

PITCHES (REBECCA ONION)

N.B.: I'm noting the circumstances of each pitch above the text, so that you can see how language and content might vary, depending on the relationship you have with the editor.

Aeon Magazine

"Lock Up Your Wives!"

A cold-ish pitch to Aeon, summer 2014 (a friend of mine had written for them, and had told his editor I'd be contacting them). The pitch eventually became this piece:
<http://aeon.co/magazine/psychology/the-warped-world-of-1950s-marriage-counselling/>

Hi ----,

I think Ben Breen let you know, a month or so ago, that I might be writing to you. I'd love to pitch a piece to Aeon--you guys do great work.

Here's one idea:

In April, Meredith Publishing announced that it would be discontinuing *Ladies' Home Journal*, a 131-year-old American women's magazine. Going down with the ship is "Can This Marriage Be Saved?", a column that launched in 1953 and was one of the most consistently popular of *LHJ*'s advice features.

The format of CTMBS never varied. A wife outlined her complaints against her husband. The husband responded with his counter-arguments. And a marriage counselor closed, assessing the situation and offering advice, usually aimed at the wife. The simultaneously common and high-stakes nature of marital fights shaped the gossipy appeal of the column.

The CTMBS column archive is not only a record of sixty years of American marital contests, but also evidence of the way that experts counseled people to surmount them. Because this advice was printed in a public format, who knows how many people read, and shaped their everyday interactions accordingly? I remember devouring CTMBS when I was in elementary school and my mom was an *LHJ* subscriber. I'd parse the interactions for evidence of how adult relationships worked, and I'm sure I still handle some arguments based on those prescriptions.

I'd like to read the sixty-year archive of CTMBS, and write an essay about the experience. I'd wrap the stories I find in the magazine in a larger history of American marriage counseling, and talk about the therapeutic value (or lack thereof!) of

reading a long history of marital strife. The essay would also be a meditation on the way that published advice shapes private lives.

Let me know if this concept works for you. I have a few other Aeon-friendly ideas, as well!

About me: I run [Slate's The Vault blog](#), and have recent longer clips in Slate, Lapham's Quarterly's Roundtable blog, and the Boston Globe Ideas section. You can [browse links to those on my website](#).

Thanks,

Rebecca

Virginia Quarterly Magazine

"On Letters of Note: The Internet's Idea of History"

A not-cold (I know her from grad school) Spring 2014 pitch to an editor at VQR that eventually became this review of Letters of Note:

<http://www.vqronline.org/criticism/2014/10/letters-note>

Note: This was a REALLY long and uncommonly elaborate pitch—I was clearly trying to work out what I thought, and I knew this editor and knew it wouldn't overwhelm her. I used a lot of the ideas in it in the review (with the editor's blessing).

Popular historians writing books and magazine articles extract and tell the juiciest stories: high-stakes conflicts; fiery love affairs; moments of innovation. The new school of Internet history does the same with actual documents. They're "the good stuff"-- history with the boring parts cut out. Letters of Note, by its very nature, excludes all of the familiar, quotidian correspondence that frames the gems. Despite this heavy labor of curation, a patina of authenticity remains—a sense that you're reading a Real Document.

All of the Letters of Note need to be self-contained universes, quickly legible with only a brief bit of introduction. This, of course, is what makes a Letter of Note deeply fun to read: all of the sense of discovery and wonder; none of the padding. Any archive of correspondence holds letters that ramble, address more than one topic, evade questions, or are simply boring ("will Alice and I see you in New York for dinner on the 27th? Regards--") The pithiness and greatness of the Letter of Note has a tendency to heighten nostalgia: "People were such better writers in the past."

Internet history, including the Letter of Note, has a repetitive emotional tone, determined by its travels across social media. Because sharing a document requires

aligning your name and profile with the document's content, items are most shareable when their meanings are directly legible in the space of a tweet or a Facebook post. This is a structural limitation: only the gems that can be well-headlined will travel.

This structure favors neat resolution over ambiguity or layered meanings. Early in my tenure on the Vault, I [posted a set of maps commissioned by the Japanese armed forces at the end of WWII](#), showing which parts of their cities had been bombed by the Americans. The historical use of these documents moved me deeply: the red-and-white maps had been posted in ships carrying demobbed soldiers back to Japan. The post went nowhere, and when I thought about it, this made sense. American Slate readers wouldn't want to appear as though they were sympathetic with the Japanese by posting such a link on social media, even if, in a longer conversation with a friend, they'd be willing to talk about the questions these documents raised. The lessons from this post have led me to pass up documents like a group of postcards depicting the Tulsa race riots of 1921, which are layered with meaning: taken by white onlookers and shared in order to celebrate the destruction of the black community, they are, of course, documents of what happened, and in their very genesis underscore the racism of the time. But their multiple levels of meaning render them unshareable. [Note: I ended up running these, later, and people actually liked them more than I thought they might] A good Letter of Note (or a Brainpicker post, or a Retronaut photo, or a successful Vault post) is perfectly shaped to slip through social filters while carrying just the right amount of meaning.

