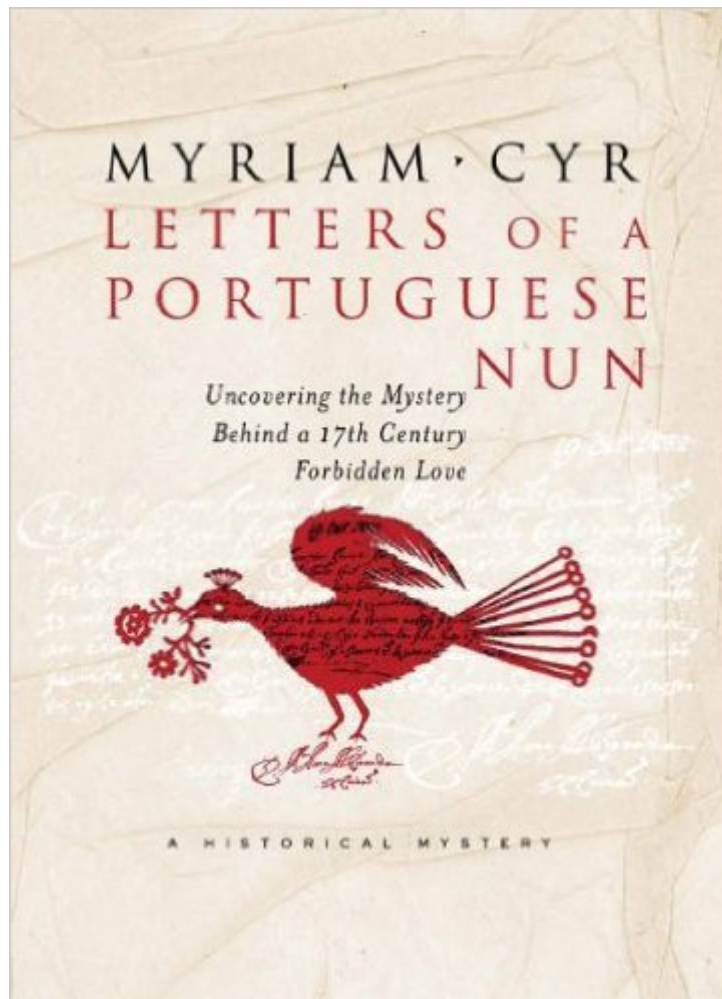


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# Letters Of A Portuguese Nun: Uncovering The Mystery Behind A 17th Century Forbidden Love



## Synopsis

In 1669, a Parisian bookseller published a slim volume called *Portuguese Letters*, which unveiled a love affair between a young Portuguese nun and a French officer that had occurred a few years earlier during a chaotic and war-torn period in Portugal. The book contained passionate love letters the nun had written when the officer was forced to return to France. The letters took Paris by storm. They spoke of love in a manner so direct, so precise, and so raw, they sent shivers of recognition through the sophisticated stratum of polite society. As remarkable as the letters are, they were rivaled by the mystery that surrounds them: the author was unknown, and most people assumed they were the fictional product of a French aristocrat. The consensus was that no woman could write words of such stunning truth and beauty. Now, through meticulous research, Myriam Cyr persuasively makes the case that the nun, Mariana Alcoforado, did indeed write the letters, and her story is one of the most moving in the history of forbidden love. While this tale is infamous throughout Europe, it is fresh to American readers, and Myriam Cyr brings us the extraordinary letters; the fraught, dangerous, complex nature of this tumultuous period; and the fascinating lives of these real-life lovers in rich historical detail.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

History is a messy place. A lot gets lost, and a lot is saved that would perhaps be better off lost.

When looking back on the scrambled fog of the past, people often see only what they want to, and only what they can believe to be true. Unfortunately this means that a lot of what actually happened

becomes distorted by the biases of the day. And in the shuffle, it's often the stories of the individuals that are lost, invalidated or claimed to be something they are not. Luckily, there are those such as actress Myriam Cyr who are willing to work to give a voice to those individual stories that are distorted by the warped mirror of time. In her first book, *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, she explores the story of Mariana Alcoforado, a seventeenth century nun who fell in love with a French officer. Gracefully intertwining their individual stories and the cultural events of the time, Cyr takes us on a journey back over three hundred years ago into the heart of a forbidden passion. Against the claims that the 1669 publication of a volume of love letters entitled *Portuguese Letters* was the fabrication of a (male) French aristocrat, Cyr asserts that the 27 year old nun Mariana was the real author and the letters did, in fact, come from the heart of longing and of loss. In spite of all the passion and drama of the story, what struck me most in reading the book was the passion of its author. Through the work, the reader can feel the author's irresistible drive to tell the truth as she sees it. A quote from the introduction lingers with me, she writes: "...I thought of the times when, as women, we are not heard, and how after 300 years Mariana, whose words have changed so many lives, is not allowed the most basic of rights, the right to claim her own voice.

They were an international bestseller when they were published, five love letters from a devastated woman who had been left by her lover as he went on to military duties. It does not matter that this was more than three hundred years ago; the theme is one that is immediate. The letters were so piercing that immediately a controversy arose over their authorship; no woman could have written them, it was said, because women generally didn't write, never wrote well, and never felt love as deeply as men. The controversy has persisted, and will persist, because there is no proof on either side, but in *Letters of a Portuguese Nun: Uncovering the Mystery Behind a 17th Century Forbidden Love* (Miramax Books), Miriam Cyr argues the case for authorship by the nun herself. This is Cyr's first book; she has had a successful career as an actress, and first heard of the letters when they were performed as a play. She determined to translate them herself (unaware that they were hugely famous and had been translated many times), and performed them on stage herself. She could not answer questions from those who heard her readings about the authenticity of the letters, but sympathized with a woman who told her the letters expressed her feelings during a painful breakup and was outraged that anyone thought they were fictional. Cyr, probably motivated by the same sort of feeling, did three years of research, and even though her conclusions are not watertight, her advocacy of the nun's authorship is convincing. More importantly, she has brought the heartbreaking letters to a new audience and supplied them with sufficient context to understand

their themes. Mariana Alcoforado was born in 1640 in the picturesque town of Beja, Portugal, and was put in a convent at the age of ten.

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