

## Source A

This extract is taken from the beginning of a novel by A.S. Byatt. Roland is a university research assistant to Professor Blackadder, an expert on Victorian poet Randolph Ash.

- 1 The London Library was Roland's favourite place. It was ten in the morning, one day in  
September 1986. Roland had the small single table he liked best, behind a square pillar,  
with the clock over the fireplace nevertheless in full view. To his right was a high sunny  
5 window, through which he could see the high green leaves of St James's Square. Roland  
was looking for old copies of Ash's poetry.
- 6 The librarian handed the book to Roland. It was immediately clear that the book had been  
undisturbed for a very long time, perhaps even since it had been laid to rest. It had been  
exhumed from the library safe where it usually stood. The book was thick and black and  
covered with dust, a black, thick, tenacious Victorian dust composed of smoke and fog  
10 particles. Its spine was missing, or, rather, protruded from amongst the leaves. Its covers  
were bowed and creaking; it had been maltreated in its own time. It was bandaged about  
and about with dirty white tape, tied in a neat bow. Roland undid the bindings. The book  
sprang apart, like a box, disgorging leaf after leaf of faded paper, blue, cream, grey,  
14 covered with rusty writing, the brown scratches of a steel nib.
- 15 Roland recognised Ash's handwriting with a shock of excitement. It appeared to be notes,  
written on the backs of bills and letters. The librarian commented that it didn't look as  
though they had been touched before.
- 18 Roland asked if he had permission to study these jottings. He was research assistant to  
Professor Blackadder, who had been editing Ash's *Complete Works* since 1951. The  
20 librarian tiptoed away to telephone. Whilst he was gone, the dead leaves continued a kind  
of rustling and shifting, enlivened by their release. Ash had put them there. The librarian  
came back and said 'yes', he had permission. The librarian would be glad to know of any  
important discoveries Roland might make.
- 25 All this was over by ten-thirty. For the next half-hour Roland worked haphazardly, moving  
backwards and forwards in the book, half looking at the poems, half reading Ash's notes,  
which was not easy, since they were written in various languages.
- At eleven, he found what he thought was the relevant passage. Roland copied parts onto  
an index card. He had two boxes of these, tomato-red and an intense grassy green, with  
springy plastic hinges that popped in the library silence.
- 30 That was eleven-fifteen. The clock ticked, specks of dust danced in sunlight, Roland  
meditated on the tiresome and bewitching endlessness of the quest for knowledge. Here  
he sat, recuperating a dead man's reading, timing his exploration by the library clock and  
the faint constriction of his belly. (Food is not to be had in the London Library.) He would  
have to show all this new treasure-trove to Professor Blackadder but he was reluctant to  
35 tell him. He enjoyed possessing this knowledge on his own.
- The poem he was looking for was between pages 288 and 289. Under page 300 lay two  
folded complete sheets of writing paper. Roland opened these delicately. They were both  
letters in Ash's flowing handwriting, both headed with his Great Russell Street address and  
dated, June 21st. No year. Both began 'Dear Madam,' and both were unsigned. One  
40 was considerably shorter than the other.

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As he read these letters, Roland was first profoundly shocked by these writings, and then, in his scholarly capacity, thrilled.

He read the letters again. Had a final draft been posted? Or had the impulse died, or been rejected? Roland was seized by a strange and uncharacteristic impulse of his own.

45 It was suddenly quite impossible to put these living words back into page 300 and return them to the library safe. He looked about him: no one was looking: he slipped the letters between the leaves of his own copy of Ash's poems, which he was never without. Then he returned to the annotations, transferring the most interesting methodically to his card index, until the clanging bell descended the stairwell, signifying the end of study. He had

50 forgotten about his lunch.

**END OF SOURCE**