

# Author of the month: Robert T. McMaster

By CAROL BEVAN-BOGART  
Chronicle volunteer

Inspired by his parents' stories of growing up in Southbridge in the early days of the 20th century, Robert T. McMaster, of Williamsburg, has written a trilogy of mystery novels set in the Holyoke area during its industrial heyday when the mills were bustling and trolley cars were the common mode of transportation. "My father lived his entire life in Southbridge, a mill town similar to Holyoke; he often regaled me with stories of how he would run alongside the trolley car and jump on board, and I was fascinated. His stories created such strong images in my mind that I decided I wanted to capture the history of those times and create characters that reflected the values of people coming of age during the period prior to and during World War I," he explained.

McMaster began his writing career after retiring from teaching biology at Holyoke Community College for 20 years. A lover of mysteries written by P.D. James and Elizabeth George and others, he wanted to write mysteries within a historical context where the events of the day are woven through the lives of the characters. He began his first novel, "Trolley Days," after a visit to Wistariahurst Museum in Holyoke. "The history of the place got my creative juices going and the book flowed, fast and furious, much of it based on my dad and his childhood, and then I hit Chapter 35, where I had to resolve the mystery. That created some tension and sleepless nights but I decided to let the characters lead me and the novel was completed in six or seven months."

The reader is introduced to the main characters in "Trolley Days" follows their lives through the next two books, "The Dyeing Room" and "Noah's Raven." The main protagonist, Jack Bernard, the son of a mill worker, is based on McMaster's father. "Jack, like my dad, is somewhat shy, loves anything mechanical and is drawn

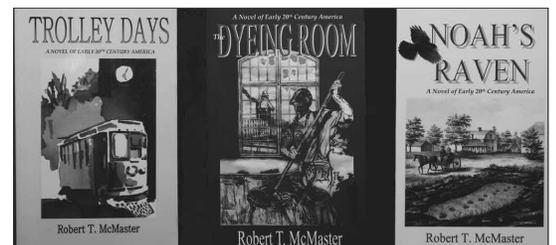


DENNIS LEE PHOTO

Robert T. McMaster is an author of mystery novels.

to engineering." Like McMaster's father, Jack loses a sister to diphtheria when she is only a child and suffers the loss of a parent to the influenza epidemic. The other primary character is Tom Wellington, the son of the mill owner, whose character is a "hybrid of classmates and people I've known", states McMaster. "Without giving anything away, Tom has a character flaw or two which creates some friction in his relationship to the other characters." According to McMaster, Tom's sister, Anne, is a bit like "Anne of Green Gables." Red-haired and compassionate, Anne is involved with several charities that support people who are on the fringes of society in the mill town and she has no qualms about recruiting others to the cause. Claire Bernard, Jack's younger sister, plays a prominent role in the novels, especially in the third book in the series.

Research for the second book, "The Dyeing Room," took McMaster into the depths and hazardous work of textile workers in New England. He recalled a visit to a woolen mill in Putnam, Connecticut, in the '60s, which left a huge impression on him. "I entered the rooms with huge circular vats filled with dye and could feel



the vapors tingling down my airways." The memory never left him and he visited a number of textile mills as research for his second novel, which places Jack in a textile mill trying to earn money for college, while the world is in chaos and the draft of young American men into the armed forces has begun. McMaster's writing places the reader inside the experiences of the characters as they go about their daily lives. In this passage from "The Dyeing Room," readers take the trolley ride from Westfield to Holyoke with Jack as he begins each day in

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the factory.

*In twenty minutes the car was bumping down Sargeant Street as the sun shone through the steam and smoke that rose from the mills on Holyoke's riverfront. Wellington Textiles was the largest woolen mill in Holyoke and one of the busiest, most successful textile businesses in all of New England. Its five four-story brick buildings stretched nearly a half mile along Race Street next to the Second Level Canal.*

When asked about the origin of the title of the third book in the series, "Noah's Raven," McMaster explained that it comes from a biblical reference in Genesis, where Noah dispatches the giant bird to search for land.

The novel, which intersects the discovery of the dinosaur tracks by the Connecticut River in Holyoke with the German sabotage efforts during the war, finds the characters involved with a German paleontologist who is trying to determine whether the tracks are from a giant bird or a dinosaur. "The novel reveals the secrets hidden deep in the rocks and in the hearts of the characters" said McMaster, who spent a lot of time in the Holyoke Public Library researching the local news from 1917, covered in the Holyoke Daily Transcript and other publications. When he reached a plateau in the novel and was flummoxed about how to continue, he began reading family letters from that period which brought a personal element to the writing and more insight into the language of the day.

