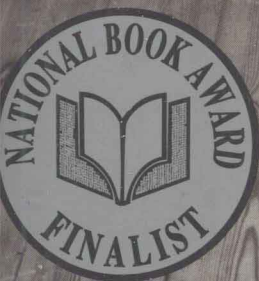


E L I Z A B E T H M C C R A C K E N

THE GIANT'S HOUSE

A R O M A N C E



TRUE MARVEL...THOROUGHLY ENJOYABLE FROM ITS UNLIKELY BEGINNING
TO ITS BITTERSWEET END." —SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

THE GIANT'S HOUSE

A R O M A N C E

ELIZABETH McCracken



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for Robert Sidney Phelps
a giant of a friend

THE GIANT'S HOUSE

PART ONE

SEE ALSO

I do not love mankind.

People think they're interesting. That's their first mistake. Every retiree you meet wants to supply you with his life story.

An example: thirty-five years ago a woman came into the library. She'd just heard about oral histories, and wanted to string one together herself.

"We have so many wonderful old people around," she said. "They have such wonderful stories. We could capture them on tape, then maybe transcribe them—don't you think that would make a wonderful record of the area? My father, for instance, is in a nursing home—"

Her father. Of course. She was not interested in *the* past, but *her* past.

"If I wanted to listen to old people nattering on," I told her, "I would ride a Greyhound bus across country. Such things get boring rather quickly, don't they."

The woman looked at me with the same smile she'd had on the entire conversation. She laughed experimentally.

"Oh Miss Cort," she said. "Surely you didn't mean that."

"I did and I do," I answered. My reputation even thirty-five years ago was already so spoiled there was no saving it. "I really don't see the point, do you?"

I felt that if those old people had some essential information they should write it down themselves. A life story can make adequate conversation but bad history.

Still, there you are in a nursing home, bored and lonely, and one day something different happens. Instead of a gang of school kids come to bellow Christmas carols at you, there's this earnest young person with a tape recorder, wanting to know about a flood sixty years ago, or what Main Street was like, or some such nonsense. All the other people in the home are sick to death of hearing your stories, because really let's be honest you only have a few.

Suddenly there's a microphone in your face. Wham! just like that, you're no longer a dull conversationalist, you're a natural resource.

Back then I thought, if you go around trying to rescue every fact or turn of phrase, you would never stop, you would eavesdrop until your fingers ached from playing the black keys of your tape recorder, until the batteries had gasped their last and the tape came to its end and thunked the machine off, *no more*, and still you would not have made a dent on the small talk of the world. People are always downstairs, talking without you. They gather in front of stores, run into each other at restaurants, and talk. They clump together at parties or couple up at the dinner table. They organize themselves by profession (for instance, waitresses), or by quality of looks, or by hobby, or compan-

ion (in the case of dog owners and married people), or by sexual preference or weight or social ease, and they talk.

Imagine what there is to collect: every exchange between a customer and a grocery store clerk, wrong numbers, awful baby talk to a puppy on the street, what people yell back at the radio, the sound the teenage boy outside my window makes when he catches the basketball with both his hands and his stomach, every *oh lord* said at church or in bed or standing up from a chair. *Thank you, hey watch it, gesundheit, who's a good boy, sweetness, how much? I love your dress.*

An Anthology of Common Conversation. Already I can tell you it will be incomplete. In reference works, as in sin, omission is as bad as willful misbehavior. All those words go around and end up nowhere; your fondest wishes won't save them. No need to be a packrat of palaver anyhow. Best to stick with recorded history.

Now, of course, I am as guilty as anyone, and this book is the evidence. I'm worse; I know my details by heart, no interviews necessary. No one has asked me a question yet, but I will not shut up.

Peggy Cort is crazy, anyone will tell you so. That lady who wanted to record the town's elders, the children who visited the library, my co-workers, every last soul in this town. The only person who ever thought I wasn't is dead; he is the subject of this memoir.

Let me stop. History is chronological, at least this one is. Some women become librarians because they love order; I'm one. Ordinal, cardinal, alphabetical, alphanumerical, geographical, by subject, by color, by shape, by size. Something logical that people—one hopes—cannot botch, although they will.

This isn't my story.

Let me start again.

