

# CLOSING THE BOOK

Travels in Life, Loss, and Literature



by  
**JOELLE RENSTROM**

CLOSING THE BOOK: Travels in Life, Loss, and Literature  
by Joelle Renstrom

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# Letters to Ray Bradbury

March 3, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

You are my hero.

The only other person I've ever said that to is my dad.

March 5, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

I've wanted to write you a letter for a long time. I'm a teacher and I almost had my class write you letters when we were reading *The Martian Chronicles*. There are a few Douglas Spauldings in my class. A couple Clarices. They'd have talked your ear off. The furious scratch of their pencils would have left little holes in the paper.

Most of them would have expressed admiration for your prophetic insights about the paranoias, preoccupations, and prejudices of society. You've blown their minds with your prescience about trigger-happiness, the addiction of colonization, xenophobia, cultural intolerance, laziness, loneliness, our increasing tendency to invent our own realities when we want something badly enough, and the fact that we'd sell hotdogs on Mars if there were money in it.

My kids are too young to understand this, but somehow they do, and they would have written to you about it: you have your finger on the dark pulse of humanity, yet you spend far more time exploring and being fascinated by it than you do chastising or worrying. You see the ugliness, but you still believe in and love people. This means we can believe you. You're not here to fool us—you're here to open us up. We all want to know what you know, what gives you insight and optimism at the same time, so we'll go wherever you take us.

They'd have asked you questions. What do you think about Pluto getting demoted? Have you ever been visited by aliens? How might America implement the happy triangle of art, science, and religion that you imagine on Mars? Do you believe in time travel? Do you believe in God?

One or two of them would have described to you in detail their new tennis shoes. They would have wriggled their toes and wished they could run and write at the same time.

Maybe I'm projecting. Maybe I'm thinking about what I would have said if I'd written you a letter.

March 12, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

My students, who are twelve to fourteen years old, read *The Martian Chronicles* a few weeks ago. What a joy it was, in the dreary Michigan February, to pull out this book and give them the best kind of homework.

I had them define science fiction. Then I promised them their definitions would change after they read your book.

"Whoa!" they all said.

"This book is not what I expected," they said.

"It's about people!"

They debated Spender's guilt with all the seriousness of greenhorn lawyers. In an attempt to explain the encounter in "Night Meeting," they invented theories

of how time works on Mars. They created Martian masks, wore them, and became powerful. They mourned the realization that one of the few qualities that separate humans from animals or other sentient races is our use of guns. "Usher II" drove them mad with delight; one student said that the "Investigator of Moral Climates" made him think of our administration ruling by "red tape and fear." My heart and mind constantly turned cartwheels when we talked about your book.

We examined the Martian purpose of life. "Why live? Life was its own answer. Life was the propagation of more life and the living of as good a life as possible. Life was now good and needed no arguments."

"This thing is good," became a class catch phrase.

We marveled at your writing ("I'm learning so much new vocabulary! 'Rococo' is totally my new favorite word!"), your imagination, your vision. When we got to "There Will Come Soft Rains," one shiny-eyed student raised her hand and said, "That house was more human than any other character in the book." They got that beautiful hurt in them when the house died. And they loved it.

This is how I know my students have souls.

This is why I wanted to write you a letter.

March 17, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

I taught synesthesia to my students today. I tied it in with *The Martian Chronicles*' themes about aesthetics and psychic evolution. I brought in Ken Crosswell's book on Mars, with mind-blowing high-definition photographs that give palpable texture to Mars' surface; ice floes look like designs drawn in mercury, clouds are crowds of bubbles. One could read those pictures like Braille.

In the book there's a close-up of Phobos orbiting Mars. Phobos looks like a dumpling with its side pinched down, like a knobby fist. I can't look at it without getting a lump in my throat—it is the most forlorn thing I've ever seen. It reminds me of a line from *The Martian Chronicles*—how Earth looks like a “lonely baseball” from outer space.

I brought in some IDM (intelligent dance music) and ambient sounds--Autechre, Aphex Twin, Boards of Canada--you know, the stuff associated either implicitly or explicitly with alien landscapes. They listened to the music and paged through the book, tracing the shapes, sensations moving from ears to fingers to eyes to mind. They drew and wrote about how they thought Mars would look and smell and

feel.

For long stretches of time they sat with their eyes shut, listening to the music. “This song is so... purple,” someone would say.

“Yeah!” someone else would say. “I hear purple too.”

