# **Biography Resource Center**

# **Elizabeth McCracken**

1966-

**Source:** Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2002. Entry Updated : 07/31/2002

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## "Sidelights"

Elizabeth McCracken is a novelist and short story writer whose work has been cited for deep and endearing characters and plots built on the vicissitudes of loving human relationships. Writing for *World and I*, Jill E. Rendelstei claimed that McCracken "is a storyteller to the core, always giving us complete access to her realm of fantasy. But it is the vivid life within McCracken, her intensity as a person, and her love that show through in her writing, making it so distinctive and alive." *New York* reviewer Daniel Mendelsohn observed in McCracken's writing "a unity of potent elements: beauty of expression; a rather shy, almost offhand way with painful emotional insights; a truly wacky sense of humor; and a kind of disarming, old-fashioned charm." In the *New York Times Book Review*, Francine Prose praised McCracken for her "sense of play, a nervy willingness to imagine a wide range of characters and situations, estimable powers of empathy and the enjoyment of watching a talented writer beginning to come into her own."

McCracken's first published book was a collection of nine short stories titled *Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry*, which was praised by reviewers both for its eccentric characters and its elegant writing style. In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Francine Prose wrote, "McCracken's attention to detail and to the truths of the human heart, her ear for the rhythms of speech, her wry, straightforward and commonsensical literary voice ground even the most fantastic tales in solid . . . reality."

Uniting many of the stories in *Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry* are the sometimes bizarre efforts characters make to insinuate themselves into the fabric of life. The opening tale of the collection, for example, tells the story of a young woman who turns her body into a "love letter" for Tiny, her husband who works as a tattoo artist. The collection's title story features "Aunt Helen," who arrives at the home of a Washington family for an extended visit--until it is discovered that she is an imposter who spends her time visiting one "relative" after another. In "What We Know about the Lost Aztec Children," an armless woman who lives in a suburb of Cleveland brings home an old friend from the time she spent as a sideshow performer in the circus. And in "Mercedes Kane," an lowa woman gives a home to an eccentric woman in the belief that the woman is a famous 1940s child prodigy. Other stories feature a man who has finished serving a prison term for murdering his wife; two children whose father takes in drunks and deadbeats; and two men who become friends because each has a relative in a treatment facility for head-injury patients. Taken together, the stories, with their oddball characters and unconventional relationships, form a kind of lesson in the meaning of family, love, and connectedness,

according to Prose in the Los Angeles Times Book Review.

McCracken followed *Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry* with her first novel, *The Giant's House*. Written in a low-key style and lightened with touches of humor, *The Giant's House* is a modern fairy tale featuring Peggy Cort, an old-maid librarian living in a Cape Cod town in the 1950s. Peggy's world is a lonely, emotionless one, punctuated only by her dry wit ("In reference works, as in sin, omission is as bad as willful misbehavior") until the day she meets eleven-year-old James Sweatt, a gentle, six-foot two-inch schoolboy afflicted with gigantism. James, too, is lonely, and soon he and Peggy fill some of the emotional voids in one another's lives. His loving but eccentric family adopts Peggy, giving her contact with a life larger and more interesting than her own. James grows to more than eight feet tall and weighs over four hundred pounds, but in time his health declines and he finally succumbs to the disorder. Events take a surprising turn when Peggy becomes pregnant by James's long-lost father, and after she gives birth, she sees the child as the offspring of James himself.

Writing in the *New Yorker* about *The Giant's House*, Daphne Merkin asked rhetorically, "Who would have thought it--that you could take one overaged virgin and one oversized boy and end up with a story that captures the feel of passion, its consuming hold?" Merkin answered her own question by pointing out the "incantatory power" that makes this unlikely romance between unlikely characters seem real and thoroughly grounded both in their characters and in the details of their lives. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer commented, "McCracken shows herself a wise and compassionate reader of the human heart." Likewise, *BookPage* correspondent Laura Reynolds Adler concluded: "In the hands of McCracken, this unusual, unconsummated love story about a librarian who finds the courage to love is not scandalous, but sweet and inevitable."

Spanning the better part of a century, *Niagara Falls All Over Again* is the fictitious chronicle of a two-man comedy team, narrated by the straight man, Mose Sharp. Through recollections of episodes in his life, from a childhood in Des Moines, Iowa, to an adulthood making movies and money in Hollywood, Sharp reveals the central relationship that informs his life, his working partnership with fat funnyman Rocky Carter. Like its predecessor, the novel garnered good reviews. In her *BookPage* commentary, Jenn McKee called it "flat-out fun--a heartbreaking and exhilarating ride." Mendelsohn felt that the book "offers many of the pleasures familiar from [McCracken's] earlier work," adding: "McCracken's act is one that every lover of serious fiction should follow." In her *New York Times Book Review* piece, Francine Prose commended the novel for its ambitious scope. The critic observed: "McCracken manages to consider an impressive number of substantial ideas, to ruminate on subjects like the comic impulse, the eroticism of partnership, the congruences and differences between the theatrical and the authentic, the compulsions that might lead someone to become an entertainer, the payoffs and drawbacks of sacrificing one's personal life for art." *New York Times* columnist Janet Maslin praised the work for its "peculiarly sweet, gravity-defying bounce," suggesting further that "there is a tender quality to Ms. McCracken's descriptive powers." Maslin concluded of *Niagara Falls All Over Again:* "The best of [the] book brims with fondness for these game, playful characters and the lost wonders of the vaudeville world."

# PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born 1966; daughter of Samuel (a writer, editor, and assistant to the provost at Boston University) and Natalie (a writer and editor at Boston University; maiden name, Jacobson) McCracken. Education: Boston University, B.A. (magna cum laude, with distinction), 1988, M.A. (English literature), 1988; University of Iowa, M.F.A. (fiction writing), 1990; Drexel University, M.S. (library and information science), 1993. Addresses: Home: 13 Charnwood Rd., Somerville, MA 02144. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Dial Press, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.

# AWARDS

James Michener grant, 1990; fellowship, Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, 1990-91, 1992-93; notable story, *Best American Short Stories*, 1991, 1992; notable essay, *Best American Essays*, 1994; National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, 1992; MacDowell Colony fellowship, 1993; notable book of the year, American Library Association, 1996; Somerville Arts Council fellowship, 1994; National Book Award finalist, 1996; included in "The Best of Young American Novelists," *Granta*, 1996; Salon Award, 1996, for *The Giant's House;* Discovery Award, Barnes & Noble, 1997; Harold Vursell Award, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1997; Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, 1998; L. L. Winship/PEN New England Award, 2002, for *Niagara Falls All Over Again.* 

# CAREER

Author. Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA, adjunct assistant lecturer for the University and Evening College, 1991-92; Somerville Public Library, Somerville, MA, circulation desk chief, 1993-95, first assistant in the audiovisual department, 1997; Somerville Arts Council, Somerville, MA, community writing instructor, 1995, 1996; Iowa Summer Writing Festival, writing instructor, 1997-98; Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center Summer Program, Provincetown, MA, instructor, 1996-98; Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, writer-in-residence, 1998. Writing committee, Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, member, 1993--; advisory committee, The Revolving Museum, member, 1996--.

# WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry (short stories), Turtle Bay/Random House (New York, NY), 1993.
- The Giant's House (novel), Dial Press (New York, NY), 1996.
- Niagara Falls All Over Again (novel), Dial Press (New York, NY), 2001.

Contributor of essays and short stories to anthologies, including *Wild Women: Contemporary Short Stories by Women Celebrating Women,* edited by Sue Thomas, introduction by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Overlook Press, 1994; A Few Thousand Words about Love, by Mickey Pearlman, St. Martin's Press, 1998; Family; The Female Body; and Sommer Lesebuch. Contributor to periodicals, including Elle, Epoch, Esquire, Granta, Michigan Quarterly Review, New York Times Magazine, Provincetown Arts, and Threepenny Review.

# FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

# PERIODICALS

- Booklist, May 1, 1993, p. 1571; March 15, 1994, p. 1350; May 15, 1996, Nancy Pearl, review of The Giant's House, p. 1569; July, 2001, Mary Ellen Quinn, review of Niagara Falls All Over Again, p. 1982.
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# OTHER

- BookPage, http://www.bookpage.com/ (September 30, 2001), Laura Reynolds Adler, "Welcome to Elizabeth McCracken's Inventive World"; Jenn McKee, review of Niagara Falls All Over Again.
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# About the Author

Elizabeth McCracken

Elizabeth McCracken is a novelist and short story writer whose work has been praised for both its endearing characters and its storylines about loving relationships. Her first book—*Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry (1993)*—a collection of stories, showcased her sense of humor and talent for creating unforgettable characters. "I believe that most people are extraordinary," says McCracken. "To me that is one of the pleasures of fiction; getting to know characters in a complex way—in a way that you sometimes don't get to know mere acquaintances."

*The Giant's House: A Romance,* her second book and first novel, is a tender and quirky novel about a lonely librarian's love for the world's tallest boy. "I think our lives are constantly transformed by love," says McCracken. "Not just what we think of as romantic love—love with the person you sleep with. But that our daily lives are with shaped by the people we love: our friends, our families."

