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May Sarton: Selected Letters, 1916-1954



Synopsis

Appearing in book form for the first time, this treasure trove of letters illuminates the life of the beloved poet/writer from early childhood into middle age. All her life, May Sarton carried on a voluminous private correspondence— with family, friends, and lovers. From the beginning, as these remarkable letters show, the essence of an extraordinary human being was present, her gifts ready to unfurl and mature. Fittingly, an early letter thanks parents for books. Later we enter the world of the theater, then years rich with study, travel, teaching, and the discipline of craft. Sarton's deep anguish as World War II approaches pervades many letters, but readers will also encounter the things that gave Sarton joy: her love of flowers, her affection for animals, her celebration of beauty in all its guises. As Sarton divides her time between America and Europe, in an era when ocean voyages were the norm, illustrious acquaintances and intimates are introduced, among them Eva Le Gallienne, Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf, Muriel Rukeyser, Julian and Juliette Huxley, and Louise Bogan. Always, Sarton's voice is clear and courageous, startlingly candid about her passions, her moods, and her vulnerabilities. Her words, seeming as fresh as when they were written, stand against the backdrop of the crucial events of the century as she invites old and new readers into her personal world. 50 photographs

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Customer Reviews

Sarton, the late poet, novelist, and memoirist (she died in 1995), occupies a distinctly midrange

position in U.S. literature, and thus the appeal of her letters will be limited largely to specialists interested in the minutiae of her life and work. Too bad: this first volume of her letters should have a broader audience, because Sarton is one of the great letter writers of our time, cultivating friends vigorously with her funny, smart, comforting prose. She tells one chum that, following a morning of distraction, she quieted her mind with a book on Japanese art, whereupon "a great peace descended like an owl sitting beside me and staring solemnly," an effect not unlike that which readers of this pleasant book will feel from time to time. Edited by Sherman (May Sarton: Among the Usual Days, LJ 10/15/93), the collection begins with Sarton's early childhood and continues into middle age; it is part of a larger project that will result in a lifetime of published letters. For pertinent collections. David Kirby, Florida State Univ., Tallahassee, Fla. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Charged with energy and with a cast of characters that includes major 20th-century literati, this is the first volume of what will likely be a massive compendium of Sarton's letters. Sarton was a copious letter writer; according to Sherman (who edited a miscellany of Sarton's writings, *Among the Usual Days*) she set aside Sunday mornings for her correspondence, "a religious service devoted to friendship." This book begins with some childish notes to her father that foreshadow the direct and revealing style of her later missives. At 15, she was writing to Eva Le Gallienne, declaring her dream of being an actress and pleading for Le Gallienne's advice and help. The direct approach worked; Sarton went on to be associated with Le Gallienne's acting company for many years. Many of the letters collected here are to her parents, from whom she was frequently separated, even as a child. They often discuss money problems but also celebrate such events as the first publication of her poems. Other correspondents include Elizabeth Bowen, Julian Huxley (her lover before Sarton fell in love with his wife, Juliette), Virginia Woolf, Louise Bogan, Diana Trilling, Marianne Moore, and Muriel Rukeyser, some of whom were her lovers. The letters to them and to less well-known friends, brimming with enthusiasm, are full of news of acquaintances, of books and poems, of critics and reviews, of dinners and teas, of Atlantic crossings, and of love and longing for friends from whom she is separated. She shares delight at accomplishments, disappointment at setbacks, and eloquent descriptions of place. Included is a rather startling (in context) letter to Bogan discussing women's homosexual relationships. In the letters of the 1950s, the resentments that colored some of Sarton's journals begin to surface. Also included in this volume is an appendix of unpublished poems, and some letters in the original French. Certainly a must for Sarton scholars, but also a pleasure for Sarton's loyal readers. (50 photos, not seen) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus

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These letters give a fascinating view into Sarton's career in the making, as well as poignant insight into the experience of the Depression and WWII as those events unfolded.

Sarton was a master of the art of letter-writing. The notes are useful, the editing is superb, and Sarton shines through as a rare, passionate, and exacting friend and lover. My only complaint is that this volume is "selected," not "complete." I'm looking forward to Susan Sherman's next presentation of the gentle art to which Sarton stayed dedicated throughout her life.

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