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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

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



Column Editor's Note: Every so often, it is a pleasure to come across something different — a little surprise that offers a break from a normal routine. So it is with this month's column. It's been a long time since a reviewer has enlightened us with her thoughts about a fiction title, and it has also been a while since a reviewer has exposed us to opinions about a non-fiction title that is not specifically related to library issues. **Kirstin Steele** and **Todd Rix** provide us with a pleasant alternative to the traditional *Monographic Musings* content.

While **Kirstin** is new to *Monographic Musings*, she is not new to *ATG*; she has been a guest editor for the Annual Report issue (2006). On top of that, she has authored a number of articles regarding collection development, technology, and space issues. You might remember **Todd's** work appearing in this column before; he has written thoughtfully about library Web design. Many thanks to **Kirstin** and **Todd** for their contributions.

Happy **Charleston Conference** and happy reading, everyone! — **DV**

Beckwith, Ruthie-Marie. *Seven Days at Oak Valley*. Albuquerque, NM: ABQ Press, 2009. 978-0977416165. 302 pages. \$14.95.

Reviewed by **Kirstin Steele** (Collection Management Librarian, Daniel Library, The Citadel) <kirstin.steele@citadel.edu>

As part of a small fiction genre, *Seven Days at Oak Valley* should be considered for public, academic, medical/patient, and high school library collections. The book, while editorially flawed, introduces readers to a promising young sleuth and to a world many of us have never known and rarely consider. The story has continued to haunt me since I finished reading, leading me to think **Beckwith** has a bright future as a serial novelist.

Tony Ervin is a young adult resident at **Oak Valley Training School and Hospital**, a state-run facility for people with intellectual and/or physical disabilities. His lifelong experience at **Oak Valley**, powers of observation, and job

as a mail carrier alert him to anomalies in the hospital's routine and put him in a unique position to connect them all to solve a pair of murders.

The first half of the book is largely dialogue yet offers little to help the reader distinguish among characters. Editorial irritations include an excess of clichés, spelling and homonymic errors, and characters with similar names and traits. I suppose in any story a certain amount of wading through location, situation, and character development is needed; unfortunately I wasn't able to "see" much of the characters, except **Tony**, until late in the book. As I've continued to mull over the story, the possibility has occurred to me that **Beckwith** purposely made the first part of the story flat or monochromatic so that the average reader experiences what intellectually disabled people might feel in restricted situations. For example, **Tony's** friend **Joey** speaks

with difficulty, dropping many initial consonants ("oody" and "ookie" for "bloody" and "cookie"). Because so much of the text is dialogue, translating **Joey's** speech makes reading slow and awkward. I was confused and frustrated, something I suspect **Tony** and **Joey** are much of the time. Another example is the trouble I had distinguishing between the "good guys" and the "bad guys." I found myself reading passages several times in order to grasp what had happened. I'm glad I was reading the book to review it; I fear other readers might not persist past the introductory chapters.

Happily for the reader, the pace picks up and as **Tony** begins to solve the murders, the characters around him come to life. His situations are believable and it's easier to feel who **Tony** is and at the same time observe how others see him. Solving the murders incidentally solves several other crimes; this wiping of the slate plus the empowerment **Tony** feels lies the groundwork for another adventure.

At the end of the book is a list of discussion questions, something I've not seen regularly outside of textbooks or specially marketed book discussion group editions. These questions encouraged me to continue pondering the book and to wonder about **Tony's** future, so I'm glad they were included.

Seven Days at Oak Valley is in many ways like an unassuming flower in the hospital's garden — initially unremarkable, possibly a bud, possibly a leaf, possibly even a dead seedhead. With attention, it unfolds to reveal themes, colors, and branches. I look forward to **Beckwith's** next blossom.

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index, each volume contains a list of all the biographies, all weapons, and all the maps to be found within the set, along with the pages where the information is found. Besides the maps, the text is complemented by numerous illustrations and photos.

Both **ABC-CLIO** and **Prof. Tucker** have spent a great deal of time and care on this reference. The *Global Chronology of Conflict: From the Ancient World to the Modern Middle East* offers readers a wealth of facts based on years of scholarship in a handsomely produced and visually attractive set.

