

Characteristics of Fiction

Fiction is prose writing that tells a story about imaginary events. Fiction has these elements:

- invented people called **characters**. These people experience a series of events called the **plot**. The plot starts with a **conflict**, or problem, that the characters face.
- a **setting**, which is the time and place of the plot
- the **point of view** of the character who narrates, or tells, the story. The narrator may or may not take part in the story's events.
- a **theme**, which is the message the author wants to tell you about life or human nature

Types of Fiction

| Type | Length | Coverage |
|-------------|--|---|
| Novel | long work usually presented in chapters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has many characters, settings, and conflicts • may contain subplots, which are separate but related stories |
| Novella | shorter than a novel but longer than a short story | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may have several characters and settings • usually has one conflict • usually does not have subplots |
| Short story | brief enough to be read in one sitting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may have several characters • usually has one setting • has one main plot driven by a single conflict |

Characteristics of Nonfiction

Nonfiction is prose writing that tells about real people, places, and events.

Nonfiction has these elements:

- Nonfiction is told by an author who is a real person.
- Nonfiction presents facts, discusses ideas, or describes true-life experiences.
- Nonfiction is written for a specific **audience**, or group of readers.
- Nonfiction authors write for a specific reason, or **purpose**.
- Nonfiction authors display their **tone**, or attitude toward the subject or reader, through word choice.

Types of Nonfiction

| Type | Characteristics | Examples |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Literary Nonfiction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tells stories of real-life events • a type of narrative nonfiction • tells the writer's thoughts and feelings about personal experiences or ideas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • autobiographies • memoirs • literary essays • journals |
| Informational Text—Expository | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • informs or explains | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analytical essays • research reports |
| Informational Text—Persuasive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presents reasons and evidence to persuade readers to act or think in a certain way | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • editorials • political speeches |
| Informational Text—Procedural | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provides information or steps that can be used to complete a task | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • instructions • consumer publications |



