

Letters and Women's Passionate Friendships in the Twenty-First Century

By Catherine Clay

IN 2004 BEST-SELLING NOVELIST Ann Patchett published her first work of non-fiction, *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*, a book about her close friend and award-winning poet, Lucy Grealy, who had died less than two years previously. The book is an account of the parts of the lives these two women shared from August 1985, upon their entering a post-graduate writing programme in Iowa city, until Grealy's tragic death in December 2002 from an accidental heroin overdose. Comprising a key element of the book are letters from Grealy to Patchett, which are interspersed throughout the narrative and provide corroboratory evidence for the writing and friendship through which these two lives are intertwined. "Someday you'll both be famous writers," Patchett quotes her mother as saying, "And these letters will be very important to you" (59). Certainly these letters are important for the story they tell about these writers' gradual journey towards literary recognition and fame. Even more important for the concerns of this article is what they reveal about the psychology and politics of women's passionate friendships—both today and as part of a culture with a long history. Letter writing and, I would surmise, now emailing has been crucial to women's friendships, and particularly romantic, passionate friendships.¹ It is an activity into which women friends continue to pour large amounts of time and energy; at one point Patchett comments that "Lucy and I wrote each other constantly" (61). What the letters included in *Truth and Beauty* also reveal, however, is female friendship's difficult competition with heterosexual relationships. Key to my argument is the uneasy relationship between the two and the fact that *Truth and Beauty* is shot through with the very real division of loyalties that comes when one or both parties of the friendship falls in love with a man. As such, Grealy's letters to Patchett do more than demonstrate that letter writing remains a crucial element in women's passionate friendships today. They also contribute to a debate about the politics of such friendships as they are lived, positioned, and defined by their protagonists and by others in auto/biographical literature in the twenty-first century.

In this respect a further important context for my discussion is the contemporary industry of confessional writing and writing about trauma.² Significantly, Grealy is best known for her highly acclaimed memoir, *Autobiography of a Face* (1994), a candid and moving account of her life defined by early childhood cancer of the jaw and endless reconstructive surgeries. Grealy made her name through writing about her disfigurement even as she challenged its terms and tried to turn the game of voyeurism and victimhood on its head (Couser). Patchett cannot escape this legacy either: she writes a book about her intimacy with Grealy in the wake of this text and so is also part of twenty-first-century auto/biographical fashion. Indeed, it is as such that the book drew adverse criticism from a surviving member of Grealy's family. Under the emotive title "Hijacked by Grief," Grealy's sister, Suellen Grealy, wrote, in an article for *The Guardian* soon after the book's publication, that it was "somehow indecent to risk laying [her] family bare for the sake of [Patchett's] personal expression of grief" (29). The inclusion of Grealy's letters is another feature of this contemporary exposé, and it is over the family permission given to Patchett to use the letters that Suellen Grealy expresses particular regret. The article ignited an intense debate (on lit blogs and the like) on the question of "who has the right to write what about who and when" (Jones). What interests me here, however, is that the letters seem to go beyond even Patchett's control, as we shall see below. Crucially, the letters remain as a testament to what was repressed in the friendship and point to levels of intimacy that even now Patchett cannot fully admit.

The majority of Grealy's letters to Patchett date from years roughly between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, before *Autobiography of a Face* shot Grealy to fame. At this point Patchett was still comparatively unknown, although she had published her first novel two years earlier. It would be in 2001 that Patchett's fourth novel, *Bel Canto*, secured her literary reputation, making her also "an overnight success" (*Truth* 239). *Truth and Beauty* is thus a book about a friendship between two literary women's passionate investments in their profession as well as in each other. "But god damn it, I want to be famous," writes Grealy in one excerpt from her letters that Patchett includes in the book. "I'm determined. . . . Okay, that's it; I'm stopping this letter right now to get some writing done. I love you" (131). But despite Grealy's and Patchett's obvious literary connections, *Truth and Beauty* shows that professional writing was in fact *not* the driving force of this friendship. "For [Grealy] it was very important that our professional careers remain separate" (165), and her disinterest in exchanging pages with Patchett contrasts with the friendship Patchett formed with another writer, Elizabeth McCracken, in which the regular exchange of writing

