Women of Letters: Reviving the Lost Art of Correspondence curated by Marieke Hardy and Michaela McGuire. Penguin Viking, 2011
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 3 April 2012

Women of Letters is a collection of short pieces which began life as talks performed at literary afternoons. Guests at these events, organised by Marieke Hardy and Michaela McGuire, were invited ‘to pen letters “to” a theme and read them aloud.’ It’s a large collection: they aimed to include all the letters read during their first year, and although they were not all available there are still nearly seventy pieces.

The blurb on the back of the book enthuses, ‘in the world of the short and swift, of texts and Twitter, there’s something of special value about a carefully composed letter’. But many of these pieces don’t appear to be particularly ‘carefully composed’, and anyway the essence, and the beauty, and the interest, of a letter is surely that it is an act of personal communication, from one individual to another. These pieces, on the other hand, are often not addressed to another person. The themes to which they are written include ‘the night I’d rather forget’, ‘the song I wish I’d written’, ‘my turning point’, and ‘the photo I wish had never been taken’. Even those which are addressed to a person – ‘to my first pin-up’ or ‘the woman who changed my life’ are often those least interesting of communications, the fan letter, or the opposite, a rant – ‘to the host of that party’, ‘to my first boss’.

The desire for inclusiveness has prompted some strange contributions. Jennifer Byrne, for some reason, reads out a letter from Apsley Cherry-Garrard in the ‘Love letter’ section. Cherry-Garrard, as I’m sure everyone knows, was the survivor from Scott’s Antarctic expedition, and his expression of undying love was for the penguin eggs he carried across the frozen wastes. He wrote this appeal to anyone who might find it, when he believed he wouldn’t make it back to base. He is hardly a ‘woman of letters’, but then among the sixty-eight or so ‘correspondents’ are a dozen or so other men, speaking in their own right. In fact, they are the sole contributors to two sections: ‘To the woman who changed my life’ (do women not change women’s lives as well as men’s?) and, even more strangely, ‘to the song I wish I’d written.’ Perhaps female songwriters don’t have such regrets.

Inevitably this collection is extremely uneven. Among the writers are actors, journalists, comedians and even some novelists. The comedians often come out worst, their jokey straining for effect falling flat on the page where it might have been scintillating when performed, and their voices, swinging from self-indulgence to self-punishment, sound remarkably similar. There are far too many contributors to mention, but there are some who stand out above the rest. It’s no surprise that Helen Garner and Alice Pung pitch their pieces perfectly. Shalini Akhil, writing to her twelve-year-old self, also strikes a note of playfulness and earnestness which many of the other autobiographical pieces miss. John Safran rewrites Paul Kelly’s song ‘When I first met your Ma’ to hilarious effect – apparently he performed it with Kelly, which must have brought the house down and would have been a hard act to follow.

The best that can be said about Women of Letters is that it’s a strange concept which has produced some interesting results. The book’s subtitle is ‘Reviving the Lost Art of Correspondence.’ None of these short pieces do that. They are basically scripts for talks: giving them a title beginning with ‘To the….’ doesn’t make them letters. Some are entertaining, some are moving, but many are self-indulgent, facetious or maudlin. A 100-page highlights volume would have been a better option than this indiscriminate, patchy and unsatisfying 400-page tome.