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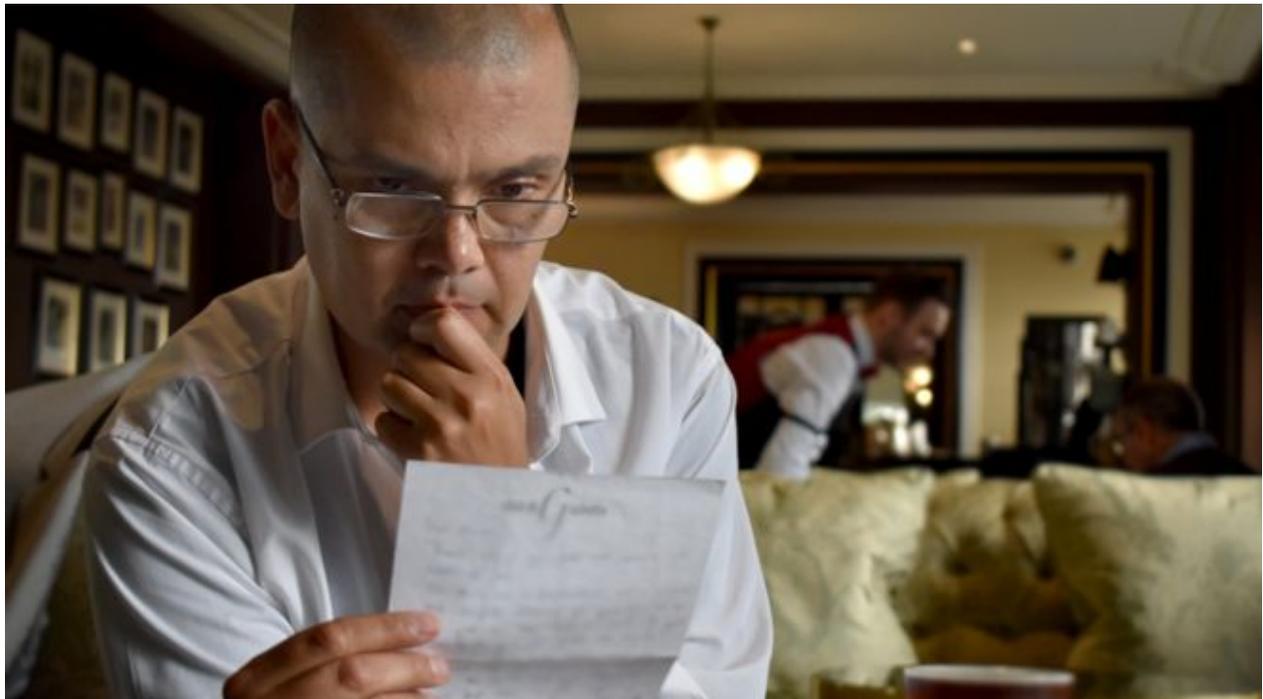
**BBC**  
REEL

## Juliet Club: 'I help answer the world's love letters'

By Alice Evans

BBC News

27 October 2019



**Martin Hopley knows all about being heartbroken - and he thinks about it most days.**

The 41-year-old spends hours of his time writing words of comfort and advice to love-struck people from across the globe.

Sometimes he gives them a push out of the door to ask their loved one to marry them. Other times he reminds them that they must learn to love themselves before they can find happiness with anyone else.

"It's my job to help people remember to open their eyes as well as their hearts, to follow love but not into a hole of doom," he says.

For the last few years Martin has been one of dozens of volunteers for the Juliet Club, a non-profit organisation based in a small storage room tucked under an archway in a quiet courtyard in the backstreets of Verona, Italy.

The club's office is a short stroll from Casa di Giuletta, or Juliet's house, where throngs of tourists flock every year to snap selfies and pay homage to Shakespeare's iconic and ill-fated heroine, Juliet Capulet.



