

A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE FROG AND THE CROCODILE

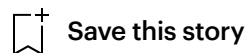
Love letters from the woman behind "The Second Sex."

By Joan Acocella

August 17, 1998



Algren and Beauvoir: the American street kid enjoyed romancing the French existentialist, and vice versa. Illustration by Gladys Perint Palmer



I love you. But do I deserve your love if I do not give you my life? . . . May I love [a man] and tell him I love him without intending to give my whole life if he asked for it? Will he never hate me?

He will hate her. As we find out in “A Transatlantic Love Affair” (New Press; \$27.50), a collection of Simone de Beauvoir’s letters to Nelson Algren, the affair between these two writers was only a few months old when Algren asked Beauvoir to come live with him. He was a novelist of the Chicago school, a naturalist, a bard of the taverns and the poker dens. He could not leave his city, his subject matter, to join Beauvoir in Paris. But he saw no reason why she, who by this time (1947) had written considerably more than he—three novels, a play, and two books of philosophy, all of them woven on the intellectual life of Paris—should not move to Chicago to be with him. In the above passage she is explaining to him that this will not happen.

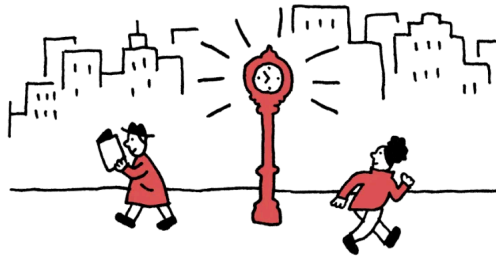
Coming from the now famous feminist, such a refusal seems fitting. She needed her career, her independence. But a major reason Beauvoir could not give her life to Algren was that she had already given it to another man, Jean-Paul Sartre. The resulting struggle in her mind—work and Sartre on one side, love and Algren on the other—was to affect all her future writings, most notably “The Second Sex.” This is the most interesting thing about “A Transatlantic Love Affair”: the light it sheds on the book that marked the beginning of the modern women’s movement. Beauvoir later claimed that when she started work on “The Second Sex,” in 1946, she had no sense that women were systematically kept down. She came to realize it only as she began her research. I would suggest that the crucial research took place in Nelson Algren’s bed. That Beauvoir, after seventeen years with Sartre, had

no sense of the unequal division of power between the sexes is staggering, but Algren taught her the truth.

The depressing facts of Beauvoir's fifty-year relationship with Sartre have been known for some time now, at least since Deirdre Bair's excellent 1990 biography of Beauvoir. Sartre and Beauvoir became lovers in 1929, when she was twenty-one and he twenty-four, soon after both had completed the philosophy program at the *École Normale Supérieure*. They made a pact, designed by Sartre. Their relationship would be, for both of them, their "essential" love, but they would be permitted "contingent" loves as well. Furthermore, they would practice "transparency": each would tell the other the details of these adjunct relationships. Not surprisingly, the arrangement turned out to be one-sided. She didn't want anyone but him. He wanted every woman in sight. He soon lost interest in Beauvoir physically; her share of his sex life was to listen to his accounts of his lovemaking with others. She was then supposed to tell him her reactions, and analyze them for him. Short of physical battery, a more sadomasochistic arrangement is hard to imagine.

But it was worse. Sartre was not the sort of man whom women naturally ran after. He was less than five feet tall, with a walleye and a tic that made him shrug his shoulders and roll his head uncontrollably. Furthermore, he was reportedly a big disappointment in bed. When he was older, and famous, he had no trouble attracting women, but in his earlier years he did suffer refusals. So Beauvoir helped out. When, early in her career, she worked as a *lycée* teacher, she would use her own bed as a holding pen for girls to offer up to him. Eventually, she laid hands on a girl with a mother energetic enough to go to the *lycée* director and get Beauvoir fired. (She never taught again—a good thing.) Later, when she had a car, she drove him to appointments with his multiple mistresses.

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This is not to speak of her services to his career. “His work was more important than mine,” she once said. “Naturally I bowed to this.” She talked him through his writings, outlined them for him, critiqued them, edited them, occasionally wrote them. Bair describes the scenario:

Often he practically pushed her into one of the booths at the Dôme or the Rotonde, fussing until she had her coffee, her bottle of ink, and the pile of papers neatly shuffled and ready for editing, and then he hurried off to a meeting in Saint-Germain followed by his liaison with Olga, Wanda or whoever else it might be that day. Sometimes he left Beauvoir with little more than a hastily scrawled text and the peremptory demand to “deal with this.”