McCracken's next novel, *Niagara Falls All Over Again*, chronicles a two-man comedy team and their flawed, passionate friendship over thirty years, weaving a powerful story of family and love, grief and loss. "I've always been curious about deep love that is not romantic, says McCracken. "I think that it's so interesting because movies and books always have this giant emphasis on romantic sexual love, of which I am strongly in favor, but there are so many other varieties of love."

Elizabeth McCracken was born in 1966 and grew up in Boston. She attended Boston University, received a Master's degree in Fine Arts from the University of Iowa and earned a Master's degree of Library Science at Drexel University. In addition to her books, she has been published in the *New York Times Magazine* and *Esquire*.

After working in libraries from the age of 15, Elizabeth McCracken now writes full-time and resides in Somerville, Massachusetts. She is working on her fourth book.



# All three of Elizabeth McCracken's books explore human relationships and the nature of love.

*Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry: Stories* has been praised by reviewers for its eccentric characters and its elegant writing style. In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Francine Prose wrote, "McCracken's attention to detail and to the truths of the human heart, her ear for the rhythms of speech, her wry, straightforward and commonsensical literary voice ground even the most fantastic tales in solid ... reality."

Her first novel, *The Giant's House: A Romance*, has been called a modern fairy tale. The year is 1950, and in a small town on Cape Cod, twenty-six-year-old librarian Peggy Cort feels like love and life have stood her up. Until the day James Carlson Sweatt—the "over-tall" eleven-year-old boy who's the talk of the town—walks into her library and changes her life forever. Two misfits whose lonely paths cross at the reference desk, Peggy and James are odd candidates for friendship, but nevertheless they find their lives entwined in ways that neither one could have predicted. And as James grows—six foot five at age twelve, then seven feet, then eight—so does Peggy's heart and their most singular romance. According to *BookPage* reviewer Laura Reynolds Adler, "In the hands of McCracken, this unusual, unconsummated love story about a librarian who finds the courage to love is not scandalous, but sweet and inevitable."

Spanning the waning years of vaudeville and the golden age of Hollywood, *Niagara Falls All Over Again* chronicles a flawed, passionate friendship over thirty years, weaving a powerful story of family and love, grief and loss. In it, McCracken introduces her most singular and affecting hero: Mose Sharp — son, brother, husband, father, friend ... and straight man to the fat guy in baggy pants who utterly transforms his life. A reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* said, "McCracken manages to consider an impressive number of substantial ideas, to ruminate on subjects like the comic impulse, the eroticism of partnership, the congruencies and differences between the theatrical and the authentic, the payoffs and drawbacks of succing one's personal life for art."



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Discussion Questions Elizabeth McCracken	The Giant's House: A Romance
<ol> <li>Both of McCracken's novels, and most of her short stories, are told in a first person narrative. What freedom-or limits-does this give the author?</li> </ol>	1. Although there is a 14-year age difference between Peggy and James, her love for him does not shock us. How does this age difference affect their feelings for each other and the reader's feelings about them?
<ol> <li>McCracken uses a conversational tone of voice in much of her writing. How do you think this affects the quality of the language she uses?</li> </ol>	<b>2.</b> Peggy is a librarian, and much of her self-image is based on her profession. What do you think about librarians and libraries after reading this book? Do you think the library world has changed since
<b>3.</b> Because there is so much emphasis on characters in McCracken's stories and books, do you think that the plots are less important to the reader?	Peggy's tenure as a small-town intrarian in the 1920s: 3. Although Peggy opens her narrative with "I do not love mankind," this novel is all about love. What is McCracken telling us about love in its many forms: romantic, parental and otherwise?
4. The theme of loss of a loved one-to death, desertion, or betrayal- is a constant theme in McCracken's fiction. Do vou think this makes	Niagara Falls All Over Again
her work sad? Realistic?	1. McCracken is a lifelong devotee of old movies, especially Laurel and
5. Love and relationships between mismatched couples are at the core	Hardy. What do you think is the timeless appeal of slapstick comedy?
of McCracken's work. Why do you think McCracken writes about such couples?	2. Mike Sharp, the narrator, feels that he has suffered an unfair amount of loss in his life. Why do you think he feels this way, and
Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry: Stories	now does nis life contrast to that of the outer cliaf acters, espectany Rocky?
1. Many of the characters in these stories are almost sideshow characters or at least are atypical physically. Why do you think the	<b>3.</b> How do Rocky and Mose relate to the women in their lives? What roles do women play in the novel?
author uses such unusual people?	4. The theatrical career of Carter and Sharp mirrors the lives of other
2. The families in these stories are far from traditional. What do you think McCracken is saying about familial love and "family values"?	comedy teams like Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello. What similarities and what differences do you see?

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## Elizabeth McCracken

Born in 1966, in Boston, and raised there and in Portland, Oregon, with annual visits to Des Moines. Grandma Ruth Jacobson was a lawyer and tireless civic activist; who not only practiced law, but ran a clothing shop. Ruth had 10 siblings, all who earned professional degrees. McCracken's grandmother died just three months after "here's your Hat, what's your Hurry" was published, but not before she'd introduce McCracken around town as "the youngest person ever to publish a novel." Her grandfather was Des Moines's first ordained rabbi, but was also a cryptologist for the government and cracked the Vatican's Latin-based codes in World War II.

Her parents were very physically and temperamentally unmatched. Her father is quiet and reserved with an encyclopedic memory and her mother is social and outgoing. Her father, Samuel McCracken is a Chaucer scholar who has for three decades been the assistant to the Provost at Boston University and is over six feet tall. Her mother, Natalie is 4' 11" and walks with two canes, the result of a birth injury. She holds a Ph. D. in Theater and is the head of publications at BU. They are also in a mixed-religion marriage, Presbyteralin and Jewish.

It was her brother's interest in old comic strips, radio shows and movies that awakened McCracken's obsession with the past. They watched hundreds of films with every comedy team there was is still a member of an international Laurel and Hardy society called Sons of the Desert.

She describes her childhood as being very uneventful and that is why she struggles with action and plot.

Took a part-time job at a Newton, Mass. Library when she was 15 and stayed there through college. Decided that being a librarian would be her "money job" and earned library science degree in 1993, while writing fiction at the same time. She acknowledges two of her teachers, Sue Miller and Allan Gurganus. Was a librarian for a decade, but never fit the stereotype of stern or sedate guardian of bibliophilic decorum. She gave up her job to write The Giant's House, but went back to work two days a week for a while after that book was published. Now she sometimes misses her former career. "As a writer, you're essentially alone, and you're necessarily the most important person in the world. That's not psychologically healthy. If you've got a family to balance it out, maybe you're not so self-absorbed. For a librarian, though, there's'fuller spectrum. People come in and say: "I need this, or I need that"...I love the sheer randomness of it." Has been an instructor at Provincetown, MA, and writer in residence at Western Michigan University (1998); writes essays and magazine articles.

On her writing: "I really need everything slapped out of my hands (to give to her editor). I'm an endless reviser. All her books have been first person narratives: "I end up thinking like the character I'm writing about", she says, confessing an instinctive empathy for

people on the fringes. "The moment that someone reveals some strange quirk, I begin to like them a lot." Her interest in the past also determines the structure of her fiction because "the only way I know how to give my books resonance is by going to the backstory." She says she "loves research; it's the librarian in me", even going so far as to draft character biographies.

Awards: National Book Award Finalist for Giant's House in 1996, Guggenheim foundation fellowship in 1998, etc.

Writes books about idiosyncratic characters who find themselves in unlikely situations. Eccentric characters joined in unconventional relationships. In general, they're aware of their place on the outposts of society, accustomed to loss, searching for connection and love.

Theme of loss, moving beyond loss: Treasures her retrospective moments with James.

The notion of love: "I've always been curious about deep love that is not romantic. I think that it's so interesting because movies and books always have this giant emphasis on romantic sexual love, of which I am strongly in favor, but there are so many other varieties of love."

Does she hold her love close to her heart because of the scandal that will ensue, or because it may go unreciprocated?

Love can appear unexpectedly; it involves leaps into the unknown and offers no guarantees of happy endings.

A profound meditation on the quietest sort of love, with dignity of its characters, all of whom are as fully alive, as fully hopeful, as they are damaged.

Loneliness: Peggy is drawn to this gently, lonely young man, both because he fills a void in her own life and because she is in effect adopted by James's loving but eccentric family.

Death in her work: Stems from writing about long stretches of time; eventually someone has to die. "I don't know, for some reason it's the way I attack plot again and again. The story can't end until somebody leaves."

**Peggy**: narrates with an alternately acerbic and tender voice. Filled with her humor, sometimes with her astringent comments. Self-deprecating, intelligent, always honest. Lonely, bitter Peggy, ostensible part caretaker, part mother figure, is in reality the one in need. Her world is lonely, emotionless, punctuated only by her dry wit.

Unapologetically self-absorbed but in every way likeable. Brief, poignant flashbacks to Juna how with the self-absorbed and the self of the second action of her clumsy college years, coax you to fall in love with her as you recognize the fragility of her carefully constructed self-assurance.

