

'This is Susan Johnson at her most original, daring, bone-deep and deliciously raw. I fell, too, with aching heart and tickled rib, under the spell of this extraordinary book.'

TRENT
DALTON

SUSAN
JOHNSON

FROM
WHERE

I
FELL

'Johnson creates two voices that echo and reverberate long after the final, heart-wrenching pages. Her best yet.'

GERALDINE
BROOKS

Praise for *The Landing*

‘An awe-inspiring ability to explore emotional truths.’ *Daily Advertiser*

‘Johnson is in control as she steers her wonderfully realised characters, and the reader, to a place if not of permanent safety, at least to a landing they can survive.’ *Newtown Review of Books*

‘Lightness is certainly part of *The Landing*’s appeal, but it is shot through with an equally appealing literary intelligence.’ *Sydney Review of Books*

Praise for *My Hundred Lovers*

‘A remarkable achievement, a genuine masterpiece of sensuality and an absorbing and very personal experience, like reading someone’s beautifully poetic and honest diary.’ *Meanjin*

‘The pleasures of bathing, cycling, Paris and song are threaded through memories of unrequited love, unrealised longing and lovers.’ *Canberra Times*

‘*My Hundred Lovers* is an original imagining of one woman’s waning flesh and the vibrant imprint of a life it still holds.’ *The Age*

Praise for *Life in Seven Mistakes*

‘She has a knack for presenting what can be unbearable in reality, of rendering it on the page with tremendous heart.’ *Sydney Morning Herald*

Praise for *The Broken Book*

‘Both very Australian and resoundingly international, *The Broken Book* confirms Johnson’s status as one of the finest Australian writers . . . fiercely beautiful.’ *The Australian*

‘A bold narrative, in which we’re constantly reminded by the quality of her prose that this is an imaginative work . . . It’s a kaleidoscope of memory, jagged and disordered as the artist’s tragic life.’ *Canberra Times*

Praise for *A Better Woman*

‘I am writing these lines with tears in my eyes . . . An extraordinary book from a great writer and a great woman.’ Isabel Allende

‘Transcendent . . . Beautifully written and remarkably wise. A distinguished memoir.’ *Kirkus Reviews*

Praise for *Hungry Ghosts*

‘. . . so well crafted it exudes a breathless quality.’ *The Australian*

‘An absorbing and disquieting tale of love, friendship, and betrayal.’ *Kirkus Reviews*

Praise for *Flying Lessons*

‘Ms Johnson’s prose is charged with feeling, insight and rambunctious wit.’ *New York Times Book Review*

Susan Johnson has been writing books since 1985, when she received the first of three grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council which allowed her to write full time. Before that she was a journalist (starting at the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* and going on to work for such diverse publications as *The Australian Women's Weekly*, *The Sun-Herald*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The National Times*).

She's written ten books: eight novels; a memoir, *A Better Woman*; and a non-fiction book, an essay, *On Beauty*. Several of her books have been published in the UK, the US, and in European translation.

She's lived in the UK, France and Greece, but returned to Brisbane, Australia, in 2010. In 2019 she took off again to live on the Greek island of Kythera with her 85-year-old mother, Barbara. A memoir about their adventure is forthcoming.

ALSO BY SUSAN JOHNSON

Fiction

Latitudes: New Writing from the North (co-editor, 1986)

Messages from Chaos (1987)

Flying Lessons (1990)

A Big Life (1993)

Women Love Sex (editor, 1996)

Hungry Ghosts (1996)

The Broken Book (2004)

Life in Seven Mistakes (2008)

My Hundred Lovers (2012)

The Landing (2015)

Non-fiction

A Better Woman (1999)

On Beauty (2009)

SUSAN
JOHNSON

FROM
WHERE
I
FELL


ALLEN & UNWIN
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

This book is a work of fiction. Its skeleton is true—its author is a divorced mother—however the events and incidents depicted in it are constructions of creative imagination.

