

# Helen's Letters

**Dear Projectkin,**

I am thrilled to be here today to discuss my current writing project. It's a work in progress, which is the exciting part. There's still a lot of unknowns and discoveries ahead. In some real respects, it's still early days. The project I have embarked on is to turn a treasure trove of letters from my paternal grandmother's adventure to India as a Methodist missionary and teacher from 1923-1926 into a published, general interest book. Some writers might hesitate to talk about their work at this stage. But Barb Tien persuaded me with her wit and charms. And I agreed, in part, because sharing how we think about creating stories is one way to encourage others to share theirs. And because I so admire Barb and the community she is building around family stories.

**Let's begin.**

**Kathryn Graven**

Author: *Memoirs of a Mask Maker*

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## Find or invent a good character.

*Luckily this is the easiest part of my project. I have Helen Ticknor Davis Graven 1901-1995, an important character in my first book, *Memoirs of a Mask Maker*. I knew Helen as "Gram," the woman who stepped in to help raise me after my mother died when I was 5. Gram was well educated, curious, sharp, competent, loving and taught me so many all important life skills. My memories are mostly of her as a gray-haired widow, who aged well and gracefully. She took me to the library, taught me to cook and sew, and never missed a chance to swim laps - even into her 90's.*

*But in this new project, she is a young 22-year-old woman from Minnesota setting out on a great adventure to live and work in India for three years. I'm getting to know my grandmother's younger self: the ups and downs of a crucial period between when she left her family of origin and before she got married and created her own family. It turns out she wasn't always so sure of herself. I have a fascination with this stage and age in young women's lives - the beginning of finding and believing in one's own voice, making choices and gaining confidence. It sets the stage for so much of what is to come, it explains how she walked so tall the rest of her life.*

*The gift of all my grandmother's letters to her parents, siblings and her beloved fiancé, Henry, arrived from my uncle while I was working on my first book. I shoved them in the closet. When my first book was struggling to find a publisher, I waded into the letters. My husband helped sort the mess chronologically, I dove in to reading. Oh my! I loved this young woman and her determination.*





## Decide the project scope.

But what to do with the letters? Write a family essay? Just sort them and pass on as is? Could they be a book? Am I the one to write this book? What kind of book? All good questions and a tall order to figure out. So naturally, I went back to finishing my own book, a story that I knew.

This past year, I've been enjoying doing book talks and readings all over - the US, Canada, England and Japan. But It's weird how when you write one book, the question people start asking - right away- is what's your next book about? The first book is barely off the press and people ask about the next one?

I returned to my grandmother's letters. Out of them, I'll write my next book. My goal, the invisible one pinned to my forehead: To write and publish and promote a general interest book about an adventurous American woman in India 100 years ago. But it's not that easy as deciding and not always linear.



HELEN T. DAVIS  
2 RITHERDON ROAD  
VEPERY, MADRAS, INDIA

Nov. 22, 1923.

Beloved of my heart:  
I am dead tired, no sleep to-day. A girl is weeping here in my room, one who has given heaps of trouble lately. She is one of my teachers. For months she's carried on a flirtation with a married man, and everyone but Miss Flynn, Miss Tall & I knew about it. When Miss Tall was gone the whole thing came out & I discharged her - Miss Tall is going to send her to her father. Miss Tall is easy with the girl. Said that wasn't so wrong. Another girl has letters perfectly vile ones from a man. And Miss...



## Take time to read and dream.

If I learned anything from writing my memoir, is that it is important not to skimp on this step. Many people latch on to an idea, get so excited that they jump in - all in - too quickly. It can make for painful restructuring and rewrites later - or worse, a bad book. Of course, there's a fine line between dreaming and procrastination. At some point diving in is required. This time, I am spending more time up front reading: books on India; novels, non-fiction, history, art history. I'm fishing for fresh ideas on structure, voice, character development.

Reading other related works is very important to me at this stage. I know myself. Once I am deep into writing, I don't want to read others. I need to hear my own narrative voice in my head, not someone else's. Which is different from researching facts. So now is the time to explore widely - different models of historical fiction.

For example, I found a novel, "Widows of Malabar Hill," by Sujata Massey. It's about one of the first female Indian lawyers practicing in Bombay, India in the early 1920's. The author grew up in Minnesota, and, like me, also lived in Japan for a spell. I liked all those coincidences. Although the book is set in Bombay, not Madras where my grandmother lived, the novel helps me visualize the time and place of my grandmother's years in India.



### Resources:

"Widows of Malabar Hill," by Sujata Massey  
[sohopress.com/books/the-widows-of-malabar-hill](http://sohopress.com/books/the-widows-of-malabar-hill)



Another example: I've also been enthralled with a non-fiction book by Simon Winchester called "Knowing What We Know," about the passing on of knowledge from ancient to modern times. This helps me understand the context of letters, their importance as historical documents, family memories, and a way of communicating that is quite possibly becoming obsolete.

