

Epistolary Novels about the World of Letters

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HALL, N. John. *Correspondence: An Adventure in Letters.* Boston: David R. Godine, 2011. Clothbound, dust jacket. 238pp. Illustrations. **\$24.95.**

HALL, N. John. *Bibliophilia: An Epistolary Novel of One Man's Obsession with Book Collecting.* Boston: David R. Godine, 2016. 8vo. Softbound with flaps. 245pp. **\$18.95.**

Me and epistolary novels have a rocky relationship. Bad memories of a graduate course on the eighteenth-century novel in which the professor expected students to consume huge examples from one class to the next – Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) one class period, the same author's *Clarissa; or the History of a Young Lady* (1748) the next, and so on. But autograph-related fiction appropriate for this column seldom appears, so when N. John Hall's *Bibliophilia: An Epistolary Novel of One Man's Obsession with Book Collecting* entered my radar the time seemed ripe to give the form another chance. Outside academia, the only epistolary novel I recollect reading for pleasure was Helene Hanff's 1970 memoir *84, Charing Cross Road*, a minor classic that helped resuscitate the flatlined epistolary tradition and without which novels such as *Bibliophilia* and *Correspondence* would likely not exist. And let's not forget that part of the appeal

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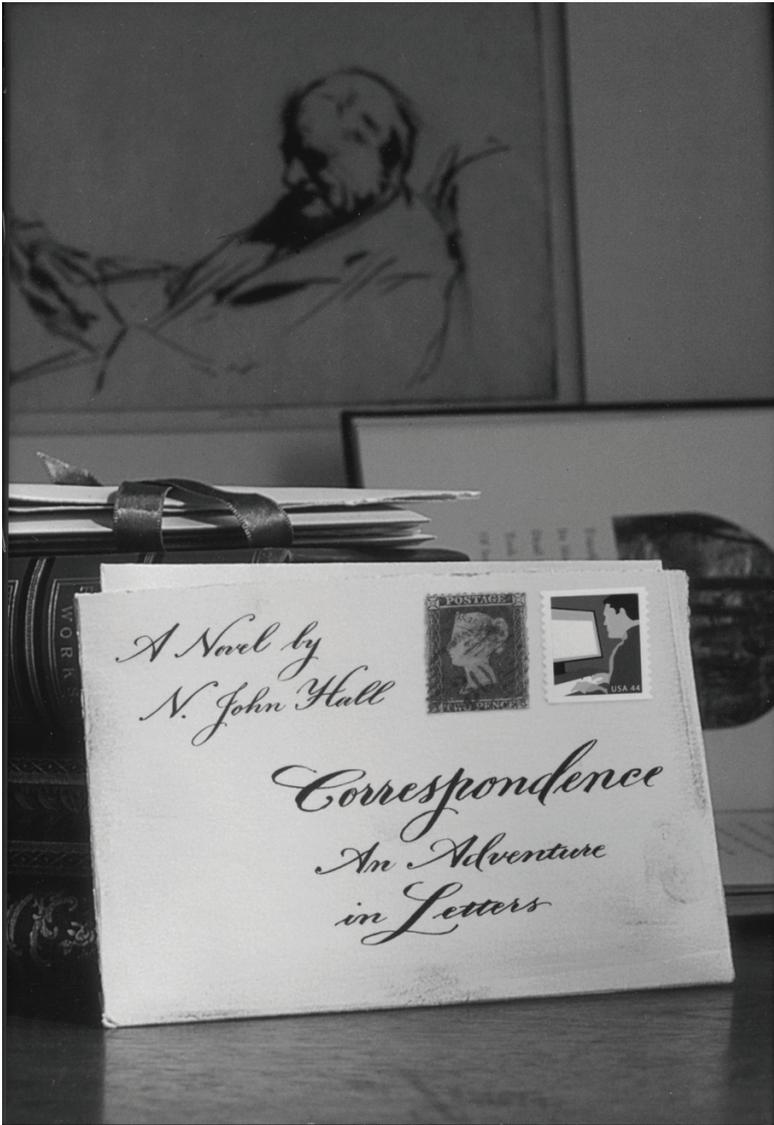
of autograph collecting is the voyeuristic aspect of reading other's people mail – just in fictional form.

