

# THE Ms. LETTERS COLLECTION—A NEW FORUM FOR A LOST ART



by Mary Thom

Letter writing is nearly a lost art in this age of telephones and easy travel—and the receipt of written correspondence that is detailed and witty is a lost pleasure. As a result, when *Ms.* magazine began publishing in 1972, few of us who were on the staff were prepared for the experience of reading the rich variety of the letters that were addressed to the editors. They allowed us to get to know thousands of our readers on a level of intimacy that one shares with only a few real-life friends.

A young editor of the Letters column in the midseventies, Valerie Monroe, recalls that through the *Ms.* letters, a whole world of women's experience was opened to her. The job of Letters editor at *Ms.* is an enviable one. There is a feeling of expectation when, having noted the postmark, you open the envelope. Some information comes from the look of the letter: Is the stationery plain? With a letterhead? A flowered note? Is it handwritten? Typed by a secretary? Fashioned on a word processor? Is it the careful lettering of a child or the sometimes wavering script of the very old?

If the copy deadline for a month's issue is at hand, an editor can get impatient—something about finally sitting down to write a letter seems to bring out the leisurely side of many of us—but it's best when, unhurried, you can take time to unravel an involved story, written across perhaps eight or nine sheets of note paper. Then you appreciate the experience, vulnerability, and wisdom of your correspondent, who has figured out some things about her life that she wants to share.

From the beginning, it was clear that the *Ms.* readers made up a very special community—mostly sympathetic to us and each other, sometimes querulous, always demanding. Perhaps because the editorial material of *Ms.* has so profoundly to do with their own life choices, most letter writers are anything but detached observers. (As one subscriber wrote recently, "*Ms.* is a good old friend. I like to read her before I go to sleep at night. We've been together since her

birth.") And they show an astonishing concern about each other that has made the Letters to the Editors column each month probably the most popular feature in Ms.

Also from the beginning, readers have claimed the Letters column as a forum in which they can participate directly in the magazine. They use this forum in a number of ways. First, though generous with their praise, they often take us and our writers to task. In this, their letters are most similar to those written to other publications, but Ms. readers seem to take it personally when they're annoyed, and their displeasure is more likely to be aimed at the magazine and its editors than a particular author. Second, they use the Letters column to talk directly to each other. They expect, and receive, feedback through letters in subsequent columns as they carry on a running conversation among themselves. Third, they use their forum to help the magazine and each other develop approaches to issues of concern and thus move forward the feminist agenda.

When our readers become critics, it can seem as though we can't get anything right. (See "Critics (and Crackpots) Take On Ms.," page 185.) But the depth of their anger generally reflects the real attachment they have to Ms. as a national vehicle for feminist thought and experience, so the criticism is easier to accept. In any case, they reserve their most biting sarcasm for the occasional antifeminist fanatic whose ravings we have let enter the discussion.

It is, I'm sure, the desire of Ms. readers to speak directly to one another that accounts for the enormous number of letters that begin, "This is the first letter I've ever written to a magazine." As one reader wrote in 1976, adding a postscript to a letter relating a disturbing exchange with her boss, "When the magazine arrives, I sit down with a cup of coffee to read the letters first. I feel sharing the thoughts of others is comforting. It's nice to know what other people think, how they feel, and the personal experiences they have." Or as another wrote in 1984, reacting to an astonishing Letters response to an article by Gloria Steinem on her mother (see "There's No Divorce Between Mothers and Daughters," pages 76 to 77), "I picked up your February issue and turned to what had always been my favorite section, the Letters to the Editors. As I was reading, my train reached its stop, and instead of putting away the magazine and continuing home, I sat on a bench in the station and read all of the letters responding to 'Ruth's Song.' "

The editorial features in the magazine certainly serve as a starting point, but often the readers take over, and the editor becomes somewhat peripheral to the process. And it is a process fueled by intensely personal letters, relating stories to which readers respond with more immediacy than to many an article. Readers share frustration and success, struggle and change. They tell funny anecdotes and report outrageous incidents. They solicit advice and offer solutions.

Over the years, Ms. readers have developed their own particular styles of communication as veteran readers of the magazine react to one another. There

are the confessional letters that ask, Is there anyone else out there like me? And the letters that share a quick fix to make readers feel better about everyday annoyances, such as comebacks to street hasslers. Then there are the classic "click" letters. The word was coined in a feminist context by Jane O'Reilly in an article for the Ms. Preview Issue, Spring 1972, "The Housewife's Moment of Truth," to indicate an instant of feminist insight. Readers enthusiastically adopted the convention as their own, and letters recording clicks, or occasionally clunks, continue to this day.

