

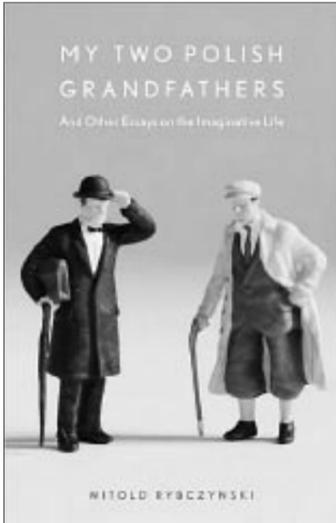
## MEMORIES: An immigrant 'three times over' looks back

By Wanda Urbanska  
JOURNAL BOOK REVIEWER

**MY TWO POLISH GRANDFATHERS: And Other Essays on the Imaginative Life.** By Witold Rybczynski. Scribner. 228 pages. \$25.

For the children of immigrants to North America — especially those who hail from impoverished or war-torn corners of the world — the business of growing up can be nothing short of wrenching. Despite North America's reputation as the "continent of immigrants," the on-the-ground experience here for children of new arrivals is almost universally one of stereotyping, prejudice and identity crisis. On the one hand, children of immigrants are linked to their parents, a bond brought even closer because of their shared loss of a homeland and culture; on the other hand, every cell in their young bodies seems to cry out for assimilation, conformity and the chance to shake the shackles of the past. In some cases, the desire to rise above the obstacles to success is so powerful that it infuses those immigrant children with a kind of turbo-charged accelerant to excel.

The celebrated writer and architect Witold Rybczynski certainly falls into this camp, as he reveals in his graceful, understated new memoir, *My Two Polish Grandfathers*. Rybczynski was born in 1943 in Scotland to Polish parents who were serving the Allied cause during World War II, alongside a sizable contingent of exiled Poles. Later, at age 10, he migrated with his family to Quebec, Canada, thus be-



*My Two Polish Grandfathers* retraces the roots of the author's family.

coming a Polish-Scottish-Canadian (and more recently, in the 1990s, an American). "I'm an immigrant three times over," he writes in this collection of nine loosely structured essays. Rybczynski recalls that on his first day of school in Canada, "a fifth grade classmate pointed at my shorts and said, 'Do you ever look stupid.' I put away my shorts and cricket skills, and learned to wear blue jeans and play hockey. It took a little longer to lose my English accent, but eventually that, too, disappeared."

His British persona proved easier to shed than his Polish identity, as he

reveals in these essays centered on the growth of his imaginative life and powers, and the connection between his emergence as an architect and cultural historian and his forebears in Poland. Though his parents had made a conscious decision — first in Scotland and later in Canada — not to "impose their Polishness" on their sons, deciding "that my brother and I would be better off if we were not burdened with two cultures. I was not sent to Polish classes, or Polish Sunday school.... I had no Polish friends." Still Rybczynski couldn't escape his roots. "For one thing, I always spoke Polish with my parents. ... We also ate different foods, barszcz (beet soup) and golabki (stuffed cabbage rolls).... My parents continued the Polish custom of celebrating name days instead of birthdays. I always kissed my father on the cheek, not twice, as the French do, but three times, according to the Polish manner."

Doubtless more influential than household customs was the legacy of his family's colorful past. When he was a child, stories about the glory days in Poland came to young Witold in fairy-tale format, his mother as the displaced princess, his parents stripped of the life of privilege on which they had embarked after their marriage in 1937. Anchoring his family story is the achingly tragic story of Poland itself as the lost, righteous kingdom, overrun by the forces of evil — Nazis to the West, Soviets to the East — and finally betrayed by its allies, Britain and the United States, who expediently looked the other way as they allowed their

unscrupulous ally, the Soviet Union, to have its murderous way with Poland. "When the yoke of Stalinism descended on Poland in 1948, he (Rybczynski's father) took it for granted that we could never return."

In the book's third of nine essays, Rybczynski examines the lives of his two grandfathers, men markedly different in temperament and achievement. Rybczynski's maternal grandfather, Mieczyslaw Jan Hofman, was a remarkable, self-made man who "przed wojna" — before the War — had risen to become president of Bank Handlowy (Commerce Bank), Poland's largest private bank.

