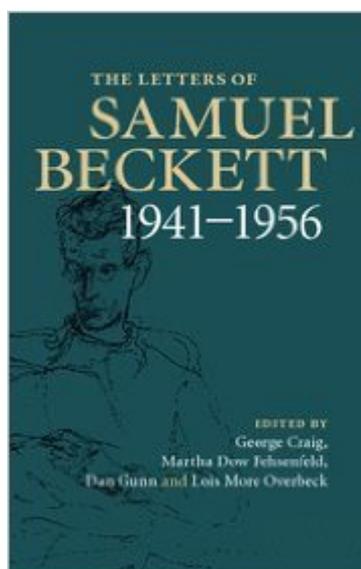


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The Letters Of Samuel Beckett: Volume 2, 1941-1956



Synopsis

This second volume of The Letters of Samuel Beckett opens with the War years, when it was often impossible or too dangerous to correspond. The surge of letters beginning in 1945, and their variety, are matched by the outpouring and the range of Beckett's published work. Primarily written in French and later translated by the author, the work includes stories, a series of novels (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable), essays and plays - most notably Waiting for Godot. The letters chronicle a passionately committed but little known writer evolving into a figure of international reputation, and his response to such fame. The volume provides detailed introductions which discuss Beckett's situation during the War and his crucial move into the French language, as well as translations of the letters, explanatory notes, year-by-year chronologies, profiles of correspondents and other contextual information.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

What I remember most from the first volume of letters is how different Beckett was from my expectations. Travelling constantly, unable to publish much, reading voraciously in several languages and deeply concerned with painting. His insecurities and illnesses (or hypochondria) are so painfully described in that volume, and his passion for what he is reading and seeing is so exuberantly described that the letters shine. I simply loved the first volume and have reread parts of it over and over. So I was very excited to read the second volume. I still give it a 5 star, and it still

keeps to the rigorous standard of scholarship in its production, but Beckett himself I find less interesting, more expected. Let me start with the physical book and the editing. Cambridge Press uses a thicker paper for this volume, and that is a great improvement. Photos are also inserted into the pages where relevant instead of being clumped into a small section of small photos in the middle of the book. Again, a helpful improvement. The multi-volume set of letters is being produced by a conglomerate of various institutions and academics. There are four editors! The result in the first volume was an absurd number of deeply anal footnotes that often swamped the letters themselves. There was no name or reference too well-known or obscure to escape a humorless note. This situation is somewhat improved in Volume 2 by omitting the well-known. This is explained by saying that "the editors can now assume that most readers will have access to the vast resources of the internet." Most? And they lacked that access when Volume 1 was published in 2009? Whatever, I'm glad we've been spared the obvious, but the notes are still less than fun to read.

This second volume of letters "having bearing on my work" elegantly compiles Samuel Beckett's postwar correspondence. Limited as it is by his estate to literary contexts, nonetheless, with forty percent of his total letters published in over eight-hundred carefully edited pages, this 2011 title allows readers to follow Beckett as he matures. The often pleading, imploring frustration of a struggling Irishman trying to land a publisher for his poems and tales has faded. After his tense time working as a farmhand and for the French Resistance in the countryside, Beckett returns to Paris and then goes away to Ussy-sur-Marne to confront himself--and to create his breakthrough prose and drama. As he had done in the first volume of his letters to Thomas McGreevy, so he opens up to Georges Duthuit from his new residence. Easing if not replacing the acerbic, dyspeptic tone of his youthful letters, he blends his unease into a mellower, if no less rueful, distillation of himself. He begins the sunset of the first day of June 1949 walking back to Ussy, accompanied or nagged along the road by mayflies. "In the end I worked out they were all accompanying me towards the Marne to be eaten by the fish, after making love on the water." This remarkable vignette exemplifies the quality of his insights. Like the first volume (see my Feb. 2013 review), the second teems with artistic and philosophical interests. Yet, it diminishes the editorial apparatus that clogged parts of its predecessor: the Net is often assumed to suffice. You will need to refer all the same to vol. 1 for appended biographies of some of the key prewar correspondents, after the war, with whom Beckett continued to correspond.

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