

Dear Dordo: The World War II Letters of Dorothy and John D. MacDonald

**Compiled and Edited by Florence M. Turcotte, Cal Branche, and Nola Branche.
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1944455132.**

Dear Dordo: The World War II Letters of Dorothy and John D. MacDonald (2021) is an Open Access eBook of letters sent between a husband and wife who were separated during the war. Dorothy MacDonald (aka “Dordo”) and the now well-known and prolific writer, John D. MacDonald were separated during the years 1943-1945 while John served in the U.S. Army. Dorothy was living in Western and Central NY and John was stationed first in Rochester, NY but later transferred to India and then Ceylon.¹ Through correspondence, the book provides an in-depth look into the effects of wartime on the life and marriage of a couple with a young son.

The book begins with a brief history about John and Dorothy’s families. John’s father had a difficult upbringing and therefore expected much out of John, such as a strong work ethic and the ability to provide for his family. Dorothy’s father died when she was fifteen, leaving the family in financial distress. Dorothy, previously married, met John in 1937, and they secretly wed in Pennsylvania.²

During the war, one of the letters John sent to Dorothy was a full short story, titled “As Through a Glass.” Dorothy later submitted the story to *Esquire* magazine, where it was rejected.³ It was eventually accepted by *Story* magazine and published in 1946, under the new title “Interlude in India.”⁴ After returning from the war, John became a prolific author, adopting a rigorous writing schedule that produced many new novels a year for the span of nearly 40 years. He was best known for his thrillers and crime novels featuring the main character Travis McGee, but he also wrote other best-selling fiction.

John’s letters provide descriptions of his life in the military, including detailed accounts of the weather, food, religious ceremonies, and other daily activities. Dorothy’s letters discuss the daily happenings with their son, Maynard (aka “Penny,” “Pen,” “Pencil,” or “John”), in N.Y. Dorothy and John agreed to number their letters for organizational purposes. However, there were gaps in time when correspondence was not delivered promptly; John was frustrated by this, especially when he did not receive a timely letter about their son’s tonsil operation.

When John stopped writing on a regular basis, it caused a long-distance argument which Dorothy addressed in a letter dated July 7, 1944. Although no confessional letter exists,⁵ Dorothy suspected John had been unfaithful to her and wrote, “It’s unbelievable to me that you would go on, day after day, so utterly blind to the implications of this affair, to the selfish

¹ British Ceylon was formerly a British colony and is now present-day Sri-Lanka.

² Florence M. Turcotte, Cal Branche and Nola Branche, eds. *Dear Dordo: The World War II Letters of Dorothy and John D. MacDonald* (Gainesville: Library Press, 2021), 10. <https://ufl.pb.unizin.org/deardordo/>

³ Turcotte, Branche and Branche, eds., *Dear Dordo*, 19.

⁴ Turcotte, Branche and Branche, eds., *Dear Dordo*, 19.

⁵ Turcotte, Branche and Branche, eds., *Dear Dordo*, xvi.

concern with which you have let it continue.”⁶ Dorothy expressed in several letters that she had suffered mentally from the suspected affair, and she later asked that John give a note to the “proper party” so that the “intruder” could know her true feelings about the situation.⁷ The couple eventually overcame the marital transgression and continued to embrace news from one another over the course of the next year.

Dear Dordo contains a total of 175 letters, which the editors note is only a sampling of the over 400 letters collected. These are part of the John D. MacDonald Collection, housed at the University of Florida (UF), Gainesville in the George A. Smathers Libraries.⁸ The collection was donated by MacDonald in the seventies and minimally processed at the time. Further processing occurred in the eighties and nineties after MacDonald’s death in 1986. The archival collection contains 199 boxes of business and personal correspondence, manuscripts, audiovisual materials, and ephemera. Additional highlights include tapes of MacDonald speaking to audiences about his writing techniques.⁹ Of the 199 boxes, four pertain to the WWII correspondence.

A preface written by compiler, editor, and archivist Florence M. Turcotte provides key details about the physical collection. The selected letters in the book were transcribed by co-compilers and editors Cal and Nola Branche,¹⁰ who organized the letters chronologically and assigned each a code: ALS (autograph letter signed), TLS (typed letter signed), V-mail, or telegram. These codes are designed to “help give the reader a sense of the physical characteristics of the original message.”¹¹

Digital images of family photographs and documents like yearbook photos, military discharge papers, and publication acceptance letters are peppered throughout the publication. However, no digitized images of the actual WWII letters are included. This is an unfortunate exclusion for the reader but may be due to the existence of copyrighted materials mentioned in the collection’s extensive finding aid. Other useful tools in the book include a list of “Persons Most Often Mentioned in the Letters” and a glossary of key terms to help identify abbreviations, phrases, and individuals outside the immediate family.

Readers should note that many of the letters contain racist remarks and slang terms for people in the countries where John was stationed. The editors prominently display a “Content Advisory” in the beginning of the book, alerting the reader to the racist language and stereotypes. They do not condone or excuse these remarks and note that they are only presented for historical accuracy; they state, “These were wrong then and are wrong now.”¹²

The Open Access eBook was published by LibraryPress at the University of Florida, Gainesville, an imprint of UF Press and the George A. Smathers Libraries.¹³ LibraryPress used Pressbooks, an Open Educational Resource (OER) platform for publishing freely available resources that scholars and researchers may reuse and redistribute. To maximize accessibility, the publisher provided three different options for downloading—EPUB, digital PDF, and PDF—

⁶ Turcotte, Branche and Branche, eds., *Dear Dordo*, 269.

⁷ Turcotte, Branche and Branche, eds., *Dear Dordo*, 271.

⁸ The John D. MacDonald Collection finding aid can be found at <https://findingaids.uflib.ufl.edu/repositories/2/resources/566>.

⁹ Turcotte, Branche and Branche, eds., *Dear Dordo*, 27.

¹⁰ It should be noted there were two sets of editors. Editors for the compiling and editing of the letters selected for the work were Florence M. Turcotte, Cal Branche, and Nola Branche. Additionally, LibraryPress lists Chelsea Johnston and Laurie Taylor as editors for the eBook, with the cover design credited to Tracy MacKay-Ratliff.

¹¹ Turcotte, Branche and Branche, eds., *Dear Dordo*, xvi.

¹² Turcotte, Branche and Branche, eds., *Dear Dordo*, 48.

¹³ The book is solely available in electronic format, and it is free to download. A direct link to the publication can be found here: <https://ufl.pb.unizin.org/deardordo/#main>.

as well as a browser version on the Pressbooks platform. All formats work well on a laptop, tablet, and smartphone. The Pressbooks platform and digital PDF were slightly more robust, with links to sections and chapters for ease of navigation rather than just a scroll of pages.

This compilation of letters could appeal to a variety of audiences. It would serve as a primary source for scholars researching WWII and the personal effects of war. Genealogists and historians from the Central and Western N.Y. may benefit from the description of life in the local towns. The book might also serve as leisure reading for anyone interested in the narratives of WWII soldiers and their families, or even for those who enjoy a wartime love story, because the letters at times read like a novel. Lastly, fans and scholars of MacDonald would gain a rare glimpse into the writer's personal life by reading this private correspondence.

These letters about everyday life at war and on the home front are captivating. The publication's accessibility is a major bonus. In addition, the editors' explanation of the process they used to organize and transcribe the letters, as well as the background information they provided about the archival collection, was invaluable. This work could certainly serve as a model for archivists who might have similar treasures in their own collections. Overall, *Dear Dordo: The World War II Letters of Dorothy and John D. MacDonald* is an engaging read that a variety of audiences will find educational, stimulating, and illuminating.

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