

Virginia Reviews



Erskine, Kathryn. *Mockingbird*. New York: Philomel Books, 2010. 235 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0399252648. \$15.99 (hardcover).

Caitlin's world is black and white, and she likes it that way, whether it's her view of life or her meticulous monotone drawings. Since the Day Our Life Fell Apart when her brother Devon was killed in a school shooting, she and her widowed father keep to simple routines. This is important to kids like Caitlin, a fifth-grader with Asperger's syndrome. Clear boundaries make it easier to cope, especially when she's trying hard to follow her counselor's advice to Look at the Person and Mind Your Manners.

As readers follow Caitlin through her days at school—meeting with the school counselor when she has a TRM (Tantrum Rage Meltdown), trying dutifully to make friends even though she prefers to be a “team of one”—they will learn to see the world as Caitlin does. She may be socially inept and literal-minded, but she also has a startling gift for humor and truth-telling. Her friendship with a first-grader, and her hard-earned ability to feel empathy, even for the cousin of the boy who shot her brother, reassure Caitlin—and readers—that she will be ready for the next step in her life. By the end of the book, she even accepts a teacher's gift of pastels and decides she's ready to add color to her black-and-white world.

Telling her story in the first person allows Erskine to develop secondary characters through Caitlin's unique viewpoint, including the fifth-grade “mean girls” who

rebuff her awkward attempts at friendship; and her grieving father, who is prompted to work through his sorrow thanks to Caitlin. Devon himself is still vividly present in Caitlin's thoughts and soon becomes dear to readers as well. References to his favorite book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, add another layer of resonance to Caitlin's story.

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autism spectrum lately, from the award-winning *Rules* by Cynthia Lord and *Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco X. Stork to *The London Eye Mystery* by Siobhan Dowd and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon. It's tricky for a writer to give voice to these characters in a way that's both authentic and artful, but Erskine pulls it off beautifully. This Charlottesville author's debut novel for young readers is sure to leave readers ten and up smiling through their tears.

—Caroline S. Parr, coordinator of youth services, Central Rappahannock Regional Library



Thompson, James C., II. *The Birth of Virginia's Aristocracy*. Edited by Deb Strubel. Index by Kathleen Strattan. Alexandria, VA: Commonwealth Books, 2010. 151 pp. ISBN-13 (hardcover): 978-0-9825922-0-5. ISBN-13 (e-book): 978-0-9825922-1-2.

The transformation of Virginia from a struggling sixteenth-century English colony to the Old Dominion of the eighteenth century brought with it the development of a class system that included men whose ownership of property garnered them wealth and enabled them to become the ruling class. In *The Birth of Virginia's Aristocracy*, James Thompson credits much of the success of the colony, and of the building of an aristocracy, to Sir Edwin Sandys (pronounced Sands). Sandys was one of the original English settlers who arrived in Virginia, and Thompson considers him an outstanding political philosopher and social visionary.

Thompson's book supplies a general review of the history of the Virginia colony, beginning in 1584 when England's Queen Elizabeth licensed Sir Walter Raleigh to colonize America. The two ships Raleigh sent across the Atlantic came to land that Raleigh named “Virginia” in honor of the queen who had recently knighted him. Although Raleigh presented colonization as an opportunity to spread God's word to the heathens and counter Spain's own expansion in the New World, it was most important to Raleigh as a moneymaking, treasure-seeking venture.

When Raleigh was sent to the Tower of London for his part in the “Main Plot,” a conspiracy to dethrone England's new king,

James Stuart of Scotland, others in England stepped in to take Virginia for themselves. King James responded in 1606 by providing grants to establish two colonies in Virginia. One colony would be ruled by a syndicate of London merchants and gentlemen, the other by a syndicate of Plymouth-area merchants and gentlemen. Both of these were to be overseen by a thirteen-member council appointed by King James. Known as the Council of Virginia, it became the core of the Virginia Company. The expenses of launching the venture were the king's responsibility. Property and produce were to be owned jointly by the settlers in what historians call a communal plan.

But the colonists met hardships that quickly decimated their ranks. King James, angry at the huge cost of the venture, rechartered the Virginia Company, transferring control of and funding for the colony from the crown to private investors.

