

Selected Letters of John Keats

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Some of John Keats's letters are nearly as well known, at least among scholars and professors, as his "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Ideas like "negative capability" ("when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason") and the image of the world as a "vale of soul-making" continue to be widely cited and discussed.

This new edition of Keats's selected letters, designed for a wider audience than previous scholarly editions, includes a selection of letters to Keats and among his friends. The aim is to offer an enriched view of the poet's character and the events of his brief life.

Keats died of tuberculosis in 1821, well short of his twenty-sixth birthday, and so everything he wrote, said, and did is the product of youth. Yet like his poems, his letters demonstrate an extraordinary facility for language, a warm and sympathetic spirit, and a steely determination to excel. They swing from mundane accounts of the day to dazzling speculations on philosophy and literature and playful yet serious images of his own life: "Nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights, or if a Sparrow come before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel."

The letters also reveal that Keats could be jealous, petty, and scornful, especially of women; in one memorable phrase, he writes that "the generality of women" "appear to me as children to whom I would rather give a Sugar Plum than my time." His love letters to Fanny Brawne will sometimes strike modern readers as impassioned, sometimes tormented, sometimes condescending. It is, however, always easy to judge those of one time by the standards of another.

By any standard, these letters are one of the major literary accomplishments of the English language. Skillfully edited by the Associate Professor of English at Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania, this volume will allow new readers to encounter the range and depth of Keats's thinking-speculations that continue to enrich, perplex and illuminate. The John Keats who emerges (even with his spots and wrinkles) is a thoroughly fascinating thinker, writer, and human being.

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