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Book Reviews: Monographic Musings

Deborah Vaughn

College of Charleston, vaughnd@cofc.edu

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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: **Debbie Vaughn** (Reference Librarian, College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

It is that time of year again when we ooh-and-ahh at the changing colors of the leaves, we serenely sigh as we pull on our fall sweaters, and we wow at all of the information awaiting us at Katina's **Charleston Conference**. The trends are a'changing, indeed, but the printed word is here to stay. As of October 1, there were nearly four million books in print, and the numbers continue to rise. Book reviews continue to help in the collection development process.

We are fortunate this month

to have critical commentary from Conference Coordinator **Mike Litchfield**, the great **Lyman Newlin**, **ATG** veteran **Phillip Powell**, and the very eloquent **Jennie Vaughn** on an array of topics. From children and cancer to wrens to wrestling; from Shakespeare to Sanskrit and from OCD to the ACS: we've got it covered in this issue.

So sit back, ooh-and-ahh, serenely sigh, and wow at the highlighted books in this very special, **Charleston Conference Issue of Against the Grain! - DV**

Also, Fred J. **Birds of North America; Eastern Region (Smithsonian Guide)**. New York: DK Publishing, 2001. 0789471566. \$24.95. 751 pages.

Flieg, G. Michael and Allan Sander. **A Photographic Guide to Birds of Southern Florida; Including the Everglades, the Keys, Sanibel and Captiva Islands**. Sanibel Island, FL: Ralph Curtis Books Publishing, 2001. 0883590530. \$15.95. 144 pages.

Reviewed by **Lyman Newlin** (Papa Lyman, Library Consultant Extraordinaire and All-Around Book Guru) <broadwater@wnyip.net>

Birds of North America; Eastern Region (Smithsonian Guide) — Although Fred J. Alsop, III, PhD is designated author on both cover and title pages, there is no mention of his name on the title verso. Hence readers, especially bibliographers, are left wondering just what part or parts are of his creation. Is he author of text or illustrator or both? As text author, compared to authors of the recent plethora of new or revised bird guidebooks, Dr. Alsop deserves a B or B-minus grade. As illustrator, the ranking goes down several notches, due primarily to fuzzy lines and inaccurate coloring of many subjects. The question arises as to the causes. Are these retouched photographs or are they free-hand portraits? Obviously intended as a handbook, this book can seldom be used as a field guide due to its three-pound weight and 5.75 x 8.75" dimensions. Certainly the 751 pages make this the winner in measurement, especially considering that it covers only the "eastern region." One can hope for improvement of content and size of "western region."

A Photographic Guide to Birds of Southern Florida; Including the Everglades, the Keys, Sanibel and Captiva Islands — This easy-to-carry pocket guide presents key descriptions of over 250 bird species that occur in southern Florida, either as residents or migrants. The 335 generally excellent color photographs combined with good copy entitle this book to inclusion in general as well as specific birdwatcher collections.

Columbia Critical Guides. Columbia UP, 1999. \$39.50 cloth, \$14.50 paper.

Toni Morrison: Beloved. Ed. Carl Plasa. 0231115261 cloth, 023111527X paper. 168 pages.

William Shakespeare: King Lear. Ed. Susan Bruce. 0231115288 cloth, 0231115296 paper. 192 pages.

James Joyce: Ulysses/A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Ed. John Coyle. 023111530X cloth, 0231115318 paper. 186 pages.

Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse/The Waves. Ed. Jane Goldman. 0231115326 cloth, 0231115334 paper. 192 pages.

Reviewed by **Jennie Vaughn** (Warren-Wilson College) <jvaughn@warren-wilson.edu>

These new critical guides from **Columbia University Press** are not for the uninitiated. In fact, they're so high-brow, the only people that will really be interested in them are graduate students in English, or perhaps an undergraduate working on an honors thesis. Nope, Cliff's Notes they aren't, but if you want to delve into the nihilist's interpretation of **King Lear** or the psychoanalytic implications of **Toni Morrison's Beloved**, then this is the series for you.

