

The Letters

LETTER 01

SORROW MUST BE SORROW

George Eliot to Lady Lytton

8 July 1870

To most people, Mary Ann Evans is better known as George Eliot, a pen name which adorns the covers of her seven novels – including, most notably, Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life, which is considered to be her masterpiece. It was in July of 1870, a year before that novel's publication, that Eliot wrote this letter. Her friend, Lady Lytton, was dealing with the recent loss of her uncle, George Villiers, 4th Earl of Clarendon, who for all intents and purposes had for many years acted as her father.

THE LETTER

Harrogate

I did not like to write to you until Mr. Lytton sent word that I might do so, because I had not the intimate knowledge that would have enabled me to measure your trouble; and one dreads, of all things, to speak or write a wrong or unseasonable word when words are the only signs of interest and sympathy that one has to give. I know now, from what your dear husband has told us, that your loss is very keenly felt by you, that it has first made you acquainted with acute grief, and this makes me think of you very much. For learning to love any one is like an increase of property—it increases care, and brings many new fears lest precious things should come to harm. I find myself often thinking of you with that sort of proprietor's anxiety, wanting you to have gentle weather all through your life, so that your face may never look worn and storm-beaten, and wanting your husband to be and do the very best, lest anything short of that should be disappointment to you. At present the thought of you is all the more with me because your trouble has been brought by death; and for nearly a year death seems to me my most intimate

daily companion. I mingle the thought of it with every other, not sadly, but as one mingles the thought of some one who is nearest in love and duty with all one's motives. I try to delight in the sunshine that will be when I shall never see it any more. And I think it is possible for this sort of impersonal life to attain great intensity—possible for us to gain much more independence than is usually believed of the small bundle of facts that make our own personality. I don't know why I should say this to you, except that my pen is chatting as my tongue would if you were here. We women are always in danger of living too exclusively in the affections, and though our affections are, perhaps, the best gifts we have, we ought also to have our share of the more independent life—some joy in things for their own sake. It is piteous to see the helplessness of some sweet women when their affections are disappointed; because all their teaching has been that they can only delight in study of any kind for the sake of a personal love. They have never contemplated an independent delight in ideas as an experience which they could confess without being laughed at. Yet surely women need this sort of defence against passionate affliction even more than men. Just under the pressure of grief, I do not believe there

is any consolation. The word seems to me to be drapery for falsities. Sorrow must be sorrow, ill must be ill, till duty and love towards all who remain recover their rightful predominance. Your life is so full of those claims that you will not have time for brooding over the unchangeable. Do not spend any of your valuable time now in writing to me, but be satisfied with sending me news of you through Mr. Lytton when he has occasion to write to Mr. Lewes.

I have lately finished reading aloud Mendelssohn's "Letters", which we had often resolved and failed to read before. They have been quite cheering to us from the sense they give of communion with an eminently pure, refined nature, with the most rigorous conscience in art. In the evening we have always a concert to listen to—a concert of modest pretensions, but well conducted enough to be agreeable.

I hope this letter of chit-chat will not reach you at a wrong moment. In any case, forgive all mistakes on the part of one who is always yours sincerely and affectionately.

LETTER 02

GRIEF IS NON-NEGOTIABLE

Nick Cave – Letter to Cynthia

The Red Hand Files, October 2018

Nick Cave was born in 1957 in the Australian town of Warracknabeal, to Dawn and Colin Cave. The formation of his first band at Caulfield Grammar School in a suburb of Melbourne ignited a decades-long career. Over the years, he has produced acclaimed music, both as a solo artist and with his band, Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds, acted on stage and screen, and written film scores and screenplays. Throughout, Cave has taken time to connect with his fans, and in 2018 he launched 'The Red Hand Files', an online platform through which they are able to ask questions of him directly, his answers published for all to see. In 2018, a letter arrived from someone named Cynthia, which read:

I have experienced the death of my father, my sister, and my first love in the past few years and feel that I have some communication with them, mostly through dreams. They are helping me. Are you and Susie feeling that your son Arthur is with you and communicating in some way?

Arthur was Nick Cave's late son. He died in 2015 aged fifteen.

This letter was Cave's reply.

THE LETTER

Dear Cynthia,

This is a very beautiful question and I am grateful that you have asked it. It seems to me, that if we love, we grieve. That's the deal. That's the pact. Grief and love are forever intertwined. Grief is the terrible reminder of the depths of our love and, like love, grief is non-negotiable. There is a vastness to grief that overwhelms our minuscule selves. We are tiny, trembling clusters of atoms subsumed within grief's awesome presence. It occupies the core of our being and extends through our fingers to the limits of the universe. Within that whirling gyre all manner of madnesses exist: ghosts and spirits and dream visitations, and everything else that we, in our anguish, will into existence. These are precious gifts that are as valid and as real as we need them to be. They are the spirit guides that lead us out of the darkness.

I feel the presence of my son, all around, but he may not be there. I hear him talk to me, parent me, guide me, though he may not be there. He visits Susie in her sleep regularly, speaks to her, comforts her, but he may not be there. Dread grief trails bright phantoms in its wake. These spirits are ideas, essentially. They are our stunned imaginations

reawakening after the calamity. Like ideas, these spirits speak of possibility. Follow your ideas, because on the other side of the idea is change and growth and redemption. Create your spirits. Call to them. Will them alive. Speak to them. It is their impossible and ghostly hands that draw us back to the world from which we were jettisoned; better now and unimaginably changed.

With love,

Nick