

**Deborah Jordan, ed. *Loving Words: Love Letters of Nettie and Vance Palmer 1909–1914*. Blackheath: Brandl and Schlesinger, 2018. 500pp  
A\$39.95 (paperback)  
ISBN: 9780994429667**

Deborah Jordan has edited the early letters between Nettie Higgins (1885–1964) and Vance Palmer (1885–1959) into a fascinating longitudinal study of blossoming love. Born in Melbourne and Brisbane respectively, the Palmers played a formative role in the literary culture of a newly federated Australia. Both were key voices in cultural criticism. They wrote journalism, biographies, reviews, literature, and featured on radio programs. Jordan discovered the courtship letters—all 350,000 loving words of them—as a postgraduate student in the 1970s amidst the National Library of Australia’s collections. Published in 2018, this book is clearly a project that, in a fitting mirror of the love letters themselves, reflects both the first hook of fascination and the slow burn of a deep commitment.

The letters are impressive. They are, as Jordan puts it, ‘perhaps the finest series of courtship letters ever likely to be archived in Australia with its sweep of action, quality of writing and fullness of detail’ (*JASAL* 76). But it is Jordan’s curation that makes this collection absorbing as a portrait of friendship and love. Having already written a biography of Nettie Palmer (1999), Jordan brings a depth of knowledge about the Palmers’ writerly worlds, but her frame of reference stretches beyond the biographical. In the introduction, she situates the reader within a rich field of scholarly literature on courtship and desire, from philosophy, sociology, and psychoanalysis. The collection is also punctuated by useful prefatory essays on the socio-historical and personal contexts for each new tranche of love letters, structured chronologically into sections including *Meeting, Friendship, Journeys, Love, Separations, and Engagement*.

In 1909, when the love story begins, Nettie lived with her family in Armadale and was studying for her Honours examination in Latin and Greek at Melbourne University. Vance, though the same age, 23, seemed to her more worldly, having already free-lanced in London as a journalist, travelling back via Finland, Russia, and Japan, to teach at a boy’s school in Brisbane. Both were honing their writing skills, reading up on the hip socialist paradigm of the day, and trying to make sense of a new literary world forged in the tensions between a dogged cultural deference to the Metropole and a burgeoning Antipodean style. These topics are the grist for their letters in the early years.

Jordan sets the Palmers as a prism through which to see all manner of political and historical happenings. The letters will be useful for readers seeking insight on topics as diverse as modernism, expatriation, nationhood, gender roles, class, religion, Indigenous-settler relations, socialism, sea travel, and mental illness. Sometimes these issues intersect in complex ways. For example, in Vance’s letters from the remote Abbieglasie station (west of Brisbane), where he works in 1909, first as a tutor and then as a station manager, the urban intellectualism of socialism collides with the exploitative Indigenous-settler relations in rural Australia. Vance writes a grave letter to Nettie when he realises that the Kooma people work on the station without wages, their daily lives scrutinised and controlled by the station owner. Jordan’s framing of the letters ensures that the volume will provide a breadth of historical reference. To this end, she also includes useful appendices that list further reading and a ‘who’s who’ index.

But the beating heart of *Loving Words* is its rich analysis of the transition from platonic to romantic love in the early twentieth century. The correspondence Jordan collects spans five

years, from when Nettie and Vance first meet in February 1909 to when they marry in May 1914. In this time, the young lovers are only in the same place for a matter of months. Vance musters the courage to speak to Nettie in the grand reading room of the State Library of Victoria. Four weeks later, he boards for London. Their friendship, and then romance, develops at a distance, in the letters we read, and in the waiting, longing, and imagining that fill the days or weeks between. As Jordan notes, many writers have exchanged love letters, but the Palmers' epistles are more than this: 'they are part of the very process of courtship marking the transition from friendship to love ... [where] a relationship is conducted in the realm of the imaginary, and friends become lovers with little actual physical presence of bodies' (JASAL 76).

In an age of instant messaging and geolocated hook-ups, the Palmer's courtship transports us to another, much slower world, where the mail only comes once a day, and by ship. The first letters sent and received in Melbourne are fascinating. Having 'noticed his address by accident,' Nettie writes (with the very formal 'yours sincerely') to 'Mr Palmer.' One feels for her as she tries to inspire more talk but quickly exhausts their common ground of avant-garde literary journals—a topic offering few inroads for flirtation. Then, in a bold and bizarre move, with this short note she encloses a long free-associative dialogue between Vance as George Bernard Shaw's 'New Woman' Vivie Warren and herself as Tennyson's Lady of Shalott. It is a stroke of genius that gives them something to talk about when they have nothing to talk about. Nettie creates a space for play and suggestion. Vance, as Vivie, soon replies.

Once acquainted, their dialogue sobers. The pre-kiss epistles written during *Friendship* are often quite boring to read. Vance especially writes detailed and earnest accounts of what he has been reading and writing and thinking, and each responds to the other's literary monologues with eagerness, and at length. Mercifully, Jordan explains that she cut some of Vance's longer treatises on 'social, intellectual, and literary affairs' to 'balance the exchange' (18). But when the tone of Palmer and Higgins's correspondence takes a sharp turn after a night spent together in London (the action in epistolary romances happens off-stage), one realises that the regularity and fullness of their preceding letters is a clue to the ensuing passion.