In this introductory set of guides — each is sold separately, and more are forthcoming — Columbia University Press has provided concise analyses of a variety of critical texts and approaches to several important works of literature. Instead of combing the stacks or searching the Net for hours, students can turn to this slim volume for a handy range of secondary writings including essays, reviews and articles.

That's the good news. The bad news is that most folks will be utterly unable to wade through pages and pages about the Oedipal undertones of **Virginia Woolf's** writing, and those that are able probably won't care. But for those few who can appreciate these informative and well-edited guides, there is much in them to applaud. They will make an excellent addition to any collection.

Gravitz, Herbert L. **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: New Help for the Family**. Santa Barbara, CA: Healing Visions Press, 1998. 0966110447. \$19.95. 224 pages.

Reviewed by **Jennie Vaughn**

In this formulaic but nonetheless very helpful book, **Herbert Gravitz** addresses the issue of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and how it affects the families of sufferers. It is written in a user-friendly question-and-answer format, and while much of the information it contains could be applied to families of alcoholics or those whose loved ones suffer from depression, it offers straight-forward and easy to understand information about this often-hidden anxiety disorder whose sufferers are unable to stop thinking or worrying about a particular idea, and then engage in ritualized behaviors (such as checking to see if the stove is turned off) to help stop the worrying. While it may seem bizarre, OCD affects approximately 3 percent of the US population. It can be caused by heredity or trauma and while it cannot be cured, it can be effectively managed with a combination of drug and behavioral therapy.

While Gravitz counsels families to treat sufferers with compassion and support them in their efforts to seek help for this disorder, he stresses that loved ones must realize that OCD is not their problem and that they must work to avoid becoming too emotionally involved in the situation. Anyone who has ever watched Oprah will recognize this gentle warning against enabling and co-dependency, and Gravitz

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THE GLOBAL WARMING DESK REFERENCE

By Bruce E. Johansen

Rapidly rising global temperatures or "infrared forcing," popularly known as the "greenhouse effect," has attracted worldwide concern. This book is a concise, college-level compendium of the research on global warming. It surveys the scientific consensus on the issue, describes recent findings, examines the political controversy surrounding the issue, and also considers the arguments of skeptics who doubt that global warming is a threat.

Greenwood Press • 2001 • 384 pages • 0-313-31679-1 • \$70.00

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is worth repeating, and Gravitz does an excellent job of tailoring it to the specific needs of his readers.

This book is designed with the lay reader in mind and is probably useless for any serious researcher. However, because there is so little out there for families of those suffering with OCD, it is a worthwhile addition to any community-minded library.

Provenzano, Jim. *Pins*. San Francisco: Myrmidude, 1999.
096723820X. \$14.95. 281 pages.

Reviewed by **Phillip Powell** (College of Charleston)
<powellp@cofc.edu>

Pins is the kind of book a gay teen should find both entertaining and eye-opening. The hero is Joe Nicci, a 15 year old high school wrestler from New Jersey. Actually, as his personal transformation takes place, Joe goes from the boyish Joey to the more formal Joseph, and finally to plain Joe. Joe is the oldest child of a wonderfully portrayed Italian-American family. The combination of blue-collar values, Catholicism, and pasta are almost palpable as Joe and his two siblings relate to each other and to their very human parents. Provenzano has skillfully created a family scene that is both affecting and natural. Within this environment we see Joe becoming increasingly aware of his attraction toward other males.

Joe's other world, like any teenager, is his high school. His family has recently moved from Newark to the fictional Little Falls, NJ. Coming to Little Falls is considered an upward move for the Niccis although there are many emotional ties remaining from the old neighborhood. At school, though, during the period of adjustment to a public from a parochial school, Joe finds his niche on the wrestling team. He becomes the team's wrestler in the 126 pound weight division. It is here, too, that Joe meets

doesn't break any new ground in this area. Still, any good advice

Donald (or Dink), his best friend and his first love. It is within this closed society where he also learns of the cruel homophobic underbelly into which he unwittingly finds himself drawn.

Jim Provenzano's style is most suitable for a book of this genre. His terse delivery and economy of words cuts to the point. Sometimes, it is so terse, the reviewer wished there had been a segue leading to the next episode. But that is more the reviewer's problem than the author's. Even without the gay plotline, Provenzano has written some very good descriptions of the high school wrestling world. Even his description of the room where the wrestlers at Little Falls High School practiced sparked in this reviewer a flood of vivid memories—mostly negative, by the way—more than three decades old.