Hofman bought his family an elegant 1860 home in the nation's capital — designed by an Italian architect for the leading Polish writer of the day — that stood near the famed Lazienki Gardens and behind Aleje Ujazdowskie, "Warsaw's Champs-Elysees."

However, the young Rybczynski was more drawn to the tragic, romantic and unorthodox tale of his paternal grandfather and namesake, Witold Erasmus Rybczynski, a mathematician and teacher who, after marrying his wife and fathering a son, did the unthinkable. Shortly after World War I — just as the Polish nation had regained its independence after more than a century of being partitioned — the elder Rybczynski fell in love with a married woman and abandoned his family to live out his life with her at her country estate in Galicia (formerly the Austrian section of Poland).

Though as a young man, Rybczyn-

ski was obsessed with jazz, the immigrants' son could ill afford the luxury of pursuing something in which he might flounder or fail. While he dallied with hippie living after graduating from McGill, during his European sojourn on the Spanish island of Formentera, the period was short-lived. The immigrants' son understood early that he would pursue a profession. And so, consciously or not, Rybczynski followed in the footsteps of his disciplined, hard-driving banker grandfather. Just as Mieczyslaw Hofman became Poland's pre-eminent banker of the interwar years, his grandson became an architectural icon in America. Paul Goldberger of *The New York Times* once opined that, "The most important legacy of the 1980s in architecture may not be a design at all, but a book... Witold Rybczynski's *Home: A Short History of an Idea*."

While *My Two Polish Grandfathers* may suffer from too slight an analysis of family history and the terrible events that shaped it, perhaps more than any of Rybczynski's previous works, this memoir offers insight into one of the most trenchant thinkers of our time. His is the saga of arriving in a new land, seeing our built environment with the worldly eye of a newcomer — the immigrants' son — and ultimately establishing a home for himself, his place in the world.

■ Wanda Urbanska is the author or co-author of seven books and an expert on simple, sustainable living ([www.simplelivingtv.net](http://www.simplelivingtv.net)). She lives in Mount Airy.

## Hope lives in story of schoolbuilder

By Monica and Hannah Young  
JOURNAL BOOK REVIEWERS

While books can entertain and transport us from reality, books can bring us inspiring stories as well — encouraging us to become better versions of ourselves and teaching us to stretch a little bit more in our world.



**THREE CUPS OF TEA: One Man's Journey to Change the World... One Child at a Time.** By Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin. Adapted by Sarah Thomson. Penguin. Ages 8 and up. 240 pages. \$8.99.

Few books touch us deeply as *Three Cups of Tea* has. Greg Mortenson's incredible mission to build schools for Middle Eastern children began in 1992 and has become his life's work.

Greg Mortenson was trying to reach the summit of a mountain in the Himalayas called K2 when he became lost. He descended the mountain and miraculously found his way, thanks to the guidance of his porter. Greg Mortenson eventually wound up in Korphe, a small mountain village in Pakistan. The gentle villagers cared for Mortenson as he regained strength. While in their midst, Mortenson noted that the village children had no school. The teacher came three days a week. On days when the teacher was not in the village, the children, unsupervised, studied outside in a harsh environment.

When Greg saw these learning conditions, he vowed to build a school for Korphe. He returned to America. Destitute from his expensive trip to the second highest mountain in the world, Mortenson persevered until he had earned enough money to build the school and fulfill his promise. Against the odds of logistics, muddled politics and many obstacles, all of the villagers, even the children, helped to build Kor-



*Listen to the Wind* and see if it calls out the story of *Three Cups of Tea*.

phe's new schoolhouse once Greg delivered the materials.

The result was life-changing. Greg eventually secured enough money to found the Central Asia Institute and build schools all over central Asia. Numerous villages have been helped by the schools, even as war and corruption have ruled many parts of the world that Mortenson has entered. This volume, a young reader's adaptation of Greg Mortenson's 2006 book *Three Cups of Tea*, was released this year. A picture book telling Greg's story for ages 6 to 8 (Penguin, \$16.99) is called *Listen to the Wind*.

The adult version of *Three Cups of Tea* became a world-wide bestseller, with more than 2 million copies sold. Mortenson's mission, commitment and success make for an uplifting and inspiring story of what one person can accomplish with a passion for doing good unto others. We encourage other families to read this one together.

