



Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson

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For the first time, selections from Emily Dickinson's thirty-six year correspondence to her neighbor and sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson, are compiled in a single volume. *Open Me Carefully* invites a dramatic new understanding of Emily Dickinson's life and work, overcoming a century of censorship and misinterpretation.

For the millions of readers who love Emily Dickinson's poetry, *Open Me Carefully* brings new light to the meaning of the poet's life and work. Gone is Emily as lonely spinster; here is Dickinson in her own words, passionate and fully alive.

Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson Details

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Abbie says

Considering myself less of a fan of poetry (in general) and more a fan of Emily Dickinson, the person, her thoughts and her life, I was completely enraptured by this piece of scholarly work. The editors' thesis was made plain throughout the book -- Emily and Susan were deeply devoted to one another throughout their lives. They spoke of everyday, emotional, spiritual, and literary matters and even collaborated in editing each others' poetry. The editors note that "in spite of the sheer volume of correspondence between Susan and Emily, and despite compelling evidence of an ongoing literary dialogue between the two women, the relationship between Emily and Susan has been neglected, distorted, and obscured." They posit that this is because of two cultural factors -- the view of the "Poetess" as tortured, delicate, and pining, and then perhaps the fear of mature, same-sex attraction that goes beyond the time's accepted ephemeral girl crush. (I rephrased the second point a bit.) Was Emily Dickinson in love with her brother's wife? We will never know. Conventions and language of the time period aside, I did find many of the letters and letter-poems to be delightfully provocative. Take, for example, this passage from one of the many early letters Emily wrote Susan while Susan was out of town:

"I hope for you so much, and feel so eager for you, feel that I cannot wait, feel that now I must have you -- that the expectation once more to see your face again, makes me feel hot and feverish, and my heart beats so fast -- I go to sleep at night, and the first thing I know, I am sitting there wide awake, and clasping my hands tightly, and thinking of next Saturday, and "never a bit" of you."

Also, as one who doesn't always "get" poetry, it pleased me greatly to read Emily's early correspondence, in which she plainly spelled out her feelings. I laughed out loud on multiple occasions. Allow me to make this review even longer by giving another example from the same letter:

"While the minister this morning was giving an account of the Roman Catholic system, and announcing several facts which were usually startling, I was trying to make up my mind w'h of the two was prettiest to go and welcome you in, my fawn colored dress, or my blue dress. Just as I had decided by all means to wear the blue, down came the minister's fist with a terrible rap on the counter, and Susie, it scared me so, I hav'nt got over it yet, but I'm glad I reached a conclusion!"

Having only limited knowledge about Dickinson's life prior to reading Open Me Carefully, I certainly learned a lot. Maybe she will always be pigeon-holed into the caricature of a brilliant but reclusive spinster by popular culture and even in classrooms, but I'm glad that this book exists for readers who, like me, desire to closely examine the life of a like-minded soul who found freedom of mind in solitude and the written word and who loved so passionately.

Later in their lives, as Emily became more prolific in her poetry-writing, the letters turned into letter-poems. I appreciate that the editors aimed to accurately portray the spacing and line breaks, although I find the thought of Dickinson only ever allowing herself a one-inch margin in which to write kind of hilarious. The fact that the cover of my copy is fading and the photographic insert in the middle of the book was bound completely upside down doesn't diminish my love. Thank you, ladies, for igniting my passion.

Becca Becca says

I took a class in college by the woman who wrote this book, who is, by the way, absolutely infatuated with Emily Dickinson. In taking her Emily Dickinson class, I realized I wasn't so much a fan of Dickinson's poetry.

EmilyAnnEdit says

I must admit, poetry is not my strong suit, particularly when it comes to less structures and simplistically worded poetry. Though I had been briefly exposed to Dickinson's poetry in High School, I had paid almost no attention to it, being largely over my head at the time. But this collection is not the general, without comment or context poetry I have seen before.

Often, Susan Dickinson - Emily's close friend and eventual sister-in-law - was ignored by Dickinson scholars, but luckily, someone noticed that Emily herself didn't ignore the woman. Susan received more letters from Emily than anyone else - a large feat considering Emily's avid letter writing - and upon reading the letters, poems, and letter-poems sent between the two, it is evident the kind of intimate and erotically loving relationship the two had.

