



Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications

William Merrill Decker

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Letters have long been read as primary sources for biography and history, but their performative, fictive, and textual dimensions have only recently attracted serious notice. In this book, William Merrill Decker examines the place of the personal letter in American popular and literary culture from the colonial to the postmodern period.

After offering an overview of the genre, Decker explores epistolary practices that coincide with American experiences of space, settlement, separation, and reunion. He discusses letters written by such well-known and well-educated persons as John Winthrop, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abigail and John Adams, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Samuel Clemens, Henry James, and Alice James, but also letters by persons who, except in their correspondence, were not writers at all: indentured servants, New England factory workers, slaves, soldiers, and Western pioneers. Individual chapters explore the letter writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, and Henry Adams--three of America's most ambitious, accomplished, and theoretically astute letter writers. Finally, Decker considers the ongoing transformation of letter writing in the electronic age.

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