Each is voracious for their mate's every musing on every matter. The young writers report on the weather, exchange family history, describe new and old friends, recount (near verbatim) conversations, review books, and discuss philosophy. They flesh out multiple interpretations of each other's comments in real time. 'Probably you weren't hair-splitting when you wrote that note, but ...' (Nettie to Vance 1909). Just when the reader suspects they must be testing even each other's patience with the level of detail, Nettie thanks Vance 'for telling me so literally what your days are like' (171). In his biographical essay *On Obsession* (2008), Malcolm Knox recalls his youthful affinity with Marcel Proust's special brand of obsessive love. Infatuation fueled his schoolyard crushes: 'you woke up imagining conversations with her, you silently narrated to her your smallest domestic or daily acts, you composed endless letters to her, you were ferociously inquisitive about everything she was doing in the menacingly blank sheet of her unknown days' (31–32). We might surmise that such insatiability is the undertow of Nettie and Vance's fiercely quotidian letters, written as they are amidst the wider currents of Edwardian restraint.

In late 1909 this simmering affection boils over into desire. The letters in *Love* are suddenly passionate and then perfunctory—quickly scrawled notes eagerly arranging the next meeting (set away from the reader's prying eyes). But soon Nettie alights for Germany to study linguistics, and they're back to pen and paper. Never explicit, the letters nonetheless render a burning desire. Both lovers set the scene—I write to you here, alone, at night. They proclaim

longing and relive intimacies. Vance recalls the feeling of Nettie's hair falling softly on his face and Nettie remembers when Vance kissed her on the cheek. The writers often try to conjure their lover into presence, and speak of visitations via apparition or dream. Vance asks Nettie 'Can you feel my lips on your face?' (292). He says he can feel when Nettie is 'wanting him most.' The letters in *Love* capture what Jordan frames, via Roland Barthes, as *a lovers' discourse*. On the sensuality of the written word Barthes writes, 'Language is a skin ... It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire' (73). The Palmers' letters, even earlier on, are full of such caresses. Vance says to Nettie, 'every word you write is like a kiss.' Nettie tells Vance she feels the hidden meaning of his 'touch words' (127), the words that are uniquely his, but teasingly will not tell him what they are or what they mean.

The most frequent, charming, and oddly jingo 'touch word' of the Palmers' exchange is their use of the endearment 'mate.' Milking the meanings of the word, letters often begin with the collegial 'dear mate,' and end with the amorous, 'I love you, my mate.' The shared moniker suits their union—steeped as it is in friendship, the meeting of kindred souls, and a uniquely Australian socialism, where mate doubles for comrade. Somehow, unlike the syrupy 'dear,' which Vance also leans on, 'mate' captures the avid individuality of these lovers, as they challenge each other's values and pick apart the logic of romance.

Jordan argues that Vance and Nettie's correspondence tests the possibilities of friendship, and indeed, this is one of the most interesting sociological threads running through the collection. Vance declares that friendships are fragile, easily dissembled by one false note. But Nettie pushes him, urging that '[f]riendships can & must stand very much injury ...' (109). Critics to the quick, the Palmers subject their own marriage plot to analytic scrutiny. As the correspondence goes on, the writers reflect on the strange alchemy of timing that brought them together *and* kept them apart. Nettie confesses to Vance that she had a crush on him when they met. Vance is glad he didn't guess, allowing something deeper to evolve:

... you didn't show it in the least ... If you had you'd have probably stirred something superficial in me and perhaps this would never have happened. I couldn't have honestly loved you at the time, for I was feeling about for something different, some white world of comradeship where people never showed anything but their essential selves, and I was harder on surface emotions than I'd ever been before. (253, 1911)

Nettie is equally grateful for the slow reveal, brandishing the 'vampire habit in friendship,' where it's 'very tempting' 'to demand all disclosures at once':

You might penetrate my disguise in a crowded hour, or I might tell you about myself perhaps, & the result would be that you would know some of the tense, serious moments of my life, moments that are abnormal. But you'd know me far better if you noticed for instance that I haven't cured myself of a stammer yet, .... It must be true that these little accidental things are the key: & it generally takes time, it certainly takes freedom from tenseness to reveal them. (59, 1909)

Here Nettie evokes German sociologist Georg Simmel's 1906 writings on friendship, where he says, as opposed to erotic love, 'friendship ... may more easily attach the whole person to the whole person, may more easily break up the reserves of the soul, not indeed by so impulsive a process, but throughout a wider area and during a longer succession' (458).

*Loving Words* then, is a survey of friendship, in all its variegations, via the heartfelt epistles of Nettie Higgins and Vance Palmer. As we follow the young colonials across states and seas, a story of love and longing unfolds amidst the dawning of a new nation state and at the precipice of a great war. Charting all this, Jordan parses out the public significance of a very private correspondence. The result is a beguiling collection of letters for writers, scholars, lovers, and mates.

Ashley Barnwell, University of Melbourne

#### WORKS CITED

- Jordan, Deborah. “‘All that my love and I / Strive after till we die’: The Courtship Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1909–1914.’ *JASAL* 8 (2008): 75–91.
- Knox, Malcolm. *On Obsession*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2008.