for marking up was a key component (81, 86). As we shall see, what really drove the friendship was something far more primitive and jealous, wonderful and awful, in a meeting of intense desires and inordinate needs. With her Catholic background, Patchett decided early on that her main role was to "help" Grealy (43): providing meals for Grealy, cleaning up after her, nursing her through illness, reading and sorting her mail, and (at one desperate moment, as Grealy struggles to fulfil a book contract) even offering to write a novel for her are just some of the ways Patchett outwardly appears to give most to the friendship. Grealy, in her turn, "liked to be carried" (7), and she could at times be demanding and unreasonable. But with her "pull of celebrity" and boundless energy (5), she is the one who "brought the truth and beauty to the party" (20), and it is the claim she makes upon Patchett's heart (in which her letters play a crucial role) that both ignites and fuels the friendship.

This claim was made the moment Grealy and Patchett met in Iowa city to take up residence in "the ugly green duplex" on Governor Street (23), the only accommodation they could afford. Patchett, traveling with her sister, reached the house before Grealy: "We weren't there five minutes before Lucy was back. When I turned around to say hello, she shot through the door with a howl. In a second she was in my arms, leaping up onto me, her arms locked around my neck, her legs wrapped around my waist. . . . It was not a greeting as much as it was a claim: she was staking out this spot on my chest as her own and I was to hold her for as long as she wanted to stay" (6). Grealy's claim is powerful, demonstrating a love that Patchett doesn't remember as "unfolding," but there already in that moment, "huge and permanent and first." "I felt I had been chosen by Lucy," she writes, "and I was thrilled" (7). But it is a love that is also possessive and jealous: "As much as Lucy liked my friends, it was important for her to know at every moment that she was my uncontested favourite" (84). Patchett goes on to describe the way in which, when they had lunch with Elizabeth McCracken, Grealy would inevitably leave her chair at some point during the meal and sit on her lap:

Lucy would lean her head against my chest and turn her eyes up to me. "Do you love me?" she said.

"Of course I love you."

"Best?"

"Yes best, but you are crushing my thigh."

Lucy sighed, contented now, and continued her conversation with Elizabeth from the comfortable vantage point of my lap, eating what she could off my plate. (84)

Illustrating, certainly, Grealy's possessive, exclusive and jealous love, this scene also points to the erotic and infantile tones of the friendship that are part of its driving forces and needs. Significantly, despite being "a little embarrassed," Patchett does not put a stop to Grealy's "fairly questionable" behavior (84).

It is in these remembered scenes that Patchett's writing comes closest to admitting the deep structures of her friendship with Grealy. But Grealy's letters get even closer to those emotions and seem to tell more than she wishes. Part of the exclusive exchange between them, they demonstrate the crucial role that letter writing plays in continuing to stake Grealy's claim upon Patchett's heart. As such the texts reactivate the thrill of their first meeting, most notably in Grealy's personalized address to Patchett and deployment of a number of pet-names including "Pet," "Axiom of Faith," and "Angora." On occasions Grealy's terms of endearment proliferate almost absurdly, but they always cement the friendship as familiar, close, essential: "Dearest Anngora, my cynical pirate of the elusive heart, my self winding watch, my showpiece, my shoelace, how are you?" (216). But it is the following excerpt, the first that Patchett includes in the book, that goes to the heart of this friendship and its representation: "Dearest anvil, dearest deposed president of some now defunct but lovingly remembered country, dearest to me, I can find no suitable words of affection for you, words that will contain the whole of your wonderfulness to me. You will have to make due with being my favourite bagel, my favourite blue awning above some great little café where the coffee is strong but milky and had real texture to it" (7).

In this letter's opening address, Grealy again searches language for words that will adequately convey her love for Patchett. But it is a verbal pun that unlocks this friendship's central economy. Telling Patchett that she will have to "make due" with being Grealy's "favourite bagel," her "favourite blue awning above some great little café," the ostensible meaning (that Patchett will have to "make do") suggests a deficit in language. As such, the implication is that Grealy remains Patchett's debtor because she hasn't found words suitable enough to contain "the whole of [Patchett's] wonderfulness" to her. However, Grealy's pun also produces an account of friendship that renders her own balance in terms of surplus, against which Patchett must pay *her* debts to Grealy. That is, Patchett will have to give back to the friendship (her "due") by being Grealy's favourite bagel, favourite blue awning, etc. The letter thus positions both writer and recipient as emotional debtors in the friendship. But it is the initial mode of address ("dearest deposed president of some now defunct but lovingly remembered country") that provides the explanatory key. Written six years after Patchett and Grealy met at Iowa, the letter represents the friendship as *already a memory*.