The writings themselves span from daily updates to rants on political affairs and declarations of devotion. There is almost an innumerable amount to discuss and analyze in Dickinson's writing, particularly when referring to herself or Susan. The organization of this anthology does something that I wish many more did - show the evolution of Dickinson, both in her writing and in her relationships with Susan (as well as her thoughts and ideas on the world). It is this chronological set up - along with the explanatory footnotes - that I feel make this book what it is; understanding the ways that the two women's relationship evolves - particularly following Susan's marriage to Arthur Dickinson, Emily's brother is the fueling force behind reading these works. The only wish I have is that we were given more of Susan's own writing back to Emily, but seeing as almost all of these letters have been destroyed, or are otherwise unable to be found, it is only wishful thinking.

Even if poetry is a bit of a sore subject, I highly recommend this book. The steady transition from fully fledged letters to more abstract poems gives the reader an easy flow into Dickinson's artistic writing, and supplies them with a much more readied mind to understand her poetry. The poems themselves are some of the most beautiful I've read - and produce a kind of devastating eroticism and intimacy (both between Emily and Susan, and Emily and herself) that is so incredibly rare to achieve. Regardless of your personal afflictions with poetry, I guarantee there is something Dickinson has written for you.

Kaushalya says

I am a die hard fan of Emily D. I leaf through the collection of poems just for inspiration and sometimes just to remember certain times and feelings I've been through.

This book caught my attention because of it's title. What a lovely title I thought. And then I realised what it was ;-)

Deborah says

Emily Dickinson remains an enigma. The pop-culture capsule view is that she was sexless, virginal, reclusive, and roamed her Amherst cemetery like a lonely ghost. Her poetry has always reflected otherwise. Its passion and lyrical propulsion complicate this vision, but scholars argue about who was Dickinson's true muse. Was it nature, the unknown "Master," or Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Massachusetts minister/abolitionist and literary correspondent to Dickinson? Ellen Louis Hart and Martha Nell Smith, *Open Me Carefully* editors say no. They claim the real muse in Emily's life was her friend and sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson.

Emily and Sue met as teens, when Susan visited a sister in Amherst. Within a couple years, Sue had moved to Amherst permanently. By the time the two were twenty (they were born within days of each other in 1830), they were spending a good deal of time together and writing when they weren't together. It was a correspondence and a friendship that would last at least 36 years.

In this collection of Emily's letters to Sue, which includes notes, poems, and "letter poems," the editors attempt to show the growth and deepening of a close relationship between the two women. From the opening letters, which contain effusions like this: "Susie, did you think that I would never write you when you were gone away--what made you? I am sure you know my promise far too well for that. . ." (10) to one of Dickinson's last known notes that says, "The tie between us is very fine, but a Hair never dissolves" (259), the two share a lifetime of experiences. They commented on each others' writings, they loved and teased and prepared food for the same family members. They debated religion, discussed flowers, exchanged books, and grieved over family deaths (especially Austin and Sue's youngest child Gilbert or "Gib," who died at 8 from typhoid fever). They lived next door to one another for thirty years. Certainly, their relationship grew and developed and was intimate. But was it quite "intimate?" The editors' use of the word "erotic" several times in the introductory information and scholarly notes sections (along with their use of the Imogen Cunningham photo of a jack in the pulpit flower on the cover) seems to suggest it. In fact, they say that Emily was, frankly, always in love with Sue.

I won't give away more, but if you're interested, particular things of note in the book are these: The authors attempt to show Emily's form as well as content--they bring us her unique punctuation style and postmodern lay out. (Dickinson would love digital technology, I think). It's also fascinating to have a better idea of her writing process, to see various drafts of some of the poems, and to learn that many began as letters to "Sister Sue."

Paris Press says

<http://www.parispress.org/shop/open-m...>

For the first time, selections from Emily Dickinson's 36 year correspondence to her neighbor and sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Dickinson, are compiled in a single volume. *Open Me Carefully* invites a dramatic new understanding of Emily Dickinson's life and work, overcoming a century of censorship and misinterpretation. This remarkable correspondence brings to light Susan Huntington Dickinson as the central source of the poet's passion and inspiration, and as her primary reader and literary companion. Gone is

Emily as the precious recluse spinster of Amherst. Here is Emily in her own words — humorous, playful, passionate, and fully alive.