James: Charismatic, has plenty of friends and interests and saves Peggy from her misanthropic self. A sad, gentle boy who grows up to be a sad, gentle man, the fact of his tallness is eclipsed only by the greatness of his heart.

Character development: Booklist says that only Peggy is the novel's only fully developed character. James never seems quite real: and the supporting characters (mother, uncle, aunt) are so one-dimensional that their purpose in the novel seems questionable. Kirkus calls the book somewhat "muted by the excessively restrained tone of the narrator". Peggy is overly protective of her memories and vague as to the parameters of her love, thereby excluding the reader from a deeper engagement. One night stand with father, claims the child is James' is "a promising idea, ultimately disappointing in execution: McCracken's first novel lacks the one aspect vital to its success—concern for the lovers."

Intricate, seamless plotting Ending: satisfying or rushed? Writing style: Mesmerized by this low-key narrative Infused with humor, sometimes through Peggy's comments, but also with minor characters who add vivid color and their own distinctive voices.

Captures the era: novel spans 8 years, beginning with 1950. Fold down seat of Nash Rambler, New York's Automat, snappy patter of journalists

A Teller's Tale; JILL E. RENDELSTEIN The World & I 04-01-1999

Elizabeth McCracken reveals her writing inspirations.

I'd like to tell you bizarre tales of circus freaks, murderers, and misanthropes that end just as abruptly as they start; yet alas, dear reader, I cannot. These exceptional plots belong to **Elizabeth McCracken**, National Book Award finalist, one of twenty best young writers named in Granta magazine, and an author "as original as they come," according to the New Yorker. But I can promise you'll hear a fascinating story of eccentricities, love, comedy, family, and loyalty about our author, **McCracken**--although her own tales will do the talking.

My first encounter with **McCracken** wasn't on a dark and stormy night; it was a light and airy twilight, with purple ribbons falling across the sky. It was during her fiction reading at the American University in Washington, D.C. **McCracken** held the audience with an intense reading of her not yet published work, Some Days You're Not Dancing, and Some Days Niagara Falls All Over Again. A magician's cape formed by shiny black hair guarded her shoulders, and the audience seemed mesmerized by the magic of her voice as well as her words.

Wrapping our coats around us, **McCracken** and I walked to a sun-warmed bench on the campus. The wind blew cool, so at times **McCracken**'s hair flew around her like a raven. And from her shimmering red lips came stories equally striking. It began when **McCracken** explained how mediocre writers become great. And I listened carefully to the epiphany as she folded her legs onto the bench. "It was the first time I understood that my earliest works had lacked plot and characters were in danger of being overtaken by their eccentricities," she said while adjusting her skirt around tucked legs. Immediately, I remembered her short story character whose body had become riddled with tattoos ("It's Bad Luck to Die"). But that wasn't **McCracken**'s first thought. "What writing teachers would most often say was 'this is glib and arch,' and I'd always say, Ah yes, those two guys down at the garage, Glib and Arch," she laughed.

Reading the often somber details of her stories, one might imagine **McCracken** to be an extension of her work, dark and serious; but like her writing, she holds delightful surprises. Moving on happily, she said, "I recently looked at some of my older stories and was shocked at how bad they really were. Some sentences would be cleverly orchestrated, but whole paragraphs were created just for the clever lines." **McCracken** explained that the characters were not well developed, nor had she learned how to make them the engine of the story. It was very clear that the author was in charge, and, then, something clicked.

"I believe firmly that writers do not get better by slow evolution," she stated confidently. "They get better by spontaneous generation. Suddenly you figure something out." She told me about an Iowa University workshop student who had written both one of the worst and best stories of the class. "After reading the first submission, I never would have known that she was capable of writing that well." **McCracken** recognized that she had had a similar experience. After taking many creative writing classes, she was good from sentence to sentence, but something was still missing. She stubbornly searched for that flicker of understanding within herself, and suddenly a switch just turned on. **McCracken** realized, "In some ways I am not in charge here; this character's in charge."

Although it's no secret that **McCracken** derived many of these characters from Guinness Book of World Records pictures, I wondered how she could have gotten into their psyches without real models. Instantly, she launched into another story. "I have a theory. Ann Patchett [author of Taft] is my best writing friend, yet we have completely different processes. Ann is very plot based and knows the whole story before she starts writing. For me, character comes first. Ann had a childhood full of incidents, including a serious car accident, her parents' divorce, and a move to Nashville from Los Angeles. Now I had an interesting childhood, but I also had lots of fascinating relatives. I think Ann learned at an early age that life is action, but I perceived it as character. And that's why, for us, these things are most important." Looking pleased with the discovery, she continued.

Because of an uneventful childhood, **McCracken** says, she struggles with action and plot. She has seen her life as consistently fascinating. "My grandmother, who practiced law and ran a clothing shop, was crazy and wonderful. She had eleven brothers and sisters, each of them more bizarre than the last. When she died at 90, I was still very close to her. 'Secretary of State' [a short story about an outlandish family] was inspired by my family. My grandfather **McCracken** was a classicist and a theologian. He was a cryptologist for the government in World War II and cracked the Vatican's Latin-based codes. I also had a cousin who was a dance teacher and really one of the most unusual people who ever existed--in a true, deep way. She was not quirky, she was not colorful, she was eccentric. But she was also a wonderful, strong willed, and extremely smart woman. She died within four hours of teaching her last lesson. In fact," **McCracken** thought deeply as if she were creating the story from scratch, "I think she taught that class from bed. Yes, she did, so she shouted to her students, 'tap loudly!' " Grinning at the memory, **McCracken** gave me a moment to digest the tale.

"When I was in graduate school, a friend of mine, who drove me home for the weekend, met my grandmother and cousin. After returning to school, she said, 'If you think **Elizabeth** doesn't write realistic fiction, meet her family--it's very real.' I giggled at this remark, finding myself captivated by her exceptional world of fiction and her real life as well. "I think real people are much stranger than fictional characters. People are so endlessly complicated, strange, neurotic, fearful, brave, and ambitious. So I do think I'm writing realistically," she asserted.

Although indirectly, **McCracken** had answered my question. Throughout life, she had researched characters within her own family. And because she was surrounded by many of these characters, inherent in her family members, **McCracken** is a natural storyteller. Like her fiction, she goes off onto delightful tangents, moving in a circular rhythm and eventually returning to the point.

Keeping the beat of our conversation steady wasn't always easy, but our talk remained rewarding no matter what vibrations came through. We proceeded with her research methods. "What We Know About the Lost Aztec Children" [a story about circus performers] was directly inspired by two photographs together; one of them was called Freak Show. But The Giant's House was really inspired by pictures of Robert P. Wadlow, the tallest man in the world and still champion."

Several family photographs ingrained in **McCracken**'s mind stimulate more stories. Relatives who remember the pictures have passed down their own version of the scenes to **McCracken**. But her vivid imagination doesn't need much prompting. "I frequently look at pictures and think, there's a story in here; there's a story in the height difference, the age difference. This person looks cheerful, but this person doesn't."

Some of **McCracken**'s digging is done within her own thoughts. "I love research; it's the librarian in me," she muses. Much of this work crafted outside the manuscript is called "speculative writing." Sometimes **McCracken** will go as far as drafting character biographies. "If I have a character who is not coming across well, I create something in his voice that won't make it into the novel. Especially if you're working with a first-person narrator; sometimes it's hard to see around him and figure out what the other characters are doing. The only way I can think about what I'm writing, and what comes next, is to actually put pen to paper. I imagine who the players are and how I believe things will happen, but it all changes when I write."

And when she writes, everything we know, all we've been trained to believe, changes too. Not only are **McCracken**'s characters mysterious and odd, but her ideas about relationships and love leave us questioning all the mores we've been taught to respect. So we began to discuss this notion of love throughout her writing and its departure from most themes of our time. "I've always been curious about deep love that is not romantic," she explains. "I think that it's so interesting because movies and books always have this giant emphasis on romantic sexual love, of which I am strongly in favor, but there are so many other varieties of love. I was very close to many of my older relatives, and in that, I do find something inherently fascinating."

**McCracken** came from a family where divorce was rare, and people either stayed married or married late. But her cousin **Elizabeth**'s older sister Sara never married. "The story was that she had been engaged and something went wrong. Another relative introduced the boy to a different woman, and that's who he ended up marrying. After that, Sara never married. Could that be the only explanation for not getting married, though? You were so disappointed that you were ruined. I've always wondered about the truth of this idea. Yet there are all these other varieties of love in which she was successful. There is a notion of romantic love being the success of your life. Of course it can be, but it seems that if you didn't have that love, you would always be pining for it. Maybe they were unlucky, or maybe it wasn't their temperament. I think the other kinds of love are every bit as complicated and filled with longing, anger, and complexity."

She spoke more about that love and her peculiar plots dealing with death and tragedy, diving deeper into what had prompted those ideals. "As far as autobiographical details of that story ["The Bar of Our Recent Unhappiness"], my grandmother **McCracken** had a head injury. She fell in the bathtub during her 80s and was in a coma for a while." Her grandmother only recovered partially from the fall. **McCracken** explained the struggle to remain devoted, not out of duty but because your love has changed. "Certainly it's based on memories of that person, but it's also about the present and this person with whom you were reintroduced."