JULIET CLUB



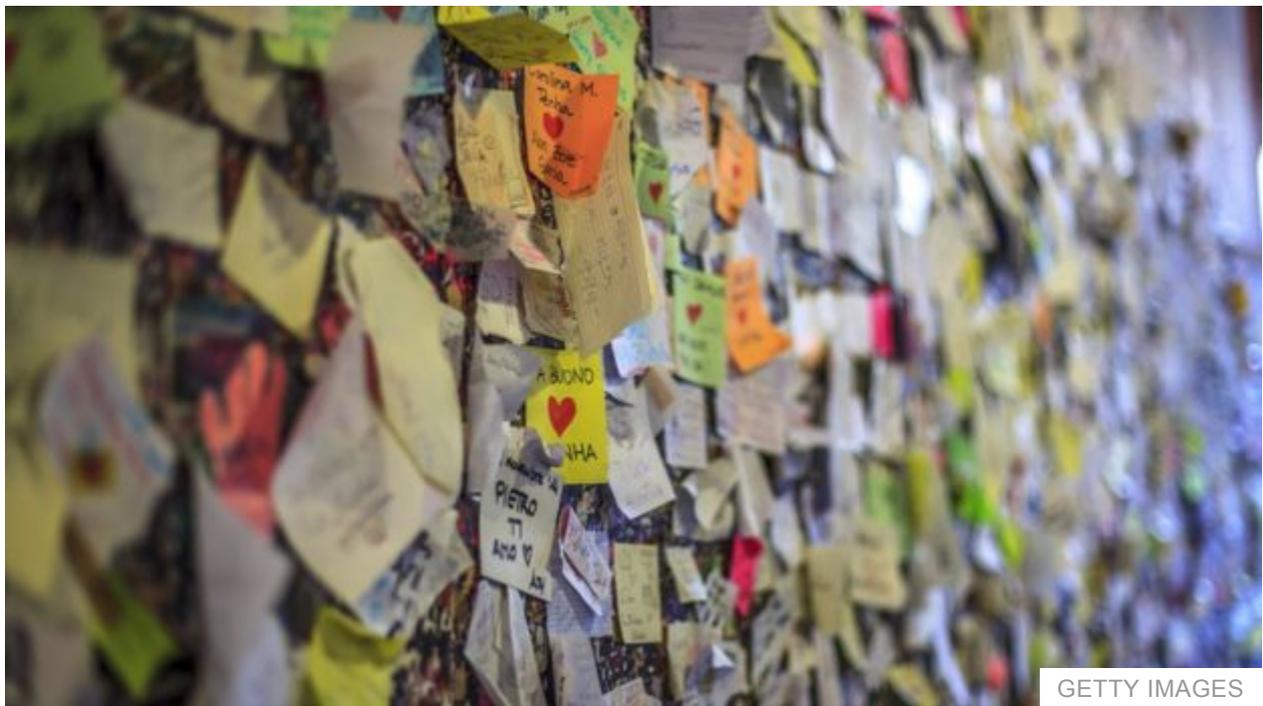
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In a tradition spanning decades, the Juliet Club receives an estimated 50,000 letters every year - many addressed simply to "Juliet, Verona, Italy" - and Martin and the other "secretaries of Juliet" respond to every letter or email that has the sender's address on.

Several special letterboxes allow people in the city to send messages without a stamp, meaning some declarations of love find their way to the volunteers on post-it notes, napkins and even cigarette packets.

Whether a flourishing handwritten poem or a hastily-typed email, the club members are kept on their creative toes as they attempt to write each response in a corresponding format.

"Because I'm not in Verona at the moment, I'm currently on email duty," Martin says from his home in Reading, England. "It's less romantic compared to hand-writing a letter... but these people put their heart and soul into the emails so Juliet replies in kind."