What do you call an epistolary novel based not on letters but rather on emails? (No, this isn't the setup for some geeky English major's joke.) An e-pistolary novel? An e-epistolary novel? Or should the literary term simply broaden to incorporate all forms of communication? This newest mutation certainly alters the time frame of a novel. Whereas a snail mail letter that takes several days or more to arrive might help determine a novel's time frame, which might cover many years, emails virtually eliminate that letter-in-transit delay. A novel could theoretically cover a far shorter period of weeks or months. Interesting how technology has forced a re-interpretation of this centuries' old literary form.

Bibliophilia: An Epistolary Novel of One Man's Obsession with Book Collecting is a delight. It's just plain fun to read this chronicle of one unlikely man's journey from non-collector to dedicated neophyte collector. The epistolary form provides the perfect vehicle for following this transformation. This journey actually begins with *Bibliophilia's* predecessor, *Correspondence: An Adventure in Letters*, which flew beneath my radar in 2011.

Correspondence follows the emails of Larry Dickerson, a just-retired New York City banker whose great-great-grandfather Jeremy MacDowell was a bookseller in Victorian London and corresponded with many of the leading authors of his day. Dickerson has inherited 200-plus meaty letters from Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, William Makepeace Thackeray, George Eliot and spouse, Thomas Hardy, Willkie Collins, Mrs. Gaskell, Samuel Butler and Charles Darwin, together with retained drafts of all of MacDowell's letters to these authors. How does this working class Joe – a bright, eager and not uneducated man who spent his career in banking and his passion on baseball, a world far removed from antiquarian books and scholarly learning -- handle a highbrow literary cache worth hundreds of thousands of dollars?

Consider the author: N. John Hall is an emeritus Bronx



Community College English professor and world-class Max Beerbohm and Anthony Trollope scholar celebrating a half century's residence in Greenwich Village – so he not only knows his literary genres well, he knows his nineteenth-century authors inside out and imbues *Correspondence* with an authentic feel of “the Village.”

Given the premise, epistolary is the ideal form to unfold Dickerson's tale. It's *believable* that he would be emailing a Christie's representative and later an adult education teacher, a bookseller and others who become characters in *Correspondence*. It would be quite a suspension of disbelief to picture Dickerson as a first-person narrator. Just as critical, Hall is able to give each of these correspondents personality and make them memorable. Dickerson's down-home approach is as distinctive as his English auction house contacts, his community college instructor and others with whom he emails. Epistolary novels also lend a sense of *urgency* and *immediacy* to any narrative. Let's face it: Any novel whose plot boils down to what to do about a stack of old paper needs all the help it can get when it comes to creating plot twists and building suspense.

But build it Hall does. Larry Dickerson is a straight-shooting, meat 'n' taters kind of guy – hardly your well-heeled collector of spendy nineteenth-century literary material. While he could simply ship his letter trove to London, brush his hands of it and eventually get a fat check, clearly he has intellectual curiosity about these authors and their work and insists on transcribing and researching the letters himself. He's an embryonic collector who just doesn't know it yet, and it's fascinating to observe his Christie's contact, Stephen Nicholls of the books and manuscripts department, take this diamond-in-the-rough under his wing. Larry's learning curve couldn't be less steep, not only about the world of autographs and books but also about the many Britishisms, social and linguistic, he encounters with Stephen and other English contacts he befriends. He has difficulty grasping, for instance, why his ancestor's letters

to these famous authors are virtually worthless in themselves, but add considerable value to each group of author letters. Any collector who's experienced the transition from simply an interested person to a true collector will enjoy reading about another's struggle with terminology, appreciating condition, understanding collecting concepts, getting to know who the good dealers are and so on. Some actual shops and dealers are mentioned by name – New York presences some of whom get a nice plug, although one somewhat creepy vulture-like Madison Avenue manuscript dealer who plays a significant role is fictional (though I'm convinced he's based on a real person and am trying to figure out his real-life counterpart – I've got a short list).

