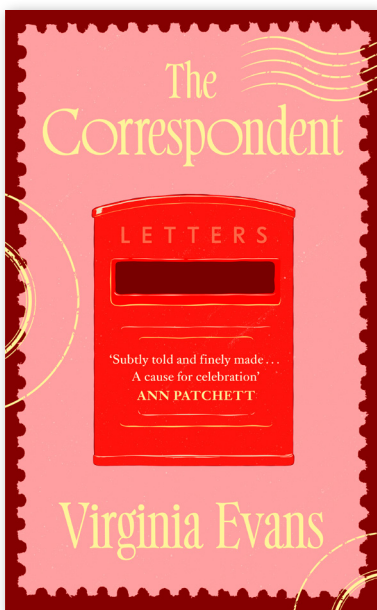


The Correspondent

by Virginia Evans



PLOT SUMMARY

Every morning, Sybil Van Antwerp sits down to write letters – to her brother, to her best friend, to the president of the university who will not allow her to attend a class she desperately wants to take, to her favourite authors to tell them what she thinks of their latest books, and to one person to whom she writes often yet never sends the letter.

At seventy-three, Sybil has used her correspondence – witty and wise – to make sense of the world. But beyond the page, she has spent the last thirty years keeping the people who love her at arms' length, until letters from someone in her past force her to examine one of the most painful periods of her life.

Now, Sybil must send the letter she has been writing for all these years, and find forgiveness within herself in order to move on.

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

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Sight, blindness, foresight and hindsight are all part of the same theme of seeing and not seeing that Evans explores in *The Correspondent*.

Early in the novel, Sybil has crashed her car because of a spell of temporary blindness when driving. Sybil's blindness is also symbolic. She describes the experience of trying to access her memory of her son Gilbert's death:

'It is as if, in my mind, there is a sentry standing outside the locked room of this memory – it won't let me in... It is like blindness.'

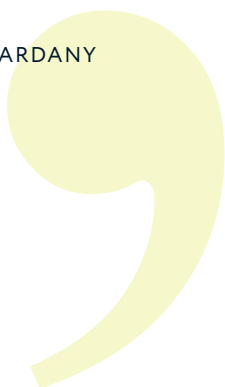
Not until the end of the book does Sybil allow herself to recall what really happened in the moments when Gilbert died, and accept her culpability in his death. Ironically, at the point when she finally allows herself to remember the truth, she is almost blind.



Shortlist
2026

“An incredibly original story... warm, heartfelt, gorgeous.”

SALMA EL-WARDANY
2026 JUDGE



Sybil is, for a long time, also blind to the reasons for her distance from her daughter, Fiona. Her long-time friend Rosalie writes a very difficult letter to Sybil, asking her to see her daughter and communicate with her.

In hindsight, Sybil also realises that her actions in the case of Dezi Martinelli's father were crueler than she would have liked, and makes the reparations she's able to. Again, in the final stages of her life, when Sybil is losing her sight and her ability to write letters, she is forced to give up the distance – and symbolic blindness – that she has relied on for so much of her life by making letter-writing her main method of communication with her friends and family. However, in the case of Dezi, it's letter-writing that provides a way to heal the rift between them, and for Dezi and Sybil to see the other person's story clearly for the first time.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Evans begins *The Correspondent* with a quote from Joan Didion:

'What I have made for myself is personal, but is not exactly peace... Most of us live less theatrically, but remain the survivors of a peculiar and inward time.'

It becomes clear in Evans' novel that Sybil uses letter-writing as a way to maintain a tolerable distance from her family and friends, because she feels unable to interact with them more personally. Yet, Sybil craves contact and connection, as we see from the volume of letters that she writes. Letter-writing is vital to Sybil's wellbeing and provides her with a way to process her thoughts at a distance from the 'real' life that she has found so painful. Sybil is a survivor, and for many years after Gilbert's death, remains in an inward-facing state of grief.