Diana says

Another of those mind-changing literary biographies (like Claire Tomalin's biography of Jane Austen and Louise de Salvo's biography of Virginia Woolf). This book gave me a view of Emily Dickinson that shattered every myth of her that I'd been exposed to. Absolutely lovingly compiled and written by Ellen Louise Hart. The fact that so much of what's in the book are Emily's own words, and some of Susan's, allows readers an intimate look at Emily's inner life. This book sits alongside Tomalin's and De Salvo's on my shelf - and I find myself often going back to each of them just to revel in the details.

Buffy says

I gave this four stars since I thought the editor did a tremendous job giving background information, explaining esoteric allusions in Emily's poems and letters and in arranging the poems themselves. It was obvious the editor did her research. However, whether you like the book or not truly depends on how well you like poetry in general and Emily Dickinson's poems in particular. I am new to poetry, but I am giving the genre my best efforts and the benefit of the doubt. There were a few poems that I truly did like and I confess, I fell in love with her letter poems. What a charming mode of expression.

Jan Carlson says

Actually I didn't finish this book. I had looked forward to reading Emily Dickinson's letters, learning more about her. Reading her letters was a tedious task that really didn't help me learn much about her other than she loved her good friend and sister-in-law Susan Huntington Dickinson. As one reviewer put it, the letters are "short, impassioned and not easy to interpret."

Nancy says

I am starting to thinking this was a one way correspondence. It is apparent that Emily was really really fond of Susan, to the point where it could cause great pain. But I also wonder, what Susan said in reply.

Deborah Markus says

If you want to buy a collection of Emily Dickinson's letters, you have two choices. There is no complete collection currently in print, which throws me into a blind rage every time I think about it so let's just move on quickly, shall we – but there are two major editions of selected letters. (There are also minor, cutesy, gifty-looking volumes of letters, often with some poems thrown in for good measure; but never mind those for now.)

One of the collections is the first you're shown on Amazon. It's edited by Thomas H. Johnson, the first scholar ever to publish Dickinson's poetry with its original wonky punctuation and capitalization.

This collection of letters is very good. It's annotated enough to give the reader a good sense of what's going on in Dickinson's life, so even if you haven't read a biography of her, you won't be lost. In fact, this collection could work as a bare-bones biography.

However, this collection of letters is a bit pricey -- \$22.57 at the time of this writing, which is an odd number in every sense. In its listing, Amazon suggests another edition that's slightly cheaper -- \$16.39. Both are paperback, so why not get the less expensive one?

The answer is: They're not the same collection.

This other edition is edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, who is described on the back of the book as "a close friend."

I find that an interesting description of a woman who never actually met Dickinson. "A close friend of *whom*?" seems a logical question in this case.

Which is where the story gets creepy.

Mabel Loomis Todd came to Amherst with her husband when he got a post as a professor at Amherst College. Dickinson's family was closely associated with the school – her grandfather was one of the original founders – and Dickinson's brother Austin and his wife Susan were among the first to welcome the Todds to town.

Mabel quickly learned of Emily Dickinson's existence, though at this point in her life Dickinson never left the house just next door to her brother's. Susan often read Dickinson's poetry to guests, and Mabel was intrigued by the woman the townspeople called "the myth."

Eventually, Mabel was invited over to Emily Dickinson's house to play the piano and sing. (In the days before recorded music, gifted amateur musicians were desirable social commodities, and Mabel was used to this sort of request.) Emily listened from another room. After Mabel's performance, Dickinson sent in a glass of sherry and a poem she'd written while listening.

And what was the poem about? The beauty of music? The singing of the birds that Dickinson was so fond of and mentions so often in her work?

Well, no. This poem marvels about the "fortitude" a soul must have

*That it can so endure
The accent of a coming Foot –
The opening of a Door –*

In other words, Dickinson had come to dread and detest the intrusion of visitors, and she had no qualms about saying so to this one.

Let's hope the sherry was good.

