



*Selected Letters of Dawn Powell  
1913-1965, edited by Tim Page  
by Elissa Schappell*

**from *Post Road 12***

Selected by Binnie Kirshenbaum, author of *The Scenic Route, An Almost Perfect Moment, A Disturbance in One Place, History on a Personal Note, Hester Among the Ruins*, and *Pure Poetry*.

*Elissa Schappell's response to Selected Letters of Dawn Powell, 1913-1965 reads as if it were Dawn Powell on Dawn Powell, or Dawn Powell on Elissa Schappell. It's equally smart, witty, and literary; very much of the New York literati at its delightful best. – BK.*

Perhaps you are feeling sorry for yourself? Maybe you lost your guy, can't make rent, or are hungover? Maybe you fear you can't write anymore, are being dogged by collection agencies, or not getting the respect you deserve from those who bestow the laurels in the literary community?

Maybe what you'd really like to do is reach out, write a letter, and infect someone with your misery and self-pity? Well, stop darling. Stop right now in the name of Dawn Powell! Before you start moaning and get all sloppy, rush right out and pick up the

Selected Letters of Dawn Powell 1913-1965, edited by Tim Page, and take a lesson from the master of the comic letter.

If you don't know Dawn Powell (well, frankly, I weep for you), let me catch you up.

Powell was a brilliant satirist who captured plain life in the American heartland, as well as the screwball sexual, social, and career hijinks of deluded, artistic urban New Yorkers in the 1920s-60s.

A model of persistence, Powell wrote fifteen novels (among them: *The Locusts Have No King*, *A Time to Be Born*, *The Golden Spur*, *The Wicked Pavilion*, *Angels on Toast*, and *Turn*, *Magic Wheel*, as well as at least a hundred short stories, half a dozen plays, scads of book reviews and articles, a remarkable diary, and thankfully thousands of letters.

Still, her genius would not be truly appreciated until 1987 (twentytwo years after her death) when her good friend Gore Vidal wrote a landmark essay in the *New York Review of Books*, "Dawn Powell: The American Writer," which sparked interest in her again, and along with the sainted Tim Page (Powell's biographer as well) her work,(via Steerforth Press in Vermont) came back in to print in the 1990s. And we are so much the better for it.

Despite a lack of commercial or real critical success, Powell was never one to complain, or sink down into the muck of self-pity or indulge in self-laceration. She didn't suffer from arrogance (no more than is healthy for a writer) and didn't let jealousy (again no more than is healthy for a writer) derail her. Nothing, not even perpetually ill health, kept Powell from writing. It is for this reason that Powell's letters are among the best for

writers to read—the other book that comes to mind is Flannery O’Connor’s *The Habit of Being*—both lay out just how resilient, self-knowing, hard-working, and level-headed a writer must be to survive.

Unlike O’Connor, Powell was known for her quick wit. Diana Trilling wrote that Powell was “the answer to the old question, ‘Who really makes the jokes that Dorothy Parker gets the credit for?’” She was a good fast

friend to many, a bright light in the literary salons of Greenwich Village (Ernest Hemingway called her his “favorite living novelist”), a hobnobber and confidant of John Dos Passos, and Edmund White, as well as one of über-editor Maxwell Perkins’ writers. It wasn’t that Powell didn’t compose letters full of complaint, sorrow, frustration, and anger—she did so, but she did so with the same sort of wit and refusal to moralize or deal in pity that makes her work so remarkable.

The collection opens with a missive from a 16-year-old Dawn to her much-adored Aunt Orpha May Sherman Steinbruek, who raised Dawn from the age of thirteen, and was the first person to ever encourage her to be a writer. The early letters from Powell’s life in Ohio capture the teenage aspirations of a budding novelist, who embraces the letterform most fervently as she explains to her dear friend Charlotte Johnson in 1918. “There is this about letter writing, I grant it freely. One can gas on ad infinitum about the eternal ego without receiving any personal violence in return or any interruption. Thus it is superior to conversation.”

And gas on she did for the next forty-seven years. The letters regarding writing and publication will comfort all writers. She bemoans (slyly) her writer's block, as well as her bad reviews, and, like all writers frets about the edit of a novel. She writes her editor Maxwell Perkins, "I decided to send these proofs back before I got out my scissors and cut it all up." She grouses when her publisher insists, she feels deprecatingly, to refer to her work as "slightly wacky."

To assuage the humiliation of asking for her pal, Edmund Wilson aka "Wig," for a recommendation for a Guggenheim she puts the question to him thusly, "How about a Guggenheim for a cup of coffee?" Then ". . . and if you are going to be disagreeable about it go ahead, and I will report you to the draft board."

For those who love literary gossip the book is sparked throughout with amusing commentary about other writers. To Max Perkins, she writes:

I have yet to see anyone around Ernest [Hemingway] even a few minutes who is not violently affected by him, as you say. He probably has more sheer personal power—I doubt if it's "charm" than anyone I ever met. Maybe Hitler is like that.

What is most effecting through out is the way the letters capture the struggle Powell endured through the Great Depression, as well as two world wars, to earn a living large enough to support her sad-sack alcoholic husband Joseph Gousha, and their autistic son Jojo. The most painful are those recounting her attempts to deal with Jojo—his violence, instability, trying to find him a new psychiatrist, or get him moved onto a better ward of the institutions where he spent his life.

However, even when the going gets downright morbid she keeps her chin high. A note to a friend depicts the way she coped with her own depression: “Light snow of crumpled tranquilizers still piling up outside here and snow of sleep piling up in me.”

Most spectacularly of a botched hysterectomy to remove cancer cells she reports to her friend Phyllis Cook, “The radiological doctor is dead now (of cancer) but here I am, Ponds Creamed up the hilt (where ovaries used to stand) and ready for employment—so cheers! Be of high heart! Or High Bust or something. Get high.”

Her spirit is infectious, her refusal to lie down and play dead an inspiration to all readers whether they be writers or not.

It seems no accident that Dawn Powell, a writer who so embodied the spirit of New York City, died the same week as the first great New York blackout. We lost a great light when we lost Ms. Powell.

Elissa Schappell is the author of the novel *Use Me*, and co-editor of the anthology *The Friend Who Got Away* as well as a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, a co-founder of *Tin House*, and formerly a senior editor at *The Paris Review*. She is a frequent contributor to *The New York Times Book Review*, and her work has appeared in magazines such as *GQ*, *Vogue*, and *SPIN*, as well as *The KGB Bar Reader*, *The Mrs. Dalloway Reader* and *The Bitch in the House*. Her new anthology *Money Changes Everything*, co-edited with Jenny Offill, is due out in the Spring of 2006.