

Return to Sender: Stories in Letters

From: Bryon Cahill [mailto:bryon@lettersinstories.com]
Sent: Tuesday, October 19, 2004 11:17 AM
To: Maya Langley
Subject: Epistolary Novels: Then & Now

Dear Maya,

Long time, no type, eh? How's Seattle? Does it really rain as much as they say? I heard you opened a small bookstore in your neighborhood! Good for you!

I'm writing an article for (believe it or not) *Writing* magazine, and you immediately popped into my head. The piece is on epistolary novels. No—they aren't books on archaic churches or steeples! :) The word *epistolary* is derived from the Old French word *epistle*, meaning "letter." Therefore, epistolary novels are entirely composed of correspondences.

I know, it sounds boring, but only at first. Once I got into it, I submitted myself to the voyeuristic pleasure of hovering over other people's lives (however fictional) by reading their private mail! Is that bad?

Hope all is well,
 Bryon Cahill

From: Maya Langley [mailto:maya77@maykebelievebooks.com]
Sent: Friday, October 22, 2004 4:34 PM
To: Bryon Cahill
Subject: Re: Epistolary Novels: Then & Now

Bryon,

Has it really been so long that you've resorted to signing your e-mails with your full name? Please, spare me the formalities. That said, how are you?? I think it's wonderful that you're writing for *Writing* (whoa, that sounds weird) and I'm sure you'll do a fine job!

Thanks for the epistolary definition, but I'm actually quite familiar with the genre. In 1740, Samuel Richardson wrote *Pamela*, the first epistolary novel of note. He attempted to display the virtues of womankind through Pamela's journal entries and letters she wrote to her parents. When I read them, I felt as if I were spying on her very heart! It may sound silly, but I don't care. It was terribly delicious.

Maya

P.S. It's true; Seattle is wetter than whale's blubber.

From: Bryon Cahill [mailto:bryon@lettersinstories.com]
Sent: Thursday, October 28, 2004 12:45 PM
To: Maya Langley
Subject: Re: Epistolary Novels: Then & Now

Maya,

I'm reading *Pamela* right now, actually. I can't imagine that Richardson's portrayal of a woman was entirely accurate at the time. I've heard that Henry Fielding wrote a mock epistolary novel called *Shamela* less than one year later. I'll have to check that out. You know me; I am completely bewildered by any woman in any century.

Clueless in Connecticut,
 Bryon

P.S. Wetter than whale blubber, eh?

From: Maya Langley [mailto:maya77@maykebelievebooks.com]
Sent: Friday, October 29, 2004 5:19 PM
To: Bryon Cahill
Subject: Re: Epistolary Novels: Then & Now

OK, maybe the whale blubber analogy was a bit dorky, but I couldn't think of anything else.

Do you like Jane Austen? Her first book, *Love and Freindship* (Austen's spelling) was written in 1790 when she was only 14 years old! In the book, a woman named Laura writes to her friend's teenage daughter, Marianne,

in the hope that sharing her life's misfortunes will help the young girl to avoid making similar mistakes.

Focusing on the themes she would one day be famous for—marriage, social pressures, family, and the generation gap—little Janey manipulates her characters in such a way that, at times, they are forced to the brink of insanity.

I love this stuff! We always have conversations I can really sink my teeth into!

You aren't completely clueless. :)
 Maya

From: Bryon Cahill [mailto:bryon@lettersinstories.com]
Sent: Sunday, October 31, 2004 13:13 PM
To: Maya Langley
Subject: Sink Your Teeth Into This!

"3 October.—As I must do something or go mad, I write this diary ... She was very, very pale, almost ghostly, and so thin that her lips were drawn away, showing her teeth in somewhat of prominence ... It made my blood run cold in my veins to think of what had occurred with poor Lucy when the Count had sucked her blood."

YEAH! I love it! It's so fiendishly macabre! That's Jonathan Harker from Bram Stoker's classic, *Dracula*. I'd be surprised if you haven't read it. Since its first publication in 1897, this gothic novel has been translated into every major language in the world. It is one of the greatest-selling books of all time.

I can't help but suspect that Stoker took great pleasure in driving both his characters and his audience batty! (Now we're even—Steven for the whale blubber.)

