

The lost art of letter writing

story Rachel Smith

MAIL MAY BE A CLICK AWAY, BUT NOTHING LEAVES A LEGACY LIKE A GOOD OLD-FASHIONED LETTER

When was the last time you sat down to write a letter – the kind that requires paper, an envelope and a trip to the postbox?

Chances are it's been a while, and we're quick to point the pen at technology. Everyone's too busy texting, Twittering and dealing with the junk mail clogging up their inboxes.

While there's no doubt putting pen to paper is on the decline (Australia Post's domestic letter volumes dropped 4.1 per cent in 2008/09), most of us still have a soft spot for the handwritten word. We love ripping open the envelope, poring over a loved one's familiar scribble and adding it to a treasured bundle.

Margaret Rockcliff, owner of Paper2 in Sydney, says letter writing is far from dead and, in our too-busy-to-breathe lives, we value the effort like never before. "To write a letter, you have to give up your time, and with everyone so busy, you really appreciate the gesture."

Historian Geoffrey Bolton agrees. He was on the panel of judges for the Letters of a Nation campaign, launched last year to mark Australia Post's bicentenary. "The trouble with email is that you state things as quickly as possible," he says. "I write a letter occasionally just to enjoy the exercise. It gives me more time to pick the right word and shade of feeling I'm trying to convey."

Here, five Australians relive the stories behind the letters they sent in to the Letters of a Nation project.

"You're sleeping so soundly, I think I will write you a little love letter. Thank you for coming, baby dear, and giving me the greatest happiness I've ever known. A whole 8lbs of you, with soft dark hair; curly eyelashes, perfect half-moons on your tiny fingers and the funniest wriggly little feet. Oh, the wonder of you!"

What it's about: A mother writes to her newborn baby, in 1934.
Who owns it: Wendy Hebbard, 75, from New Gisborne, Vic – the baby in the letter.

Do you come from a keen letter writing family? I do, and it goes back well into the 1890s – we've all been fond of writing. My daughters remember getting letters with stories written by my mum. Even my granddaughter, who's only four, writes me letters and loves receiving them. **Did your mum give you this one herself?** No, I only read it very recently. When she died, I found all these letters she'd kept. She was obviously over the moon to have a baby daughter. Even now, if I try to read it aloud, I get choked up. I guess I didn't realise how much she loved me. **Do you still write letters?** Yes. In my family, we write short notes to each other, even just cheer-up notes. In the early days, you'd write 'SWAK' on the back of a letter, which meant 'sealed with a kiss'. I haven't written that for years; it's sounds corny now.

"Well, little pal, Daddy is on his way home to you and Mummy at last. Has been a long time, hasn't it? But never mind, Ron, never again. We'll have some great times together, just you and I, and if Mummy is good, well, maybe her as well. When you get this, Daddy should only be a couple of days from Sydney. What a happy day this will be – but, Ron, there will be more to come."

What it's about: In 1945, after World War II, a recently released POW writes to tell his son he's coming home.
Who owns it: Ron Castle, 71, from Figtree, NSW, who received the letter as a child.

Tell us about receiving this letter. When I first read it, I wasn't even seven. I was two when Dad went away, so I didn't know him at all. This was the first communication I'd had with him. **What do you remember from that reunion?** A lot of the family went to Ingleburn, where the buses came in with the POWs. Dad came over to say hello, but he didn't know who I was, as I'd been a baby when he'd left. But it was a fantastic day. **How does it feel to read the letter these days?** I get a bit cut up. Dad carried on quite well with his life after coming home. We had a holiday house down the coast and we had some good times there. He was good to his word. >

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"Leap year is here at last. How I've longed for this year of feminine liberty, my sweet. I've loved you since first I gazed into your dear eyes and I want you for my own adorable husband. I can cook, sew and dig in the garden. I'd make your life one long dream of bliss."

What it's about: It's a 1924 leap year proposal from Jessie Corbett to John Wilks. **Who owns it:** Angela McKillop-Davies, 53, from Ormeau Hills, Qld. Her husband, Stephen, is Jessie's grandson.

So, did Jessie get her man? Yes, Jessie and John married and lived a long and happy life together. **Sounds like she was ahead of her time, taking the lead like that.** She definitely wore the pants in the family. My husband remembers her as quite a stern woman, but she loved her husband dearly. **What does the family think of the letter?** Jessie's son cracked up laughing. They couldn't believe she'd never shown that side of herself. **She sounds inspirational.** She is. In the leap year 2004, my daughter proposed to her partner, and she told me, "I'm taking after great-grandma." She did it in person, and he said yes. **Do you have a special letter of your own?** I have one from Stephen, from 1977, when we met. We read it again about 10 years ago and it rekindled all those beautiful feelings.

"Greetings from cold, cold Melbourne. You're a long way away, and it would be a long walk back. Australia is certainly a big country with far horizons. We hope you enjoy its places and its people as much as Mum and I have. Lots of love to you. We'll have sandwiches for you when you get home on Sunday night."

What it's about: A dad writes to his daughter, who's away at camp. **Who owns it:** Helen McKenzie, 44, from Miami, Qld, who received it in 1982, aged 16. **Why is this letter so special?** The letter's not that unusual but, the day I got it, Dad died of a cerebral haemorrhage. I never saw him again. I think I knew the world wasn't right when I read it. I rang Mum later and said, "You can tell me," and she broke down. **Did she read the letter, too?** Only recently. She bawled her eyes out and said she had no idea he'd written it. **Do you have other letters from him?** I have heaps of notes. We'd write in code sometimes. We had a special relationship, me and Dad - we were mates.

"I'm so glad I had the opportunity to meet your mum, and I have some idea of how very much you must all miss her. There seems no reason for some things that happen, [but] the support of good and true friends is a precious thing. I hope that friendship can last always."

What it's about: It's a condolence letter after a mother's death. **Who owns it:** Brett Campbell, 40, from Wagga Wagga, NSW, who received it from Gael Stanford in 1993.

What's the link between you and Gael? She's a friend's mum, an incredible lady who's still alive. **You've kept it a long time.** I'm not much of a hoarder, but I really appreciated it. Mum died suddenly at 50. We had a wonderful relationship. She was a nurse and did lots of really good things. It was great to receive that recognition [of her] from a woman I respected. **What do you love about receiving a letter?** It's a journey in itself. Someone writing it, stamping it, posting it. You just think, how special is that? **SM**

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