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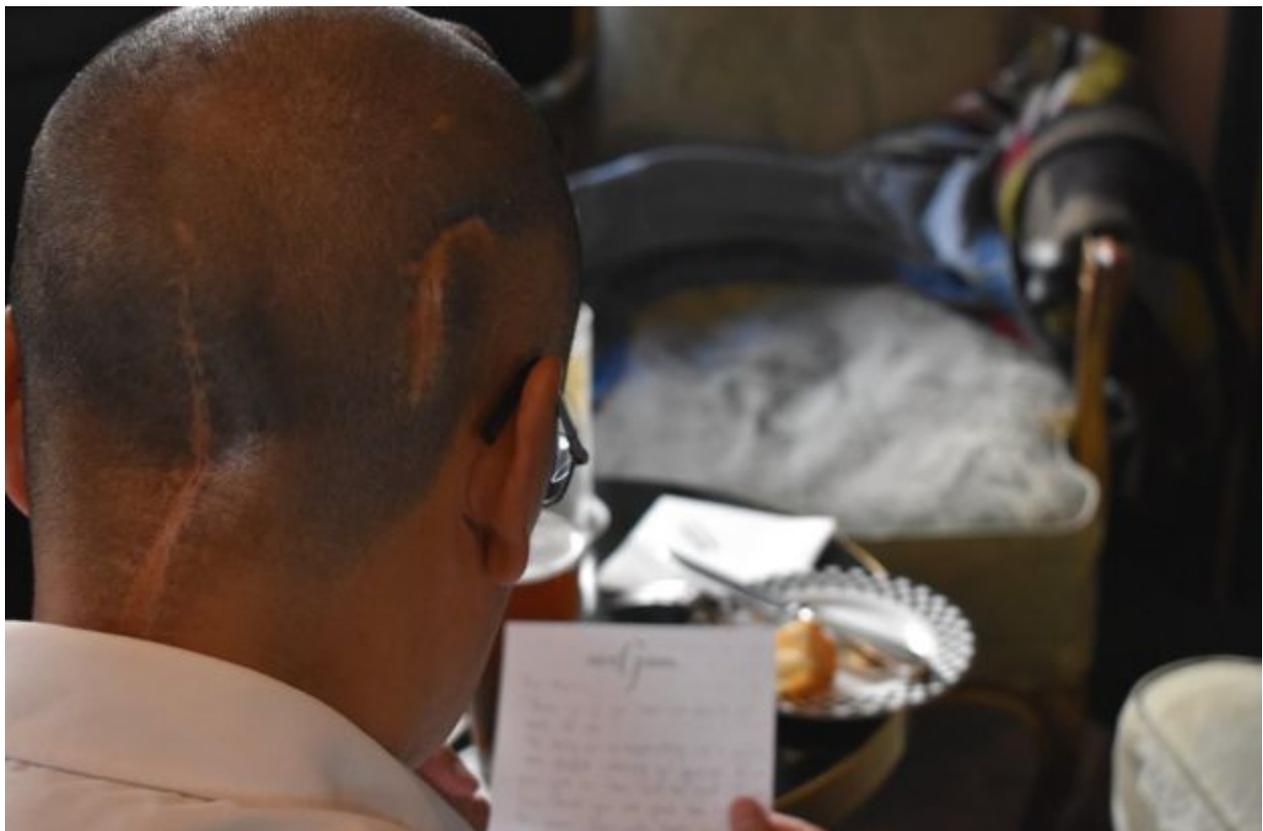
JULIET CLUB

Martin sometimes spends days musing over how to answer letters. He tries to get inspiration from his own letter from Juliet, which sits proudly in a frame on his desk.

Remembering the moment in 2015 that he posted his own letter to Verona after learning about the Juliet Club's existence, Martin says: "There's something about putting your feeling on a piece of paper and putting it into a letterbox that makes you feel sick. You've put your heart and soul into a letter for all the world to see."

In his letter, Martin told Juliet about surviving a brain tumour as a child and living with various disabilities as a result of his illness. Having his heart broken by a friend meant he knew he could still fall in love, "even with brain damage and all common sense against me" - so he asked Juliet for her "magic" to help his next love story reach a happy ending.

Six months later, an envelope marked with a Poste Italiane stamp dropped through Martin's letterbox, and, he says, changed his life.



"The words Juliet had written by hand were like nothing I had ever heard, nothing I had ever read before because she was specifically talking to me," he says.

"When people write to Juliet, [their] hearts are often frustrated, confused and in a mess. But she takes all those feelings, calms them down and reads them back to you as a beautiful song that's easier to understand."

The only phrase from Juliet's letter to Martin that he is willing to share is: "You are meant to be alive."