Seriously though, reading the impossible horrors in *Dracula* got me thinking: Maybe the story seems more real because it is retold through the characters' personal writings. If Stoker had written his novel through an omniscient narrator, would it have had the same effect on a century of readers?

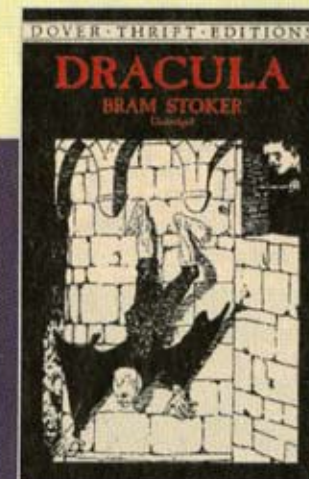
Happy Halloween, Maya!

P.S. I had to wax intellectual at least a little—I don't want to give you the impression you're writing my article for me!

Maya's so smart and wonderful. Why'd I ever let her go? Why'd she ever let me let her? Maybe she'll say ...

Phonetic Alphabet
A Alpha
B Bravo
C Charlie
D Delta
E Echo
F Foxtrot
G Golf
H Hotel
I India
J Juliet
K Kilo
L Lima
M Mike
N November
O Oscar
P Papa
Q Quebec
R Romeo
S Sierra
T Tango
U Uniform
V Victor
W Whiskey
X X-ray
Y Yankee
Z Zulu

Bryon Cahill is an associate editor for *Writing*. He is a real guy. As for Maya—Bryon's not saying ... or is he?



From: Maya Langley [mailto:maya77@maykebelievebooks.com]
Sent: Tuesday, November 2, 2004 10:45 AM
To: Bryon Cahill
Subject: Re: Sink Your Teeth Into This!

Because Dracula is a classic, I will hold my tongue ... but eww! Why does the male species always find blood and guts so fascinating? Huh, I guess I didn't hold my tongue after all! ;)

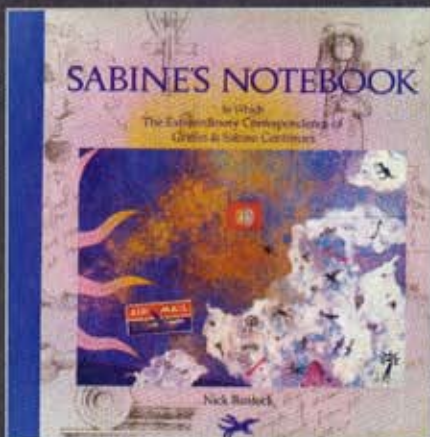
Yesterday, in an effort to bring our conversation out of the dark ages, I picked up the entire *Griffin and Sabine* series, by Nick Bantock. These books are amazing, Bry! You absolutely HAVE to read them! All six of them left me weak in the knees and longing for a postscript.

Bantock fuses magnificent letter writing, postcards, art, and a gorgeous story about an artist (Griffin) and a woman (Sabine) who claims to receive visions of his paintings. The book is designed so that you can pull out the actual letters from envelopes and read postcards on the page. How cool is that?

The wonder of Griffin's cosmic romance comes to a head as he begins to question whether it is possible that he has created his overseas love. At the end of the first book, *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence*, he writes off Sabine as a figment of his imagination:

"If you are reading this, then you exist. (Is that true? I mean, it should be bloody obvious to me, but it isn't.) If I invented you then you don't exist. Right? But how then can you still write to me?"

It is heart wrenching to think that Griffin's long-distance love affair is a creation of his own design. Don't you agree?



I'm in there ... drifting in the clouds with Griffin ... flying away in thoughts of Maya.

Gosh, Sabine sort of looks like Maya – except Maya's not purple. But I do remember her stars.

Griffin - A photograph would not be possible. I offer myself in paint instead. It's self-flattering, but that's our prerogative as artists - to record ourselves the way we wish. Why, my kindred spirit, are you prepared to settle for a postcard of my face? If you wish to see me, why not come here? What is there to stop you - you're clearly unhappy where you are. Come.

Sabine
Griffin Moss
41 Yeats Avenue
London NW3
England

From: Bryon Cahill [mailto:bryon@lettersinstories.com]
Sent: Tuesday, November 2, 2004 7:57 PM
To: Maya Langley
Subject: G&S! ... P.S.