"In recapturing my parents' stories," McMaster said, "I found many similarities between the political situation then and today. Although each generation will examine their lives differently, there are themes such as immigration and economic uncertainty that run through human history and I use the characters' development to examine those ideas."

**Bob McMaster will read from his books on Wednesday, Sept. 13, from 6 to 8 p.m., at the Senior Center.**

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patients. And as a fully covered Medicare benefit, hospice services even include coverage for medications and supplies related to the life-limiting illness.

Then why aren't more people taking advantage of this benefit? Largely because people don't understand all that hospice can offer, or because their perspective is limited to an individual hospice experience that may not have met their needs.

Come and find out how hospice works from Beacon Hospice workers and the ways it can help eligible patients and their families. Knowledge can be the first step toward peace of mind.

The event will be Thursday, Sept. 7, 9 to 11 a.m., at the Senior Center.

## Farmers Market ambassadors

Healthy Hampshire is recruiting Farmers Market Ambassadors to help market managers and SNAP clients navigate the first year of the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP).

This is a volunteer opportunity for anyone, from teens to seniors, to help increase access to healthy, local fruits and vegetables.

Responsibilities of the role include helping SNAP clients and retail staff understand how to take advantage of the HIP benefit — and being an extra pair of hands on deck to help HIP transactions go smoothly at farmers markets.

Multilingual volunteers are much appreciated, but not required, and training is available.

More information about this opportunity is available on [Volunteermatch.org](http://Volunteermatch.org).

For more information contact Andrea Schmid at [aschmid@collaborative.org](mailto:aschmid@collaborative.org).

## Trips for 2017

Sept. 14: Quechee Gorge, Vermont, \$111 includes gourmet lunch at Simon Pearce, view of waterfalls and glass blowing. Stop at Vermont Country Store. Sign-up deadline Aug. 14; seats still available.

Sept. 27: Big E time. Performance by the Lovin' Spoonful. \$12 for Northampton residents, \$14 for others. Sign-up deadline Sept. 14. No refunds due to bargain price.

Oct. 19: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. \$65. Lunch on your own. Stop at The Shoppes at Blackstone Valley on the way for a quick bite to eat. (This is not a shopping trip.) Sign-up deadline Sept. 19. Seats still remain.

Dec. 6: Enjoy the Rockettes' Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall and free time in New York. \$142. Lunch on your own. Deposit \$50 will reserve a seat. Balance due by Oct. 27. Only a few seats remain.

## Fixing our throwaway culture

Are you handy? Do you have repair skills to share? The City of Northampton ReUse Committee is seeking fix-it volunteers to participate in a Sept. 16 Community RePair event at Smith Vocational High School.

Join a great community of handy people who want to avoid tossing usable goods in the landfill and want to help others do the same.

We held our first Community RePair event in June and our team of volunteers was able to fix the majority of broken objects participants brought ... for free. There is a particularly high demand for repair of electric and electronic items, but we seek people who know how to repair, mend and sharpen ALL kinds of things.

Contact Susan Waite 413-658-5844 ([swaite@northamptonma.gov](mailto:swaite@northamptonma.gov)) to get involved and learn more.

## We appreciate their support

The following people have contributed to the annual appeal: Sharon Moulton, Ted Tymmons, Norita Reynolds, Jane H. Katz and George M. Robinson.

Also, Nancy H. August in honor of Morris Gould and Gail & Eric Stahlberg in memory of Frank Keller.

### FLU CLINIC



Provided by:

The City of Northampton Health Department

Northampton Public Health  
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

Hosted by: The Northampton Senior Center  
67 Conz Street, Northampton, MA 01060

**Friday, October 06 8:30 A.M. – 11 A.M.**

- ◆ Each year in the United States, on average, 5-20% of the population gets the flu.
- ◆ More than 200,000 people are hospitalized each year from flu-related complications.
- ◆ The flu vaccine, cannot give you the flu. The vaccine is made with either no flu virus at all, or a virus that has been 'inactivated'.

Patients must be 19 years of age or older

No pre-registration necessary & no insurance required

- ◆ Please bring your insurance and/or Medicare card(s) so we may bill your insurance for administrative costs. This reimbursement helps subsidize the Northampton Public Health Vaccine program and ensures clinics can continue for years to come.