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Ben Sonnenberg, Jr. Papers, 1956-2001

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SUMMARY INFORMATION

Creator

Ben Sonnenberg, Jr., 1936-

Title and dates

Ben Sonnenberg, Jr. Papers, 1956-2001

Abstract

Ben Sonnenberg, Jr., is a writer and editor best known for founding *Grand Street*, a New York literary quarterly, which he edited from 1981 until his retirement in 1989; the magazine continued for another fifteen years before it finally ceased publication in the fall of 2004. The bulk of the collection comprises correspondence between Ben Sonnenberg, Jr. and literary contributors associated with *Grand Street*. Some *Grand Street* administrative files and a small amount of personal material, including family letters and writings, are also included.

Size

7 linear feet (14 document boxes)

Call number

MS #1457

Location

Columbia University
Butler Library, 6th Floor
Rare Book and Manuscript Library
535 West 114th Street
New York, NY 10027

Language(s) of material

English

Biographical Note

Native New Yorker Ben Sonnenberg, Jr., is best known as the founder and editor of *Grand Street*, an influential literary and cultural magazine based in New York City in the mid-1980s and 1990s. Sonnenberg's exposure to the New York literary scene began early in his life: he was the son of Benjamin Sonnenberg, the famous press agent who transformed the family home at 19 Gramercy Place into a central hub for the city's business and literary circles. Sonnenberg both resisted and embraced his cosmopolitan upbringing, recalling his childhood as that of a "younger son in a family of great English furniture." In and out of private schools as a child, he eschewed college in favor of a rigorous program of reading and self-education, traveling abroad and establishing close relations with other writers including W.S. Merwin and Ted Hughes, both with whom he would correspond extensively over the next three decades. In 1963, Sonnenberg completed his first play, *Jane Street*, shortly before returning to New York to pursue his literary career.

In 1981, Sonnenberg invested his inheritance in founding *Grand Street*, a "little magazine" dedicated to literature, politics, and cultural criticism. Hailed in the tradition of *The Dial* and the *Partisan Review*, *Grand Street* quickly established itself as a major New York literary organ, with Sonnenberg hosting informal gatherings with friends and contributors at his apartment on Riverside Drive. As an editor, Sonnenberg was known for unprecedented generosity and trust in his writers, as well as his oft-spoken desire to enfranchise rising talent: "[I want] the money to go into their pockets," he frequently said of his contributors. Early contributors included writers like Susan Minot and Anne Carson, whose work he assiduously promoted in *Grand Street* and through private foundations; the magazine also regularly published works by Edward Said, Arthur Danto, Grover Amen, James Salter, Padgett Powell, James Laughlin, Alice Munro, Edward Sorel, and others.

Through the 1980s, Sonnenberg's work at *Grand Street* was increasingly inhibited by failing health. He was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at the age of 34 and spent most of his adult life as a paraplegic, composing his correspondence and literary materials by dictation. Sonnenberg retired from the magazine in 1989; in 1991 he published his memoir, *Lost Property: Memoirs and Confessions of a Bad Boy*, a well-received account of his adolescence and his subsequent years abroad. Sonnenberg continues to write poetry and film criticism, with essays appearing in *Raritan*, *The Nation*, and other venues. He lives in New York with his wife, Dorothy Gallagher.

Description

The majority of the collection consists of personal and professional correspondence between Ben Sonnenberg, Jr., *Grand Street* contributors, and other writers associated with the New York literary scene. The correspondence is primarily literary in scope, with writers often responding to criticism of manuscripts and works in progress, as well as providing "updates" on work and home life. In addition to letters from contributors, the series includes letters from other editors – some amicable, others less so – which provide an incisive portrait of the New York literary culture in the mid-1990s.

Also included in the collection are administrative and financial records from *Grand Street* magazine, manuscripts of Sonnenberg's own work, and a small amount of family and personal

correspondence. Overall, the material is in excellent condition, with the exception of newspaper clippings and magazine articles, many of which are acidic and have been either separated or photocopied to preserve their integrity.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged in three series.

Series I: Correspondence and Manuscripts, 1956-2001

Series II: *Grand Street* Administrative, 1983-2001

Series III: Personal, 1969-2001

Series I: Correspondence and Manuscripts, 1956-2001

This series consists of correspondence from the mid-1960s through the 1990s, with a strong emphasis the years immediately following Sonnenberg's retirement as editor of *Grand Street* magazine (1989-2000). In addition to written correspondence, materials include drafts and manuscripts of written work, photos, drawings, and other ephemera included with written letters. Of particular interest is correspondence with W.S. Merwin, James Salter, James Laughlin, Anne Carson, and Susan Minot, which spans multiple decades and provides a rich glimpse into their respective literary careers. This series is arranged alphabetically.