It should stand proudly on the shelf next to other standard military references as well as be seen as a complement to more broadly based chronologies like **ABC-CLIO's** *Chronology of World History* (1999, 978-1576071557, available used from **Amazon**.) In addition to being a solid choice for most academic libraries, this six-volume set is equally appropriate for larger public libraries where there is interest in military history. 🐼

Bennett, Judith A. *Natives and Exotics: World War II and Environment in the Southern Pacific*. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2009. 978-0824833503. 439 pages. \$30.00.

Reviewed by **Todd Rix** (Instruction and Electronic Resources Librarian, Coker College) <trix@coker.edu>

As our library's resident World War II expert, I've read many volumes covering the various aspects of combat during those dark days of the 1930s and 1940s. From veteran's memoirs and in-depth histories of particular operations or battles to broad coverage of the entire conflict, most of these tomes cover the combat and heroics of front line troops. A few might mention the rear echelon soldiers, sailors and airmen, but most look at these troops with derision (with nicknames unprintable here). A few cover these troops well, like **David Colley's** *The Road to Victory: the Untold Story of World War II's Red Ball Express*.

Judith A. Bennett's *Natives and Exotics: World War II and Environment in the Southern Pacific* is unique because it is one of the first books to cover the great environmental impact of

having over two million men and women — Japanese, Dutch, Australian, British, and American — invade the hostile environment of the Southern Pacific. Although tales of combat are mentioned, most of the book deals with the rear areas and the troops that provided medical care, supplies, and food to the frontline soldiers and **Marines**.

Most casual readers of World War II history know that the Pacific theater was a difficult place to wage war, but most probably didn't know how difficult it was just to survive on some of those islands. Incessant rain, disease, poor sanitation practices, and lack of food/diversity of diet were some of the major environmental factors affecting both sides — and all of that happened before combat even started!

Bennett tells of the infamous fighting on

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the Kokoda Trail, between Australian (and later U.S.) and Japanese troops. The Japanese military was still unstoppable at this point - the Philippines, Wake Island, Guam, and Singapore had fallen and now Australia itself was threatened. The Japanese military decided to land on the northern coast of New Guinea, near the villages of Buna and Gona. Their objective was to take Port Moresby, on the southern coast, via a "road" through the treacherous Owen Stanley Mountains. Their beachhead was located near malarial swamps, so by the time the Japanese troops met the Australian forces, they were in the throes of malaria. Moving their bivouacs out of these swamps, and using better anti-malarial practices might have had a huge impact on the Japanese troops' performance. The Aussies were using better anti-malarial practices (basically getting rid of mosquito larvae, defoliating, issuing insect repellent, and so on) and thus were able to fight at almost full strength. However, when American forces joined the Australians late in

the campaign, they disregarded the successful anti-malarial practices (more than likely, supplies were low of bug repellent and defoliants) and suffered greatly from a large outbreak of malaria, impairing their performance. Not surprisingly, U.S. forces made a habit of disregarding local or Allied expertise in fighting in the environs of the South Pacific.

With every soldier or Marine, food was of utmost importance — even if only for keeping morale high. Shipping the food across the great expanse of the Pacific Ocean was costly. Refrigeration was in high demand for blood plasma, so food supplies were often canned or dehydrated. Both combatants turned to local gardens and native farming to help give their troops some variety in the mess halls and in the field. For the Japanese on isolated outposts late in the war (after their naval link to the home islands was cut), this local gardening was all they had. **Bennett** does an excellent job discussing the different types of crops and methods used, as well as incorporating natives and their practices into farming.

Fishing proved to be an important food source for both sides, and they would even use

explosives (when they could be spared) to blast the fish to the surface. Australian forces set up fish processing stations using local Melanesian labor and allowing the islanders to design their own workstations. Americans took a different tack. They supplied their support troops with fishing gear designed to work in the cold waters of New England. The tackle was too heavy to use near the coral reefs that permeate the South Pacific, so few fish were caught without modifying the gear. Once fish was caught and ready to be processed, American forces set up elaborate processing stations for local labor to utilize, with tables and benches. The islanders had been fishing for many generations using their own methods. They preferred to clean and process fish sitting on the ground, cross-legged. Needless to say, satisfactory changes were made and the islanders began processing record amounts of fish for hospitals and outposts.

