

Archived Book Reviews by Library Staff

Neverland: J.M. Barrie, the Du Mauriers, and the Dark Side of Peter Pan

Review by Chantal Walvoord

Piers Dudgeon paints a mostly negative portrait of J.M. Barrie, the playwright and creator of Peter Pan. In Dudgeon's estimation, Barrie is an interloper who manipulated the Llewelyn-Davies children as well as those of the Du Mauriers. Daphne DuMaurier was a first cousin of the Llewelyn-Davies boys, the inspiration for Barrie's Peter Pan.

Barrie played a large role in the Llewelyn-Davies' boys' lives, eventually unofficially adopting them and later setting up Peter Llewelyn-Davies as a publisher. The book is highly detailed and quotes several credible sources and certainly there is proof that Barrie tampered with Sylvia Llewelyn-Davies' will, giving Barrie guardianship of her children. Whether Barrie played the part of their Svengali as Dudgeon claims in *Neverland* is for the reader to decide.

The strength of *Neverland* is the detailed analysis of Daphne DuMaurier's works. That some of Daphne DuMaurier's characters may be directly related to her friendship with "Uncle Jim" (as she called Barrie) is fascinating. Her parents were actors who had met and fallen in love while playing parts in one of James Barrie's plays. Barrie was obviously a strong influence on DuMaurier from the beginning.

Dudgeon gives a fascinating glimpse into the lives of 3 families who happen to be actors, artists, and writers. Family secrets, suicides, unexplained illnesses are rampant; and, yet, these same individuals are also known for incredible bursts of creativity. Though some footnotes are given, Dudgeon's style is highly readable.

Additional staff reviews: rocklibadults.blogspot.com

1/23/09

Beyond Belief by Josh Hamilton

Review by Chantal Walvoord, Reference Librarian, Rockwall County Library

Beyond Belief, a memoir published by Hachette for young adults is a cautionary tale every young adult and every parent, for that matter, should read. Shortly after high school, Josh Hamilton was the number one pick in the 1999 minor league baseball draft. In North Carolina, where he grew up, no one doubted his talent. As a child playing for Little League, he could throw about 50 mph and was a regular topic of conversation among scouts. Hamilton was unstoppable; his prospects were golden; and his character, at this time, was above reproach.

Sometime after joining Tampa's Ray Devils things began to go horribly wrong for Hamilton. Frequent injuries and self-doubt took over. Instead of sliding into bases, Hamilton finds himself sliding into full-scale drug addiction - alcohol, cocaine, and, at the height of his addiction, crack. For violation of the Ray Devils' drug policy, Hamilton is suspended from playing baseball for a year. To his credit, Hamilton blames no one for his fall and emphasizes that his parents have never been anything but completely supportive.

Hamilton goes through a revolving door of drug rehab clinics, never finding any solace until, as he tells it, he turns himself over to his faith one day at his Grandmother's house. Kicking drugs is only half the battle. As the title pointedly states, it is "beyond belief" that Hamilton not only reinstates himself at the minor league level but also moves beyond that to the major leagues. Hamilton credits God in his recovery. "It's a God thing," he says in his book.

Beyond Belief is a captivating spiritual and sports memoir by All Star Outfielder for the Texas Rangers, Josh Hamilton. Not too long ago, memoir writing was thrown into question when A Million Little Pieces author, James Frey, admitted he had fabricated large portions of his memoir. Unlike Frey's memoir, Hamilton's story is true - "all stories herein are true." Many networks, including ESPN, reported Hamilton's struggle with addiction and his phoenix-like return to the sport he loves. Hamilton's memoir has also given hope to many - he regularly speaks about his recovery from addiction - and his Christianity.

1/12/09

Sea Swept by Nora Roberts

Review by Laura Brosie, Library Assistant

I admit it. I was a snob. With an undergraduate degree in Mass Communications, I rarely read fiction. In fact, I can't remember a time prior to two summers ago when I read fiction. I was a news junkie and found myself reading serious non-fiction books and watching serious television.