Series II: *Grand Street* Administrative, 1983-2001

Included in this series are administrative and financial records associated with *Grand Street*, charitable donations and letters from fans and contributors. The materials are arranged alphabetically.

Series III: Personal, 1969-2001

Personal materials, including manuscripts of Sonnenberg's writings, and research materials, as well as photos and family correspondence comprise this small series. The materials are arranged alphabetically.

ACCESS AND USE

Access

This collection has no restrictions.

This collection is located off-site. You will need to request this material at least twenty-four (24) hours in advance to use the collection in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library reading room.

Restrictions on Use and Copyright Information

Single photocopies may be made for research purposes. Permission to publish material from the collection must be requested from the Curator of Manuscripts, Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML). The RBML approves permission to publish that which it physically owns; the responsibility to secure copyright permission rests with the patron.

Other Finding Aids

Ted Hughes, Letters to Ben Sonnenberg, 1961-2000
Emory University

The Sally Belfrage Papers, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives
Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University

Grand Street Records, Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Butler Library, Columbia University

ACQUISITION AND APPRAISAL
Provenance and Acquisition

Purchase, May 2002.

Accrual of Records

No additions are expected.

PROCESSING AND OTHER INFORMATION
Processing Information

This collection was processed by Katie Gradowski, GSAS 2012. Finding aid written by Katie Gradowski in July 2008.

Descriptive Rules Used

Finding aid adheres to that prescribed by *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*

Encoding

Finding aid written in English.

Preferred Citation

Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Ben Sonnenberg, Jr. Papers; Box and Folder;
Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

Subject Headings

These papers have been indexed in the Columbia University Library online catalog using the following terms. Those seeking related materials should search under these terms.

Amen, Grover
Carson, Anne
Danto, Arthur
Grand Street
Hughes, Ted
Laughlin, James
Literature--Periodicals
Little magazines--Periodicals

Mailer, Norman
Merwin, W.S.
Minot, Susan
Munro, Alice
New York--Periodicals
Powell, Padgett
Said, Edward
Salter, James
Sonnenberg, Benjamin, Jr.
Sorel, Edward

Series I: Correspondence and Manuscripts, 1956-2001

Box 1

- F.1 A--General, 1971-2000 (Egbal Ahmad, Colin Amery, Kingsley Amis, Sallie Anderson, Gabriele Annan, Michael Arlen, Toby Armour, William Arrowsmith, Artists Space, James Atlas, Renata Adler)
- F.2 Adams, Bobby Neal, 1997
- F.3 Amen, Grover, 1962-1997
- F.4 Arbus, Diane, 1959-1960
- F.5 B--General, 1997-2000 (Valerie Borchardt, Elena Brunet, Mark Brown, Eve Bates, Dorothy Braudy, Dierdre Bergson, David Bellos)
- F.6-8 Benkert, Ernst, 1998-2001 (3 folders)
- F.9 Bernard, Kenneth, 1990
- F.10 Brennan, Gerald and Gamel, 1960-1961
- F.11 Brophy, Brigid, 1987-1995
- F.12 Belfrage, Cedric, 1990
- F.13 Belfrage, Sally, 1972-1994

Box 2

- F.1 Belfrage, Sally, 1972-1994
- F.2 Brown, Saidee, 2000
- F.3 C--General, 1968-1999 ("Caldwell," Amy Campitt, Elias Canetti, Colin Campbell, Mary Campbell, Vincent Canby, Aristide Caratzas, E.M. Cioran, Benjamin Cheever, N.A. Choudhury, Angela Conner, Carolyn Cooke, Jane Coola, Alfred Corn, Richard E. Cytowic, Cyril Connolly, Prudence Crowther, Noam Chomsky)
- F.4-8 Carson, Anne, 1987-2001 (5 folders)

Box 3

- Carson, Anne
- F.1-2 1987-2001 (2 folders)
- F.3 *Autobiography of Red*, 1996
- F.4 *Autobiography of Red*, 1997
- F.5 *The Beauty of the Husband*, undated
- F.6 General, undated
- F.7 Canby, Vincent, 2000
- F.8 Charkow, Natalie, 1981
- F.9 Cockburn, Alexander, 1986-1996
- F.10 Collins, Billy, 1999-2000

Box 4

- F.1 D--General, 1969-1994 (Lynn Darling, Hope Hale Davis, Michael DeLisio, Michael Dirda, Tom Dirch, Carl Djerassi, Wilma Dobie, Morris Dickstein, Ethel de Croisset, Mark Doty, Jean Douglas, Debra--Countess of Devonshire)
- F.2 Danto, Arthur, 1989-2000
- F.3 Douglas, Keith, 2000
- F.4 E--General, 1989-1996 (Richard Eder, Leon Edel, Gavin Ewart, William Eppes)
- F.5 Epstein, Helen, 1998-1999

