

Hometown Pasadena, Sweet Hometown

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Prospect Park Books' Colleen Dunn Bates discovers there's no place like home when it comes to publishing books the way IT SHOULD BE DONE.

By lyle james slack



This is it — the world headquarters of Prospect Park Books, Pasadena publishing house extraordinaire. Perched above a machine shop on South Raymond Avenue, the place consists of two small rooms and a bathroom the staff shares with the other second-floor tenant, a map-maker — and this is a step up for the budding imprint.

“I’d been working out of my home office,” says publisher Colleen Dunn Bates, “but ‘Hometown Pasadena’ took off so fast, it took over our dining room and then my house, and finally my kids told me I had to move out.”

Forty years ago, Volkswagen declared that small is beautiful. If the guidebook that this Little Publisher That Could gave birth to two years ago is any gauge, small is still beautiful. “Hometown Pasadena” turned out to be a surprisingly handsome, colorful and irreverent 256-page tour of everything Pasadena — restaurants, theater, music, clubs, architecture, hiking trails, even a chapter titled “Cemeteries We Love!” “That was one of our writers, Sandy Gillis,” veteran journalist Bates, 50, says with a laugh. “She said, ‘If you love landscaping and gardens, that’s what cemeteries are.’”

Bates’ unusual guidebook — written by locals for locals — debuted in October 2006, sold out by Christmas and eventually went through four printings. And now Prospect Park Books has published a larger, updated edition for 2009-10. Apart from weeding out all the restaurants, food sources and drinking spots that have closed down in the past two years and adding a ton

of new ones, the recent release features a new chapter on literary Pasadena, a new Q&A about horticulture, a tribute to the retrofitted Pasadena City Hall, more information on gardens and nurseries, an article on the historic Arroyo arts culture, new galleries and a sidebar on the happening Highland Park gallery scene — plus listings for lots of new shops, including a section on the burgeoning mid-century antique row on East Colorado Boulevard.

“A big part of the book’s success is the element of discovery,” says Sherri Valentine, a book buyer for Vroman’s Bookstore, which sold nearly 2,700 copies of the original edition. “I’ve lived in the San Gabriel Valley pretty much my whole life, and when I flipped through it, here were all these places in my own backyard that I never knew about.”

The heady success of Bates’ first book gave the sixth-generation Californian the confidence to move forward with six other books, including similarly cheeky guides for Santa Barbara, the Eastern Sierra and Santa Monica, which *Library Journal* praised as “witty and informative” and “an essential acquisition for L.A.-area libraries.” Bates also published another ode to the Crown City in the hardcover, lavishly illustrated “At Home: Pasadena,” which won a 2008 Independent Book Publishers Awards silver medal. Rounding out her catalog are “A Pocket of Paradise: The Story of Beach Road,” a portrait of Capistrano Beach by her father, Joe Dunn, and two food books: “The Santa Monica Farmers’ Market Cookbook: Seasonal Foods, Simple Recipes and Stories from the Market and Farm” by Amelia Saltsman and the newly minted “Eat: Los Angeles – The Food Lover’s Guide to Los Angeles,” featuring “more than 1,000 of the best restaurants, breakfast cafes, gourmet markets, taco trucks, cookbook stores, sushi bars, farmers’ markets, caterers, bakeries, coffeehouses, cheese shops, food festivals, cooking schools, ethnic markets” and more.

Bates first tackled guidebooks 25 years ago when, fresh out of USC’s School of Journalism, she got a job working for the Paris-based Gault Millau (which produced restaurant guides in the U.S. and internationally), eventually rising to editor of its L.A.-based operations. The introduction was not a happy one. “I thought if I had to read one more bland, generic guidebook,” says the no-nonsense Bates, “I’d shoot myself.”