The communal plan still hamstrung the colony's development, and Thompson writes that this lack of private economic incentives was the problem. Sir Thomas Dale and Captain John Smith presented the need for a new plan. Thus in 1616 the Virginia Company began making land distributions to its investors. The introduction of private land ownership attracted a different kind of adventurer to the New World. Under the leadership of Sir Edwin Sandys, the Virginia Company instituted in 1618 a "headright" system that granted fifty acres of land to people who paid their own way to Virginia and lived on the land for three years. This and the opportunity to make a profit by planting and selling tobacco attracted entrepreneurs to the New World. Sandys further promoted the success of these entrepreneurs by creating a general assembly in which they

could make laws to promote their common good. United under one government for the express purpose of preserving their personal property, the leading men formed a commonwealth, and Virginia's early plantations shaped its first civil society.

Thompson's premise in *The Birth of Virginia's Aristocracy* is that it was more than the ongoing growth in wealth and power of the leading entrepreneurs that led to the formation of Virginia's aristocracy. On page 1, Thompson con-

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tends that it also had to do with "a seldom-mentioned transfer of allegiance by Colonel Richard Lee II from his squabbling, fragmented community to a distant English Lord." Not until chapter seven do we learn that this is Lord Fairfax, and that Lee's allegiance to him, subsequently followed by that of other leading colonists, added social pedigree to their wealth and power. On page 101, Thompson says, "This transfer of allegiance completed the birth of Virginia's aristocracy."

At only 150 pages, *The Birth of Virginia's Aristocracy* presents much historical data, but with a lack of detail that makes it difficult to follow. While reading, I repeatedly scrambled to other Virginia history resources to fill in gaps where it seemed that Thompson assumed his reader would know what he was talking about. For example,

on page 10, Thompson writes, "Sir Francis Drake rescued the survivors of the doomed settlement on his visit in 1586. Subsequent efforts to revive the colony were unsuccessful." Nowhere does Thompson name this colony (The Lost Colony of Roanoke, North Carolina). On page 46, Thompson writes that "By far the greatest share of the company's new funds came from the lotteries that King James had licensed the company to conduct in 1612." No explanation is made, however, as to what these lotteries entailed. In these and other instances I wished for the author to expound in the text. Providing all the details would make the book accessible to a general audience.

There are other trouble spots in the book. The acknowledgements contain typographical inconsistencies and errors. Between the table of contents and the introduction, Thompson includes a lengthy list of illustrations that would work better at the end of the book. Each chapter begins with a type of synopsis, set apart from the main text and written in a different tone and style. However, there are no attributions as to who wrote these. If they are by Thompson, I wonder why they are not simply incorporated into the chapter itself.

With a graduate degree in philosophy from the University of Virginia, Thompson explains that he is writing "through a philosophical filter." He includes brief mentions of the leading political philosophers of the day—Thomas Hobbes, Sir Robert Filmer, and John Locke—writing that the actual process by which Virginia and its civil society were formed did not match their theories.

James Thompson wrote *The Birth of Virginia's Aristocracy* as the culmination of his research as a Batten Fellow at the International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia. Thompson's book is one in a series

by Commonwealth Books called Pocket Book Histories of America: People and Events.

—Susan Ujka Larson, branch manager and Internet services librarian, Fairfax County Public Library



Edds, Margaret. *Finding Sara: A Daughter's Journey*. Louisville, KY: Butler Books, 2009. 304 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-935497-06-6. \$15.00 (soft-cover).

It isn't unusual for many of us, especially as we get older, to wish we knew more about our parents when they were young. Particularly after they're gone, and even more so if a parent was lost when we were too young to form any solid memories. Virginia author Margaret Edds was three when she lost her mother, Sara Barnes Edds. But later Margaret found a treasure: letters her mother had written from her childhood until the year of her death at age thirty-five. What they revealed was an incredibly rich portrait of a young woman in early twentieth-century Appalachia who loved life, her family, books, learning, and the world at large. And through those letters, Margaret—herself trying to navigate the grief and anger of a broken marriage—discovered revelations about herself as well.

The "hillbilly" stereotype persists to this day, including casting Appalachian residents as unintelligent and violent. But Sara, born in 1915 to a farming family, smashes this stereotype from age eleven on. She not only loved the simple pleasures the occasionally lonely but "unspeakably lovely" countryside offered a child in unelectrified Delina, Tennessee, but also great literature: she writes that she has been reading *David Copperfield* and *Little Women*, and just finished *Jo's Boys*. But at sixteen her best friend dies, and Sara seems to decide that she must live life to the full-

est however she thinks best. As she prepares to leave high school, she writes, "The past is gone; the future is uncertain; the present is all I have. May I live today so that my tomorrows may be happy ones."