Beauvoir was willing, for this made her, as she saw it, the central woman in Sartre’s life, whatever the incursions of others. Meanwhile, she went on with her own writing (she was an utterly dogged worker), but that, too, was laid at Sartre’s feet. In “The Second Sex,” as she frankly stated in her introduction, she took his existentialism as her point of view: her chief complaint about the condition of women was not that they weren’t happy but that they weren’t free—that they

lacked the capacity for “transcendence” (of circumstances, of biology), that greatest of Sartrean goods. Most of her other books also disseminated his views, to the point where some people regarded her simply as his publicist. “Notre-Dame de Sartre,” “La Grande Sartreuse,” her detractors called her.

This servitude to Sartre damaged not just her reputation but also her self-esteem and her femininity, which were already precarious. Beauvoir was a brilliant, bookish child, and in her haut-bourgeois Parisian family these were not regarded as female traits. “Simone has a man’s brain,” her father said. “She is a man.” Simone took the hint and turned herself into the furthest thing possible from a woman, or at least from her convent-bred, needlepoint-doing mother. She was loud, rude, slovenly, tyrannical. (If she didn’t get her way, she would vomit.) She cared about nothing but her work. As she entered into adulthood, the relationship with Sartre no doubt confirmed her in these habits. She developed a hard, humorless manner. She also became one of the worst-dressed women in Paris. (“We always know when it’s summer,” Algren later said. “We tell Simone . . . to take off the navy-blue wool dress and put on the cotton one.”) No longer Sartre’s mistress, she became his spinster sister. Small wonder that his existentialism, with its anguished freedom, appealed to her. But she acknowledged no anguish. Though she apparently had anxiety attacks all her life and would suffer violent crying jags in public, she told herself that everything was fine.

Then something unexpected happened: Sartre fell seriously in love. Before, most of Sartre’s girlfriends had been younger women, who bowed to Beauvoir’s authority. Many were her friends; if not, they at least knew to send her birthday cards. But in 1945, on a trip to New York, Sartre took up with a different sort of woman, Dolores Vanetti Ehrenreich—wealthy, sophisticated, older, and, perhaps not incidentally, one of the few women in the world shorter than he. Ehrenreich had no intention of sending Beauvoir birthday cards. Indeed, she was determined

to marry Sartre, and, as Beauvoir began to understand, that was a distinct possibility, for Ehrenreich offered him not only the sexual recreation he had with his other women but also the thing that hitherto he had enjoyed only with Beauvoir: intellectual companionship. Beauvoir panicked.

Soon afterward, she received an invitation to go on a lecture tour of the United States. On a stopover in Chicago, she called a number that someone had given her: Nelson Algren, novelist. For two days, he showed her what, in his Chicago-school view, were the local attractions: “I introduced her to stickup men, pimps, baggage thieves. . . . I took her on a tour of the County Jail and showed her the electric chair.” Then they went back to his apartment and made love. Apparently, the American street kid enjoyed romancing the French existentialist, and vice versa. Still, it might have been just a passing thing had Beauvoir, upon returning to New York to fly back to France, not received a telegram from Sartre asking if she could delay her homecoming. Ehrenreich was in Paris and wanted to stay with him a little longer. Beauvoir promptly called Algren, and they spent two more weeks together, much of the time between the sheets. She had the first orgasm of her life, and they pledged themselves to each other. Now if Sartre had a lover intent on marriage, so did Beauvoir. Such marriages were not to be, but it took Algren a while to figure that out, so the affair lasted five years, from 1947 through 1951, most of it conducted by mail.

