Books Are Us

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Books Are Us

by Anne Robichaux (Professor Emerita, Medical University of South Carolina; Consultant, Majors Scientific Books) <awkr772@charleston.net>

Editor: This column is supposed to cover fiction about people like us — librarians, publishers, vendors, booksellers, etc. All contributions are welcome. — AR

Jan Karon's newest book in the Mitford series, In This Mountain (Viking Press, 2002) mentions a young woman, Earlene, who "used to be a librarian but the flour company offered a benefit package you wouldn't believe." On a happier note, the town of Mitford has a Happy Endings Bookstore. Father Tim loves books, and his wife Cynthia is a writer of Children's Books, but if there is a librarian or a library, I’ve missed it.

Harry Potter fans reading this undoubtedly caught the description of the librarian in J. K. Rowling's fourth book in the series, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (Scholastic Press, 2000). Harry asked "the irritable, vulture-like librarian, Madam Pince, for help" with no further discourse on whether or not Madam Pince was helpful.


The novel takes place in the 1950's on Cape Cod, and features Peggy Cort, the director of the Brewster Public Library, her interest in James Carlson Sweet, an "over-tall" boy, and the friendship between them that develops into an unlikely romance. While Peggy has some of the common stereotypes of librarians — she is unmarried, reclusive, frugal, passionate for order — she is also imaginative, warm, compassionate and not judgmental. She states "I am a librarian, and you cannot stop me from annotating, revising, updating. I like to think that — because I am a librarian — I offer accurate and spurious advice with no judgment, good and bad next to each other on the shelf" (p.5). She protests that "people think librarians are unromantic, unimaginative" and explains that "we are people whose dreams run in particular ways — the idea of a library full of books, the books full of knowledge, fills me with fear and love and courage and endless wonder" (p.8).

Mazmanian notes that the character of James Carlson Sweet is based on Robert Pershing Wadlow, who holds the Guinness Book of World Records for height (see http://www.altorweb.com/history/wadlow/). He quotes McCracken: "There are certain pictures from my childhood that are just burned into my brain from the Guinness Book of World Records. Perhaps it shows that I was going to become a librarian since my favorite book as a child was basically a reference book."

continued on page 83

Book Pricing Update — Broad Trends in Pricing and Coverage

by Tom Loughran (Manager Approval Systems, Blackwell's Book Services, 6024 SW Jean Road, Building G, Lake Oswego, OR 97035; Phone: 877-270-4338)

Each year, Blackwell's reports on pricing trends in academic monographic publishing. We derive this data from the books that were treated on our academic Approval Program during the previous year. In the year ending this last June, we treated 40,444 academic monograph titles with an average list price of $60.49. Excluding 1,742 reprints, the average list price of the 38,815 remaining new titles was $61.79.

The distribution of titles by country of origin, and the average list price by country (including reprints), are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th># of titles</th>
<th>% of all titles treated</th>
<th>Avg. List Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. origin</td>
<td>24,629</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
<td>$53.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K. origin</td>
<td>10,345</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>$64.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other origin</td>
<td>5,470</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>$82.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Countries accounting for "Other origin" titles included Netherlands (1,636 titles), Germany (1,437 titles), Canada (589 titles), Singapore (288 titles), Australia (327 titles), New Zealand (51 titles) Switzerland (230 titles), Japan (69 titles) India (162 titles), Sweden (56 titles), Denmark (85 titles), Italy (72 titles) and Austria (66 titles). An additional 34 countries contributed to this total with fewer than 50 titles each.

Last year we treated 10,171 university press titles, or 25% of all titles. The average list price of all university press titles was $49.08. Again, excluding reprints, the average list price of the remaining 9,493 new university press titles was $50.15.

In broad subject areas the number of new titles treated (excluding reprints), and their average list prices, broke down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Subject</th>
<th># of titles</th>
<th>% of all titles treated</th>
<th>Avg. List Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts/Humanities</td>
<td>13,329</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>$46.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>13,055</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>$57.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sci./Tech./Med.</td>
<td>12,359</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>$82.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average list price for a scholarly book in the Arts and Humanities last year represents a two percent increase over the average price of the year before ($46.27). The average for a book in the Social Sciences also increased two percent, from $56.05. Prices for an average title in the Sciences, Technology and Medicine fell one percent from last year's average price of $83.56.

