

# Desire



Boston socialite, writer, and philanthropist  
Annie Adams Fields as painted by John  
Singer Sargent in 1889.

# Under the Fir

Society chronicler **Annie Adams Fields** played muse and *Tory* lover for **Sarah Orne Jewett**, author of *Country of the Pointed Firs*.



**ERRY HELLER**, Ph.D., had never been to the small Maine town where **Sarah Orne Jewett** lived

when he first fell in love with her books about the people and life of her rural New England world. But Jewett's stories made the young teacher living in 1970s Iowa yearn for the 19th century South Berwick, to know Jewett herself, and to be a part of her intimate circle of friends.

Today, Heller is a world authority on Jewett (1849-1909) and has spent decades amassing **The Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project** from his base at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Like most everyone fascinated by the life and times of this writer, he knows all about Jewett and Boston aristocrat Annie Fields: they were close friends, deeply and even passionately connected, travel companions, and life partners. But even today, Heller is unwilling to definitively comment on the suggestion of romantic involvement that hovered over the women's relationship between 1882 and 1909.

"There is no doubt about the deep and abiding affection between Sarah and Annie," says Heller, in a recent visit to South Berwick. "But there is plenty of doubt about an erotic component because so far there is a lack of unequivocally persuasive evidence."



BY AMY MILLER

The signs are everywhere. There are the stories of intimate intrigues sprinkled through two of Jewett's best-known works, *Deephaven* (1877) and *Country of Pointed Firs* (1896), relationships between women that often mirror her own life stories and friendships. Indeed, there are love poems directed quite startlingly to women, dozens of them, in fact. Jewett wrote in the opening of an 1880 poem:

*Do you remember, darling,  
A year ago today  
When we gave ourselves to each other...*

Most telling of all are the myriad letters written back and forth between Jewett

and Fields, a Boston author whose relationship began while Fields was still married and continued for 30 years after Fields's husband, *Atlantic Monthly* publisher James Fields, died in 1881. Jewett wrote to Fields in 1882:

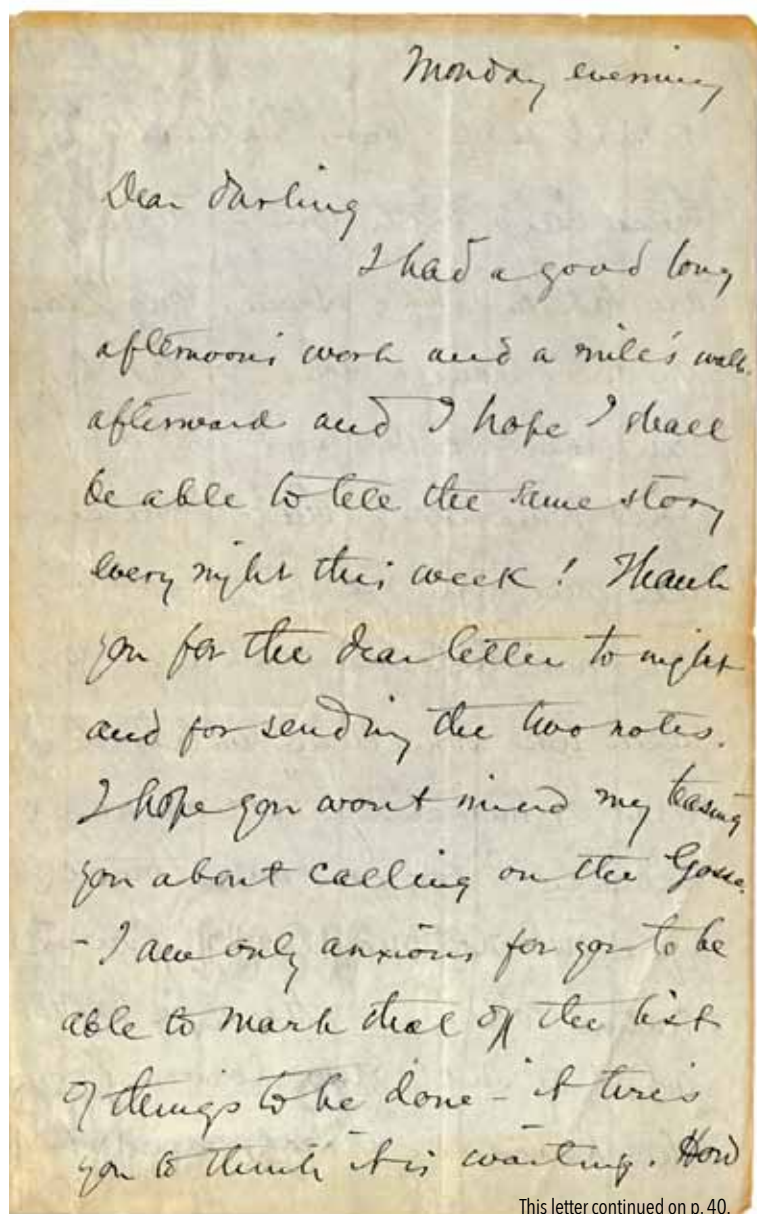
*Oh my dear darling I had  
forgotten that we loved each other  
so much a year ago—for it all seems  
so new to me every day—there is so much  
for us to remember already...*

## A COVER-UP UNCOVERED

Nina Maurer, regional administrator for the Jewett House in South Berwick and several other historic New England properties in the 1990s, recalls that even at a Jewett conference in 1995, no one was willing to go out on a limb and say Jewett was gay.

