

# Corresponding With the Past

**LETTERS OF THE CENTURY: America 1900-1999.** Edited by Lisa Grunwald and Stephen J. Adler. Dial, 741 pp., \$35.

By Michael Kramer

**D**earest Reader,

I was going to e-mail you the big news but my computer keeps crashing, so I'll have to write you the old-fashioned way: with ink.

I've finished reading "Letters of the Century: America 1900-1999," edited by Lisa Grunwald and Stephen J. Adler. This is news because it's a long book — more than 400 letters. Considering that you and I neither write nor read many actual letters anymore (by Grunwald and Adler's count, the amount of personal mail that currently passes through the post office is a paltry 2 percent of the total), this is a lot of correspondence to encounter at one time.

You probably won't want to read them all, will you, reader? You're busy. From what I can tell by reading their letters, in this respect you resemble many Americans during this century. Their letters are sometimes not much more than quick notes.

Still, there's nothing quite like reading other people's mail. "Letters of the Century" may be the kind of book you leave out on your coffee table for occasional browsing. Dive in, and there you are with Andrew Carnegie, donating \$5,200,000 in 1901 to help start the New York Public Library system; or join the dignified Martin Luther King Jr., in a Birmingham jail in 1963, or sneak a salacious peek at Monica Lewinsky's flirtatious note to President Clinton in 1997.

Yet I must warn you that reading "Letters of the Century" merely for textual voyeurism grows old



Photo by Marion Ettlinger

Lisa Grunwald and Stephen J. Adler

quickly. The more important question to ask of this book is, What does the collection tell us about the Americans in this century? The answer: only their tremendous variety. That and the fact that many Americans are terrible spellers.

Each of the book's chapters chronicles a decade, and begins with a page of Harper's Index-like statistics. The letters give voice to these statistics by demonstrating how personal lives intersect with public events (a man describes the 1906 San Francisco earthquake; an economist reassures an investor about his stocks just before the 1929 stock market crash; an Army nurse describes the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the writer Edmund White describes the 1969 Stonewall riot).

But the problem with "Letters of the Century" is that it presents a star-spangled smorgasbord of mis-sives rather than a cohesive narrative of our centu-

ry. Because the letters are arranged chronologically rather than topically, we get a sort of strobe-light version of 20th-Century America. A tumult of entertaining but disjointed events, people and ideas crosses the stage, and we hear a cacophony of voices, but rarely anything more.

Occasionally, letters do resonate with each other. Then we not only get a sense of history noisily passing, but also of transformations in American values (views on sexuality, gender equality and racial attitudes in particular). There are even sections of the book in which Grunwald and Adler are able to have their timeline and trace it too, stringing together letters that share themes, styles or subject matter.

At their most heartfelt, Grunwald and Adler, a married couple with children, present letters of parents and children. We get a strong sense of the American family as an institution — and of generational conflict — in everything from advice letters (William Carlos Williams to his son in college; the Rosenbergs to their children just before their execution) to letters announcing breaks with past attitudes (a daughter writes her parents in 1972 that she has moved in with her boyfriend, they write back shocked; a grown son bravely comes out of the closet to his parents in 1983).

But what else links Americans together? The editors' choices mostly stress diversity. Maybe this is the story of America in the 20th Century. But Grunwald and Adler don't make the point. The only rationale they give for their selections is that "if a letter was beautifully written and historically important, it was in. If it was one or the other, it was considered. If it was neither it was out."

I prefer the ones that are beautifully written, the ones in which the writer's personality leaps off the page. You can almost see Groucho Marx' eyebrows wriggling, cigar dangling from his greasypaint moustache, when he responds to Warner Bros. that if they sue the Marx Brothers for using the word

See GRUNWALD on B14

Michael Kramer is a writer living in Chapel Hill.

---

# Dear America

GRUNWALD from B13

---

"Casablanca" in a movie title, he will sue them back for using the word "Brothers" in their name. So, too, James Baldwin's stirring meditation on race in a letter to his nephew sends shivers down the spine. "You can only be destroyed," Baldwin writes, "by believing that you are what the white world calls a *nigger*. I

tell you this because I love you, and please don't you ever forget it."

Letters like these crackle with imagination and spunk and dignity. Written by individuals for specific occasions, they bring into focus a greater understanding of modern life's strange twists and turns, its absurdities and its possibilities. I wish more of them had made their way into "Letters of the Century," for this may be the last century of letters.

Or maybe not. Send me an e-mail when you can.