


The Dead Letter Office

by MARY-LOU MCCARTHY

Resource Pack





“Letters are the most intimate form of long-distance correspondence we have available. It is a tangible connection between the sender and receiver. One cannot hold an email and marvel at how they are touching the same object that someone else held thousands of miles away. Writing a letter gives one the opportunity to choose their words with care, rather than having to spit them out willy-nilly into the ethereal land of zeroes and ones. A letter is proof of history, an artifact of one’s life and community.”

Letter Writer's Society





Hi,

my name is Mary-Lou McCarthy. I am an actor and a writer and I wrote *The Dead Letter Office*. What I love about writing is having an idea and not knowing where it will take you. Sometimes the idea can turn into a short story. Or an audio story. Or sometimes it turns into nothing at all. Or it turns into a play for children like this one did!

I had the idea for *The Dead Letter Office* in 2011 when I read about this place called a dead letter office; it's where lost post and parcels are sent to be sorted. I wondered what does a dead letter office look like? Who works there? What do they do all day? And, most importantly, what's inside the lost packages they receive? The idea wouldn't go away! I tried to ignore it. I worked on other things like plays, or TV series, but at the back of my mind I was still thinking about this mysterious place called a dead letter office. When the idea wouldn't go away I knew I had to write it! So, in 2019, I saw an opportunity at the Civic Theatre in Dublin to apply for some money to develop the idea into a play for young people. I applied, I did an interview where I had to present my idea in front of people and then I was lucky enough to be chosen for a commission. (A commission is where you get paid to write the play.) I was thrilled! I was lucky! I was living in London! So, I packed my bags, moved back to Ireland and finally started writing *The Dead Letter Office*.





Pre-Show

A typewriter, a series of letters and postcards are suspended from a line in the foyer of the theatre. Young people waiting to go into the show are invited to read them and think about who are they from? Who are they to? What would have happened if that letter never arrived?

There are copies of these letters at the back of this resource so that you can revisit them and use them as the pretext for creative writing in **Activity 1**. The typewriter can be used as a starting point for **Activity 2**.



Activity 1

This activity links to SPHE and English

Session 1



What you need:

- > You will need copies of the letters from the exhibition on your white board or print off.
- > The questions from the clue sheet printed up or on another board (*see next page*).
- > Paper
- > Pens



1. In groups the participants are asked to review one of the letters or postcards and look for clues and fill in the clue sheet.
2. As individuals ask them to imagine the reply to that letter and to write it.
3. Ask them to share their replies with the others in their original group and discuss them.

Activity 1

Session 1



Clue sheet

- Who sent the letter, postcard or telegram?
- Is there an envelope or stamp?
- What do we know about them and what can we guess?
- Who have they written to?
- What do you think is the relationship between these people?
- Can you imagine or create the scene when the person got the letter/postcard that was for them?
- Can you imagine or create the scene of what happened because the letter/postcard never arrived?



Activity 1

Session 2



What you need:

- > Paper
- > Pens
- > The Clue sheets from the last session



1. Elizabeth and Hassan's story had a beginning, a middle and an end. Ask the participants to see if they can write the story of the lost letter. This can be a group, pair or individual exercise.
2. Encourage them to start with a beginning and return to the clue sheet e.g. who wrote the letter and why did they write the letter? Where did they write the letter?
If you wish to use drama, think about creating a still image of the letter writing and bring it to life for 5 seconds and see how the character felt writing the letter.
3. Encourage the participants to move their focus to the middle of their story. Reassure the participants that there are no right answers and each individual will have their own ideas about the letter's journey. Consider what is the letter's journey? Was it long or short? How did it get lost? Was another character involved? How were they involved?
Again you could use drama, recreate a moment the letter got lost, mislaid, stolen or whatever you wish to have happened to it in three frozen images illustrating the moment before, during and after the letter was lost.
4. Encourage the participants to finish with an end e.g. what happened because the letter didn't arrive? What were the consequences for the letter writer and receiver?
If you wish to use drama, role play/ hot seat the letter writer about what it was like for them not to get a response and for the person expecting it not to hear from the writer.

Activity 1

Session 3



What you need:

- > An example of a letter on the whiteboard



1. Elizabeth loved getting letters from her friend, Alice. Write a letter to your friend telling them about a day in your life.

