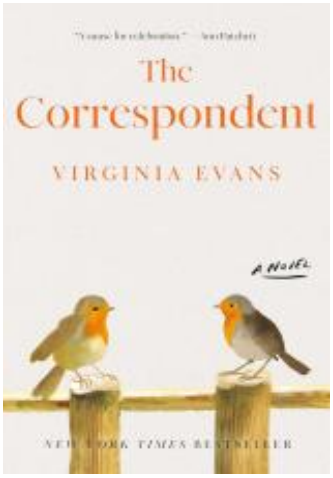
The Correspondent

by Virginia Evans



About the Book

Discover the word-of-mouth hit hailed by Ann Patchett as ?[a] cause for celebration? --- an intimate novel about the transformative power of the written word and the beauty of slowing down to reconnect with the people we love.

?Imagine, the letters one has sent out into the world, the letters received back in turn, are like the pieces of a magnificent puzzle.... Isn?t there something wonderful in that, to think that a story of one?s life is preserved in some way, that this very letter may one day mean something, even if it is a very small thing, to someone??

Filled with knowledge that only comes from a life fully lived, THE CORRESPONDENT is a gem of a novel about the power of finding solace in literature and connection with people we might never meet in person. It is about the hubris of youth and the wisdom of old age, and the mistakes and acts of kindness that occur during a lifetime.

Throughout her life, Sybil Van Antwerp has used letters to make sense of the world and her place in it. Most mornings, around half past 10, Sybil sits down to write letters --- to her brother, to her best friend, to the president of the university who will not allow her to audit a class she desperately wants to take, to Joan Didion and Larry McMurtry to tell them what she thinks of their latest books, and to one person to whom she writes often yet never sends the letter.

Sybil expects her world to go on as it always has. A mother, grandmother, wife, divorcee and distinguished lawyer, she has lived a very full life. But when letters from someone in her past force her to examine one of the most painful periods of her life, she realizes that the letter she has been writing over the years needs to be read and that she cannot move forward until she finds it in her heart to offer forgiveness.

Sybil Van Antwerp?s life of letters might be ?a very small thing,? but she also might be one of the most memorable characters you will ever read.

Discussion Guide

In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is sometimes necessary to reveal certain aspects of the storyline. If you have not finished reading, you may want to do so before reviewing this guide.

1. ?But the worst dream, the one that repeats, is that I sit down at the desk to write and there is the stack of letter writing paper, there are my pens, there are the envelopes, and I?m pawing at them like a cat, but I cannot pick them up...I can?t write.? Sybil states this early on in the narrative, about the dreams she is having as she deals with going blind. What did this tell you about her character early on?

2. Sybil is not only a fanatic for the art of letter writing, she holds classic forms of communication in high regard (she tells James that she still reads the newspaper ?in print, adequately edited, without the muck of advertisements blinking away?). What value do you see in these older forms of communicating? Are there things you wish were still mainstream that have been replaced by modern tech?

3. Sybil often remarks in her letters that they are follow-ups to phone calls or in lieu of calls so that she can compose her thoughts. What, do you find, are the benefits of writing out thoughts instead of a call? How do you think it helps Sybil to deal with the strained relationships in her life?

4. Sybil doesn?t just communicate with her contemporaries but younger people as well, like Harry and the high school student writing a paper on her. How did you notice her tone shift when addressing these characters of various ages? How does Sybil paint a different picture of herself with different people? Which one is the ?true? Sybil, if any?

5. Sybil writes to Joan Didion and Ann Patchett, among others. Which authors would you send letters to, whose work has impacted you the most?

6. During one of her letters to Harry, in answer to his question about her history, she briefly tells him and ends with ?now that?s me breezing over something like 30 years of day-in-day-out work.? If you had to distill your professional history into a few sentences, what would you say?

7. Did you have any theories about who the unsent pages throughout the novel were intended for?

8. Sybil ends up in quite a love triangle. Between Theodore and Mick, who were you rooting for, if any, for her to wind up with?

9. Were you shocked at Rosalie?s ?betrayal? with Sybil?s daughter? Did you see it as a betrayal, as Sybil calls it?

10. When Sybil reveals the truth about Gilbert?s death, how did this shift your understanding of her?

Author Bio

Virginia Evans is from the northeastern United States. She attended James Madison University for her bachelor?s in English literature, as well as Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, for her master?s of philosophy in creative writing. She lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, with her husband, two children, and her Red Labrador, Brigid.

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