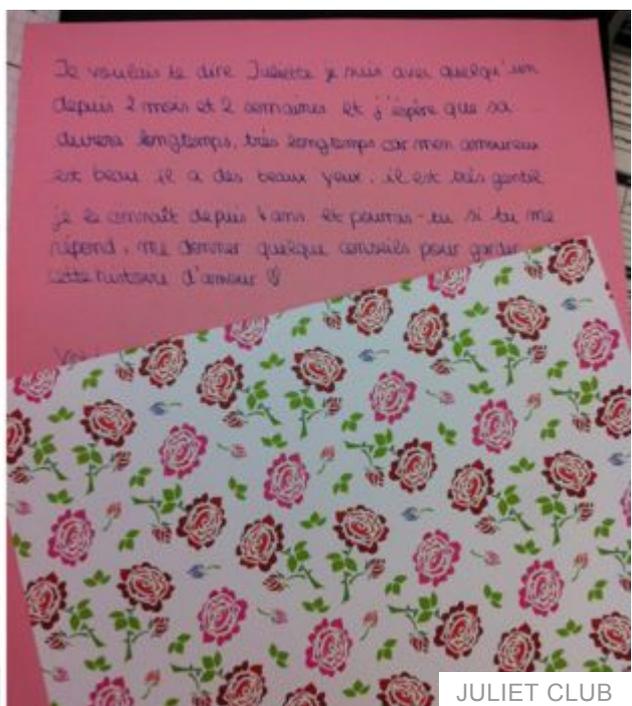
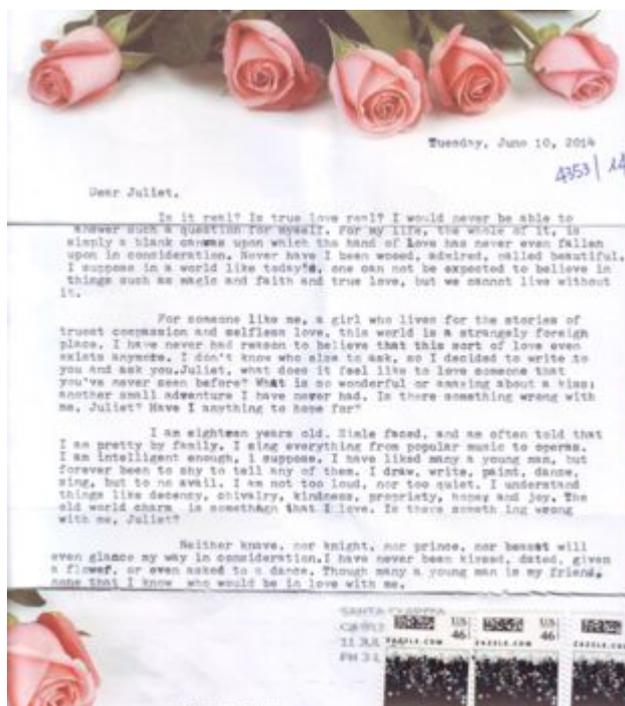
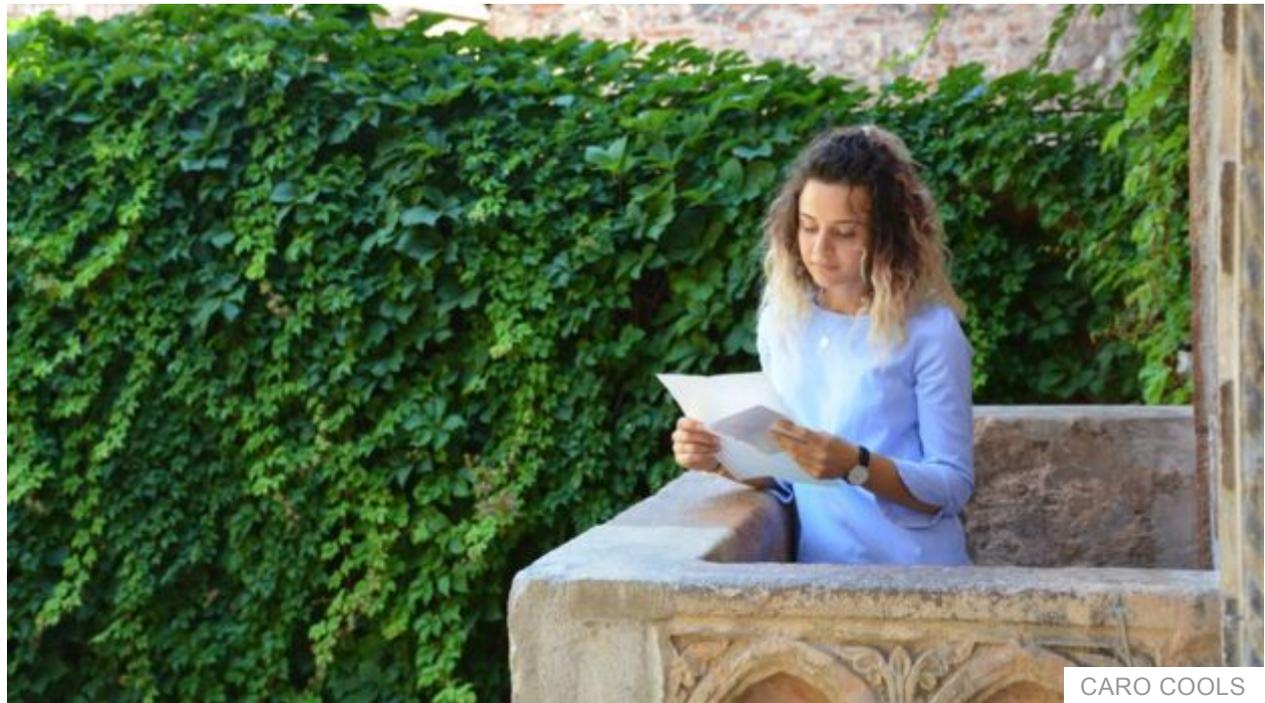
"That line has never escaped my Swiss cheese mind because there is something magical about it," he says.

