

LOST LETTERS

**INK-ON-PAPER LETTERS ARE FADING INTO HISTORY.
WHAT HAVE WE LOST?**

During the summer of 1922, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote a letter to his editor, Maxwell Perkins. In handwriting at once refined and sloppy, Fitzgerald wrote in the last paragraph:

Will you see that the semi-yearly account is mailed to me by the 1st of the month – or before it is ready? I want to see where I stand. I want to write something new – something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned.

As Usual, F Scott Fitzgerald

If he were alive today, Fitzgerald would probably use e-mail. I've given him an address: fscott96@westegg.com. Fscott96 might have written his e-mails while drunk, which he often was. Because of the ease of e-mail, he'd send it, instead of sleep on it. Rather than receiving a thoughtful letter, Perkins would likely be buried in hundreds of e-mails, most of them nonsensical, illiterate or both. Fitzgerald's historic letter might have read: "i need \$!!! r u mailing soon??? will rite good sh*t asap!!!" ("LOL!" Perkins might have written back.)

Should Perkins have read his young author's rambling missives, it would almost certainly be with less gravitas. In the summer of 1922, when the pulse of society was slower and eyes set upon words with patience – when options of what to read, see and do were fewer – a letter was something to care about.

Fortunately, for those who love *The Great Gatsby* – the "new" book about which Fitzgerald mused – Maxwell Perkins read Fitzgerald's letter, then saved it. He cared about it. That letter and many of the thousands of letters Fitzgerald sent were collected and saved over the years by those who cared about *him*, as a man. The writer mattered, not just some disconnected

words. Words weren't stored *en masse* on a 30-terabyte storage e-mail server (which is now available; for context, the Library of Congress contains 20 terabytes of information), where they would sit ignominiously, exposed to no one specifically and everyone theoretically. His e-mail would have been a grain of sand on a beach. As it now exists, the letter stands alone. Much more than a grain of sand, it's a small world.

Fitzgerald's imploring first sentence is a variation on themes about which he wrote many times. He was usually broke, often begging money from editors, publishers and friends. Singular snapshots of insecurity, the letters serve to make the iconic writer human.

The second half of the last paragraph embodies the lifelong motivation of (arguably) America's greatest 20th-century fiction writer. "*I want to write something new – something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned.*"

Fitzgerald did what he hoped. He wrote a new kind of novel that remains extraordinary and beautiful and simple and intricately patterned. No Fitzgerald critic or everyday reader could say it better than he imagined it. Maxwell Perkins thought enough of this letter to save it, then to donate it to a collection of letters that give us a glimpse into Fitzgerald's exciting, anguished and complex life. By judiciously sharing them with the rest of the world, Perkins gave us a priceless literary gift. Would he have saved an e-mail?

I am not against e-mail; I use it all the time. I think there are times, though, when a letter serves me far better – when what I want to say is something that I want to last, to matter. It's harder to write a letter; it takes

more thought, more revision, more expense, more time.

What we are losing is not just the letter, but also those things that go into the creation and sending of it: the purchase of the stationery, the feel of the paper – a sensory, human experience. We're losing the writing and rewriting of what we – or perhaps our better angels – truly want to express, rather than a momentarily angry, sorrowful or even hateful thought. The ancient, elegant action of writing a letter is going the way of the glaciers, melting into a sea of trillions of electronic words, many of which should never have been sent, much less written.

A letter on paper is a breath, not a thought. An e-mail is electric thought made manifest. It can be helpful, exhilarating, efficient and immensely practical. Usually, e-mails land harmlessly, but when written in haste, they can strike with the randomness of lightning. Made from the same stardust as our bodies, paper and ink are our physical cousins. In the endless ether that is the Internet, words rage at the speed of light.

Fitzgerald's letters continue to thrill and haunt me. People who cared about him decided that the world could benefit by reading his letters. Each letter from this alternately broke, flush, scared, confident, brilliant man was considered, acquired legally and finally published. Letters were how he came to bring his two worlds together: the desperate, alcoholic man clinging to a dream, and the expression of the dream itself.

As I was finishing this column, which I wrote on a computer, I clicked on the fake e-mail address that I created for a modern Scott Fitzgerald. I wrote "test" in the subject line, then hit "Send." It was, of course, instantly returned to me. "A message that you sent could not be delivered to one or more of its recipients. This," said no one to me, "is a permanent error."

Exactly so. ■