I had begun to see a more serious side of **McCracken**, but it didn't last long. She admitted that death in her work stems from writing about long stretches of time; eventually, someone has to die. "I don't know, for some reason it's the way I attack plot again and again. The story can't end until somebody leaves. I don't know why that is exactly, but there's part of me that always wants it to be like a fairy tale, so you know how it all ends. And to some extent, it's what I'm drawn to in life. I love hearing sad stories, touching stories about people's families. One of the things I'm always attempting to do is make my writing funnier. Once I tried to write a comical story; it totally failed. Actually, I'm a pretty chipper person. I don't think authors tend to be like their fiction, and I know that my characters are more serious and worried about life than I am. I suppose a lot of psychologists will say, oh well, that's how you really are; but I think my characters are much more deliberate and stubborn." She shrugged her shoulders, perhaps brushing off these mistaken philosophies.

To prove her point, **McCracken** revealed more childhood secrets. As a young girl, she wasn't interested in producing fiction. "I was not a deep child. Recently I read a memoir, Lucy Grealy's Autobiography of a Face, and noticed all the discerning ideas she had as a girl. Then I realized, as a child, I was really wondering if we were going to have tuna casserole for dinner. I was happy to watch Abbott and Costello theater on TV and hang around with my older brother."

But as she constructed this vivid picture of a carefree youth, images of her brilliant analogies danced a little harder

across my thoughts. Dazzling and intelligent metaphors giving our imaginations enigmas to solve. ... Could these have come from such a normal child? She leaves us wondering while these metaphors take us by surprise and hold us until we're breathless.

"Every night at Fort Madison [a prison], I dreamed up new ways to die. I slipped off the edge of a tall building or was torn into by an angry dog, or got shot in the woods by someone looking for food who bagged only skinny Joseph Green. One night I imagined undoing my body as if it were a machine, unscrewing first my feet, then calves, opening my torso like a cabinet and clattering around in there, untightening kidneys. Then, with an arm that in my dream still worked, I packed myself in a suitcase, veins and intestines coiled so that I would fit, muscles folded like bedclothes, lungs jigsawed together, and threw myself in the river. ... My deaths took place outside the prison, every one. It was my way of keeping alive. I did not want to die there, forbade myself to even imagine it. (from Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry)"

Despite Joseph's motive to keep his heart pumping, we the audience can use these dreams to elevate us above the ordinary experiences, make our pulses beat a little faster.

Yet, while some such inconceivable descriptions really do work, how does **McCracken** decide when they don't? She confessed to the difficulty of relinquishing those lovely lines that don't make sense. **McCracken** relies on her peers to tell her when a metaphor isn't quite working: "I say to whomever read it--you liked it, right? It was a pretty, pretty line, right? And they say, 'Yes it's very nice, but it has to go. Deal with it.' " She smirked and seemed to be thinking about one of those instances.

Although most of **McCracken**'s work results from careful concentration, some texts have more simplistic origins. "A few weeks ago," **McCracken** said, "I was at a school where they had studied 'What We Know About the Lost Aztec Children' and one of the students raised his hand and said, 'why did you do that?' And I said, I don't know, I think it was a really bad choice and you're right to question me. All the English teachers' faces fell. They'd been analyzing this story in which the author did everything by accident."

Is it ever really a mistake, though? If the ideas did not come from her experiences, then perhaps they derived only from her subconscious. Whatever their root, **McCracken** seems just as astounded as we are about the whole process. "It seems really peculiar to me that I was sitting around in a chair, eating a bowl of Rice Crispies, typing with one hand, and somehow somebody read it, people are analyzing it. It's delightful and strange to me."

The author had tired, and the air felt colder. Our tale has concluded happily, but like great literature, leaves our thoughts churning after the fact. **McCracken** is a storyteller to the core, always giving us complete access to her realm of fantasy. But it is the vivid life within **McCracken**, her intensity as a person, and her love that show through in her writing, making it so distinctive and alive. As I watched her cab drive away, her stories lingered, leaving me to witness their spirited existence.n



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A priest & a rabbi walk into a bar...; Steinberg, Sybil Publishers Weekly 08-06-2001

A priest & a rabbi walk into a bar...

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Forget Marian the Librarian. **Elizabeth McCracken** pursued the profession for a decade, but she'll never fit the stereotype of a stern or sedate guardian of bibliophilic decorum. An engagingly forthright young woman who takes her comic turn of mind seriously, **McCracken** writes books about idiosyncratic characters who find themselves in unlikely situations. Her second novel, Niagara Falls All Over Again (Forecasts, May 28), out this month from Dial Press, is the exuberant and poignant saga of a twoman comedy team whose physical appearances and personalities (the fall guy: fat and dopey; the straight man: thin and sporting a mortarboard) are only the outward manifestations of an inspired and loving companionship ultimately riven by a fundamental difference in their views of life.

Eccentric characters joined in unconventional relationships are a hallmark of **McCracken**'s fiction. In general, they're aware of their place on the outposts of society, accustomed to loss, searching for connection and love. The tall woman married to a tiny tattoo artist who maps his wife's entire body with his art in the short story collection Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry is one such example, as is the armless wife and mother in another tale, whose gift to her children is to make herself seem normal. **McCracken**'s first novel, The Giant's House, is narrated by a lonely librarian in her mid2os who befriends and then falls in love with a young boy afflicted with gigantism, despite the 15-year difference in their ages. **McCracken** presents all her characters with a mixture of dry wit and bemused tolerance.

A characteristic tone of plangent nostalgia is leavened by snappy, tart dialogue, quirky but surprisingly apt similes (one character is "as chinless and gloomy as a clarinet," another's eyebrows are "so plucked that they looked like two columns of marching ants") and apercus that resonate with earthy wisdom.

Beginning in the 1920s, Niagara Falls All Over Again chronicles the life of Mose Sharp, scion of a Jewish family from Valley Junction, Iowa, a suburb of Des Moines. The only boy among six sisters, Mose decides early on that he'll be stifled if he takes over his father's haberdashery. Mose and his older sister Hattie plan to run away and become stars in vaudeville, but after a stunning tragedy, Mose goes on the road alone. When pudgy comedian Rocky Carter anoints Mose as his straight man, a nerdy know-it-all called the Professor, the team of Carter and Sharp savor the heady rush of fame, first on the vaudeville circuit, then in Hollywood. The lifelong partnership is both enriching and all-consuming. It's only after he marries and has children that Mose realizes the downside of the relationship, the way Rocky's self-destructive personality threatens to rob Moses own life of warmth and tenderness. A constant thread throughout the narrative is Moses wonder at the miracle that a Jewish boy from Iowa (Mose's father was born Jakov Sharansky in Lithuania) could gain celebrity and wealth.

**McCracken** says she did not intend that Mose would be the protagonist of her narrative. She had begun a novel about the Jewish population of Des Moines, based loosely on the experiences of her mother's family. "Everyone in my family loves to tell stories," she says, recalling her delight as a child when her mother talked about her own early years. An elderly cousin was another repository of family anecdotes; it was she who showed **McCracken** two photos that haunted her imagination. Both were of the real Mose, a great uncle. One showed him as a young man, "in a very theatrical pose, looking beautiful, with thick black hair," **McCracken** remembers. The other picture captured him in his 50s, "looking broken. He's wearing an undershirt, he's bald, and he has a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He became a shopkeeper. And my cousin said to me: `It's a shame he wasn't born into another family. He should have gone into vaudeville. He was so funny.'"

In typical fashion, **McCracken** acknowledges her unromantic Midwestern setting in the novel's first sentence: "This story-like most of the stories in the history of the world-begins far away from Des Moines, Iowa." Yet to **McCracken**, who was born in Boston and raised there and in Portland, Ore., annual visits to Des Moines made it "the constant in my childhood." Her grandmother Ruth Jacobson, a lawyer and a tireless civic activist, was a magnetic figure. Grandma spun endless reminiscences about her own grandfather, Des Moines's first ordained rabbi; his son (her father), the owner of a furniture store; and her lo siblings, all of whom earned professional degrees. During **McCracken**'s two years of postgraduate study at the Iowa Writers Workshop, she visited her grandmother often; Here's Your Hat is dedicated to her. Ruth Jacobson died three months after the book was published, but not before she'd had a chance to take **McCracken** around town and introduce her as "the youngest person ever to publish a novel." "The only thing true in that sentence is that I'm a person," **McCracken** says with a smile. "It was not a novel, and I wasn't even close to being the youngest. But she wanted to make sure her enthusiasm was commensurate with her pride in me."

**McCracken** herself relates family stories with gusto. She has a mobile and expressive face, with earnest brown eyes and heavy brows that furrow when she carefully considers a response to Ps questions. Dark brown hair curls haphazardly over her shoulders. Her full lips seem designed for pouting until they break into a grin that awakens the trace of a dimple. When she meets PW in a cafe in Manhattan, she's wearing a demure black blouse turned camp by a necklace with luridly colored medallions of old-time cartoon characters (Blondie, Skeezix, Smilin' Jack), a chic white skirt and black net stockings that would be comfortable doing the can-can. She's in town from her home in a Boston suburb to hear her agent, Henry Dunow, read from his new memoir, A Way Home. It's given her a chance to eat an Abbott and Costello sandwich at Lindy's and to buy her older brother, Harry, a nest of Russian dolls that portray a riot of Fleisher comic-book characters in diminishing sizes.

