

## **Letter to “A”**

19 November 1949

Monika Proba Collection

Due to a series of Postmaster General's Department (now Australia Post) blunders, Graham's letter to her lover was accidentally received instead by a single mother of eight in war torn Warsaw, Poland.\*

The psychiatrist who is mentioned in Graham's letter, Doctor John Cade (18 January 1912 – 16 November 1980), was treating Graham at the time. Cade is credited with discovering the mood stabilising effects of lithium carbonate in the treatment of bipolar disorder and other mental illnesses.

In 1948, after a series of experiments in an unused kitchen involving guinea pigs, human urine, egg whisks, syringes, lithium urate and self-raising flour, Cade discovered that lithium ion had a calming effect on his literal guinea pigs. He went on to test lithium citrate and lithium carbonate on himself to check its safety, and then to administer it to his mentally unwell human patients (including Fitri Graham) which, as well as calming them, greatly improved their performance in dish washing and drying up.

Graham was lucky that the toxicity of her lithium medication did not kill her – as it did in the case of some of Cade's less fortunate patients.

This letter is generously loaned for exhibition by the Polish recipient's friend's great-granddaughter's neighbour (also Polish) and was couriered to Australia in time for this retrospective with a company called FedEx. [www.fedex.com/pl](http://www.fedex.com/pl)

\*The Singlemotherofeight, it should be noted, did not define herself by her relationship to men and her birthing history alone. Nor did she equate her identity with the number of *złoty* in her pocket, boil her entire existence down to being a survivor of war, or consider the significance of her life to hinge upon accidentally receiving or not receiving a letter from the other side of the world.

To name a small handful of experiences and interests that she saw as comprising her identity and noteworthy from her life: she was an avid balcony gardener; Champion Poppyseed Cake Baker (three times running) at the district fair; a regular contributor to the local newspaper; she loved to sing made-up songs at the top of her lungs while cooking her favourite herring dish; and in her later life she was able to travel to Japan to visit many exquisite gardens which she had admired, first as grainy photographs, in the book gifted as a self-to-self on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday. And it was through these kinds of details that she wanted to be remembered.