How does the method of using letters to and from Sybil show her 'peculiar and inward' state of mind, her character, her secrets and her relationships? How do the subjective, fractured and deeply personal nature of letters as a form of writing help build Sybil's character in the reader's mind? How do we get to feel like we know her so well? How does Evans construct Sybil's personality in this way?

QUESTIONS

How does Sybil's relationship with Harry compare to Rosalie's relationship with Fiona?

Why do you think Virginia Evans chose Joan Didion as Sybil's most frequent author-correspondent?

How is Melissa, the University Dean's experience of being a woman in a male-dominated workplace similar and different to Sybil's?



Shortlist
2026

How did Theodore compare with Daan and Mick as Sybil's love interests?

NEXT STEPS

Reading *The Correspondent* would surely make anyone want to start writing letters to their friends and family – perhaps even to authors and other well-known figures! Write a letter to someone. Remember Sybil's advice about how to write a good letter – ask questions of the other person and, if you receive a reply, answer theirs, ensuring that there is plenty to write about. Find some lovely letter-writing paper and envelopes and perhaps some stickers or other decorations that you like. You could write a number of letters and see what comes back – who writes back to you, and are any of the replies unexpected? Do you learn anything about the people that you write to that you didn't know before? Do you learn anything about yourself in the process of writing letters? What do you choose to write about yourself, and what do you leave out?

Alternatively, *The Correspondent* contains a number of great book recommendations, from the works of Ann Patchett to Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, and many others besides. Read at least one of the books that Sybil or one of her friends or family say they're reading. If you enjoy it, write a review online or consider writing a letter to the author telling them what you enjoyed about it. ■

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Virginia Evans is from the East Coast of the United States. She attended James Madison University for her bachelor's in English literature. After starting a family, she went back to school for her master's of philosophy in creative writing at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, where she studied under tutors including Claire Keegan and Kevin Power. She now lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, with her husband, Mark, two children, Jack and Mae, and her Red Labrador, Brigid.



If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

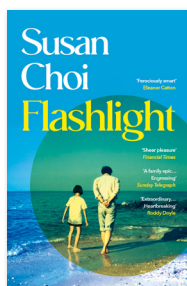
In *84 Charing Cross Road*, Helene Hanff tells a funny, poignant, classic love story about two book-lovers through a series of letters between herself and a used-book dealer in London.

In *The Sentence*, Louise Erdrich's novel of a bookstore owner and the cast of characters that frequent it also includes a fabulous selection of book recommendations.

Want more? Our website is packed full of book recommendations, reading lists, author interviews and more. And our Women's Prize Library is brimming with books, both fiction and non-fiction, that will satisfy every reader from gripping mysteries and inspiring memoirs to magical romances and thrilling historical accounts.

womensprize.com

EXPLORE THE 2026 SHORTLIST



Flashlight
by Susan Choi



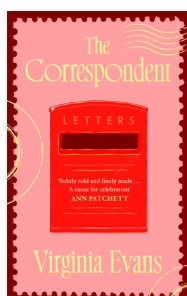
The Mercy Step
by Marcia Hutchinson



Dominion
by Addie E. Citchens



Kingfisher
by Rozie Kelly



The Correspondent
by Virginia Evans



Heart the Lover
by Lily King

DISCOVER MORE!

There are many ways to get involved with the Women's Prize:

Join our book-loving community and subscribe to our newsletter, chat on social media and join us at our events, both in-person and online.

We run free writing workshops, online book clubs and an annual book festival to bring our community together. And listen out for our podcast *Bookshelfie*, where each week a guest picks her five favourite books written by women and

discusses the impact they have had on her life and career.

The Women's Prize Trust is a registered charity, and we appreciate donations of any size to support our outreach work with writers and readers from disadvantaged backgrounds. So, however you wish to, **join us and help put more books written by women into the hands of more readers.**

womensprize.com
[@womensprize](https://www.instagram.com/womensprize)



SUPPORTED BY