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"What sort of magician?" I said. "Like Merlin?" Recently a teacher had read aloud from *The Sword and the Stone*, and they all wanted more stories.

"No," he said. He put his hands on the circulation desk. His fingernails were cleaner than an ordinary eleven-year-old's; his mother was then still alive. "Just tricks," he said. "I want to make things look like they disappear. I looked in the card catalog under magic, but I didn't find anything."

"Try 'conjuring,' " I told him.

We found only one book, an oversized skinny volume called *Magic for Boys and Girls*. He took it to a table in the front room. He wasn't clumsy, as you might expect, but terribly delicate. His hands were large, out of proportion even with his big body, and he had to use them delicately to accomplish anything at all.

I watched his narrow back as he read the book. After an hour I walked over.

"Is that the sort of thing you wanted?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, not looking at me. The book was opened flat on the table in front of him, and he worked his hands in the air according to the instructions, without any props. His fingers kept slowly snatching at nothing, as if he had already made dozens of things disappear, rabbits and cards and rubber balls and bouquets of paper flowers, and had done this so brilliantly even he could not bring them back.



I may be adding things. It's been years now, and nearly every day I dream up my hours and meetings with James Carlson Sweatt. I am a librarian, and you cannot stop me from annotating, revising, updating. I like to think that—because I am a librarian—I offer accurate and spurious advice with no judgment, good and bad next to each other on the shelf. But my memories are not books. Blessing if

they were. Then maybe someone would borrow one and keep it too long and return it, a little battered, offering money for my forgiveness, each memory new after its long absence.

My memories are not books. They are only stories that I have been over so many times in my head that I don't know from one day to the next what's remembered and what's made up. Like when you memorize a poem, and for one small unimportant part you supply your own words. The meaning's the same, the meter's identical. When you read the actual version you can never get it into your head that it's right and you're wrong.

What I give you is the day's edition. Tomorrow it may be different.



I lived then, as now, in Brewsterville, an unremarkable little town on Cape Cod. Brewsterville lies halfway up the spit curl of the Cape, not close enough to the rest of the world to be convenient nor far enough to be attractively remote. We get tourists who don't know exactly what they've come out to see. Now we have little to show them: a few places that sell homemade jelly, a few guest houses, a small stretch of beach on the bay side. Our zoning laws keep us quaint, but just.

Once we had more. We had James Carlson Sweatt walking the streets. Some people came out specifically to visit James; some came for the ocean and happened upon him, more impressive than the ocean because no philosopher ever wonderingly addressed him, no poet compared him to God or a lover's restless body. Moreover, the ocean does not grant autographs. James did, politely, and then asked how you were enjoying your visit.

Everyone knew him as The Giant. Well, what else could you call him? Brilliant, maybe, and handsome and talented, but doomed to be mostly enormous. A painter,

an amateur magician, a compulsive letter-writer, James Carlson Sweatt spent his life sitting down, hunching over. Hunching partly because that's the way he grew, like a flower; partly to make him seem smaller to others. Five feet tall in kindergarten; six foot two at age eleven. He turned sixteen and hit seven-five the same week.

The town's talking about building a statue to honor James, but there's a lot of bickering: for instance, what size? Life-sized puts it at about the same height as the statue of the town founder, who's life-and-a-half. Some people claim it'll attract tourists, who even now take pictures in front of the founder. Others maintain that tourists will take a picture of any old thing. "Who's this behind me?" a lady tourist asks her husband, who is intent on his focusing.

"Pilgrims," he answers.

For some people, history is simply what your wife looks good standing in front of. It's what's cast in bronze, or framed in sepia tones, or acted out with wax dummies and period furniture. It takes place in glass bubbles filled with water and chunks of plastic snow; it's stamped on souvenir pencils and summarized in reprint newspapers. History nowadays is recorded in memorabilia. If you can't purchase a shopping bag that alludes to something, people won't believe it ever happened.

Librarian (like Stewardess, Certified Public Accountant, Used Car Salesman) is one of those occupations that people assume attract a certain deformed personality. Librarians are supposed to be bitter spinsters; grudging, lonely. And above all stingy: we love our fine money, our silence.