Well, no more. Suddenly, the world was serious enough whether or not I took notice. And so it was, on that long, hot summer afternoon that I read my last paragraph of non-fiction. It was a very important book, I'm sure. But I set it aside and declared myself free to enjoy reading for pure pleasure.

And I've never looked back.

I've read more than one hundred titles since I made my declaration to fiction. But the very first title remains one of my favorites. Perhaps it's one of yours, too.

Sea Swept, the first title in the Chesapeake Bay series by Nora Roberts, brings all of the elements of real life into focus. With Roberts, it's all about family. Roberts, in real life, was the youngest of five children and the only girl in her family. Perhaps that is why the men in her novels are so believable.

Cameron "Cam" Quinn, is the oldest of three foster-children, adopted by Ray and Stella Quinn, a loving older couple in a small town on Maryland's eastern shore. And, though we first meet a grown Cam, as a successful international boat racer, absently (rather comically) romancing a super model after his latest win in Monaco, his priorities realign abruptly when he receives word his father has been critically wounded in a car crash.

Losing their mother several years earlier, Cam and his brothers now return home in time to hear their father's dying wish and to say goodbye to the only father they've ever known. And, on his deathbed, their father introduces them to their newly adopted brother, Seth. Their promise? To come back to Maryland and make a home for this brooding, young stranger. And, unanswered until the third installment of the series, what connection did this rebellious teen have to their father?

Unlike most romance novels, Sea Swept is more a story of the hero, rather than the heroine. Anna Spinelli, the social worker assigned to decide whether or not the Quinn men can provide a suitable home for Seth, is no pushover. Obviously attracted to Cam - and who wouldn't be? - she takes her job seriously and, because she has a past of her own, maybe a bit too personally.

There are a few surprises, a bit of romance, some colorful language, but all of it is neatly woven by Roberts in the tales of these men and what they had to do as children to survive and how unconditional love can change everything.

The series is about each man, struggling to be more than their past. And, in their own way, keeping their promise to save a boy who is so much like they were. Who better to take him in than men who were taken in, themselves? And, in taking him in, honor Ray and Stella Quinn, who meant so much to them all.

Rediscover Nora Roberts. She writes the books you never want to put down and the stories you never want to end.

2/9/09

The Year of Fog by Michelle Richmond

Review by Eileen Conway, Circulation Supervisor

We all know that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Unfortunately for me, when I pass a book in the library that has an appealing cover, it literally jumps off the shelf and into my arms. There is nothing like a brilliant photograph or illustration to pique my interest and make me want to flip open the cover and read the "tease" on the front flap. Such was the case with *The Year of Fog* by Michelle Richmond. Little did I know that when I chose to look further into the story behind that incredible cover illustration, I would be treated to one of the most compelling plots and some of the most beautiful prose that I had read in a very long time.

Abby Mason, photographer, fiancée, and soon-to-be-stepmother lives for the mornings she spends on the beach with 6 year old Emma. Her love for Emma is every bit as strong as if she had given birth to her. Together they collect sea shells, ocean glass, pebbles and all the wonderfully colorful treasures that fill a six-year-olds pockets and imagination. So when Emma runs ahead and disappears into the thick San Francisco fog, a family is torn apart. At first Abby thinks Emma is playing hide-and-seek. Then she becomes angry when Emma won't answer. Then panic sets in.

Abby becomes obsessed with finding Emma. She searches beaches, roads, restaurants, and places nearby. Grasping at tidbits of information, she travels far and wide trying to restore the life they once had. Days drag into weeks and into months while she attempts to recover the little girl she lost.

Emma's father becomes distant, although he claims that he doesn't blame Abby. He finds comfort in religion and tries to come to grips with the truth - his little girl is forever lost. He recognizes that Abby blames herself and he tries to convince her to move on, but she soon realizes he means for her to move on without him.

With the weight of an almost unbearable guilt, Abby vows to provide Emma's father with closure and perhaps restore some of the life they had. She leaves San Francisco for a country thousands of miles away. There, on another beach, she makes a most terrible discovery.

Michelle Richmond paints pictures with words. She teases us with memory games shrouded in "fog" so that we want to flip back and forth to see what she didn't see when Emma disappeared. She creates a story so profoundly moving that we rush to the end and at the same time we regret that it is over. It was published in 2007. Think you might have read it? If you can't remember, then you didn't. Think you know how it will end?