In 1992, she moved to Pasadena with her film editor–husband, Darryl, and joined the Los Angeles Times Syndicate. After a year there as food editor, Bates left so that she could have a more flexible schedule while raising her two daughters. For the next decade, she worked as a freelance writer and editor for half a dozen different city magazines, including the now-defunct L.A. Style. Her editor there was Susan LaTempa, who teamed up with her to write a tour guide to the real places children learn about in countless bedtime stories. In 2002, “Storybook Travels: From Eloise’s New York to Harry Potter’s London, Visits to 30 of the Best-Loved Landmarks in Children’s Literature” came out to solid reviews, with Peter Greenberg of “The Today Show” praising its “approach to family travel that keeps the child alive in all of us.” But the publisher, Random House, put little into promoting the book, Bates says. “We had to sit and watch the book die,” she says in a husky voice. “It was so disheartening.”

She traced the problem to what she saw as the new realities of the book business: Editors didn’t get the chance to edit but were forced to ram projects through the pipeline so they could get them out quickly. And promoting them? Ha. “Everything we got in terms of publicity and marketing we got as the result of our own effort,” she says. “So I thought, if I have to do all the work to market it, I might as well do it for myself instead of Random House, and then I can control it and have it be right.”

Casting around for a new book idea, Bates circled back to an observation that had been gestating in her mind for some years — that Los Angeles, known as the sprawling, decentralized city of the future, was in fact devolving back into a more traditionally structured community, where (nearly) everyone knew your name. “I grew up in an era of L.A. where, no matter where you wanted to go, you were never more than 20 minutes away,” she says. “Not anymore. So one thing I think I’ve tapped into is a strong sense of neighborhood. Partly, it’s that people want to be in their community, especially a place like Pasadena where we’re all really proud of being here and want to explore [where we live]. And partly it’s because you may want to go to Santa Monica, but you don’t have five hours to make the trip.”

Bates decided to celebrate the city in an untested way. “I’ve always loved the idea of what a guidebook could be, because I’m a true nonfiction feature kind of writer,” she says. “I like telling people things that are fun to know about, fun to do.” What sort of fun things? That a *New Yorker* magazine writer once said Pasadena is a city “where very old people live in very big houses with their parents.” That Trader Joe’s was born in South Pasadena and that Soumarelo’s rotisserie chicken first clucked in Pasadena.

Over the years, Bates had come to love the unexpected diversity of the city, so she decided that her guidebook would be written by a team of local journalists who, like Bates herself, had lived most of their lives in Pasadena or environs and knew the town intimately. “I told the writers this is not generic — I want personality. I want to hear your voice.” One way they accomplished that was by using feature stories as well as listings to create their portrait of the city. Thus, interviews with Caltech professors like “bioinorganic” chemistry pioneer Harry B. Gray and mechanical engineer Melany Hunt, who studies “singing sand” dunes that make a booming sound in an avalanche. And the new edition’s excerpts from novels by Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Morrow Mayo and others whose stories are set, at least in part, in the city. Longtime resident Sally Miller wrote a piece about treading every single block of the city with her stubby-legged, walk-loving mutt, Otto. Bates even

included a primer on racism in Pasadena. “There has been a history of conservatism here,” she says, “and I think it’s important to know what that was about.”

With “Hometown Pasadena,” Bates finally had complete control of the publishing process, and she relished it. “I fussed over every single thing. I wanted it to be to my standards, and it was.” She was determined, for instance, to use a photo on the back cover of Albert Einstein, who taught at Caltech in the 1930s. Yet virtually every known photograph of Einstein is controlled by Getty Images, a major — and expensive — stock photo agency, which wanted \$5,000 for publication rights. Bates says that lordly sum “was more than my entire editorial budget. But I dug and dug and dug and finally found a couple of newspaper photographers — brothers — in New York from the first part of the 20th century, and their grandchildren still managed their photos. I got it for 150 bucks.”

But that kind of devotion, she adds with a mordant laugh, doesn’t necessarily translate into dollar signs. “Here’s the challenge: You have to do a really good job, and to do a really good job takes money. And it’s hard to make money on a smaller scale. That’s where I’m struggling with the paradigm — how I can do this and make a decent living?”