Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression

Edited by Robert Cohen
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Reviewed by Wynell Schamel

Granette, Ark.
Nov. 6, 1936
Dear Mrs. Roosevelt
I am writing to you for some of your old.
soiled dresses if you have any.
As I am a poor girl who has to stay out of
school. On Account of dresses & slips and
a coat. I am in the seventh grade in school
but I have to stay out of school because I
have no books or clothes to wear.

Tens of thousands of poignant, innocent pleas for help like this one were penned by poverty-stricken children to Eleanor Roosevelt during the dismal years of the Great Depression. In an effort to make these letters more easily available to classrooms and the public, Robert Cohen has meticulously and methodically selected 200 of these youth letters in a unique collection entitled simply, Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression.

In a thorough and balanced introduction, Cohen describes the letters, how they were selected, what they contain, what they reveal, and what they teach us. He painstakingly searched volume after volume of correspondence preserved by the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, to locate examples that he determined best "conveyed the situation of the letter writer," in other words, those with extensive autobiographical data that in turn revealed the most about conditions of the Depression. Most of the letters are located in the Material Assistance Requested Files of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers and the remainder are found in the Donations Requested Files. These file names suggest the content of the pleas from children and teens who wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt, but the letters themselves reveal the faith that children from all over the United States had in Mrs. Roosevelt's generosity and good heart, and the children's willingness to describe their tragic conditions of poverty to her as though she were a close friend. According to Cohen's research, children were disproportionately represented below the poverty line during the Depression. Despite the large numbers of children who suffered during this period, historians have largely ignored their voices. Mrs. Roosevelt did not ignore them, however. In fact, Cohen states, "No resident of the White House has ever approached Mrs. Roosevelt as though she were a close friend."

In his introductory essay, Cohen has arranged the collection of letters in order of material requests the authors made to Mrs. Roosevelt. In the first chapter, entitled "Ill-Clothed, Ill-Housed, Ill-Fed," the introductory essay includes statistics and reports on the economic effects of the Depression on children. The letters that follow request clothing, food, health and medical care, household conveniences, help with debts, and money for burials. Cohen calls our attention to the disparity between these requests from the 1930s and the expectations of youth today. In the second chapter, letters on education reflect the children's limited resources for tuition, transportation, books, clothing, and graduation costs. Cohen groups this section of letters as primary, secondary, vocational, arts, higher milestones, and celebrations.

The third chapter, entitled "Social Life," examines requests related to marriage, recreation, and holidays. Cohen emphasizes that this section of letters is among the most selfless in that children mostly asked for gifts for siblings and parents. Cohen also points out that when children requested items associated with play and recreation, bicycles, for example, they indicated that they needed them for practical reasons, such as transportation and work. The chapter on minorities includes letters from African American, Native American, immigrant, feminist, and disabled children. Surprisingly, these letters centered on economic and social issues too, rather than on politics—i.e., seeking help in acquiring jobs and education, not in reducing violence or securing rights.

Throughout Cohen's explanatory essays he discusses the limitations of the New Deal relief programs. In the epilogue, he describes Mrs. Roosevelt's actions in response to the children's requests. While the sheer volume of requests naturally impeded the First Lady from meeting the needs of each individual youth, Cohen reminds us that she could and did respond to them at the policy level by "becoming the New Deal's most outspoken advocate of federal aid to needy youth." He is critical, on the other hand, of her methods of responding, or lack of responding, to the children's letters. He believes that Mrs. Roosevelt, through her staff writers, could have given these children moral support even if material assistance was not immediately possible. It is sobering to think, as Cohen points out, that perhaps this collection of letters represents those received from the less needy, while the more serious appeals may have been deferred to agencies and charitable organizations.

As an educator and proponent of teaching with documents, I read this extraordinary collection of children's letters along with Cohen's informative, insightful essays, and viewed them as possible teaching tools. They do, no doubt, as Cohen eloquently imagines, give voice to the ragged children clinging to the impoverished migrant mother in Dorothea Lange's classic Depression photograph, an image used in many classrooms studying the effects of the Great Depression. My regret is that the collection does not contain more facsimiles of the letters so that students and teachers can examine the correspondence as closely as Cohen did originally at the F.D.R. Library. The rare reproduction of a letter as illustration in this book proves the impact of a letter written in a child's handwriting. Not only do these facsimiles engage the reader more personally, but they also make the spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors more authentic and less distracting.

Cohen is right when he states that these letters stimulate discussions that go far beyond analyzing the requests they make for economic and social assistance. They can be used by teachers to raise perennial issues of the Great Depression, such as the glorification of the United States as land of opportunity, the role of government in the lives of its citizens, and the importance of protest and dissent in a democracy.

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