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A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren

By Simone de Beauvoir, Nelson Algren, Sylvie Le Bon De Beauvoir, Vanessa Kling



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In 1947, Simone de Beauvoir met Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Nelson Algren in Chicago, and it was love at first sight. A passionate affair ensued, spanning twenty years and four continents in an era when a transatlantic flight took twenty-four hours and overseas telephone calls were a luxury. *A Transatlantic Love Affair* collects more than three hundred love letters written in English by de Beauvoir to Algren.

Unique among the prolific correspondence de Beauvoir conducted throughout her life, these letters involved someone not at all of her world. De Beauvoir was forced to explain to Algren everything that usually went without saying: her background, her life in Paris, and the political situation in Paris. The result is a cross between a personal memoir and an insider's intellectual history of Left Bank life in postwar Paris, populated with luminaries including Albert Camus, Truman Capote, Colette, Alberto Giacometti, Margaret Mead, and Richard Wright.

Written as she was working on *The Mandarins*, *America Day by Day*, and *The Second Sex*, the letters provide a new backdrop for those now classic works. Recently on the bestseller list in France, these frank, tender, and often humorous letters reveal an unusual portrait of the "Second Simone."



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Simone de Beauvoir met Nelson Algren in Chicago in February 1947, when a mutual friend arranged for him to serve as her tour guide for two days. The attraction was immediate, and within two months they were in love. Because Algren was so alien to de Beauvoir's world, she spent time describing events and people to him she might otherwise have taken for granted. The result is that de Beauvoir's 300 surviving letters to Algren are unusually rich in detail--love letters with a conscious undercurrent of French social history. Translated and annotated by Kate Leblanc, they offer amusing insights into postwar Parisian life and characters, delivered with the charm of the nonnative writer.

In one letter, de Beauvoir sums up Albert Camus as "an interesting but difficult guy. When he was not pleased with the book he was writing, he was very arrogant; now, he has got a rather great success and he has become very modest and sincere." She coolly describes a dinner party where she witnessed the separation of the apexes of mind and body: "Sartre was alone in a corner, eating sadly some corned-beef, and I sat in front of Rita Hayworth, trying to speak to her, and looking at her beautiful shoulders and breasts which could have made so many men crazy but which were so useless for me." This is essential reading for devotees of the Paris literary scene and other literary romantics. --*Regina Marler*

From Publishers Weekly

This engrossing collection is the first publication in America of the 300-plus letters that de Beauvoir wrote to her lover, Algren (The Man with the Golden Arm), between February 1947 and November 1964. At a time when transatlantic phone calls were rare, de Beauvoir used letter-writing to charm her "beloved Chicago man," to outline her progress on what would become *The Second Sex* and *The Mandarins*, and to describe the postwar Parisian intelligentsia surrounding her, Sartre and their monthly, *Les Temps Modernes*. There is more gossip here than philosophical or political debate: for example, fistfights between Arthur Koestler and Albert Camus, daily death threats to Sartre, "this ridiculous thing which is Truman Capote," "Jean Genet, the pederast-burglar" and the "cave" hopping of the literati?the less well known of whom are helpfully footnoted. But her detached descriptions of places, events and parties are ultimately more interesting than her often condescending opinions of people and her need to reiterate to Algren how many women are attracted to her. Written in often awkward yet energetically chatty English ("It is not scotch; it is the moving boat which makes my handwriting so shaking."), de Beauvoir's letters are both guarded and vulnerable. One frustration here is the lack of Algren's voice, although there are some brief summaries of letters or pertinent meetings. If those expecting steamy love letters will be disappointed, this one-sided correspondence provides invaluable primary material for scholars of the Paris intelligentsia and while doing so, reveals a woman alternately feisty, catty, proud and unsure.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

The most interesting thing about *A Transatlantic Love Affair* [is] the light it sheds on the book that marked the beginning of the modern women's movement.... Beauvoir's letters are fascinating.

Users Review

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Linda Yohe:

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