

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Diana Athill, *Instead of a Book: Letters to a Friend* (Granta, 2011)

I first encountered Diana Athill through her memoir *Stet* while doing research on V.S. Naipaul, but like a someone introduced by a mutual acquaintance who then goes on to become a close friend, I have for some time now been an avid reader of her books and I treasure her for her own sake.

Athill was an editor, and made a significant and scantily-rewarded contribution to the success of the André Deutsch, the publishing firm that gave Naipaul his first break and published many other significant writers, including Jean Rhys and John Updike. Since her retirement she has pursued a new career as an author in her own right. Now, at the age of 94, she has eight successful books to her name. The latest, teasingly titled *Instead of a Book*, consists of a collection of her letters to Edward Field, a New York poet with whom she has corresponded since 1981. This is really a joint venture, since her letters were transcribed, lovingly, by Field and his partner, Neil Derrick, and Field provides an introduction to match Athill's. Unfortunately she has not kept his letters to her, so it is only one side of the correspondence, but she adds illuminating notes where necessary.

Athill disarms the reader immediately in her Introduction, when explaining how her friendship with Field began:

I am a bad reader of poetry. When it is complex, greatly condensed and obscure I don't like it because I believe that the purpose of language is communication. If something which has to be expressed can only be put on paper to the satisfaction of the expresser in what amounts to code, I am prepared to take other people's word for it that it is beautiful but I don't want to read it. At the same time, however, no one can be quite unaffected by the surrounding intellectual climate, which means that often I find that poems I can understand leave me feeling that anything so easy can't be much good. (viii)

Field's poetry, however, delighted her, especially because, in his words, 'the whole point of poetry is subject matter, saying what I have to say, saying what has never been said before, what's not polite to say' (ix). Athill is an expert at saying 'what's not polite to say', and though, as she says, it is difficult to resist the intellectual fashions of the time, she constantly pushes against them. She gives Field some advice about his memoirs:

Why don't you buck the trend and say, 'What's all this nonsense about seduction by older men? It was delicious' and then tell all. Though perhaps your compatriots are more pious than Europeans in their observation of passing fashions in thinking, so this might not be very good advice. (123)

As she, Edward and most of their friends are approaching extreme old age, illness and death are inevitably constant preoccupations. However, this is not as tedious as it might have been. Athill is bracingly honest about her long-time companion Barry, whose gradual descent into debility and senility is charted in these letters. Breezily, she wrote that a party she and his friends held for him in 2006 'went well', and then went on to describe how he 'behaved disgracefully', complaining about the food, not thanking anyone for his presents, and 'stump[ing] off back to bed half way through the first course. ... So we went ahead and

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Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.

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enjoyed ourselves' (298-9). Eventually, he became too much for her, approaching 90, to cope with, and his niece in Jamaica came to the rescue and arranged for him to move out there. 'It was a shock, and of course it was sad that our long relationship had come to this: but simultaneously it was a most profound relief' (318-9). And, without being in the least bit sentimental, Athill has found compensations in growing old. For instance, since 'one ceases to be a sexual being ... I have become free to love men without wanting to go to bed with them, which is surprisingly delightful' (vii). When her mother died in 1990, she missed her, but all the pain was 'blanketed by gratitude' because 'she was so stunningly lucky in the way she went' (55). The fear that we have to face, it is implied, is not death itself but the long months or years of pain and dependency which might precede it. Above all, she has, 'in spite of all the heavy reasons for anxiety and sadness ... been experiencing amazing and inexplicable moments of well-being' (194). These letters don't offer any false consolations, or take the terror out of growing old and dying, but they provide a chart to what might lie ahead, and somehow that is reassuring.

When the letters began in 1981, Athill was still working with André Deutsch, and would be for another eleven years. As the book progresses, her own writing career took off and she discovered the pleasures of moderate celebrity. In 1985 she exclaimed at being quoted in the *New York Times* 'as tho' I were Somerset Maugham or someone!!!! Wow!' (28). When her book *Make Believe* was published in 1993, she was delighted to be given prominent place in the *Spectator*, though she soon learned that 'that thing about fame is that it's here today and gone tomorrow' (95). To illustrate this point, she tells Field that one of the only two 'fan' letters she had received was 'a three-page effusion, illustrated, about Black Penises – unfortunately so wildly incoherent that we can't make out whether the writer is in favour of same, or against them, although it's clear that he does believe them to be much much *much* bigger than white ones' (96). There is something very cheering about an 85-year-old woman who can find this not threatening or offensive, but merely amusing. One symptom of celebrity causes her some gentle self-examination:

I'm coming to the conclusion that real fame would be appallingly corrupting, given the qualms that can result from insy-tinsy-mini fame! My ability to make an audience beam because I'm so nice seems to me deeply suspect. I suppose the sensible thing is just to enjoy it while given the chance. (242)

She was, however, 'very cross' about the reviews of *Make Believe*: 'None of them seem to recognize a beady eye when they see one' (96). But of course other writers are fair game. When having dental problems, she says, 'I considered a course of Prozac, but chose instead to plunge into a rereading of the novels of Anthony Trollope. I once found them boring, but for this emergency they are just the thing' (125).

Diana Athill is now living in a home for the 'active elderly' and still makes the news from time to time: her recent story 'A Hopeless Case' has been longlisted for the *Sunday Times* short story award. When *Instead of a Letter* was published, 'the correspondence still continues, as does our friendship, but it seems to me that this is the time to write FINIS', she writes in her Postscript (327). An affectionate and trusting friendship, a dry wit, self-deprecating honesty and the complete absence of sentimentality make *Instead of a Book* an absolute delight.

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