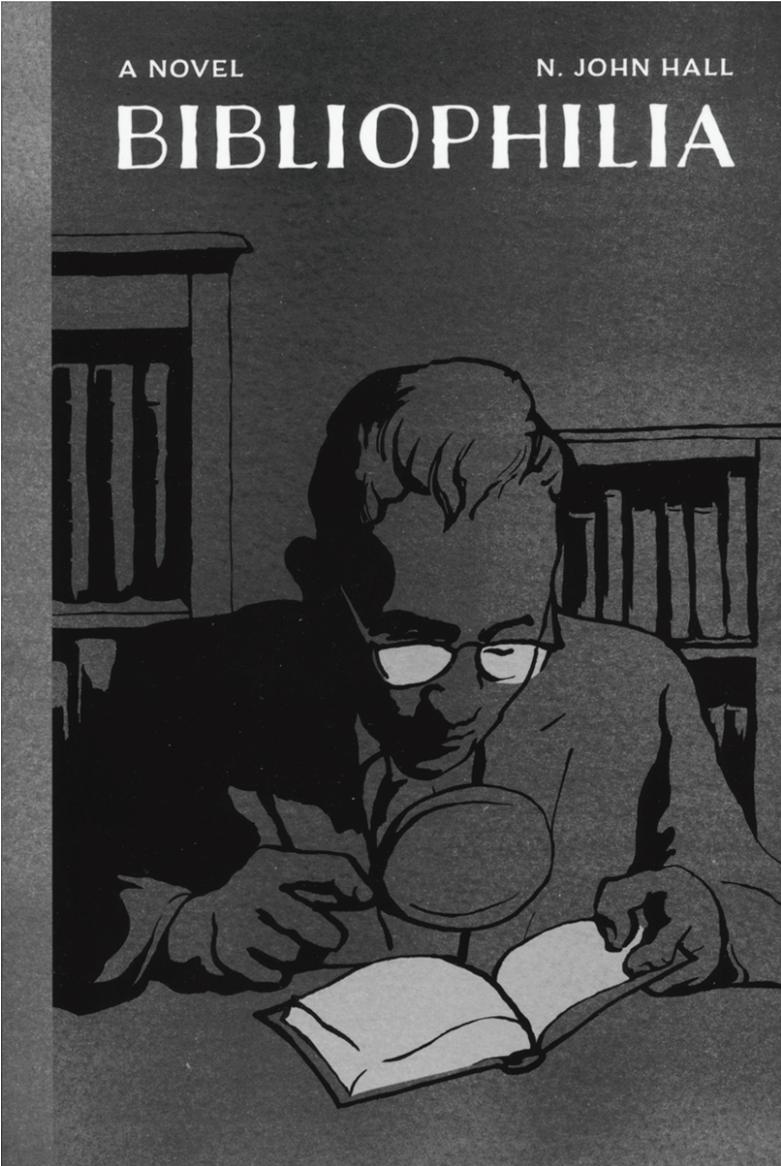
Most impressive to this reviewer is Hall's ability to write lengthy, substantial content letters from these Victorian literary luminaries as Dickerson quotes them to Stephen. Quite a feat that, skillfully adopting the style and language of various authors and making them sound distinctive and authentic to the period. It requires extraordinarily deep knowledge of an author's life and works to pull this off convincingly. You've got to wonder whether these letters are 100% original "in the style of" compositions or whether actual verbiage from these authors was repurposed verbatim. Whatever the case, you've got to hand it to Hall for these marvelous spot-on interpretations of what these authors might conceivably have written to a contemporary bookseller.

Correspondence: An Adventure in Letters proved an unexpectedly fun page-turner – and its new sequel *Bibliophilia: An Epistolary Novel of One Man's Obsession with Book Collecting* proves no less enjoyable. Larry Dickerson is now a retiree with some bucks to his name, the sale of his author letter archive netting him a nice six-digit sum. No spendthrift he, Dickerson now makes the bold, bizarre announcement to his auctioneer friend Stephen that "I am going to become a rare book collector." He also baffles this taxpayer with the assertion that "I have managed to keep that \$400,000 I made in 2008... almost intact." Wish I knew his

A NOVEL

N. JOHN HALL

BIBLIOPHILIA



fictional tax advisor.

