



Letters to a Friend

Diana Athill , Edward Field (Introduction)

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Diana Athill is one of our great women of letters. The renowned editor of V. S. Naipaul, Jean Rhys, and many others, she is also a celebrated memoirist whose *Somewhere Towards the End* was a *New York Times* bestseller and a National Book Critics Circle Award winner. For thirty years, Athill corresponded with the American poet Edward Field, freely sharing jokes, pleasures, and pains with her old friend. *Letters to a Friend* is an epistolary memoir that describes a warm, decades-long friendship. Written with intimacy and spontaneity, candor and grace, it is perhaps more revealing than any of her celebrated books.

Edited, selected, and introduced by Athill, and annotated with her own delightful notes, this collection—rich with Athill’s characteristic wit, humor, elegance, and honesty—reveals a sharply intelligent woman with a keen eye for the absurd, a brilliant turn of phrase, and a wicked sense of humor. Covering her career as an editor, the adventure of her retirement, her immersion in her own writing, and her reactions to becoming unexpectedly famous in her old age—including gossip about legendary authors and mutual friends, sharp pen-portraits, and uninhibited accounts of her relationships—*Letters to a Friend* describes a flourishing friendship and offers a portrait of a woman growing older without ever losing her zest for life.

Letters to a Friend Details

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Tock says

So I honestly didn't think I would care for the book. The book is entirely all letters to her friend, Edward. But I guess it's just pure curiosity and what next that kept me interested. And being there was no set chapters, just letters, this book was easy to keep in the car and grab when I had time to kill.

Hol says

I don't ordinarily read collections of letters, but Diana Athill is such good company. It's amazing to be able to follow her first-person writing--memoirs and letters--over such a long period of time. By now illness has replaced sex as a preoccupation, and it's interesting to learn how she deals with the vicissitudes of aging; at one point, for instance, she has broken off two of her remaining teeth and in her wait for treatment becomes depressed and considers Prozac, but turns to Trollope instead. Note: The cover of this book is quite striking, and I noticed people starting at it on the subway while I read.

Carolyn says

I love reading letters. Athill had already thrown away her correspondent's letters when he had the idea of publishing them as a book. Awkward? I could really relate to her frustrations with computers and the aging process. Lots of good stuff about the National Health system. I liked this enough that I want to read her books now.

Lynn Kearney says

Some of the material is familiar to readers of her other books, especially Somewhere Towards the End, but it's an engaging read nonetheless; she's such an interesting woman and she writes so very well.

Judith Hannan says

I liked Somewhere Towards the End, but I did not like Letters to a Friend. I thought it diminished Athill. These are just ordinary letters filled with ordinary thoughts. Which is fine, but not as a book. It felt petty. Perhaps in another form they would have felt weightier, but here they weren't too far removed from listening in on a one-sided phone conversation. I was often confused because the reader is privy to only a one-way conversation. Any book--whether it is fiction, memoir, biography, young adult, graphic, "adult," or letters--has to be about characters and ideas, and both of these were weak for me in Letters to a Friend. I'm actually not sure why I finished it except to think that, seen as a whole, I would find more wisdom in the letters. I did not. Too bad.

Jeremy says

I don't usually read collections of letters, so was pleasantly surprised how good these were. Athill is quite the character, and this book shines with her exuberance, zest for life, and a unique way of expressing it. Fascinating and captivating

Jeff Howells says

I read a collection of Diana Athill's a few years ago, enjoyed them a lot so picked this one up. I fear this is a genre of book than with the rise of social media will totally disappear in a generation's time. It's a collection of letters written to an American friend and frankly it's excellent. Like all good letters it informative & gossipy but the thing it's done most is make me really think about growing old and dying. There is a quote in the book that says "Obsession with health can easily take over from sex as life's major problem..." Ain't that the truth...

Deodand says

I find myself smiling when I read Athill's work. She seems like a rare person, who is grateful for everything and full of optimism and enthusiasm. Also one hell of a friend - she is the type who will stick by until death. She's exactly what I would want in a friend. I think this book may be a bore or irrelevant to many, but for some reason it is just to my taste.

Caroline says

This is the second book I have read by Diana Athill in three months, and what a joy it was.

It consists of a collection of her letters - over thirty years of correspondence with the American poet Edward Field. The letters started when she was eighty-four. This was a late-blossoming friendship and all the more appreciated because of that. They began quite formally, with her addressing him as "Dear Mr. Field", and when they ended, when she was ninety, she was addressing him "Darling" and "Darling Edward".