Activity 2

This activity links to SPHE, English and History

Session 1



What you need:

- > White board to play the first of two pre-recorded videos.
- > One of Hassan talking about curation
<https://youtu.be/wpFQKvROViI>
- > A second of him saying thank you for the images of the exhibition.
<https://youtu.be/Lukb2pX2IHQ>

Please note that a version of the transcript of the first video is at the end of this pack if you are unable to play the video clip.



1. Play the video
2. Remind the participants of the performance and how Elizabeth had collected objects and letters that were important to her. Remind them how Hassan had felt that his coin and Cuneiform were so important to the human story that he risked his life to save them. Ask if anyone can remember the objects from the play that were important to Elizabeth and Hassan.
3. Invite each person to think of 3-5 potential artefacts that they feel tell their story. Remind them to think of things that can evoke a memory or smell like the spices and perfume. These can add to your future visitor's experience and are another way to tell an individual's story.
4. Ask the participants to fill in the **information sheet** for each artefact and reassure them that they don't have to answer all of the questions.
5. Remind the participants that they can choose if they want people to touch the artefact or not, but they have to let them know.
6. Using the **information sheet**, ask each participant to write a label describing each of their artefacts in very simple language e.g. 2010 Peter's baby bib; 2016 a brick from my first lego set; 2018 my first sports day medal; 1986 my grandparent's cookbook; 2021 Covid mask.
7. Invite them to bring the artefact into school. If the artefact is deemed too valuable to do so they can take a photograph or do a drawing of the artefact and bring that in to exhibit instead. The real artefact is preferable.

Activity 2

Session 2



What you need:

- > You will need to prepare the space i.e. a clear classroom, desks or boards.
- > A sheet of card per student (and a few spares)
- > A camera phone
- > A bluetooth speaker
- > An atomiser and aromatherapy blends (*optional and use with care*)



1. Everyone gets an opportunity to share their artefact with their peers. If it is a large class, you can do this by creating mini displays. Half the participants can act as visitors while the other half display their artefacts.
However this exercise also gives you the opportunity to ask the participants if they wish to, to explain/ write or voice memo the significance of the artefact to their story as a class bonding exercise.
2. Remind them that Hassan said that curators think carefully about how best to tell a story by how they place the artefacts.
Explain that for the exhibition each participant has to lay out their artefacts using the card, labels and information sheets with care and in a way that they are happy with. Each display will be placed carefully in the classroom and photographed with the person's name and age. These are the photographs you can send to Hassan.
3. As a group discuss how you would like visitors to feel when they visit your exhibition. The following questions might help this process:
 - If you were to put a smell with the objects what would it be?
 - If you were to put a sound behind it what would it be?
 - Are the group going to be part of the exhibit? And if they are, what will they wear?
4. Set a date and time for your exhibition to open and send an invitation to another class.

Activity 2

Session 3



What you need:

- > The exhibition
- > Visitors (real or virtual)
- > A camera



1. The exhibition can be in person, virtual or done with another class visiting but allow people to come in and experience the participants' exhibition. Remind the participants curating the exhibition, what artefacts can be handled and those that cannot. Remind them that they are the curators so they need to be ready to answer questions about the exhibition.
2. Open the exhibition and allow your public in. Remember to ask your visitors what they thought of your exhibition before they leave.
3. Discuss how the participants found the experience when your visitors leave, record the exhibition and carefully put away the exhibition.
4. You can record the exhibition on flickr or make a mini-publication of your exhibition.
5. Play the second video of Hassan thanking the participants for the images of their exhibition.

Activity 2

Object information sheet

Try and draw your object here

The National Museum of Ireland Decorative Arts and History in Collins Barracks has assisted us with this resource and are happy to offer their 'If Things Could Talk' Exploring Museums workshop to participating schools.

Collins Barracks is on the Red Luas line and is close to Heuston Station. This workshop involves a touch tour of historical objects, a discussion of the role of curator and a tour of the museum.

What is it called?

What is it made from?

When and where was it made? Is there a label on it?

Who made it?

What does it look like?

What is it used for?

Who owned it? Who used it? Or who or what is it associated with?



