



Professor Ackerman in the jam-packed office where she writes her letters.

CURRENT OBSESSION

## Woman of Letters

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I think the very first letter-to-the-editor I wrote was in response to a 1970s *Time* article about teaching people in nursing homes how to write poetry. I said it was patronizing to old people to tell them their lousy poetry was good. I mean, I sing in the shower but nobody's going to tell me I have a nice voice.

For the last 10 to 20 years I've probably written more than five letters a week. [Ed. note: A 2014 *New Yorker* piece on Ackerman estimated she'd published more than 200 letters in the *New York Times*, making her likely the paper's most published letter-writer.]

Only a tiny percentage of my letters get published. Letters objecting to the pressure on sick old people to die, which I think is appalling, are relatively easy to get published. The same with critiques of academia or the stigmatization of fat people. The hardest are letters criticizing environmentalism. I'm a liberal but my concern is about my fellow humans, not piping plovers. Pro-immigration

letters are hard to get published too because many people write them, thank goodness.

I usually write letters in my office or at home with my wonderful cat, Palomides, which is the name of a character in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, my favorite book, as is *Nimue* (pronounced NIM-u-ah), my self-given name. I don't eat while I write. I can normally get a letter written in about 20 minutes.

Writing letters to the editor is a great hobby for an opinionated person with a short attention span and a high tolerance for rejection, and I am all of those things. It's fun! When I read news, I'm definitely thinking in terms of letters I could write. I ask myself if I have something to say that other people won't. I try to make them short and funny. Occasionally I write them in the form of verse, like, "I thought that I would never see/a president as bad as T." Please tell the readers that I have a large picture of Trump in my office. Then at the end of the story tell them it is a dartboard.

#### "Obsessed"?

"As a character says in one of my short stories, an obsession is a strong interest that someone disapproves of. That's somewhat oversimplified because of course we can say that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was obsessed with justice without disapproving of him. But I would just call my letter-writing an enjoyable hobby. If I had any real obsessions, I would be unlikely to tell strangers about them."

A blog once satirized Ackerman with the headline: "New *N.Y. Times* Policy Requires All Letters to Be From Single Brown Professor."