And he also nails for me a big reason for why I, and hopefully others, will care about these letters. "Travel is essentially a child of curiosity," is how Winchester puts it. "Even when a journey is taken for reasons other than exploration, a curious mind will inevitably be diverted by an irresistible need to acquire knowledge en route." In other words, there is so much to learn from Helen- about what it was like for a single woman to travel, what it was to be an American in British colonial India - her eyes on a place and people beginning to plot their fight for independence. Travelers are witness to a time in history.

**Resources:**

"Knowing What We Know," by Simon Winchester  
[harpercollins.com/products/knowning-what-we-know-simon-winchester](http://harpercollins.com/products/knowning-what-we-know-simon-winchester)



... I knew in a moment but went straight to his work.





## Hire a research assistant to sort and scan

A crucial part of any book project, is knowing and accepting my own strengths and weaknesses. I love stories. I love reading. I love researching. I love noticing little details that might be a clue, that sends me down a research rabbit hole, or two. I am not an organizer. But I appreciate others who have the skills and patience. Hiring a recent college graduate who majored in history and works for a well-established historical and genealogical society, is the smartest thing I've done. We work well together. She is scanning all the letters, sending them to me via google docs, so I can read them and have them with me as I continue my historical research. Early on, I decided that whether the letters become a book or not, I wanted them scanned and organized so that they could be distributed to others and that I would have a back up - in case my house burns down. There is a cost to this, of course, but a small price for the gift I was given.

Another bonus idea I'd like to share. It is a tip from a life coach who is also a friend: to take yourself seriously as a writer it is good to properly resource your projects. Paying for help is one way. Bartering or exchanging is another. The point is to seek and ask for help in areas that you need. Don't feel you have to do everything by yourself.

Miss Helen T. J.  
 M. E. Mission ~~Bangor~~  
 2 Ritherdon Rd, ~~Idaho~~  
~~Idaho~~



Receipts:

197 11 8  
 1 12  
 Deficit  
 Return of seal 4 8 - 6 4  
 Payfund on daily flight 6 4 6 4  
 191 7 8 191 7 8  
 6 4 -  
 Deficit  
 Deficit

July 14	Bath -	1 2	
	Munthofar	2 12	4 2 -
	tail, not done	2 12	
25	meal of Magnesian	1 12	
	seal	1 9	
	thread, safety pin	5 14	
	Orallie's malted milk	1 0	
	To better at Sam Rogers	2 -	15 7
	Madison Min Conference	2 10	
	Miss Tall, clock	1 -	
	"Mailin's"	6 -	9 10 -
	Shohie	13 -	
	at Carriage	15 -	1 12 -
	July - Bailey, Rev. V.P.A.	5 -	
	at Roxie	8 -	
	toll gate	1 -	6 8
		8 -	



## Test my commitment and interest level - a big trip to India

In January, my husband I went to India. We spent two weeks recreating parts of my grandmother's journey there - 100 years later 1923 - 2023. We arrived in Bombay, went to a Methodist Church service, took a 22-hour train ride from Bombay to Bangalore, and later another 8-hour train trip to Madras, where she lived for three years. We visited Methodist churches and schools and focused on what colonial Madras would have been like. I've been to India several times before, in part inspired by my grandmother. But this time, I wanted to see if I could get in to India again. Was I interested enough to really commit to a book dealing with India? It's been a passion, but not an area of academic study for me. I know that a book will take me a couple of years, so I wanted to make sure I had enough interest.

I was also testing various narrative ideas out as we traveled: what kind of book this could be?

A Helen and Kathryn story of going to India 100 years apart? Sort of a not-so-perfect comparison to Julie and Julia - a young NY City woman who tries to recreate Julia Child's year of French cooking.

### MANGER HOTELS - NEW YORK CITY

HOTELS UNDER SAME MANAGEMENT  
GREAT NORTHERN  
ENDICOTT  
NETHERLAND  
NAVARRRE  
WOODSTOCK  
CUMBERLAND  
GRAND  
HERMITAGE  
TIMES SQUARE  
YORK  
BELL APARTMENT  
MARTHA WASHINGTON  
ALSO  
PLAZA HOTEL  
CHICAGO



**HOTEL WOLCOTT**  
FIFTH AVE. & THIRTY-FIRST ST.  
TELEPHONE LONGACRE 4700

May 17, 1925.  
Minneapolis, Minn.

My darling Helen: Your two special letters to me were received; one before I went to N.Y; and the other Mother had for me on my return. They were so sweet and cheerful and were much appreciated as they help to cheer and make my efforts seem more worth while.