Videos

Video Insert 1

<https://youtu.be/wpFQKvROVil>



Hassan :

mrhban! aismi hasan. I am also a curator of a museum in Syria. I was very lucky that for a long time I lived in a peaceful place where we could keep all our artefacts and objects safe, and we could let people visit them: to see the story of our people. To see the story of all people, really.

Do you know what a curator does?

It was my job to manage collections of historical artefacts. Some of my job involves detective work like tracking down an artefact or making sure that it isn't a fake or forgery.

Then it would change to being a minder: to mind and care for the artefact. You see many artefacts are old and delicate, so we have to be very careful about how we transport them, how we keep them and how we show them to the public. Did you know that some things have to be kept at a particular temperature to protect them? Other things have to be kept away from natural light (which is why many museums have to be careful with their lighting). Then that brings me to one of my favourite parts of my job: how we display or tell the story of the artefact to the people who come to visit the museum.

I love this part, placing one artefact with another to create a picture in the mind of a person of what life was like at a certain time. Human beings have great imaginations and if you give them a sense of a time or of a place through objects, sounds, pictures, textures and smells, they can imagine that place and time... Its significance or importance in human history. These artefacts show 'our shared history of the world'. We are the only ones who can and do put meaning on an thing...

Each object or artefact is special. What is it? What was it called? What is it made from? When and where was it made? Who made it? Why? What was it used for? Who used it? Who owned it? Why do we curators choose it?

I have learnt that there are loads of great museums in Ireland. Did you know the Chester Beatty Library has the biggest collection of Korans outside of the Middle East and they are so beautiful? Wonderful drawings telling amazing stories from all over the world from the Koran, The Bible and the Mahabharata. They keep them under special lights so they don't fade and carefully turn the pages so you can see different things each time. They wear special gloves and masks because paper, especially old paper, can react to the acid on our human skin... did you know that?

The Cork Museum- this has a great exhibit about the layers and layers of artefacts discovered when they were digging the modern drains for the city. All those things lying there for years and no one knew! Things that people thought were not important- combs, buttons, a dice... all tell a story of that place at that time.

What artefacts would you use to tell your story in your time?

What would I choose? My Baharat spice mix. It reminds me of where I come from. The Cuneiform that I got out of my museum that used symbols to tell stories before we had letters. The picture of my family.

What would you choose? Or make? Or photograph?

What artefacts would you use to curate your story? Have you pictures of when you were small? Objects from then? Artefacts that tell us a bit about your life now? Small things like your favourite bar or a lego brick or a picture you drew.

So I have a challenge for you...

Try and curate your own group exhibition- like a living time capsule. Gather up your objects and do like I do, and tell the story of your class. Think about the people coming in and what atmosphere you want to create. What kind of lighting? What kind of smells? What kind of sounds?

I've left instructions on what to do next with your teachers, but please send pictures back to me and I'll send you a message back!

Videos

Video
Insert 2

<https://youtu.be/Lukb2pX2IHQ>



Thank you my friends for sending me all the information about your exhibition. It is a joy to see. I hope you enjoyed making it. Bye!



England 1944

Dear Mossy,

I am writing this to you instead of to your Mam and I am sending it to your uncle Eddy so he can pass it on to you. You are eleven now and the man of the house so I know you will be able to do what I ask.

You probably know I'm on board a boat called the Spirit of Plymouth and we are waiting to sail to France. Don't tell anyone because it's all a big secret and I'm having to sneak this ~~the~~ letter out with a friend.

I'm sure everything will be alright but your Mam is worried so I need you to take care of something for me, if anything happens. I'm sure it will all be fine but just in case.

If anything does happen, you are to climb up and have a look on top of the big wardrobe in our bedroom. You will find a cigar-box. Inside it is a bank book. It is some money I saved up for you and your Mam in case anything went wrong. You are to give it to your Mam if anything happens.
Your loving Dad,

M lves Carpets
51 The Coombe,
The Liberties
Dublin

Dear Mr. Yeats,

While we appreciate the notice advertising our carpets in your establishment, it doesnot take from the £450 outstanding on your account. We are a small firm and our repeated requests for you to settle your accounts with us have fallen on deaf ears. I have no choice but to call on you personally to collect the money on 4th AUGUST At 12pm. I WILL BE WITH SEVERAL OF OUR EMPLOYEES.