Her daughter Margaret gives readers no up-front biography about Sara except small, general sketches. Instead, she shares the immediacy she felt when she read the hundreds of letters, plus ones written to Sara—such as by a roguish boyfriend named Bud who broke Sara's heart. "Sara, Sara,

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run while you can," her daughter warns a half-century later. "Too late." Eventually the letters trace Sara meeting her future husband Tom—himself every bit as eloquent as Sara—and deal with her lingering feelings for Bud and her hesitancy about growing close to a man again. Sara recounts the brief but precious times she and Tom spend together while he is serving during World War II and Sara is far from home working in a bustling, brand-new community where nobody knows exactly who or what they're working for: the atomic bomb city of Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Happily, true love wins. "Foolish of me to have questioned Tom's courting skills," Margaret tells us. "Genuine devotion outshines Bud's glib tongue."

Working together across the decades, Sara and Margaret also

give us a picture of the places and eras Sara witnessed: the childhood idylls of Delina; the thriving and exuberant coal town of Lynch, Kentucky; being on the periphery of the mining violence of Harlan County, Kentucky; and the teeming work and social life of Oak Ridge amid constant secrecy and the watchful eyes of seemingly countless guards. Sara is stubborn, but not hidebound, even in recording events—first depicting her anger at striking miners, blaming them for holding up the war effort, then admitting she can't be upset at their wanting a higher salary since she pulled up roots for the same reason. The late 1940s are dominated by the peaceful, settled post-war life of raising a family when both Sara and America were hopeful that that the future was a bright one.

Margaret's own journey, as mirrored by these letters, with a personality formed by never having a mother growing up, weaves in and out of Sara's life inextricably but never obtrusively. Of the short time she had with her mother, she writes, "But I cannot read the letters of the next three years without knowing that, if I have a confidence toward life, a resiliency and a sense of self-worth, it was planted and tended by her." By the time Sara is reaching the end of her life—not realizing it was such—readers may share Margaret's heartbreak: "I want to scream, to rewind the tape, to interrupt the relentless forward motion of the doomed. Consult five more doctors, Sara. Take 1,000 penicillin shots. Get into bed and do not move."

Margaret often stumbles through her own later life without Sara present, as shown in the aftermath of her first panic attack: "Many years, and a few more episodes, pass before I learn that the miserable feeling has a name and, most likely, a cause tracing back to a far more pivotal loss." Ultimately, the

letters become not only a treasure, but therapy. Not a miracle—“Be honest, now. Did I...expect it? No. Wish for it? Long to slip through that impenetrable veil? The emptiness answers for me. Yes.” Not a cure, but a salve of hope and reassurance.

Memoirs, even secondhand ones, can often be self-serving on one end of the spectrum, saccharine on the other. But Margaret discusses her own life just enough to put her loss in perspective without slipping the book into maudlin shadows. She lets Sara speak for herself, picking out letters that reveal her best, smartest, and most romantic aspects, but also her temper, failures, and even the occasional narrow-mindedness. Sara becomes a human being to the reader, like friends we’ve known, reaching across sixty years with honesty but no apologies.

Finding Sara doesn’t need to be confined to readers who are primarily interested in memoirs, or Appalachia, or books about confronting grief. This is also a love story, and an easy lesson about how much life can be lived in a limited space of time.

—Danny Adams, evening services librarian assistant, Ferrum College



Poe-tic License

Stashower, Daniel. *The Beautiful Cigar Girl: Mary Rogers, Edgar Allan Poe, and the Invention of Murder*. New York: Berkley Books, 2006. 400 pp. ISBN-10: 0425217825 (2007 edition). \$15 (trade paperback).