**HOPE IS AN OPEN HEART.** By Lauren Thompson. Scholastic. Ages 4-9. \$16.99.

This book is filled with poignant, beautiful photography, and its text brings hope alive. "Hope is the warmth of strong arms around you. Hope is sad tears flowing to make room for joy. Hope is finding happiness in simple things." With multiple examples of hope, this book pro-

vides a lovely springboard for reassurance and for conversation. "Hope is remembering that you are not alone. Many others feel just the way you do. Many others care." The author of last year's phenomenal *Ballerina Dreams: A True Story* has created another inspiring book of photography for young readers.

And a little fiction with tea and teacups ...

**A CUP FOR EVERYONE.** By Yusuke Yonezu. Penguin. Ages 5-8. \$15.99.

Pucca the penguin lives in a small village where he helps with his father's cup-making business. Production slows because practically everyone in their little village owns one of Pucca's father's cups. Pucca is left home as his father travels to the next village to sell his cups.

While his father is away, Pucca tries to make cups. He soon finds that he is not very talented and makes figurines instead. Pucca makes a figure of Mrs. Parrot, his baby-sitter, and turns it into a cup. Mrs. Parrot loves the gift and tells all her friends. Pucca's father returns home to a booming business.

**THE TEASHOP GIRLS.** By Laura Schaeffer. Simon & Schuster. Ages 8-14. 250 pages. \$15.99.

Changing times and "progress" are threatening Annie's grandmother's teashop, *The Leaf*. Annie, devastated that her grandmother might lose her quaint teashop, enlists her best friends to help save their childhood hangout ... only Zoe and Genna are changing, too. Annie struggles to navigate growing up while trying to hold onto people and places she holds dear. A terrific middle-school/late-elementary girl read.

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A beautiful paradise waits in the Amazon

## Unreachable

By Judith Long  
JOURNAL BOOK REVIEWER

**THE LOST CITY OF Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon.** By David Grann. Doubleday. 339 pages. \$27.50.

In 1925, 58-year-old British explorer Col. Percy Harrison Fawcett headed to the Amazon in search of what he called "Z," a city of wealth and beauty deep in the jungle, "immune to the rottenness of Western civilization." Fawcett and his party never returned, and Z's existence was never proved.

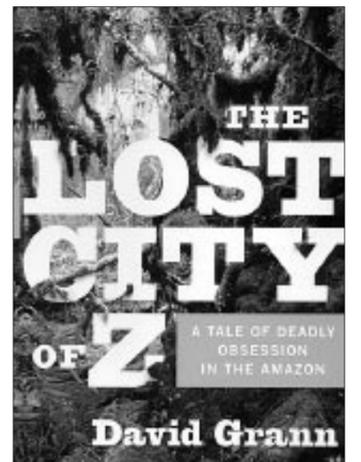
In 2005, author David Grann, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, traveled to the Royal Geographical Society in London to pore over historical documents like many a "Fawcett freak." As recently as 1996, Brazilian banker James Lynch and son, who traveled to the Amazon in hopes of solving the mystery, were kidnapped and held for ransom by natives. Undeterred, Grann made plans to follow Fawcett's route, leaving the relative comfort of New York with these words of wisdom from his wife: "Don't be stupid."



DAVID GRANN

No Indiana Jones, the author is small of stature, not athletic, and fond of take-out and air conditioning; but for the sake of a story, he would head down a trail that had left thousands dead and countless others diminished by illness or mental breakdown. Many, like Fawcett, vanished as if they'd been vaporized. Since the game was up decades ago, what could be learned? Plenty, including insights from Fawcett's granddaughter and one final interview, conducted by Grann, that yields astonishing information.

Fawcett's character fascinates as much as any El Dorado. He was a man exploring hell who, once safe at home, steadily mounted the reserves to return to that hell. In addition to hostile Indians, jungle predators included insects hovering in a mass of blackness; mosquitoes carrying malaria and yellow fever; ants and ticks; chiggers and millipedes; and worms that cause blindness. And tiny bees — "eye lickers" — that are attracted to sweat and invade the pupils. Lean and disciplined, Fawcett pushed himself and others for 12 hours a day, showing little tolerance for those who began with bravado, only to complain of hunger, fatigue and swollen, maggot-infested limbs. Seldom afflicted during missions, Fawcett was often astute in his choice of traveling companions. One regrettable pick was an Australian boxer, Lewis Bick, who suffered a mental breakdown; another



*The Lost City of Z* is about an explorer in search of a legendary city.

er was James Murray, who survived with Ernest Shackleton in the Antarctic only to unravel in the Amazonian heat.