If you have ever grieved for the family of a child - if you have ever loved a child - you must treat yourself to *The Year of Fog*. And do judge a book by its cover. You will find the most wonderful treasures.

2/19/09

Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson

Review by Laurie Lynne Smith, Library Assistant

I was there...in Pakistan and later Afghanistan, following Greg Mortenson, a Montana-sized American, as he built school after school. Okay, I wasn't actually there but Mortenson led this reader into each impoverished village, met each child who hugged him with excitement and gratitude, and felt cold fear as he struggled to survive in a country where insurgents revile Americans.

Apparently I'm not the only fan of Mortenson's book, *Three Cups of Tea*, as it's been a Number 1 New York Times bestseller for 82 weeks since its January 2007 release, and was Time Magazine Asia Book of The Year. Before reading this best seller, the title made me think of a cozy setting with English women sharing a spot of tea in delicate porcelain cups held tenderly with pinkies up in the air. Titles can be so misleading.

Mortenson didn't set out to be an American ambassador in a hotbed of political chaos. He simply found a village where a group of girls sat in the dirt scratching out school lessons without benefit of walls, floors, textbooks, shelter from the weather, a place of their own to learn. He vowed to build that school and stone on stone reverberated goodwill and peace. In his own words, "You can drop bombs, hand out condoms, build roads, or put in electricity, but until the girls are educated, a society won't change".

Although I don't normally read non-fiction, this book will remain one of my favorites. Not only was it a fiction-like page-turner but I found myself appreciating that I was learning more about the people of this region, their customs and dreams, daily lives and tribal traditions.

While I fell in love with the author and his story of goodwill, I must give kudos to two other people who played roles in this book: Tara Mortenson shouldered family responsibilities back home in the States while lending support to her husband's efforts in Pakistan and Afghanistan and co-writer David Relin who struggled in getting Mortenson to stay still long enough to get this incredible story written.

Three Cups of Tea is an excellent read with a cup of coffee, a cup of tea, or in my case, a Diet Dr. Pepper.

[Note: In April 2011, critiques and challenges of the book and Mortenson surfaced. Author Jon Krakauer author and former CAI donor, disclosed alleged that a number of Mortenson's claims and incidents described in the book are fictitious and accused him of mismanaging CAI charitable funds. In 2012, Mortenson agreed to repay \$1 million to CAI following an investigation by the Montana attorney general. The inquiry determined that he had misspent over \$6 million of the organization's money, although no criminality was found. Some of the "schools" he built are being used for non-educational purposes such a grain storage.]

3/6/09

The Worst Hard Time by Timothy Egan

Review by Gavin Sheaffer, Reference Librarian

For this book review, I chose Timothy Egan's *The Worst Hard Time*. This book can best be described as a non-fiction novel; its subject is the great depression. Egan addresses much more than the depression; whole chapters are devoted to customs, attitudes, and beliefs of the different people at the time. Egan address sociological, environmental, and political issues that were the hot button topics of the late twenties and early thirties. Egan approaches the twin terrors of the Dust Bowl effect and the Great Depression with the vigor of an investigative journalist, supplemented with copious eye witness accounts and benefitting from meticulous research of archival sources. *The Worst Hard Time* may be non-fiction, but it does not read like your typical non-fiction work.

The sales pitch went as follows: Come to the great American plains, the last unsettled frontier in the US, where a man can own a piece of the earth and make an honest living from it. This was the lure that was used to seduce, dupe, and otherwise cajole desperate sharecroppers and tenement farmers to settle in what was otherwise the ancestral hunting ground of the Cherokee, Kiowa, Apaches, and other plains Indians. The settlers were bound and determined to make the best of a rotten situation; there would be viable farming on the Great Plains. The method used at the time was known as dry earth farming, which required the removal of the native prairie grass. Removal of the prairie grass was a mistake. The grass acted like an anchor for the topsoil; with the grass removed, nothing would prevent the wind from blowing the topsoil away. Add to this the drought-like conditions that the plains area faced plus howling winds and you have the making of the worst ecological disaster in American history. The farmers' actions led to an even more life altering and devastating atmospheric phenomenon, massive dust storms. The thick clouds of prairie topsoil blew across the United States, but its deadly effects were felt mainly in the prairie states. The effects of blowing topsoil led to a condition that was later diagnosed as dust pneumonia. Dust pneumonia killed slowly and indiscriminately.

