

The Archivist by Martha Cooley

1955-

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2004.

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Sidelights

Martha Cooley's first novel *The Archivist*, which was published in 1998, was greeted positively by several reviewers and described as "remarkably assured" by *Publishers Weekly*. The story revolves around Matt Lane, an elderly archivist who is in charge of the library holdings for an institution of higher learning. Among the holdings are poems which T. S. Eliot wrote to a woman friend while his own wife was committed to an asylum. Eliot's friend donated the poetry to the library on the condition that it remain sealed until the year 2020. While Eliot's situation bears painful resemblance to Lane's personal background, he has been able to avoid thinking about these similarities until a young graduate student named Roberta arrives on the scene, asking to see the poetry. While Lane denies the graduate student's request, the two find that they have much in common. Roberta has just discovered that her parents, who are converted Christians, were really Jews that fled Germany to escape the Holocaust. Roberta hopes to gain insight about T. S. Eliot's conversion to Catholicism by reading the sealed poetry.

But the whole matter also troubles Lane deeply--his past bears parallels to both Roberta's and T. S. Eliot's situations. Lane had once been married to Judith, a poet of Jewish background who was so troubled by the Holocaust that she devoted that last part of her life to researching and recording Nazi atrocities. She committed herself to an asylum at Lane's urging but then committed suicide. When Roberta appears in Lane's life and forces him to think about T. S. Eliot's life, Lane is shaken by the parallels from both situations and realizes that he shut himself off from his wife's pain as well as from the rest of the world in his archival safe haven.

A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* praised the book for capturing both the reader's intellect and emotions; the critic called the effort "an auspicious debut from a writer who already has mastered the craft." Brian Morton of the *New York Times Book Review* remarked on Cooley's ability to capture diverse character voices and declared that it is amazing that the novel works so well, given the seriousness of some of the questions that the book considers. But Morton also expressed the desire that the author had delved more deeply into the character of Judith. Diana Postlethwaite of the *Women's Review of Books* commented on the fact that the book presents an interesting dichotomy: the contrast between carefully planned organization (represented by the archivist Lane) and creative chaos and madness (represented by Lane's suicidal poet-wife Judith). According to Postlethwaite, Cooley skillfully showed that both types of experience lead to the truth for these characters. Postlethwaite assessed Judith's portrayal as powerful and effective, and could lead one to accept that madness was a reasonable way to react to the Holocaust. The reviewer concluded by saying that Cooley "served up a wonderful story, filled with rich interrelationships among love, faith, history, and the life of the mind."

The Archivist

by Martha Cooley

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born September 1, 1955. Memberships: Author's Guild, Editorial Freelancer Association. Address-
es: Agent: Gelfman Schneider, 250 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10107.

AWARDS: New York Times Notable Books, Fiction and Poetry, 1998; Library Journal Best Books, 1998.

CAREER: Writer.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR

FICTION

- The Archivist, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 1998.
- Thirty-three Swoons, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2005

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- Entertainment Weekly, May 8, 1998, p. 68.
- New York Times Book Review, April 26, 1998, p. 9.
- Publishers Weekly, February 16, 1998, p. 201.
- Women's Review of Books, July, 1998, p. 26.

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