

The Archivist by Martha Cooley

Booklist Review: The articulate yet restrained archivist who narrates this exceptional first novel confides, “Books never cease to astonish me,” a sentiment that could easily be aroused by Cooley’s resolute and somber tale. It takes great vision and verve to work with the heavily freighted materials she handles so adroitly: the terrible legacy of the Holocaust; questions of faith, conversion, and sanity; and the life and poetry of T. S. Eliot. Using Eliot’s tragic first marriage, religious convictions, and abortive relationship with his confidante, Emily Hale, as a template, Cooley explores and extends his traumas through the prisms of her highly cerebral characters. Now in his sixties, Matthias takes quiet pleasure in his guardianship of a university archive that contains letters between Eliot and Hale. This invaluable correspondence is off-limits until 2019, but Roberta, an attractive poet, is determined to gain access to it and draws Matthias into a tense tango of negotiations that unfreezes painful memories of his poet-wife’s suicide. Much of Cooley’s unusual novel flows like a psychological thriller, and even its slow passages are moodily compelling. ((Reviewed March 15, 1998)) -- Donna Seaman

Publishers Weekly Review: The reserved voice of 65-year-old Matthias Lane, archivist at a prestigious Eastern university, opens this remarkably assured first novel, a complex and beautifully written tale of loss, crises of faith and resolution. Then we read the anguished journal of his wife, Judith, a poet who committed suicide in a mental institution in 1965, the same year as T.S. Eliot died. This is just one of the many parallels between the life of the poet and those of Matt and Judith (Eliot, of course, committed his own wife, Vivienne, to an asylum). Grad student and poet Roberta Spire requests Matt’s permission to look at the sealed correspondence between Eliot and a Boston woman named Emily Hale, to whom he may have bared his emotions. Roberta has more than an academic interest in this correspondence. She is immensely disturbed by her parents’ belated revelation that they were Jews who fled Germany and converted to Christianity in the U.S., and she feels that Eliot’s conversion to Catholicism may hold insights for her. She is unaware that Judith’s mental breakdown was related to the Holocaust, but Matt is quick to see the relationship and to recognize the parallels between Eliot’s reclusive personality and his own emotional detachment. As several wrenching surprises about the past are revealed, Matt is finally opened to his pain and guilt and to an affirmative act of connectedness and trust. With its sinewy interplay of moral, spiritual and philosophical issues, its graceful interjection of lines of poetry and references to jazz, the novel first engages the reader’s intellect. Soon, however, the emotions are also engaged, and the narrative acquires unflagging suspense as it peels back layers of secrets. This is an auspicious debut from a writer who already has mastered the craft. (Apr.)

Library Journal Review: Matthias Lane quietly inhabits his work as the keeper of an unnamed university library’s special collection, which includes the letters T.S. Eliot wrote to Emily Hale. When a young poet requests access to the sequestered papers, Matt must confront a personal history he’s been avoiding--a mystery that, ironically, recalls the terrible pain between Eliot and his wife, Vivienne. Cooley builds upon a parallel between Vivienne and Matt’s dead wife, Judith, to reveal a staid conformity that cannot withstand the failure of love. Told through Matt’s recollections and Judith’s journals, this excellent first effort chips away at issues of religious faith, madness, and the troubling intersection between life and art.