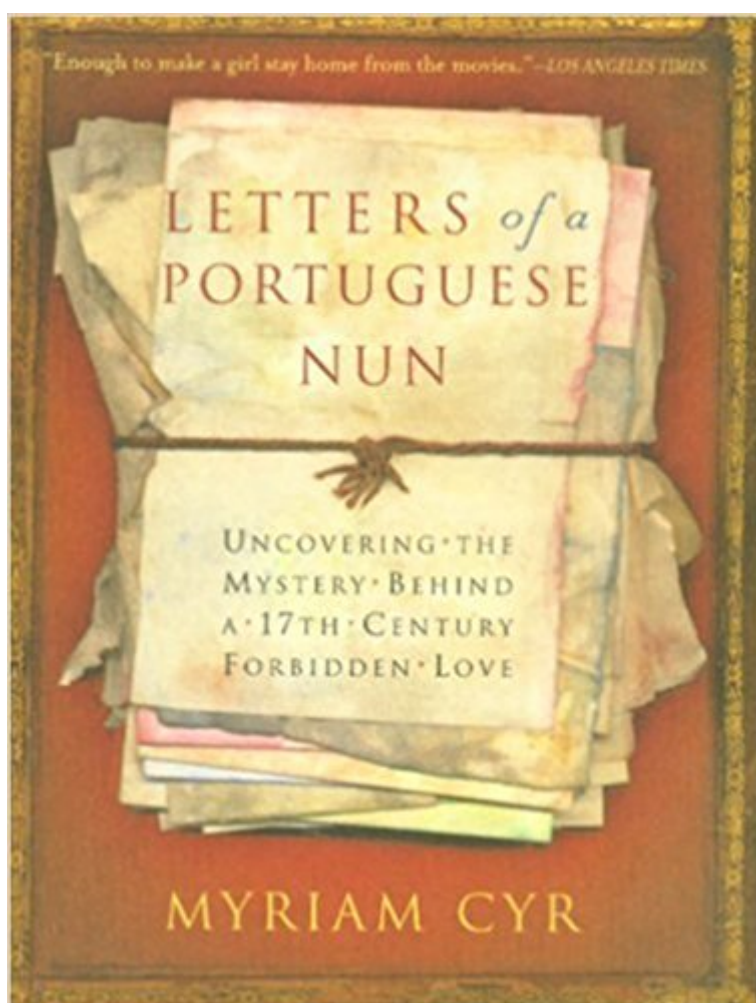


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Letters Of A Portuguese Nun: Uncovering The Mystery Behind A 17th Century Forbidden Love



Synopsis

In 1669, a Parisian bookseller published a slim volume called *Portuguese Letters*, which unveiled a love affair between a young Portuguese nun and a French officer that had occurred a few years earlier during a war-torn period in Portugal. The book contained passionate love letters from the nun when the officer was forced to return to France. The letters took Paris by storm. They spoke of love in a manner so direct, so precise, and so raw, they sent shivers of recognition through the sophisticated stratum of polite society. Equally remarkable was the mystery that surrounds the letters: the author was unknown, and most people assumed they were the fictional product of a French aristocrat. Now, Myriam Cyr persuasively makes the case that the nun, Mariana Alcoforado, did indeed write the letters, and her story is one of the most moving in the history of forbidden love.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In 1669, five letters, supposedly written by a Portuguese nun, were published in Paris. They spoke of heartbreak at the desertion of a French lover after a passionate affair. The letters were a resounding success in French polite and literary society, and almost immediately sparked a controversy. Were they really the anguished cries of a scorned woman or the work of a talented male writer desperate for employment? Cyr, a stage and screen actress, claims "contra most scholars" that Mariana Alcoforado, the daughter of a rich and influential family, wrote the letters to the dashing French officer Chamilly after he returned to France. The story is fascinating, and Cyr does a good job of setting the context of 17th-century Portuguese and French life, explaining the role of convents in social and commercial realms as well as the international politics that brought

