



LADIES OF LETTERS

PRIVATE, PASSIONATE AND SEXUALLY EXPLICIT – FOR WOMEN WHO LOVE WOMEN THE LETTER HAS BEEN A SECRET SPACE TO EXPLORE HIDDEN DESIRES WORDS **MARIA HANNAH BASS** ILLUSTRATION **RODRIGO MOREIRA**

Valentine's Day. That one special date on the calendar when secret admirers summon up the courage to admit their desire in a handwritten note. And who does love letters best of all? Not Romeos or Casanovas but lesbians.

Women have always been letter writers, our words confined to private missives before we were permitted to write openly of our love in published novels. Sappho herself even wrote, "The female creature is a letter". For centuries women, unable to speak their minds in public, found their voice in secretive scrolls or enclosed within envelopes.

If women in the past relied on correspondence for self-expression, then for women who loved women the letter was doubly important: a secret space to explore hidden desires.

There is a deep connection, not only between women and letter writing, but between lesbians and the love letter. Margaretta Jolly, author of *In Love and Struggle: Let-*

ters in Contemporary Feminism, says: "Sexual minorities, which historically have been made invisible, have a great attachment to letters as a way to forge a sense of community."

Clandestine correspondence reveals a lesbian community hidden from our history books. In historic letters to other women, we find a secret side to famous females. Most of the letters written by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to her friend and rumoured lover Lorena Hickok were burned for fear of scandal. One surviving note says: "I wish I could lie down beside you tonight & take you in my arms..."

To which "Hick", as Eleanor called her, replied: "Most clearly I remember your eyes, with a kind of teasing smile in them, and the feeling of that soft spot just north-east of the corner of your mouth against my lips..." The White House has not seen such goo-goo eyes since, to our knowledge.

The lesbian love-letter took off with the

birth of Britain's penny post in 1840 and the States' five cent post in 1847. Even the stiffest of Victorian upper lips would quiver at the resulting flood of florid letters sent between women.

The 19th century poet Emily Dickinson sent over 300 letters to a Susan Gilbert, with whom many have speculated that Emily was deeply in love. In a plot twist straight from a saucy soap, Susan ended up marrying Emily's brother – but that didn't stop the poet from pursuing her with lustful letters:

"I have but one thought, Susie, this afternoon of June, and that of you, and I have one prayer, only; dear Susie, that is for you... If you were here – and Oh that you were, my Susie, we need not talk at all, our eyes would whisper for us, and your hand fast in mine, we would not ask for language."

The turn of the century only turned up the heat in the sapphic letter. The early 20th century intellectual set, the Bloomsbury

Group, was notorious for wife-swapping and bisexual antics, but it's the letters between the Bloomsbury women that make for the steamiest reading.

Top Bloomsbury babe Virginia Woolf had a long and notorious affair with fellow writer Vita Sackville-West. Vita even inspired the gender-bending hero/heroine of Woolf's novel Orlando – after it was published, Virginia wrote jokingly to Vita: "The percentage of Lesbians in the States is rising, all because of you."

Despite the "free love" attitude of the Bloomsbury Group, the two women, who remained married to men throughout their affair, strove to keep their love secret. Its memory was preserved largely in letters that range from the intellectual to the downright dirty – Vita once diagnosed the cause of Virginia's period of illness as "SUPPRESSED RANDINESS". (Her caps.)

Separated from her lover in 1926, Vita wrote: "I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia... You have broken down my defences. And I don't really resent it."

"Most clearly I remember the feeling of that soft spot just north-east of the corner of your mouth against my lips..."

While in public theirs remained the love that dare not speak its name, other early 20th century women were equally passionate in their epistles. Almeda Sperry's 1912 letter to fellow feminist Emma Goldman is virtually a verbal orgasm: "I am a savage, Emma, a wild, wild, savage. And they can't tame me with their puling conventions, their stinking houses nor their damned religion. And it is the untamed part of me that loves you because you don't want to put leading strings on it... God! God! God! God!"

And in 1900 the academic Mary Woolley wrote to her lover Jeanette Marks: "It takes me one-half second to tear open your envelope and then, darling, I literally devour the contents..."

Letters, like lovers, are meant to be undressed, caressed and "devoured". Author Margaretta Jolly believes that the physicality of the letter gives it potency. She says: "Love letters stand in for the body of the sender. That's why they have such power. That's why we want to wrap them in ribbons and cover them in perfume and treasure them."



Flicking through letters from decades ago reveals lesbians performing what Margaretta calls "paper stripteases". The sexual tangles of the Bloomsbury Group – more love octagons than triangles – produced stacks. The young socialite writer Violet Trefusis trod on Virginia's toes with her devotion to Vita Sackville-West – and her erotic letters to Vita would make even a modern-day lover blush:

"I want you every second and every hour of the day, yet I am being slowly and inexorably tied to somebody else... Sometimes I am flooded by an agony of physical longing for you... a craving for your nearness and your touch... I try so hard to imagine your lips on mine... Nothing and no one in the world could kill the love I have for you. I have surrendered my whole individuality, the very essence of my being to you. I have given you my body time after time to treat as you pleased, to tear in pieces if such had been your will. All the hoardings of my imagination I have laid bare to you. There isn't a recess in my brain into which you haven't penetrated. I have clung to you and caressed you and slept with you and I would like to tell the whole world I clamour for you."

You've got to admit, it beats a spot of sexting. As Margaretta says, "Valentine's Day is a great occasion for playing with the physical dimension of the letter and that has survived into the post-print age. Now that we mostly communicate using email and text, there's even more fetishisation of the physical letter."

So this Valentine's Day, don't just send an e-card or settle for a Facebook poke. Take a tip from sapphic lovers of old: unburden your heart of hidden desires with a sexy love letter. If it's good enough for Virginia Woolf, we're pretty sure it'll charm your crush. Just tell her it's all part of a little-known lesbian tradition... **D**

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- **Dear Sappho:** A Legacy of Lesbian Love Letters by Kay Turner
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