Internet history powerfully rewards a teleological sense of the moral advancement of history. One of the all-time most-clicked Letters of Note is [by Journdon Anderson, an emancipated slave](#). Anderson replies to his former owner's request that he return to work on his farm by asking for back wages owed, and wondering whether the ex-owner will promise to keep his beautiful daughters safe. It's a wonderful letter, full of rhetorical power and righteousness. I've had similar traffic success with [an open letter from Helen Keller to the German students who planned to burn her book](#). In the headline, I called it "blistering": "Do not imagine your barbarities to the Jews are unknown here. God sleepeth not, and He will visit His judgment upon you," Keller warned. These letters give readers a triumphant sense that, despite the indignities of history, people were there speaking out, protesting, and being counted. Less mobile are moments of half-heartedness, confusion, and backsliding, though these (of course!) are also the meat of human existence.

Social media selects for those documents and stories that can be labeled "timeless" or "universal." This is why advice between parents and children, lists of writers' routines, love letters, and reflections on growing older or the nature of creativity tend to travel. While history, in its uncurated form, thwarts attempts at direct comparison and neat analogies, the hunger for "timelessness" privileges overly neat historical comparisons. (See: [the recent Brainpickings post comparing Mark Twain to Steve Jobs](#), or [the much-circulated Retronaut image of inventor Hugo Gernsback's "Isolator"](#))

[helmet.](#)) Letters of Note is particularly prone to this tendency, as many of its [most-clicked letters between historical figures](#) are about emotional matters: love, death, the passage of time. The temptation to sort historical things by "just like us!" (or, conversely, deeply and inexplicably "weird") is one that historians resist for good reason. Presentism cuts interesting historical investigation off at the knees.

I hope this helps - obviously, there's much more to say - and I hope to avoid a chiding tone. Let me know what you think.

Slate (Double X)

"The Pre-Pregnancy Contract"

A casual note to the people at Slate who do the Mom and Dad Are Fighting podcast. One of them eventually convinced me to write it as this piece:

http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2014/07/pre_pregnancy_contract_signing_on_the_dotted_line_to_avoid_household_conflict.html

Re: deciding whether or not to have kids, & along the lines of Ruth Graham's recent piece: Husband and I are continually on the fence about kid(s), and part of the reason is that I can't make him grok the amount of work it'd be, the changes it'd bring to his life, and the expectations I'd have of him. Everyone says "Make sure you marry an understanding partner," and Nick is generally a good person (I should hope!), but he has never been around kids that much. Even when he is, he tends to identify more with the dads (who don't shoulder as much of the burden as I'd want him to) than see how much the moms are doing. And he's certainly not reading Jennifer Senior's book or any of the many articles/posts/blah blah on the Internet that make me scared of taking the step. That's just not part of his circuit of concerns.

Did either of you talk about expectations for division of labor before reproducing? I want, like, a pre-pregnancy contract, like a prenup but for a baby. "I will go ahead with this if you promise to cook three times a week"; "I will go ahead with this if you can guarantee I get to work X hours a week"; or something.

Does this even make sense, or is the fact that I want it proof that I should not have a child?

Liking the podcast, btw!

Slate (History)

"Boyhood"

A pitch to my main editor at Slate that eventually became this piece:

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2015/05/nelson_archive_at_amherst_a_one_of_a_kind_trove_reveals_what_rural_19th.html

I'd like to write about the Nelson Brothers archive. This is a bunch of juvenilia produced by three teenage brothers living on a farm in Goshen, New Hampshire, in the 1890s. Elmer, Arthur, and Walter Nelson made little hand-printed booklets, illustrated quite competently. The brothers produced gazetteers, seed catalogs, newspapers, and dime novels—clearly, they were imitating the print culture that was around them. They loved war, sailboats, and Indian "savages."

I thought at first that I might write about this on the Vault, but I couldn't figure out how to pick just one of their little books. Really what's interesting is the whole thing, as a body of work.

I'd use the archive to talk about a few bigger themes: children's literary culture of the late nineteenth century; the knotty conceptual problem of children's archives (which get saved? and why?); and the weirdness of having a very specific record of one family's imaginative life. (Sometimes they're a little bit racist, in the mode of their day, which is a strange thing to have preserved.) It's just interesting to have this little window into the way one group of children processed the culture around them at the end of the 19th c.

The Nelson archive is at Amherst College, and some of the documents [have been digitized](#) in the course of a seminar held at the college in 2014. The students also did some digging into the history of the Nelson family in Goshen, so that material is available as well. I think we could get permission to publish images of some of the little booklets - in fact, if you like the idea, I'd probably ask *before* starting to write this because the images are such a big part of the appeal.