It was her brother's interest in old comic strips, radio shows and movies that awakened **McCracken**'s self-styled "obsession with the past." The siblings watched "hundreds of films with even, comedy team there was," she says. Now a computer journalist, Harry still shares her frame of reference. They're both members of a "tent" or chapter, of the international Laurel and Hardy society called Sons of the Desert. **McCracken** was watching a tape of the last Laurel and Hardy movie, Atoll K, when she heard Hardy utter a line that she later used for Niagara Falls's epigraph. "Haven't I always taken care of you? You're the first one I think of." The quote encapsulates Carter and Sharp's symbiotic bond. One of **McCracken**'s last research forays for the book was a sentimental journey with her brother to L.A., where they attended a cloth birthday party for one of Harry's friends, the legendary animation designer Maurice Noble. Noble's clear memory of filmland in the 193os and '4os provided **McCracken** with authentic background material. He died soon afterward.

The dedication to Niagara Falls offers a clue to **McCracken**'s wisecracking fictional voice: "To Samuel and Natalie Jacobson **McCracken**/My favorite comedy team." In explanation, **McCracken** says," I come from a family of tremendously eccentric people." According to **McCracken**, her parents are deadpan comics of memorable wit, albeit temperamentally unmatched. Her father is quiet and reserved, with an encyclopedic memory; her mother is social and outgoing. Physically, too, they are a startling contrast. Samuel **McCracken**, a Chaucer scholar who for three decades has been Provost John Silber's assistant at Boston University, is "6'2" or 6'3"--a really big guy." Natalie **McCracken** is 4'11", and she walks with two canes, the result of a birth injury. She holds a Ph.D. in theater, and is head of publications at BU. "They're a distinctive couple," **McCracken** says, "sort of a team of their own. You can recognize their silhouettes from blocks away."

Her parents' tolerance of their mixed-religion marriage undoubtedly influenced **McCracken**'s eclectic view of human nature. When they visited Des Moines, **McCracken**'s family worshiped both at the Cottage Grove Presbyterian Church and her grandmother's temple. Her ecumenical grandmother Jacobson believed to the end of her life that Easter was a secular holiday. Grandfather **McCracken** was a professor of classics at Drake and the editor and publisher of American Genealogy magazine. From both sides of the family, **McCracken** stresses, she received a strict sense of right and wrong, and a feeling of civic obligation. "A combination of guilt and moral imperatives never hurt anybody," she deadpans.

**McCracken**'s own career path has followed parallel channels. She took a part-time job at the Newton, Mass., local library when she was 15, and stayed there seven years, through high school and college. Early on, she determined that being a librarian would be her "money job," and she earned a library science degree in 1993- Meanwhile, she devoted herself to writing fiction. Her books carry acknowledgments and thank-yous to Sue Miller, who taught **McCracken** creative writing at BU, and Allan Gurganus, who was her teacher at Iowa. During her first session at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, in 1990, she met Ann Patchett, who was working on The Patron Saint of Liars. She and Patchett became fast friends and first readers of each other's works. "We understand how much to say to each other," **McCracken** observes. "We have very similar views of fiction writing, but extremely different methods. She's very plot oriented, and I'm not so handy with plot. She writes much tighter first drafts than I do. My first drafts are horrific and inefficient; I write pages and pages that don't get into the book. She's very good at seeing the book within the book."

A tight circle of other writer friends (she thanks Karen Bender, Bruce Holbert and Max Phillips, among others) also offer advice. It was Phillips who recommended **McCracken** to agent Henry Dunow, during **McCracken**'s second year at Iowa. Dunow read several of her stories over a weekend, and called her up on the following Monday. Since **McCracken** says she never thought ahead to possible publication, she's grateful for the benevolence of fate. "I'm appalling about the future," she says. "It's not that I lack ambition; it's that I lack forethought."

Even Here's Your Hat being the last book with the Turtle Bay imprint turned out to be lucky for **McCracken**. Susan Kamil went to Dial Press, where she edited The Giant's House, which was an NBA finalist in 1996 and earned **McCracken** a place on Granta's Best Young American Novelists list that same year, and the current novel. "She's a great editor," says **McCracken** of Kamil, "one of the best. She rarely says she doesn't like something in my work. She asks leading questions about my intentions, and sometimes she tells me I haven't got there yet," **McCracken** says. "I really need everything slapped out of my hands. I'm an endless reviser."That same focus on the present, and the past that formed it, determines the voices in her work. All are firstperson narratives, whose protagonists' distinctive voices come to her easily. "I end up thinking like the character I'm writing about," she says, confessing an instinctive empathy for people on the fringes. "I think that people are more eccentric as a whole than popular culture would have you believe," she observes with the air of one who dares you to disagree. "The moment that someone reveals some strange quirk, I begin to like them a lot." **McCracken**'s favorite book is A Confederacy of Dunces; she says that her own work

is "never as funny as I want it to be." Her interest in the past also determines the structure of her fiction, because "the only way I know how to give my books resonance is by going to the backstory." In contrasting her characters' hopeful beginnings and the vicissitudes of their troubled lives, she maintains a sympathetic understanding of the resilience of the human spirit.

**McCracken** gave up her library job to write The Giant's House, but she went back to work there two days a week for a while ofter that book was published. Now she sometimes misses her former career. "As a writer, you're essentially alone, and you're necessarily the most important person in the world. That's not psychologically healthy. If you've got a family to balance it out, maybe you're not so self-absorbed. For a librarian, though, there's a fuller spectrum. People come in and say: 'I need this, or I need that'... I love the sheer randomness of it."

Appropriately, the sheer randomness of life acquires enchanting resonance in McCracken's fiction.

Elizabeth McCracken: Perspectives on Romance and Loss; JILL MENKES KUSHNER; ; The Literary Review; 02-01-1997;

Elizabeth McCracken: Perspectives on Romance and Loss

Discovering a writer is always a pleasure and a challenge: You think about what it is that feels familiar (and therefore comfortable), and you analyze what it is that feels different (and therefore broadening). Elizabeth McCracken's work - in both novel and short story formats - offers the comfort of known feelings and the opportunity to appreciate the uniqueness of how those feelings are expressed, through original characters who offer a fresh view of familiar territory. Her novel The Giant's House came out in 1996. It is subtitled "A Romance," and, indeed, it is - although an unlikely one. The tale traces the relationship between small-town librarian Peggy Cort and an exceedingly tall (yes, a real giant) young man, James Carlson Sweatt, from its budding development to its denouement, as James approaches the demise caused by his giantism. The Giant's House could easily be trite - the possibility for overstatement and oversimplification is right there in its premise - and its primary characters could easily be parodies. But in the skilled hands of Ms. McCracken, the novel stretches beyond the obvious to tell a poignant story. Instead of supporting caricatures, she explodes them. Librarian Peggy Cort describes her tale as a memoir

Librarian Peggy Cort describes her tale as a memoir about James. But it is clearly also her history. She defines herself explicitly through her life's work: As a librarian, I longed to be acknowledged, even to be taken for granted. I sat at the desk, brimming with book reviews, information, warnings, all my good schooling, advice . . . But there were days nobody talked to me at all . . .

All it takes is a patron asking. And then asking again . . . The patron you become fond of will say, I can't believe you have this book. Or even better (believe it or not) you don't own this book - is there a way I can get it?

Yes. (11)

The Giant's House. New York: The Dial Press (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.), 1996. Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry. (Winner of the ALA Notable Award). New York: Turtle Bay Books, A Division of Random House, 1993. James becomes a librarian's dream patron, asking questions and waiting for answers. And Peggy Cort responds, with her need to be needed and her views about

Peggy

Despite popular theories, I believe people fall in love based not on good looks or fate but on knowledge. Either they are amazed by something a beloved knows that they themselves do not know; or they discover common rare knowledge; or they can supply knowledge to someone who's lacking. (8)

Peggy admires James's seriousness, his earnest pursuit of information. She is impressed by his offbeat, dry sense of humor. But there are other, more troubling reasons (his and hers) for their relationship: "I loved him because he was young and dying and needed me" (78). And consistently self-conscious, she adds: "I loved him because I discovered that day, after years of practice, I had a talent for it" (79).

As James grows taller and taller (and gets closer to his death), Peggy builds her life around his. She bears the pain of his being different, while he remains stoic. She relates both to his offered wisdom and his occasional bad moods.

Elizabeth McCracken's skill is most evident in how she resolves a story whose predestined ending is bound to be disturbing. Although clearly there is a theme of loss here, there is more substantially a theme of moving beyond loss. Peggy, the character through whom we see the plot develop, is not bitter in recharting the fragile friendship she shares with James. Neither she nor he are quite sure about their faith in themselves or in the way the world works. Nonetheless, she treasures her retrospective moments with a young man she deems precious.

