

A Light in the Window Short Guide

A Light in the Window by Jan Karon

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Characters

Karon continues developing many characters that she created in *At Home in Mitford*, including Father Tim, Cynthia, Dooley, and Miss Sadie. She adds Buck Leeper and Meg Patrick and expands the role of Edith Mallory.

Father Tim is a sixty-three-year-old bachelor, the rector of Our Lord's Chapel. A diabetic, he diets and exercises regularly, so he is physically stronger than he was in the first novel, *At Home in Mitford*. His spiritual life is not as evident in *A Light in the Window* as it was in the first book. He is more involved with secular concerns. Father Tim discovers that he must not only make a commitment to God, but also to people he loves.

Cynthia Coppersmith is a charming woman, pretty, petite, fun-loving, affectionate. Father Tim's family and friends urge him to marry her, but he procrastinates and nearly loses her. She has a successful career writing and illustrating children's books, rather like Beatrix Potter, the originator of *The Tales of Peter Rabbit*. The local librarian tells Father Tim that Cynthia is the "Proust of children's literature." While she is working in New York, Father Tim reads her *Violet*, the *Cat* series and realizes what a talented woman she is.

In this second book, Dooley is a young teenager. He sings solos with the youth choir, plays football, "hangs out" with the guys, and thinks about becoming a veterinarian. Always the realist, Dooley's comments about Edith Mallory and Meg Patrick are perceptive and humorous.

Because Father Tim gives Dooley more freedom than the boy can handle, Dooley smokes cigarettes on the school grounds and gets expelled. The principal demands that Father Tim exert more discipline than a scolding, which he ignores. Dooley and Tommy trespass on the Hope House construction site, and Tommy is badly injured. Father Tim discovers that parents have to do more than pray that their children will learn right from wrong.

Karon stereotypes Dooley's public school principal as a rigid martinet with little knowledge of how to deal with adolescents or their parents. She also stereotypes Dooley's tutor Miss Appleshaw as stern and inflexible. For example, in contrast to Miss Appleshaw's methods, Father Tim's casual read-aloud-and-discuss approach to the English language and the classics is better. Dooley and Father Tim plan to serve Miss Appleshaw a meal of "rat tonsils, snake bellies, and frog puke" before they fire her. Relieved of the onerous Miss Appleshaw, Dooley suddenly "gets smart." Sharing his lessons with Father Tim opens Dooley's mind to new ideas. His favorite public school teachers give him letters of recommendation, and he selects a private school for his future education.

Miss Sadie, benefactress of Hope House, seldom gets involved in Mitford social life. However, when she discovers that Olivia is her niece, she insists on having Olivia and Doctor Hoppy's wedding reception in the ballroom at Ferngate. Several episodes focus

on Miss Sadie: the antique hat show at Olivia's, her stories about the fresco on the ceiling of the ballroom and falling into the well.

Her generous offer to educate Dooley in private school is based on an Oliver Wendell Holmes's quotation: "A mind stretched to a new idea never returns to its original shape." She thinks Dooley needs to have his mind stretched.

Buck Leeper smashes through the novel like a bulldozer out of control. Ron Malcolm assures Father Tim that Buck is the best construction foreman in the business, but he offends townspeople in Mitford with his rude, belligerent attitude.

Buck confesses to Father Tim that his guilt over the death of a younger brother and consequent rejection by his father is the reason for his hostility and anger.

Father Tim feels empathy for Leeper because he, too, had a similar father. By the end of the book, Leeper's personality begins to mellow.

Edith Mallory and Meg Patrick remain Father Tim's antagonists to the end of the novel. Meg Patrick pretends she is Father Tim's cousin from Sligo, Ireland, and moves into the rectory. Barnabas and Dooley suspect that she is a fake from the beginning, but Father Tim thinks she is a bona fide Kavanaugh because she can recite the family tree. Dooley and Father Tim seldom see her during the daytime.

Dressed in a stained pink chenille bathrobe, she slinks in and out of her room "like a cockroach" and eats all of the leftovers in the refrigerator. She is writing a book, which turns out to be a trashy novel.

