

LAST WORDS
Imaginary Letters from Real People
by
Dorothy Bryant

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INTRODUCTION

Most stories I write are not chosen consciously by me. They choose me, stalking me, pestering me, or suddenly pouncing on me. This group of letter-stories grew out of my peevish reaction to a recent Oscar Wilde craze, the subject of which was not Wilde's work, but his life, specifically the portrayal of Wilde as a martyr to English homophobia. Certainly he became that, yet, usually overlooked in the plays, movies, articles, and books of the 1990s was the fact that Wilde himself, to satisfy his boyfriend's demands, and ignoring all his friends' advice, abandoned simple common sense—initiating a libel suit that led, not only to his own ruin, but to that of his wife and his two young sons (whose very existence largely escaped the awareness of the public when it became ready to exchange vilification for pity, if not canonization.)

While reading his *De Profundis*, the creepy, ambivalent, book length letter Wilde wrote from prison to Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, I kept thinking of Wilde's two young sons, whose weekly letters to their father he never answered (he was "traveling," their mother told them). I thought of Wilde's wife Constance, soon to die at age forty after undergoing surgery. I imagined Constance, knowing that the proposed surgery—like all surgery in 1898—was risky, writing her own "De Profundis," a letter to these two young boys, should they grow up in the care of relatives whose frigid silence already hinted at some unspeakable disgrace that had destroyed their home.

My first impulse was to inject some ignored facts, to nail Oscar for his narcissistic and self-destructive irresponsibility toward his family. Then I had to ask myself, would Constance make such accusations the last words she would leave for her boys? No. She would put aside her own anguish and try to leave behind a broader, deeper, more generous truth to help her orphaned children to mend their lives and move on.

After I had researched, imagined, and written the letter from Constance, other possibilities of fictional letters-before-dying came to me. I avoided attempting letters by famous, mythologized figures in distant history, like Napoleon or Jesus. I largely avoided professional writers whose work has outlived them; I felt I would be merely paraphrasing their own autobiographical writings. Instead I wrote a fictional letter from George Gissing, more typical of most serious writers, whose work, copious as it might be, is forgotten at their deaths, if not earlier.

Generally, I chose less renowned figures from our recent past, people who had not already told their own story. Like Constance, these people were not famous, though they sometimes were connected to famous people or famous events or movements. Like Cornelia Connelly, some had been briefly famous or infamous, but are now forgotten. The letters, we might say, add discarded bits of our history, like crumbs dropped on the floor during a banquet, or intentionally swept under the rug.

Far from systematic, like the personalities and events presented by a professional historian, my scraps of history are limited to people whose life and death happened to catch my attention: people I had run across while researching other projects (Constance Wilde, Cornelia Connelly) or through general reading (George Gissing, Eddie Slovik); people whose names made headlines briefly in recent times (Ricky Rodriguez, Dan White); people whose lives and work had touched the lives of personal friends or acquaintances (Bruno Bettelheim, Fay Stender.)

Although these people may not have been famous, their lives expressed some aspect of the world they inhabited and of the world we have inherited. Usually supporting cast in some public drama, their obscure agonies may add a dimension to major events. Some of these letters/stories are revisionist, correcting a mythologized distortion of history—attempting to set the record straight.

My choices were also limited by technical aspects of fictional credibility. No sudden, accidental deaths or murders—imminent death had to be an almost certain expectation, but the dying person must have sufficient time and energy to write at some length. A slow, natural death from illness ended the lives of Cornelia Connelly, and of George Gissing. Constance Wilde knew she faced grave risk in submitting to last-resort surgery to arrest a “creeping paralysis” resulting from a back injury. (In fact, there was a Victorian tradition of literate women writing such letters during each pregnancy, there being a good chance the mother would not survive childbirth.) Some deaths were self-inflicted according to plan: Bruno Bettelheim overdosed in order to end the pain of old-age maladies; Fay Stender, at half Bettelheim’s age, did the same, to complete the work of the would-be killer who had left her paralyzed and in constant pain; Ricky Rodriguez, not quite thirty years old, shot himself after murdering one of the people he held responsible for bizarre childhood abuse he had suffered; Dan White, also a vengeful assassin/suicide, has been mythologized into an archetypal homophobe, while his actual motive for double murder seems to have been far more interesting and complex. By contrast with these two young killers, Eddie Slovik had—at twenty-four, for the first time in his life—found love and hope. He was tried, sentenced, and executed because he could not bring himself to kill anyone.

Other requirements included an actual, credible recipient for a final long letter and a reason for writing it. Both Constance Wilde and Cornelia Connelly, long separated from their children, might hope to achieve a kind of posthumous reconciliation by leaving a word of comfort containing information that had been withheld from them. Bruno Bettelheim might write to his grown children in order to prepare them for the collapse of his inflated reputation under damaging facts certain to come out at his death. Dan White might want to leave a letter to his seven-year-old son, who would grow up under the shadow of the media image of his father as a homophobic killer. Eddie Slovik’s motive would be to explain his execution to the only man who had ever acted as a father to him, and who deserved to know that Eddie had done his best to live up to this man’s trust in him. I imagined Ricky Rodriguez writing to admonish the English judge whose ten-year-old decision in an actual child custody dispute (peripherally involving Ricky) might very well have convinced Ricky that children in his plight could not count on the justice system to rescue them from evil.

Two other letters are addressed to people who, though not closely related, deeply shared the convictions and motivations of the dying letter-writer. George Gissing writes his “letter” to the friend who epitomizes the New Woman he nurtured in his fiction, if not in his life. Fay Stender, after (actually) writing brief, affectionate farewells to family and friends, might credibly have written to legal colleague, Beverly Axelrod, whose accomplishments and betrayed hopes anticipated and paralleled those that indirectly led to Stender’s tragic death.

I researched the lives of these people and the facts of each case, incorporating factual background details into each story. (Constance did, in fact, begin reading the stoic

Epictetus shortly before her death; Ricky Rodriguez did view the weirdly moralistic/violent film *Boondock Saints* repeatedly; Dan White was an admirer of Jack London and had aspired to becoming a writer.)

Of course, I took liberties, inventing thoughts and words of characters, but I tried to keep these inventions consistent with recorded facts. Bettelheim's nightmares of exposure seemed credible inventions. Fay Stender's decision to leave her husband (for her female lover) did coincide with her learning about the assassination of the first openly gay man elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, although I have no evidence that this event was a deciding factor for her. I invented a brief love affair between George Gissing and his loyal friend Clara Collet. This completely undocumented love affair seems credible, considering the fact that Collet destroyed her diaries for that period and insisted that the Gissing/Collet letters be destroyed when Gissing married another woman—in order that all three of them could remain friends. There is no evidence that Ricky Rodriguez ever read Albert Camus's *The Plague*. Camus's allegory seemed useful to underline Ricky's struggle with the evil behind the masks of love worn by his mother and the cult she led.

I alluded briefly, by name, to protagonists' families and friends, some of whom are still living. I tried to avoid making assumptions or errors that might offend any of these people. If I did stumble into some factual or presumptuous error, I apologize. Better still, let me know, and I will try to correct it.

Each letter is followed by a factual epilogue, adding actual events connected to the person I wrote about. I also list my sources, for the reader who wants to fact-check my view, or to learn more about the historical events involved.

I arranged the letter-stories chronologically, but they may be read in any order.

If there is any theme connecting them, perhaps it is expressed by the cynical old Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times."