It is too bad that we are not always understood and do not seem to always understand others, because most of us put forth an honest effort, I believe, to be helpful and make life happier and in the end easier for others, but alas, too frequently we are burdened with cares, responsibilities, worries and weaknesses of body and spirit until the proper prospective is blurred or else our expression is clothed in language that is irritating and closes the avenues of the silent's understanding, particularly if he or she happens to be at all or burdened almost beyond





## Think through the bigger picture


*Since I am aiming for the end product to be a full-length book manuscript, I need to think about who will want to read the book? That requires making some bigger connections. The trip to India helped me sort out this question on many levels.*

*Helen's letters connect to a broader story - in the 1920's one of the few ways single women could travel and work abroad was through the Foreign Women's Mission Society - as teachers/missionaries. The role of missionaries is complicated in history - and so in India. Teaching young girls to read and think was foundational to fostering self-rule in India. It put her at odds with the British, which though steeped in Christianity, also wanted to hold together their empire. In other words: there's some tension to work with here. And questions I'll need my character to address. How aware is she of her moment in history?*

*Her letters speak to young women traveling and to the amazing changes that have occurred in transportation. I know a lot of people travel to India, but everyone I mention my grandmother's journey to quickly remark how difficult the travel was back then, how brave she was. We hopped on a plane in London and 8 hours later landed in Bombay. Her ship sailed from NY to Southampton, then onward through the Suez Canal to Bombay and took several weeks. She didn't come home for three years. No telephone calls, no Facetime. Everyone communicated through letters.*







There is a genuine love story here. Helen tells her boyfriend, Henry Graven, that she will marry him - if he is willing to wait for her for three years. They get to know each other through this long-distance correspondence. And through the letters, I get to know my grandparents as a young couple in love, pining for each other, sharing their hopes and dreams for a future life together.

Helen's story is an interesting backdrop to the geo-political world of right now. Companies and governments wary of doing business in China are eyeing India for their next foreign investment or to build new strategic defense alliances. Americans just might be waking up to the importance of India. And if they do, they might just wonder, who else has gone to India and what did it mean to them?


## Time

I think it will take two years to complete the manuscript. Give or take. It shouldn't take as long as the last book. Hopefully, I have learned some things from that process. But each book is its own beast and requires different things. I am not the same writer as I was for the last book. But I also have to stay open to becoming a new kind of writer, too.

My go-to guide for constructing the narrative: "The Anatomy of a Premise," by Jeff Lyons. I highly recommend it. The author helps establish some lanes and guard rails which can serve any writer on their path to completion - fiction or non-fiction. "A story premise is a container that holds your story's right, true, and natural structure."

## Resources:

"The Anatomy of a Premise," by Jeff Lyons  
[www.routledge.com/Anatomy-of-a-Premise-Line-How-to-Master-Premise-and-Story-Development-for-Writing-Success/Lyons/p/book/9781138838857](http://www.routledge.com/Anatomy-of-a-Premise-Line-How-to-Master-Premise-and-Story-Development-for-Writing-Success/Lyons/p/book/9781138838857)



*This is where i am right now. Working out the premise. I think I am dealing with a "fictional memoir." I think I don't want to be in the story - Helen's story is strong enough to stand alone. But I could change my mind. I've done a lot of work, made progress, but haven't written any chapters yet. I can see a strong narrative arc, and that's what is propelling me now. In many ways, writing will be the easy part for me. What I've described is the critical work that must come first.*

### **Conclusion**

*Now, not everyone wants or needs to turn family letters into a book. Projectkin does such a great job illuminating so many creative possibilities to do with our family histories. I'm kind of envious of all the different ways people are approaching this. But alas, I am a journalist by training, a history student, academically, and a person who can't seem to ever get tired of traveling. So I guess, this is the project for me. Which brings me to the final idea for today: We all have amazing family stories to tell. The trick is to find the story and project that fits with who you are and taps your strongest interests and talents. Because projects like these take time, patience and abundant love.*

*Thank you.*

*Kathryn Graven*



**From Kathryn,**

*My grandmother made this salad all summer with cucumbers from her Iowa garden. It's great along side grilled chicken, meats and vegetables.*

HELEN T. DAVIS  
2 RITHERDON ROAD  
VEPERY, MADRAS, INDIA



### **Gramma Helen's Cucumber Salad**

*Peel and thinly slice one large English cucumber, or two regular cucumbers. (I keep the seeds in, but remove if you prefer)*

*Thinly slice 1/2 red onion.*

*Soak cucumbers and red onion in a bowl of cold water with about two teaspoons salt for 30 minutes to one hour. Plop a couple of ice cubes in for extra cold.*

*In a colander, drain and rinse the cucumbers and onions with cold water. Set aside.*

*In a bowl, mix 3/4 cup- to 1 cup sour cream with 1 TBSP sugar and 2 TBSP white wine vinegar, or tarragon vinegar, salt and pepper to taste. Adjust the taste with more sugar or more vinegar as desired.*

*Combine cucumbers, onions and dressing. Add finely chopped fresh herbs such as dill, or tarragon. Refrigerate til chilled.*

*Serve cold*