Chamilly to Portugal. It's clear that Cyr did extensive research; she is not, however, a writer or a historian. Though her account is compelling and plausible, proof of Mariana's authorship, or even that she had an affair with Chamilly, remains circumstantial at best, and Cyr's argument rests on her own strong response to the sentiments in the letters. (Jan. 11) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In 1669, a Parisian bookseller published a volume of love letters that took Paris by storm. Purportedly written by a Portuguese nun to a French officer, they detailed a forbidden love affair so passionate it captured the imagination of an entire nation. Although debate remained as to the identity, sex, and status--an impoverished writer, perhaps?--of the author, the letters themselves touched a collective chord in the hearts and the minds of the literati. Centuries later, Cyr traces the origins of the letters to Mariana Alcoforado, the cloistered daughter of a Portuguese aristocrat. As the tale of the star-crossed lovers unfolds, one gets the sense that Cyr is more caught up in the possibilities of a romantic love story than in actually authenticating the authorship of the letters. Margaret Flanagan Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A masterpiece by Myriam Cyr..."It may be you will find greater beauty, but NEVER will you find such love, and all the rest is nothing"... such are the words written by 26 years old Mariana Alcoforado in a first letter -as she was a shut nun in 1665 Portugal- to her recently lost lover, a kind of mysterious, tall, intelligent, handsome and passionate french officer (monsieur Chamilly) who's destiny brought him to the scene of a local civil warfare that involved stationed troops and a few times romantic encounters...In 1669, in Paris, a volume entitled "Portuguese letters" was published by the most successful publisher in town, the thing was -maybe- not even him expected such a fire started out of these five love texts... and the derived controversy in regards to whom these words really belonged to, for many thought they were a fictional work... such was their power on european societies at the time. Now, for anyone who ever has lived such kind of fire in his / her belly, it is clear such controversy is absurd... the letters were written by Mariana, no doubt... or in any case don't believe me! judge by yourself... just be prepared to look at this mirror of adventure, pain, erotism, love, life and dead... after all, as a popular salon game played in 1664 Paris that involved 34 inconvenient questions in which one of them read:"In love what is the greatest crime? to be refused or not to have dared to ask?

Historical documents of hidden letters from a nun to a gentleman friend

still reading it.....

Enjoyed the historical portion of the book that takes place in Beja, Portugal. I worked in Beja with the Portuguese Air Force for 9 months and was familiar with the convent and the surrounding Alentajo cities and landscape

A long story about being loved and abandoned. Depressing. I didn't finish it. Dreary. Wanted to slap and wake up this spoiled nun and tell her to wake up.

At the beginning of Chapter 7 of her book, Myriam Cyr includes the following quote from Choderlos de Laclos's epistolary novel, 'Dangerous Liaisons': "By dint of looking for reasons, we find them, we speak them out loud; and after, we cherish them, not so much because they are good, but to avoid contradicting ourselves". Well, in my opinion, that's exactly what Myriam Cyr is doing. I had read the Portuguese Letters before, and was aware that there was a long-standing controversy on whether they had been written by Mariana de Alcoforado herself or by a French man-about-town, Gabriel de Guilleragues, based on a French officer's alleged affair with a nun of that name. (The majority of modern scholars, BTW, believe that they were written by Guilleragues). Like other literary enigmas, such as the real identity of Shakespeare, the issue is not likely to be solved unless hitherto unknown documentary evidence turns up somewhere, and Ms. Cyr doesn't really advance any new arguments or theories apart from the ones that have been debated for centuries. The problem with this book is not Ms. Cyr's warm championing of Mariana as the author of the letters, but that she doesn't seem to know much about history, and so reaches 'conclusions' on the basis of mere speculation, of reasonings that no real historian would incur in, or of a mere misreading of the scant documents available --- such as when she affirms that 'from the day Chamilly left, Mariana's health deteriorated', then quotes in her support the nun's death certificate, which merely says that she 'suffered great infirmities with patience' (the nun Mariana was supposedly abandoned by her lover at age 27, and died at the age of 87). Sometimes, her reading of historical events or her description of characters is so naive and muddled as to be almost comical --- as when she describes the literary salons that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as little more than gossiping venues, or when King Pedro II of Portugal, who 'indulged in promiscuous sex, and had commerce

with prostitutes and African slaves', is said eight lines below to have 'slowly redressed the country's dissolute ways'. Not bad for a debaucher and philanderer. Characters appear and disappear at odd times in the book, sometimes leaving bothersome questions behind. To continue with the example of King Pedro: at some point in the book he is described as having entered a love affair with his brother's wife, whom he subsequently married (after she got an annulment). Nothing more is said of this alleged love match, which, if real, would be extremely unusual --- at that time royalty seldom, if ever, married for love. King Pedro later reappears in an appendix, this time bedding whores and slaves. I wanted to know more about whether he really married for love. Another big problem is that the book is disorganized (the letters, for instance, appear in the middle, and there are several superfluous appendixes at the end), as well as full of annoying typos and erratic punctuation. The author does not seem to understand the naming conventions for the nobility, either French or Portuguese, so that -for example- the Marquise de Sabl   is indexed as 'Sabl  , Madeleine de Souvr  '. This is not about snobbery, but about accuracy --- in any serious history book, historical characters should be identified and indexed properly. My advice? If you're interested in the controversy around the authorship of the Portuguese Letters, go to the Internet. There's a lot of information that is more accurate and better presented than the one in this book. I give it two stars for the description of the geographical setting - especially the convent - but in my opinion this is one to skip.

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