Timothy Egan recreates through creative narrative a window to view the misfortunes and tragedy that befell thousands of families in several states. The environmental degradation, droughts, speculative fervor and crop failure described in the book are to blame for the settlers' trouble. Egan draws the reader in and vividly describes an environment hostile to life in all forms. Egan also captures the unique outlook (or stubbornness) of the landowners who were determined to stay with their homesteads against all odds. *The Worst Hard Time* is written with an attention to historical detail, capturing the triumphs and tragedy of a colossal catastrophe and illuminating this event for the many who did not live it, but whose lives (in a roundabout way) are shaped from it. *The Worst Hard Time* is available at the Rockwall County Library in the adult non-fiction area.

3/19/09

Murder with Peacocks: A Meg Langslow Mystery by Donna Andrews

Review by Lindsey Snelling, General Services Librarian

Some books make you laugh out loud and for me *Murder with Peacocks* by Donna Andrews is one of them. *Murder with Peacocks* is the first installment in the Meg Langslow Mystery series and an endearing read if you like kooky extended families and/or amateur-sleuth mysteries.

Three weddings in three weeks...as maid-of-honor and designated wedding organizer for all three of the impending nuptials, Meg Langslow was feeling overwhelmed (and not a little bit cranky) and that was before they found the body.

Meg's mother, her brother Rob and best friend Eileen are all getting married within three weeks of each other; and the brides seem convinced that only Meg can keep the wedding plans on track.

Meg's mother, a woman whose beauty is only exceeded by her delegating skills, is engaged to the oddly skittish widower Jake, her forgetful brother Rob is engaged to the rather cunning yet narrow-minded Samantha Brewster. Meanwhile Eileen's wedding to Steve is first on the docket and she's the only bride that hasn't chosen gowns for her bridesmaids.

As Meg grows increasingly frustrated with her trio of brides, the discovery of a body and the resultant investigation turn this rural Virginia town on its ear just as all the eccentric Langslow cousins are beginning to

turn out in force for the upcoming celebrations. Meg along with her intrepid father and Michael, the hunky son of the local seamstress, endeavor to resolve the mystery before it interferes with the festivities.

Murder with Peacocks is an animated read that's true charm lies in the foibles of its supporting cast of characters. Save a date and spend some time with this whimsical novel featuring Meg Langslow as the beleaguered maid-of-honor for three weddings that are going to be the death of someone.

4/7/09

Nebula Awards Showcase 2008: The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy edited by Ben Bova

Review by Denise Fudge, Library Assistant

I call myself a science fiction fan, but in truth I have only read a handful of favorite authors extensively. So when I saw this book, I thought it would be a good way to get introduced to some new authors and I was not disappointed.

What are the Nebula Awards, you ask? Think Hollywood and the Oscars. The Nebula Award winners are chosen by published SF authors each year, starting in 1965 with four categories: novel, novella, novelette and short story. Since then, other awards such as Grand Master and Best Script have been added. The list of past winners, included at the end of the book, is a veritable Who's Who of science fiction - Asimov, Bradbury, and Clarke, just for starters.

This 2008 volume includes an excerpt from the award-winning novel and the shorter works in their entirety, all by authors new to me: Jack McDevitt, Elizabeth Hand, James Patrick Kelly, and Peter S. Beagle. Each story begins with a preface by the author. Expecting to enjoy a female writer's post-September-11th apocalyptic story, I was disappointed to find it boring. Anticipating that a story about fire-fighting in a Walden-type society would be just for guys, I was pleasantly surprised to like it instead. That is one benefit of reading a story collection: if you don't like one story, you haven't wasted much time and the next story offers a fresh beginning.

