

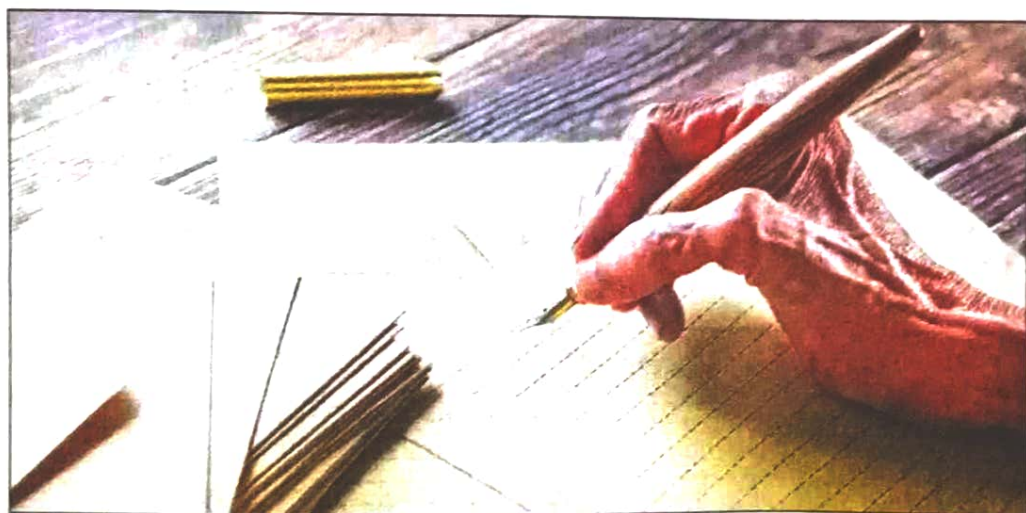
A life in letters

THE CORRESPONDENT

By Virginia Evans,
Michael Joseph, ₹899

Letters are curated fragments of life. We send them to others; yet they often return us to ourselves. Along the way, they gather silences, misunderstandings, and meanings that their writers never intended. Virginia Evans's book is built around such complexity, as a 73-year-old retired lawyer, Sybil van Antwerp, unfolds her entire life in a series of moving and beautifully-crafted letters and emails. Through her exchanges with family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers, readers gradually piece together the contours of her life: its joys, disappointments, losses, and lingering regrets.

Despite being tucked away in her quiet Annapolis home and with rapidly failing eyesight, Sybil manages to stay in touch with a wide array of people. Some of them are childhood connections, like those with her brother, Felix, and her friend, Rosalie. The others she has known only for a few days. She does not hesitate to strike up a correspondence with a bright, socially awkward boy young enough to be her grandson or a customer care executive whom she comes across on a DNA-testing website. Though Sybil's physical world is small — she is largely confined to her home and beloved garden — her letters create a vast social landscape populated by relatives, old friends, admirers, and distant correspondents.



As the correspondences take shape, we hear a conglomeration of voices. New possibilities begin to emerge in her carefully-ordered life, forcing her to confront relationships and memories she would rather leave undisturbed. However, even when various detailed accounts from her past resurface, Sybil remains forever elusive. She weaves an aura of mystery without surrendering fully. Whimsical, stubborn, and cranky, she rarely lets her guard down though occasional glimpses of her softer, more vulnerable, side lends her character an unexpected depth. Having buried painful memories of a lost child, a divorce, and a fraught relationship with her daughter, she allows readers to peek into the core of her world, one letter at a time.

What makes the novel particularly compelling is the gap between what is written and what remains unsaid. Besides the letters she sends, Sybil

writes a series of despatches that never reach their destination. These unsent missives become the emotional core of the novel, revealing vulnerabilities and griefs she cannot bring herself to share with others. They remind us that correspondence is never merely a means of communication; it is also a record of silence, hesitation, and desire.

The style, despite being fragmented, creates a sense of intimacy with the reader who steps into the role of piecing the puzzle together. With rich characterisation, an innovative and immersive epistolary structure, and elegant prose, the novel weaves a reflective journey that rewards patience and emotional engagement. The novel's greatest strength, however, is Sybil herself. Sharp-tongued, opinionated, and fiercely intelligent, she is also deeply courteous, a combination that makes her fascinating.

Ananya Sasaru