"At the time, the people I talked to said they didn't have any evidence or documents that would corroborate the fact or supposition that she was gay," says Maurer, a South Berwick resident.

Enter Portland playwright **Carolyn Gage**, who includes Jewett and Fields's relationship in her show "**Theatrical Journey Through Maine's Lesbian History**." According to Gage, the two women "attended séances to



This letter continued on p. 40.

## Life, Love & Literature

"Sarah Orne Jewett's most famous work, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, gained her considerable fame and a place in the canon of American letters. Henry James praised the book for being "so absolutely true-not a word overdone-such elegance and exactness." A reviewer of Jewett's work wrote in 1880



that she had already, at the age of 31, begun to attract a devoted audience with her numerous and widely-published short stories. Much of Jewett's writing centered on friendships and love between women, a theme that was a reflection of the way she chose to live her life. In 1882, Jewett began a relationship with Boston philanthropist and socialite Annie Adams Fields that would last until Jewett's death in 1909. The two shared a deep and intimate union that was known at the time as a "Boston marriage."

"While the correspondence between Jewett and Fields, and between many other such couples, is full of intimate endearments and references to physical closeness, it is impossible to tell the exact nature or extent of their physical relationship. It is obvious, however, that they saw a clear parallel between their union and heterosexual marriage.

"Over the course of Jewett's lifetime, society's attitude toward Boston marriages began to change. The new science of psychology denounced same-sex love, equating it with arrested development and mental disorder. The impact of this change was evident in the correspondence between Jewett and Willa Cather, a younger writer who looked to Jewett as a mentor. While Jewett wrote openly about the emotional connections between women, Cather often created male characters who may well have been surrogates for herself.

In commenting on Cather's work, Jewett remarked upon the shortcomings of writing in disguise. But Cather, who came of age when society had already begun to view women's relationships with suspicion, was not as willing as Jewett to be direct about women's love for each other." - From the PBS archives

gain approval [for their relationship] from the spirits of a dead father and former husband."

Gage, both as a playwright and a member of the lesbian community, feels it is the responsibility of the academic community as "the gatekeepers of history to incorporate [Jewett's] lesbianism. And that would require an understanding that there is a culture associated with lesbianism. Jewett and Fields were part of several networks of upper- and upper-middle-class lesbian activists and artists who only recently have begun to be uncovered and studied. Jewett's life and work should provide a proud lesbian legacy for all Mainers. She is one of the few women authors in the canon of what are considered the 'classics' of 19th century American litera-

**"[Sarah and Annie] attended seances to gain approval from the spirits of a dead father and former husband."**

ture. *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, focused on the lives and the relationships between older, rural women in Maine, is quintessentially lesbian, but it has been historically closeted along with her life by both academics and docents."

### CULTURAL CONTEXT

What we do know of the intimacies that passed between Jewett and Fields became an iconic example of a "Boston marriage," the name given to intimate friendships between women in the 19th century, not to mention a celebrated 1999 play by David Mamet.

### 'IMPROPER' BOSTONIANS

Jewett's friend and contemporary Henry James was so intrigued by her friendship with Fields that it was a springboard for his 1886 novel *The Bostonians*. Josephine Donovan writes in *The Unpublished Love Poems of Sarah Orne Jewett*, "Helen Howe suggests that Henry James was unnerved by the pair. 'What Henry James, whose *The Bostonians*



James Thomas Fields, Nathaniel Hawthorne,  
and William Davis Ticknor



was published in 1888, found to 'catch at' in the friendship between the Charles Street ladies we can only guess.' The implication here is that the latent lesbian relationship between the characters Olive Chancellor and Verena Tarrant which James satirized in the novel was based on the Jewett-Fields liaison. There are in fact some parallels between the two couples: Olive was older than Verena, more aristocratic; Fields was also older and more urbane than Jewett, a native of rural Maine. Without commenting on this possibility, Leon Edel claims that James was merely reflecting the attitudes of his time in depicting the women so harshly. Nan Bauer Maglin argues that *The Bostonians* was an attempt to discredit the suffrage movement "with the charge of 'lesbianism' or perhaps only 'intense relationshipism.'" Jewett in fact knew of the intense relationship that existed between Henry's sister Alice and Katherine Loring, commenting in a letter how 'Alice James's going has made a great empty place in [Katherine's] life.'"