“This song feels like one of those stress balls that you can smooch in your hand.”

“I smell fireworks!”

“This thing is good,” someone said.

We all agreed that our class on synesthesia was, per your book, a “Martian” experience. The ability to mix senses and sensory experiences is one of the ways the Martians in your book are more evolved than the humans. Someone said that next time, we should invite you. What do you say, Mr. Bradbury? Would you like to hang out with my class and draw music?

March 26, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

My students recently read an essay called “How the Lawyers Stole Winter,” by Christopher Daly. The piece is about how much times have changed, especially for kids. Daly reminisces about skating on



a pond as a kid and bemoans the fact that kids nowadays aren't allowed to—there are fences, danger signs and parents too scared to let their kids outside, much less onto a frozen lake.

My students talked about how none of them play outside very much. The times when all the neighbor kids congregated on someone's lawn for a game of hide-and-go-seek are over. It's dangerous out there, so the parents keep their children in, which only makes it more dangerous.

They talked about the amount of time they, their families and their friends spend online, playing video games, and watching television. No one's going to fall through the ice doing that.

They all have cell phones.

Childhood is so different now than it was fifty, thirty or just ten years ago. It seems as though the Douglas Spaulding moments are fewer and farther between.

"It's not as innocent as it was," one of my students said.

"It's not as innocent as it should be," said another.

I asked if any of them had ever had an invisible friend. Two of them raised their hands. We talked about what that meant. One of the girls in the front

stared at me, eyes wide. “Oh my gosh,” she said. “It *is* the death of imagination. Almost anything we could’ve imagined is online or in a video game, so most people don’t bother. What would happen if everyone stopped imagining?”

They were silent. Perhaps a little worried, and probably vowing to themselves that their imaginations would never die. They seemed to be experiencing nostalgia for the childhood they should have had.

“This thing isn’t good,” someone said.

I looked at their round open faces. They looked innocent, like babes. The idea that they weren’t—that they couldn’t be—was unspeakably sad for all of us.

“Can we read something uplifting?” one of them asked.

Lucky for them I had just the thing. Before class I’d run copies of “On the Shoulders of Giants.” There’s nothing like a Bradbury essay to cure the blues:

“Comes the Evolution. The survival of that species called Child. The children, dying of starvation, hungry for ideas which lay all about in this fabulous land, locked into machines and architecture, struck out on their own. What did they do?

They walked into classrooms in Waukesha and

Peoria and Neepawa and Cheyenne and Moose Jaw and Redwood City and placed a gentle bomb on a teacher's desk. Instead of an apple it was Asimov.

'What's that?' the teacher asked, suspiciously.

'Try it. It's good for you,' said the students.

'No thanks.'

'Try it,' said the students. 'Read the first page. If you don't like it, stop.' And the clever students turned and went away.

The teachers (and the librarians, later) put off reading, kept the book around the house for a few weeks and then, late one night, tried the first paragraph.

And the bomb exploded.

They not only read the first but the second paragraph, the second and third pages, the fourth and fifth.

'My God!' they cried, almost in unison, 'these damned books are *about* something!'"

My students cheered for children. Their renewed faith in imagination—in themselves—ran through them, flushing their cheeks.

Their next set of papers was all magic thunder. They invented alien races (one of which worshipped duct

tape), they wrote about six-headed dragons, their characters spoke in devilish riddles, and their poems morphed into blank-verse epics.

Covering those papers with exclamation points, checkmarks, and smiley faces wasn't enough. I should have put those papers in a time capsule and buried it in my backyard. Dug it up two years later, five, ten—whenever we needed it. I'd unearth it one day and read the stories and we would learn this lesson again, in case we'd forgotten. Or even if we hadn't.

April 2, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

I read *Zen in the Art of Writing* on a bus to Copenhagen. It was a used copy—the pages were slightly worn and the corners were a little greasy. They had creases like wrinkles on a face.

Two thirds of the way through the preface, my heart broke. I cried as though a dam had burst behind my eyes. I didn't care who saw me; I was on a bus ten thousand miles away from anyone or anything I knew. I cried for all it was worth.

I should probably explain.

It wasn't just that I was reading your book—it was

that I was reading it at that precise moment, under those exact circumstances. My fairy godmother might've put that book into my hands.

The exact circumstances were these: my dad was dead.

