

[HOME](#) | [ABOUT US](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#) | [SUBMISSION GUIDELINES](#) | [SSN BLOG](#) | [MASTHEAD](#) | [CONTACT US](#) | [LINKS](#)

## SEARCH THE SITE

## EXPLORE THIS ISSUE

[EDITOR'S NOTE](#)

[FICTION](#)

[POETRY](#)

[NON FICTION](#)

[COLUMNS](#)

[INTERVIEWS](#)

[BOOK REVIEWS](#)

[PAST ISSUES OF SSN](#)

## SUBSCRIBE



Volume 3 Issue 2  
of Small Spiral  
Notebook Print  
Journal

## ATOM/RSS FEED

[Subscribe to the Book Reviews feed](#)

## *The Letters of James Schuyler to Frank O'Hara* by James Schuyler (Edited by William Corbett)

Reviewed by Jessica Allen  
2.10.07

### Reader Comments

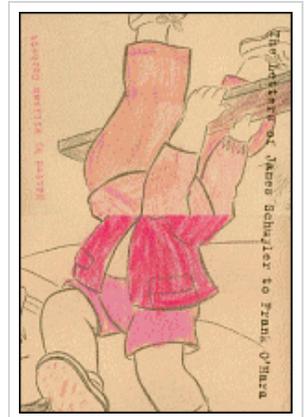
In 1951 a young man named James Schuyler introduced himself to another young man, named Frank O'Hara, at a party. The pair had much in common: both lived in New York City, were gay, loved art, and had recently published some work in the same little magazine. This, as the saying goes, was the start of a beautiful friendship.

Today Schuyler is probably the best-loved least-remembered member of the New York School, a group of loosely connected poets and painters who drank together and influenced one another's work during the 1950s and 1960s in New York City. Although Schuyler won a Pulitzer for poetry in 1981, his literary talents sometimes suffer when compared to those belonging to his fellow New York School poets, including John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and O'Hara, whose fame has steadily increased in the decades since his accidental death in 1966.

By all accounts, O'Hara had the type of charming, magnetic personality that attracted everyone. Schuyler was smitten with the more outgoing O'Hara, and even claimed that O'Hara inspired him to write poetry. While there's no record of a love affair between the two men, it's clear that they had a meaningful friendship for several years. They were roommates on and off until they gradually drifted apart in the late 1950s, perhaps as a result of Schuyler's depression. Some speculate that fun-loving O'Hara began to find sad Schuyler something of a drag.

Editor William Corbett has selected slightly more than thirty charming letters from Schuyler to O'Hara, written between 1954 and 1958. This slim volume serves as a companion to *Just the Thing: Selected Letters of James Schuyler* (2004), which spans forty years. Corbett's helpful footnotes supply context and biographical details.

The letters reveal Schuyler's quick wit and fully developed sense of what we'd now call "camp." A missive from Rome begins, "I never like to write letters after 6 in the evening (it's just 6)—I'm so afraid I may describe the sunset, or mention my aspirations." Schuyler spends most of the space gossiping about who drank too much, which affairs have ended, who has been publishing what where, and who appears to have taken a lover: "I think she must be getting it," he writes about a mutual acquaintance's recent glow.



by James Schuyler (Edited  
by William Corbett)

96pp

Turtle Point Press, 2006

\$11.95

[Buy the Book](#)

[Interview with William Corbett](#)

Whatever demons would come to dominate Schuyler in later years are only shadows here. Instead, the all-too-brief descriptions of art demonstrate a youthful joie de vivre, as does the cavalier optimism about poems and stories yet to be written, or finished: "I've been working on a sort of thing but if I don't see any large, or any, design in it, I don't much care. As long as a fellow keeps up his plain-sewing and hem-stitching there's bound to be something in his hope chest some day." Schuyler wrote and revised his novel *Alfred and Guinevere* (1958) during this period.

A tone of casualness pervades any discussion of work, which belies just how hard Schuyler and friends were working at the time. Schuyler encloses only one poem for O'Hara's review but remains steadfastly interested in what everyone else is doing, asking in the first letter, "What are you painting? What are they writing?" These questions obliquely refer to the shared goals of the New York School: the poets wanted to write the way the artists painted. But Schuyler keeps it lighthearted by mixing up the pronouns and actions. The "they" refers to abstract painters Fairfield Porter and Larry Rivers. The "you" refers to O'Hara, a writer (a few years later, O'Hara explained his unique relationship to painting in the poem "Why I Am Not a Painter"). Behind the jokes rests a firm belief in their artistic enterprise. Day by day, everyone worked to fill their hope chests.

In the acknowledgements, Corbett explains that he wanted a tiny trim size to enable readers to slip the book into their pockets for easy perusing during lunch or trips on the subway. The book's small size and Corbett's desire echo *Lunch Poems* (1964), O'Hara's little volume of verse written during his lunch hour and meant to be consumed as the reader ate his or her own midday meal.

Readers looking for insight into O'Hara as a young man will enjoy the starring role he plays in his friend's epistles, even though his replies disappointingly occur offstage. Schuyler addresses his confidant as "Pearl Without Price," "Sweets," and "Francey Man." He seems genuinely moved when O'Hara asks for advice about which poems to include in *Meditations in an Emergency* (1956), and many letters try to persuade O'Hara to come visit Schuyler (one goes so far as to outline the different types of transportation O'Hara could take to Maine). In all, the letters tenderly capture a relationship between writers who savored being "together on the [new] stands," even when the poets themselves were apart.

---

Small Spiral Notebook is a proud member of the [Council of Literary Magazine & Presses](#)

Copyright © SmallSpiralNotebook.com 2001-2006. All rights reserved. Please do not republish any content without Small Spiral Notebook's expressed written permission. If you would like to use any of our content, please [contact us](#). Site by [Dynamic Vantage](#).