

## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

JOPLIN READS



## EVENTS

April 1, 4:00 pm: **Take-Home Kit: Letter Writing**

April 2, 6:00 - 7:00 pm: **Post Art Library Art Challenge Reception: Stamps**

April 4, 11:00 am - 12:00 pm: **Plant Swap**

April 7, 6:00 - 8:00 pm: **Chat & Craft: Reading Journals**

April 10, 6:00 pm: **Dear Listener: A Night of Letters Aloud (at Joplin Avenue Coffee)**

April 14, 5:30 - 7:30 pm: **Post Art Library & Makerspace: Creative Correspondence**

April 16, 1:00 - 2:00 pm AND 6:00 - 7:00 pm: **Book Discussions**

April 21, 6:00 - 7:00 pm: **MSSU Dr. Amy Gates: Sibylline Letters and the History of the Epistolary**

April 23, 6:00 pm: **Friends of the Joplin Public Library: It's Complicated: Orphans, Italian Adoptions, & Finding Your Roots**

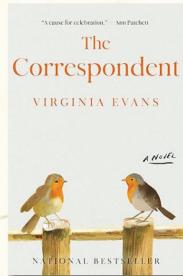
April 28, 6:00 pm: **Virginia Evans Author Visit & Book Signing**

## READ-A-LIKES

- **Olive Kitteridge** by Elizabeth Strout
- **Sipsworth** by Simon Van Body
- **Sandwich** by Catherine Newman
- **Tom Lake** by Ann Patchett
- **Broken Country** by Clare Leslie Hall
- **Dear Committee Members** by Julie Schumacher
- **84 Charing Cross Road** by Helene Hanff
- **The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society** by Mary Ann Shaffer & Annie Barrows
- **Three Days in June** by Anne Tyler
- **This is How You Lose the Time War** by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone

## BOOK SUMMARY

"Imagine, the letters one has sent out into the world, the letters received back in turn, are like the pieces of a magnificent puzzle. . . . Isn't there something wonderful in that, to think that a story of one's life is preserved in some way, that this very letter may one day mean something, even if it is a very small thing, to someone?"



Sybil Van Antwerp has throughout her life used letters to make sense of the world and her place in it. Most mornings, around half past ten, Sybil sits down to write letters—to her brother, to her best friend, to the president of the university who will not allow her to audit a class she desperately wants to take, to Joan Didion and Larry McMurtry to tell them what she thinks of their latest books, and to one person to whom she writes often yet never sends the letter.

Sybil expects her world to go on as it always has—a mother, grandmother, wife, divorcee, distinguished lawyer, she has lived a very full life. But when letters from someone in her past force her to examine one of the most painful periods of her life, she realizes that the letter she has been writing over the years needs to be read and that she cannot move forward until she finds it in her heart to offer forgiveness.

Sybil Van Antwerp's life of letters might be "a very small thing," but she also might be one of the most memorable characters you will ever read.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Virginia Evans attended James Madison University for her bachelor's in English literature. After starting a family, she went back to school for her master's of philosophy in creative writing at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. She now lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, with her husband, Mark, two children, Jack and Mae, and her Red Labrador, Brigid.



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## DISCUSSION GUIDE

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1. Why did Sybil choose letter writing as a hobby? What drew her to it, and what kept her in the routine of writing letters?
2. Sybil is retired. How do you envision yourself in retirement? What will bring you meaning and purpose?
3. The story is a love letter to literature. Have you read any of the novels mentioned?
4. What was your overall impression of Sybil when you first started the book? How did it evolve as the story went on?
5. Sybil is quite set in her ways. She's stubborn, quick to judge, and isn't easily swayed or influenced. When did she start to show cracks in her facade?
6. We learn that Sybil is slowly going blind. Why did she wait so long to tell her loved ones?
7. Sybil receives a letter from the past that is unsettling. It's from the son of a man (Dezi) that she helped send to jail, and it completely changed everything for his family. Why did this letter affect Sybil so much?
8. Sybil develops a bond with Henry, the son of a former colleague. Why do you feel the two shared a bond? How did they both help each other?

9. Sybil's ex-husband Daan writes her a very heartfelt letter before he passes away from cancer, but Sybil couldn't bring herself to respond. Why didn't Sybil send the letter she was working on to Daan?
10. Sybil was adopted, and she finds out about her birth family and connects with her sister. In what ways were she and Hattie similar?
11. What threatens Sybil's strong relationship with Rosalie? Can you understand the conflict from both perspectives? Is there something to be learned from their reconciliation process? Do you consider Rosalie's actions or lack of disclosure a betrayal? Have you ever had to confront and handle betrayal?
12. Eventually, Sybil answers Dezi and admits that she was in the wrong, but at the time, she was overwhelmed with grief about losing Gilbert. How did telling the truth to Dezi finally help Sybil move forward with her life?
13. What caused the strained relationship between Sybil and her daughter, Fiona? What is the best way to improve this relationship? Is the hurt too deep? What happens when two people feel equally hurt and justified in their anger?
14. Grief is a strong theme throughout the story. Sybil continues to grieve and wrestle with a devastating loss that happened decades earlier. Do we ever recover from deep loss, or do we learn to live with it over time? Were you surprised at Sybil's account of the tragedy? Did your view of Sybil change after she reveals the details of the accident? What are your thoughts about the unsent letter?



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