#### VOICING THE SILENCE

Missing from our 21st-century vantage is the atmosphere in which passions of the times operated. Victorian society left little room for expression of even heterosexual love, let alone passion, except quietly in the privacy of a marital bedroom. But while physical relationships between men were considered an outrage, physical intimacies between women did not carry the same stigma.

"Female homosexuality was almost inconceivable to the public mind until the term 'sexual inversion,' a coinage by sexol-



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## PERSPECTIVES

ogist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, was popularized,” says Heller.

Jewett and Fields sensed a growing suspicion towards the nature of their relationship towards the end of Jewett’s life. Although Fields was willing to publish the full extent of their intimate correspondence following Jewett’s death in 1909, there are indications that her editors chose to eliminate incriminating details from the letters before publication in 1911.

Definitions of sexuality were far less black and white, explains Sarah Way Sherman, associate professor of English and American studies at the University of New Hampshire and author of *Sarah Orne Jewett, An American Persephone*.

“Assessing these unions is difficult from a 20th-century perspective,” Sherman says. “Relationships like the one between Jewett and Fields were true unions: intimate life-long commitments that can serve as models for loving relationships today.”

The friendship between Fields, a Boston sophisticate, and Jewett, a relative country girl, turned intimate after the death of Fields’s husband, according to Sherman.

“Sometime in the winter of 1881 in the wake of James Fields’s death, Annie Fields and Sarah Jewett fell in love,” she wrote. For the rest of Jewett’s life the two would live much of the time in Fields’s homes in Manchester-by-the-Sea, New Hampshire, or on Charles Street in Boston, where they were part of a literary crowd that included Willa Cather, Sarah Whitman, Alice James, and other writers and intellectuals of the time.

During his recent visit to Jewett’s hometown, Terry Heller canoed the Salmon Falls River, walked along the Ogunquit coast, and was received at the historical society’s Counting House Museum, enjoying much of the scenery captured in Jewett’s books.

Remarkably, Main Street today is not all that different from when Jewett lived here. Heller and his wife stayed in a house with an apple orchard Jewett frequented that is just doors away from the historic house where she lived, and which is open to the public for tours.

While Fields’s sexuality may be an academic question to, well, academics, Heller knows it could have relevance for individuals today whose sexuality is marginalized, namely the LGBTQ community.

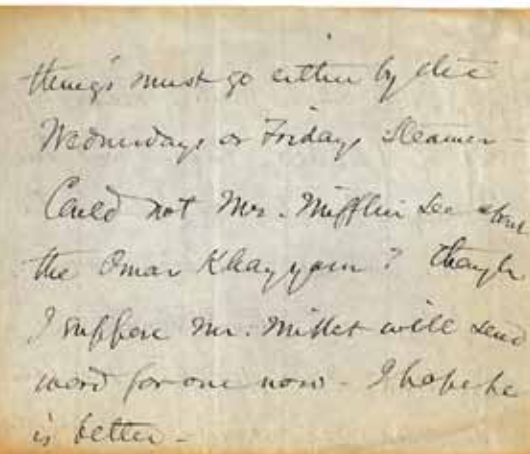


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"It helps if you feel like an excluded minority to point to people included in the fellowship, especially famous people through history," Heller suggests.

Meanwhile, towards the end of the interview, Heller notes with seeming surprise that in all his years teaching classes on Jewett he never addressed the subject of her sexuality.

"Students never knew to bring it up, and I didn't know how to answer the question, so I didn't," says Heller.

Just as our country's relationship with homosexuality has evolved over the years, Heller has noticed his own feelings about this question of Jewett's sexuality. He once worried this already marginalized writer would be judged. Now, though, he's ready to embrace whatever truths may be uncovered.

"I loved Jewett and still do, so when people said things that lacked evidence my first reaction was to back off—not because it was bad," he says, "but in protectiveness, like why do we want to invade her privacy?" Today, the label of homosexuality may enrich the reputation of his literary hero. For love's sake; for art's sake.

"The world has changed, and I've changed with it," he says. ■

Online Extras: Go to [portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2016/10/sarah-ome-jewett](http://portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2016/10/sarah-ome-jewett) to read the fully transcribed version of Jewett and Fields's correspondence, provided by Maine Women Writers Collection, University of New England, Portland.

## On the Term "Boston Marriage"

• "Boston marriage is an historical term, not prejudicial in the least. A play of that name was written in 1999 by David Mamet, so certainly the expression "Boston marriage" should be familiar to many people. I think [the term] is entirely relevant today." —*Martha Stone, writer, Boston*

• "I wouldn't say "Boston marriage" is pejorative, but neither is it popular. In fact, some of my (gay male) colleagues had never heard it and didn't know what it meant. I'd describe it as archaic but inoffensive." —*Teresa Theophano, writer & LGBTQ social worker, New York*

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