It's a one-side correspondence. We only see her letters, as Edward's were destroyed by Athill's overly-practical and tidying hand, but what a treat for us that Edward kept hers.... Also, in spite of the one-sidedness, it is unabashedly clear the deep affection they had for one another....and that warmth infuses the letters with much charm.

Even in her eighties Athill is quite the high energy woman of letters. She writes with gusto about friends, parties, writing books, being a recognised author, her travels, various life crises, money and ageing. Inject into all of that a kindly but astute eye for people, a fine intelligence and a wry sense of humour - and the letters light up. Here is a taster of her wonderful warmth and enthusiasm.

Darling Edward –

This morning your book arrived. What a beautiful book – emerging from its wrappings like the sun from cloud – and then I opened it and began to have just a quick look before getting up – obviously such a lovely fat book was going to need slow reading , so just a preliminary squint.....and darling Edward, it is now 1:30 and I am still in bed and I am still thinking of it as a quick preliminary squint because that's what it is. There's so much marvellous reading in your poems I'm going to return and return to them, and they make me love you so much. It really is a life that you are bravely putting into our hands, and it's awe-inspiring to see that being done.”

I think this is a wonderful book by a wonderful woman. It makes you feel better about being a human being.

Kathleen Smith says

So far I am just beginning this Novel. I love books that delve into conversations in letter, email, etc. It brings a new dimension to the writing.. So here I go-wish me luck. My friend stole it from me and will not give it back. She loves it. So as soon as I get it back I will be attacking it.

Bernadette Jansen op de Haar says

Wonderful example of how 'old-fashioned' letters can tell a story and bring characters to life. Even more fascinating because the letters represent only one half of the conversation. Same to think that this will no longer work in this era of email conversations.

Rebecca says

In this companion piece to her wonderful memoirs, Athill gives one side (hers) of her correspondence with American poet Edward Field. Their correspondence began in 1981, after Field made an enquiry to Athill, at André Deutsch publishing house (where she worked as an editor for over 40 years), about reviving their mutual friend Alfred Chester's publications. As the letters progress, “Dear Mr. Field” quickly becomes “Darling Edward” and “Dearest Edward.”

It was an unlikely friendship in some ways: Athill was a posh English lady in her mid-sixties, while Field was a gay, bohemian poet in New York City. “You are such a different kind of person from me,” Diana wrote early on, “and how rarely does someone open his sensibility so wide that one is able to enter into a different way of feeling.” Despite their differences – and a separation of over 3,000 miles – Athill remembers “it was truly lovely to feel, as soon as I met you and Neil [Derrick, Fields's partner], ‘Now here are people with whom it's possible really to connect’ ... which seems to me to be worth celebrating.”

It is interesting to see the effects of a growing dependence on technology: for both Athill and Field the typewriter is eventually overtaken by the computer, and letters replaced by e-mails. With these changes comes an inevitable loss of formality and poetry. Yet there is a remarkable liveliness and wit to these letters, as Athill reflects on a life with books.

(This review formed part of an article about letter writing for Bookkaholic.)

Lorraine says

I read this for a Reading Group so it's not something I would usually choose but I really enjoyed it. It took a while to warm to some of the characters (I think the letter format makes it tricky to connect the characters to each other sometimes) but I grew to love the author's unique voice and want to read more of her memoirs.

Sue Uden says

On the first page of the book under 'Praise for Diana Athill' the quote from The Observer reads 'There is a sense throughout Athill's work that you are making a new friend'. And reading these letters felt just like that to me. My only consolation that I have finished them now is that I have 'Stet' waiting in my TBR and I fully intend to lay my hands on every other word she has written. She has also made me curious about the recipient of her letters, Edward Field, about whom I know nothing. So I must look on the shelves for his books also. I can't recommend these letters highly enough, especially to anyone of 'a certain age'.

Lee Kofman says

I can't say I particularly enjoyed this collection of letters. Their total really didn't amount to a book... While the book paints a poignant picture of what it is like to get older, I found a lot of the material repetitive or too mundane to be interesting. Athill's voice is lovely even in these letters but the clever sentences didn't compensate – for me at least – for the overall tedium. I think sometimes when people turn too famous they should become particularly discerning as to what they publish. This book was nowhere near the standard of her memoir writing.