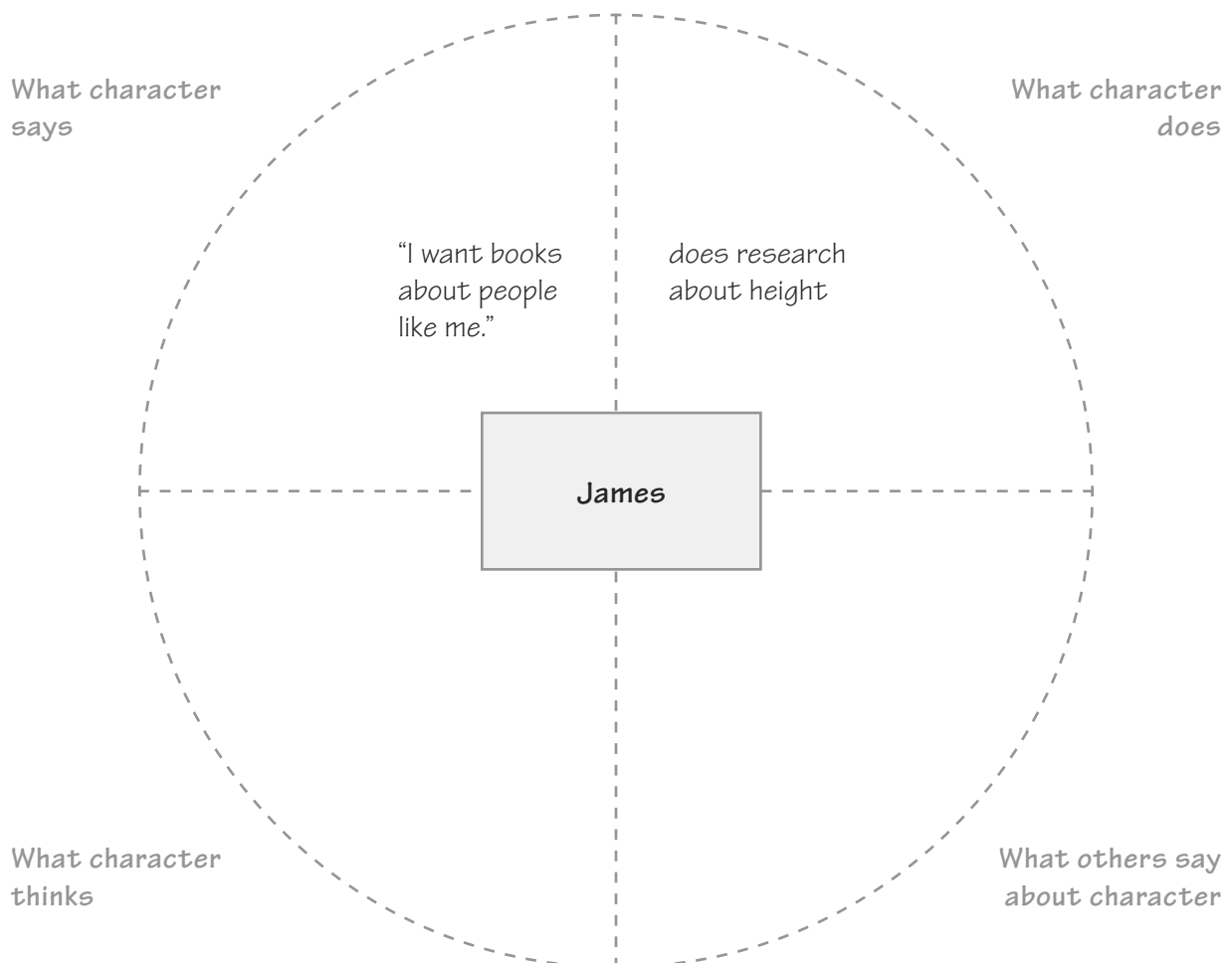
from *The Giant's House*

Elizabeth McCracken

Summary James is an unusually tall young man. One day, he asks Peggy, the librarian, for help finding books. He is looking for information about people like him. James and Peggy look under different topics to find what James wants to know.

Note-taking Guide

As you read, fill in this chart that tells what James says, does, and thinks. Then, tell what others say about him.



from The Giant's House

Elizabeth McCracken

James took out books on astronomy, ornithology:¹ sciences at once about tininess and height. He approached the desk with books he'd liked and asked for more—he knew it was easier to find more books with a good example in hand.

Then one day, in the first months of 1955—I remember looking over his head at some awful persistent Christmas decoration Astoria had stuck to the ceiling—he came to me without books. His height had become unwieldy; he reached out to touch walls as he walked, sometimes leaving marks way above where the other teenage boys smudged their hands. “I want books about people like me,” he said.

I thought I knew what he was talking about, but I wanted to be cautious. “What exactly about you?” I asked. I made myself think of all the things he could have meant: Boy Scouts, basketball players. Never jump to conclusions when trying to answer a reference question. Interview the patron.

“Tall people,” he said.

“Tall people? Just tall people in general?”

“Very tall people. Like *me*,” he said, clearly exasperated with my playing dumb. “What they do.”

“Okay,” I told him. “Try the card catalog. Look in the big books on the table—see those books?” I pointed. “Those are books of subject headings for the card catalog. Look under words that you think describe your topic.” James was used to me doing this: I gave directions but would not pull the books off the shelf for him. My job was to show people—even people I liked—how to use the library, not to use it for them. “Dig around,” I said. “Try height, try stature. Then look in the catalog for books.”

He nodded, leaned on the desk, and pushed off.

An hour later he headed out the door.

“Did you find what you needed?” I asked.

“There isn't anything,” he said. “There was one book that sort of was about it, but I couldn't find it on the shelf.”

“There's something,” I told him. “Come back. We'll look for it together.”

TAKE NOTES

Activate Prior Knowledge

When you think about giants, what words and ideas come to mind?

Fiction

The **setting** is the time and place in which a story happens. Underline words in the bracketed passage that tell you when this story occurs.

Fiction

Readers get to know **characters** by looking at what they say, do, think, and feel. Write two things you learn about Peggy, the librarian.