During the summer of 1841, a young girl named Mary Rogers took a sales job for John Anderson’s Tobacco Emporium on Lower Broadway in Manhattan. She soon became renowned for her enigmatic beauty, and countless men flocked to the cigar shop to vie for her affections. Tragically, Rogers’s lifeless body was found floating

in the Hudson River not too long after she returned from a mysterious disappearance. The brutality and suspicious circumstances of her death not only spurred a frantic investigation by police, but also a frenzy among journalists to expose the true and grisly facts of the crime. Among those compelled to solve the murder of the beautiful cigar girl was famed Virginia author Edgar Allan Poe. Although the mystery of Mary Rogers’s death continues to remain unsolved, several new types of print media

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emerged from the chaos of her untimely demise. At least, that’s the argument made by Daniel Stashower in *The Beautiful Cigar Girl: Mary Rogers, Edgar Allan Poe, and the Invention of Murder*.

Perhaps best known for his five mystery novels, Stashower has written prolifically for such publications as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Smithsonian Magazine*. In 2008, he won the Edgar Award for his exceptionally well-researched biography *Teller of Tales: The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle*. In *The Beautiful Cigar Girl*, Stashower deftly combines his talent for vivid storytelling with a skillful eye for critical historical analysis. The result is an elegantly written account of several intertwining historical phenomena in antebellum New York, all of which contribute to a better understanding of American print history.

By setting his serious critical analysis to the exhilarating pace

of a mystery novel, Stashower fuses several events and historical accounts into a single compelling story. His lush descriptions of the area of New York known as the “The Five Points” are matched only by his uncanny ability to juggle several narratives at once. In doing so, Stashower demonstrates that print phenomena are not created in a vacuum, but rather emerge from a series of discursive events and influences. In order to bolster his arguments about the invention of antebellum American print media, he considers several contributing social, economic, and technological factors. While the book may feel as though it constantly shifts from one narrative to another, Stashower’s shrewd pacing and inventive storytelling make *The Beautiful Cigar Girl* an unusual yet relevant addition to the discipline of print history.

In addition to being exceptionally well written, *The Beautiful Cigar Girl* is exceedingly well researched. Stashower validates his conclusions by drawing from a wide variety of sources, often quoting them directly. While Stashower acknowledges that insufficient records were kept of homicides in 1840s New York, he is still able to amass a substantial number of newspaper and tabloid accounts of the crime. This is especially important as he argues that the Rogers case was the main catalyst for expanding lurid journalism in America. Some of the publications cited include local tabloids such as “penny presses” and “tattlers,” newspapers such as the *New York Herald*, and annual subscription publications such as the *Commercial Advertiser*. Such a wealth of primary sources not only lends historical credibility to Stashower’s arguments, but also breathes life into his subjects. Unfortunately, Stashower gives equal attention to the biographical history and elaborate writing process of Edgar Allan Poe. While

such details are fascinating and well researched, they often distract from the main thrust of Stashower's argument, which ultimately relies on tying Poe's fictional account of Mary Rogers's murder to similar accounts in the press.

Stashower's book is most successful in its ability to creatively address major issues relevant to print history scholarship. By focusing on the power-sharing relationship among publishers and their readers, Stashower confirms Robert Darnton's theory that print culture is comprised of a complex communication circuit in which the reader has dual roles.¹ In the first half of the book, Stashower demonstrates the ability of the printed word to commodify, alter, and disseminate facts about Rogers for the entertainment of a deeply patriarchal society. He does this by quoting several publications that focus on Rogers as a sexualized object of desire among men, even after her death. However, Stashower is quick to expose the strategy of the press to keep from offending their readers with such sexually charged accounts by including language that conveyed genuine concern for Rogers. He also cites instances where publishers defended their exploitation of Rogers as a way of educating the public. In the end, he argues that while publishers sensationalized Rogers's death due to public demand, they also took great care not to offend their readers' sensibilities.

In the second half of the book, Stashower explores a second aspect of power and print culture surrounding the Rogers case. For this, Stashower turns to Edgar Allan Poe's adaptation of the Rogers case, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in which Poe raced to solve the identity of her murderer before the newspapers. Stashower argues that Poe's adaptation should be credited with inventing the detective genre by introducing a single authorita-

tive detective, C. Auguste Dupin. While Stashower does not spend enough time defending this point, he does make the compelling argument that Dupin introduced a new kind of authority over readers. Since Dupin was the only one in the story to know the true nature of the murder, readers were relegated to following along with him as he alone discovered the true name of the killer. Although Stashower does not explicitly discuss parallels between Dupin and Poe, his analysis does touch on Poe's desire to

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dictate what readers thought about the Rogers case. Since the story had implications in real life, Poe effectively extended this authority into the realm of actual police work. Unfortunately for Poe, he was too hasty in his conclusions, and his version of the story was soon discredited. Despite Poe's failure, Stashower stresses Poe's need for control by detailing his revision process over three separate installations of the story. While such detail feels heavy-handed at times, the gripping biographical history of Edgar Allan Poe provides further context to an already complex history.

