When the state of Colorado ordered its residents to shelter in place in response to the spread of coronavirus, writers Pam Houston and Amy Irvine—who had never met—began a correspondence based on their shared devotion to the rugged, windswept mountains that surround their homes, one on either side of the Continental Divide. As the numbers of infected and dead rose and the nation split dangerously over the crisis, Houston and Irvine found their letters to one another as necessary as breath. Part tribute to wilderness, part indictment against tyranny and greed, Air Mail: Letters of Politics, Pandemics, and Place reveals the evolution of a friendship that galvanizes as it chronicles a strange new world.

“This epistolary exchange, which becomes a friendship, and then a fierce and loving sistership, reminds us that solidarity, by which maybe I really mean love, emerges in conversation—in listening, in asking, in sharing, in wondering, in sorrowing, in raging, in attempting, in dreaming.”

—ROSS GAY, author of The Book of Delights

AMY: Air Mail is a pre-election, epistolary polemic! It’s a collection of love letters, a manifesto. It’s fast and furious and designed to light a fire under every ass who cares about the state of the world.

PAM: And….it is written by two women who do not want to raise their voices at each other, they want to raise their voices together, and together with a million other women, to step into the power that we know we have and try to make the world a gentler, more compassionate, healthier place.

Pam Houston is the author of the memoir, Deep Creek: Finding Hope In the High Country and other books. She teaches in the Low Rez MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts, is professor of English at UC Davis, and cofounder and creative director of the literary nonprofit Writing By Writers. She lives at nine thousand feet above sea level near the headwaters of the Rio Grande.

Amy Irvine is a sixth-generation Utahn and long-time public lands activist. Author of Desert Cabal and Trespass: Living at the Edge of the Promised Land, Irvine teaches in the MFA program of Southern New Hampshire University. She lives and writes off the grid in southwest Colorado, just spitting distance from her Utah homeland.

Amy and Pam are available to discuss Air Mail with reading groups in person or virtually. For more information, email anne@torreyhouse.com.
CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. A belted kingfisher illustration appears at the beginning of each of Pam’s letters, and a Steller’s jay appears on Amy’s. Why do you think the authors chose these birds? Which bird or animal would you choose for yourself?

2. Amy and Pam build a friendship by sharing letters written from their homes on either side of the Continental Divide. To what extent did this mode of communication shape their friendship? Did it inspire you to reexamine your own communication habits?

3. Amy and Pam connect with each other over feminism and environmentalism. How do these movements inform one another? Is being a feminist also being an environmentalist? Why or why not?

4. In the first letter, Pam imagines wild animals celebrating the time the pandemic has given them alone, without human intrusion. When the pandemic comes to a close, how can we reimagine our place in the natural world? Do you think the pandemic has had a lasting effect on the way you live your life?

5. Amy finds herself hugged by a man who is not wearing a facemask. The interaction was awkward and unpleasant. What can you do to prepare yourself to say “no” to other people? Are there specific actions that help you feel empowered and confident in awkward situations?

6. Pam finds a young female elk caught in a barbed wire fence. Upon returning to the fence after grabbing tools, she sees the elk has disappeared without a trace. Thinking this might be a sign of something bigger, Pam writes, “Maybe against all odds the wild Earth will escape.” How do you interpret that statement?

7. How does Air Mail address the political instability of America and individual responsibility? Are there ways we can help solve the problems that divide people along political lines?

8. Amy and Pam end their final letters with the word sisterhood. How does the book reinforce or expand the idea of sisterhood? Have you experienced a sisterhood of your own?

9. The authors each struggle with how their federal and local governments handled the pandemic. Do you relate to these frustrations?

10. Is there a specific letter in Air Mail that resonated with you?

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