First published in 2021

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The paper in this book is FSC® certified. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

In memory of Gillian Mears

For manifestly you have been aware of what
you mean when you use the expression 'being'.
We, however, who used to think we understood it,
have now become perplexed.

PLATO, *THE SOPHIST*

Raphael

FROM: Pamela Robinson <prrobinson@hotmail.com>

TO: Chris Woods <chrisxwoods@hotmail.com> <chrisxwoods@gmail.com>

Dear Chris,

Alors, Raf turned sixteen today. Can you ever forget the sight of him new, no bigger than your fist? A machine keeping his lungs open between breaths, his own body not knowing how to breathe, believing it still lived underwater. Remember when he was released from his radiant cradle I donned a lead apron like a bulletproof vest and placed him against an X-ray machine, holding up his tiny arms, tender as the new shoots of a plant? Why was I wearing the protective vest and not him, his smudge of self, barely there? His lungs were fine and now he is sixteen years old, filling those same brave lungs with carcinogenic smoke. Did you know he smokes? I've forbidden it—of course—but I know he does. The first generation to grow up bombarded with anti-tobacco propaganda and he takes up smoking.

Time is a trickster—I feel at any moment I might turn around and find Raf swaddled on the couch behind me, my first baby, my terror, my love, unfingered by life. Yesterday I came across a photo of him and Claude in the garden at Deauville—before Baptiste was born—both of them small enough to squeeze into nappy buckets, smiling up at the camera. I felt as if I could walk into the frame to find everyone living in that moment, dumb to the future.

I've wanted to write to you many times. Most often to say that if I'd known the cost of leaving the marriage I would never have left. I am to blame for the pain the boys have endured—and if this is something you wanted to hear, then yes, I admit it.

But what I regret most is telling you I didn't love you anymore—bad advice I heeded, and my fault for asking for advice and following it. You will always be the father of my children and I will always love you. For what it's worth, I am very sorry for what happened to us, but sorrier for Raphael, Claude and Baptiste. We created three sons, a truth that will exist forever in time.

Love,
Pamela

THU 21/02 9.15AM

Mistake

FROM: Chris Woods <chrisxwoods@gmail.com>

TO: Pamela Robinson <prrobinson@hotmail.com>

Hi Pamela, you have the wrong person/email address. Good luck and hope things work out for you. Take care, Chrisanthi Woods

Re: Mistake

FROM: Pamela Robinson

TO: Chris Woods

Oh my God, how *excruciating*! I'm not in the habit of pouring my heart out to strangers. My ex-husband (who's Christophe Woods, not Chrisanthi Woods!) has a new Gmail account and I've obviously used the wrong address. Raf showed me an email with his dad's new address but I didn't write it down—I simply assumed Chris changed his old Hotmail email to the new Gmail one, keeping the same address format, so I used both just in case. The Hotmail one hasn't bounced back, which I suppose means he got my email. He thinks I blew up his life—which I did—just not on purpose like he thinks. He won't speak to me. Oh, dear—I suppose I *do* pour my heart out to strangers . . .

Apologies from Sydney, Australia. Where are you by the way?

Best wishes,

Pamela Robinson

THU 21/02 9.32AM

Hello from Schenectady, New York

FROM: Chris Woods

TO: Pamela Robinson

Hi Pamela, we're in upstate New York. Did you hear back from your ex? Take care, Chris

Hello again

FROM: Pamela Robinson

TO: Chris Woods

Hi Chris,

I haven't heard a thing.

It feels weird writing an email to someone with the same name as my ex-husband—a Chris who is not 'my' Chris—and a woman not a man to boot. My Chris is Christophe Xavier—what's your X stand for? And you're Chris, not Chrisanthi? I was Pam when I was young, but in my old age I've reclaimed Pamela. My Chris—who's in Paris—only gets Christophe from French people who don't know him.

Best wishes,

Pamela

THU 21/02 1.13PM

Chris or Chrisanthi

FROM: Chris Woods

TO: Pamela Robinson

Hi Pamela, my mom calls me Chrisanthi Xenia (my full name). Everyone else calls me Chris. PS Your ex should speak to you. Refusing to speak to someone is usually controlling behaviour.