I am not a violent man, Mr. Yeats but this has been going on for too long and I cannot have a debt of the magnitude on my books for so long. It is now three years and 2 months. I have overhead too.

12pm 4th AUGUST

I hope for a peaceful resolution of the matter.

yours sincerely,

Arthur Mulve

S sundriv epk

Kim Age

b Jan 1982

Dearest Lucy,

I have been dreading wrtling this letter to you. I want you to know that I meant everything I said. I care for you very deeply and maybe we could have made a life for ourselves together. BUT FOR me, that would only be a half life of hiding my true self.

I am getting the late ferry tonight to England, and from there who knows where but you will never see me again. I hope you can forgive me in time and know that I only wanted the best for you and the baby.

yours with love,

A handwritten signature, possibly 'J.O.', written in dark ink. It consists of a large, stylized 'J' with a horizontal bar, followed by a smaller 'O'.

Padre Pio Cottage
Coxabury
Co. Monaghan
10th March 1979

Dear Aojk

Not much news this month. Calving is going well so we'll have a good yield.

Same old same old but you know your way. Her mother was a Haggan from Castleblaney but she is an ex-townie. Grew up in Athlone, moved to Ballymacward when she got married. Lives next door to her in-laws. She has a rake of children about 7 dogs and 4 cats, about 30 chickens, ducks and a few turkeys for Xmas. I hear she has one of them hamsters as well.

Well I heard from Silvia in the shop that she is putting a shrine to the Virgin Mary in her garden for the Pope's visit. Over the left side. What do you think of that?

Love
Maia.

52 la lane
The countie

Dear Mammy + Sisters + Daddy
I miss you very much
will I see you again. when will
that be. were having lost of fun
I gob you a surprise hope you
like it. come and visit us. your
surprise is money and food. The
man and woman gave it to us.
The food will come in a darg.
Love you lost and lost

Love
me Lucy and zoe and peppy

€50

€500

€15

to Mammy + zoe, sisters

52 la Lane
The Countie

13 August '52

Dear June

Just a note to remind you
to tell Maurine to meet me
at the bus station on Tuesday
at 3.00. This is very important.

So don't forget.

This is our last chance, so
don't let me down.

Bennie.

