

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

do. Its approach is fresh and tasteful, with colour plates so clearly reproduced, you can even see the laid paper pattern on which the originals were printed.

I've always had a distant respect for Randolph Caldecott (1846–86), who, along with Walter Crane, worked to fame with Victorian colour woodblock printer Edmund Evans. Caldecott's *A Frog He Would a-Wooing Go* had a tremendous influence on one of my favourite illustrators, Beatrix Potter. But it is his lively, humorous line work that influenced my favourite illustrator in the whole wide world, Arthur Rackham. I'm indebted to Caldecott for that!

Desmarais writes enthusiastically about the Caldecott approach. In an age when stiff, museum-like drawings were the standard, he pioneered a natural, entertaining style—often quite ribald—that appealed directly to children.

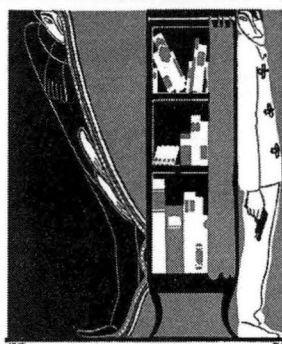
Most of the illustrations in the book are taken from Desmarais' own Caldecott book collection, and it is nice to see so many of the gold-blocked buckram covers reproduced. My only wish would have been to see a few reproductions of original drawings for that extra touch of intimacy. I understand, however, that the book had to follow the exhibition content.

I spoke briefly with Desmarais when he recently visited Vancouver and, like his book, he seemed immensely pleasant and unassuming. It is always reassuring when someone's heart is evident in their work.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Joan Bailey, AB ♦ Douglas Barnes, PQ
 Maurie Barrett, ON
 J. C. Byers, ON ♦ Marian Craig, BC
 Agnes Cserhati, ON
 Jim Curran, BC ♦ Gail Edward, BC
 Neil Elliott, CA
 Liz Grieve, AB ♦ Mark Hall, TX
 Frances Hunter, BC
 Elsie Jang, BC ♦ Holly Keller, BC
 Sharon Lawrence, BC
 Ingrid Luters, BC ♦ Gillian Mothersill, ON
 Patty Montpellier, BC
 Michelle Mayne, BC ♦ Keith Niall, ON
 Shane Plante, BC
 Meredith Pue, BC ♦ Dai-Juin Rapanos, BC
 Jeremiah Saunders, BC
 Five Seventeen, BC ♦ Simon Fraser University, BC
 Claudia Skelton, WA
 Larry Thompson, ON

EX LIBRIS



**EX LIBRIS.
 DR. SOMOGYI ÖDÖN**

THIS IS A bookplate that immediately catches the eye, obvious in style yet obscurely mysterious in thematic representation. Its subject is surely a rarity to the art form known as ex libris. *Murder!* it screams. *Revenge in waiting!* The furtive creeping of a shadowy figure, and out from the darkness a scarfed face is revealed. From the cold street he has come with eager hands. Twice before he has been here; as guest some months back, when he had first laid eyes on the bookcase and its curtained contents, and then, a night two weeks ago, when reason had been subdued by desire. He had not intended to take it that night, but a pounding heart is a great manipulator of the will. Such a small, insignificant volume, after all, would surely not be missed.

Or so he thought, for envy has left this unsuspecting soul blind to the fury of a man who has already once been taken for part of his worth. The second figure, adorned in opposing white, stands waiting, solution in hand. His back pressed to the fruits of his labour, he waits. Rarest of the rare, these volumes have cost him much, yet without that one now gone, none of them mean anything to him. Each day since, he has been waiting, longing for that most malicious villain to return. Silent and breathing, he waits. Steps upon the floor—now is the time. Steps coming closer—now it will be done!

So goes the fate of the book thief. Created by an unknown artist in 1913 for Dr. Somogyi Ödön of Hungary, this bookplate is a wonderful example of the art nouveau movement in Europe. This pictorial bookplate is printed in pistol black and a shade of green suggesting the intruder's decadent passion.

Adam Cowling