An immaculate housekeeper, Puny enters Meg's room to clean it after she discovers the missing key. Shocked by the mess, Puny shows Father Tim the garbage and dirty clothes that have accumulated in the guest room. He finds his mother's stolen amethyst brooch on Meg's dresser, and he asks her to leave.

Some of Karon's secondary characters like Percy Mosely and Mayor Cunningham gain status in *A Light in the Window* because their actions affect the plot.

Other characters who were important in *At Home in Mitford* (1994; see separate entry), like Hal and Marge Owen, Olivia and Doctor "Hoppy," Homeless Hobbes, Miss Rose and Uncle Billy, Andrew Gregory, Absalom Greer, and even Emma and Puny fade into the background.

Social Concerns

The title *A Light in the Window* refers to a warm welcome that awaits loved ones when they return home. Jan Karon uses the light as a metaphor for love between Father Timothy Kavanaugh and Cynthia Coppersmith, who are having trouble declaring their commitment to each other. Father Tim has journeyed to Ireland for a two month's vacation to research his genealogy and to think about future commitments to Cynthia and his job as rector of Our Lord's Chapel in Mitford, North Carolina. Upon his return, Father Tim and Cynthia embrace and acknowledge how much they have missed each other, but Father Tim is soon distracted by concerns of other people and his parish duties: his ward Dooley Barlowe, Edith Mallory with her "seductive casseroles," Miss Sadie's Hope House project, and a town council meeting. A dedicated religious leader must put the needs of his congregation first. Except for brief encounters and phone calls, ten days pass before Father Tim goes through the hedge to Cynthia's house to renew their friendship and to accept her offer to "go steady." To his disappointment, she has departed for New York to work on her children's book.

In New York, Cynthia lives in the vacated apartment of an editor, while she draws illustrations for a new animal series.

Deadlines prevent her from returning to Mitford, except briefly, from Thanksgiving until March, so she and Father Tim write love letters. In this way, they reveal emotions that they cannot confess face-to-face. They begin to think of each other as a pair of "bookends." The inability of people to express their love is a continuing concern in Karon's novels.

Another social concern is the construction of Hope House, a retirement home.

Miss Sadie has donated five million dollars for its construction. Ron Malcolm is chairman of the building committee, and Buck Leeper is construction foreman.

Dynamiting rocks beneath the site and truck traffic disrupt the peace of Mitford.

Although Leeper does an excellent construction job, he offends people in Mitford with his rude, bullying manner.

Malcolm assures Father Tim and Miss Sadie that Leeper is dependable, as far as his work is concerned, but his personal life is unstable and unhappy. In a belligerent tone, Leeper warns Father Tim to keep Dooley and his friends away from the construction site. Because Father Tim thinks Leeper overreacts to the boys' interest in the building project, he says nothing to Dooley. Predictably, Dooley and his friend Tom fall on a pile of lumber, and Tom is seriously injured.

Through events at the hospital and at Leeper's home, Father Tim gains insight into Leeper's personality. Leeper confesses that he caused his younger brother's death, a

tragedy for which he has never forgiven himself. His emotioncharged confession to Father Tim opens Leeper's heart to self-forgiveness.

The accident brings up another social concern: parental responsibilities. Although Father Tim is Dooley's surrogate parent, he discovers that parenting is a twenty-four-hour job. He has assumed that Dooley will learn to make moral choices and acquire good manners through gentle guidance and example.

This theory proves false when Dooley is expelled from school for smoking on the grounds, and when Dooley and Tom trespass on the construction site and Tom is injured. Father Tim "grounds" Dooley, and guilt over Tom's injury and a bad case of influenza punishes both of them.

Father Tim must find a good school for Dooley in order to take advantage of Miss Sadie's offer to pay his tuition. Dooley's science and math skills are outstanding, but his English grammar and composition skills are atrocious. However, a few sessions with a disagreeable tutor convince Dooley that Father Tim is the best teacher.

Another concern to Father Tim is aggressive women. Edith Mallory pursues him with invitations to her home for dinner and offers of rides home in her black limousine. Emma, the church secretary, calls her the "Big Whang-do." Like an ocean wave, "she roars in and back out." Although this wealthy widow wears fashionable clothes, lives in a lovely home, and donates \$10,000 to the children's hospital, Father Tim finds Edith repulsive, but he does not know how to stop her unwelcome advances. Bishop Stuart Cullen advises him to be honest with her and just say no. "Clergy attract women like flies," he says. Instead, Father Tim leaps from her car like a scared rabbit when she caresses his thigh.