We were supposed to go to Sweden together—we'd talked about the trip for ages. Now, I had in my bag a glass jar filled with his ashes. The last day of my trip I would spread them over Hedemora, where my grandfather's grandparents had lived. I got up every morning and had to figure out how I would say goodbye that day. Each footfall was a goodbye. Every blink, every yawn, every drop of rain.

I travelled alone. He was the only person who belonged with me on that trip. Most days I was socked by the one-two-three of awe, sadness, and anger. I'd see something beautiful and seconds later the awe transformed to sadness that he couldn't see it. Then I'd get mad, because he should've been there.

I got caught in the hamster wheel, spinning around and around the fact that It Wasn't Fair. No matter how many times I ran around it, no matter how many angles from which I examined it, that fact never changed. At least when I travelled, I was actually going somewhere instead of pacing around my apartment. Working that fact through my body

instead of around it, getting it out of my system.

I tried to be Martian about it. As long as there was awe, I would be okay. I was halfway around the world; I could give up the habit of compartmentalizing. I could let myself feel all three emotions at once, distinctly, despite the discomfort. And maybe then I could grok things more fully.

Exposition is never easy, is it?

April 6, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

Your book is a guide to writing, but on the bus to Copenhagen, it became a guide to living.

I missed my dad all the time, completely and loudly. When I was submerged in grief, I felt more like myself than I had since he died. Being his daughter was the most stable identity I had. Yet I kept thinking to myself, how can this person who's got her father's ashes in her bag possibly be me?

During those moments I didn't know myself as anything other than a girl who had lost her dad and was desperately trying to find him again. No other parts of me existed.

After a while, though, other parts of me peeked out. We're still here, they'd say. Underneath all this. You'll see us soon.

*Zen in the Art of Writing* made the writer part of me, who had been hiding for over a year, emerge, albeit shakily. I was thrilled to see her and gave her permission to appreciate the surges of emotion, the wash of tears during my rides on public transportation, the poignancy of me visiting the fatherland alone. The writer part of me filled notebooks. This is important, she said. This means something. I should write about this.

The daughter part of me answered, this is sacred. If you're going to write about it, write about it. Don't say you're going to write about it and then mope around the house instead.

The writer part of me got sheepish. I know, I know, it said. I won't do that. The writer in me remembered one of the last things my dad ever said to me. I told him that I would dedicate my first book to him and he said, "Thank you. But you have to finish it first."

It was during these talks between my daughter self and my writer self that I read the preface of your book.

Is it gauche to quote you to yourself? Do you think,

I know all this already? Or do you think, damn, *I* wrote that. Good for me. It goes without saying that I hope for the latter. You wrote this, and it's perfect. Hot damn:

“What, you ask, does writing teach us?”

First and foremost, it reminds us that we are alive and that it is a gift and privilege, not a right. We must earn life once it has been awarded us. Life asks for rewards back because it has favored us with animation.

So while our art cannot, as we wish it could, save us from wars, privation, envy, greed, old age, or death, it can revitalize us amidst it all.

Second, writing is survival. Any art, any good work, of course, is that.

Not to write, for many of us, is to die.

We must take arms each and every day, perhaps knowing that the battle cannot be entirely won, but fight we must, if only a gentle bout. The smallest effort to win means, at the end of each day, a sort of victory. Remember the pianist who said that if he did not practice every day he would know, if he did not practice for two days, the critics would know, after three days, his audiences would know.

A variation of this is true for writers. Not that your style, whatever that is, would melt out of shape in



those few days.

But what would happen is that the world would catch up with and try to sicken you. If you didn't write every day, the poisons would accumulate and you would begin to die, or act crazy, or both.

You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you.

For writing allows just the proper recipes of truth, life, reality as you are able to eat, drink and digest without hyperventilating and flopping like a dead fish in your bed.

I have learned, on my journeys, that if I let a day go by without writing, I grow uneasy. Two days and I am in tremor. Three and I suspect lunacy. Four and I might as well be a hog, suffering the flux in a wallow. An hour's writing is tonic. I'm on my feet, running in circles, and yelling for a clean pair of spats.

Taking your pinch of arsenic every morn so you can survive to sunset. Another pinch at sunset so that you can more than survive until dawn.

The micro-arsenic-dose swallowed here prepares you not to be poisoned and destroyed up ahead.

Work in the midst of life is that dosage. To manipulate life, toss the bright colored orbs up to mix with the dark ones, blending a variation of truths. We use

the grand and beautiful facts of existence in order to put up with the horrors that afflict us directly in our families and friends, or through the newspapers and TV.