That is, as the verbal pun on making do/due in the friendship reveals, the friendship is now experienced in terms of absence and loss. Crucially, in its topographic desire to locate their friendship in a café “where the coffee is strong but milky and had real texture to it,” this letter invokes the physical meeting spaces of friendship for which letters are a necessary but inadequate substitute.

Grealy's letter therefore marks, in this early framing of the friendship, that something valuable was lost even ten years before her tragic death in December 2002. Specifically, it is each other's presence that is lost through the geographical separation that followed their college days in Iowa.³ But while Patchett's narrative assumes that the companionship of this period could not last for ever, Grealy's letter produces an open challenge to a friendship that is called upon to reoccupy familiar ground.⁴ That is, if Patchett is a “*deposed* president” (emphasis added), there are political questions to be asked about how and why their friendship has been displaced and about what prevents it from being re-instated. Crucial here is Patchett's admission, a little later in the book, that she did Grealy and herself “a great disservice” when, in their second year at Iowa, she “left the house on Governor Street to move in with [her] boyfriend” (45). She continues:

This act of packing up and leaving home set in motion a much larger mistake that would take years to correct. At the time I thought this was my big chance for love, that I was doing something very romantic and important, but looking back on it now, it all seems part of a very simple equation: I left the house where I lived with someone who loved me to go to the house of someone who did not love me at all. Wasn't it more important to live with a man . . . ? Wasn't that more valuable than staying with a friend who made me laugh, who made me think about everything, but was, in the end, just a girl? I shouldn't have had to choose between them. Lucy was devastated that I was going and she let me know it in no uncertain terms. I left her all my furniture and continued to pay my half of the rent for months until she could find a place of her own, but it didn't make any difference. (45)

In the light of this passage it is possible to read the whole book as Patchett's attempt to come to terms with the “mistake” she made, nearly twenty years earlier, in leaving Grealy and “the little home we made together, our life in the ugly green duplex” (23). Describing how she later left Grealy “for the second time” (for a different state, with her boyfriend, in the winter of 1987) Patchett writes, “I knew I was making another mistake . . . but at this point I felt like I was on a train shooting off into the future” (53–54). Here Patchett's narrative focuses

attention on the difficult competition between female friendship and heterosexual relationships. Patchett may answer Grealy's question "Do you love me?" in the affirmative *ad infinitum*, even tell her that she loves her "best." But in this retrospective apologia, her guilt is implied. As we have seen, Grealy's letters provide the true reminder of their love for each other before Patchett left her for a boyfriend. They also play a crucial role in sustaining an exclusive exchange between them now. In one excerpt, which refers to the break-up of Patchett's marriage (to the boyfriend for whom she had left Grealy), Grealy addresses Patchett as "my little lamp on the wharf" and "my most loved hero now and for always" (61). Positioning Patchett as the "hero" of *their* romance, for Grealy at least, it is not a relationship with a man but *their* friendship that is represented as the essential homecoming. This is despite the fact that Grealy also had a string of boyfriends. Her letters also speak of her sexual relationships with men and her "get-a-man crusade" when she is without one (15). But they also admit that, in using sex with men in order to feel less lonely, "for all the men I've had, I've never felt lonelier" (175). In contrast, she writes to Patchett on another occasion: "it's just so amazing to me how good you can make me feel, more than anyone else (sounds like a pop song, I know)" (52). In this allusion to contemporary love-songs, Grealy once again asserts female friendship as the site of a more intense and enduring passion.

