

# 'A masterfully constructed epistolary novel'

Virginia Evans, "The Correspondent: A Novel" (Crown Publishing Company, 2025).

There are many correspondents in this masterfully constructed epistolary novel, but the central figure is Sybil Van Antwerp, retired from a brilliant 30-year career as a lawyer. Long divorced, infrequently visited by her son and not at all by her daughter, she lives alone in a house with a beautifully tended garden and a distant view of Annapolis over the Severn River. Every other day at 10 o'clock, she sits down at her desk, readies her imported stationery, and writes letters to her family, friends, authors whose books she admires, acquaintances and neighbors. As the book opens in 2012, she has just turned 73, and for the next nine years, readers look over her shoulder at letters that mirror a life that she describes as "a strange balance between the marvelous and the mundane."

Sybil is conscious of her letters' anomalous place in a world in which email and Instagram have affected the practice—and hence, the whole idea—of correspondence. But she not only writes letters, she keeps the ones she receives. The earliest letter in her possession is one from her birth mother, which her adoptive parents gave her when she was six. Decades later, she has preserved all the letters she has received during a 60-year correspondence with a childhood pen pal who later married her husband's brother. "Letters," she writes to a student who has studied her legal career, "are the mainstay of my life, where I was only practicing law for 30 years or so: (My legal work) was my job: the letters amount to who I am." Some years later, she imagines that if all the letters she has written and received were collected, they would preserve the story of her life in some way, "like pieces of a magnificent jigsaw puzzle."

Reading Evans's novel is indeed like working on a jigsaw

puzzle. After encountering a few pages, alert readers realize that the different pieces are going to be difficult to fit together, and they soon learn to pay attention to the letters' progressive dates. But the chronological organization of the letters does not extend to past events mentioned in them. Increasingly as the novel progresses, Evans aligns important pieces in such a way that readers only suddenly realize that two crucial events occurred at the same time, and in fact affected each other deeply. Those revelations are so

surprising that some readers may page backward, wondering if Sybil's inimitable voice—by turns kind, sharp, defensive, dismissive, understanding, witty, hurtful—might have led them to read over something. But that is rarely the case. Evans places essential puzzle pieces as carefully as mystery novelists place clues.

What emerges is a portrait of a woman who deeply believes that "words, especially those written, are immortal," but who is unable to write about the guilt that unceasingly screams in her head for causing a tragic loss decades past. Her unexpressed grief has cut her off from everybody but the recipient of one long, accumulating letter that resides, face down and unsent, in her desk drawer. In the closing quarter of the novel, however, unforeseen circumstances disrupt Sybil's long-existing defenses, and by unexpectedly enriching her life, they enable her to see beyond the past. Her reaction is to send her children and other correspondents a crisp, straightforward—and deeply moving—"litany of apologies" in which she acknowledges regrettably the lack of personal closeness (of which her letters were an expression) that affected both them and herself. The jigsaw novel in which Evans so skillfully places the pieces is riveting, revealing, and deeply satisfying.

## One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