In the context of gay literature, the themes are fairly standard. There is Joe becoming aware of his gay identity and his growing self acceptance. Different facets of homophobia are addressed in both subtle and blatant forms. And true to form, there is the adolescent (gay or straight) dealing with raging hormones. Provenzano's style saves *Pins* from the fate other gay-themed novels and films often suffer. This reviewer has seen and read potentially powerful stories regress to mawkish, sometimes maudlin, soap operas. The urban edginess of *Pins*—even if it is set in the suburbs—keeps Joe's story moving rapidly forward from one difficult, often traumatic, episode to the next without languishing. The style is edgy, but the anger of some writers for a more mature audience—Monette comes to mind—is not present.

Is there a happy ending? Happy is not the word that describes Joe's life, but there is hope. One has the sense life will be all right for Joe Nicci. It will not necessarily be perfect, but one can see he has overcome a lot of important obstacles. These are obstacles which a young gay reader may easily identify and begin to understand that his or her experience is not unique. Isolation and silence can be as detrimental as the problems Joe encountered.

Like the other books reviewed in *Against the Grain*, this reviewer
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same book, and the process was the same for *Pins*. With one understandable exception—the *San Francisco Chronicle*—not one mainstream non-gay publication has reviewed this thought-provoking novel. There has been significant positive reception in the gay/alternative press, but these are not publications where the everyday acquisitions librarian, particularly in a community without a visible gay presence, is likely to search for new titles.

You Know Me: The Gita. Trans. Irina N. Gajjar. Ill. Navin J. Gajjar. Houston: Emerald Ink Publishing, 2000.
1885373279. \$19.95. 310 pages.

Reviewed by **Michael Litchfield** (Charleston Conference Coordinator) <libconf@cofc.edu>

I am faced with the rather daunting task of reviewing one of the seminal religious works in world history: the **Bhagavadgita**. Quite honestly, I do not know enough about Hinduism to even pretend to pull off such a task—which is why this particular version of the Bhagavadgita was prepared. It is a simple, easy-to-read translation intended to provide a basic understanding of Hinduism.

Any translation is difficult, and in this particular case a poorly done translation could make several million adherents more than a little angry with the translator. While I cannot vouch for the authority of the translation, Dr. Gajjar has excellent credentials: a Ph.D. in Ancient Indian Studies from Bombay University. She has presented this text in what seems to be a very objective fashion—"The inconsistencies in the text exist in the Sanskrit and are left to the readers to analyze if they chose to do so," as she states in her preface. While many existing editions of the Bhagavadgita are literal, word-for-word translations, Dr. Gajjar has worked to maintain the poetry of the original in her English translation, as well as making it easily understandable.

When an idea in Sanskrit proves too thorny to be easily rendered in English, it is defined in the glossary rather than making a sacrifice to the poetry. There is also a very cursory history of the Bhagavadgita and Hinduism from pre-Vedic India of 4,500 years ago to the present, along with a description of the **Mahabharata**, the great epic which contains the Bhagavadgita. The real gem of this book, at least from an artistic standpoint, is the Sanskrit. The text is laid out in facing pages, matching the Sanskrit to the English, and the Sanskrit is in a beautiful hand-drawn script, with illuminations of Hindu iconography.

The translation is, at times, very simplistic, and at first I thought that the glossary could use more in-depth definitions. I also felt that there were some terms in the glossary that were common enough in Western usage that they didn't really need to be defined, such as Brahmin, Karma, and Yoga. Then I remembered that this is a translation primarily intended for young readers. This role is fulfilled. Any student in college would require a more detailed, scholarly text, one with copious footnotes and appendices. However, as an introduction to Hinduism, Dr. Gajjar's translation would serve well in a public or school library.

Children's Critical Corner

Frahm, Amelia. *Tickles Tabitha's Cancer-Tankerous Mommy*. Ill. Elizabeth Schultz. Hutchinson, MN: Nutcracker Publishing, 2001. 0970575203. \$9.95. 32 pages. Ages 4-9.

