

# The journey to 'The Dyeing Room'

McMASTER VISITS LIBRARY TO DISCUSS LATEST NOVEL

BY OLIVIA RICHMAN  
NEWS STAFF WRITER

SOUTHBRIDGE — “When I was in college, I was working a job that brought me into a lot of mills around the area. Several times I went into this mill in Putnam — Cargill Falls Mill. Little did I know it’s one of the oldest mills in America. Here I am, on this job, and one day I had the opportunity to walk through the dye house. There were these big dye tubs. They were filled with boiling dyes. The place was very, very hot. You could feel a burning sensation in your airways. It didn’t seem like a good place for people to be and there were people who spent their whole life in there. It stayed with me. It triggered the idea for the second book — “The Dyeing Room.””

Author and retired professor Robert T. McMaster came to the Jacob Edwards Library on Thursday, March 26, to discuss “Dyeing Room,” the second in his Trolley Days series. The Reading Room was packed with people — many who had read and loved “Trolley Days” — who listened to McMaster read excerpts from his new book and discuss Massachusetts in the early 20th century.

Set in a bustling New England industrial city, the series focuses on the lives of teenagers as they navigate through the tumultuous era in American history that includes World War I, discrimination, women’s suffrage, new technologies, love and adventure.

Inspired by stories from his father, McMaster loves writing fiction and hopes to keep adding to the series. A third book is already forming in his mind. Staff writer Olivia Richman sat down with the knowledgeable author to discuss Southbridge’s history, his love of writing, and the memory of his father.

**You grew up in Southbridge. How was that experience for you?**

“I loved it. I had a blast growing up in Southbridge. Kids wandered far and free in those days. When I was 10 I had a bike. I was all over town and so were all of my friends. It was like the whole town was our playground. It was a lot of fun.”



Olivia Richman photos

Many people came to Jacob Edwards Library Thursday, March 26, to hear author Robert T. McMaster discuss the area’s history and read a few chapters from his newest novel, “The Dyeing Room.”

**What do you like about Southbridge now?**

“I like how well it has been preserved and the old buildings. There is so much interest amongst folks here in keeping the historical architecture and history of the town intact. Every city has to change, but there’s a lot you’ll see that mirrors the past.”

**You mentioned that you were a professor before you retired.**

“I was a professor at Holyoke Community College for 20 years. My field was biology. I’ve had a lifelong interest in the sciences.”

**From your novels, it seems like you’re very into writing and history. What got you into science?**

“My first wife was a biologist, and when she died very young, I decided that I wanted to see her research continue. I loved teaching there. I would still be teaching there today except for the commute. The commute in winter was especially bad. Glad I wasn’t doing it this winter!”

**When did you become interested in writing a book?**

“I’ve always liked writing. During my years of teaching, my writing was scientific, which is very hard. I would



After the book discussion, people purchased a signed copy of “The Dyeing Room.”



Robert T. McMaster with his newest novel. A recently retired professor, McMaster is already planning his third installment in the series.

never call it fun. It was something you have to do as part of your work. Writing fiction is just fun. It’s full of opportunities for creativity. For me, it’s been a way to kind of recapture and better understand what my parents’ world was like. At my age, you start to wonder about your parents’ lives and what they were like long before you were around. A lot of this was working through the things I’ve heard about their lives and what the world was like then and how different it is today, yet so similar in some respects.”

**When did you write “Trolley Days”?**

“‘Trolley Days’ was published in 2012. The title would suggest it’s about trolleys. But it’s about that era. My father’s stories had to do with the streetcars that went up and down Main Street here. He told me how he’d run alongside an open streetcar and jump on to catch a ride with his friends. It was very dangerous and very prohibited, but it was stories like that that got me interested in that period. When I was a kid the trolleys were long gone but the tracks were still in the streets, especially Hamilton Street.”

**What made you decide to write a sequel?**

“When I wrote the first book I created this character and they’ve become like friends. When I am not writing about them I miss them. Writing the next book is like getting back to my ‘homies,’ my old friends.”

**A lot of people here tonight seemed to really enjoy “Trolley Days.” How do you feel that people are so into it?**

“That’s one of the reasons you keep writing — people seem to like it ... especially when they talk about the characters like they’re real people. You say, ‘Gee, it’s just made up!’ But I’ve had people — especially students — ask more about them as if they’re real people I knew.”

The characters themselves are fictional, but a lot of writers base characters off of people they know. Were your characters inspired by anyone in your life?

“Jack was inspired by my father. In many respects, he’s my father, although he was not French Canadian. A lot of things about him are similar. His physical appearance, interest in gardening and interest in tinkering, like going to engineering school. He gets accepted to Worcester Tech, where my father went. Losing a younger sibling who died at a very early age — that happened to my father and it happens to Jack, as well as losing a parent. My father’s father died when he was 10. Jack’s mother dies when he was a little older. There are quite a few connections there, especially the personality type. It’s so much easier to write when you’re thinking of somebody you know. You can make them more realistic that way.”

**What are you going to be doing next?**

“The third book in the series is already in process. It’s called ‘Noah’s Raven.’ It’ll pick right up where these two leave off, taking place during World War I. There was a lot of German sabotage during World War I. That’s part of the story. An important part is some of those efforts to blow up mills.”

**Why do you think people would enjoy the Trolley Days series?**

“There’s a lot of Southbridge connections that people from this area usually enjoy. They’ll see it again in all three books. There are connections to places and people that I’ve come across in Southbridge.”

For more information on McMaster and the Trolley Days series visit [trolleydays.net](http://trolleydays.net). Olivia Richman can be reached at 508-909-4132 or by email at [olivia@stonebridgepress.com](mailto:olivia@stonebridgepress.com).