It is in Grealy's repeated appeal to reinstate the primacy of their friendship that the full measure of what is lost is felt. Another letter written from Provincetown (where Grealy had taken up a scholarship in 1992) reveals Grealy's still intense desire for intimacy with Patchett that surfaces here in a dream: "The other night I dreamed you called me on the phone to tell me you weren't going to Montana, that you were coming to P-town after all. I was so happy, and the dream seemed so real that I spent half the morning thinking it was true" (116). In an echo of earlier events we find that Patchett had gone to Montana with her new boyfriend, whom she had met in Kentucky the previous year. But it is Grealy's letter that preserves the tension between the inevitability of Patchett's narrative and the choice Patchett in fact made in placing the claims of a heterosexual relationship before those of female friendship. As things turned out, the following year this relationship also "fell apart fairly quickly" when Patchett took up a scholarship in Boston (118). Over the next few years, Patchett and Grealy saw each other regularly, both during the height of Grealy's fame (in the wake of *Autobiography of a Face*) and later during Grealy's sad battle with heroin-addiction and self-harm.⁵ By this time, however, the terms of their friendship appear to have shifted. Visiting Grealy in the hospital after a particularly severe surgical operation in November 2001,

Patchett marvels at the fact that Grealy had "so many friends, so many people who loved her, who had histories with her I had never even heard" (226). What Patchett doesn't quite admit is that Grealy had had to move on from her dream of a passionate friendship dyad to a network of friends whom she knitted together "to find the perfect balance of what she needed from all of us" (208). Again, it is one of Grealy's letters that marks this shift more overtly. Dated 10/15/01, it follows Patchett's description of a quarrel and comes with a gift: "a jewelry [*sic*] roll-up bag" from Florida. It opens, "Dearest Angora, How strange and sweet to be writing a card the old fashioned way," before going on to explain that the card represents "a learning" of "what it means to be a truly great friend" (221–22). What makes this excerpt different from the other letter writing presented in the book is its less personalized discourse and its self-conscious reliance on conventions (the card, the gift) to convey the friendship's regained intimacy. Writing in "the old fashioned way," Grealy reasserts the importance of the friendship in terms that invoke a long tradition of letter writing between women friends. But its use of language (in contrast to Grealy's former elaborate modes of address) is less unique.

Grealy's card, written in the year before her death, thus functions as a foil for the main body of letter writing presented by the book, focusing attention on the passionate intensity of Grealy's earlier letters, which sustained their exclusive exchange in former years. Only after Grealy's death does Patchett realize that, "If Lucy couldn't give up the heroin, I could not give up Lucy" (253), so her writing of the book is haunted by dreams: "Most nights I dream of her. I am in a strange city and I see her sitting in a café, drinking coffee and writing in a notebook. She is frail beyond anything I could have imagined, barely able to pick up her cup with two hands, but she's happy to see me. I run to her, kiss her, and she pulls herself up in my arms to sit in my lap and curl against me like a little bird" (254). Of particular interest here is the dreamed-of location—a café—which recalls the topography of the friendship imagined in Grealy's defining letter that made visible their emotional debts. Crucially, in registering Patchett's trauma occasioned by Grealy's death, the recurring dream also bears the repressed knowledge that the greater loss occurred even further back in time when Patchett's decision to leave Grealy in Iowa put an end to their intimate companionship and the home they had made there together. Patchett goes on to reveal that "Night after night after night I find her, always in a public place, a museum, a restaurant, on a train" (255). After "the Iowa years" (44), public spaces were Grealy's and Patchett's most common meeting grounds. But Patchett's nightly replaying of these encounters carries memory-traces too of the private/intimate space surrendered in the unequal competition between heterosexual relationships and

female friendship. At another point in the book Patchett makes the revealing comment that, "I've always been a believer in repression" (177). Now in her dreams Patchett confronts the friendship's real emotions and depths. But as we have seen, it is Grealy's letters that preserve this repressed knowledge at the heart of this text.

