



from

# The Giant's House

Elizabeth McCracken

James took out books on astronomy, ornithology:<sup>1</sup> sciences at once about tininess and height. He approached the desk with books he'd liked and asked for more—he knew it was easier to find more books with a good example in hand.

Then one day, in the first months of 1955—I remember looking over his head at some awful persistent Christmas decoration Astoria had stuck to the ceiling—he came to me without books. His height had become unwieldy; he reached out to touch walls as he walked, sometimes leaving marks way above where the other teenage boys smudged their hands. “I want books about people like me,” he said.

I thought I knew what he was talking about, but I wanted to be cautious. “What exactly about you?” I asked. I made myself think of all the things he could have meant: Boy Scouts, basketball players. Never jump to conclusions when trying to answer a reference question. Interview the patron.

1. **astronomy, ornithology** Astronomy is the study of the stars and planets. Ornithology is the study of birds.

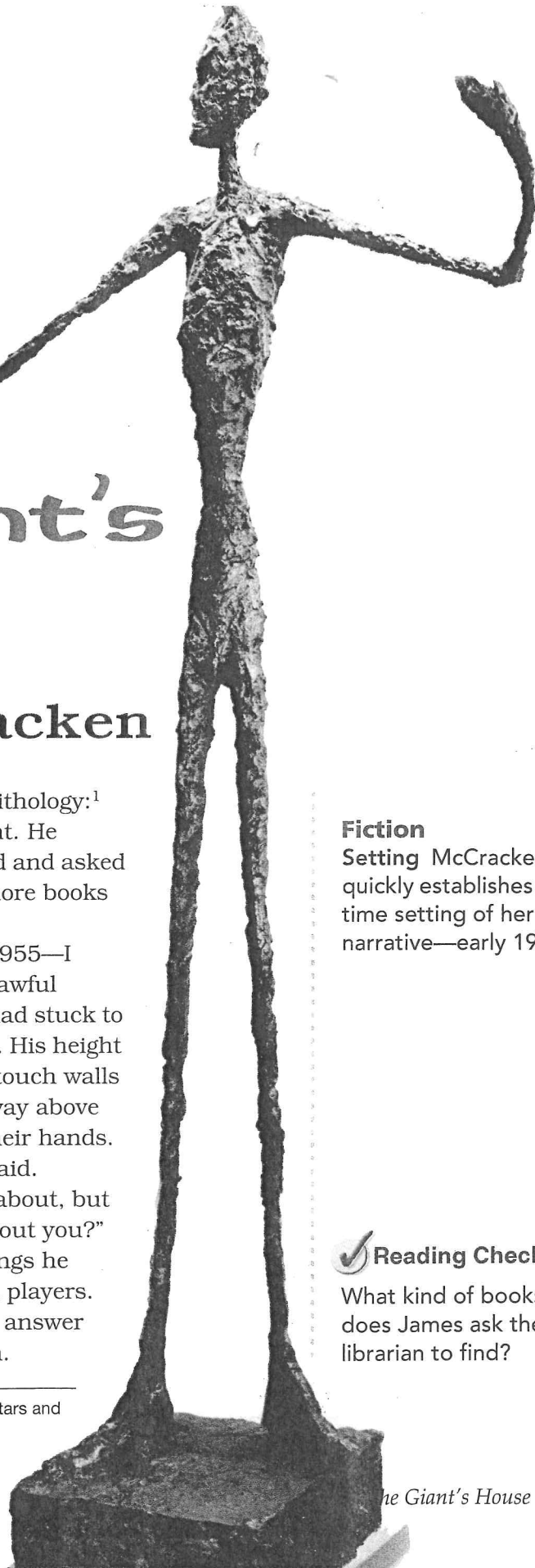
## Fiction

**Setting** McCracken quickly establishes the time setting of her narrative—early 1955.



## Reading Check

What kind of books does James ask the librarian to find?



“Tall people,” he said.

“Tall people? Just tall people in general?”

“Very tall people. Like *me*,” he said, clearly exasperated with my playing dumb. “What they do.”

