



# Epistolary Responses: The Letter in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Criticism

*Anne Bower*

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*Epistolary Responses* explores the transformative nature of epistolary fiction and criticism in letter form from a largely feminist perspective. While most scholarly work to date has focused on 17th- and 18th-century manifestations of this genre, Bower's study concentrates on epistolary fiction by contemporary American writers published between 1912 and 1988. The novels discussed, all featuring women letter writers, include: Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*, John Barth's *LETTERS*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, John Updike's *S.*, Jean Webster's *Daddy-Long-Legs*, Upton Sinclair's *Another Pamela*, and Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*.

Bower explores the influence letters have on the act of writing and writing as act, their encoded desire for reply, their incompleteness as units of narrative information, their play on ideas of absence and presence, their apparently personal and private nature, and their foregrounding of the writer's agency and authority, all of which make letters a most useful genre both for novelists and for scholars. Several of the book's "fiction" chapters include a letter from the author of the text (sometimes a critic) that complements and supplements Bower's analysis. The final part of the book explores how seven scholars--men and women--have applied letters to their own critical writing, finding that this formal move allows them to question issues of public and private discourse, the authority of signature, and the "feminine" location.

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