I did not love fine money: I forgave much more than I collected. I did not shush people unless they yelled. And though I was technically a spinster, I was bitter only insofar as people made me. It isn't that bitter people become librarians; it's that being a librarian may turn the most giving

person bitter. We are paid all day to be generous, and no one recognizes our generosity.

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. I wanted people to constantly callously approach. But there were days nobody talked to me at all, they just walked to the shelves and grabbed a book and checked out, said, at most, *thank you*, and sometimes only *you're welcome* when I thanked them first. I had gone to school to learn how to help them, but they believed I was simply a clerk who stamped the books.

All it takes is a patron asking. And then asking again. A piece of paper covered with notes, the pencil smudged: a left-hander (for instance, James) will smudge more. 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.

Even at age eleven, twelve, James asked me how to find things in the catalog. He told me of books he liked, wanting something similar. He recognized me as an expert. 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. Hasn't everyone found a strange ignorance in someone beguiling? An earnest question: what day of the week does Thanksgiving fall on this year? Nowadays, trendy librarians, wanting to be important, say, Knowledge is power. I know better. *Knowledge is love*.

People think librarians are unromantic, unimaginative. This is not true. We are people whose dreams run in particular ways. Ask a mountain climber what he feels when he sees a mountain; a lion tamer what goes through his mind

when he meets a new lion; a doctor confronted with a beautiful malfunctioning body. The idea of a library full of books, the books full of knowledge, fills me with fear and love and courage and endless wonder. I knew I would be a librarian in college as a student assistant at a reference desk, watching those lovely people at work. "I don't think there's such a book—" a patron would begin, and then the librarian would hand it to them, that very book.

Unromantic? This is a reference librarian's fantasy.

A patron arrives, says, Tell me something. You reach across the desk and pull him toward you, bear hug him a second and then take him into your lap, stroke his forehead, whisper facts in his ear. *The climate of Chad is tropical in the south, desert in the north. Source: 1991 CIA World Factbook. Do you love me? Americans consumed 6.2 gallons of tea per capita in 1989. Source: Statistical Abstract of the United States. Synecdoche is a literary device meaning the part for the whole, as in, the crowned heads of Europe. I love you. I could find you British Parliamentary papers, I could track down a book you only barely remember reading. Do you love me now? We own that book, we subscribe to that journal, Elvis Presley's first movie was called Love Me Tender.*

And then you lift the patron again, take him over the desk and set him down so gently he doesn't feel it, because there's someone else arriving, and she looks, oh, she looks *uninformed*.



He became a regular after that first school visit, took four books out at a time, returned them, took another four. I let him renew the magic book again and again, even though the rules said one renewal only. Librarians lose reason when it comes to the regulars, the good people, the *readers*. Especially when they're like James: it wasn't that he was lonely or bored; he wasn't dragged into the library by a parent. He didn't have that strange desperate look that some li-

brarygoers develop, even children, the one that says: *this is the only place I'm welcome anymore*. Even when he didn't want advice, he'd approach the desk with notes crumpled up, warm from his palm, his palm gray from the graphite. He'd hold it out until I grabbed the wastebasket by its rim, swung it around and offered it; his paper would go thunking in.

James was an eccentric kid, my favorite kind. I never knew how much of this eccentricity was height. He sometimes seemed peculiarly young, since he had the altitude but not the attitude of a man; and yet there was something elderly about him, too. He never returned a book without telling me that it was on time. Every now and then, when he returned one late, he was nearly frantic, almost angry; I didn't know whether it was at me for requiring books back at a certain time, or with himself for disregarding the due date.

He'd been coming in for a year when I finally met his mother. I didn't know her by sight: she was an exotic thing, with blond wavy hair down her back like a teenager, though she was thirty-five, ten years older than me. Her full cotton skirt had some sort of gold-flecked frosting swirled over the print.

"My son needs books," she said.

"Yes?" I did not like mothers who come in for their children; they are meddlesome. "Where is he?"

"In the hospital, up to Boston," she said. A doleful twang pinched her voice. "He wants books on history."

"How old is he?"

"Twelve-but-smart," she said. She wouldn't look me in the eye, and she trilled her fingertips over the edge of the counter. "Ummm . . . Robert the Bruce? Is that somebody?"

"Yes," I said. James and I had been discussing him. "Is this for James? Are you Mrs. Sweatt?"