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## ***Correspondence: 1927-1987* by Joseph Campbell**

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## ***Correspondence: 1927-1987* by Joseph Campbell**

### **Abstract**

*Correspondence: 1927–1987* by Joseph Campbell, edited by Dennis Patrick Slattery and Evans Lansing Smith is a fine addition to The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series. It is a solid work and a pleasure to read for fans of Joseph Campbell and his works. The book provides a balance of letters written by Joseph Campbell to friends and colleagues with letters written to him by the same people over the span of his adult life starting at age twenty-four. The letters provide a picture of the remarkable life of a man who was both a friend to many and a person engaged in the worlds of ideas, education, and publishing. Correspondents include Angela Gregory, Jean Erdman, John Steinbeck, Ed Ricketts, Alan Watts, Carl Jung, Thomas Mann, and others.

### **Additional Keywords**

Joseph Campbell

**CORRESPONDENCE: 1927–1987 (THE COLLECTED WORKS OF JOSEPH CAMPBELL).** Joseph Campbell. Edited by Dennis Patrick Slattery and Evans Lansing Smith. New World Library. 2019. 429p. 978-1608683253. \$26.95.

THIS IS A FINE ADDITION TO THE COLLECTED WORKS OF JOSEPH CAMPBELL series. It is a solid work and a pleasure to read for fans of Campbell and his works. The book provides a balance of letters written by Campbell to friends and colleagues with letters written to him by the same people over the span of his adult life starting at age twenty-four. The letters provide a picture of the remarkable life of a man who was both a friend to many and a person engaged in the worlds of ideas, education, and publishing. Correspondents include Angela Gregory, Jean Erdman, John Steinbeck, Ed Ricketts, Alan Watts, Carl Jung, Thomas Mann, and others.

In his “Introduction: Joseph Campbell’s Correspondence: A Portrait of an Epoch,” editor Evans Lansing Smith observes that “After Campbell died, he was viciously maligned by a small coterie of academics who were apparently incapable of assessing his contribution to American life, culture and education” (xviii). Smith provides examples of some of the ways Campbell was posthumously misrepresented and treated dismissively in print. Due to this treatment, one of the values of *Correspondence: 1927–1987* is that it counterbalances the negative view of Campbell and his work that is still found in print to this day. Smith continues: “The letters that were written to and about Joseph Campbell while he was alive, and to his wife, Jean Erdman, after he died, tell a very different story. They come from an astonishing diversity of individuals who were touched and inspired by his books and lectures” (xix-xx). The book does an outstanding job of representing the high regard in which artists, writers, and intellectuals held him, in their own words, as they exchanged ideas, read the manuscripts of and critiqued each other’s works in progress, and socialized. These are things one typically only does with one’s intellectual and professional equals. The editors provide ample explanatory passages that summarize Campbell’s life and career, give introductory descriptions of the correspondents in the book, and provide context for the content of the letters throughout the volume.

The book opens with letters exchanged with his friend, artist Angela Gregory, who sculpted a bust of him in 1927. They would correspond with each other to the end of his life. In this section of the book we see a young Campbell seeking the direction his life will take. The exchange of letters allow us to hear him, in his own voice, struggling to find himself over a six-year period. In 1928 he is eager to visit Jiddu Krishnamurti, a messianic figure in the Theosophical Society, who he met in 1924 and remained friends with and visited when possible for many years. Campbell shares in his 1928 letter, “I’m thoroughly

excited about the talk I had with Krishna. He has helped me to select a star worth aiming at. [...] I know that the way which I have been seeking exists. Krishna more than anyone I know, is like the person I have wanted to be" (8). The influence and encouragement of Krishnamurti explains in part Campbell's lifelong interest in the study of Sanskrit and Vedic literature. By 1932 Campbell writes: "Within the past week I have managed to put anthropology into the subservient position which I feel sure it ought to occupy in my plans and I have conclusively decided that my major emphasis should be on literature and history rather than on science" (21). It is a pleasure to watch Campbell reporting a decision, at the time it occurred to his friend, that the contemporary reader knows could be used as a thumbnail sketch of his approach to analyzing and teaching about mythology in his writings and lectures for the rest of his life.