Vocabulary Development

exasperated (ig ZAS puh ray tid) *adj.* annoyed

1. **astronomy, ornithology** Astronomy is the study of the stars and planets. Ornithology is the study of birds.

TAKE NOTES

Fiction

As the narrator of the story, Peggy tells readers about both herself and James. Underline words and groups of words in the bracketed passage that tell how she feels about her job.

Stop to Reflect

Why does the librarian say that she could not bear to tell James to look under the word *giant*?

Fiction

Conflict is the problem characters try to solve as the story progresses. What problem does Peggy have?

Reading Check

James has a hard time finding what he needs. Circle the words in the text that Peggy uses to look up information for James.

That night after closing, I hunted around myself. The only thing under *stature* was a book about growth and nutrition. I tried our two encyclopedias under height and found passing references. Not much.

In truth, my library was a small-town place, and this was a specialized topic. Still, I was certain I could find more. I got that familiar mania—there is information somewhere here, and I can find it, I have to. A good librarian is not so different from a prospector, her whole brain a divining rod. She walks to books and stands and wonders: here? Is the answer here? The same blind faith in finding, even when hopeless. If someone caught me when I was in the throes of tracking something *elusive*, I would have told them: but it's out there. I can feel it. God *wants* me to find it.

That night I wandered the reference department, eyed the bindings of the encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases. James was so big I almost expected to locate him in the gazetteer.² I set my hands upon our little card catalog, curled my fingers in the curved handles of the drawers. Then I went to the big volumes of subject headings.

Looking under *height* and *stature* turned up nothing; *anthropometry* was not quite right. Then I realized the word I was looking for: *Giant*.

Giant described him. *Giant*, I knew, would lead me to countless things—not just the word, located in indexes and catalogs and encyclopedias, but the idea of Giant, the knowledge that the people that James wanted to read about, people who could be described as like him, were not just tall but giants. I sat in a spindle-backed chair in the reference room, waiting for a minute. Then I checked the volume of the Library of Congress headings. *Giants*. *See also: dwarfs*.

We did not have a book, but I found several encyclopedia entries. Nowadays I could just photocopy; but that night I wrote down the page and volume numbers, thinking I could not bear to tell him the word to look under. Most of the very tall people mentioned in the encyclopedia had worked in the circus as professional giants, so I went to our books on the circus.

The photographs showed enormous people. Not just tall, though of course they were that, often with an ordinary person posed beside them. The tall people looked

Vocabulary Development

elusive (i LOO siv) *adj.* hard to grasp or retain mentally

2. **gazetteer** (ga zuh TEER) *n.* dictionary or index of geographical names.

twice as big as the ambassador from the normal-sized, as if they were an entirely different race. The books described weak stomachs and legs and bones. Sometimes what made them tall showed in their faces: each feature looked like something disturbed in an avalanche, separate from the others, in danger of slipping off.

Anna Swann, the Nova Scotia Giantess, married Captain Bates, the Kentucky Giant. As a young woman at Barnum's Dime Museum in New York, Miss Swann had been in two fires; in the second she had to be lifted out by a crane. No ordinary over-the-shoulder rescue for a woman better than seven feet tall. She and her husband retired to Ohio, to a specially made house. Their church installed an extra-large pew.

Byrne, the Irish Giant, lived in fear of a certain doctor who lusted after his skeleton; he imagined the doctor's giant kettle ready to boil his bones.

Jack Earle was over seven feet tall, traveled with the circus for years; after his retirement he wrote poetry.

I took comfort in Anna Swann and her husband. They were solid-looking people. Respectable. They'd had two children, though neither survived. The book described them as *in love*, and you could believe that from the pictures: their complementary heights were just a lovely coincidence to their love affair. I found myself that late night a little jealous of Anna Swann and her handsome, bearded captain.

The books said that giants tended to exaggerate their heights for exhibition purposes. I did not know it then, but every person I read about was shorter than James grew to be.

