

The Fossils of Feeling

If letter writing is on the endangered species list these days, then *illustrated* letters may be said to be on the extinct animals' poster, along with the Great Auk and the Pig-Footed Bandicoot. Fancy taking the time to put pen to paper and write longhand, page upon page of correspondence, to someone you love, or at least like. Totally out of the realm of reason, I suppose, is using even more precious time to do a drawing on that same letter to illustrate perhaps some story you have just related or some emotion you've described in the letter itself. Or better yet, taking the time to draw *on* the envelope. So that by the time the recipient slits open the envelope flap using a letter opener, yes, a *letter opener*, our smiling recipient is already transported to the sender's world.

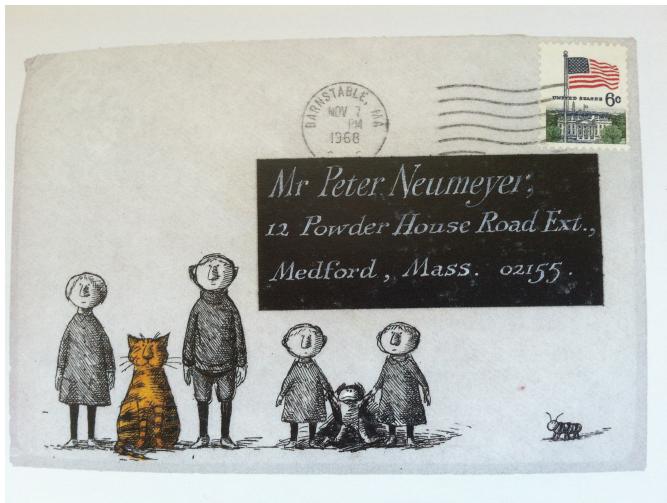
Such is the case with two superb books showing us why illustrated letter writing is not only a lost art, but one that should be found again, and if need be, by a pack of sniff dogs trained to ferret out the smell of octopus ink and papyrus.

Barring that, *Floating Worlds: The Letters of Edward Gorey and Peter F. Neumeyer* will suffice. Edited by Peter Neumeyer himself, *Floating Worlds* packs its glossy pages, which I swear must be 100# stock at least, with the year of intense correspondence between those two authors. Matched together by a publisher—Gorey did the illustrations and Neumeyer the writing—this unlikely duo went on to create one of the most beloved children's books, *Donald and the....*

Their partnership began with an episode straight out of one of Gorey's own macabre, dark humored books. Forced into a meeting by their publisher, Harry Stanton of Addison-Wesley, Stanton took them both sailing in his small boat off Barnstable on Cape Cod. Attempting to step on to the dock, Gorey lost his balance, and fell into the ocean between the boat and the pier. Neumeyer grabbed Gorey by his arm and, in doing so, dislocated Gorey's shoulder. They ended up in the emergency room with time to kill during which the two pored over Gorey's proposed illustrations for the Donald book. Soon afterwards, they began their correspondence from 1968 - 1969.

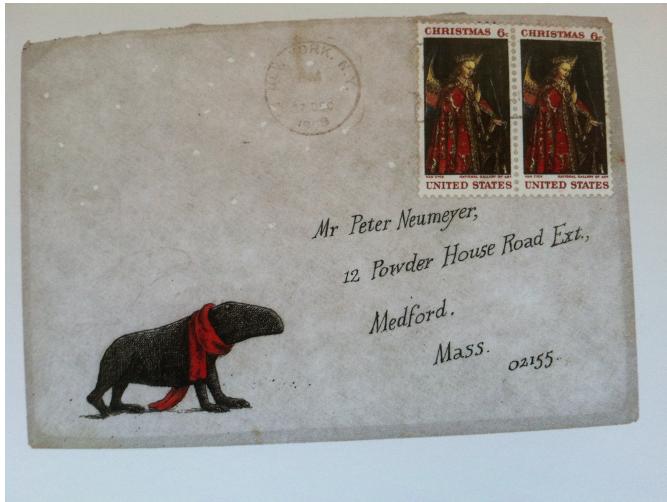
What comes across in their letters is their shared obsession with everything literary, philosophical, and artistic. Thoughtful about others' work, they also turn their critical lens on their own ideas for further collaboration, as well as on what they had written individually before their meeting.

Gorey's translation of French books is equaled by Neumeyer's penchant for hard-to-find German ones. And so it goes, as with any true collaboration: each feeding the other's passion by way of a new perspective, a new thought, even new languages.



