

BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

Review: Marcel Proust's 'Letters to His Neighbor'

Proust complained about noise, "everything that is dragged over the floor, that falls on it, runs across it."

By Geoff Wisner

Jan. 19, 2018 4:32 pm ET

What do you do when the people upstairs are making too much noise? You might pound on the ceiling with a broomstick. You might complain to the building's management. Or if you are Marcel Proust, living at 102 Boulevard Haussmann, you might interrupt your work on the greatest novel of the 20th century to write your neighbors a series of letters that mingle flattery and understated reproach, accompanied by gifts.

On a Saturday in the fall of 1909, Proust writes to Dr. Williams, the American dentist who has moved into the building with his French wife: "I hope that you will be willing to accept these four pheasants with as much simplicity as I put into offering them to you as neighbor. I will also permit myself to send you a few of my works." Only then does he request that the hammering of the Williamses' workmen be suspended for the whole of next Monday.

The following year Proust has his bedroom lined with cork. It is not enough. The noise continues—as do the gifts, the delicately worded appeals for quiet, and the subtly planted allusions to the asthma that disturbs his rest.

Proust's letters to the Williamses, recently discovered in a Paris archive, span the decade from 1908 to 1918. These 26 items make a delightful addendum to the four-volume "Selected Letters." What makes this small volume worth having, however, is the bookmaking, including the textured endpapers and facsimiles of letters in which the lines of loose and airy handwriting sometimes droop and run off the page.



Marcel Proust

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

LETTERS TO HIS NEIGHBOR

By Marcel Proust

New Directions, 110 pages, \$19.95

The letters have been translated by the estimable Lydia Davis, who supplements the notes in the French edition of 2013 and provides an afterword almost as long as the letters themselves. She offers insights from her experience translating “Swann’s Way” and a remembered glimpse of what remained of Proust’s bedroom some years ago, emptied of his furniture and made available for viewing (one afternoon per week) by the bank that now owns the building.

—*Mr. Wisner’s latest book is “Thoreau’s Animals.”*