In the early letters, other correspondents include novelist John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts, the marine biologist who would be portrayed as the character "Doc" in Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*. Throughout the book the reader watches as Campbell accepts, in 1934, a teaching position at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, and successfully struggles to be an academic editor, writer, and lecturer; as he edits the multi-volume posthumous papers of Heinrich Zimmer; and writing his own *Two Came to Their Father, A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*, and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (65).

The letters fall into three categories: some are to and from luminaries of the time who are also his friends, some are interesting business letters about his publishing projects, and some are from fans reaching out to express their admiration of his work and describing its significance to their lives, or to ask questions relevant to his expertise. All of *Correspondence: 1927–1987* shows a man who was a good friend, a person who thought for himself and who defended his beliefs, but who was always diplomatic, even when in serious disagreement with the person he was writing to. An example of this can be found in his disagreement with Thomas Mann on pages 229-237 that resulted in the end of their friendship.

*Correspondence: 1927–1987* can also be read as a celebration of letter writing, once as ubiquitous as email is today: it captures much of what was pleasurable in writing and receiving a letter or card in the mail. The book begins with a brief celebration of the art of letter writing by editor Dennis Patrick Slattery: "Letter Writing: The Imagination's Personal Genre." Slattery discusses the intimacy and personal information cues that are conveyed by letters, especially handwritten, but to a lesser degree by typed ones; much of what is personal in a handwritten letter is stripped down by today's information technology.

The selection of letters conveys the intimacy shared through correspondence between people who think highly of each other. They also

demonstrate the format and conventions of good letter writing, such as creating a balance between sharing something interesting with the reader about oneself with asking questions about how the recipient is doing, or sharing a memory of a mutual common experience from the past; asking about the recipient's significant other (inclusiveness was a consistent characteristic of all of the letters written by Campbell and his circle of friends, and this inclusiveness made Jean Erdman, his wife, a constant, though usually off screen, presence throughout the book); and being diplomatic and courteous. Slattery observes that the rarity of letters "enhanced the thrill of receiving a handwritten letter or card, which carries a charge the other vehicles lack" (xiii). I personally know this to be true. Before the ubiquity of email I was a big letter writer, and more than one old college friend has told me over the years that they have kept my letters all of this time.

There are many ways that *Correspondence: 1927–1987* can be read. The book can be enjoyed by a reader who loves everything by Joseph Campbell. It can be consulted for biographical information about him, or any of his correspondents, especially to see Campbell's development as a professional and to read, in his words, the challenges of producing all of the major works that he edited or wrote. I also think this book could be inspirational to young academics, who don't know how the story of their professional lives are going to go, because it provides a success story in Campbell's personal hero's journey. However the book is approached by the reader, *Correspondence: 1927–1987* is another fine addition to The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series.

—Phillip Fitzsimmons



**PAMELA COLMAN SMITH: TAROT ARTIST: THE PIOUS PIXIE.** Dawn G. Robinson. Fonthill Media, 2020. 213 pp. with notes, bibliography, and 32 plates. ISBN 978-1-78155-741-9. \$29.00.

**PAMELA COLMAN SMITH: ARTIST, FEMINIST, AND MYSTIC.** Elizabeth Foley O'Connor. Clemson UP, 2021. 320 pp. with notes. Index, 34 b/w illustrations. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-949979-39-8. \$115. eISBN 9781949979404.

**O**ALUN G. ROBINSON IS A TEACHER, LECTURER, FREELANCE WRITER, and author of *Bude Through Time* (Amberley, 2013), *Bude The Postcard Collection* (Amberley, 2015), and *Secret Bude* (Amberley, 2016). While working on *Secret Bude*, she developed an interest in Pamela Colman Smith, co-creator of the famous *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot* (1909). While many know the origin story of this deck, few know that after the artist finished it, she converted to Catholicism