

Letters to Evelyn

John Selman

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The memoir-cum-novel Letters to Evelyn mixes personal anecdotes into its imaginative universe of love, aliens, and space travel.

Combining memoir and fantasy elements, John Selman's book *Letters to Evelyn* recounts the past experiences and fictionalized future of Selman's life, detailing his time in the navy, meeting Evelyn, and alien contact with Earth.

The first half of the book is labeled as memoir, opening with the divorce of Selman's parents. It includes anecdotes of being kidnapped by his father and stepmother following the divorce and of psychological and physical abuse at their hands. Then the narration jumps ahead to when Selman was in college and part of the Naval ROTC. After a visit to his father and stepmother, he believed he had been poisoned; he hallucinated for months after, struggling to complete his coursework and military tasks because of the voices in his head and the shadowy figures clouding his vision. During a conversation with his captain, he had prophetic visions of the future and saw the woman he wanted to marry: Evelyn. Years later, when he met Evelyn in a chemistry class, he was unable to form the relationship with her that he had imagined in his visions, though.

After covering this rejection, the book breaks off into fantasy realms. The story picks up with Evelyn reading the first half of this book and returning to Selman. They encounter aliens visiting Earth. As humans establish contact with these aliens, the universe opens up for exploration.

The structure of the book is unique in its combination of facts with fiction. Half of the story is set in the past and the other half in an imagined future. The timeline is muddled, though, due to a flashback and frequent flash-forwards. Each chapter is also dated, though the implications of these dates are not explicit and further confuse the timeline.

The book's pacing is inconsistent, and its introduction of supernatural elements is jarring. Its characters often soliloquize about society, religion, war, and politics; these long discursive passages slow the book's pace. And when characters are in conversation with one another, their voices are stilted and their topics repetitive. Time jumps between scenes occur with minimal segue, and the connections between the book's parts are too loose, resulting in a fractured narrative whose plotline is obscured. Too little space is devoted to action, and for all its wild developments, the book is quite light on tension.

A memoir that transitions into a fantasy novel, *Letters to Evelyn* mixes personal anecdotes into its imaginative universe of love, aliens, and space travel.

JULIA DILLMAN (July 10, 2024)

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