Along with these fascinatingly open letters, comes beautiful reproductions of Gorey's illustrated envelopes which accompanied almost every letter he wrote to Neumeyer. Many of them illustrated some new idea for a potential future children's book that the two were volleying about. I gladly would have purchased *Floating Worlds* for the envelope illustrations alone, whether it is the Gorey fabricated beast called the STOEJGNPF wearing a red scarf for a letter posted close to Christmas (the beast's name was contrived by using all of their initials: Edward

St. John Gorey Peter Florian Olivier Neumeyer), or the “rather curious family” as Gorey calls them, which would be used for their joint children’s book *Why We Have Day and Night*.



In February of 2011, I went to the [Boston Athenaeum’s](#) exhibit of original Gorey letters and envelopes. And while nothing can compare to seeing these in the papyrus so to speak, *Floating Worlds* comes awfully close. Although I wasn’t opening the envelopes myself, I felt as if I was with every turn of a page where another surprising illustration waited.

I felt a similar frisson when I received illustrated envelopes from the artist [Sara Lee Hughes](#). Sara Lee and I met during a month-long artist residency at [Vermont Studio Center](#). Each week a ‘present’ arrived in the shape of a new drawing on the envelope addressed to me. Some were of places she had been, including the back porch of my then Cambridge apartment.



Others held early sketches of her paintings or illustrations of the novel I was working on, in which a character had the Joseph Cornellian practice of putting half his body in a slightly warm oven to take the chill off during cold days.



Sometimes Sara Lee's letters themselves were illustrated as well. I was reminded of that again when I opened *More Than Words: Illustrated Letters from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art* by Liza Kirwin. The book was a gift to me from the artist [Christine Destrempe](#) and what a gift it is. Inside is a feast for the eyes as illustrated letter after illustrated letter shows us that letter writing does not have to be confined to the drabness of the hello-how-are-you-I-am-fine ilk.

Take a look at Paul Bransom's anguished letter and self-portrait to his eventual wife, the actress Grace Bond, who was away in Boston rehearsing a play. Kirwin tells us in the brief paragraph accompanying the letter facsimile, "A year later, at age twenty-one, Bransom married Grace; he also sold five covers to the Saturday Evening Post, launching his career as a freelance illustrator." Seeing the letter's illustration so startlingly candid in its portrayal of Bransom's suffering and longing for Grace, one wonders how he could have had the heart energy, yet the physical stamina to paint such a revealing self-portrait, lick the envelope and stamp, and truck on over to the PO.



Or spend time on page 107 where the writer of *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's letter to his friend, the painter Hedda Sterne, appears. The writing only takes up three lines on what looks like an 8 1/2 x 11 drawing:

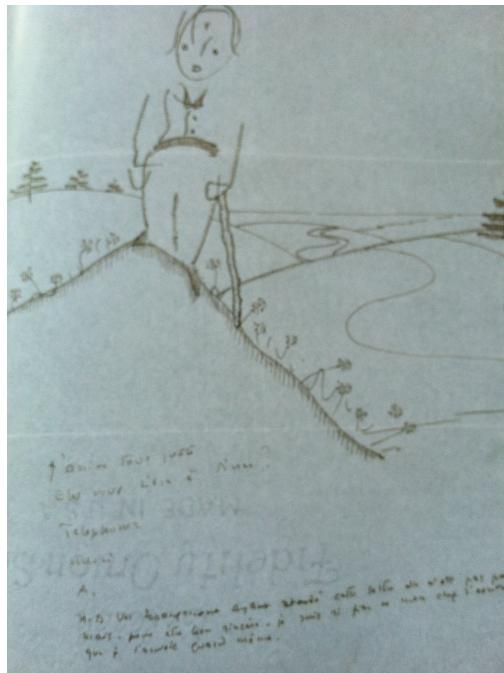
I just arrived.

Do you have time for dinner?

Call

Thanks,

A.



It's written in French, but Kirwin provides the English translation as well. What's more, she provides transcriptions of every letter in the book, not next to the letters but, in a terrifically thoughtful move, Kirwin groups them together at the *end* of the book. The transcriptions are also on different textured paper, with the feel of a 1920's bonded typewriter paper and in blue typewriter-like ink. It's as if Kirwin knows that the beauty of the letters should not be diminished by anything as ordinary as a typed translation of someone's poor penmanship. As Kirwin puts it, "Illustrated letters are inspired communications." Indeed, they are.

But it's the New Yorker writer Janet Malcolm who best summed up the *raison d'être* for letter writing when she said, "Letters are the great fixative of experience. Time erodes feeling. Time creates indifference. Letters prove to us that we once cared. They are the fossils of feeling."