Ben Sonnenberg, Jr. Papers

- F.6 F--General, 1989-1996 (Robert Fagles, Harry Ford, Gerry Fremlin, Sue Friedrich, Isabel Fonseca, Anne Frydman, Feldman, Anna Fels)
- F.7 Fainlight, Harry and Ruth, 1954-1997
- F.8 Feldman, Irving, 1988-1994
- F.9 General, 1960-1988
- F.10 G--General, 1972-1996 (Fred Gardner, Deborah Garrison, Ron Gault, Alice Rose George, General Electric Young Writers Award, Jack Gilbert, Elise Simon Goodman, Peter Green, Martha Greenwald, Margaret M. Gallette, Red Grooms)
- F.11 Gallagher, Dorothy, 2001-2002
- F.12 Gardinier, Suzanne, 1989-2000
- F.13 Gardinier, Suzanne--*The Gathering of Intelligence*, 1997

Box 5

- F.1 Gifford, Henry, 1989-1995
- F.2 Gill, Brendan, 1970-2000
- F.3 Gilliatt, Penelope, 1988-1993
- F.4 H--General, 1960-1997 (Marilyn Hacker, Anna and Philip Hamburger, Josef Hamersky, Michaela Harari, Kent Haruf, Ronald Hayman, John Hess, Lillian Hellman, Greta Hellstrom, Frank Hewitt, Daryl Hime, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Hoffman, John Hollander, Liz Hollander, Michael Holroyd, Glenn Horowitz, Maureen Howard, Suzanne Hyman, Linell Hanover)
- F.5 Haas, Diana, 1995 (see also: George Savidis)
- F.6 Hart, Emma, 1990-2001
- F.7 Hauser, Frank, 1962-2001
- F.8 Hempel, Amy, 1991-1995
- F.9 Hollander, John, 1999
- F.10 Howard, Richard, 1989-1999
- Hughes, Ted
- F.11 Articles, 1957-1971
- F.12 Books and pamphlets, circa 1966
- F.13 Articles and poems, 1996
- F.14 General, 1987-1998

Box 6

- Hughes, Ted
- F.1 Photos, 1978-1998
- F.2 Obituaries, 1999
- F.3 I--General, 1971-1987 (Manahnaz Ispahani, Robert Indiana)
- F.4 J--General, 1993-1996 (Thom Jones, Barbara Jones)
- F.5 K--General, 1985-2000 (Walter Kaiser, Murray Kempton, Frances Kiernan, Andrew Kopkind, Karl Kirchwey, Marthe Keller, Hilton Kramer, Andrew Kopkin)
- F.6 Kavanagh, Patrick, 1989-1996
- F.7 Keeley, Edmund (Mike), 1989-1999
- F.8 Kendall, Tim, 1998-2001
- F.9 Klawans, Stuart, 1995-2001
- F.10 Knox, Bernard, 1989-1999
- F.11 L--General, 1960-1999 (Elinor Langer, Laurie Lee, David Lehman, Robin Lehman, Herb Leibowitz, Wendy Lesser, William Levitan, William Logan, Deacon Derek Lindsay, Bill Logan,

- Kennett Love, Albert LaFarge, Michael Levey, Michael de Lisio)
F.12 Laughlin, James, 1991-1997
F.13 Leaf, June, 1991-2001
F.14 Lutyens, Elisabeth and Mary, 1961-1990

Box 7

- F.1 M--General, 1967-2000 (Norman Mailer, Janet Malcolm, Philip Mansel, Maria Margaronis, Sandy McClatchy, Daniel Mendelsohn, Karl Miller, Rick Moody, Lucas Myers, Elena Margaronis, Charles Monteith, Alex, Carrie Minot Bell, Robert Mitchell)
F.2 McCullers, Carson, 1957-1958
F.3 Menaker, Daniel, 1990-1999
F.4 Merwin, W.S., 1960-2000
F.5 Michie, James, 1962-1990
Minot, Susan
F.6 1984-2000
F.7 Articles, 1996
F.8 *The Bedroom Ceiling*, undated
F.9 *Dancing by Myself*, 1995
F.10 *Dancing by Myself*, 1994

Box 8

- Minot, Susan
F.1 Drawings and photographs, 1987
F.2 General, 1986-1999
F.3 Poems, 1995-1996
F.4 Short Stories, 1987-1992
F.5 Morris, Herbert, 2000
F.6 Munro, Alice, 1990-2000
F.7 N--General, 2001 (Annie Nocenti)
F.8 Nehamas, Alexander, 1997-1998
F.9 Nelson, Graham, 1998
F.10 O--General, 2000 (Jules Olitski)
F.11 P--General, 1961-1999 (Francis Partridge, Tom Paulin, John Peet, Martin Peretz, Charles Platt, George Plimpton, Allison Prete, Kathrin Perutz)
F.12 Parker, Robert A., 1997-2001
F.13 Perillo, Lucia, 1998-2001
F.14 Peterson, Lewis, 2000
F.15 Plachy, Sylvia, 1989-2000