Reviewed by **Debbie Vaughn** (Reference Librarian, College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

October is not only the commencement of fall, it is also **Breast Cancer Awareness Month**. According to the **American Cancer Society**, an estimated 1.2 million new cancer cases are expected to be diagnosed this year.¹ Of those, an estimated 192,000 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer.²

makes a concerted effort to read what others have written about the

When **Amelia Frahm** was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 34, her young children, then ages two and four, noticed the natural swings in her mood due to her chemotherapy treatment. After looking for a children's book that took into hand the side-effects of cancer treatment, Frahm was surprised not to find one. She then did what any good journalist would do: she wrote her own book to read to her children and to help them understand that the "very medicine she needed to help save her life contributed to her behavior."³

Tickles Tabitha's Cancer-Tankerous Mommy is written from Tabitha's point-of-view. While teaching children about the realities of chemotherapy—hair loss, exhaustion, moodiness—Frahm's premier book keeps the focus: it emphasizes that ill parents love their children no matter tired or cranky they might be. Although a handful of children's books exist explaining cancer and cancer-related death,⁴ *Tickles Tabitha* deals specifically with family dynamics. The wording and rhythm of the book make it easily understandable for a young audience, and the situations that are presented are genuine and not strictly sentimental. Mommy gets irritated at Daddy for trying to eat her pie; Albert the cat gets hissy when Mommy raises her voice; Mommy tickles Tabitha so that Tabitha will loosen her bear-hug grip—these touching, honest scenarios are but brief examples of the down-to-earth nature of this publication.

Illustrator **Elizabeth Schultz** has succeeded in marrying Frahm's tender story with comforting visual reflections. A senior at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Schultz answered an advertisement seeking an illustrator for *Tickles Tabitha*. As Marjorie Priceman does in Katie Couric's *The Brand New Kid*,⁵ Schultz captures every morsel of emotion that Frahm's words generate. Soothing periwinkles, bright magentas, and buttery yellows complete the color scheme of *Tickles Tabitha*, in which all of the illustrations were painted in acrylic. The rich texture and hues only further the immense sense of warmth and love that radiates from this book.

I had the opportunity to communicate via email with Frahm and Schultz about *Tickles Tabitha* and their experiences with this project. Schultz wrote something that I think aptly sums up the theme of this delightful tome:

"The book was rewarding yet difficult when dealing with such a touchy subject. I had a lot of issues to confront within myself. For example, Amelia felt that in some spreads it was important to show mom with no hair. This was very difficult for me. Amelia finally told me, 'Liz, the children reading this book have to deal with this issue everyday. We need to show them that they aren't the only ones. To them, it's normal'... I have a new awareness about cancer. Not just for those that have lost their loved ones, but those [who] have to wake up everyday and continue on with their lives."⁶

When a no-frills, sincere children's book comes along, you have to snatch it right up. *Tickles Tabitha*, without a doubt, falls into this category. Buy it for your public library, your school library, your elementary education curriculum, and your personal collection.

Endnotes

1. American Cancer Society, *Cancer Facts and Figures 2001*, <www.cancer.org/downloads/STT/F&F2001.pdf>. This publication "conveys the Society's annual estimates of expected numbers of new cancer cases and deaths."
2. American Cancer Society, *Breast Cancer Facts and Figures 2001-2002*, <www.cancer.org/downloads/STT/BrCaFF2001.pdf>. This publication provides information tailored specifically to breast cancer, whereas Cancer Facts and Figures is more general in scope. Breast Cancer Facts and Figures also includes more detailed information about breast cancer treatment and prevention.
3. Nutcracker Publishing Company, <www.nutcrackerpublishing.com>. This site gives information about Frahm and *Tickles Tabitha*.
4. Take a look at Carol Carrick's *Upside-Down Cake* (1999); Sherry Kohlenberg's *Sammy's Mommy Has Cancer* (1993); and Judith Vigna's *When Eric's Mom Fought Cancer* (1993).
5. See "Children's Critical Corner," *Against the Grain*, 12.6, p. 70-71.
6. This is an excerpt from an email message that Elizabeth sent to me on September 27, 2001