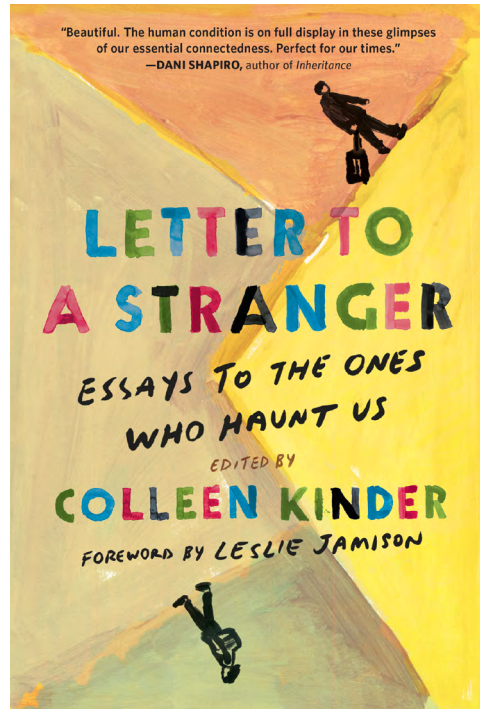


INTIMATE STRANGERS

BY MATEO GARCIA-OLAZÁBAL



Letter to a Stranger: Essays to the Ones Who Haunt Us edited by Colleen Kinder, who was a Fulbright Scholar to Mexico in 2019.

Letter to a Stranger is a poignant anthology that explores the transformative power of letter writing. Editor Colleen Kinder asked writers to compose letters to strangers who “haunt” them. Their provocative responses reveal the intricate tapestry of human connections, illuminating how strangers can impact our lives in profound ways.

The book’s premise is an obvious yet often overlooked truth: most people are strangers, or as novelist and essayist Lesley Jamison wrote in the introduction, “We are born into a world of strangers.” Our absolute favorite people or even our worst enemies were once unknown to us. This is especially true for writers, who try to seduce unfamiliar readers by choosing the precise words to carve a place in their hearts and memories, while at the same time are haunted by their unknown expectations.

The anthology also forces us to consider the unique characteristics of traditional letters. The long period between the time the letter is crafted and it meets its destination (especially in our current culture) is an opportunity to delve

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and question every word we have written, or even worse, every word we omitted or forgot to include. Then, there's the interplay between memory and forgetfulness, which recurs throughout the anthology, with each author grappling with what to remember or forget about their encounters with strangers. Fulbrighter Peter Orner acknowledges this: "I prefer to think on it as a memory – the story as something I experienced as opposed to something I can fact-check. If I've got it wrong, I've got it wrong" (88-89). This dynamic invites readers to reflect on our own memories and the ways they shape our understanding of the unfamiliar.

What's more, *Letters to a Stranger* turns out to be a collection of super-interesting stories and a lot of fun to read! We read about a drunk who helped a multicultural mother-in-law bond with her daughter's boyfriend; a total stranger that showed up at a research station in the Peruvian Andes; a passerby at a remote lake who asked a single question, impossible to forget, and kids who fought over toys which in the end shaped their lives. From Fulbrighter Sheba Karim, we read a German-Indian tale of what happens when you see cobras dance. She asks, "Were the snakes lovers or mortal enemies?" (82). Fulbrighter Arena Reign relates a love story about a taxi driver in Paris: "Anything was possible now, me and you, and your bakeries and our Jewish life together in Paris" (120); Fulbrighter Akemi Johnson writes to a poet who tragically disappeared in Japan: "[Y]ou had gone to hike a volcano on an island north of Okinawa three days earlier and never returned" (280).

As I immersed myself in *Letter to Stranger*, I found myself reflecting on the myriads of strangers I personally encountered daily—those brief moments that often slip by unnoticed. The book serves as a call for greater awareness of these interactions and encourages deeper appreciation for the people we meet, no matter how fleetingly. It emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the role that strangers play in our personal stories and the potential for connection that lies within every single encounter. Fulbrighter Elizabeth Kolbert reminds us, "The world is full of strangers. Mostly we turn away from them. But when we look, we find that they are smiling" (67).

Letters to a Stranger is a captivating exploration of the connections we form with those around us, even when they are unfamiliar. The diverse voices within this anthology create a rich landscape of human experience, urging readers to reflect on their own interactions with strangers. More than just a collection of letters, this book is a thoughtful exercise in introspection and appreciation which was also provocative, inspiring, and immensely entertaining. These letters remind us that in a world filled with strangers, each of us holds the power to connect, reflect, and express gratitude.

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BIOGRAPHY

Mateo García-Olazábal, Ph.D is an evolutionary biologist/ecologist turned molecular biologist with a passion for story telling and science communication. Originally from Uruguay, now Texas imprinted, he's an outdoor enthusiast, sports fan, and music lover. When not in the lab at Texas State University testing tumor suppressor candidate gene functions, he can be found either paddling Texan rivers, at the local community radio station recording his podcast, Science Stories, or planting pine trees. He can be reached at mateog90@gmail.com.