Fawcett did not always conceal his jealousy of a contemporary explorer, Dr. Alexander Rice, whom he considered "too soft for the game." On his treks into the Amazon, Rice traveled with a custom-made boat, a wireless radio and even a plane. In contrast, Fawcett's wife, Nina, lived in near poverty while her husband scrounged for funds, all the while fearing that Rice would beat him to the elusive Z. Just before his final mission, Fawcett was delighted to learn that Rice had returned from his latest venture with no sightings of a lost city.

Eventually, Fawcett realized that his son, Jack, would be an ideal choice on the quest for Z. In April 1925, they set off, entering an area of the jungle so hot that fish were cooked alive in the river. Millions of people across the globe waited for news of their exploits. Like his father, Jack flourished; but Jack's childhood friend, Ralph Rimell, along for the journey, hurt his foot and soon lost interest in the mission. For a while, there were letters and dispatches carried by Indian runners; and then, after a few months, silence, and nothing but a frenzy of speculation on the fate of the threesome. In 1928, adventurer George Dyott headed into the jungle in an attempt to rescue Fawcett and barely survived himself.

In the months and years after the disappearance, many claimed to know Fawcett's whereabouts or have information about him, for a price. Nina Fawcett never lost faith in her husband and his abilities, hoping to the end that he and Jack would return. It had been Fawcett's practice to lead others off his trail, carefully concealing information and providing false leads, to ensure that only he would find Z. Perhaps he did.

■ Judith Long is a reviewer who lives in Mooresville.

## BEST SELLERS

## Fiction

1. **Dead and Gone**, by Charlaine Harris. Ace, \$25.95. Sookie Stackhouse searches for the killer of a werepanther.
2. **The 8th Confession**, by James Patterson and Maxine Paetro. Little, Brown, \$27.99.
3. **Pygmy**, by Chuck Palahniuk. Doubleday, \$24.95. Terrorists from a totalitarian country enter the Midwest disguised as exchange students in this satire.
4. **First Family**, by David Baldacci. Grand Central, \$27.99.
5. **Tea Time for the Traditionally Built**, by Alexander McCall Smith. Pantheon, \$23.95.
6. **Just Take My Heart**, by Mary Higgins Clark. Simon & Schuster, \$25.95.
7. **Summer on Blossom Street**, by Debbie Macomber. Mira, \$24.95.
8. **The Host**, by Stephenie Meyer. Little, Brown, \$25.99.
9. **Lover Avenged**, by J.R. Ward. New American Library, \$24.95.
10. **The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun**, by J.R.R. Tolkien. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$26. The previously unpublished adventures of a medieval Norse hero, written before *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*.

## Nonfiction

1. **Liberty and Tyranny**, by Mark R. Levin. Threshold Editions, \$25.
2. **Always Looking Up**, by Michael J. Fox. Hyperion, \$25.99.
3. **Resilience**, by Elizabeth Edwards. Broadway, \$22.95. Dealing with life's challenges, including cancer and her husband's infidelity.
4. **Outliers**, by Malcolm Gladwell. Little, Brown, \$27.99.
5. **The Girls from Ames**, by Jeffrey Zaslow. Gotham, \$26.
6. **Losing Mum and Pup**, by Christopher Buckley. Twelve, \$24.99.
7. **The End of Overeating**, by David A. Kessler. Rodale, \$25.95.
8. **Pretty in Plaid**, by Jen Lancaster. New American Library, \$24.95. A humorous look at her early years from the author of *Bitter Is the New Black* and *Such a Pretty Fat*.
9. **A-Rod**, by Selena Roberts. Harper, \$26.99. The life and career of the Yankees third baseman, by the writer who broke the story of his use of performance-enhancing substances.
10. **Columbine**, by Dave Cullen. Twelve, \$26.99.

\* — Indicates first appearance on the list.

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