

Correspondence Course

A history of the United States told in letters from women.

WOMEN'S LETTERS

America From the Revolutionary War to the Present.

Edited by Lisa Grunwald and Stephen J. Adler.
824 pp. The Dial Press. \$35.

By TONI BENTLEY

“UNLESS a man is taking out my garbage or making love to me,” I recently overheard a wife and mother remark, “I’m not really interested in his company. Women are simply more interesting.” Evidence for this possibly enlightened point of view is abundant in a new collection of women’s letters titled, well, “Women’s Letters.” It could have been called “Only Connect,” but a man wrote that. Or “Remember the Ladies,” as Abigail Adams so memorably wrote to her husband just before work began on the Declaration of Independence. “That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical,” she continued, “is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute.”

Adams, who was to become the country’s second first lady, set the tone for the outspoken feistiness that separates the typical American woman from her European grandmothers. To her 11-year-old son, traveling with his father, Adams wrote, “I would much rather you should have found your grave in the ocean you have crossed . . . than see you an immoral, profligate or graceless child.” Harsh words, but they worked: John Quincy Adams became the country’s sixth president in 1825.

“Women’s Letters” also sheds interesting light on a theory presented by Simon Baron-Cohen in “The Essential Difference: The Truth About the Male and Female Brain” — namely that men (thanks to testosterone) generally systematize while women (thanks to less testosterone) empathize. It’s good to have our empathy systematized . . . I guess. Judging from these letters, you might also argue that women empathize mostly with one another — advising, encouraging, consoling. Often they inspire empathy simply by being noble examples to their own sex.

Edited by the same husband-and-wife team — the novelist Lisa Grunwald and Stephen J. Adler, editor in chief of Business Week — that produced the wonderful collection “Letters of the Century: America 1900-1999,” this new book, with over 400 letters, is arranged chronologically, covering 230 years of American history. Each of its sections is preceded by a useful, and often amusing, timeline of events, and each letter is introduced with an explanatory note. Savoring so many of the letters that Grunwald and Adler found, one can only imagine the thousands that have been lost. Those, for example, of the beloved mother of Harry Houdini — a man obsessed with defying death — which rest, they tell us, “in a black bag under the magician’s head,” buried in his coffin.

There are, predictably, inspiring examples of hope, patriotism, charm, naïveté and humor — and such bucketfuls of sorrow that the book should be sold with a box of tissues. What’s less predictable is the inescapable evidence of women’s resilience under duress, of a courage most touching for rarely being acknowledged. But there’s also evidence of the

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fine line that separates genuine humility and the socially conditioned subservience that can lead to self-conscious martyrdom.

Sometimes, though, it’s simply a matter of setting the right priorities. In 1792, a woman identified only as A. V. published a note in a Philadelphia magazine addressed to her niece, who was mourning the loss of her beauty after suffering the ravages of smallpox. A far greater concern, A. V. warned, is posed by the ravages of vanity: “You have lost what the greater number of the human race never have possessed. . . . Consider yourself, Maria, as a being born to know, to reason and to act: rise at once from your dream of melancholy to wisdom, and to piety: you will find that there are other charms than those of beauty, and other joys than the praise of fools.”

Throughout this volume, women report perceptively on the larger events of history — the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the War of 1812, World Wars I and II. But the less visible wars implicit in these communications are the inner struggle to gain a sense of self-worth and then, finally, in the 20th century, the struggle to achieve recognition in a man’s world.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the organizers of the first women’s rights convention in 1848, called the sewing needle “that one-eyed demon of destruction, that evil genius of our sex which slays its thousands annually.” In other words, “Get out of the house, girls!” Fifty years later, Susan B. Anthony, age 82, wrote to Stanton, age 86, after they had worked together for decades advocating women’s suffrage. “Strong, courageous, capable young women will take our place and complete our work. . . . And we, dear old friend, shall move on to the next sphere of existence — higher and larger, we cannot fail to believe, and one where women will not be placed in an inferior position but will be welcomed on a plane of perfect intellectual and spiritual equality.” A hundred years later, progress, not perfection, prevails.

The letters begin in 1775 with a brief note, enclosing £125, from Rachel Revere to Paul (both note and husband were confiscated by the British) and ends with a devastating condemnation of the war in Iraq sent via e-mail last year from the Wall Street Journal correspondent Farnaz Fassihi.

Over the years, there have, of course, been plenty of domestic wars, and the battle with the wayward husband has had numerous casualties. Mary Dodd of Kentucky offered a twist on the early 19th-century frontier maxim “Every man for himself — and every woman for him too” by warning widows to stay clear of her shyster husband. Though “remarkably ugly and good-natured,” went the notice she posted in the local newspaper, “the said Dougherty has a number of wives living, perhaps eight or ten . . . and will no doubt, if he can get them, have eight or ten more.”

Throughout the book, female correspondents remark not just on personal but social injustice. In 1863, a Union Army nurse, Cornelia Hancock, came face to face with history after freed slaves began to arrive in the nation’s capital, still dragging their shackles. “One of them had his master’s name branded on his forehead,” she wrote, “and with him he brought all the instruments of torture that he wore at different times during 39 years of hard slavery. . . . He wore an iron collar with three prongs standing up so he could not lay down his head; then a contrivance to render one leg en-



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tirely stiff and a chain clanking behind him with a bar weighing 50 lbs.” The shame of a nation was not so easily measured.

Fighting for the freedom of these slaves was a 17-year-old girl, Emily (her last name is unknown), who disguised herself as a man and enlisted in the Union Army. The telegram she dictated to her father as she was dying, after the Battle of Lookout Mountain, melds youthful grandiosity with timeless dignity: “My native soil drinks my blood. I expected to deliver my country but the fates would not have it so.”

There are, naturally, many letters concerning women’s starring roles in the war of love, some serious, some less so. “Petting is my biggest problem,” begins one letter to an advice column in Photoplay magazine in 1926. “All the boys want to pet. I’ve been out with nearly 50 different ones and every one does it. I thought sometimes it was my fault but when I tried hardest to keep from it they were all the worse. . . . What’s to be done?” What’s to be done was, apparently, done. Less conflicted, the poet Elinor Wylie, writing to her second husband in 1927, while married to her third, captures the illogical rationale of the heart: “I loved you first, I loved you more, I loved him afterwards, but now that I love you both, I love you best.”

The messages from mothers to their children — both dead and alive — are often devastating. “Life is not easy,” the 40-year-old poet Anne Sexton instructed her 16-year-old daughter, Linda, in 1969. Writing for the future, she intends the letter to be read by “the 40-year-old Linda.” Life, she explains, “is not easy. It is awfully lonely. I know that. Now you too know it. . . . But I’ve had a good life — I wrote unhappy — but I lived to the hilt. You too, Linda — Live to the HILT! To the top. I love you, 40-year-old Linda.” Sexton killed herself five years later.

It is, finally, another poet who haunts this moving book with its shortest letter, written on her deathbed. As if her life in its entirety had been merely an emanation from eternity — and perhaps it was — Emily Dickinson wrote two words, “Called back.” Thus she calls all forth. The ladies are remembered. □

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