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## 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>

**AKA Your 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 Giant's House*, a Romance by Eliza-

beth McCracken (Dial Press, 1996, ISBN 0-385-31433-7; paper, Avon Books, July 1997, ISBN 0-380-73020-0) not only features a librarian who tells the story, but the author herself is a librarian who left the profession to write full time. McCracken worked in libraries from the age of 15, earned her M.L.S. at Drexel in 1992 and subsequently worked in a public library, in between selling a collection of short stories prior to the publication of this, her first novel. In his review (*Library Journal*, July, 1996, and <http://www.mindspring.com/~mazmanian/new.profile.mccracken.htm>) Adam Mazmanian notes her love of libraries, librarians, and working in libraries.

The novel takes place in the 1950's on Cape Cod, and features Peggy Cort, the director of the Brewsterville public library, her interest in James Carlson Sweatt, 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

non 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 Sweatt is based on Robert Pershing Wadlow, who holds the *Guinness Book of World Records* for height (see <http://www.altonweb.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



### Trends in Book Pricing for the year ending June 30, 2002

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:

Country	# of titles	% of all titles treated	Avg. List Price
U.S. origin	24,629	60.5%	\$53.93
U.K. origin	10,345	26%	\$64.70
Other origin	5,470	13.5%	\$82.10

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:

Broad Subject	# of titles	% of all titles treated	Avg. List Price
Arts/Humanities	13,329	34%	\$46.99
Social Sciences	13,055	34%	\$57.17
Sci./Tech./Med.	12,359	32%	\$82.82

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.

by **Barry Fast** (Deltabooks, 186 Cross St., City Island, NY 10464; Phone: 718-885-9563) <barry0112@aol.com>



## 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 babe 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 skewered 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 Bull**, 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 "bonkbuster" 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 life-savers, 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 exhibits his or her own brand of ADD, elucidating a theme or psychoanalyzing 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 an all time low, and general agreement in the industry that too many non-selling new books are com-

continued on page 84

## Book Are Us from page 82

There are many excellent reviews for *The Giant's House* at **Amazon.com** with a few comments about the strangeness of the plot. Most found the story touching, tender, intriguing and most agree that Elizabeth McCracken is a writer to watch with a real gift for language. She has been compared to many Southern writers such as **Carson McCullers**, **Harper Lee**, **Walker Percy**, and **Eudora Welty**. **Susan Kamil**, her editor, describes her as a fierce romantic and calls her writing "magical." She further compares her to **Alice Hoffman** and **Anne Tyler** but states that she really isn't like anybody else she has ever read before. (<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0397/>

*mccracken/*). While I am not generally drawn to the romance genre, I found her writing appealing. She writes with humor and wit about subjects that would not normally be described from that perspective. And she can certainly turn a phrase, e.g., "she had a rear end as big as an open dictionary..." (p.23).

For more information about the author and the book, check out **Bob Goodman's** "The Novelist-Librarian: An Interview with Elizabeth McCracken." Originally published in *The Beacon Street Review* (10:1, 1997), it is reproduced at **Natterbox.com** (<http://www.natterbox.com/mccracken/mccracken1.html>) where **McCracken** "reflects on her collection of family tales, her obsession with outcasts, and her ongoing love for the life of the librarian." 