In between the stories are essays on the state of science fiction as a genre and other industry tidbits. For example, Diane Wynne Jones humorously comments on the "book to film" process for her novel "Howl's Moving Castle" whose script (which she did not write) won Best Script award. Reading such essays is like watching the special features on a DVD; easy to fast-forward past if you're not interested.

My biggest surprise was to learn about the Rhysling Awards presented by the Science Fiction Poetry Association. Science Fiction Poetry! Where have I been? Categories include short poem, long poem, and the new Dwarf Stars Award for poems less than ten lines in length. What an interesting sub-sub-genre to discover! In the spirit of my discovery, I offer the following haiku conclusion:

find new SF tales

handy in softbound cover

at the library.

4/18/09

Some Favorite Children's Series Books

Review by Doreen Miller, Children's Librarian

Magic Tree House books by author Mary Pope Osborne

Clarice Bean books by Lauren Child

Magical Kids series written and illustrated by Sally Gardner

One of the most enjoyable aspects of my position as the children's librarian at the Rockwall County Library is suggesting books to young patrons, called reader's advisory in librarianship. But the joy of sharing books goes both ways and I am delighted when children tell me about their favorite books and the latest "must reads." A young patron was the first to tell me about the **Magic Tree House** books by author Mary Pope Osborne during the summer of 1999, before they became the best sellers they are now. Another young friend Cecil and I have talked about the **Clarice Bean** books by author Lauren Child and eagerly awaited new installments.

Therefore it's not surprising that book-savvy Brooke Hill introduced me to the **Magical Kids** series written and illustrated by British author Sally Gardner. Seems Brooke first discovered the books at the Dallas Public library while there on a genealogy foray with her grandfather, Raymond Hill. Brooke wanted children in Rockwall to enjoy them as well and her grandfather offered to purchase the books for the Rockwall County Library. Thanks to the Hills we started with **The Strongest Girl in the World** and **The Invisible Boy**, published here in the US together in a fun flip-book format.

Ms. Gardner is best known for her masterful tale **I, Coriander** written for an older audience. The stories in the Magical Kids series are shorter novels for children ages 6 through 10, with appealing young characters. In the stories, ordinary children gain magical powers and use those powers to help their friends and families. Sometimes adults in the stories try to exploit the magical talents of the children but the children triumph through their own strength of convictions and ingenuity.

Last week I read the newest two stories in the series to be published in the US, **The Smallest Girl Ever** and **The Boy Who Could Fly**. While admittedly **The Smallest Girl Ever** is the stronger of the pair, especially with its implications that the ability to read stories is "magic" in itself, **The Boy Who Could Fly** was my favorite. On Thomas' ninth birthday he receives a surprise visit from a plump, no-nonsense fairy. First she gives him a run-down of birthday wishing rules: "You can't wish for all the money in the world or to turn Aunt Maud into a sheep. It just won't work like that." And although Thomas wants to wish for his father to be fun, that too is against the wishing rules. Instead Thomas wishes for the first thing that comes into his head: he wishes he could fly!

And fly he does! Tentatively at first, but with growing confidence that soon spills over into his everyday life. Thomas' unusual talent causes a positive change in himself as well as those around him. By the end of the story, other characters, including Thomas' father, have learned to look beyond the ordinary to recognize the everyday magic all around us.

So thanks to Brooke, Cecil, Jason, and many other children, I read lots of great books. The next time you wonder what you should read next, ask some youngsters in your life. They would be glad to share.

5/5/09

Redwall Series by Brian Jacques

Review by Arlene Sosta, Library Assistant

Over the years some wonderful fantasy books have come from the pens or computers of new and well-known authors. In addition, some of these books have made it to the big screen. Many times readers go to the movies to see how the written words were interpreted as they watch the story unfold. There are times that the adaptation follows the original story and other times the story's content has been altered or changed.

Fantasy and science fiction have a common thread- make believe tales. The genre of fantasy involves stories that have characters and events that do not exist in real life. A few ingredients we find in this genre are magic, wizards, and mythological characters. The story may begin as a realistic one, but soon evolves into a strange tale that could never really happen. On the other hand, science fiction stories incorporate science and technology and involve the future on the printed page. The writers try to create a world and life quite different from planet Earth.

