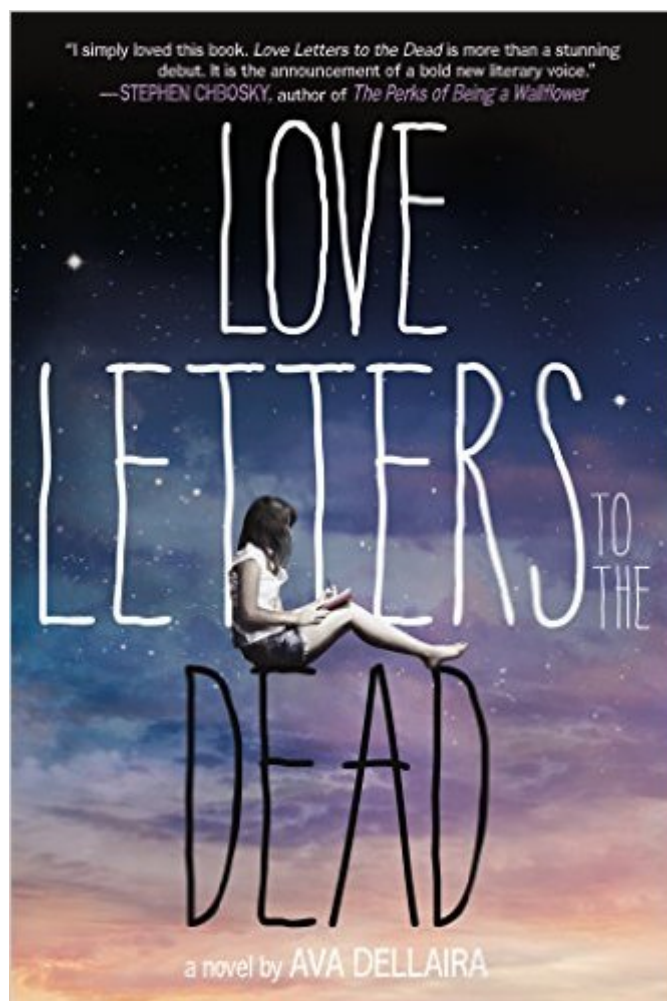


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# Love Letters To The Dead: A Novel



## Synopsis

It begins as an assignment for English class: Write a letter to a dead person. Laurel chooses Kurt Cobain because her sister, May, loved him. And he died young, just like May did. Soon, Laurel has a notebook full of letters to people like Janis Joplin, Amy Winehouse, Amelia Earhart, Heath Ledger, and more -- though she never gives a single one of them to her teacher. She writes about starting high school, navigating new friendships, falling in love for the first time, learning to live with her splintering family. And, finally, about the abuse she suffered while May was supposed to be looking out for her. Only then, once Laurel has written down the truth about what happened to herself, can she truly begin to accept what happened to May. And only when Laurel has begun to see her sister as the person she was -- lovely and amazing and deeply flawed -- can she begin to discover her own path in this stunning debut from Ava Dellaira, *Love Letters to the Dead*.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 12 - 18 years

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

Gr 9 Up—Debut author Dellaira's heart-wrenching epistolary novel begins with Laurel's freshman assignment to write a letter to a dead person. She starts with a missive to Kurt Cobain, who had been a favorite of her recently deceased older sister, May. Gradually, through the teen's letters to other dead celebrities (Janis Joplin, Amelia Earhart, River Phoenix, and more), readers will begin to piece together the history of her splintered family life, including her parents' divorce and

mother's virtual abandonment following May's unexplained death. Laurel is devastatingly, emotionally fragile, but she makes friends at her new high school and even starts to develop a serious love interest. Her misconstrued hero-worship of May gradually evolves into a deeper understanding of her beloved sister's strengths and many imperfections. Beautifully written, although a bit choppy in sections, particularly regarding the dead addressees' lives, this powerful novel deftly illustrates the concept that writing is an especially valuable form of healing for those dealing with overwhelming pain and grief. Best for teens who enjoyed Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (MTV, 1999). --Susan Riley, Mamaroneck Public Library, NY --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**\*Starred Review\*** The assignment: write a letter to someone who is dead. Laurel falls into this classroom task deeper than she could have ever imagined, writing to deceased stars like Kurt Cobain, Amelia Earhart, Judy Garland, River Phoenix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Amy Winehouse, and others whose lives ended as abruptly as Laurel's older sister's did. Her methodology expands beyond simply writing to the dead. Rather, she researches each recipient, learning about their lives in order to make each letter relatable to the intended party. These quite savvy letters become Laurel's way of working through her emotions as she begins high school, makes new friends, deals with a crumbling family, falls in love, and continues to grieve for the loss of her sister. With the help of her fantasy correspondence, she is able to find common ground, express herself, and eventually discover the messages and lessons of the deceased addressee's lives as well as her own. Well paced and cleverly plotted, this debut uses a fresh, new voice to tell a sometimes sad, sometimes edgy, but always compelling narrative. Fans of Sarah Dessen and Jenny Han, get ready. Grades 7-10. --Jeanne Fredriksen --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**Why I chose this book:** One of my favorite types of books to read is epistolary novels. I am a girl that is all about letters, especially love letters. So when this book began to pop up on several book blogging radars, I knew I had to pick it up. Oddly enough, I wrote my own grandfather's eulogy while reading this book, so I related with the book on a whole other level.

