persons alike, a conversational history of postal services, with photographs of some of literary figures known for their letters, envelopes and stamps (without going too deeply into philately - this is mainly about the practice of writing and reading letters), and how writing habits have changed through the centuries, all rendered mainly through anecdote and an amiable, conversational voice - not unlike a very long letter itself. Threaded throughout the book is an astonishing correspondence between a World War II soldier and his sweetheart, who were married soon after the war.

I start off with an interest in the subject, as I still prefer letters myself and write a great many, but I think even if I did not arrive with such interest this book would have been just as enjoyable.

Susan says

In this book the author looks at a now vanishing art - that of letter writing. As a child I remember having many pen-pals - some I am still in contact with now, although admittedly we mostly email. Email certainly has its uses and is an immediate way to contact someone, but perhaps they do not have the depth of a letter and the author explores this unique form of communication. He argues that letters in the modern sense are both personal and informative and begin properly with the Romans, "the first true letter writers.". We hear from Cicero, "personal and scheming" and of what Julius Caesar was like as a dinner guest and Seneca, "instructional and disarming", who possibly wrote the first self help manuals.

This entire book is full of wonderful nuggets and just about every famous literary and historical era is covered. From prolific letter writers, such as Erasmus and Madame de Sevigne, to the family letters of the Paston family, whose members lived through the reigns of Henry VI, Edward IV and Richard III. The author looks in depth at love letters, greeting cards, the postal service and how to write the perfect letter. There are endless facts to be learnt - for example that 'x's' on a letter first developed from drawing a cross in medieval times and kissing it as a sign of faith, which developed into shorthand for kisses or where the first fictional letter appears (the Illiad). He examines epistolary novels of the eighteenth century, those who wrote letters with an eye on posterity and being published and those, like Jane Austen, whose letters were domestic in viewpoint (domestic, but certainly not dull - Austen could never be dull in my opinion).

From Virginia Woolf, Ted Hughes, Keats, Robert Browing and Elizabeth Barrett, Anais Nin and Henry Miller, Simon Garfield has unveiled a treasure trove of letters from great literary figures and wonderful love stories. However, I think the most touching of all is that of a couple who were not famous. Interspersed with all the great names in this book are letters from Chris Barker, a Post Office worker who was stationed to North Africa in the Second World War. He began to write to a lady he had previously worked with, Bessie Moore. Friendship gradually blossoms to love in a very sweet way and we read the unfolding story of a courtship entirely by post.

Naturally, the author ends his work in the only way possible - with a thank you letter to everyone who helped him. I would like to add my thanks - this is a wonderful book to either dip into or read in a single setting. Letters range from the formal to the desperate, the chatty to the life changing and the entire book is a riveting read. I am sure that anyone with an interest in history or literature would find this enjoyable and, possibly, even be tempted to write a letter yourself.

Alisha says

This has been languishing in my pile of books for weeks now. Picked it up, put it down, read a little, skimmed a little, flipped through the rest of the pages in case something caught my eye. It has its interesting bits but it is TOO long for someone with only a casual and not a scholarly interest in letter-writing.

Melanie Hilliard says

I love this author, he writes about what I'm most interested in! Who hasn't dreamed of working in the dead letter office. And while I probably knew this, I'm a tad bit afraid of the world once the last personal letter has been sent (Garfield claims it will be in our lifetime).

He also puts into words perfectly the difference between a mailed letter and email. With a letter, I know the journey. With email, I can't possibly understand the netherworld of server farms across the great Midwest plains.

A Girl Has No Name says

4 stars!

In this book, *Simon Garfield* takes his readers on a **beautiful journey through the lost world of letter writing**. As a passionate snail mailer myself, I have highly enjoyed this book. It tells us about the development of the postal service, it offers us insights into the vital importance of letters in past times and it let us get a glimpse into very personal letters from a wide array of different personalities – philosophers, authors, kings and artist, but also ordinary people like you and me.

It was intriguing to disappear into a world of funny, emotional and inspirational aspects of letter writing and I really enjoyed most of the book. I however **had a problem with the transition between chapters**. The single aspects addressed sometimes felt unconnected to each other and it stopped me from getting into a balance reading flow. That’s why I’m rating this book with four stars!

Wouter says

When I stumbled upon a book about letters, I knew I had to buy and read it. As an old-school letter writing (and receiving) enthousiast, I must say that I enjoyed reading through this overview. It contains a lot of pointers to great letter writers throughout history and got me to look into for instance Mdme. De Sévigné's amusing writings. I do wish Simon also dedicated at least one chapter to ink and the writing instruments themselves. There's also little about the growing need to write in the World Wars (and the rise and fall of fountain pens that came with it). It's an excellent diving board into the more in-depth material I guess.

Koen Crolla says

``Unnecessarily detailed histories of random things'' is quickly becoming one of my favourite genres, but *To the Letter* isn't one of those. Though Garfield does purport to describe the history of letters and the postal system, he is a Wikipedia historian at best, and covers only the most well-known facts without any attempt at synthesis or even truly niche knowledge.

He starts at Vindolanda, skips to a tiny subset of the letters by famous Romans any secondary school student will have translated (incidentally illustrating a paragraph of Seneca with a picture of a rather poor marble copy of the Pseudo-Seneca; how the hell does that even happen?), and then sweeps a full millennium under the table to get to Abélard, after which he never so much as pretends to talk about non-Anglo mail again. Even the meagre information there is is poorly delivered, using vague or sensationalist wording to conceal uncertainty, because Garfield doesn't see the difference between the shameful ignorance of a hack writer too lazy to do his research properly and the more honourable ignorance of a science—even a softer science like history—at the cutting edge of its investigations.

The book quickly devolves into fragmentary transcripts of every letter you've ever heard of, and by the end, Garfield has given up on pretending the point of *To the Letter* is to present a history of letter-writing, claiming instead that it's to get people to write more letters now.
Even if you accept his questionable premise that letter-writing is a dying art (his evidence: mumble mumble e-mail *waves hands*), why anyone should be convinced by his defence isn't clear: Garfield shows himself to be a professional voyeur, whose only interest in letters is that they give him and other leering vultures the ability to pore over every aspect of a dead persons' private life with impunity.† I have, on occasion, written e-mails in the style of the traditional ``epistolary discourse''; if I have ever been tempted to move to a medium more likely to survive me and my correspondents, I'm certainly not now.

I really wish my bookseller's would clearly mark non-fiction written by journalists, so I could stop picking it up by accident.

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† One particularly blatant example: in one of her last letters before her suicide, Virginia Woolf asked her husband to destroy her papers. Garfield relates this as if it were merely a bit of amusing trivia, pretending that the fact that her husband didn't absolves him from any moral culpability in reprinting her private correspondence. Garfield is a revolting ghoul.