Martin was so inspired by Juliet's reply to him that he became an active follower of the club's Facebook page, commenting on posts and engaging in conversations with other fans. Soon enough, the secretaries began asking for his help answering some of the letters - and five years on, Martin is part of the team of regular volunteers.

The secretaries spread the workload by each taking on letters that are most relevant to their own experiences.

"From the woman who's fallen in love with a close friend, to the man whose wife has passed away, to the boy who's coming to terms with his sexuality, to the girl who doesn't believe she's beautiful enough to find love... Juliet has probably heard every possible scenario you can think of," Martin says.

"If one secretary can't answer a particular subject, it'll be passed on to someone who can."



Many of the letters that Martin is asked to reply to involve him drawing on his own experience of having disabilities and worrying: "Why would anyone fall in love with me?"

He says the bumpy scars on his head from various high-risk operations to rid him of his brain tumour used to mean he would ask the same question. But he has since come to believe his scars "show that I am a fighter and a survivor".

The 18 operations and countless radiotherapy sessions Martin has undergone since his tumour was discovered at the age of 14 have left him with chronic pain, double vision, coordination problems and a memory so full of holes it is like, in his words, a "Swiss cheese".

Martin's memory problems mean he finds verbal communication difficult, which he says is one reason he has struggled to cope with full-time employment.

However, writing gives him time to "think carefully" about what he wants to say, helping him to "release a lot of emotions". This reflective habit has helped him to produce hundreds of colourful and heartfelt letters for the Juliet Club.



HOPLEY FAMILY



MARTIN HOPLEY

He says he's even responsible for a marriage, having persuaded a woman who wrote to Juliet to move across the world to be with her boyfriend. About a year later, the woman wrote a second letter to say the pair had got married.

"They had been together for donkey's years but just needed a gentle push from Juliet," Martin says.

He says he feels like a better person when he is writing on behalf of Juliet. "In many ways it doesn't feel like me," he says, adding: "I'm nice but not that nice... She will never mock you, she will never judge you, she will never discriminate you, she will just be compassionate in her reply.

"Juliet brings the best out of all of us."

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