“Okay,” I told him. “Try the card catalog. Look in the big books on the table—see those books?” I pointed. “Those are books of subject headings for the card catalog. Look under words that you think describe your topic.” James was used to me doing this: I gave directions but would not pull the books off the shelf for him. My job was to show people—even people I liked—how to use the library, not to use it for them. “Dig around,” I said. “Try height, try stature. Then look in the catalog for books.”

He nodded, leaned on the desk, and pushed off.

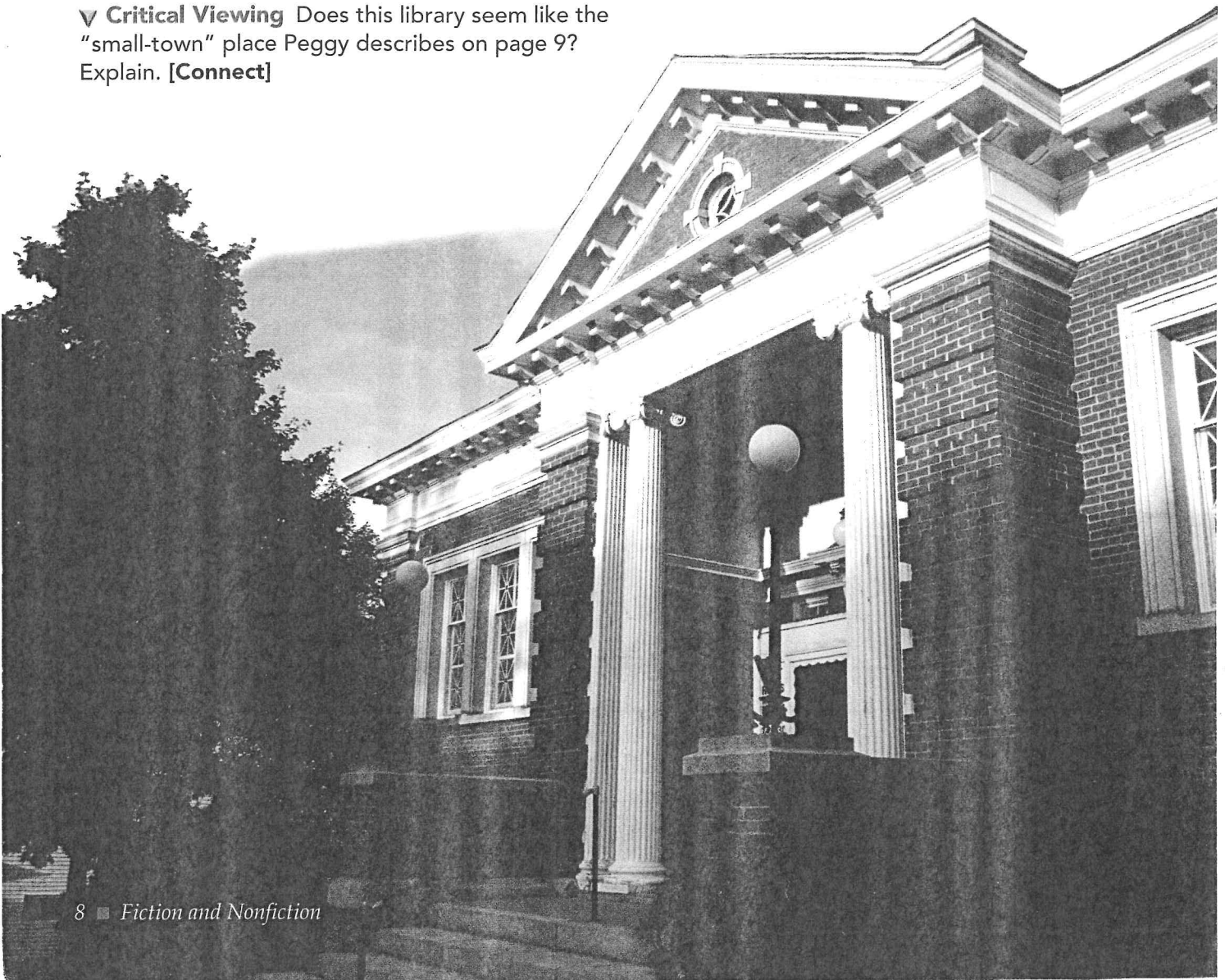
An hour later he headed out the door.