“**A** Transatlantic Love Affair” contains only Beauvoir’s side of the correspondence. Apparently, the editor, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir (Beauvoir’s adoptive daughter), was unable to get permission to include Algren’s letters. This is a shame; Algren doesn’t get his say. Still, Beauvoir’s letters are fascinating. As Le Bon de Beauvoir points out in her preface, Beauvoir and Algren had little in common. She had to explain her world to him, and that is what she does—that is how she flirts, by constructing for him a kind of comic theatre of Left Bank life in the forties and fifties. The political situation—the effort of France’s postwar intellectuals to find some honorable ground between American

capitalism and Russian Communism—is vividly sketched in, as is the literary world, which at that point was inseparable from the political. She has lunch with Carlo Levi; his politics are O.K., but “he lies as naturally as he breathes,” and he never picks up a check. Cocteau, “a very well known French poet and pederast,” is directing Sartre’s new play. He has brought in Christian Bérard to help with the sets, but Bérard spends all his time crying, because his boyfriend has passed out somewhere in the theatre from an ether overdose. Gide dies—“the one who got the Nobel Prize for having written all his life long that it was fine to be a pansy”—and the day after his death the poet Anne-Marie Cazalis sends a telegram to the Catholic writer François Mauriac, who, along with the poet Paul Claudel, was among Gide’s arch-enemies: “HELL DOES NOT EXIST. MAY ENJOY YOURSELF. TELL CLAUDEL. ANDRÉ GIDE.” Most of the artists in Paris seem to walk through these pages—Camus, of course, Raymond Queneau, Giacometti (whom Beauvoir adored), Richard Wright (one of the few friends Beauvoir and Algren had in common), Violette Leduc (madly in love with Beauvoir)—breathing and real, working like crazy all day and, at night, going to bars and getting drunk and arguing and slapping each other and seducing each other’s lovers and then going off to rest for two months in the country. It is a portrait of the literary life from the inside, with the books born screaming. When Beauvoir published “The Prime of Life,” the second volume of her autobiography, one of Sartre’s mistresses, Wanda Kosakiewicz, took a butcher knife and chopped up a copy—along with her own wrists—so enthusiastically that she practically bled to death. To these people, art mattered.

In Beauvoir’s near-English, the events seem all the more immediate, and her voice more intimate. In a foreign language, and in fear of losing Algren, she is unable to summon the self-assurance that made her, in many of her other writings, seem dry and dictatorial—“governessy,” to quote Elizabeth Hardwick’s review of “The Second Sex.” On the contrary, she sounds almost childlike and, at the same time, terribly intelligent and sincere. She also makes charming mistakes. One night she has to write by candlelight: “The electric lamp has blown up, as it often happens.”

People are sending death threats in response to her and Sartre's anti-Gaullist broadcasts: "As you say, it is the worse disease not to be able of humour." She herself was said not to be able of humor; love proved her otherwise.

It also ripped her in two. A crucial fact of the Beauvoir-Algren relationship was its sexual success. Algren, Beauvoir later said, was "the only truly passionate love in my life." The experience didn't come till she was thirty-nine and had given up hope of any such thing. So when it arrived she embraced it wholly. She described herself as his wife. (He had given her a ring.) She telegraphed in panic if his letters were late. She dreamed of being eaten up by him. He called her his little frog; she called him her big crocodile—he had a toothy grin—and she liked to imagine the crocodile swallowing the frog. "It must be nice and warm and comfortable for a little frog to lie leisurely in your crocodile stomach," she wrote. Sometimes the love talk gets a little tiresome. Still, in view of her long years as Sartre's eunuch, the spectacle of her sudden sexual happiness is touching:

I was deeply moved when I read in your letter that you loved, as well as my eyes, my ways in love. And I thought I had to tell you these ways were just my loving for you. I had always the same eyes, but I never loved anybody in these ways.

Such words have been said before ("I only do that with you"), but in her case they were probably true. To this sexual compatibility we also owe the few endearingly dirty parts of the correspondence. In one letter she tells him, in jest, that she has written a report on the sexual behavior of the American male:

I had a very interesting experience about it. American local males like to make love (which is strange); they do it every day, sometimes twice a day. . . . They walk quite naked in hotel-lobbies—sometimes they pretend to put a kind of towel around their belly, but they manage not to hide what would be hidden; I cannot decently tell you what they do in bed but I can tell you it is not decent at all. I described all that and many other things (their peculiar ways in boat-cabins, the use they do of mirrors, chiefly of round black ones).

Mirrors. Good for her.

