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Books Are Us

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

Column Editor's Note: This column covers fictitious accounts of people in our industry — librarians, publishers, vendors, booksellers, etc. — people like us. All contributions, comments, suggestions are welcome. — AR

Thanks again to **Diane Rourke**, Director, Health Sciences Library, Baptist Health Systems of South Florida (Miami), for recommending *The Music Lesson* by **Katharine Weber** (Crown Publishers, 1999, ISBN 0-609-60317-5). This is a concise and well written novel presented as a journal of the protagonist's intense involvement with a distant Irish cousin, the story of a stolen (fictitious) Vermeer painting, *The Music Lesson*, and the "healing truths of art."

Patricia Dolan is a 41 year old Irish American, an art historian and librarian who works in the Frick Museum's Art Reference Library. She assists scholars with their research and is quite knowledgeable. When the Chief Librarian hired her he told her it was because she was ideally suited to the job: she knows "something about everything, and everything about something." She was also the number two person in the art library at Yale, which helped her get the job at Frick. She is paid only when she works, allowing her flexibility to travel for extended periods.

However, Patricia has experienced enormous tragedy in her life. She sees life as "nothing more than a series of losses, from beginning to end." She describes herself as other library staff might view her as an "efficient, rather cold, humorless person, a woman on her own, someone neither adventurous or passionate." Although she appears to lead a dull, reclusive, rather joyless life, we learn that she is indeed passionate: about art, in particular the works of Vermeer; about her 25 year old third cousin from Ireland; about her family; and about her Irish heritage.

An immediate attraction to her charming cousin leads to an intense physical reawakening, a no-holds-barred affair, and to Patricia's complicity in a major art theft. Her cousin, Mickey, uses her expertise, and her passion for Vermeer

in particular, to steal *The Music Lesson* for ransom on behalf of an IRA splinter group, the "Irish Republican Liberation Organization." Patricia uses her position at Frick to access correspondence at various museums to find out specific details about an Exhibition at The Hague. She notes that "only when I was searching the computer files for information to help Mickey did I realize that I had agreed, that I was, in fact, taking part in a conspiracy to break the law, to steal."

Patricia writes that the "whole scheme seemed like a lark, like some elaborate role-playing fantasy, a wonderful game," a game in which she was thrilled to be invited to participate, a tremendously exciting adventure. Should we interpret this to mean the dull librarian can spice up her life with big time crime and a desperate forbidden love? The story really isn't that simplistic.

There are wonderful descriptions of Vermeer's works and Patricia's reactions to *The Music Lesson* in particular. She writes about her sense "that a painting can contain knowledge, information, beautiful information." She discovers many truths about herself as she has studied this painting during the days she has been sequestered with it in the small cottage on a remote Irish Coast. She realizes that only in the presence of this painting has she felt truly alive, that all else she has experienced has been an "approximation of a life."

The story is well told, with a twist at the end. Reviewers at **Amazon.com** are primarily positive, one describes the story as a "startling, contemplative literary thriller." Reviewers quoted on the book jacket describe the novel as captivating, compelling, an ingenious, artful, evocative mystery. The book jacket also informs us that the author, **Katharine Weber**, teaches fiction writing at Yale, and spends part of every year in Ireland. She dedicated this novel to her mother: "who loves words."

her as she continued to indulge in her passion for cooking. In requesting the apartment, she told the grocer that she worked at the library, lived quietly and could promise she would cause no trouble. The grocer felt "she had a great respect for learning and books, and would be proud to be able to tell her customers when they came in to buy their coffee that she had rented her rooms to a librarian."

Rosa starting working in the Library as a clerk who shelved books, progressing to assistant junior librarian, eventually becoming the cataloger and keeper of the manuscripts. Twenty five years pass, and she laments "years of cataloging books in the library had weakened my eyesight so that I balanced a pair of severe spectacles on the bridge of my nose." The younger girls in the library mimicked her country accent, laughed at her homemade clothes, mocked her passion for food, her generous size, her overwhelming breasts, and her lack of a man — basically she became the be-spectacled, spinster stereotype.

There is an hilarious description of bureaucracy in action when a patron comes into the library to research the heritage of Sicilian cuisine — the delay she took in seeing him, the fact that it was the wrong day to look at the manuscripts, that he needed a permit from another agency to access them, etc. The patron, a chef and writer, who immediately sparked interest in Rosa (the feeling was quite mutual), called her a "petty bureaucrat... thinking I was an embittered old maid enjoying my little bit of power." Sounded like a good call, eh?

Rosa began to dress more as a business woman than a librarian (?) as the mysterious chef, known only as L'Inglese, continued to visit the library to conduct his research. They began a mutual and passionate love affair during which time Rosa teaches him the secrets of her Italian kitchen, and he teaches her the secrets of love. As the affair progresses, Rosa declares "from the dull spinster librarian I had suddenly turned into a woman, a real woman regarded by the staff with awe." And further, "we both learned our lessons: L'Inglese had become skilled in the arts of the Sicilian kitchen and I, the librarian, had learned what it is to love and be loved by a man. What a banquet of the senses it had been!"

From **harpercollins.com**, *La Cucina* is described as exuberant and touching, a novel that "celebrates family, food, passion, and the eternal rapture of romance." **Joanne Harris**, author of *Chocolat*, relates the novel to *Like Water for Chocolate* in its celebration of love, the family, the body, and food. "Like an excellent meal, it leaves the reader feeling warm, satisfied..." — stereotypical descriptions aside. 🍷

Cases of Note from page 77

In **Redneck Beer** — they never give you pictures in these things — the lettering was different and differently colored. In **Leslie's**, the bandana hangs out of the pocket. On the **Fischer** six-pack the bandana is on the handle of the carrier. And there's no "suds" on the six-pack as there is on **Leslie's** beer bottle.

But on the other hand, a reasonable juror could find the total concept to be quite similar.

So the case got sent back down for trial with instructions to the district court to write down why it dismissed the Lanham Act claim. 🍷

La Cucina: A Novel of Rapture by Lily Prior (Harper Collins, November 2000, ISBN 006019538X; paper, September 2001) is a delicious and lascivious novel about food and passion in Italy, featuring a young peasant woman from Sicily who becomes a librarian in Palermo. From an early age, Rosa Fiore found creativity in cooking, and solace, after her lover of one night was killed. She eventually leaves her familiar life and takes a job as a library assistant in the *Biblioteca Nazionale* in Palermo, resigning herself to a staid, loveless life, growing fat on her succulent creations.

In looking for a place to live in Palermo, Rosa found rooms over a grocery, which pleased