There are many new fantasy authors whose books have made it into school and public libraries. Christopher Paolini (The Inheritance Cycle) and Rick Riordan (The Percy Jackson Series) are very familiar names to readers of fantasy. However, if we look on the shelves we will still see the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Jules Verne, C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman.

British author Brian Jacques has been writing for many years and his Redwall series has stood the test of time. The adventures and challenges of the characters are set in Medieval times. The first book's setting is Redwall Abby and Mossflower Wood. The protagonists are the mice, moles, shrews, squirrels and their friends. The antagonists are the rats, weasels, stoats, foxes and their allies. Throughout the series the theme of good versus evil is evident.

I imagine most readers are not particularly fond of mice but Brian Jacques makes us fond of Matthias, a young mouse who shows us that size does not always matter. This vibrant and charming character shows us that courage and determination can help us do the impossible. The key to bringing peace to Redwall Abbey is recovering the lost sword of Martin the Warrior. The legendary sword will help the animals combat the evil rat Cluny the Scourge and his band of followers. Matthias reminds us of Don Quixote who was on a quest while dreaming the impossible dream. Unlike Don Quixote Matthias is not chasing windmills. Matthias's mission is believable since he is determined to keep his friends and family out of harm's way. He promises to find the weapon and defeat the enemy (Cluny and his band of brothers). The hope of recovering the famous sword brings the peace-loving inhabitants of Redwall to join forces with Matthias in his quest. As the story unfolds, we forget that the compelling and fascinating characters are not humans. Such is the case with the strong badger named Constance and Silent Sam whose knowledge of the forest is an asset. This book and the others in the series have all the excitement and elements of an action packed fantasy adventure. The series consists of twenty books.

In 2010 there will be another book added to the Redwall Series-the Sable Queen. Redwall is not just for older children but the books could definitely spark interest in the series for adults. In 2007 Brian Jacques and artist Christopher Denise transformed three of the Redwall books into picture books. A graphic novel was also published based on Redwall.

Our world and lives are constantly changing and at times we find ourselves feeling the pressures and challenges that face us each day. It is great if we can relax and curl up with a good book. Redwall might be a book that will help you unwind and envision what is happening in the theater of your mind.

I would recommend this series for ages 10 and up (this includes adults). It is shelved in the juvenile fiction section at the Rockwall County Library.

5/15/09

Thunderstruck by Erik Larson

Review by Gavin Sheaffer, Reference Librarian

For this week's review, I chose Erik Larson's *Thunderstruck*. *Thunderstruck* is a work of nonfiction but it reads like a mystery novel. The novel consists of two divergent plot points that converge to form a spectacular conclusion. Erik Larson is a prominent author in the non fiction novel genre. You might have already read and enjoyed *Isaac's Storm* or *The Devil in the White City* and, if you have, this book is for you. If not, don't despair, you will be entertained, mortified, and amazed by the novel *Thunderstruck*.

Thunderstruck, at its heart, is a tale of scientific achievement by one man who single handedly revolutionized communication and its impact on the schemes of another man. The achievement was wireless telegraph transmission and this breakthrough is attributed to Guglielmo Marconi. The wireless telegraphy breakthrough entailed a great deal of controversy and dispute. Other notable scientists had claimed earlier successes but for some reason or another, did not receive credit or the financial windfall that suddenly came with this discovery. Larson describes in great detail the various battles that break out over Marconi's new invention and the forces that seek to control or exploit the man and his discovery. Larson describes Marconi as an aloof, socially insensitive yet hardworking Italian inventor who was driven by an insatiable curiosity, especially concerning the field of electrical engineering and telegraph technology. Marconi felt that electrical engineering was the way of the future and he knew this discipline and the technology that would spring forth from it would change the world. The second actor in this story is a mild mannered doctor name Hawley Harvey Crippen who happens to be a Doctor of Osteopathic medicine who is blessed with sharp business acumen and the good fortune to be at the right place, at the right time. Crippen is married to a domineering woman who openly flaunts convention whenever possible, yet is embraced and adored in several prominent British social circles. Before the end of the book, Crippen will be at the center of a worldwide manhunt with several police agencies acting in unison in an attempt to track down the elusive Doctor. It is in this chase-scenario that the very real implications of Marconi's discovery are realized.