Yet at the very same time that Beauvoir was offering herself as Algren's love slave she was emphatically asserting her independence. Never once did she try to fool him about the impossibility of her coming to live with him. Nor did she disguise Sartre's role in this. She reassured Algren that Sartre was lousy in bed and that she hadn't slept with him in years. Still, he needed her, she said, and she would never leave him. Actually, what Beauvoir was offering Algren was, by her postwar lights, an exemplary equality-of-the-sexes arrangement: wifely devotion when she was in his presence but with the right to choose when she would bestow her presence. (She promised to join him several months a year.) He, however, was no believer in equality of the sexes. As he later explained to an interviewer, he and Beauvoir had—or he thought they had—"a relationship that assumed the secondary status of the female in relation to the male."

But if his confusion was great, imagine hers. For a woman born in 1908, it was one thing to propose an egalitarian relationship, another thing to live it. From letter to letter, sometimes from paragraph to paragraph, she zigs and zags from submissiveness to dominance. My favorite letters are the ones in which she is planning their visits together. She longs for him, she says. She is trembling with joy. She can't wait to give him everything, everything: "I'll wash the floor, I'll cook the whole meals, I'll write your book as well as mine." But, by the way, how big is this summer cabin they're going to? Will she have a room to work in where she won't have to hear his typewriter noise? And would he mind rearranging his schedule so that she can come in June rather than later, because June is when Sartre will be travelling, too? Then she realizes what she has done, and reverts to the love-slave posture: "I belong to you. . . . I am your own little love token."

It wasn't just the number of her demands that worried her. There was a pronounced inequality between Beauvoir and Algren. She was a superbly cultivated upper-bourgeois intellectual. He, though a serious writer, was a working-class tough guy, and willingly provincial. She writes to him in his language; he declines to learn a word of hers. She is fascinated by everything American; he seems indifferent to anything European. (She feels she has to explain to him not only who Cocteau and Gide are but also Léger and Pirandello and Bartók.) She does everything possible to further his career—finds him French publishers and translators, gets his essays published in *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal she and Sartre edited. Meanwhile, she delicately underplays her own career. Though she is writing “The Second Sex,” she almost never shares with him her ideas for that monumental work, and she speaks of her other books as if they were minor things. Her “Ethics of Ambiguity,” which came out in 1947, she describes to him as “a little essay about ethics: how can moral and politics be adjusted to each other nowadays, and things of this kind.” It has a pretty cover, she says—pale blue.

In her mind, she tries to make a virtue of their inequality. Compared with those fractious eggheads she hangs out with in Paris, she finds Algren “so generous and genuine.” Stuck in New York with a bunch of literary types, she is “wishing to feel a woman in a good man's heart.” These words have a familiar ring. What is it? It is the sound of an intellectual having an affair with a streetcar conductor. Now and then, she will make a dangerous little joke. When he scoffs at her notions of sexual equality, she writes back, “I thoroughly admit equality is only a myth, I never sincerely thought you were my equal.” Nor does she omit to tell him that she is giving lectures, being interviewed, being translated. She wants him to know that she is someone substantial, someone worth having. But at other times she is obviously afraid that her prominence will scare him off. One gets the sense that she desperately wants this to be a real, old-fashioned love affair, the kind she has read about in novels. Theirs, she tells Algren, is “a beautiful, corny love story.” Such stories, she knows, do not normally involve prickly-minded feminist intellectuals.

In 1948 and again in 1949, the year in which “The Second Sex” was published, Beauvoir and Algren travelled together for several months, but over time he became increasingly surly and withdrawn. (That, by the way, was not just because she refused to live in Chicago. According to his biographer, Bettina Drew, he was surly and withdrawn by nature. If Beauvoir had moved in with him, the affair probably wouldn’t have lasted six months.) To minister to his loneliness in her absence, she offered him his sexual freedom; he took it and, like Sartre, told her the details. As his letters became cooler, hers became pleading and desperate, and the relationship took an unpleasant turn. In 1950, he bought a cabin on Lake Michigan. She invited herself for the summer, and when she arrived he told her that he didn’t love her anymore, indeed that he was thinking of remarrying his ex-wife. She thereupon stayed with him for *three* months, as he sulked and avoided her. Soon after this grim vacation, she is begging to see him again: “I shall not assume that you love me anew, not even that you have to sleep with me. . . . But know that I’ll always long for your asking me.” She apologizes for her tears during the summer: “I realize how . . . boring they have been for you.” He doesn’t have to write to her, she says. (Nevertheless, “I go up and down stair in the cold three times a morning” to see if a letter has arrived.) With the outbreak of the Korean conflict, she fears that there will be a world war, but she takes some comfort in this: “For the very first time I was glad that you don’t love me any longer because if we never can see each other again, it will not make so much difference now.”

