

## REVIEW

### *The Romance of Libraries*

Edited by Madeleine Lefebvre (Scarecrow, 2006, US\$25). Reviewed by Peter Mitham

During early episodes of the long-running British sitcom *Last of the Summer Wine*, the librarians in the small Yorkshire town where the series is set make many disingenuous attempts to conceal their snogging behind the desk.

Madeleine Lefebvre makes no such effort to conceal the amorous intentions of the contributors to this volume of stories about romances that blossomed in, around or as a result of a library. Then again, there's not much need, for many of the stories are downright ordinary, more poignant than pornographic and hardly—despite Lefebvre's assertion at the end of the book—a convincing demonstration that passionate hearts beat amid the shelving. The tales are heart-warming, but if Lefebvre believes they counter a perception of librarians as dowdy or dull, the narratives' attention to the details of "dates, times and distances... recent or distant" undercuts their success.

This is not to say the book doesn't reveal the personal excitement that surrounds these library-born romances; it's just that they're ordinary. What sets them apart, if the observation in the foreword by Michael Gorman is accepted, is that a library, "like the moon, makes men and women especially open to the urgings of the heart."

But what Lefebvre does offer is 16 chapters of narratives that fulfill her commitment to produce a collection with the flavour of oral storytelling. The challenge she faces is drawing out the greater significance of these tales, weaving them into something more than a collection of first-person versions on a par with the relationship profiles in the Weddings and Celebrations section of the *New York Times*.

Lefebvre, chief librarian at St. Mary's University in Halifax, largely limits her analysis to grouping the narratives by place of origin ("The Romance of Reference," "The Romance of Academic Libraries," "The Romance of Library Conferences") and presenting them as the individual story of each contributor ("Maija's Story," "Darren's Story," "Donna's Story"). Paradoxically, this formula lends a clinical tone to a volume that should be anything but.

The final chapter does little to punctuate the stream of narrative. Instead, it urges the importance of the physical library as a place for romance, argues that this very thing will help protect the library against the digitization projects and other initiatives

that threaten its existence, and notes, "When two library lovers unite and produce a new generation of library lovers, should we really be worried about the demise of the library?"

Indeed, while some of the narratives do offer demure references to exchanges of passionate kisses (little more) among the stacks and flings at conferences, the majority of these romances appear to lead to marriage, children and (we're told) fulfilled lives. Lefebvre even suggests that those who would do likewise haunt the stacks and study carrels on Thursday nights, when most library romances seem to bloom.

And where are Lefebvre's contributors from? CBC broadcaster Bill Richardson helped recruit submissions by mentioning the project on his afternoon radio show, *Richardson's Roundup*. Other tales came in from around the world through a Web site Lefebvre established for the project.

Books, like romance, should take us beyond ourselves. Although one wishes that Lefebvre had spent more time putting her narratives in context or developing a more lively graphic presentation, this book will surely interest those who need reassurance that love can happen, that more than books are being checked out in libraries.

## REVIEW

### *Randolph Caldecott: His Books and Illustrations for Young Readers*

By Robert Desmarais

(University of Alberta Libraries, 2006, \$24.95)

Reviewed by Charles van Sandwyk

*Randolph Caldecott: His Books and Illustrations for Young Readers* reads more like a little art book than a catalogue. The book, by Robert Desmarais, was issued in conjunction with an exhibition of the artist's work at the University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Special Collections Library last summer. Desmarais is a recent graduate of the University of Toronto's information studies program who joined the staff at the University of Alberta in early 2006, working in special collections. This catalogue, and the show it accompanied, was developed from his personal collection of Caldecott books.

I hardly ever see trade books put together this way anymore, and certainly not in Canada. One of the virtues of this edition is the genuine simplicity of design. Contemporary trends generally beckon those who attempt book design to follow in a stylish or updated fashion, which this little volume does not