Elizabeth McCracken's first book, the collection Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry (1993), is, unfortunately now out of print - although it's worth hounding your local librarian to get a copy, albeit temporarily. The collection provides an ample showcase for Ms. McCracken's ability to create characters who are at once quirky and believable. Her people sport external qualities that would surely make them outsiders in a world that craves conventionality. But they consistently offer wisdom, tenderness, and a vulnerability to reality that makes them good teachers for those of us who don't spend most of our waking hours living in one version or another of Edge City.

The characters span a wide range. In "It's Bad Luck to Die," we meet Tiny, a tattoo artist whose wife defends his underappreciated art.

Now they started asking me: "Does it hurt?" I told the truth. Of course it hurts, about the same as a vaccination, a lightly skinned knee, but less than a well-landed punch, a bad muscle cramp, or paying the Falling in love need to be neededbills. And look what you get: something that can't be stolen, pawned, lost, forgotten, or outgrown. (11) The story "Some Have Entertained Angels, Unaware" introduces an absent father, who, even when present is consistently absent-minded about his children's care. It takes his daughter awhile to put the pieces of the problem together:

My first memory takes place somewhere dark, with light the color of honey, and as sticky. I sit low to the ground - on a curb? - and listen to a dozen voices, themselves like honey, thick and unfathomably sweet . . . A few years later, I realized: I was on the footrail of the Kinvaraugh pub, listening to my father get drunk. (27)

Cared for by others, the narrator tries to come to terms with her father's inability to parent successfully. In "Secretary of State," the Barron family members entertain themselves by cross-examining everyone within quizzing distance. Sisters Ida and Estelle raise the practice of worrying to a near art as they verbally play out to outrageous conclusion all of the horrific potentialities that could befall those whom they love: First they'd be serious, but soon as the worries got

worse, they'd take a certain odd turn. Bad posture?

Tillie [Ida's daughter] marries a hunchback. Reckless eating habits? I run away and join

the circus as a combination fat lady, sword swallower, and circus

geek, "the girl who'll swallow anything," my slogan. (168)

But the family's overattention lapses at critical moments and Estelle's husband Frank, ironically, is treated with neutral but unfortunate neglect.

The most charismatic, outlandish character in the collection is Aunt Helen Beck of the title story. It is not giving too much away to say there is both more and less about her than one might think. She is brazen but engaging:

After a while, everyone Aunt Helen Beck knew was dead, and so she wrote a lot of letters, dictated to the children, who, despite being terrified of the enormous old lady on the sofa, loved scribbling down: "Dear Arthur. You have been dead fifty years and I still don't forgive you." (56)

Aunt Helen Beck (addressed always by her full name) has extended visits with an expanded network of kinfolk. Passionate and restless, she offers her opinions freely, even while she cares deeply about others' opinions of her. Perhaps she most strongly epitomizes many of the characters in this collection - as she, and they, seem to spend much of their time waiting, wondering when they will next hear the insinuated, unspoken words: "Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry." The theme of lost connection - and of other losses - travels through all of the stories: the predictable, but still potent, loss from death, disease, and disability; the loss of childhood fantasy to harsh adult reality; the loss associated with holding onto memory as time washes it away. These common threads combine to create a very strong collection, one that deals realistically with the difficult feelings, all of us, conventional or campy, must endure. Ms. McCracken is currently working on her second novel and was, until fairly recently, a librarian. Her respect for words is evident and her writing is thoughtful and intelligent. It will be a welcome pleasure, and a challenge, to discover more of her work, her characters, and their perceptions.

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**The Review of Contemporary Fiction**, Spring 1997 v17 n1 p207(2)

The Giant's House. (book reviews) O'Rear, Joseph Allen.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 1997 Review of Contemporary Fiction

Elizabeth McCracken. Dial Press, 1996. 259 pp. \$19.95.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who found it odd that Elizabeth McCracken should be nominated one of the twenty-five "Best Young Novelists in America" by Granta in their recent issue of the same name: at the time the nominations were submitted, McCracken had not yet published a novel would you award an Oscar to a movie that no one had seen? (To be fair, her short story collection, Here's Your Hat, What's Your Hurry, received considerable acclaim a few years ago.) Somewhat skeptical, I sat down with the published excerpt from The Giant's House; the next time I got out of that chair it was to jump on a late-night bus, make three transfers, and endure the sullen indignity of closing-shift bookstore employees in order to get my hands on this stunning first novel.

Ostensibly the memoirs of Peggy Cort, retired librarian of Brewsterville, Cape Cod, the elegantly drawn tale which unfolds across the book's (physically) tall pages is much more than fictional reminiscence; an often profound meditation on the quietest sort of love, McCracken's novel insists upon the dignity of its characters, all of whom are as fully alive, as fully hopeful, as they are damaged. Peggy never once questioned her choice of vocation--"I was to the library born," she tells James Sweatt, the tallest boy in the world. It's the perfect profession for the shy, self-styled misanthrope, who not only watches James grow from a boy to a man but gradually falls in love with him as well. She really is one of my favorite characters in recent fiction, unapologetically self-absorbed but in every way likeable--the brief, poignant flashbacks to her clumsy college years, for example, coax you to fall in love with her as you recognize the fragility of her carefully constructed self-assurance. James, fourteen years Peggy's junior, is equally memorable: a sad, gentle boy who grows up to be a sad, gentle man, the fact of his tallness is eclipsed only by the greatness of his heart. The long, nearly pantomimic courtship between these two misfits, including its intersections with McCracken's wonderful secondary characters, constitutes the plot of the novel entire.

Which is not to say nothing happens--a lot does. In fact, upon second reading, I was repeatedly impressed by McCracken's intricate, seamless plotting. The ending of this wholly original novel, fantastic to the point of improbable, reads as anything but. For McCracken to be named as one of our best seems, then, not odd at all.

## Back in Print

\* These were never out of print but are well worth noting. Under the book imprint of State Street Books, Borders has begun a series that parallels Modern Library and Everyman, but at a much cheaper price. While the quality of production is in fact superior to that of Modern Library and Everyman (State Street has completely reset its books so that the print is clear and crisp), these hardback uniform editions are in the \$10-12 price range. Among the initial volumes are: Henry David Thoreau's Citizen Thoreau (which includes Walden, Civil Disobedience, and other writings, 442 pages, \$11.00); Henry James's Portrait of a Lady (759 pages, \$12.00), and Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice (443 pages, \$9.95).

## The Giant's House : A Romance

by Elizabeth McCracken "I do not love mankind..." (more)

### Amazon.com

An unlikely love story about a lonely spinster librarian and a younger man, forced into loneliness because of his monstrous size. Peggy Cort, the reclusive librarian in a small Cape Cod town falls for a boy 14 years her junior -- one who grows to be 8 feet 7 inches and 415 pounds. Though initially attracted out of sympathy, Peggy soon finds she has much in common with this sensitive, albeit enormous man. A romance ensues, but the unique connectedness they share -- something neither has ever felt before -- is cruelly interrupted by tragedy.--*This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.* 

## **From Publishers Weekly**

A platonic, decorous and achingly poignant love affair between a young man who suffers from gigantism and a librarian who is 14 years his senior is the focus of this remarkable debut novel. McCracken is not merely a born raconteur; she is also an assured stylist and an astute student of human nature. Narrator Peggy Cort, spinster librarian in a small town on Cape Cod, first becomes aware of James Sweatt when he comes into the library with his grade-school class. At age 11, James is already 6'2" and destined to keep growing. Peggy finds herself drawn to the gentle, lonely young man, both because he fills a void in her own life and because she is in effect adopted by James's loving but eccentric family. The reader is mesmerized by this low-key narrative, first lured by Peggy's alternately acerbic and tender voice, then captivated by James's situation and intrigued by his family, later engulfed by pathos as James's body begins to fail and, finally, amazed by a turn of events that ends the novel with a major surprise. McCracken also invests the narrative with humor, sometimes through Peggy's astringent comments and more often through the use of minor characters who add vivid color and their own distinctive voices. One thinks of Anne Tyler's Illumination Night as the closest comparison to this brilliantly imagined chronicle of a peculiar, unique relationship. And like Tyler, McCracken (who also wrote the well-reviewed short-story collection Here's Your Hat, What's Your Hurry), shows herself a wise and compassionate reader of the human heart. BOMC selection. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.--This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

### **From School Library Journal**

YA-As a librarian, Peggy Cort is fully able to provenance the quotation "Whoever lov'd that lov'd not at first sight." But she finds it impossible to establish why, at 26 years of age, she is so instantly obsessed by James Sweatt from his first appearance across her desk. He is 11 years old, overly tall, with a faraway look and unusual interests that bring him often into her Cape Cod reading room. This is an unusual story of fascination developing into an abiding, supportive devotion. James is far from average. By the age of 19 he is over 8 feet tall, the giant of the title. So unique is he in his physical form that he carries with him only a vague and disturbing medical prognosis. His adolescence in a 1950s small town is as gently average as his extraordinary physical demands can render it. Supported by the loving acceptance of family and community, James would yet have been isolated but for Peggy's singular recognition of him as her someone to cherish and nurture. With nothing of the freak about it, this is an involving and moving romance.