**Elizabeth  
McCracken**

**Author’s Insight**

Card catalogs have been replaced by computer catalogs. I miss them, even though computers are more efficient in almost every way.

▼ **Critical Viewing** Does this library seem like the “small-town” place Peggy describes on page 9? Explain. [**Connect**]





“Did you find what you needed?” I asked.

“There isn’t anything,” he said. “There was one book that sort of was about it, but I couldn’t find it on the shelf.”

“There’s something,” I told him. “Come back. We’ll look for it together.”

That night after closing, I hunted around myself. The only thing under *stature* was a book about growth and nutrition. I tried our two encyclopedias under height and found passing references. Not much.

In truth, my library was a small-town place, and this was a specialized topic. Still, I was certain I could find more. I got that familiar mania—there is information somewhere here, and I can find it, I have to. A good librarian is not so different from a prospector, her whole brain a divining rod. She walks to books and stands and wonders: here? Is the answer here? The same blind faith in finding, even when hopeless. If someone caught me when I was in the throes of tracking something *elusive*, I would have told them: but it’s out there. I can feel it. God *wants* me to find it.

That night I wandered the reference department, eyed the bindings of the encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases. James was so big I almost expected to locate him in the gazetteer.<sup>2</sup> I set my hands upon our little card catalog, curled my fingers in the curved handles of the drawers. Then I went to the big volumes of subject headings.

Looking under *height* and *stature* turned up nothing; *anthropometry* was not quite right. Then I realized the word I was looking for: *Giant*.

*Giant* described him. *Giant*, I knew, would lead me to countless things—not just the word, located in indexes and catalogs and encyclopedias, but the idea of Giant, the knowledge that the people that James wanted to read about, people who could be described as like him, were not just tall but giants. I sat in a spindle-backed chair in the reference room, waiting for a minute. Then I checked the volume of the Library of Congress headings. *Giants*. See also: *dwarfs*.

We did not have a book, but I found several encyclopedia entries. Nowadays I could just photocopy; but that night I wrote down the page and volume numbers, thinking I could not bear to tell him the word to look under. Most of the very tall people mentioned in the encyclopedia had worked in the circus as professional giants, so I went to our books on the circus.

The photographs showed enormous people. Not just tall, though of course they were that, often with an ordinary person posed

