

SHELF AWARENESS, August 19, 2009

Deeper Understanding

## Betsy-Tacy Books Have High-Profile Following

In a *Newsweek* piece, "My Five Most Important Books," Laura Lippman included the Betsy-Tacy novels by Maud Hart Lovelace--in particular *Betsy in Spite of Herself*. "There are two kinds of women: those who know these books (including Anna Quindlen and Bette Midler) and those who don't," she stated.

In the former category is Jennifer Hart, v-p and associate publisher of Harper Perennial and Harper Paperbacks, who is a lifelong fan of the children's novels. Her affinity for them--along with the recommendation of another devotee, librarian Nancy Pearl--led her to suggest that several of the later books in the series, which had been out of print, be reissued as Harper Perennial Modern Classics editions. "They deserve a place in Perennial Classics alongside *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*," said Hart, editor of the new editions.

Three volumes--each with two novels--go on sale September 29: *Heaven to Betsy/Betsy in Spite of Herself*, *Betsy Was a Junior/Betsy and Joe* and *Betsy and the Great World/Betsy's Wedding*. They feature cover art that appeared on the original publications and have forewords by well-known scribes: Laura Lippman, Anna Quindlen and Meg Cabot. Supplemental material, excerpted from Sharla Scannell Whalen's *The Betsy-Tacy Companion*, includes archival photographs and information about the author and the real-life figures who provided inspiration for her characters.

Hart Lovelace's highly autobiographical, 10-book series follows the adventures of Betsy Ray of Deep Valley, Minn., and her friends Tacy and Tib from the age of five through her marriage at the start of World War I. The Harper Perennial Modern Classics editions begin with Betsy's high school years. (The first four novels are available from the HarperCollins children's division.)

Meg Cabot first read the Betsy-Tacy books several years ago on the recommendation of her editor. "The amazing thing is how much the same everything is, despite the fact that they take place 100 years ago," noted Cabot, author of the Princess Diaries series and other works. "While to me the romances are the main appeal, there are strong storylines about friendships (betrayal! cliques!) and family, plus Betsy, through all the books, is always pursuing her dream of becoming a published writer. What, exactly, is there not to love?"

Cabot delivered the keynote address at the Betsy-Tacy Convention last month in Mankato, Minn. (the basis for Deep Valley). "It was great to meet so many dedicated readers," she said. "I met a lot of mothers who were there with their daughters. The great thing about the series is that it starts with books about Betsy when she was five (written at that reading level) and end with her getting married (written for young adult/adult readers) so you really can start reading them with very young children."

For young adults and adults new to the series, Kathleen Baxter, co-founder of the Maud Hart Lovelace Society, a children's librarian and *School Library Journal* columnist, recommends *Heaven to Betsy*. Cabot might disagree since her favorite is Betsy and Joe, but they concur on the timeless aspect of the books. "They're sometimes considered dated and old-fashioned by people who haven't read them, but there's nothing better than what Maud Hart Lovelace wrote," said Baxter. In the foreword to *Betsy and the Great World/Betsy's Wedding*, Quindlen even makes the case for Betsy Ray as "feminist icon."

More than 200 readers from 31 states and as far away as France turned out at the convention. Hart, who spoke on a panel about keeping Maud Hart Lovelace's legacy alive, is working with the regional Betsy-Tacy Society chapters and other organizations across the country to plan events at bookstores and libraries. Gatherings will be "aimed at 9- to 12-year-old girls so that we can grow new fans. There will be games, readings and other fun activities culled from the books," Hart said. Grown-ups are welcome, too.

Hart plans to work closely with booksellers in the Midwest to promote the novels, which are Midwest Connections picks for October, and reach out to readers via the Internet. There are three related Facebook groups (I Want to Be Betsy-Tacy-Tib, the Virtual Crowd and Maud Hart Lovelace) and an active listserv discussion board about the author. The Betsy-Tacy Society is hosting a book release party in Mankato on October 3.

When Hart traveled to Minnesota for the convention, she brought along two companions: her seven-month-old daughter and her sister. (You can read about her adventures on her blog at [http://www.bookclubgirl.com/book\\_club\\_girl/betsy-tacy-convention/](http://www.bookclubgirl.com/book_club_girl/betsy-tacy-convention/) .) Besides attending the convention, they toured Maud Hart Lovelace's childhood home and other sites associated with the Betsy-Tacy books. "It was a literary pilgrimage to a place that means a lot to my sister and me," Hart said. "Even though we don't agree on many things--she's a Red Sox fan, I'm a Yankees fan--this is something we've always had in common."--Shannon McKenna Schmidt