Mabel was more intrigued than ever by the woman she was already convinced was a genius. She and Dickinson exchanged some letters, but Dickinson never relented on her closed-door policy, no matter how bird-like Mabel attempted to make her music.

This was friendship, of a sort. But it didn't hold a candle to the bond between Dickinson and her sister-in-law Susan. They'd known and loved each other since before Susan accepted Austin Dickinson's proposal of marriage. Dickinson wrote more letters to Sue than she did to anyone else. She also saw Sue in person long after she'd given up other social contact.

Mabel *was* "close" to Austin Dickinson, however. Specifically, she had a long affair with the man who had married his current wife the year Mabel was born.

In the words of the immortal bard, *ew*.

This was nineteenth-century New England. Divorce and remarriage wasn't an option. Mabel was passionately in love with Austin, and she wanted to be part of his life somehow. More, she wanted some sort of sign that their relationship wasn't just a fling – it was a union blessed by the God who must have been talking about other people when he made that commandment against adultery.

Mabel couldn't be Austin's wife – couldn't even be the mother of his child, though she tried. But she could be the midwife to a great poet's career, and in that way have her name forever associated with the Dickinson family.

Title divine, is mine.

The Wife without the Sign –

as Emily Dickinson wrote.

The strange, twisted story of how Mabel Loomis Todd came to be the editor of Dickinson's poetry and letters is a tale for another review. The reason I bring it up now is this: if you buy that less expensive edition of Dickinson's letters – which is also the edition you'll be purchasing if you click on the Kindle option – you won't hear a thing about Austin's wife Susan. Mabel was furious at Sue for even existing, and then for having the nerve to cut Mabel socially once news of the affair broke. She couldn't kill Sue off and marry Austin the way she desperately wanted to. But she *could* do her damnedest to write her out of history.

If you buy the edition of letters Mabel edited, you won't see a single reference to Susan Gilbert Huntington Dickinson. Sue was Emily Dickinson's closest friend. She's said to have prepared Dickinson's body for burial (though some biographers dispute this). Certainly she wrote an eloquent obituary of her brilliant friend. She's mentioned by name in some poems. And, as I mentioned, Dickinson wrote more letters to her than to anyone else.

But Mabel did her best to pretend she'd never existed.

Ironically, the back of Mabel's edition of the letters mentions how reclusive Dickinson grew in her later years. She "seldom saw her many friends, [but] she thought of them often and affectionately. ...The small cast of daily characters in her little world takes on vivid life in the letters."

Well, yes. As long as you understand that a large country in that little world was erased from the map.

That damage isn't localized. Robert N. Linscott's *Selected Poems & Letters of Emily Dickinson*, an inexpensive volume often found on bookstore shelves, doesn't contain a single letter to Susan. Neither does the Everyman Pocket edition of Dickinson's letters, a pretty hardcover just begging to be given as a gift to that Dickinson fan in your life.

Nicely done, Mabel.

Open Me Carefully seeks to undo some of that damage.

In their introduction to this collection of letters, Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith make it clear that they consider these missives "romantic and erotic." I don't know if I agree that Dickinson had to have been in love with Susan in order to have written as she did. My own opinion – and I'm only an interested civilian – is that Dickinson was emotionally close to very few people; but those she loved, she *adored*. Certainly she was passionately fond of Susan.

I neither know nor care if that passion extended to anything physical, either in thought or in deed. I only know that it's an injustice both to Susan and to Dickinson to ignore or trivialize their relationship.

I was interested to learn that though Dickinson used conventional formal stationery with other correspondents, she wrote to Susan on whatever came to hand – "graph, scrap, and formal embossed paper of all sizes." That sort of casual intimacy is the equivalent of paying (or receiving) a visit barefoot, or in one's bathrobe. But it's not the kind of detail a reader can know unless the editor points it out.

Hart and Smith do something else I haven't seen other editors of Dickinson's letters do: they present her letters as they would have looked to the recipient. Not in her handwriting, although they do offer a few photos. But they follow the line breaks Dickinson made.