Larry sets about his goal of collecting those authors with which his great-great-grandfather had corresponded. His first leap turns into an embarrassing nosedive when he snaps up a half dozen later printing Trollope titles at inflated prices. Bookish correspondents make him realize he could spend the rest of his life and many fortunes and never complete such a grandiose plan, persuading him to just strive for one nice true first edition (that is, the English edition) of each of the authors in question. He sets himself a yearly budget that feels generous but not extravagant. One lady friend at Christie's offers basic "Book Collecting 101" advice:

You want English first editions and not American editions. That's where the value is. But it's value over time – you can't immediately sell even a true first edition and get your money back. You are getting first editions not for resale – i.e., to make a profit – rather, you are buying them as a collector, to keep in a collection. Years down the road chances are they will have grown in value, but at this point you must not look at books as an investment. Although some people do collect books as an investment, it's not a good idea. And while most rare books rise in value, some of them in the long run go out of fashion. Supply and demand....

What makes *Bibliophilia* ring especially true is that we all know Larry Dickersons – budding collectors we've come to know and like but whose enthusiasm exceeds their expertise. We fear for Larry, we fret about him as does George Bailey for Clarence the guardian angel in *It's a Wonderful Life* – which only happens because Hall has succeeded in him a three-dimensional character that we care about. One of Larry's most endearing qualities is expressed by an advanced collector he meets, who remarks to another correspondent on Larry's open, trusting nature: "I can't help but admire a person so unashamedly frank and humbly inquisitive, not at all afraid to 'make sure he has things straight.'" (Another

characteristic of a good epistolary novel is that a series of letters easily begins to read like nonfiction – you have to remind yourself that its fiction.) I worry that this fellow who’s spent \$25,000 in a matter of months (he ends up raising his allowance) could fit his book collecting knowledge in a thimble – that learning his ABCs as he goes is an incredibly risky scenario. Larry’s book collecting naivete also shows in his frequent quoting of prices found “on the internet” and citing of specific prices as if all are alike across the board. One sees this gross oversimplifying all the time – new collectors not appreciating that the internet is a vast conglomeration of individual entities of widely varying levels of expertise, widely varying prices. Seasoned collectors certainly do cite prices asked – but usually qualify such statements with the name of the dealer offering it. Without that all-important name of a dealer who is a known quantity, seasoned collectors realize that noting prices “on the internet” is fairly meaningless.

Thus we follow Larry’s progress as a collector as he charts a rather predictable course. Early on he confronts sticker shock over the prices of Victorian first editions of “triple decker” classic titles. He struggles to discipline himself about condition issues. Before long he discovers the allure of signed copies and association copies and comes to appreciate how it alters value. As he gets to know various dealers and gains some perspective, he begins to gauge them. Inevitably, his goal of collecting a nice title from each of his Victorian authors is broadened to include select *New Yorker* contributors – so twentieth-century figures such as Harold Ross, James Thurber, J.D. Salinger and others enter the scene and complicate his task. To select correspondents, he includes a running tally of how much he’s spent to date, surprised and a little afraid at how quickly he’s burning through his yearly budget. It’s a learning and discovery process we’ve all been through at some point in our collecting career, but it’s great fun and also instructional to observe this fictional collector’s journey in the pages of *Bibliophilia*.

Bibliophilia isn’t without its flaws. Occasionally Hall gives

Dickerson an aw-shucks Gary Cooper naivete that stretches credulity. One lady friend signs off an email with “XO,” for instance, to which Larry replies “What the hell is XO?” C’mon – really? What grown man doesn’t know that “XO” means hug and kiss? And this friend’s explanation is equally inane: “It is computer language for a kiss and a hug – I trust your girlfriend won’t mind.” Huh? These commonplace symbols have been around for many centuries, “X” dating to the Middle Ages and “O” of disputed but old origin -- I can’t believe any literate person would think these symbols somehow came about because of computers.

But this feels like nitpicking in the face of two of the most enjoyable novels about collecting this reviewer has covered in many a year. Hall’s *Correspondence* and *Bibliophilia* earn a spot on any autograph and/or book collector’s reference shelves alongside all those nonfiction how-to’s, bibliographies, price guides and such.