The worst book was called *Medical Curiosities*. I say worst now. That is hindsight. The night I looked, I thought, in fact, that it was the best book—not because it was good or even accurate, but because it had the most pages on the subject I was researching. I found it under the subject heading *Abnormalities, human*. A terrible phrase, and one I knew I could not repeat to James. It was a late-nineteenth-century medical book, described two-headed people and parasitic twins and dwarfs. And giants. Not exactly information, but interesting: giants who had enormous or usual appetites; ones who grew throughout their lives or only after adolescence; professional giants and private citizens.

Fiction

Peggy is the narrator. The story is told from her **point of view**. Is she a part of the events in Anna Swann's life? Explain your answer.

Stop to Reflect

Why do you think Peggy does not want James to realize where she found the most information?

Fiction

Circle words and groups of words in the bracketed paragraph that show how Peggy feels about the books she finds.

Vocabulary Development

ambassador (am BAS uh der) *n.* an official who represents his or her country in another country

avalanche (AV uh lanch) *n.* the fall of a large amount of snow and ice down the side of a mountain

TAKE NOTES

Fiction

What does the first bracketed paragraph tell you about Peggy's character?

Fiction

Read the second bracketed passage. Explain the **conflict** that James seems to be having.

Reading Check

Underline the subject of the information that James wants books about.

So I took that book, and the circus books, marked the pertinent places with the old catalog cards I used for scrap, and set them aside. Ready for him, so that he did not have to look in the index, or wander through the pages at all.

"Your tall friend is here," Astoria said to me the next week. I was in my office, reading reviews. "He's looking for you."

James waited for me at the circ desk. "You said we could—"

"I looked," I said. I'd stowed the books beneath the shelf. "Try these out."

He took them to the big table in the front room. Read them. He made the sturdy chair, the same chair I'd sat in the night before, seem tiny.

Afterward he came up to me.

"How were they?" I asked. "Would you like to take them home?"

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "Thanks."

"Nothing useful here at all?"

"No," he said.

I tried to catch his eye. "Close?"

"Close. I guess." He pointed at *Medical Curiosities*. "I guess that's close."

I picked up the book and opened it to where the marker was, but he'd moved it to another page. A line drawing of a double-bodied baby looked up at me. Horrible. I snapped the book shut.

"I meant medical books," he said. "But new ones. Ones that say what goes wrong. How to cure it."

"Cures," I said. "Oh." Cures for giants? No such thing. No cure for height. Only preventive medicine. I said it as a question. "Cures? For tall people?"

"Yes," he said.

All I wanted was for him to explain it to me. It seemed presumptuous to come to any conclusions myself. I knew what he was talking about. I did. But what he wanted, I couldn't help him with.

Darla, the shelve, came rattling up with her metal cart. "Shelve these?" she said, pointing at the books. The catalog cards I'd used stuck out from the pages; James had lined them up, like a pack of cards he'd shuffled into them. "Hi, Jim," she said.

Vocabulary Development

pertinent (PERT n uhnt) *adj.* relevant; having a connection to the matter at hand

presumptuous (pri ZUMP choo uhs) *adj.* seeming disrespectful because one is overly confident

“Hi.” He squinted down at her.
 She stared at me; I waited for her to get back to shelving.
 “Peggy. Shelve them, or not?”
 “Not yet,” I said. She sighed and pushed the cart off.
 James stood in silence on the other side of the desk. He looked ready to leave.
 “You mean how to stop growing,” I said.
 “Yes.” Now he looked at me. “Medicine, or operations, or something.”
 “I’m not sure we have anything here,” I said. That was a lie. I knew we didn’t. “A medical library somewhere, perhaps. Or a university library. But really—” I started pulling the bookmarks from the books. I tried to sound gentle. “Really, you should ask your doctor.”
 “I have,” he said. “I’ve asked a lot of doctors.”

Reader’s Response: How would you feel if you were James? Explain.

Fiction 

Theme is the message the author wants you to understand about life or human nature. Circle words or groups of words on this page that give you clues about the theme. What is the theme of this excerpt from *The Giant’s House*? Think about why James is so worried about his height.