Behaviour

FROM: Pamela Robinson

TO: Chris Woods

Hi Chris I Don't Even Know,

Look, I don't know the first thing about you, and you don't know the first thing about me, but aren't some things about everyone the same? Pain is universal, only the details differ, so why does pain feel exasperatingly personal?

I've given up trying to work out other people—how does anyone know anything about anyone? Is my ex-husband's behaviour controlling? He's grievously hurt, that's all—and the older I get, the less I know about anyone. How do we even know pain is universal if we experience it as ours alone? It took me ten years to leave my husband, because I kept seeing things from his point of view and because I kept hoping. We broke up once but I went back because I'm not very good at saying goodbye.

Yours in ignorance,
Pamela

Re: Behaviour

TO: Pamela Robinson

FROM: Chris Woods

Hey Pamela, you sound like someone who overthinks things. Give yourself a break—take a day off, buy an ice cream. It's summer in Australia, right? When the weather's fine I take my book and my fold-up chair and go sit in the park. Sundays in winter I head to the Dewey. This afternoon two kids came in looking for the library's New Deal murals. You know how kids don't talk these days, they sit with their cell phones, moving their thumbs? So, the girl takes a quick look at the murals, goes straight back to her phone. After a while she asks the boy, without looking up, 'Did you take some photos, Charlie?' And he says, 'Nah. I'll get better ones off Google later on.' What a world. Take care, Chris

MON 25/02 6.10AM

Me again . . .

FROM: Pamela Robinson

TO: Chris Woods

What do you do in Schenectady? Husband? Girlfriend? Kids?
You said 'we' live in Schenectady.

I'm a librarian as it happens (no murals where I work)—I'm
fifty-one, headed for the knackers.

Warm wishes,

Pamela

Knackers

TO: Pamela Robinson

FROM: Chris Woods

Hi Pamela, I'm sixty-four come June so no talk of the knackers please. Right now, I'm looking after a friend five years younger than you, dying of lung cancer, so no complaining either. Kathleen's never smoked in her life, so I was smiling when I read what you said about your son smoking.

Yeah, I've got a husband—Mike. Yesterday he climbed into the trash can to squash down some garbage, the trash can fell over and he cracked his head open. So, now I'm visiting my friend Kathleen in the hospice, my mom in her retirement complex and Mike in Ellis, between driving over to Kathleen's to feed her cat Boris and water her plants. She hangs her dresses according to colour. It's interesting to see the different ways folk live their lives.

I work in Albany, a half-hour drive on a good day, in student enrolments at SUNY. Some days I think it's great, everyone believing their lives will be better than their folks'. When I was young I expected something wonderful would happen to me.

So, a librarian. I'm a big fan of libraries. I'm always reading (I'm an English major). Right now, I'm coming to the end of *Madame Bovary*. This book gives me eyes. I've read it more times than I care to count and whenever I raise my new eyes to the real world I'm a little disappointed. Your ex is French? How come his surname is Woods? Take care, Chris

Pen pals

FROM: Pamela Robinson

TO: Chris Woods

Hi there,

Isn't this odd, talking to someone you don't know? We're not really talking either—I've got no idea what your voice sounds like or what you look like—although I picture you as tall, with a long, serious face. But really I've got no idea who you are—you could be a twenty-five-year-old Kenyan guy for all I know. It's bizarre—I send an email to bounce off some satellite in space and it falls into your inbox—out of all the Chris X Woodses on the planet who are not my ex-husband. But I'm totally convinced you are who you say you are—I mean, Chris from Schenectady, married to Mike, who climbs into garbage cans. I googled 'M and C Woods, Schenectady' and only a Michael K Woods came up—is that Mike? There are a couple of 'Chrysanthi Woods' on Facebook but no 'Chrisanthi Woods' and none called either in Schenectady. How strange that our lives are so traceable, digital trails everywhere like snails leaving glistening tracks—floating out there in the galaxies.