Frances Reiher, Fairfax County Library System, VA

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## From Library Journal

The plot of McCracken's eloquent and hauntingly beautiful first novel is fairy-tale simple: A young librarian meets an overgrown boy who is destined to become the world's tallest man. She falls in love with him, though he is doomed to die young. The events of the novel span eight years beginning in 1950. McCracken convincingly portrays the period, deploying a few telling details?the fold-down seat of a Nash Rambler, New York City's Automat, the snappy patter of journalists?rather than reckless ornamentation. Narrator Peggy Cort is the library director of Brewsterville, a Massachusetts town "halfway up the spit curl of the Cape." James Carlson Sweatt is 11 and "tall even for a grown man." The title refers to the house that is built in James's backyard to accommodate his prodigious size. Peggy holds her love for James close to her heart, partly because of the scandal that might result but mostly out of fear that it would go unreciprocated. The theme of carrying a secret love is resolved ingeniously in a surprising and satisfying ending. This is a teriffic first novel, and McCracken is definitely a writer to watch. Highly recommended. [For more on this book see "Librarian Falls for Pituitary Giant," p. 165.?Ed.]?Adam Mazmanian, "Library Journal.

-?Adam Mazmanian, "Library Journal"

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## The New York Times Book Review, Diana Postlethwaite

Ms. McCracken unpacks her metaphors with the intensity of a poet.... Ms. McCracken opts ... for a melodramatic finale that would make a Brontë sister blush.

## From **Booklist**

Although displaying the same gift for language and compassion for misfits that were reflected in her short story collection Here's Your Hat, What's Your Hurry? (1994), McCracken's first novel is a not-altogether-successful story of two lonely people who meet in a small Massachusetts town. At 25, acerbic librarian Peggy Cort has pretty much resigned herself to a loveless spinsterhood until she meets James Sweatt, whose malfunctioning endocrine glands have turned him, at age 11, into an "overtall" boy. During the next 10 years, as James grows up (literally) to become the tallest man in the world, Peggy's world gradually narrows to a focus on ensuring James' well-being. She discovers that love can appear unexpectedly; it involves leaps into the unknown and offers no guarantees of happy endings. A major problem with this promising novel is its problematic character development. The only fully developed character is Peggy. James never seems guite real; and the supporting characters--James' mother, aunt, and uncle--are so one-dimensional that their purpose in the novel seems questionable. In addition, the ending is rushed and unsatisfactory. Still, this tender and eccentric romance should be read if for no other reason than getting to know Peggy, whose voice is self-deprecating, intelligent, and always ruefully honest. Nancy Pearl--This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

## **From Kirkus Reviews**

McCracken's eccentric debut tale of a prim librarian's secret passion for the town giant presents an intriguing premise--one that is finally muted, unfortunately, by the excessively restrained tone of the narrator. Peggy Court, the newly appointed librarian to a small Cape Cod town in the 1950s, first meets James Carlson Sweatt when, as a six feet two inches tall 11-year-old, he is part of a school field trip to her circulation desk. A bright, curious boy, James immediately wins Peggy's icy heart, and they build a relationship based on a mutual interest--the pursuit of knowledge. As he grows older (and taller by the year--James suffers from a form of giantism in which the person never stops growing), and after the suicide of his mother, the two forge a rather curious bond. Lonely, bitter Peggy, ostensibly part caretaker, part mother figure, is in reality the one in need: Charismatic James, it seems, has plenty of friends and interests and, in fact, saves Peggy from her misanthropic self. Though James lives happily with his aunt and uncle, Peggy becomes obsessed during their ten-year relationship with James's needs, having a proportionate house and furniture built for him, and a car modified for his size. She sees to his medical problems, accompanies him on promotional tours, and chaperons his one-week stint as a headliner for the circus. Though their ``romance'' is the novel's concern, Peggy, narrating in flashbacks, is overly protective of her memories and vague as to the parameters of her love, thereby excluding the reader from a deeper engagement. Finally, after James's inevitably young death, the story takes a bizarre turn when Peggy has a one-night stand with James's grieving father, then claims that the child from that union was fathered by James. A promising idea, ultimately disappointing in execution: McCracken's first novel lacks the one aspect vital to its success- -concern for the lovers. (Book-of-the-Month Club selection) -- Copyright ©1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.-

## From the Publisher

An unusual love story about a little librarian on Cape Cod and the tallest boy in the world, *The Giant's House* is the magical first novel from the author of the 1994 ALA Notable collection Here's Your Hat, What's Your Hurry.

The year is 1950, and in a small town on Cape Cod twenty-six-year-old librarian Peggy Cort feels like love and life have stood her up. Until the day James Carlson Sweatt--the "over tall" eleven-year-old boy who's the talk of the town--walks into her library and changes her life forever. Two misfits whose lonely paths cross at the circulation desk, Peggy and James are odd candidates for friendship, but nevertheless they soon find their lives entwined in ways that neither one could have predicted. In James, Peggy discovers the one person who's ever really understood her, and as he grows--six foot five at age twelve, then seven feet, then eight--so does her heart and their most singular romance. *The Giant's House* is an unforgettably tender and quirky novel about learning to welcome the unexpected miracle, and about the strength of choosing to love in a world that gives no promises, and no guarantees. --*This text refers to the <u>Hardcover</u> edition*.

## **Product Description:**

Named one of the 20 Best Young American Novelists by Granta magazine, Elizabeth McCracken is a writer of fabulous gifts. *The Giant's House,* her first novel, is an unforgettably tender and quirky novel about the strength of choosing to love in a world that offers no promises, and no guarantees.

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Sentimental journey

Byline: McCracken, Elizabeth ISSN: 00177873 Publication Date: 09-01-2001 Page: 308 Type: Periodical Language: English

LIFE HEADNOTE FIRST PERSON HEADNOTE Growing up in the '70s, **Elizabeth McCracken** often wondered if she'd been born in the wrong decade. Now, her nostalgia for the past informs her fiction and her identity.

What I remember of my childhood are black-and-white slapstick movies, Margaret Whiting on the record player, and a General MacArthur doll sprawled on the floor of the playroom. It's 1972 in the rest of the world, but not in my house, with my mother singing a lullaby:

Pepsi-Cola hits the spot.

Twelve full ounces, that's a lot.

Twice as much for your money, too.

Pepsi-Cola is the drink for you!

Nickel nickel-nickel-nikel-nikel-nikel.

My mother's family was Jewish; my father's, Protestant. My brother and I were brought up as devout Nostalgians. My friends watched The Brady Bunch; I watched Shirley Temple tap-dancing with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. My friends listened to Wolfman Jack's radio show; I listened to tapes of Fred Allen and Jack Benny. My friends bought Tiger Beat so that they could kiss the glossy cheeks of the Bay City Rollers, Shaun Cassidy, and Donny Osmond; me, I really went for Bing Crosby. It's a little like being raised Amish, I imagine.

My parents weren't old-fashioned or Miss Havisham-ish. They were simply sentimental, and so passed on stories, dolls, board games, and picture books from their 1940s childhoods. I could have spent my allowance on any records I liked or sent fan letters to the most pallid, ham-faced older Osmond brother; my parents would have addressed the envelope. Instead, I wrote to my own teen idol, who sent me a picture of himself in his fishing cap; across his left shoulder, in green ink, the words "To **Elizabeth McCracken**, with every good wish, Bing Crosby."

I watched Abbott and Costello movies every Saturday afternoon. I adored the bad jokes and the USO girls, the patter and songs and dance numbers. I understood that there had been a War in the 1940s. Things blew up. There was a guy named Hitler, but he must have been a harmless buffoon, to hear Spike Jones tell about der Fuhrer's face. Four of my mother's maternal uncles served during World War II, but the stories I heard were charming: There were postcards that said, "Do you miss your funny uncles?" And a visit from her favorite, Joseph, in his uniform when she'd had her tonsils out, and the romantic tale of my Uncle David meeting my Aunt Jessica in Italy.

There was another war going on during my childhood (I was born in 1966), but I didn't have a clue. As far as I knew back then, General MacArthur was a doll. When you went to Europe, the Andrews Sisters would descend a flight of stairs to congratulate you, their shoulders hitching in rhythm. My mother had owned a book full of the silhouettes of Japanese fighter planes, so she could scan the skies over Iowa for enemy shadows. But Iowa-my grandmother surely must have told her-was safe. I knew that, and so I assumed the whole world was, and there was no reason not to be as optimistic as the wartime culture that found me, in a suburb of Boston in the 1970s.

