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**Davis Enterprise, The (CA)**

**Books are always the perfect present**

Elisabeth Sherwin/Enterprise staff writer

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Each of the four public events at UC Davis that featured author John McPhee earlier this month attracted standing-room-only crowds. Based on the hundreds of people who turned out to see him, he must be Davis' current No. 1 choice in nonfiction writers. So any recommendations for holiday book purchases must put McPhee at the top of the list.

For instance, at Bogey's Books in downtown Davis, McPhee's two local bestsellers, "The Founding Fish," and "Assembling California," are available. But you'll also find other McPhee titles tucked away in hidden corners of the store depending on the eclectic subject matter: There are 25 copies of 11 McPhee titles in seven area within the store. (But don't bother looking for "Levels of the Game," McPhee's 1969 book on a tennis match between Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner. I recently bought the last two copies.)

If you have anyone on your holiday list interested in Alaska, birch bark canoes, oranges, farmers' markets, local geology, fine dining, Switzerland, or fishing -- McPhee is your man.

It's amazing to hear McPhee talk about his writing style, considering this New Yorker magazine freelancer has written 28 books and is nothing less than hugely successful.

"I start (writing) at a zero level of confidence," McPhee told a University Club audience. "My first draft is an uncomfortable experience in many ways. I then relax and do better on the second draft.

"On any given day I just can't get anything done," he added. "I work in a turret on top of the geology building in Princeton. I have a small form of writer's block that I have to break through each day," he said.

"Joan Didion calls it 'the low dread,'" McPhee said.

"I sit there looking at my notes until something gathers. A component of that is panic at the thought of going home with nothing done. Around 4 p.m., I start to write and I always quit at 7 p.m.

"The way to get anything done is to be there everyday and over a whole year it adds up," McPhee said.

It's surprising and somehow reassuring to know that McPhee has trouble writing each day. New and seasoned writers, take heart.

Other books out in the time for the 2003 holiday season include Joan Didion's "Where I was From," a book of reflections about California and her life and work. The native Californian who lives in New York has befuddled critics with this book. She includes much history and a variety of observations on the state of the state but fails to answer the big question: "So what?"

Of local interest

UC Davis English Professor Max Byrd has a new book out, too. It's "Shooting the Sun," about Selena Cott, a Victorian female astronomer's expedition on the Santa Fe Trail in the 1830s.

Earlier in his career, Byrd wrote a few mysteries. He has done much better with historical novels, the last three of which have been about presidents: "Jefferson," "Jackson" and "Grant."

Another academic associated with UCD, Kelly Stewart, has written a book titled "Gorillas: Natural History & Conservation" published by WorldLife Library. The full-color oversized paperback contains many wonderful photographs of these wild creatures.

Stewart is a research associate in the anthropology department at Davis. She first went to Rwanda in 1973 to be a research assistant to Dian Fossey at Karisoke Research Center and completed her dissertation on the behavior of immature gorillas. She received a degree from Cambridge University in 1982. With her husband, UCD Professor Alexander Harcourt, she co-directed the Karisoke Research Center 1981-1983.

The book is appropriate for adults and children ages 10 and up.

"But you'd have to be a kid pretty interested in gorillas," laughs Stewart. Still, she has given programs in Davis elementary schools about gorillas and would like to do so again.

"I talk a lot about conservation (in the book) and the message I'd like to get across is that animals need the help and concern of humans," she said.

The future of gorillas is not hopeless, she said.

"The gorillas in Rwanda are doing very well," she added. "And after all they've gone through, it shows that there are reasons for hope."

"Gorillas" (\$16.95) is available at the UC Davis Book Store.

A poet who died too young is remembered and memorialized in "How to Be This Man: The Walter Pavlich Memorial Poetry Anthology," published by his widow, UCD English Professor Sandra McPherson.

"In honor of Walter, this collection brings together many men's evocations and invocations of maleness, boyhood, guyness, the days of men's lives," said McPherson, editor of Swan Scythe Press.

The collection includes four poems by Pavlich, the presents he left behind.

"On a summer day in 2002, my always young, always kind, and ever-funny husband and soul-mate left his loved ones without his presence, except for the present of his poems," McPherson said in the introduction. Other UCD poets included in the wide-ranging collection include Clarence Major and Francisco Aragon.

If you are interested in books about Davis or Woodland, you're in luck. **Mark Francis** of UC Davis has written "Village Homes: A Community by Design" about Davis' most famous neighborhood. The book, filled with color photographs, was published by the Landscape Architecture Foundation.

And "Crafting a Valley Jewel" is David L. Wilkinson's book about the architects and builders of Woodland. Published by the Yolo County Historical Society, this book explains why our neighbor has more quality home styles in better condition across a wider time period than any comparably sized California city. And it's right here in Yolo County.

A book that focuses more broadly on the Central Valley is "The King of California: J. G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire" (PublicAffairs, \$27.50) by Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman. A history of California, the book focuses on the untold story of America's biggest farmer, Boswell, who controls more than \$1 billion worth of water rights and real estate in the heart of the state.

#### Children

And if you are looking for children's books, don't forget classics like "The Borrowers" by Mary Norton, now available in a lovely 50th anniversary hardback edition (Harcourt, \$19.95).

Norton (1903-1992) was an actress and playwright in England, where she lived most of her life. She is remembered today mainly for her award-winning children's books about the tiny Clock family. She wrote five novels about the Borrowers -- "The Borrowers" is the first.

A great new picture book to read to the young ones is "How I Became A Pirate" (Harcourt, \$16) by Melinda Long, illustrated by David Shannon. This is a delight. Little Jeremy Jacob is only too happy to join a band of pirates on an exciting voyage and has the time of his life, until he finds out that the adventurous life has some drawbacks. Pirates, for instance, are not tucked in at night by their moms.

#### Politics

And no holiday season with family and friends would be complete without a loud argument about politics, right?

If you want to gather ammunition in advance, get a copy of Saul Landau's "The Pre-Emptive Empire: A Guide to Bush's Kingdom" (Pluto Press). Landau, the ultimate critic, offers a scathing and witty account of George W. Bush's world before and after the 9-11 terrorist attacks.

As the blurb says: "He dissects the blatant imperialism of U.S. international policy, and shows how Bush's use of patriotism obfuscates debate in Congress and the media."

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