Once I had another email account—back when email began—and Chris and I courted that way. I mean, we courted in real life, too, when we could. He's American. (Well, he's half French. His mother's French, but his dad was from Detroit, where Chris and his brother grew up, and where we lived for three years after we got married.) I'm 100 per cent mongrel white Australian—a bit of English and Irish, mostly Scots. Chris and I met in New York twenty years ago when I was on the hoof; I've lived a peripatetic life, here and there, everywhere

and nowhere. Email was how we kept in touch—our love flung up into the heavens, no letters, no words on paper, only soft words among the planets. A few weeks ago—in the middle of the night, when I couldn't sleep for thinking about how I wrecked everything—I got up and turned on my laptop and logged into an old email service we used. Our emails had vanished—gone! Apparently if you don't use Hotmail email addresses after a certain number of years the address evaporates—*pouf*—flung back into the mystery from whence they came. No glistening trails, no comfort for me in the middle of the night trying to warm myself by love's flame. How hard we loved and how dazzling love turned us! Our beautiful words, lost, and only an image left in my head of our love falling back to earth, letter by letter, loosed among the stars . . .

Do you think there are two of us now? Our time is lived in both virtual and physical space, our physical selves and our second selves with our glistening trails, our vanished email selves a kind of cosmic echo. Maybe our virtual selves transmute into a sort of disembodied, captured past, like photographs, a palimpsest of every earlier lost version of ourselves. There I am, a ghost of the air, my younger self eternally in love with my lost Chris, who is not you. And there you are, Chrisanthi Xenia, whose physical self is unknown to me but whom I picture as a tall woman, with a long, serious face. I wish there *were* two of me—I'm too busy to have a pen pal—yet here we are, strangers, connected in air.

Warm wishes,
Pamela

Re: Pen pals

FROM: Chris Woods

TO: Pamela Robinson

Hi Pamela, yeah, well, here's the one and only me, trying to stop my crazy husband climbing a ladder to paint a wall. Ellis kicked him out after scans showed it was only a hairline fracture. He's Michael W (for Walter) Woods, he ran a radio repair business until everyone stopped buying radios. We're not on Facebook.

I hate to break it to you but I'm not tall. I'm five foot, and carrying too much weight. My face is not long and intelligent. My mother says, 'Kindly show me a pleasant expression, Chrisanthi Xenia, if nature hasn't blessed you with one.' Except she says it in Greek, which doesn't sound so polite.

I had a pen pal back in the day. I was a paid-up member of GOYA (Greek Orthodox Youth of America). Four years straight I wrote my pen pal Dimitra in Athens. I was learning Greek at Saturday Greek school, she was learning English. I wanted to know everything about her: what her room was like, what she ate, did she have a pet. Other people's lives are way more interesting than mine.

Everything was going great until Dimitra got into boys. The closest I got to a boy in those days was watching *The Monkees* on TV. Dimitra was making out with her boyfriend, being wild with other Athenian teenagers. She was in 1969 while I was in 1949, with the other kids whose parents had immigrated to America.

I hope you're a better pen pal than Dimitra. Take care, Chris

WED 27/02 10.55PM

Re: Re: Pen pals

FROM: Pamela Robinson

TO: Chris Woods

Please keep emailing—I promise to be a good pen pal. Lucky for you, I'm never making out with boys again.

Warmest,

Pamela

Update

FROM: Chris Woods

TO: Pamela Robinson

Hi Pamela, so it turns out Kathleen has a sister. She told me she had no family, met her husband Ray on a train, followed him out East. They were married two years when he was electrocuted at work. I was pissed she lied about having no family.

Saturday, I spent the afternoon washing and blow-drying what's left of Kathleen's hair. She likes to keep herself neat. She's dying, and she asks me to pick up some hair combs because hers are broken. 'Could you pick up some hair dye too, please?' she asks, and it was on the tip of my tongue to say, 'What's the point?' when this bedraggled-looking woman walks in, rushes over to Kathleen, cries all over her. I'm about to haul her off when Kathleen mouths, 'No, no, it's OK.' You'd never pick them for sisters.

