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A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren

Simone de Beauvoir
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Lovers of de Beauvoir will adore A Transatlantic Love Affair, a compilation of the philosopher's love letters to writer Nelson Algren spanning nearly twenty years, with a preface by her adopted daughter, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir. The letters offer a unique glimpse into the intimate thoughts of one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century, but their real value is in what they reveal about her.

Algren and de Beauvoir met in Chicago in 1947, fell in love, and conducted their affair via letters, packages and long visits. Famous writers, artists, and others casually troop through her missives, yielding observations such as, "I met an horrible American doctor woman, Mrs. Mead," and "met this ridiculous thing which is called Truman Capote…he looked like a white mushroom."

Readers are likely to find her comments around the time of publishing The Second Sex most intriguing. What goes through a great writer's mind after publication of such a definitive work? Says de Beauvoir, "My Deuxiéme Sexe brought me really a lot of money, So I decided to buy a pick-up [a record player]….I wait for the pick-up man to come and explain me how I'll manage it." She's more serious than that, too, but her deeper thoughts are available in her well-known works. As for the obscenity trial over The Second Sex, she says simply, "I hope I'll win." She also shows pleasure over beating Sartre, her lifelong companion (Algren was a "contingent relationship"), on the bestseller lists: "The Second Sex comes in third in these last months bestseller list; Sartre is…only seventh."

The most shocking part of the book is what de Beauvoir reveals about herself in her relationship with Algren: the theme running throughout the letters which towers over all discussion of Parisian intellectual life: "I love you, Nelson! Please write!" Turning down an all-expense paid trip to an existentialist conference in Mexico, she says, "I remember how I should have been in rapture, four years ago, if I had been offered to go to Mexico, even for an existentialist session. Now….All the time I can honestly spare out from my daily life, I want to spare it for you, only for you, as long as you care to get it."

All this having been said, the fact is that most of the letters are about the usual mundane things—what she ate for dinner, who she ate it with, where she went for walks—and while some of this does add to the intimate atmosphere, the bulk of it is often overwhelming.

For readers who don't love de Beauvoir, a volume at half the length would have sufficed. For those who do love her, will you still love her when you really know her? For some, these letters will make her more human; for others, the great feminist as beseeching woman might bring her tumbling down from a pedestal. These letters don't contain the usual sentiments one connects with Beauvoir, but, then again, it's not at all an unpleasant side of her to find.

CELESTE SOLLOD (December 16, 1998)

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