The following year, incredibly, she returned to Algren’s cabin. This time, he greeted her with the news that they would not sleep together. She spent her days writing her famous essay on Sade. (How much of her defense of Sade was the product of her complicity in Algren’s sadism?) On her last day, Algren suddenly blurted out that he loved her, thus rekindling her hopes. “Please don’t take your love away from me,” she wrote from New York as she waited for the plane to Paris. In his next letter, he did exactly that: he wanted his life back, he said. Finally, she let him go. “Be happy,” she wrote, “and keep a small place for me in the basement of your heart.” In the basement? The author of these words was at that time the

world's leading feminist. Somehow it doesn't help to find out that she finally got over Algren only by starting up with a new man, Claude Lanzmann, the future maker of "Shoah," who was seventeen years her junior. She and Algren went on writing to each other, but her letters soon became chatty and infrequent.

The romance had a bitter sequel. Bair says that all Beauvoir's writing was in the service of understanding her personal experience. Already in 1949 she had begun a novel, "The Mandarins," involving a thirty-nine-year-old woman who, tied to the foremost intellectual in Paris, goes to the United States on a professional trip and enters into a love affair with a tough-guy novelist from Chicago. "It is not exactly about you, honey," Beauvoir wrote to Algren. No, not exactly. She changed his name. But pretty much the whole episode is there, souped up into the corny love story she had wanted it to be:

We threw off our clothes, letting them lie where they fell.

"Why do I want you so much?" Lewis said.

"Because I want you so much."

He took me on the rug, he took me again on the bed.

By the time "The Mandarins" was published, in 1954, the affair was long over. Still, Algren felt that his privacy had been invaded. More was to come. In 1963, Beauvoir published the third volume of her autobiography, "Force of Circumstance," with a full description of the affair, including long excerpts from his letters to her. Algren now turned on her with fury. Reviewing the American edition in *Harper's*, he described her as a writer of asphyxiating dullness. He also went after her weak spot, her femininity. When he was asked by *Newsweek* about the accuracy of her account, he said, "She's fantasizing a relationship in the manner of a middle-aged spinster. It was mostly a friendship. . . . It was casual."

There followed a flurry of angry letters, after which they never communicated again. But still he went on insulting her in print. In a 1972 article in *Playboy* he described a trip they once took to Tunisia (“She hadn’t shut up since Casablanca”), where they visited a red-light district. As they were leaving, he wrote, a little prostitute ran up to Beauvoir, lifted her dress, and, pointing, yelled to the other whores, “See! She has one too! She has one too!”

Part of Algren’s wrath, surely, had to do with the differing curves of their careers. At the peak of their affair, in 1949, they both had their first great successes, she with “*The Second Sex*,” he with “*The Man with the Golden Arm*,” which won the first National Book Award for fiction. But Algren’s first triumph was also his last. In the fifties, his life fell in ruins around him. He was trapped in a loveless marriage. (He did remarry his ex-wife, Amanda, probably to punish Beauvoir. He proposed to Amanda a month after he got Beauvoir’s news about Lanzmann.) He couldn’t write, and when he did, the resulting novel, “*A Walk on the Wild Side*,” was rejected by his publisher. Brought out by another house, it was widely panned. Poor Algren had become one of the “proletarian writers” just as that school was dying out. A man of the social-protest thirties, he was shipwrecked in the formalist fifties. In 1960, he visited Beauvoir in Paris and stayed in her apartment (though not in her bed). As she recorded in “*Force of Circumstance*,” “He was awakened every morning by his own anger: ‘I’ve been eaten alive, made a sucker of, betrayed.’” He wrote one further novel, which he could not get published. Thereafter, he confined himself mostly to travel pieces and book reviews. What money he earned he generally lost at the poker tables. (He was a compulsive gambler.) During his stay in Paris, Beauvoir had to give him spending money.