By way of conclusion it is interesting to compare *Truth and Beauty* with the "ur-text" of female friendship, Vera Brittain's biography of Winifred Holtby, *Testament of Friendship* (1940). The parallels between these two texts are striking. Like Patchett's book, Brittain's memoir is also a story about the friendship of two women who met at college (Somerville College, Oxford) and who embarked together on their professional careers as writers in London the early 1920s. As for Patchett and Grealy, "work"/writing defines and shapes the friendship of Brittain and Holtby at the same time as this friendship's intense desires for intimacy exceed its professional investments (Clay 37-50). Significantly, Brittain also left Holtby (and the home they had built together) in circumstances similar to those in which Patchett left Grealy: in 1925 Brittain married and left Holtby to join her husband in America. Unlike Patchett and Grealy, however, Brittain and Holtby re-established their "joint existence" in a larger flat in London in 1927 with Brittain's husband joining them for six months of every year. After Holtby's death in 1935, Brittain's act in writing about "the best friend whom life has given me" represented one way in which she could repay her debts to the friendship (Brittain 4). Similarly, *Truth and Beauty* may be read as Patchett's attempt to "make due" in a friendship that has made her an emotional debtor and to come to terms with the "mistake" she made in leaving Grealy many years earlier. But there is a key difference between these two texts, namely that Brittain and Holtby found a much more radical way to manage the division of loyalties than Patchett and Grealy, though so many years before. Certainly letter writing (and, as I've suggested, emailing too) remains a crucial element in women's friendships today. Of course, few can write with the brilliance or inventiveness of Grealy and Patchett, but even unprepossessing emails can reveal that women continue to have passionate friendships that exceed conventional sexual descriptions and categorizations (Jolly). But what the comparison between these texts also shows is that the problems of competition between women's friendships with each other and their relationships with men are just as persistent, even post feminism and post lesbian liberation, and that others way before us may have found better solutions.

As a text that brings female friendship into renewed literary prominence, *Truth and Beauty* thus also focuses attention on the politics of women's friendships today and their cultural representation. As such, it should lead us to consider what would have been lost if Patchett had

been prevented from using Grealy's letters or indeed publishing the book at all. Whether or not Suellen Grealy's anger about family exposure was justified, I would venture to suggest that women's passionate friendships are still not visible enough, at least in so far as "a friendship" between two women remains an unusual focus for a book-length study of a writer's life. Significantly, Patchett's title for the book registers her awareness of the important contribution she is making for literary writing about women's friendships; "Truth and Beauty" is, of course, a reference to Keats's poem on the eternal value of art, "Ode on a Grecian Urn." This poem carried a special resonance for Grealy, herself a poet, who "could talk on the nature of truth and beauty for hours" (18). But in this book it is her friendship with Patchett that is given a permanent place in literature. Crucially, it is Grealy's letters that produce the most compelling revelations about this friendship's exclusive exchange and its difficult competition with heterosexual relationships. As such Grealy's letters themselves take on "a perverse form of literary transcendence" (Jolly 29). Attesting to the survival of letters and women's passionate friendships into the twenty-first century, the texts remain fascinating demonstrations of the continuing role that letter writing plays in women staking claims upon each other's hearts.

Lancaster University

Notes

1. "Romantic Friendship" as a term for women's passionate friendships was popularized by Faderman. Collections of letters between women friends include Holtby and Brittain, and Thompson.

2. For a useful overview of this literature see Cosslett et al. (especially the introduction).

3. Grealy remained in Iowa city until June 1988, leaving America in the fall for Europe: first Berlin, then London, and later Aberdeen—for a new cycle of surgeries lasting nearly three years. Patchett continued to live in America throughout this period and made a two-week visit to Grealy in Aberdeen in November 1989.

4. Interestingly, the inevitability of Patchett's narrative may also be found in an article for *The New York Times Magazine* about the popular television series *Sex and the City* ("Friendship"). Here she makes the compelling argument that the deepest fantasy of this program for female viewers is not the glamor associated with its four women protagonists, or even the plentiful sex, but of "having such close women friends and having the time to actually spend with them." This fantasy, she suggests, is based on women's experience of the kind of friendship they make in and through their twenties "that for many of us becomes

one of life's most important relationships." But while such friendships frequently get pushed aside later by work, relationships, and other life-circumstances, "here are four adult women who have continued the intensity of their friendships as if they were still college girls. No one moves away."

5. Grealy was living in New York when Patchett moved to Boston. Patchett moved to Nashville when her scholarship ended, but records that she and Grealy "flew back and forth between Nashville and New York for regular visits" (165).

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