Box 9

- F.1 Poirier, Richard, 1987-2000
F.2 Powell, Padgett, 1990-1998
F.3 Quinn, Alice 1995-2000
F.4 R--General, 1990-1999 (Henry Rago, *Raritan* (Richard Poirier), Henry Reed, Donald Revell, Adrienne Rich, Robin Robertson, Ned Rorem, Suzanne Ruta, Kitty Ross, Royal Society of Literature)
F.5 Raine, Craig, 1991-2000
F.6 Reid, Christopher, 1991-2000
F.7 Ricks, Christopher, 1969-2000

- F.8 Rofihe, Rick, 1989-1997
F.9 S--General, 1962-2000 (Harvey Sachs, Lee Savage, Nora Sayre, Salvatore Santagati, Senopolous, Mira Schor, Lloyd Schwartz, Elaine Segal, Gilbert Seldes, Roger Shaddock, Israel Shahak, Jim Shepard, Dennis Silk, Alan Silltoe, Michael Silverblatt, Ken Silverstein, Ilena Smith, Yolanda Sonnabend, Pat Strachan, Muriel Spark, Francis Steegmuller, Max Steele, Donald Stewart, Mark Strand, Paul Strand, René Servoise, Marina Somer, Gerald Silk, Jack Shoemaker, Charles Sarka)
F.10 Saba, Fauzi, 1998-2000

Box 10

- F.1 Said, Edward, 1977-2000
F.2 Salter, James, 1973-1998
F.3 Saunders, Frances Stonor, 1997-1998
F.4 Savidis, George, 1975-1999
F.5 Schmidt, Michael, 1997-2001
F.6 Schneider, Stephen, 1999-2001
F.7 Schulman, Grace, 1982-1998
F.8 Sherrill, Robert, 1989-1996
F.9 Sonnenberg, Susanna, 2000
F.10 Sorel, Edward, 1990-2000
F.11 Steinberg, Saul, 1988-1999
F.12 Stewart, Lucretia, 2000-2001
F.13 Sweeney, Sean, 1997
F.14 T--General, 1989-2000 (Dorothy Tanning, Eleanor Ross Taylor, William Tester, Deborah Thomas, Lori Toppel, Jeremy Treglown, Holly Eley Treglown, William Trevor, Jeannie Tift)
F.15 Tambimuttu, 1956-1960
F.16 Tanning, Dorothea, 1998-2000

Box 11

- F.1 Thompson, Virgil, 1960-1989
F.2 Train, Michael, 2000
F.3 U--General, 1997 (George Urban)
F.4 V--General, 1999-2000 (Minos Volanakis)
F.5 W--General, 1989-2000 (Scott Wallace, Marina Warner, Robert A. Wilson, Lindsay Waters, Mike Wallace)
F.6 Wolff, Daniel, 1989-1990
F.7-10 Wade, Sidney, 1983-2001 (4 folders)
F.11 Wade, Sidney--Poems, undated
F.12 Wheatley, David, 1998-1999
F.13 Wheelock, John Hall, 1956-1959
F.14 Williams, Hugo, 1999-2000
F.15 Wypijewski, JoAnn, 1998-1999
F.16 XYZ--General, 1991-2000 (T. Yoshida, Gavin Young, Kathleen Zane)

Series II: Grand Street Administrative, 1983-2001

Box 12

- F.1-9 A-Z--Contributors, 1983-1992 (9 folders)

Box 13

- F.1 A-Z--Contributors, 1983-1992

- F.2 Donations--Charitable, 1987-1997
Grand Street
- F.3 Farewells, 1989-1990
- F.4 General, 1982-1990
- F.5 Logo--Drafts, undated
- F.6 *Grand Street* Foundation, 1989-1995
- F.7 Guggenheim Foundation, 1989-1990
- F.8 *Lost Property*, 1989-1996
- F.9 Prete, Allison, 1995-2001
- F.10 Royal Society of Literature, 1994-1995

Series III: Personal, 1969-2001

- Sonnenberg, Ben Jr.
F.11 "The Crease," 1995-1996

Box 14

- Sonnenberg, Ben Jr.
- F.1 Dog research, 1991-1994
- F.2 Plays--*Jane Street, A Childhood Disease*, 1963
- F.3 Poetry, 1989-1991
- F.4 Prose, 1996
- F.5 *Savage Children's Poems*, 1974
- F.6 Work--About, 1996
- F.7 Sonnenberg, Ben Sr., 1989-1990
- F.8-9 Sonnenberg Family, 1969-2001 (2 folders)
- F.10-11 Sonnenberg, Susanna, 1976-1996 (2 folders)