Meanwhile, Beauvoir’s star rose and rose. After “*The Second Sex*,” she published fourteen more books, several of them best-sellers. “*The Mandarins*” (which included a lot more, and better, than its love story) won the Prix Goncourt, France’s most prestigious literary prize. In 1955, as Algren was desperately trying

to re-start his career, Beauvoir was writing to him that in order to leave her apartment she had to sneak out the back door of the building, so great was the mob of journalists camped at the front door waiting to interview her about her prize. In the fifties, Sartre and Beauvoir became two of the most important people in Europe. Existentialism was the cry of Paris; it supplied the language, the emotions, indeed the clothing style (black turtlenecks, ballet slippers) of the Left Bank. In 1960, Beauvoir reported to Algren that the second volume of her autobiography had sold a hundred and thirty thousand copies in a single month. He no doubt remembered that figure when he read the third volume and took out after it.

But it was not in her autobiography, or even in “The Mandarins,” that Algren should have looked for the effect he had on Beauvoir; it was in “The Second Sex.” Many people have commented on the curious violence of “The Second Sex,” and on its “victim blaming.” Though Beauvoir repeats again and again that women are socialized into inferiority, she spends far fewer words on that process than on the manifestations of women’s inferiority—their weakness, muddleheadedness, fatuity, vanity, envy, parasitism, resentment, frigidity, neuroticism, on and on—which, as the force of her portrayal gathers, seem to unmoor themselves from their social cause and become absolute. Her tone is one of disgust. Man, she says, is “transcendence,” action; woman is “immanence,” need. A famous passage, often quoted, is her description of the male and female sexual anatomies:

The sex organ of a man is simple and neat as a finger . . . but the feminine sex organ is mysterious even to the woman herself, concealed, mucous, and humid, as it is; it bleeds each month, it is often sullied with bodily fluids . . . a horrid decomposition. . . . Man dives upon his prey like the eagle and the hawk; woman lies in wait like the carnivorous plant, the bog, in which insects and children are swallowed up. She is absorption, suction, humus, pitch and glue, a passive influx, insinuating and viscous.

It's like something out of a monster movie. Here we see the reverberations of Beauvoir's discovery of the power of sex, its ability to create hunger in the woman. Probably the strongest words in "The Second Sex" are those devoted to the subject of female masochism. For the woman in love, Beauvoir writes, "the descent . . . to masochistic madness is an easy one." She showers the man with attentions, endearments; they "bore him to distraction." She grovels, "gathers up the crumbs that the male cares to toss her." These words, I am sorry to report, were written before, not after, Beauvoir hung around Algren's summer cabin for two years in a row, apologizing for her tears. The book, of course, ends with a ringing call for an end to all that—for free and equal male-female relationships. Such arrangements, she promises, will not preclude "love, happiness, poetry, dream." Whether that is true is something that men and women are still trying to figure out, but in "The Second Sex" we can read how unsure Beauvoir was, too, and how tempted by old-style dependency.

Not surprisingly, many feminists have had mixed feelings about "The Second Sex." Just as, by the sixties, existentialism had been shouldered aside by structuralism—and classical philosophy itself by new theories coming out of anthropology, psychoanalysis, and semiology—so in the seventies French feminism came to be dominated by ideas born of those disciplines, above all by *différence* theory, which viewed woman's difference from man not as a source of oppression but as a well of richness: a better way of thinking and living. Beauvoir's descriptions of femininity as a swamp, a bog, did not go down well with the *différence* theorists. The trouble got worse in 1990, four years after Beauvoir's death, when Bair published her biography, sparing no details of Beauvoir's peonage to Sartre, and when Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, sweeping up the literary remains ("A Transatlantic Love Affair" is part of that process), brought out an edition of Beauvoir's previously unpublished "Letters to Sartre," which broke the news of Beauvoir's pimping for Sartre among her *lycée* students. Now Beauvoir was not just a misogynist; she was a closet bisexual. Indignation was great; her

partisans had to plead for her. There will no doubt be more indignation, more pleading, when people get a load of “A Transatlantic Love Affair.”

Beauvoir’s critics should read some history books. When “The Second Sex” was published, in 1949, Frenchwomen had had the vote for only five years. If Beauvoir’s mind, as her detractors claim, was swamped with “masculinist” ideas, those were the only ideas around at the time. If she omitted to tell her public about her lesbian experiences, to do otherwise would have been fatal to the reputation of any woman writer of the period. (Beauvoir’s critics should also take another look at her defense of lesbianism—a whole chapter—in “The Second Sex.” For 1949, that was brave.) It is possible that the best writers on social injustice—certainly the most moving—are those who grew up when the injustice in question was not viewed as a problem, and who therefore say things that get them in trouble, later, with holders of more correct views, views that they themselves gave birth to. I am thinking of Abraham Lincoln’s pre-Civil War statements on the inferiority of Negroes, so decried by recent historians. It is one thing to free a people whom you regard as equal. But what does it take to free a people whom you have been trained to regard as inferior, and who, by your standards, are inferior? It takes something else, a kind of imagination and courage that we do not understand.