Erik Larson seamlessly blends history, crime, and mystery into an intensely readable work of non-fiction. The twin characters of Marconi and Crippen are identical in so many ways, yet their ambitions and means to achieve them are devastatingly different. If you prefer a good mystery and a well written nonfiction volume, then *Thunderstruck* is the book for you. *Thunderstruck* is available at the Rockwall County Library in the Adult non-fiction collection.

5/27/09

Breakfast at Sally's by Richard LeMieux

Review by Laurie Lynne Smith, Library Assistant

Sally's offers hope with the hashbrowns and companionship with the coffee with its sit-down meal for the homeless. Those in-the-know have given the Salvation Army in Bremerton, Washington its affectionate moniker, Sally's. Richard LeMieux was introduced to Sally's when he found himself living in his van with his precious dog, Willow, having no money and no prospects for the future. In his book, "Breakfast at Sally's", LeMieux shares with readers his own experiences with homeless people and those who give diddly-squat about them.

What a ride this book took me on as I followed this once happily married man, father, and successful businessman through his adventures in homelessness. Gas money in his pocket promised the equilibrium he sought day-to-day. It meant freedom to move about this small town, to find a safe parking lot for the night, to give rides to fellow vagabonds like himself. He even resorted to panhandling, a great descent for a man who once traveled the world, drove high-end cars and owned a home boasting more than 5000 square feet.

While LeMieux delivered chapters devoted to his new acquaintances, I found myself wanting to know more about how he arrived at this low echelon of our society. He shared those few details sparingly throughout the book. I wanted much more but perhaps that's for another book.

I now have it on good account that some of my assumptions about the homeless are right on. For the most part, the homeless are society's throw-a-ways due to mental disabilities. I have always felt that our government should offer more to help these people. This responsibility has fallen to churches and other non-profits like the Salvation Army. LeMieux never got on a soap box about this, however, through his narration he provokes the reader to question what a single person can do to help.

There were three nuggets of insight I took from "Breakfast at Sally's":

The homeless, having very little, will help a fellow down-and-outer who needs companionship, food, shelter, money, or clothes. They are acutely aware of basic necessities and what it means to be lacking in any category. They are truly generous.

While some of us fear them, they seek safety from those who would do them harm, namely, those outside of their commune of homelessness. They know of people like them who have been tormented due to their similar circumstances.

When a successful businessman can fall from a rung high on the ladder to the lowest rung, all within a year, then many of us are more vulnerable than we thought.

Do I recommend this book? Did I thoroughly enjoy it? Yes and no. While there was some light-heartedness it was still tough to read at times. Underneath the light tone presented in this book detailing the humanity of the homeless, I felt an undertow of discomfort. I wanted all the characters to end up well. Not all did. Call me Pollyanna. What I did find endearing were those who did give a diddly-squat about these people. God bless 'em.

So you must be wondering what precipitated LeMieux's slip and what his plans for the future are after the debut of his book. Dear reader, I must leave something for you to discover. You can find this title in the "New Books" section at the Rockwall County Library.

Wishing on Dandelions by Mary DeMuth

Review by Chantal Walvoord, Adult Services Librarian

Wishing on Dandelions is a moving coming-of-age novel that leaves readers longing for the third installment. Continuing where *Watching Tree Limbs* left off, DeMuth continues to explore topics that most writers shy away from—racism and sexual abuse—with exceptional verve. Though her novels explore serious social problems, they are also filled with humor and are highly enjoyable. Mara has been abused by a vicious boy named General, yet she finds hope by relying upon God’s grace. That’s one reason Mara changes her given name, which means bitter, to “Maranatha” which means “Come, Lord Jesus.”

Despite her name change, Maranatha is no cardboard cut-out Christian. She is sometimes “bitter,” as Violin Charlie claims. Maranatha frequently jumps to conclusions and judges others harshly. Maranatha’s flaws make her all the more believable and lovable, especially as she is so remarkably self-aware and honest about her flaws. In one memorable scene, Maranatha blames her deeply prejudiced step-mother, Georgeanne, for stealing her favorite white dress, which used to belong to her mother. Georgeanne had actually taken the dress, which had been stained by red punch, to be professionally laundered in Dallas.