I'd like to claim that I was a deep child, given to musing over history, more interested in other people's lives than my own. It would be a dreamy explanation: portrait of the novelist as a suburban kid. Fact of the matter is, I was a blithe, self-- absorbed child, and I was lazy. By the time I was seven, my family had moved five times, and I understood that I would never catch up on what was cool and what wasn't. It was easier to plan on being out-of-date. Besides, I remember only one abiding childhood worry: I wanted to be interesting, especially to grown-ups. Grown-ups were not educated when it came to Scooby-Doo. They were foggy about the Jackson 5. Grown-ups, I discovered, were interested in the past.  $- \rho_a f - c$  My study of my parents' childhood was my earliest inkling of what it would be like to write a novel. Here were these mesmerizing adults in front of me: I was fascinated by the geometry of families (my grandfather was a genealogist)how an uncle could be a child in one story, an old man in another, and still have time to die years before I was born. Like I said, I was self-- absorbed: I wanted to know the back story, how that uncle led to me. In fact, that's pretty much the plot of any fiction I've ever written. Twice I've meant to write novels that take place in the present. Both times I came up with a contemporary plotline and then got waylaid by the back story. The present is best explained by the past, after all. If you're lucky, your childhood is largely plotless, as mine was. Even now, I stink at plot. I blame my happy, uneventful childhood. IMAGE ILLUSTRATION

PAST PERFECT

The author, above, in 1977; left, her mother with her twin in 1941. Right, Shirley Temple, one of **McCracken**'s favorite stars.

Then something happened. I went to junior high school, where I was suffused with hormones. Not my own-I was a late bloomer-but the ambient flush of everyone else's. Hormones; flavored lip gloss (fingered out delicately from plastic cases in the shape of toy cookies or miniature Hershey's bars and giving off a pleasing aroma that might, the girls must have thought, lure adolescent boys); the extra-sugary drip of the latest bubble gum; the smell from the cafeteria of a baked-cheese dish called, mysteriously, salamagundi. Suddenly, I felt at the mercy of substances I'd never encountered before, and did not understand.

I was a game girl, but I understood that my eccentricities would not play so well on the mean streets of F. A. Day Junior High. So I said goodbye to the '40s and swore I'd live in the present. I bought a pair of rainbow-striped suspenders that I wore with satin pants and a plaid Daisy Duke-style midriff blouse shot through with gold thread. These clothes will change my life, I thought I must have looked like a farmer in the Land of Oz.

People a few years older than me may remember disco as the soundtrack for unbridled sex and drugs. Disco reminds me of the cafeteria of F. A. Day Junior High School darkened, ninth graders in the corners. Rumor was, they were French-kissing. My best friend, Linda, and I stood near the door, peering into the darkness: We thought we could see the phosphorescent Bash of tongues. Linda was the smartest girl at Day Junior High. She was also boy crazy. Before parties, I would go to her house, where we would listen to Earth, Wind & amp; Fire and apply the curling iron to our bangs. The goal: giant feathered wings.

We were going to a party at Charlotte's house. Charlotte owned every popular record there was. She thought Blondie's "Heart of Glass" was very deep. Disco, for me, is inseparable from giant bowls of M&M's on every table of Charlotte Wiig's attic party room. Charlotte, with a heavy hand, poured us Coke from one of the giant new two-liter bottles. When the soda was gone, we'd play spin the bottle. In the meantime, we'd do the bump and all the variations of the hustle we knew: Latin, rope, slide. The plastic bottle often went flying out of the circle, and the girls fell out of formation to surround it, referees in the World Cup of Kissing. Fair or foul? Scott or Jim? Donna Summer explained from the stereo that she wanted some hot stuff, baby, this evening. I was terrified. I missed Bing. I missed Judy Garland longing for the boy next door.

And so I returned to the '30s and '40s, to Ruth Etting and Ella Fitzgerald. To the Boswell Sisters, the Andrews Sisters, the Marx Brothers, the Ritz Brothers. By high school, most of my clothing was vintage. I had a white dinner jacket that I adored, and several 1950s skirts that I wore with crinolines. (Here's what scares me: Today, in my 1978 satin pants and midriff top, I would be as retro as I was in 1980, in crinolines and saddle shoes.)

Don't get me wrong: I was-and am-interested in the present. I just wasn't all that interested in the future. Adolescence, for most kids, is several years in which you positively vibrate with fantasies about what will happen to you in the immediate future: My friends wanted to know who would ask them to the movies next week, who would kiss them next month, who they'd go steady with next year. Me, I didn't much care. Besides, I was still lazy. Nonconformity takes less energy than conformity. You always know that you're doing it right.

I now read nostalgic novels about the 1970s with fascination and some envy. If only I'd paid attention then. It turns out they were interesting times after all, and look: Now they're the past. To write such a book, I'd have to do endless research. Those teen idols are just a haze of haircuts to me; I've used up all my knowledge from my two years of lip gloss and disco in this very essay. It's a familiar feeling from my childhood: I know it's impossible to catch up. The past-the past before my own past-is waiting for me, unchangeable, well documented, well lit. And the soundtrack's not bad, either. Reading Group Guide | THE GIANT'S HOUSE by Elizabeth McCracken

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	About	This	Book
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Discussion Questions Critical Praise Author Biography

Excerpt

## HarperCollins

# The Giant's House by Elizabeth McCracken

List Price: \$12.50 Format: Paperback ISBN: 0380730200 Publisher: HarperCollins

Buy this book from Amazan.com



# About this Book

The year is 1950. Peggy Cort, a librarian in a small Cape Cod town, is 26 and has begun to fear that she will live her life without ever experiencing love's transforming power. Until she meets James, 11 years old, six foot four, and still growing. Quietly heroic about his predicament, James checks out books on conjuring and gigantism, and they soon find their lives entwined in ways that neither of them could have predicted. In James, Peggy discovers the one person suited to encompass her love, and as he grows--six foot five at age 12, then seven feet, then eight--so does her heart and their most singular romance. This stunning first novel was a finalist for a National Book Award in Fiction in 1996.

top of the page

# **Discussion** Questions

**1**. Elizabeth McCracken subtitles her book "A Romance." Why does she use this term? Does she mean it literally, or ironically? In what ways does the novel depart from the kind of story that is usually classified as romance?

2. Peggy begins her story with the sentence, "I do not love mankind." Do you believe this statement to be true? Do you find Peggy's real character to be different from the character she tries to present to the reader?

**3**. Why has Peggy chosen to be a librarian? What aspects of the work conform with her own character and predilections?

3 4. What are the reasons for Mrs. Sweatt's deep sadness? What

differences, and what similarities, exist between Mrs. Sweatt and Peggy? What does Peggy mean when she says "We are the truly sad" (p. 74)? Do you believe that Mrs. Sweatt's overdose was deliberate?

**5**. Peggy calls herself "an unimaginative woman" (p. 120). Do you find this to be true? If not, why does she make such a claim? What roles do imagination and fantasy play in her life?

**6**. How do you interpret James's feelings for Stella? Does he fall in love with her? If so, what kind of love is it, and how does it compare with the kind of passion Peggy feels for him?

7. What is the significance of Rocket Bride in the story? Why does Rocket Bride, halfway through the novel, acquire a baby? What relation does Rocket Bride bear, not only to Mrs. Sweatt, but to Peggy herself?

8. How does James's character change and develop during the course of the novel? How do his feelings about his size, and his strange plight, readjust themselves? What effect, if any, does Patty Flood have upon James's outlook?

**9.** How do strangers, and even friends, react to James's size? Is anyone Ù including Peggy able to forget his height for a moment? What do their reactions say about our feelings forthe abnormal? Why do circus freaks continue to exert a fascination upon us?

**10.** Is Dr. Calloway's "Giantism: Report of a Case" an accurate or scientific study? In what ways does it present a false picture of James? What does this report say about Dr. Calloway's own character? What does it imply about the nature of scientific observation?

**11.** Peggy says that the act of giving oneself to others, of existing for other people, is "a selfishness" (p. 234). Is this true? Are Peggy's many "unselfish" acts in actuality an expression of selfishness?

12. "By now," Peggy says at the end of her story, "you are tired of me insisting, but it wasn't sex" (p. 250). To what extent in fact was, or was not, her passion for James a sexual one? Is it possible entirely to separate sex and love?

13. How would you describe Peggy's motivations for her sexual encounter with Calvin Sweatt? Do you believe, as she does, that subconsciously she wanted James's child? Given a chance, might she have grown to love Calvin himself?

**14**. Peggy says that she and James had "a true, real marriage" (p. 290), and states that they loved one another. Do you believe that James loved Peggy in the same way that she loved him? Do you think that he was "in love"? Was he drawn

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to her, or did he simply come to feel affection, and to accept her presence?

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Critical Praise
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"Ms. McCracken unpacks her metaphors with the intensity of a poet.... By the time of his death...the young giant (now 8 feet 7 inches and 415 pounds) has transformed the heart of the lonely spinster from a tabula rasa into a fully annotated book of love." *-The New York Times Book Review* 

"Such is the incantatory power of McCracken's eccentric tale that by its close we are completely in the grip of its strangely conceived ardor.... I was reminded at various points of Harper Lee, Marjorie Kellogg, Carson McCullers and Walker Percy." -Daphne Merkin, *The New Yorker* 

"A true marvel...thoroughly enjoyable from its unlikely beginning to its bittersweet end...McCracken knows all kinds of subtle, enticing secrets of the heart and conveys them in silky, transparent language." -San Francisco Chronicle

"Rare and refreshing...the daringly freakish characters in Elizabeth McCracken's debut novel, **The Giant's House**, lend a macabre and unexpected charm to an improbable quasiromance between the Tallest Boy in the World and the spinster librarian who loves him.... McCracken's sense of character is deeply subversive."

-Boston Magazine

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