In the recent flap over Beauvoir we see again what might now be called Larkin syndrome: the insistence on the part of modern critics that celebrated authors’ lives be as admirable as their books. In the case of Beauvoir one might answer, “Do as she said, not as she did.” (That, in fact, is the title of an article that Deirdre Bair was moved to write for the *Times Magazine* in response to the outrage over the revelations in her biography and in the “Letters to Sartre.”) But even if we did as she did, we wouldn’t be doing so badly. After all, she did not move to Chicago, and her reasons were not just Sartre but also her career, her place in the literary

life of Paris. If that career was tied up with her servitude to Sartre, good writing has sprung from more humiliating conditions. And, of course, the relationship with Sartre helped to germinate “The Second Sex.” The affair with Algren, so sexual and therefore so searing, may have released her knowledge of the condition of women, but, whatever her denials, the knowledge was certainly there before. If it hadn’t been, why would she, the year before meeting Algren, have begun work on what she described as a book “about women situation.” What situation was she planning to discuss?

After Algren, Beauvoir returned to her old life—Sartre’s work, her work. Claude Lanzmann, though he was with her for seven years and moved in with her, was not allowed to disturb her schedule. Lanzmann told Bair:

On the first morning, I thought to lie in bed, but she got up, dressed, and went to her work table. “You work there,” she said, pointing at the bed. So I got up and sat on the edge of the bed and smoked and pretended that I was working. I don’t think she said a word to me until it was time for lunch. Then she went to Sartre and they lunched; sometimes I joined them. Then in the afternoon she went to his place and they worked three, maybe four hours. . . . Later we met for dinner, and almost always she and Sartre would go to sit alone and she would offer the critique of what he wrote that day.

Then she and Lanzmann went home and went to sleep.

In the sixties and seventies, the Sartre-Beauvoir relationship underwent a change. A prodigious drinker and amphetamine-user all his life, Sartre began aging horribly. He drooled; he was incontinent; he went blind. He still chased girls, though, and Beauvoir, who was repelled by illness, let his girls take care of him. He then legally adopted one of his young mistresses, thus paying Beauvoir back for a lifetime of service by depriving her of any control over his literary remains. Beauvoir responded by creating a new life of her own. In the seventies, belatedly but energetically, she became an activist in the women’s movement. She had also

found a new love, Sylvie Le Bon, thirty-four years younger than she, who, as a student, had asked to meet her. They were a couple for almost twenty-five years, to the end of Beauvoir's life. (No, Beauvoir said, there was no sexual involvement. Le Bon's remarks suggest otherwise.)

Sartre died in 1980. Beauvoir went half mad with grief, throwing herself on his corpse in the hospital. After the funeral, she had to be hospitalized herself for a month. She recovered, adopted Le Bon, and lived quietly, working for feminist causes, for six more years. Algren died in 1981, and at that time she said she felt nothing for him. But clearly she felt something. When she herself succumbed to cirrhosis of the liver (she drank almost as much as Sartre) and pulmonary edema in 1986, she was buried wearing the ring that Algren had given her. She had never taken it off. ♦

Published in the print edition of the August 24 & 31, 1998, issue.

*Joan Acocella was a staff writer at *The New Yorker* from 1995 until her death, in 2024.*

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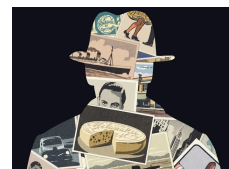


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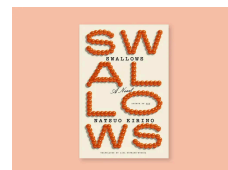
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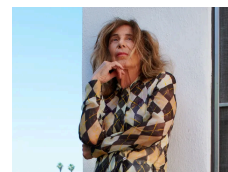


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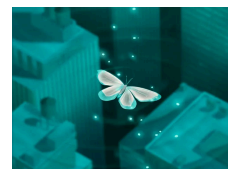


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