Because of Father Tim's naivete, another aggressive woman mooches her way inside the rectory. Meg Patrick, a redheaded woman who claims to be his cousin from Ireland, arrives on the doorstep. Father Tim offers her the guest room, which she occupies for many months. Dooley, a better judge of bad character than Father Tim, distrusts her on sight. Keeping her door locked, Meg emerges at night "like a cockroach" and devours the contents of the refrigerator.

Father Tim hears her pounding on a typewriter at odd hours. Much later, Puny, Father Tim's housekeeper, discovers that the guest room is full of dirty clothes and trash and that the book she is writing is trashy, too.

When Father Tim discovers that Cousin Meg has stolen his mother's brooch, he asks her to leave. Later, he finds out that Meg has pulled this scam with other cousins in Boston. She is not a cousin and has never even been to Ireland.

However, she has a connection with someone there who tips her off to addresses of gullible Irish Americans.

Percy Mosely's Main Street Grill, the eating and meeting place of Mitford men, is threatened with closure. Father Tim, Mule Skinner, J.C., Coot Hendrick, Ron Malcolm,



and others eat breakfast and lunch at the Grill, where they gossip and engage in male "bonding," but Edith Mallory owns the building. Angry at people in Mitford, she blames her late husband's heart attack on the grease he ate at the Grill; Father Tim thinks Pat Mallory probably died to get away from Edith. She increases the rent so much that Percy and Velma cannot afford to pay it. She says that after extensive remodeling, the building will house an exclusive women's clothing store.

Although one of her motives is to spite the men of Mitford, Edith wishes to replace the Grill with something she is particularly interested in, a women's boutique. Her contract with a new business owner from Florida would mean a change in the Main Street business community, new people in town, and money in Edith's pocket. Mitford is not ready for change.

Friends and neighbors help Velma and Percy Mosely move the contents from the Grill and its basement, where old signs, an antique jukebox and records, seventy-two boxes of canned goods, and memorabilia of two generations are stored. Percy is distraught, but Father Tim assures him that if God takes something away, he replaces it with something better. He comforts Percy with words from Isaiah: "I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord." In the dark and empty basement, Father Tim notices that supporting timbers under the Grill are rotten and that the building is ready to collapse. Because this nullifies Mallory's contract with another company, and after much persuasion from Father Tim, she signs a new contract with Percy. While the Grill undergoes repairs, Percy and Velma take a vacation in Hawaii, and Edith travels to Spain.

Living on the outskirts of town, Homeless Hobbes observes people living in house trailers and shacks. He sees how drugs and alcohol cause family abuse and shootings and stabbings. Donations from people in Mitford allow him to serve soup every Wednesday to about thirty people. He tells Father Tim that they need a preacher and someone to lead gospel music because they have no religious or moral leadership. Father Tim thinks Absalom Greer's style of preaching would appeal to them.

Other social concerns in Mitford include the Christmas celebration, dedication of Willard Porter's statue, the opening of a museum, two confirmations, and two weddings. Father Tim strings lights at Cynthia's house in anticipation of her homecoming and puts up a fir tree in the rectory. Shortly after the Advent pageant, snow in twenty foot drifts and ice that makes the houses look "like frozen ice cubes" paralyzes Mitford. Father Tim and Dooley deliver Christmas baskets to townspeople who have no electricity or telephones; Father Tim and Cynthia spend Christmas apart. The episode symbolizes Father Tim's life: ritually correct but emotionally frozen.

In the spring, townspeople and tourists attend the dedication of Willard Porter's impressive statue and opening of the Mitford museum. The town council is remodeling a second room in the Porter mansion to house the museum while Miss Rose, Porter's sister, continues to live in an apartment in the mansion with her husband, Uncle Billy. To raise money at the dedication, the band plays, and Joe Ivey donates proceeds from his barbering booth, Fancy Skinner donates proceeds from doing manicures and pedicures,

and Winnie Ivey donates baked goods. People pay to see Mayor Cunningham kiss a pig, Percy hula dance in a grass skirt, and Father Tim control Barnabas's behavior by reciting scripture.

