



LETTERS TO THE END OF LOVE

by Yvette Walker

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THE STORY

This complex non-linear narrative is told by a number of different narrators in three different interwoven sets of correspondence. It begins in 1969 in Ireland, with a Russian artist named Dmitri Palovich (D.P. Vasilev) writing to his wife Caithleen in ‘The Cork Letters’. He recalls their meeting in 1933 and their subsequent life in London before moving back to Caithleen’s home in Ireland. He is painting a totally white canvas and instead of playing his customary classical music while he works, has purchased the Beatles’ White album which is out of character for him. Caithleen answers his letters which reveal that they are both waiting for his possible death from cancer.

Then the narrative shifts to ‘The Perth Letters’ written in 2011, by Grace, a Perth bookseller writing to Louise, her estranged lover who works as a manager for an international rock musician named Stow. This section is set in both Perth and Europe. Grace and Lou met on her nephew Nate’s tenth birthday when Lou arrived with Nate’s friend Tom, Lou’s nephew. Grace’s brother Pete has brought up his son Nate (a jazz performer who is gay), and he and Grace have a special bond. But over her relationship with Lou hovers Grace’s grief over the death of her other brother Patrick six years earlier in Iraq.

Then in the third alternating section ‘The Bournemouth Letters’ written in 1948 we meet an English doctor named John Carpenter who is writing to his dead lover, a German artist named David whom he had met in 1929. His letters describe musical parties with Kurt Ehrlich singing in their Viennese apartment before the war, his family life with sister Vivienne, brother Alistair, father, and a mother who was a classical soloist who loved Beethoven more than her children.

The story shifts constantly between these characters until it concludes with John writing a sad and yet uplifting epitaph to ‘The Bournemouth Letters’: ‘No one is simply given a love like this, it is not a common gift, it is grace. So I remember your love, through the eye of these words, through this disintegrating heart of mine. John.’ (p 234) But there are also two other ‘endings’, to ‘The Cork Letters’: ‘With you in my mind, with you at the centre of my body, with you at the centre of my life, it is your name I have carved into the canvas – you are the vertebrae of the white painting. Dmitri’ (pp 204-5) and to ‘The Perth Letters’: ‘Come to Basel, Grace. Get on a plane. Meet me in front of Patrick’s Ad Marginem. I want to ask you to marry me. Lou.’ (p 213) Both of these final lines also celebrate the sustaining influence of love.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yvette Walker was born in 1970 in Melbourne. *Letters to the End of Love*, her first novel, evolved out of a short story called ‘Dear Reader’, which won the 2003 HQ Magazine National Short Story Competition. In 2009 Yvette won the Eleanor Dark Flagship Fellowship for Fiction, and spent time at Varuna, the Writer’s Centre. *Letters to the End of Love* was completed as part of a Doctorate of Creative Arts at Curtin University. Yvette lives in Perth with her wife, Melanie Rodriga and works as a bookseller.

DISCUSSION NOTES

1. ‘Death still frightens me the way He did when he first arrived, knocking at our back door like a salesman, His signature bold and flourished on your test results.’ (p 16) This is Dmitri speaking but it might equally be any character in this novel. This quote is about the fear of the aloneness of death as much as it is about sharing love. Discuss.

2. ‘Before you, I thought such a thing was a stereotype, an act, merely a way of seeking attention and publicity. Now I know it is a completely unique way of being, your gentle, studious nature not weakness but flexibility, the strongest defence against anything – the ability to see something in a thousand different ways. I don’t have that ability. I never did.’ (p 47) Discuss Grace’s personality type; is Lou correct in what she writes here?

3. Each pair of lovers seem to have been opposites:
 - ‘Your vision of the world was multi-dimensional, multi-layered; mine was linear, logical, ordered and English. I struggle with the abstract.’ (p 48)
 - ‘There was no poetry in your dreams, only practicalities. And I thought, that was probably why we worked, and probably why I still loved you. Grace.’ (p 176)
 - Does the old saying ‘opposites attract’ have any currency for you? Is it possible to love someone who is very like you in temperament or do we need the frisson of contrast to enliven any romance?

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4. This novel is embedded with references to art (eg Klee, Malevich, Madden), literature (Forster, Acmeist poetry), music (Beethoven, Shostakovich, The Beatles, Dave Rawlings and Gillian Welch) and radio/television (The Goon Show). Caithleen is a writer, Dmitri an artist, and Viktor was a writer; David was an artist and John's mother a classical performer; Grace owns a bookshop, Lou works for a muso, and used to run with a band, and Nate is a jazz performer. Many poems, writers, artists and musicians are referred to. What role do the arts play in this narrative?

5. One of the strongest linking threads is the mention of two paintings: Dmitri is working on a white painting which is later mentioned (p 89) as being in the WA Art Gallery where it is seen by Grace and Lou. Dmitri talks of staying with Paul Klee and his son Felix at Dessau (p 155) and of their gift of *Ad Marginem* a Klee painting which hangs over Dmitri and Caithleen's bed and which is mentioned by John when he recalls David buying a reproduction of it (p 191). Later we read that: 'Patrick told me he liked to stop in Basel, to look at *Ad Marginem*, because it made him remember where he came from. What Patrick saw in that painting was home. Perth. A city carved out of the desert, blooming on the margins, eccentric and a little overlooked, but uniquely itself.' (p 213) Finally Lou writes to Grace: 'Meet me in front of Patrick's *Ad Marginem*. I want to ask you to marry me. Lou.' (p 213) What do these two artworks signify?