### Vocabulary Builder

**elusive** (ē lōō’ siv) *adj.* hard to grasp or retain mentally

### Elizabeth McCracken

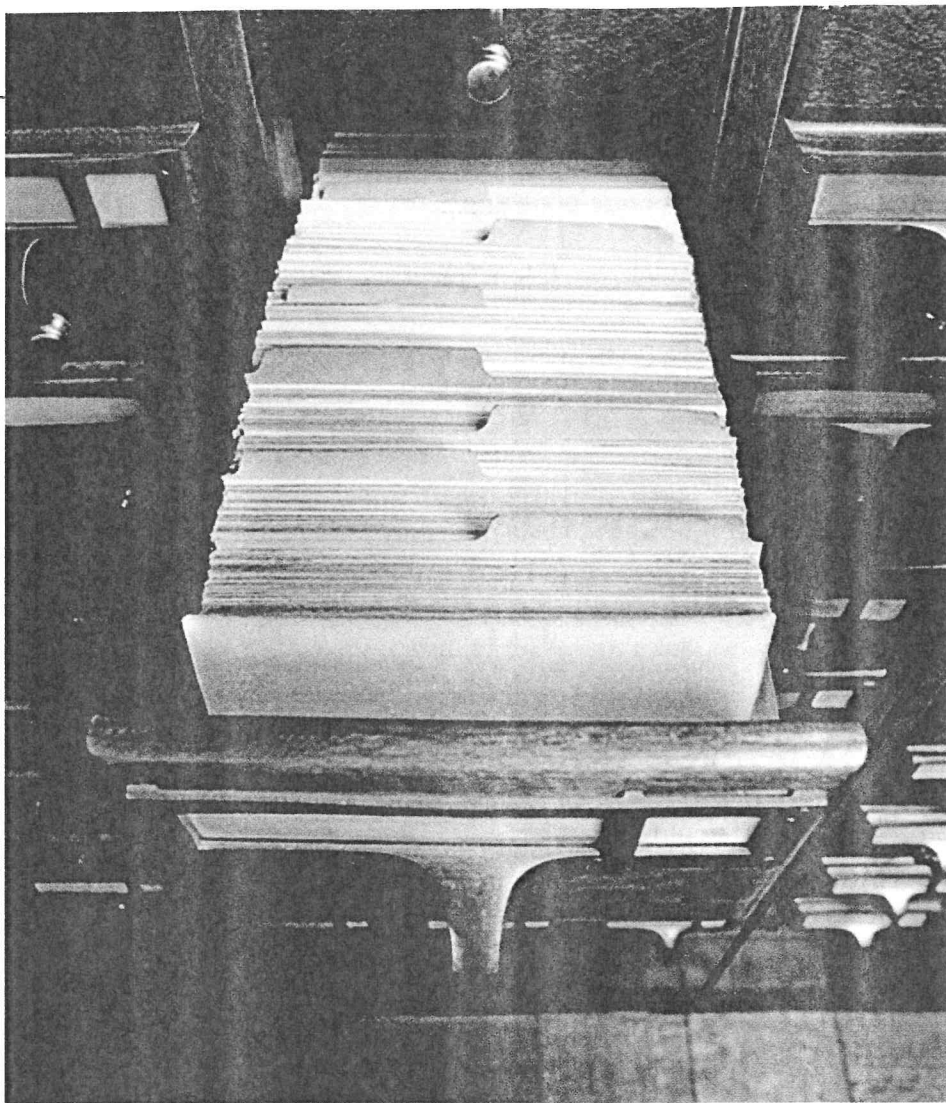
#### Author’s Insight

I love the word *anthropometry*, which means the measuring of human beings.

### ✓ Reading Check

What word does the librarian use to direct her search?

2. *gazetteer* (gaz’ ē tir’) *n.* dictionary or index of geographical names.



### ◀ Critical Viewing

Why might a card catalog like the one shown seem rich with possibility to a librarian like Peggy? [Speculate]

beside them. The tall people looked twice as big as the ambassador from the normal-sized, as if they were an entirely different race. The books described weak stomachs and legs and bones. Sometimes what made them tall showed in their faces: each feature looked like something disturbed in an avalanche, separate from the others, in danger of slipping off.

Anna Swann, the Nova Scotia Giantess, married Captain Bates, the Kentucky Giant. As a young woman at Barnum's Dime Museum in New York, Miss Swann had been in two fires; in the second she had to be lifted out by a crane. No ordinary over-the-shoulder rescue for a woman better than seven feet tall. She and her husband retired to Ohio, to a specially made house. Their church installed an extra-large pew.

Byrne, the Irish Giant, lived in fear of a certain doctor who lusted after his skeleton; he imagined the doctor's giant kettle ready to boil his bones.

### Fiction

**Characters** Real-life details about Anna Swann, Byrne, and Jack Earle make these characters more vivid.



Jack Earle was over seven feet tall, traveled with the circus for years; after his retirement he wrote poetry.

I took comfort in Anna Swann and her husband. They were solid-looking people. Respectable. They'd had two children, though neither survived. The book described them as *in love*, and you could believe that from the pictures: their complementary heights were just a lovely coincidence to their love affair. I found myself that late night a little jealous of Anna Swann and her handsome, bearded captain.

The books said that giants tended to exaggerate their heights for exhibition purposes. I did not know it then, but every person I read about was shorter than James grew to be.

The worst book was called *Medical Curiosities*. I say worst now. That is hindsight. The night I looked, I thought, in fact, that it was the best book—not because it was good or even accurate, but because it had the most pages on the subject I was researching. I found it under the subject heading *Abnormalities, human*. A terrible phrase, and one I knew I could not repeat to James. It was a late-nineteenth-century medical book, described two-headed people and parasitic twins and dwarfs. And giants. Not exactly information, but interesting: giants who had enormous or usual appetites; ones who grew throughout their lives or only after adolescence; professional giants and private citizens.