People's desire to form families and close relationships is an important aspect of *A Light in the Window*, and the idea is developed in a number of ways. Bishop Cullen, Father Tim's longtime friend, and his wife Martha arrive for Dooley's and Cynthia's confirmation ceremonies. Father Tim begins to think of Cynthia and Dooley as his family, and he realizes that his home would have no "light in the window" without them. Puny's wedding to J.J. Guthrie, a Cunningham grandson, is performed in the Baptist Church with Preacher Absalom Greer officiating. As she walks down the aisle on Father Tim's arm, Puny is "glowing like a lamp." He realizes that he loves her like a daughter.

Miss Sophie is delighted to discover that Olivia is her great niece. She has the third floor ballroom of Ferngate renovated, and she and Louella host the wedding reception of Olivia and Doctor Harper.

The reception is the social event of the year with catered refreshments and an orchestra for dancing. Confirmation services and weddings convince Father Tim that he and Cynthia belong together, like a pair of "bookends." On the last page of the book, they announce their engagement in the church newsletter.

Techniques

Much of the novel follows this pattern: separation, loneliness, and introspection, followed by joyful, but brief, reunions.

The effect is a gradual change in Father Tim's character. No longer does he find refuge in religion and introspection. He needs Cynthia to complete his life and make it whole.

Karon breaks her twenty-one chapters into brief segments, some no longer than a paragraph. The effect is like reading Father Tim's diary or daily journal, except that Karon writes from a third-person point of view, rather than first person.

Several episodes do not further the plot, especially those involving Miss Sadie's reminiscences over her mother's hats and the fresco in the Ferngate ballroom.

Except for brief mention, Homeless Hobbes remains in the cabin at the edge of town, and Absalom Greer stays in his country store. Both of these men assume surrogate ministries that Father Tim seems unable to fill. They serve as Father Tim's mentors and provide Karon with a means of expanding the provincial life of Mitford, especially to the Creek. Their presence in *A Light In the Window* gives Karon the option of using them in future novels.

Karon's novel contains much dialogue that follows speech patterns of people in North Carolina. Some of the funniest conversations take place in the Main Street Grill as the men of Mitford bond over coffee and grits.

In many chapters, Karon uses epistles (love letters) to reveal emotions and slow down the plot. Father Timothy and Cynthia's five month separation creates suspense. While Cynthia is working on her book in New York, she and Father Tim write often. In letters, he overcomes his inhibitions and tells Cynthia how he feels.

He compares his lovesick yearning to having the measles. Without reserve, she confides her love for him. They discover through letters that between them, like a pair of bookends, they have many interests in common. Consequently, they use the term Bookend with affection as they sign off. As time passes, and Father Tim questions whether he is ready for marriage, his letters become very formal.

Emotionally perceptive, Cynthia accuses him of writing thank you notes.

Themes

Once again, as in Karon's previous novel *At Home in Mitford* (1994; see separate entry), separation and loneliness are underlying themes. Father Tim's restful vacation in Ireland with his cousins Walter and Katherine has given him time to think about his future in Mitford. Still not ready to commit to marriage, he intends to give Cynthia a Waterford crystal vase and maybe his mother's amethyst brooch and accept her invitation to "go steady."

However, Cynthia's career interferes with such a casual relationship. During most of the novel, Cynthia lives in a New York city apartment and keeps in touch with Father Tim through love letters.

When Father Tim is with Cynthia, he knows how much he needs her and enjoys her company. When they are apart, he admits his emotional impotence and fear of marriage. He asks himself: Can a sixty-year-old bachelor combine marriage with the ministry? Will I lose control of my life? Will my diabetes interfere? Can I share my bed with Cynthia? Will we truly become one flesh? And what about my dog Barnabas and her cat Violet?

During their on-and-off courtship, Father Tim gains insight into his own personality. Although other people think he is compassionate, he admits to himself that he is a bachelor because he is selfish and unemotional. His heart has been "cold granite" until Cynthia, Dooley, and Barnabas, his dog, came along. Father Tim's friends and acquaintances urge him to marry Cynthia, but he procrastinates.