6. 'All those years we had together, we had not realised that what the public really loathes in homosexuality is not the thing itself but having to think about it.' (p 146) Homosexual life is very much a topic in this novel; John and David, and Grace and Lou are partners and Grace's nephew Nate is gay; other passing references include the famous tennis player Von Cramm being described as being 'queer' (p 145). Although Grace and Lou are able to live more openly as lovers there is still a stigma attached which makes Grace wary of displaying affection in public. 'This sexuality suits the boundary riders and the misfits and I am neither of those things.' (pp 207-8) Discuss with reference to the above quotes.

7. 'Love is not what we think it will be, we can't imagine what it will do to us going in, we can't imagine what it will reveal to us, late, in the black blue centre of the night when nothing else is awake, nothing else is alive but our desires.' (p 210) Discuss.

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8. Dreams riddle this narrative. For example, Caithleen (p 165) sees a small girl who has her lost baby in one of the many dreamlike sequences in this book. This conversation is also full of references to many other subjects and events such as the sinking of the Lusitania. Discuss this or one of the other sequences and what they might mean psychologically or thematically.

9. Grief can be a very destructive force if we don't find a way to deal with it. Read the following quotes and discuss:

- 'We still have the grief. That is the way it should be. And I will leave you with a sadness years deeper. I have no way to make this better. And the sugar of nostalgia, it will not help you. Death will be a bitter pill.' (p 109)
- 'There's a dark, dark tunnel that runs through my heart, it was carved out when Patrick died and if I get on a plane this tunnel will collapse and wreck me. All of my dreams, they are dreams of trains, buses, cars, ships and trucks.' (p 133)
- 'My brother is gone but gone where, I can't say. That's the most maddening part. To not know where he is, when the world is without him and wants him back, makes nothing final. Grace.' (p 134)
- 'It's like you believe that Patrick is coming back. He was always away, always leaving, why should his death be any different? I'm sorry if this hurts but this is our problem now. Six years on, it's gone beyond grief and turned into melancholy, into something unworkable, into something which has taken over everything.' (p 136)

10. 'None of Mother's children were musical. Not because we didn't care for the music. But by the time we were seven or eight, by the time we had seven or eight years of Mother's relentless regime of practice and performance, we understood what great music demanded, and to us it seemed to be the most serious adult pursuit that existed.' (p 139) How difficult might it be to be the child of a great artist, given the absolute dedication it requires? How might the daughter of Dmitri and Caithleen have coped, for instance?

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11. John writes of his mother's love for Beethoven: 'When we were small he was like the older, smarter, more favoured brother, even more loved than Alistair, and we couldn't compete with him.' (p 50) But Mrs Halligan's memory of how John's mother fed her and her husband soup in the church after the death of their two sons in a WWII air raid, though, reveals a kinder side of her we don't see in his accounts at all. Has John's childhood jealousy of her music coloured his appreciation of her qualities irreparably?

12. 'There are a million things we both need to say. Strange invisible lines sing around us, questions from the past and the present, the unsaid moving between us, decades of conversations we have never had – these bind us together, marry us in a way that is stronger than love.' (p 162) Discuss this description of any long term relationship. How is it that even after years of cohabiting we still haven't said many of the things we wish to say to our lovers?

13. 'He said it was like he had experienced a drowning that had gone on for years, a drowning he had eventually escaped, but now he was on dry land, walking and talking again, he had no words for what had happened.' (p 220) The Flossenbürg camp where Peter de Visser and David were imprisoned was one of many concentration camps where millions died during WWII and which left the survivors with a complicated mixture of relief and guilt, haunting the rest of their lives. How did such survivors cope with later life? Read non-fiction accounts about this subject to inform this discussion.

14. 'I sometimes believe this is why your heart has become so complicated, the impossibility of living the life that you have, the impossibility of freedom.' (p 116) Dmitri, like Peter de Visser, is a survivor although his experiences were earlier, during the post WWII Soviet persecution of so-called detractors like Viktor. How did his guilt over his survival effect his marriage to Caithleen?

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15. Discuss these descriptions of the artistic process:

- ‘I paint white because I see white. That is what is left for me now in this world of cups and tea strainers, old magazines and vases of flowers, bowls of chocolate and wristwatches left on kitchen window sills.’ (p 9)
- ‘You painted (you said) to understand the absence of love, the absence of God, to know the glorious and terrible nothing at the centre of everything.’ (p 223)

16. The quote from Maurice by E.M. Forster (p 80) is about the power of words or letters between those who love each other, which is the theme of this novel too. ‘This line of communication between you and I, this thin grey line between us, seems to me at times the most absurd piece of artifice, and at others the greatest, simplest way to remember you.’ (p 233) But other quotes seem to contradict this, eg ‘There is no honesty in my words. Without you in the room with me everything I say to you is false. I can’t give you anything, just words stuck on a piece of paper, pressed into the page with blunt metal keys.’ (p 211) How useful is writing as a way of conveying feelings? What is this novel ultimately saying about these love letters?