**3 Things You Need to Know:**

1. **Epistolary Novel.** This is a story told in letters. While I hear many a complaint about this, I really enjoyed this format and felt that it did the story justice. Sometimes you can't sort out feelings and emotions until you tell them to another person. The character of Laurel understands this as she writes letters to dead icons throughout

history. Sometimes their stories give Laurel insight, and sometimes they are simply there to listen. Either way, Laurel discovers insights about her feelings, and about life around her. After all, high school is never easy.<sup>2</sup> All aboard the FEELS train! I had an idea about how this book would end, but I did not expect the pain and emotion that would come with it. Ugh. Dellaira definitely knows how to make you feel ALL THE THINGS. I found myself wanting to hold Laurel and protect her from life's cruelties; something that I often feel when looking back at my own teen years.<sup>3</sup> A place for the lovers of music, poetry, and culture. Dellaira writes so beautifully as she intertwines snippets of reality into Laurel's world. While still giving vivid and beautiful descriptions about life, love, and everything in-between, she carefully sculpts the voice of a questioning teen. Laurel's voice is authentic as it is original. While still maintaining the form of a vulnerable and broken girl, you see all the potential that Laurel has. It is equal parts lovely and heartbreaking.

**Final Thoughts:** I really enjoyed this book. While it may have been due to where I was in my life, I still believe that this is a beautifully written novel. Love letters are totally capable of telling a story, and Ava Dellaira proves this over and over again. I gave this book four stars on Goodreads. Check out more of my reviews at [ofspectaclesandbooks.com](http://ofspectaclesandbooks.com)

This book changed my life. I always looked at death as something that always happened to everyone else. Laurel throughout the events of the novel hit home as it should with any other teenage reader whose dealt with the aspects and sucky nature of being a teen. It's absolute perfection. The whole rage of the teenage rebellion shook whole within the walls of her world. She lost someone close to her and dealt with the severity of the situation under the covers, and to release all that pent up emotion she looked for a way out. It's realistic. The bond between sisters is greater than anyone realizes. It's a bit of a trigger for some readers. However, it is still an excellent read. This is the type of book that defines a generation. Highly Recommend.

This is a sweet story, with some endearing characters, but overall it fell short for me. The format is a challenge. I'm not convinced the letters to dead people were the best way to tell the story. The targets of the letters played some role in Laurel's character development, and the eventual shift in her relationship with her (also dead) sister. However, the author chewed up a lot of words regurgitating facts Laurel had looked up online about these famous people. This didn't feel natural, in that I don't think one would actually restate so many facts about someone when writing a letter to them -- at least not in that much detail. As a device, it sometimes felt awkward and pulled me out of the narrative. I wonder if the story wouldn't have been stronger from a standard first-person or

close third POV. The letters feel like a device that became precious to the writer in an early draft, and may have been able to be removed or refined more later. It's a slippery slope. Stephen Chbosky did this with *Perks of Being a Wallflower* and it became a cult classic. I think it helped that Chbosky chose an anonymous recipient. That left more space for the main character in the narrative, as opposed to exposition re: the recipient's histories. Speaking of the main character, I struggled a bit with believability/authenticity. Sometimes Laurel felt too juvenile, and sometimes her insights felt too mature or at least too capable of meta-cognition for her age. In other words, I occasionally became aware that Laurel's commentary and insights were really the author's. Her reactions seemed a little off: like when a teacher says, "May [her sister] was special, too, like you." • Laurel is mostly tickled that her teacher said she was like May. I get that little sisters look up to big sisters and want to be like them, but to say that to a grieving teen her reaction would be much more complicated, and maybe even bristly. Likewise, this book suffers from something I see in a lot of teen stories. Laurel and the love interest, Sky, are shown falling in love mainly through looks, car rides, and then kissing. Teen love is way more than lust, right? When they're falling in love, I wanted to see them connecting in that intense, not-just-kissing way teen lovers do. I want to see why Laurel is so pulled to him. It's not just that he's handsome and mysterious. We see that much later in the story. And it's not just kissing we see that later, too. But we're expected to fill in the blanks of the emotional connection too much in the early stages. That's not to say I didn't like the story, or the characters. I liked the ambiguity around May's death, and the way it made Laurel grapple with her views of others' lives and motivations. I liked that the author included LGBT characters. I liked the way Laurel's adoration of the famous deceased she's writing to falls apart and matures over time. I appreciated that the author didn't glorify suicide, or any of the other questionable ways the famous folks in Laurel's letters died. I appreciated that the characters all had unique and complicated lives as they weren't two-dimensional stereotypes. However, there were a few flaws that got in the way of the narrative flow and character development.

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