I found this artistically significant. Her early letters are in this respect perfectly conventional – they spread across the page as any letter would. But her late letters snake down the page, two or three words a line, looking like nothing so much as that "narrow fellow in the grass" she made the subject of one of her longer poems (one of the few published in her lifetime – but that's another story for another review). Seen this way, these late letters look less like correspondence and more like modern poetry. This, for instance, was written while Susan was visiting her sister in New York:

*Without the
annual parting
I thought to
shun the
Loneliness that
parting ratifies.
How artfully
in vain!
Your Coffee
cooled un-
touched except
by random
Fly.*

Compare that to William Carlos Williams' letter-poem "This Is Just To Say":

*I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox*

*and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast*

*Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold*

Dickinson may have been more ahead of her time artistically than she's yet been given credit for.

So this collection is important in that it attempts to restore not merely a crucial relationship, but some of Dickinson's artistry. Oh, and that cooling coffee makes it clear that contrary to what's been written elsewhere about Dickinson, she was still seeing Susan face-to-face in the 1870s.

There are also sweet personal touches one won't find in any collection of her poetry. In the 1850s, Emily sent this poem as a letter to Susan:

*The morns are meeker than they were –
The nuts are getting brown –
The berry's cheek is plumper –
The Rose is out of town –*

*The Maple wears a gayer scarf –
The field – a Scarlet gown –
Lest I sh'd seem old fashioned
I'll put a trinket on!*

I've loved this poem since I found it in a children's collection and read it to my very young son – we both laughed at the line about the rose being out of town. So I enjoyed learning that, as Smith and Hart point out in their note to this letter, "A yellowed ribbon that once held a flower is woven through this letter-poem. The paper is cut so that the ribbon, precisely trimmed, does not cover the text of the poem."

Anecdotes like this also make it clearer why Susan and Lavinia, Emily's sister, disagreed so strongly on what to do with Dickinson's poetry after her death. Lavinia wanted to follow the more conventional path of publication, including "correcting" Emily's spelling and punctuation and giving titles to the poems. Susan felt that this was ripping the poetry out of context. She struggled – and failed – to find a way to bring Dickinson's "letter to the world" in a way that was more authentic and less ironed-out.

It has taken years of patient scholarship to begin to undo the damage done to Dickinson's artistic legacy by Mabel Loomis Todd. I'm not being spiteful here. I understand that this was a long time ago, long before "Antiques Roadshow." But it's cringe-inducing to learn how Mabel eagerly took apart the booklets of poetry Dickinson sewed together by hand, and didn't bother keeping track afterwards of which poems had been

stitched to which. It's maddening that the woman who supposedly recognized Dickinson's genius not only forced titles on those brilliant poems, but sometimes changed words in order to force rhymes.

If you buy an inexpensive volume of Dickinson's poetry, or see some in an old textbook, odds are good you're looking at Mabel's editing. Ironically, Dickinson's poetry *as she wrote it* won't be in the public domain any time soon, even though she died in 1886. Copyright has to do with what was published when, and Dickinson's poetry wasn't restored to its true self until well into the 20th century.

I mention this because *Open Me* offers the Dickinson lover not merely some wonderful letters, but also early drafts of poems. Dickinson was always sending Susan poetry – sometimes to bounce ideas off her, and sometimes to observe an occasion, whether that was a beautiful day or a shared grief.

I'll close this review with a letter-poem Emily wrote to Susan after the death of Susan's youngest son, Gib, at the age of eight. Both women adored him, and his death is thought by many biographers to have contributed to the final fatal decline in Dickinson's health. Not all of Dickinson's poems are so intimately tied to her personal life, but this collection makes it clear that many were, and many were written "for love of her," the almost-sister, always-friend, possibly-lover of our great American poet.

*Climbing to
reach the
costly Hearts
To which he
gave the worth,
He broke them,
fearing punishment
He ran away
from Earth –*

Maureen says

she writes beautiful poems, and letters. she is fierce and passionate, and these letters subtly changed my perception of her as one undiscovered to one that was already living in a surfeit of emotion though barely published in her lifetime.

Zack says

so fabulous. hadn't read much of dickinson and didn't realize she was a queer mystic.

Lindsey says

Some of the most beautifully written letters ever written.

Braeden says

Beautiful. Like reading the intimate diaries of two lovers.