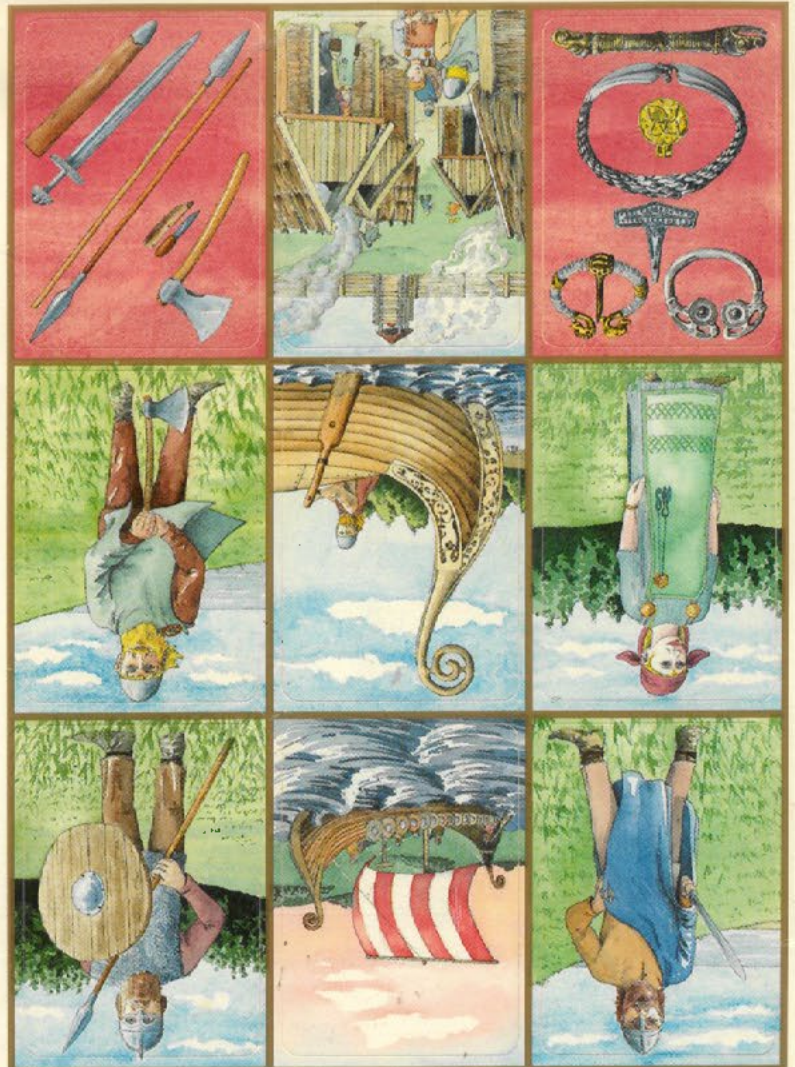
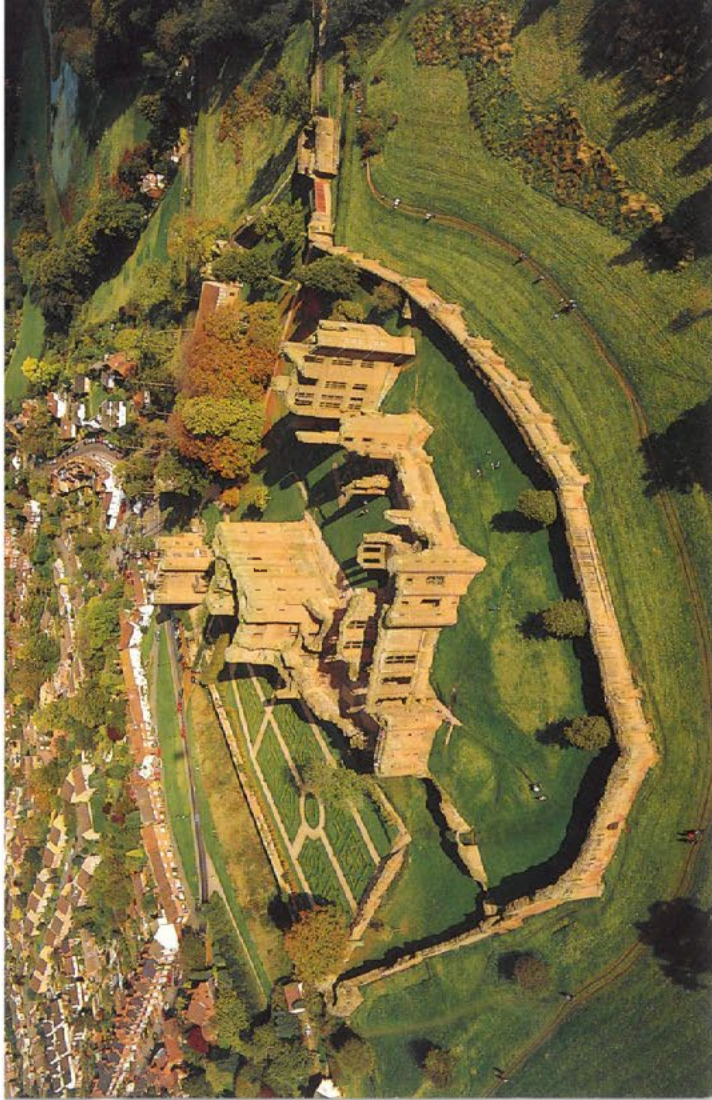
28th of August, 1978