Although Cynthia has no emotional fence around her life, her career as a successful writer and illustrator requires much time in isolation. After Father Tim proposes marriage, she tells him that she lacks qualities of a traditional rector's wife. She cannot sing, play an organ, do church dinners, or wash altar linens.

However, she promises that she will give him plenty of tender, loving care.

Another theme in the novel emerges from childhood memories that either enrich or twist adult lives. Miss Sadie shares her memories of living in the wash house with her mother and father and China May, Louella's mother, during the time that Fernbank was under construction. Their relationship was close and affectionate in such a cozy environment with no taint of racial prejudice.

Miss Sadie also shares with Father Tim how Angelo Francesca from Florence, Italy, and his young son Leonardo painted the ceiling of the ballroom. They lived in Mitford for many months as they fresco-painted angels floating across a background of blue sky and white clouds.

One angel has a rosebud in her fingertips.

Miss Sadie recalls the time she went on a picnic with Leon and his father. She and Leon were playing at an abandoned house site, and she fell six feet down a well, "stuffed in there like a pimiento in an olive." After Leon could not find her, he alerted his father and a search began, which lasted all night. During prayer, Leon had a vision of an angel that led him to Miss Sadie. The angel with the rosebud is the one that Leon saw in his vision.

Buck Leeper recalls a childhood incident that twisted his life. When Father Tim calls on Leeper to apologize for his failure to keep Dooley and Tom away from the construction site, he finds Buck alone and very drunk. Leeper confides that his father was a harsh disciplinarian who expected him to act like a man when he was still a child. Buck took his younger brother for a ride on the tractor and backhoe, and it overturned, killing the brother. Buck's father never forgave him, and he has never forgiven himself. His repressed anger isolates him from other people. He tries to deaden his emotional pain with alcohol, which makes him even more violent. Although Buck Leeper wears emotional armor during most of the book, Father Tim's empathy brings a change of heart. Both men endured childhoods with harsh, overbearing fathers. Leeper later shows kindness to Tommy in the hospital.

A motif in the novel involves female schemers. Edith Mallory, a wealthy widow, owns most of the property in Mitford. Sex-starved, she pursues Father Tim. Emma calls her the big "Whang Do," and Dooley thinks she is an old witch. First, she tries to win Father Tim with "seductive casseroles" and dinner invitations. Then she lures him into her limousine when it is raining and he needs a ride. Later, she tries to win him by donating money to the children's hospital. Nothing works.

Frustrated by Mitford's provincial ways and its "tacky" downtown, Edith decides to evict Percy Mosely, proprietor of the Main Street Grill, and install an exclusive ladies' boutique. She thinks that by eliminating the Grill, she will get even with the men of Mitford. The Grill has been in operation for two generations, and Mitford men meet there daily for breakfast, lunch, and gossip. They desperately try to persuade Edith to change her mind, but she is adamant, right up to moving day.

When Father Tim discovers that timbers beneath the Grill are rotten and that the building needs extensive repairs, Edith is forced to cancel her contract with the dress shop people from Florida. She signs a new lease with Percy and leaves in a huff for Spain.

The other scheming woman is Meg Patrick, Father Tim's counterfeit cousin, who arrives unexpectedly on the rectory doorstep. She tells him they met in Ireland and convinces him they are cousins by reciting the Kavanaugh family genealogy. Being a naive and kindly bachelor, Father Tim offers her the guest room', which becomes her lair. She locks the door and for weeks, seldom comes out, except at night. He knows she is in there because she flushes the toilet and pounds the keys of her typewriter in the middle of the night.

Dooley and Puny are not fooled by this skinny redhead whose eyes behind thick lensed glasses look like the "magnified eyes of a house fly." Although she claims to be a vegetarian, she eats everything in the refrigerator and even steals Dooley's candy.

When Meg accidentally drops her key and leaves the house, Puny opens the door and discovers garbage, dirty clothes, and a nasty novel that Meg is writing.

Father Tim asks her to leave after he finds his mother's missing amethyst brooch in her room. Later he discovers that cousins in Boston have fallen for the same scam.

