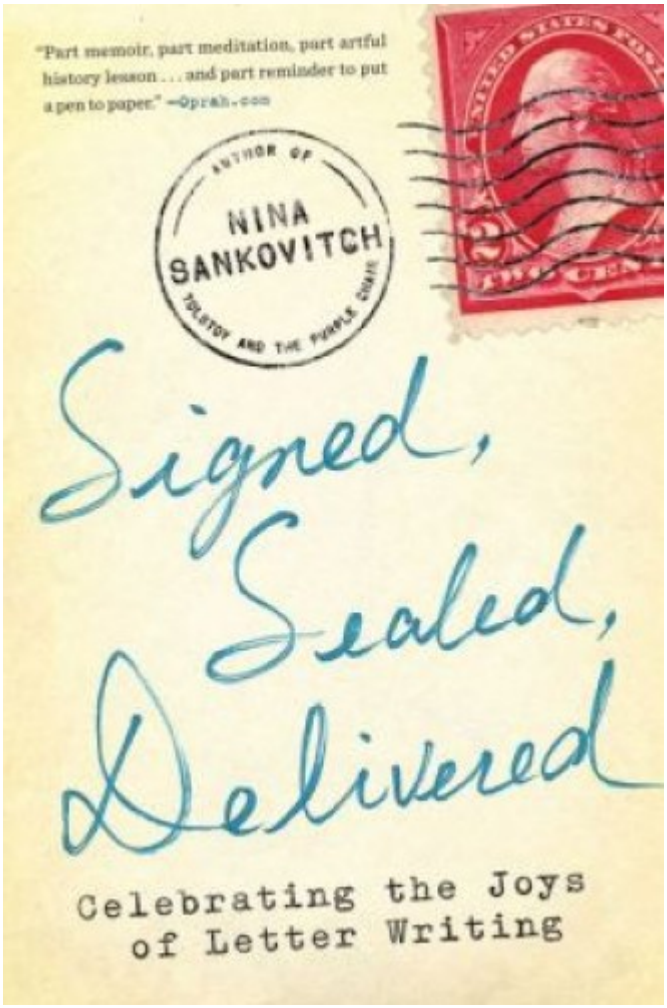
Signed, Sealed, Delivered, by Nina Sankovitch

reviewed by Jeffrey L. Johnson in the May 13, 2015 issue

In Review



Signed, Sealed, Delivered

By Nina Sankovitch
Simon & Schuster

A member of my congregation is dying at home in the care of a hospice team and his wife, who keeps medications straight and speaks with the pharmacist, doctor, nurses, and aides. She prepares meals and tends to her husband's personal comfort

and other needs. The couple's daughter reported that one day her father said to her mother, "Would you sit here for a minute and hold my hand?" The daughter continued, "My mother is so busy doing things for my dad she forgets to take time to be with him."

While there is no substitute for the touch of a loved one's hand, when that hand is not nearby, a personal letter is the next best thing. Sankovitch writes, "There can be no greater kindness, no greater offering of compassion, than the lessening of sorrow and the bringing of comfort through a letter."

When Sankovitch's son left home for college, she wished for letters from him: "A letter, if I am lucky, offers the very smell of my child, his scent on the page, soap or sweat. . . . A letter brings him home again." From this personal starting point Sankovitch explores the meaning and value of letters in our post-postal age. E-mail, texting, and Twitter are mainstream modes of personal and group communication, certainly for current college students. Letters—considered, composed, and posted—seem like quaint artifacts, the custom and property of older generations.

But letters still capture our attention. We find them stuffed into file drawers and stacked in storage boxes in the basement and in archives at the library. Occasionally we become quiet long enough to write a letter ourselves.

Sankovitch samples letters from young adults, from soldiers, from lovers, from parents, from the dying, from the bereaved, and from those who hope to comfort the bereaved. There are letters from intimate friends and letters from leaders who reach out with authority to people whom they have never seen in person.

In 1964 Thomas Merton wrote a letter to Chris McNair, father of 11-year-old Denise McNair, who was killed by a bomb planted in a Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama. Merton acknowledged that he was a stranger to McNair, but he wanted to tell him through a letter that his daughter remained "a witness to innocence and to love, and inspiration to all of us who remain to face . . . the heart-break of the struggle for human rights and dignity."

Sankovitch also shows us letters from writers of fiction and poetry. Emily Dickinson wrote a letter in response to a request for a photograph of herself. She had no picture to send, so she put this in her letter: "I am small, like the wren; and my hair is bold, like the chestnut bur; and my eyes, like the sherry in the glass, that the guest leaves. Would this do just as well?" Another time Dickinson wrote that "a letter

is a joy of earth.”

Over the deathbed and over the ages, hands and letters bring some of the same messages. Some decades ago, *Atlantic Monthly* editor Edward Weeks stated something about letters that applies to those of us who still sit together to hear words of depth and importance in ancient letters read publicly: “Letters reflect the spirit, affection and passion of men and women reaching across the silence of space for the sympathy of another heart.”