Bennett includes pictures, charts, maps, and ample graphs. The book is heavily footnoted and has a substantial bibliography. Not exactly for the casual history reader, the book is a good read and breaks new ground in an important field of study. 🌿

Booklover — Age of Iron

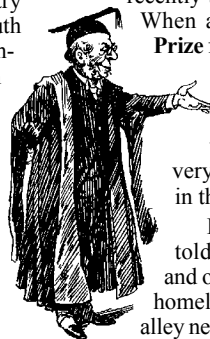
Column Editor: **Donna Jacobs** (Research Specialist, Transgenic Mouse Core Facility, MUSC, Charleston, SC 29425)
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GOOOOAAAALLLL! I heard this triumphant cry many times earlier this summer. Working at the **Medical University of South Carolina** affords me a continued rich diversity from other cultures. One of which is sports — mainly football or what we Americans call soccer. Many of the students, post-doctoral fellows, residents, and professors hail from parts of the world where watching this sport comes close to the importance of observing religious rituals.

Football has its origins in Britain during the 19th century. The ball floated across the pond in the mid 19th century with Americans and Canadians taking up the sport. In the early 20th century gridiron football or "American Football" was becoming popular in the states and there needed to be a term to distinguish the two games from each other. The term "socca" had arisen as an abbreviation for "association football" and was used to differentiate this type of football from "rugby football." In the U.S. there was a further evolution of this slang version to "soccer" which we use today. Nevertheless, the terminology debate continues, and there is actually a Website with maps to show country by country preferences for the terminology usage. In South Africa this summer the **FIFA World Cup** competition unfolded in venues from Cape Town to Johannesburg via Durban, Polokwane with several cities in between, and once again the world's attention was on football/soccer and South Africa. Competitions like **World Cup** soccer and the Olympics bring together the world in ways that few other events do. They heighten our awareness of our need for respect and understanding, and for a few days we may even forget that war and inequities are the norm for much of the world.

South Africa is no stranger to unfortunate inequitable relationships. The legal system of separateness known as apartheid was enforced in South Africa from 1948 to 1994. Under this system the "white people" ruled and curtailed the rights of non-white inhabitants, which represented the majority. Racial segregation began during colonial times, but it was introduced as an official policy during the 1948 election. This policy not only classified individuals and restricted their movements, but also segregated residential areas, education, social services, and medical care. It took until 1990 for negotiations to begin for the end of apartheid, and in 1994 **Nelson Mandela** of the **African National Congress** won the multi-racial democratic election.

In the novel, *Age of Iron*, written by **J. M. Coetzee**, the relationship between a dying woman, **Elizabeth Curren**, and a homeless man, **Mr. Vercueil**, provide the basis to explore the influence of apartheid on South Africa. **J. M. Coetzee** is of Afrikaner (the Dutch word for Dutch settlers in South Africa) descent born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1940, but has recently become a citizen of Australia.



When awarding **Coetzee** the **Nobel Prize** for literature in 2003, the Swedish academy noted that he "in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider." This statement very accurately reflects the story in the *Age of Iron*.

Elizabeth Curren has been told that she is dying of cancer, and on this very day she discovers a homeless man living at the end of the alley next to her home. She recognizes

him from the street. Such power in the beginning imagery of this novel. Apartheid has existed all around her, and only now in the form of a homeless man does she allow herself to become aware and "recognize" it. The conflict/awareness unfolds in a letter to her daughter who now resides in America. She muses: "To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me."

This reader was drawn like fountain pen ink to paper into **Curren's** philosophical questions, her struggle with death, difficulties with the language to use in writing to her daughter, a developing relationship with **Mr. Vercueil**, and the increasing awareness of the violence in her society. Ultimately, **Mrs. Curren** leaves her whitewashed middle class environment to help her housekeeper whose son has been murdered. She witnesses firsthand life in Site C of the Guguletu township and recounts to **Vercueil**: "Now that child is buried and we walk upon him. Let me tell you, when you walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have gathering feelings of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig iron floating under the skin of the earth. The age of iron waiting to return."

As **Mrs. Curren** comes to grip with her fate, the death of apartheid's grip on South Africa, and the future of the black youth (the age of iron), she ends the agonizingly detailed letter of her dying life with little hope: "I am going to release you soon from this rope of words. There is no need to be sorry for me. But spare a thought for this man left behind who cannot swim, does not yet know how to fly." 🌿