



I Promise to Be Good: The Letters of Arthur Rimbaud: 2 (Modern Library Classics)

By Arthur Rimbaud

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One of the most written-about literary figures in the past decade, Arthur Rimbaud left few traces when he abandoned poetry at age twenty-one and disappeared into the African desert. Although the dozen biographies devoted to Rimbaud's life depend on one main source for information—his own correspondence—a complete edition of these remarkable letters has never been published in English. Until now.

A moving document of decline, Rimbaud's letters begin with the enthusiastic artistic pronouncements of a fifteen-year-old genius, and end with the bitter what-ifs of a man whose life has slipped disastrously away. But whether soapboxing on the essence of art, or struggling under the yoke of self-imposed exile in the desert of his later years, Rimbaud was incapable of writing an uninteresting sentence. As translator and editor Wyatt Mason makes clear in his engaging Introduction, the letters reveal a Rimbaud very different from our expectations. Rimbaud—presented by many biographers as a bohemian wild man—is unveiled as “diligent in his pursuit of his goals . . . wildly, soberly ambitious, in poetry, in everything.”

I Promise to Be Good: The Letters of Arthur Rimbaud is the second and final volume in Mason's authoritative presentation of Rimbaud's writings. Called by Edward Hirsch “the definitive translation for our time,” Mason's first volume, *Rimbaud Complete* (Modern Library, 2002), brought Rimbaud's poetry and prose into vivid focus. In *I Promise to Be Good*, Mason adds the missing epistolary pieces to our picture of Rimbaud. “These letters,” he writes, “are proofs in all their variety—of impudence and precocity, of tenderness and rage—for the existence of Arthur Rimbaud.” *I Promise to Be Good* allows English-language readers to see with new eyes one of the most extraordinary poets in history.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The story, of course, is the stuff of legend: after a painful affair with the older, married poet Paul Verlaine, Rimbaud (1854-1891) put poetry behind him at age 21 and became a commercial traveler in Africa and Arabia, returning home to Charlevoix and his family only at the end of his brief life and dying painfully of gangrene complications. Mason, the American translator who last year published Rimbaud's collected poems in English, gives us a Rimbaud that's a far cry from the Dionysian figure who inspired Jim Morrison, Patti Smith and David Wojnarowicz with his call for a slow derangement of the senses. In the 27 letters included here that were written before Rimbaud's departure (the first, from 1870, left in a teacher's mailbox), Mason unveils instead an Apollonian craftsman, one who took infinite pains to achieve perfection of expression and who comes clear in the letters "not with rubbery biographical inventions or facile psychological putty" but as a "clear, deliberate personality." Rimbaud quits France after seeing Verlaine for the last time in 1875 for five years of poorly documented sojourns in Europe and the U.K., for which there are only five letters. From there, the interest level of the 149 epistles that follow plunges way down. Mason's an agile, skillful translator, and he does his best to enliven the long litany of profit and loss in Rimbaud's African commercial adventures, but when he tells us he has excluded 34 letters to Alfred Ilg, a trading colleague of Rimbaud's, on the ground that they're too boring, anyone who has read through this whole volume will not feel it a loss.

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Review

"Wyatt Mason's translation of Rimbaud's letters is a swashbuckler of a book, nothing less than a resurrection of a remarkable life. As such, it is a worthy companion to Mason's fine translation of the poems. No admirer of Rimbaud will want to be without it." —**Arthur Goldhammer**, translator of more than eighty books from the French

"These letters, together with the poems, provide as direct a record as possible of what the archetypal bohemian boy-genius did with his gift. They brim with curiosity, ambition, spite, self-pity, and a giant talent; his art is as impervious to time as that of Catullus or Heine. Thanks to Wyatt Mason's masterly translations, Rimbaud has, after a century and a half, recovered his gift." —**Askold Melnyczuk**, author of *What Is Told* and *Ambassador of the Dead*

From the Hardcover edition.

From the Inside Flap

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