

**Deborah Jordan, ed. *Loving Words: Love Letters of Nettie and Vance Palmer 1909–1914*. Blackheath: Brandl and Schlesinger, 2018. 500pp  
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Deborah Jordan has edited the early letters between Nettie Higgins (1885–1964) and Vance Palmer (1885–1959) into a fascinating longitudinal study of blossoming love. Born in Melbourne and Brisbane respectively, the Palmers played a formative role in the literary culture of a newly federated Australia. Both were key voices in cultural criticism. They wrote journalism, biographies, reviews, literature, and featured on radio programs. Jordan discovered the courtship letters—all 350, 000 loving words of them—as a postgraduate student in the 1970s amidst the National Library of Australia’s collections. Published in 2018, this book is clearly a project that, in a fitting mirror of the love letters themselves, reflects both the first hook of fascination and the slow burn of a deep commitment.

The letters are impressive. They are, as Jordan puts it, ‘perhaps the finest series of courtship letters ever likely to be archived in Australia with its sweep of action, quality of writing and fullness of detail’ (*JASAL* 76). But it is Jordan’s curation that makes this collection absorbing as a portrait of friendship and love. Having already written a biography of Nettie Palmer (1999), Jordan brings a depth of knowledge about the Palmers’ writerly worlds, but her frame of reference stretches beyond the biographical. In the introduction, she situates the reader within a rich field of scholarly literature on courtship and desire, from philosophy, sociology, and psychoanalysis. The collection is also punctuated by useful prefatory essays on the socio-historical and personal contexts for each new tranche of love letters, structured chronologically into sections including *Meeting, Friendship, Journeys, Love, Separations, and Engagement*.

In 1909, when the love story begins, Nettie lived with her family in Armadale and was studying for her Honours examination in Latin and Greek at Melbourne University. Vance, though the same age, 23, seemed to her more worldly, having already free-lanced in London as a journalist, travelling back via Finland, Russia, and Japan, to teach at a boy’s school in Brisbane. Both were honing their writing skills, reading up on the hip socialist paradigm of the day, and trying to make sense of a new literary world forged in the tensions between a dogged cultural deference to the Metropole and a burgeoning Antipodean style. These topics are the grist for their letters in the early years.

Jordan sets the Palmers as a prism through which to see all manner of political and historical happenings. The letters will be useful for readers seeking insight on topics as diverse as modernism, expatriation, nationhood, gender roles, class, religion, Indigenous-settler relations, socialism, sea travel, and mental illness. Sometimes these issues intersect in complex ways. For example, in Vance’s letters from the remote Abbieglasie station (west of Brisbane), where he works in 1909, first as a tutor and then as a station manager, the urban intellectualism of socialism collides with the exploitative Indigenous-settler relations in rural Australia. Vance writes a grave letter to Nettie when he realises that the Kooma people work on the station without wages, their daily lives scrutinised and controlled by the station owner. Jordan’s framing of the letters ensures that the volume will provide a breadth of historical reference. To this end, she also includes useful appendices that list further reading and a ‘who’s who’ index.

But the beating heart of *Loving Words* is its rich analysis of the transition from platonic to romantic love in the early twentieth century. The correspondence Jordan collects spans five





*Loving Words* then, is a survey of friendship, in all its variegations, via the heartfelt epistles of Nettie Higgins and Vance Palmer. As we follow the young colonials across states and seas, a story of love and longing unfolds amidst the dawning of a new nation state and at the precipice of a great war. Charting all this, Jordan parses out the public significance of a very private correspondence. The result is a beguiling collection of letters for writers, scholars, lovers, and mates.

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#### **WORKS CITED**

- Jordan, Deborah. "All that my love and I / Strive after till we die": The Courtship Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1909–1914.' *JASAL* 8 (2008): 75–91.
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