Ms. was founded to give voice to the concerns of a movement, and the letters help us fulfill that purpose. Often the response to an issue raised editorially will further the discussion in a crucial way. For example, in a cover story on battered women in August 1976, author Judith Gingold made what was at the time a shocking assertion. She said that contrary to what was generally believed, battery took place among all social groups in the United States and that the battered woman was not a stranger; she could be your neighbor next door. The letters in response, which we published as special forum in December 1976, proved her point with an impact greater than the most carefully collected statistics.

The feminist movement had early on discovered the power of a "speak-out" as a way of dealing with issues that were often painful and personal. In the late sixties and the early seventies—before Ms. began—activists fighting for reproductive freedom organized speak-outs to share the truth about abortion. In an extension of this tactic, fifty-three well-known American women signed a statement published in the Preview Issue of Ms. declaring that each had had an abortion, which was at the time illegal in most states. Readers joined the campaign with their signatures and with their stories.

Following a cover story in November 1977 by Karen Lindsey on sexual harassment on the job, Ms. sponsored a speak-out in New York City where women shared stories, tactics, and support in an effort to force legislators to stop thinking that sexual harassment was a dirty joke and start seeing it as a form of job discrimination. Again Ms. readers supplied testimony from their own experiences in letters that became a readers' forum. And in an emotional breaking of the silence in the September 1977 issue, readers revealed long-held secrets in a forum responding to an article by Ellen Weber on incest.

Where there was controversy within the women's movement around issues such as the best way to deal with pornography and the question of feminist anti-Semitism, Ms. reader mail often served to sort out arguments and air dissension. Ms. readers have been particularly ready to use the Letters column for frank talk about sexuality, and this forum, unlike the prototype feminist consciousness-raising session, was one in which men could, and did, participate. (See "Sex: Whose Revolution Was It?" page 3.)

The letters are a continued source of discovery and renewal, and we at Ms. are often surprised at the *enthusiasm and depth of feeling* that coverage of a particular issue can elicit. Sometimes the response alerts us to a constituency that had been neglected in the magazine. In this way, the outpouring of response to special issues on aging (January 1982) and spirituality (December 1985) helped us to define new frontiers and issues for future attention.

In preparing this book, I have read tens of thousands of letters, both published and unpublished, many of them housed as a permanent historical record in the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although most of the characteristics of the earliest letters—the enthusiasm, generosity, and involvement of the readers in particular—carry through to the current letters, there are some differences over time. The language, for example, has changed somewhat. The ambitious campaign to make language more inclusive of women has resulted in changes in national usage. (See “Language: The Great ‘Personhole Cover’ Debate,” page 139.) And with today’s wider public acceptance of feminist goals, readers are less apt to use rhetoric to set themselves apart. They are simply more at ease with their feminism.

The letters are a measure of the progress of the women’s movement. Some critical problems that readers wrote about over and over again in the early seventies happily have nearly disappeared, such as the most blatant forms of discrimination in employment (employers who blandly would say, or even write, that they didn’t hire women, period) and in the granting of credit (see “The Workplace Revolution,” page 99, and “Up Against the Institution,” pages 158 to 162). Thanks to the women’s health movement, as well as to a national focus on fitness, we’ve gained a respect for our bodies that has made us smarter consumers of medical care. (See “Woman’s Body, Woman’s Mind,” page 121.) Less happily, some advances, such as the enormous strides that women and girls have made in improving athletic programs (see “Up Against the Institution,” pages 176 to 178), are threatened today by a backsliding on earlier legislative gains. And then there are timeless discussions of relationships within families and with friends and lovers that prove over and over again that personal change is at best painstaking and incremental—though definitely worth the effort. (See “Men: Love, Marriage, and Just Friends,” page 25, “Parenting: Bringing Up ‘Free’ Children,” page 42, and “Small and Momentous Changes in Everyday Life,” page 78.)

Most movingly, Ms. readers look to the Letters column as a caring community to share their reactions to national events that affected them, whether it was despair over the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, horror at the New Bedford rape trial, euphoria over the tennis Battle of the Sexes between Billie Jean King and Bobbie Riggs, or excitement over the vice-presidential campaign

of Geraldine Ferraro. And on the occasion of our anniversaries, particularly the fifth (July 1977) and the tenth (July/August 1982), readers joined us in assessing their own personal progress as they struggled to make change in their lives. For the fifteenth anniversary celebration in 1987, readers also helped us look forward through the next fifteen years into the twenty-first century. (See "Milestones: Readers Live Fifteen Years of History," page 207.) And always, letter writers felt a strength in community with other readers. As one wrote us in 1982, "In 1972, I asked 'What's wrong with me?' Now, at thirty-three, I ask 'What the hell is the matter with them!'"