Sadly, Maranatha views herself as just as “stained,” as the white dress. Maranatha blames herself for the sexual abuse she endured as a child and views herself as “marked”. Sensing that she is stained, she even feels that her pure love for Charlie may be tainted. In this hopeless state, Maranatha prays that Jesus would show her his love while standing in an abandoned field of dandelions. Though praying is not the same as wishing, Maranatha feels, at this immature stage in her life, that they are one and the same. Here in this field she finds and loses a ring that she feels is symbolic of God’s love.

Local author DeMuth easily captures the quirks of Southern small-town life. Along with wise eccentrics, like Camilla and Burl, her version of Texas has its share of bigoted and predatory characters. One character, Old Mack, has a shop filled with items he never sells. Camilla is a wise-cracking poet who writes zany “truth” poems. Mama Frankie is a prophetic member of the Mt. Moriah church and Mabel is a one-eyed woman who scares children on Halloween with her glass eye. Characters get their comeuppance—like Georgeanne who experiences embarrassment at the barbecue picnic—but they are also blessed with healing grace. Maranatha fights against her own cowardice to testify against a predatory character and begins to make peace with her past.

Mary DeMuth, author of *Wishing on Dandelions*, will make an appearance at the Rockwall County Library at 1215 E Yellowjacket Lane in Rockwall on August 6, 2009 from 7-8pm. She will speak about her latest book and offer information to budding writers on how to get published. Should you happen to read *Wishing on Dandelions* or one of DeMuth’s other books, she would be glad to answer your questions.

6/26/09

Yankee Chick's Survival Guide to Texas by Sophia Dembling

Review by Denise Fudge, Library Assistant

I am proud to say that I am a native Texan, born and raised in Dallas, and college-educated in Houston. But in my young 20's, I moved to New England for 5 years and felt I had moved to another country. About the same time, Sophia Dembling was making the same transition, only in reverse, moving from New York to Texas. In 2001 she wrote the insightful and funny book *The Yankee Chick's Survival Guide to Texas*.

The Friends of the Library hosted Ms. Dembling for a talk a few years back. This book is very funny if you are not above looking in the mirror and laughing at yourself. A few of our customs that she tries to understand are the obsession with pickup trucks, the cult of football and cheerleaders, the reverence for the Alamo, and our love of the shape of Texas and the Texas flag. Here's a hint that the book will show at least a little respect for the state: it's published by Republic of Texas Press.

I like her assessment of the major Texas cities. Austin is hip and cool and "where most Texans would live if whatever they do wasn't keeping them where they are." Dallas is the "epicenter of conspicuous consumption" yet has an inferiority complex. Houston is "grown up, with a sophisticated arts scene and municipal self-confidence that makes Dallas look needy and Austin look like a frat boy." Her notes on the college scene around Texas are right on the mark too.

This book reads like a very long Texas Monthly article. She has traveled all over the state and has her own stories to tell, plus lots of Yankee friends to quote. Her total conversion to Mexican cuisine and barbecue makes me smile, with some recipes in the back of the book that I want to give a try. I learned the difference between a "bubba" and a "good ol' boy" and was enlightened by her take on the phrase "bless your heart."

Next time you're "fixin' to" go to the library, check it out!

Some Mystery Ideas

McKinney author Deborah Crombie has created a great series of British police procedurals featuring police officers Gemma James and Duncan Kincaid. Elegantly written and cleverly plotted, these are similar to the work of P.D. James and Peter Robinson. The series begins with *A Share in Death*. The latest entry is *Where Memories Lie*.

For a light escape from everyday life, try some culinary mysteries like the *Goldy Bear* series from Diane Mott Davidson (beginning with *Catering to Nobody*) or the *Hannah Swenson* mysteries from Joanna Fluke (beginning with *The Chocolate Chip Cookie Murder*). Both series feature crime-solving caterers with plenty of humor and a few recipes thrown in for fun.