Overall, *The Beautiful Cigar Girl* is a creative and compelling addition to the discipline of print history. Not only does it satisfy several criteria set forth in the essay "What Is the History of Books?" by Robert Darnton, but it also does so in a fresh, imaginative manner. First of all, the book uses Mary

Rogers's murder as a case study to explain how ideas were transmitted through print in antebellum New York. Second, it demonstrates the profound influence those ideas had on such cultural institutions as the judicial system and other social and religious networks. Finally, the book constitutes a fresh approach to traditional scholarship, often merging several disciplines to fully address the complex and discursive circuit of print communication. While Stashower's book occasionally becomes mired in the minutiae of Mary Rogers's and Poe's personal lives, its commentary on how power functioned within the print culture of 1840s New York makes it a valuable addition to scholarship on the history of print, as well as other disciplines concerned with antebellum literature and society.

1. Robert Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?," *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 67.

—Jessica Ritchie, supervisor,
Hofheimer Art Library, Old Dominion
University



Stanley, J. B. *The Battered Body: A Supper Club Mystery*. Woodbury, Minn.: Midnight Ink, 2009. 301 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-7387-1472-1. \$13.95 (trade paperback).

In the Supper Club mysteries, Richmond author J. B. Stanley chronicles life in Quincy's Gap, a small town in the beautiful Blue Ridge region of Virginia. Head of the rural library, protagonist James Henry gave up a beloved and promising career as an English professor at William and Mary to move back to Quincy's Gap to help his father following his mother's death. As a member of a small dieter's support group, James works with his friends in the Supper Club to help solve murders that threaten their community. *The Battered Body* centers on the wedding of James's father Jackson to the club's one-

time cooking teacher, Milla. When Milla's sister, Paulette Martine, the Diva of Dough, arrives to bake the perfect wedding cake, the mystery quickly heats up. Paulette's acerbic personality and her seeming determination to belittle and demean almost everyone around her rapidly earn the animosity of many of the town's inhabitants. Soon enough, her murdered body is found covered in dough.

True to the cozy mystery genre, the charm of this series is its memorable and likeable cast of characters, along with that comfortable hometown feeling—yet each book also contains plenty of suspense as the characters investigate, and often get far too close to, the crimes. Each volume advances the characters' lives a little more, and feels like a visit with old friends. In *The Battered Body*, readers get to witness mail carrier Bennett Marshall finally getting his shot at *Jeopardy*, a lifelong dream. James himself finds there's more to his family than he realized. There's even a hilarious bit of parody as journalist Murphy Alistair writes her own version of the Supper Club's

adventures in a bit of metafiction reminiscent of Agatha Christie's humorous send-ups of her Poirot books via the character of mystery writer Ariadne Oliver.

Known for its recipes and nutritional facts, the series this time appropriately offers up plenty of

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cakes and baked goods. Wedding cake icons at the start of chapters provide calorie counts for items contained within, while the chapters are named for food that plays a role. The book includes recipes for "Lucy's Hot Buttered Rum," "Mrs. Waxman's Sweet Potato Pecan Pie," "The Diva's Eggnog Cake," "The Diva's Butter Rum Frosting," and "The Diva's Praline Pecan Cake." All appear at appropriate points in the plot, and puzzle-solvers may

take extra pleasure in speculating on which foods will be featured as recipes. Indeed, Stanley invokes a strong sense of taste in these books in which food and drink are so well described. Both male and female characters engage in cooking and baking at varying levels of complexity whose practical descriptions may help build confidence in the reader to try these recipes. In *The Battered Body*, a nutritionist's sensible approach to healthy eating also offers good advice and hope not only to James Henry, but to the reader as well.

By the end of a book, the varied threads of the plot—including a momentous surprise that awaits James—are woven together so well that one feels comfortable leaving the characters to enjoy their lives during our few months' absence, while having plenty to look forward to in their next adventure. These cozies truly are a treat, and there's a special delight in a book that moves us further along in the characters' lives while wrapping up well on its own.

—Lyn C. A. Gardner 