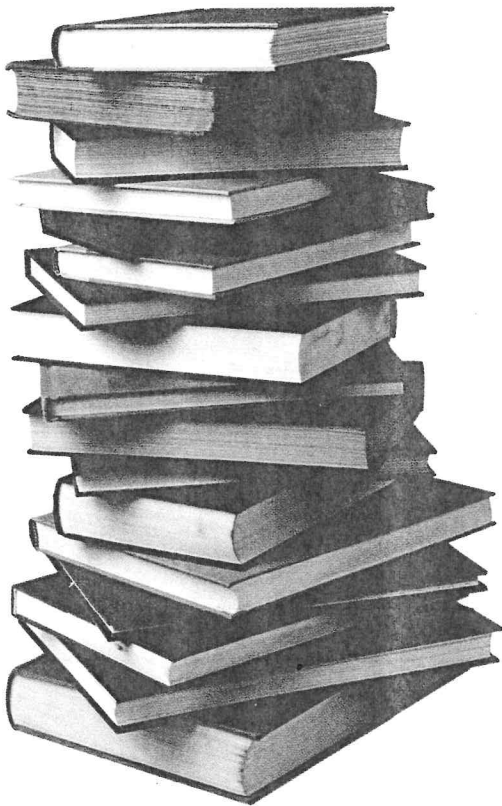
So I took that book, and the circus books, marked the pertinent places with the old catalog cards I used for scrap, and set them aside. Ready for him, so that he did not have to look in the index, or wander through the pages at all.

“Your tall friend is here,” Astoria said to me the next week. I was in my office, reading reviews. “He’s looking for you.”

James waited for me at the circ desk. “You said we could—”

“I looked,” I said. I’d stowed the books beneath the shelf. “Try these out.”

He took them to the big table in the front room. Read them.



### Elizabeth McCracken

#### Author’s Insight

I can’t remember whether I’ve seen this book or I made it up. There are definitely books with this title, but did I have one in mind? Who knows!

#### Vocabulary Builder

**pertinent** (pərt’*n* ənt)  
*adj.* relevant; having a connection to the matter at hand

#### ✓ Reading Check

Under what subject heading does the librarian finally find information that will be useful to James?

He made the sturdy chair, the same chair I'd sat in the night before, seem tiny.

Afterward he came up to me.

"How were they?" I asked. "Would you like to take them home?"

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "Thanks."

"Nothing useful here at all?"

"No," he said.

I tried to catch his eye. "Close?"

"Close. I guess." He pointed at *Medical Curiosities*. "I guess that's close."

I picked up the book and opened it to where the marker was, but he'd moved it to another page. A line drawing of a double-bodied baby looked up at me. Horrible. I snapped the book shut.

"I meant medical books," he said. "But new ones. Ones that say what goes wrong. How to cure it."

"Cures," I said. "Oh." Cures for giants? No such thing. No cure for height. Only preventive medicine. I said it as a question. "Cures? For tall people?"

"Yes," he said.

All I wanted was for him to explain it to me. It seemed presumptuous to come to any conclusions myself. I knew what he was talking about. I did. But what he wanted, I couldn't help him with.

Darla, the shelver, came rattling up with her metal cart. "Shelve these?" she said, pointing at the books. The catalog cards I'd used stuck out from the pages; James had lined them up, like a pack of cards he'd shuffled into them. "Hi, Jim," she said.

"Hi." He squinted down at her.

She stared at me; I waited for her to get back to shelving.

"Peggy. Shelve them, or not?"

"Not yet," I said. She sighed and pushed the cart off.

James stood in silence on the other side of the desk. He looked ready to leave.

"You mean how to stop growing," I said.

"Yes." Now he looked at me. "Medicine, or operations, or something."

"I'm not sure we have anything here," I said. That was a lie. I knew we didn't. "A medical library somewhere, perhaps. Or a university library. But really—" I started pulling the bookmarks from the books. I tried to sound gentle. "Really, you should ask your doctor."

"I have," he said. "I've asked a lot of doctors."

### **Fiction**

**Plot** Peggy's attempts at research finally cause James to reveal his real quest.

### **Elizabeth McCracken**

**Author's Insight** Earlier in the book, James comes to the library to learn how to do card and other magic tricks.