

## Satisfy Your Epistolary Longings At Snow Library

by **Kaimi Rose Lum**

Remember the days when you wrote letters? Real, handwritten letters, on stationery personalized with your initials, maybe, or doodled on in the margins, and licked shut in an envelope polished off with a stamp picked to please the addressee? My dad used to take me to the Mayflower Shop on Main Street in Chatham every summer just to stock up on cards and stationery – a necessity, not a novelty, back in the days before the Internet. When I was old enough to post my own letters I was even given a stick of red Hallmark sealing wax to play around with. I don't remember using it very much, but now that I'm older and more sentimental I find myself wishing there were room in our lives, somehow, for the extravagant civility of things like sealing wax.

And for letter-writing. For the time to sit and scrawl away, your thoughts pacing themselves nicely to the rhythm of your pen, your eyes spared the glare of the computer screen. In times when this longing becomes acute, but the stationery is elusive, I resort to reading books like "Griffin and Sabine," Nick Bantock's epistolary fantasy about a stamp designer on an island in the South Pacific who begins a mysterious correspondence with an artist in London. The books – there are three in the series – are constructed with an envelope on each page, from which you can pull and unfold the postcard or letter, experiencing both the tactile pleasure of reading a piece of mail and the voyeuristic kick that comes from its being someone else's. The pleasure is heightened by the adornments on the letters, the drawings, collages and paintings composing a dreamy visual iconography that Bantock has invented for the title characters.

With the holidays approaching, some of the best entertainment to enjoy together as a family is reading J.R.R. Tolkien's "Letters from Father Christmas." Every December for about 23 years, beginning in 1920, St. Nicholas composed a letter to the Tolkien children, telling them about mishaps and household dramas at the North Pole, many of which involve the mischievous, accident-prone North Polar Bear, who sometimes adds messages to the children in a thick script he attributes to his fat paw. The letters include wonderful pictures that Tolkien, er, Santa, has painted to illustrate, say, the North Polar Bear's tumble down the stairs while carrying a load of Christmas parcels, or the tremendous firework unleashed on the Arctic when someone tampers with the tap controlling the Aurora Borealis.

Adventures in letters continue in novels like "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society," Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows' story

of an English writer who, looking for inspiration for her next book, is drawn into the eclectic community of the formerly German-occupied island of Guernsey in the years just following WWII. "To the Bright Edge of the World," by Eowyn Ivey, charts – through letters, journal entries and newspaper clippings – an American

Army officer's epic expedition on a survey of the Alaskan territory in the late 1800s, side by side with his young wife's journey of self-discovery back home, as she develops into a talented naturalist. Other contemporary titles featuring plots

framed by personal correspondence include "Possession" by A.S. Byatt, "Ella Minnow Pea" by Mark Dunn and "Where'd You Go, Bernadette?" by Maria Semple.

Eavesdrop on real-life conversations between friends, sometimes lovers, in classics like "84, Charing Cross Road," a collection of letters between Helen Hanff, a sassy New Yorker and author, and Frank Doel, a very proper salesman at the London bookshop Marks & Co. Their correspondence began in October 1949, when Hanff wrote the shop to order some out-of-print books, and continued for two decades, during which Hanff and Doel developed a strong affection for one another.

For collections of personal letters by notable figures, pick your pleasure from a long list of volumes available. History lovers will enjoy "Winston and Clementine: The Personal Letters of the Churchills," or "My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams." Virginia Woolf was a tremendous diarist and letter-writer (See "The Letters of Virginia Woolf") as was the great poet Elizabeth Bishop ("One Art"), and a second volume of Sylvia Plath's letters – containing some wonderful descriptive passages of Eastham and Orleans, where Plath and Ted Hughes summered – came out last year. Also recommended: any journals or letters by The New Yorker's longtime Paris correspondent Janet Flanner (e.g. "Paris Was Yesterday," "Darlinghissima: Letters to a Friend") and humorist James Thurber.

Last but not least, the great Colette pays tribute to the lost ritual of letter-writing in her autobiographical short story "Green Sealing Wax," which brings an unromantic piece of furniture – a desk – to sensual life in a few unforgettable pages ("The Collected Stories of Colette.") See if it won't get you dreaming, once more, about stationery.

*All of the titles mentioned are available at Snow Library or in CLAMS; visit [clamsnet.org](http://clamsnet.org) to search the online catalog. Kaimi is the assistant director at Snow Library in Orleans.*

