

Lovesick? Broken heart?

Write to Juliet



If you know the famous story of *Romeo and Juliet*, written by Shakespeare in the 16th century, you'll know that their home city is Verona, Italy. Verona is now also the home of the *Club di Giulietta* (the Juliet Club), a remarkable association that receives letters from all over the world addressed to Shakespeare's heroine. The writers, often in love, write to Juliet to seek advice or to unburden themselves. ¹And a group of

committed volunteers, known as Juliet's secretaries, read what they write and reply to every single letter that arrives.



Probably as the result of George Cukor's 1936 film version of Shakespeare's tragedy, the first letter, addressed simply to "Juliet, Verona," arrived in the 1930s. The letter found its way to "Juliet's tomb," in a monastery just outside the city walls. The attendant there, a veteran who had picked up some English in the First World War, decided to reply. And he carried on replying as more letters arrived. After the Second

World War, a local poet secretly took on the role of Juliet's secretary, but gave it up, apparently in embarrassment, when his identity became known. Finally, in the 1980s, the mayor of Verona decided to give the task to the *Club di Giulietta*, a group formed to promote initiatives linking their city to the famous play.



correspondence as "a blog on humanity." "We get more than 5,000 letters a year," says Tamassia. "And then there are the thousands of notes that get left behind at Juliet's house and tomb."

She reckons about three-quarters of the messages are from women, and that the biggest single group is made up of American teenagers. On the wall of the arch leading to Juliet's house in the medieval centre of Verona, though, there are notes in every conceivable language. Some of the letters and professions of undying love are genuinely poetic: "For hope and love for the one I loved most, my heart"; others less so: "I've got a stomach ache in the heart." When letters are serious, the secretaries can call on the services of a psychologist, and sometimes they need them.

Juliet's house also has a post box where letters can be left and four computer work stations where visitors may tap out a message to her. But surprisingly, perhaps, emails account for fewer than 10% of the messages that end up in her secretaries' offices. Of the letters, the vast majority are handwritten in pen and ink. And that is how they are always replied to. "What people often write is: 'You are the only one who can understand me,'" says Giovanni Carabetta, the club's archivist.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of this whole endeavor is that the secretaries do it for free. "Well, the council gives us the money for the stamps," explains Giulio Tamassia. "But it's not even enough to cover the postage. Right now, I'm having a battle with the council. "What we do brings all sorts of advantages for Verona, and I think it is time they stopped treating us like this. We're all working for nothing." Carabetta smiles. "Not for nothing, Giulio ... for the pleasure of reading these wonderful letters."

Sitting around a table strewn with handwritten letters, three of Juliet's "secretaries," Giovanna Tamassia, Elena Marchi, and Gioia Ambrosi, tell stories that are by turns touching and weird, thought-provoking, and heart-rending. "It's a great responsibility," says Tamassia, whose father Giulio is the club's president and a founder member. Ambrosi, a 25-year-old student, describes the



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And perhaps, in some cases, for other, more personal reasons. "It has helped me to believe again in feelings," says Marchi. "But what counts is to have a heart that is alive, no? To be in touch with your feelings, however things go. It's not as if there is a guarantee as to the future." A sentiment with which the real – or rather, fictional – Juliet would have fervently agreed.



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Text builder clauses with *what*

Clauses with *what* can be about the subject or the object of the sentence. *What* can refer to singular or plural things. Subject clauses with *what* are often at the start of a sentence. The verb is singular, not plural:

What people say is very important. (= the things people say)

What they do is even more important, though. (= the things they do)

Object clauses with *what* are often at the end of a sentence:

I just finished reading what you wrote. (= the thing/things you wrote)

I like what you wrote in the last sentence. (= the thing/things you wrote in the last sentence)

7 What does the word *what* refer to in the sentences below?

- 1 What I don't understand is why someone would write to a fictional character.
- 2 I don't think I'd enjoy reading what people write to Juliet. It's too personal!