Jean's her name. She phones Kathleen every couple months on her landline. Kathleen's the only person I know who still has a landline; it kind of goes with her colour-coded clothes. The last time Jean phones Kathleen she can't raise her no matter what time she calls, so she tracks her down to her place of work (she works with me at SUNY) and gets it out of them that Kathleen's in the hospital but not which one. (Stupid new privacy protocols at work meant I couldn't even get the home address of my colleague Tracey when she had another miscarriage and I wanted to visit.) So, Jean rings every hospital across town, gets nowhere, catches a plane from Milwaukee, and takes a cab to every hospital in Schenectady in person. When she can't find her in any of the hospitals, she starts on the hospices until she locates her.

They don't even like each other. Jean's the eldest, and treated Kathleen like she was her personal toy. She cut off Kathleen's eyelashes when Kathleen was eight, and once she made her march (at gunpoint) around the yard on the hottest day of summer until Kathleen fainted. 'It was only an air rifle,' Kathleen says, so I ask her, 'What's the difference between an air rifle and a gun when it comes to shooting a person?' Kathleen shrugs, if lying on your back hardly being able to move counts as a shrug. 'She said if I told Mom she would creep into my room in the night and shoot my toes off.'

Mike is driving me nuts so I've started going to the Dewey evenings as well. I'm the one paying our medical insurance plan and he's the one climbing into trash cans. Sometimes I like living in a book better than I like living my actual life. I think I told you I'm an English major (SUNY, big surprise). I've lived in Schenectady forever. Take care, Chris

Re: Update

FROM: Pamela Robinson

TO: Chris Woods

Hi again,

I can't tell you how much pleasure your emails bring me—even though we've never laid eyes on each other. How random life is. Look at us: two strangers, accidentally connecting, falling into friendship in mid-air. I admit I still get an occasional queasy moment seeing that 'Chris X Woods' in my inbox, but I'm getting used to it now. It's peculiar having an interaction with someone with the same name, even if it's only a virtual interaction. In a strange way it's like having a second chance at getting it right, if you know what I mean. Don't worry—I'm not some weirdo who's going to turn up on your doorstep, confusing you with him!

And how strange that time exists in two places at once—that you're alive in time in another day, living in another moment. How can it be that you are still in yesterday, and I am alive in today?

Maybe our identities are more fluid now we have multiple virtual versions of ourselves in time. I can assure you I'm me—a librarian of modest means living in a two-bedroom flat the size of a shoebox I'm lucky I could afford to buy, though only with a ginormous mortgage bigger than the flat. It's in a suburb called Ashfield, in the inner west, nowhere near Bondi Beach or the Opera House or any other celebrated Sydney tourist spot. I'm the mother of three boys—two angry teenagers forced to share a bedroom and my littlest, Baptiste, who turned eight last month, aka my let's-try-to-save-our-marriage baby, who sleeps on the enclosed front veranda in a bed he says is too far from mine.

The world needs more people like you—rooted to one spot—
than people like me living a helter-skelter life. Can you imagine
if everyone were like me, belonging nowhere? Or is it no-one
belonging anywhere?

Warmest,
Pamela

Belonging

FROM: Chris Woods

TO: Pamela Robinson

Hi Pamela, I'll swap you belonging for elsewhere. I'll throw in Mike, who's still climbing ladders. Lucky you, working in a library, surrounded by books. I used to dream of being an American in Paris. I pictured the apartment I lived in, with bookshelves and high windows, opening onto a square. I went to Paris once when I was eighteen. What's your ex-husband doing there? Did you hear back from him?

Kathleen's time is getting close. Waiting for death is like waiting for birth. You know it's soon, you just don't know when. The world seems changed. I go to work, everything looks different. It makes me wonder if any of us are anything more than our bodies. We're all God's creatures, but sometimes I think even He takes His eye off the ball. Take care, Chris