Dear Toie

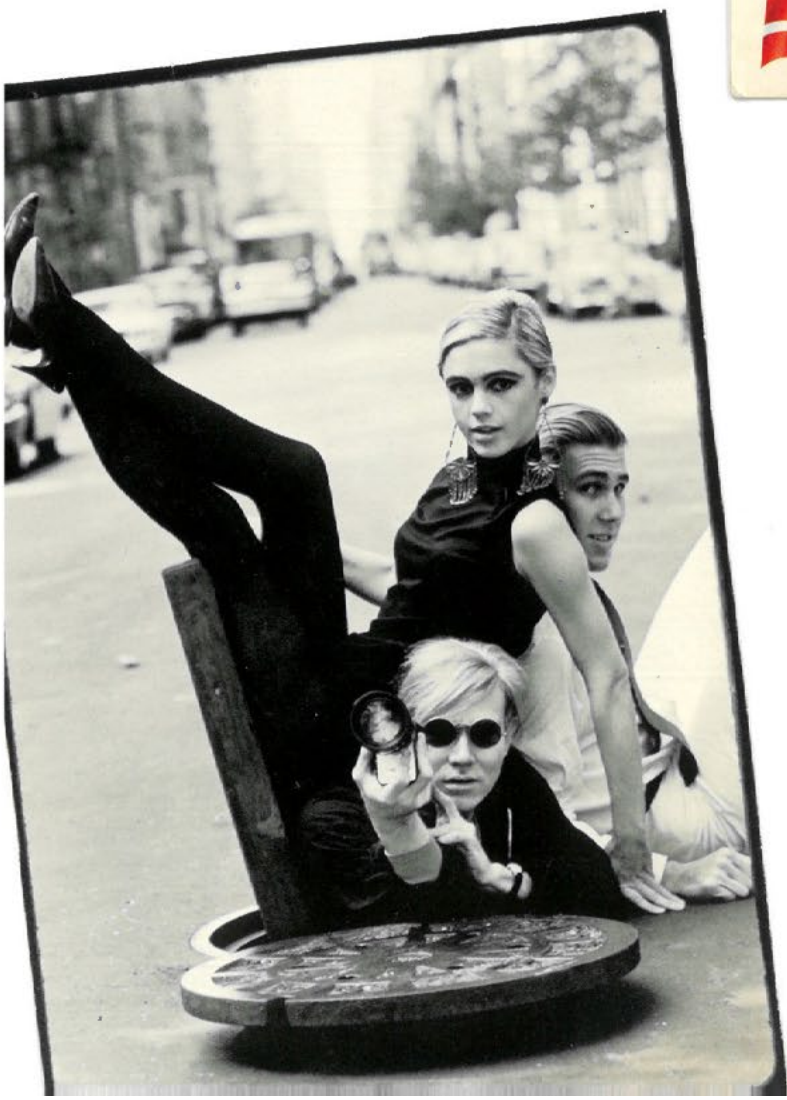
I hope this finds you well. I am very sorry I took the money from behind the clock. I know it was your place for keeping money for the rent and things. But I had to pay a fella I owed or he would of killed me or something.

I have a job here gutting fish and maybe I can get one on a trawler soon and that pays good money. I am saving up what I can and will send you the money as soon as I can. Honest.

Your baby brother,
Fin.



Vikings of Denmark



Swatably silly
postcard for
no reason!!
from



Search for Gribben

TEAR Theatre Co.,
4 Marlborough Place,
1 Dublin 1



ALSO AVAILABLE: JEFF STODOLKA, CHUCK KLEIN, NEW YORK CITY, 1965
PHOTOGRAPH BY BURT GLINN

New York is
Amazing. Sorry
I took off so quick
but I'll explain
when I get home.
I have you WAM
Alex

13 Rushfield Terrace
Drogheda
Co Louth
Republic of
Ireland.

Here are a couple of Vikings
e you, Xav. Show is going
now well and I'm drinking
drop beer, eating candy
cheese and doing other
lavish things. Hope
it is cool with you. It's
pretty freezing here, still,
have a great Birthday,
Love & Swatching,
JAHAN

KENILWORTH CASTLE
WARWICKSHIRE
June 1962

Dearest Frank,
we are having a lovely
time on Holidays and
I hope this gets to you
before you leave but
my answer is yes and
we can talk more when
I get back to Ireland. Orla

The dramatic red sandstone remains of Kenilworth are among
the grandest and most extensive in England. The medieval
castle, extended in Elizabethan times, was once surrounded on
two sides by a vast artificial lake.

ENGLISH HERITAGE/ENGLAND



P.S. - Remember to feed the cat.
Xav-Man
24 Carricktoyle Terrace,
Old Kilmahigan,
Dublin 8.
Ireland

Frank O'Sullivan
410 O'Sullivan's
Jazz,
yellow farm house
on the Kenmare
rd,
Co Kerry