In the next "Book Pricing Update," we'll investigate how prices in individual subject areas of these broader categories fared.
Memo to Library Directors: Stay Home If You're In a Bad Mood

The New York Times reports on the re-emergence of the revenge literary genre, first made famous in the last century by Mommy Dearest. Tell-all books are thriving in the post-Enron blame game world. A host of anti-boss memoirs or thinly disguised novels are about to hit bookstore and library shelves. These include: Lizzie Grubman's (tabloid bae of Hamptons crashing SUV fame) assistant will tell us what an awful person she is (duh), two novels and a screenplay describe what a witch Vogue's Anna Wintour is (double duh), Graydon Carter of Vanity Fair is skrewed by his former assistant, and hedge fund manager, CNBC talking head, and author of Confessions of a Street Addict James Cramer throws phones and destroys monitors, according to his assistant. The award for hypocrisy goes to Richard Blow for his American Son, a profile of his boss John Kennedy's years editing George magazine. When John-John died in the plane crash, Blow, the managing editor, forbade his staff to write anything about their famous boss. He then broke his own rule. The Times says that most of these memoirs reveal the moodiness of bosses, not their malfeasance. So stay upbeat in the office, or, as James Cramer says, never hire anyone "with a literary bent."

Or Maybe It Was Linda Lovelace

Celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Watergate scandal, John Dean has published an eBook naming five suspects as the whistleblower dubbed Deep Throat. Woodward and Bernstein, the Washington Post reporters who relentlessly pursued the story, have vowed never to name their informant until he/she is dead. Guessing the identity has become political sport inside and outside Washington (A group of University of Illinois journalism students has been working on this mystery for three years). Prior to publication Dean intimated that he'd solved the puzzle, but in fact he names five people as contenders in his Unmasking Deep Throat. They are columnist, anti-immigration Neanderthal Pat Buchanan, former press secretary Ron Ziegler, Nixon assistant Steve Buell, special assistant Raymond Price, and Ziegler's assistant Jerry Warren. Others nominate Henry Kissinger, Al Haig and even Diane Sawyer. Woodward stays firmly above the fray, saying in the New York Daily News "it's about keeping our word for thirty years." Refreshing, isn't it?

And You Thought They Were Celebrating the Queen's Jubilee

According to The Guardian, Brits are "celebrating" the inclusion of the word "bonkusbiter" in the online Oxford English Dictionary. This new literary term describes a best-selling novel where the characters have "frequent sexual contact" with each other.

Dumbing Down Achieves New High

C'mon, confess. We all used Cliff Notes in college. Especially when we hated the assigned books or prepared for an exam by staying out until 3AM at the local bar. It was dumb, but it was an EMERGENCY. Not any more. Those familiar yellow and black lifesavers, and onrushing competitor Sparknotes, are now squeezing 500 page popular novels like Harry Potter and Midnight's Children into fifty page summaries for busy social climbers. If you are not content with seeing the movie to fool your friends into thinking you read the book, you'll be able to find Cliff Notes or Sparknotes editions of Snow Falling on Cedars, All the Pretty Horses and Cold Mountain. If you followed Oprah's recommendation and read A Lesson Before Dying, but had trouble following the plot, Sparknotes will explain it to you. For a mere $4.99 a Sparknotes Harvard-educated writer will demystify Jurassic Park. If you ever thought book discussion group members had too much time on their hands, think again. They constitute a significant minority of Cliff Notes and Sparknotes buyers. A New York ad executive explains "I'm the typical 40 something professional, I have the same case of Attention Deficit Disorder my colleagues do." He buys Sparknotes to avoid embarrassment at his book club gatherings. And high achieving college students report that in 2000 Cliffs were used by 32.5% of them, up from 24.5% in 1993.

But, complains the New York Times, all too often the Cliff or Sparknotes writer exults his or her own brand of ADD, elucidating a theme or psychomaniacanly analyzing a character incorrectly. Frank McCourt found a Cliff copy of his Angela's Ashes while on a book tour: "Something about the inevitable search for the father, Telemachus's search for Odysseus. The old, old story. Only I didn't know it."

Metaphor Attack: Are Books Pop Tarts or Chicken Cutlets?

More on Borders Bookstore's category management approach to ordering and displaying books: Ralph Nader, Noam Chomsky and other similar experts on the retailing business have sent a letter to Borders attacking their plan to appoint publishers to help Borders manage book categories, a widely practiced merchandizing program in supermarkets. Their fear is that large publishers will shut out small publishers in the categories they co-manage with Borders' buyers. "There is a difference between books and Pop Tarts," the letter explains. They gripe that publishers are required to pay fees to manage a category, but Borders says these fees are charged to cover the costs of market research that will be shared with paying publishers. Ultimately, they say, most of the research will be shared with all publishers, including smaller non-paying presses. An organizer of the protest letter conceded that their fears "might be overblown," but went on to fault "too much market research" as damaging to unpopular books. "It's all right for chicken cutlets, but this as all about ideas."

With book sales increases at all time low, and general agreement in the industry that too many non-selling new books are com-