The horrors are not to be denied. Who amongst us has not had a cancer-dead friend? Which family exists where some relative has not been killed or maimed by the automobile? I know of none. The list is endless and crushing if we do not creatively oppose it.

Which means writing as cure. Not completely, of course. You never get over your parents in the hospital or your best love in the grave.

I won't use the word therapy—it's too clean, too sterile. I only say when death slows others, you must leap to set up your diving board and dive head first into your typewriter.

I have come up with a new simile to describe myself lately. It can be yours.

Every morning I jump out of bed and step on a landmine. The landmine is me.

After the explosion, I spend the rest of the day putting the pieces together.

Now, it's your turn. Jump."

Joelle Renstrom

I read this on the bus to Copenhagen and the daughter and writer parts of me wept together.

A thousand times a day I dissolved into pieces and, with your help, a thousand times a day I attempted my own reconstruction.

April 17, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

When you travel, you can't escape yourself. You think that because you're in some other place under some other sun looking at strange people and things, you won't be inside yourself. But you're more inside yourself than ever. It's the landmine. The explosion is loud. It's messy and painful. It just so happens that the stuff that lingers inside us is the most terrifying stuff there is. Your book helped me pull my insides out and gave me the courage to look at them. I didn't try to run away from myself. Even when I was in a museum or a sculpture garden I stared myself in the eye, looking at and around and through everything that I was without blinking. Not afraid, at least not of some things, anymore.

“...[O]nly by being truly sick can one regain health. Even beasts know when it is good and proper to throw

up. Teach me how to be sick then, in the right time and place, so that I may again walk in the fields and with the wise and smiling dogs know enough to chew sweet grass," you say.

There were some tough times, like a four-day stint when it poured nonstop and all my stuff got soaked. I cried about being soggy and frustrated and cold and angry. I cried about being alone, about not having spoken to anyone in three days. I cried out of relief, because I had come so close to combustion from trying to be strong and responsible. I cried about my unfinished book, about everything in my life I was worried would remain unfinished. I cried about the carnage scattered in the wake of the landmine. I cried because I wanted my daddy.

When Dad first got sick, crying felt like ripping my heart out. I thought that pieces were being extracted that would never find their way back again. But after a stretch of daily cries, those moments became more peaceful. Not so wrenching. Sometimes, even beautiful. I realized that instead of being stoic or "over it," I'd rather be drenched in Oslo, cursing and nursing my wet feet, letting my tears fall, held fast in life's fist.

Joelle Renstrom

April 28, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

The other night, I joined a science fiction writers group. I've never written science fiction in my life, but what the hell, right?

May 2, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

My students are writing literary research papers now. About half of them are writing about *The Martian Chronicles*. This is the first time I've seen students actually excited about research papers. They want to dig till their hands get dirty. I get to see the fingerprints.

The student who cried when she read "There Will Come Soft Rains" came up to me the other day and said, "Please tell me you've read *Yestermorrow: Obvious Answers to Impossible Futures*." I confessed I hadn't. "Oh," she said, and clapped her hands. "You will just love it. I can't wait for you to read it!"

I bought a copy. Used. It's on my bookshelf now, stretched horizontally across the tops of your other books. I'm waiting to read it. In June I'm going to

Eastern Europe for a month. Once again, I'm travelling solo. But not alone.

I'm amassing an arsenal of landmines and secret weapons, horse manure and cicadas, memories and dreams. Tools for reconstruction.

"If your boy is a poet, horse manure can only mean flowers to him," you say, which I love, even though I sometimes turn flowers into horse manure. I'm a great appreciator of terrible beauty, but I can get stuck and wallow in the terrible part for a while before I remember to open my eyes. To travel is to open your eyes again, wider and rounder. To see the inside of things, like Superman. To see that indeed, life is its own answer.

A couple months ago during a visit to New York, I found myself wandering around the financial district trying to peek around tarps to get a look at the construction that consumed whole blocks. It wasn't your average makeover—this one would take a long time. Maybe forever.

The enormity of the reconstruction turned my stomach. The bulldozers looked exhausted; they've spent years pushing against the immovable. Yet, there's a lesson in the bulldozer. It doesn't look at the mess and think, this will never be fixed. It doesn't ask whether the work is worth it. The bulldozer does

Joelle Renstrom

what it does—it keeps going. There's nothing wrong with rebuilding forever. It's an apt metaphor for life. Actually, it's not a metaphor at all.



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