Father Tim's naivete about women is an underlying theme throughout the book. His fear of marriage is the cause of his loneliness and conflict. Dooley and Barnabas are good companions, but they do not fill the need that Cynthia has created. Although Father Tim and Cynthia are merely engaged at the end of *A Light in the Window*, the title foreshadows a marriage.

Adaptations

According to Karon, film rights to the Mitford series are pending.

Key Questions

Karon's first book, *At Home in Mitford*, portrays Father Tim as a devout priest, uncertain of his ability to minister to his parishioners and uncertain of his love relationship with Cynthia. His near-death experience in a diabetic coma somewhat explains his ambiguity toward both situations.

The second book, *A Light in the Window*, portrays Father Tim as incredibly naive in his relationships with women and as a somewhat incompetent surrogate parent. Although he prays earnestly for guidance, his spiritual connection seems weak as he attempts to solve Mitford's secular problems. Karon's use of dialogue in creating characters and humor is authentic and excellent.

1. How could Father Timothy have better handled his relationship with Edith Mallory? Can you think of solutions other than Bishop Cullen's "just say no"?
2. The principal of Dooley's public school and Miss Appleshaw, the English tutor, are very disagreeable people. Why do writers tend to stereotype teachers in this way? How do Karon's teachers contrast with teachers in your own community?
3. What is your reaction to Dooley's enrollment at a private school? Knowing his background as a deprived child, what problems do you predict he will have?
4. How likely is it that people interested in genealogy might become victims of a scam like Cousin Meg perpetrated? Discuss why so many people today are interested in tracing their family trees.
5. Discuss the menu of a popular restaurant in your town or community where men gather to drink coffee and gossip. What is the most popular food on the menu? Do women have similar "bonding" rituals?
6. Have seasonal festivals become traditions in your town? How typical are the money-raising events for the Mitford museum?
7. Which segments of society does Karon omit from her novel? What does this imply about the future of Mitford?
8. What is your reaction to love letters between Father Tim and Cynthia?
9. If you were editing Jan Karon's book, which episodes in Father Tim's life would you change or omit? Which characters do you think Karon will develop in future books in the Mitford series? Which characters will fade into the background?
10. If you were Cynthia Coppersmith, would you marry Father Timothy? Why or why not?

Literary Precedents

Two British authors have inspired Karon in the development of her main characters Father Timothy Kavanaugh and Cynthia Coppersmith: C. S. Lewis, author of science-fiction, fantasy, and Christian books for children and adults and Beatrix Potter, author and illustrator of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1900) and more than forty-five other children's books.

Evan K. Gibson (1980) has written an excellent analysis of Lewis's writing, entitled *C. S. Lewis Spinner of Tales*. This easy-to-read book explains Lewis's story-telling techniques, including plot structure, point of view, main characters, and his themes of good and evil. The underlying philosophy of Lewis's religious books follow two paths to understanding God: one path examines common errors in reason and logic, and the other path reveals the joy of discovery. Previous to his involvement with Cynthia and Dooley, Father Tim has allowed reason and logic to guide his life. Duty to God and his church have shielded him from worldly emotional ties. Through Cynthia, he discovers the joy of love for a woman and affection for his surrogate son Dooley. These relationships expand his ability to serve God.

Leslie Linder's *History of the Writings of Beatrix Potter* (1971) includes letters, photographs, first drafts, illustrations, and lists of Potter's books. Potter began drawing and writing when she was a child spending vacations in the country and continued her work in adulthood. Cynthia Coppersmith's books are much like Potter's in that she draws her animals in a realistic style but personifies them in the narration. Like Potter's stories, Cynthia's have a moral lesson with a humorous tone.

Related Titles

A Light in the Window is the second novel in the Mitford series, which includes *At Home in Mitford*, *These High, Green Hills* (1996; see separate entry), and *Out to Canaan* (1997). A fifth Mitford novel is in progress. All of the novels feature Father Timothy Kavanaugh, an Episcopal priest, as the protagonist. Important secondary characters in all of the books are Cynthia Coppersmith, his love interest, and Dooley Barlowe, a foster child.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994