Omigosh! The *Griffin and Sabine* books are not only the reason I am writing the article ... they also inspired me to invent a character to write my own epistolary fiction! This sort of thing happens all the time.

In *P.S. Longer Letter Later*, Paula Danziger (*The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*) and Ann M. Martin (*The Baby-Sitter's Club*) decided to create fictional entities for themselves and wrote each other letters as those characters. They became two teenage girls who are coping with the struggles of their individual lives and trying to remain friends, even when one of them moves far away.

Whenever Tara Starr begins to feel down about her life, her good friend Elizabeth is just a letter away from making her smile:

"I'm so sorry about your life being a shambles. It better turn around soon. Your life is the only good life I have."

P.S. Longer Letter Later was so much fun to write that when the computer age came into its own, the authors continued the story in e-mail form. It's called *Snail Mail No More*.

See? It's not all about "blood and guts" with me.



From: Maya Langley [mailto:maya77@maykebelievebooks.com]
Sent: Wednesday, November 3, 2004 10:08 AM
To: Bryon Cahill
Subject: Heart on My Sleeve

I'm surprised that you admitted you liked those books. Are you trying to impress me? Well, if you really like them, check out *Heart on My Sleeve*, by Ellen Wittlinger. It's a brand-new epistolary novel entirely composed of e-mails, IMs, and letters. In it, the main character, Chloe, writes e-mails and letters to her family and friends about her struggle between looking forward to college and leaving her old life behind ... oh, and a boy.

Huh. I just thought of something ... I've missed this ... our literary talks and whatnot. I've missed you.

From: Bryon Cahill [mailto:bryon@lettersinstories.com]
Sent: Wednesday, November 3, 2004 11:22 AM
To: Maya Langley
Subject: Without Letters, There Would Be No Words

I've missed this ... you ... too. I worry about you. You're taking care of yourself, right? You're not meeting any strange men on the Internet or anything like that? Sorry ... that's not as totally random as it sounds. I just finished reading about an Internet romance connection gone bad in a Digital Epistolary Novel (DEN) at www.greatamericanovel.com.

It's a romantic mystery called *Intimacies* that you can download right to your computer. E-mails and IMs pop up right on your computer screen. This thing is hot. (DEN's creator is even selling the software to the program to help people write their own digital epistolary novels.)

We've come along way, haven't we? The genre I mean ... not us. Oh, who am I kidding? I meant us. I wish you had never left. But you did and I didn't and here we are. Lost in our pseudo e-reality. Ho hum ...

Hold it ... is today the 3rd already?!? ACK! My deadline for this article was Monday! I still have to read *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker; *The Screwtape Letters*, by C. S. Lewis; and *Ella Minnow Pea*, by Mark Dunn. How did I not even notice it was November? Look, I'm going to be in some serious hot water here, kiddo. You may not hear from me for a while.

You make time irrelevant,
Bry



Our hearts are designed to be challenged, but is hers really true? Is mine?

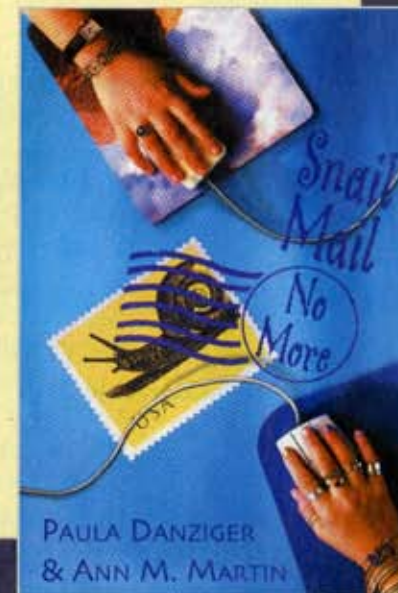
From: Maya Langley [mailto:maya77@maykebelievebooks.com]
Sent: Wednesday, November 3, 2004 2:21 PM
To: Bryon Cahill
Subject: Sabine in Seattle

Bry,

You don't know anything. Your article is already written. You're so engrossed in it that you're completely beyond it. It hurts that I'm merely your invention, and I won't do it anymore.

I'm coming to Connecticut, dear. I'll be seeing you soon.

Love,
Maya



I can imagine her hand guiding her mouse ... Her passion for literature driving her fingertips over the keyboard. I am not obsessed ... I am not obsessed ...