Desiderata

Elizabeth McCracken

Summary In this essay, the author explores the importance of family papers. Letters and even shopping lists move her to write stories. McCracken’s wish to be a writer came from the words family members left behind.

Note-taking Guide

Nonfiction authors may write for several different purposes. As you read “Desiderata,” use this chart to take notes on the reasons Elizabeth McCracken wrote this essay.

| Author’s Purpose | Examples from Text |
|------------------|---|
| To inform | Author’s collection of <i>desiderata</i> includes grandfather’s genealogy, grandmother’s letter collection, diplomas, diaries, and laundry lists. |
| To entertain | |
| To persuade | |
| To reflect | |

Desiderata

Elizabeth McCracken

TAKE NOTES

Desiderata, I learned in library science school, were the items you needed for an archive to make it useful. Useful, not complete, because there is no such thing as a complete archive. There's always a letter out there you want and need, either in someone else's collection or in an attic or just unfound. You need and want things you don't even know exist. That's how collections work.

I come from a family strong on documents. I have a small archive myself. My grandfather McCracken was a genealogist—I have his history of the McCrackens, a lovely compilation of research on early ancestors and personal remembrances of his own relatives. His wife, my grandmother, wrote stories and poems; I have copies of those, and remember once opening a drawer full of letters she wrote to God, part prayer and part daily correspondence to Someone dear. I have my grandmother Jacobson's collection of family letters; she had 11 brothers and sisters, some who wrote often and some just now and then. I have diplomas of relatives I never met. I have diaries and laundry lists. I love anything written by a relative, any evidence of what they really thought.

And I read these documents fairly regularly. Besides letters from her family, my grandmother also saved letters from Martha, her children's nanny. My mother, who says she had the happiest childhood on record, remembers Martha and her letters as lovely and slightly daffy. Her twin sister, my aunt Carolyn, remembers the letters and the woman as dark and Dickensian,¹ longing for a time that never really existed. I'd always assumed that the truth was somewhere in the middle, but I have the letters and now know that Martha was, at best, weird. She wrote to my travelling grandmother that the twins—The Dollies, she called them—didn't miss her at all. She reported that she took them out to her mother's farm, and couldn't

Activate Prior Knowledge

What could you learn from an old shopping list? What could you learn from an old family letter?

Nonfiction

Early in the essay, the author gives you important facts. She helps you understand the kinds of papers she collects. She states what an archive includes.

Underline words and groups of words in the bracketed passage that tell you the kinds of documents she collects.

Stop to Reflect

Why does Elizabeth McCracken like hearing different sides of the same story?

Vocabulary Development

archive (AHR kyv) *n.* storage area for historical or family objects and documents

genealogist (jee nee AHL uh jist) *n.* someone who studies the history of a family

correspondence (kawr uh SPAHN duhns) *n.* communication through written letters

1. **Dickensian** of or relating to English novelist Charles Dickens (1812–1880).

TAKE NOTES

Nonfiction

Literary nonfiction uses character sketches. List the words the author uses to describe her grandmother's sisters.

Nonfiction

Circle the facts the author gives about grandmother Jacobson. Double underline her thoughts and feelings about her grandmother.

Reading Check

What is the author's major frustration about collecting family papers? Underline the words in the text that tell you.

understand why the girls were so upset to be served for dinner the chicken they'd met earlier. She reported on The Dollies' toilet training as if it were grand opera, and the Dollies heroines who wanted only, desperately, to triumph.

I'm glad to know this, I think. Certainly, it's a whole different Martha than the one I knew from my mother's stories. I know Martha now because of all that she reveals of herself, not knowing she was doing it, in her letters.

Still, there are many frustrations to family papers. First of all, you may learn things you don't want to know. For instance: some of my grandmother's sisters wanted to sue the widow of one of their brothers. Even in letters from the litigious² sisters themselves, this comes across as merely petty and vindictive. There are letters that can break your heart: my Aunt Edna, writing to my grandmother, lamented how poor her health was, how the doctors told her to slow down; I know from the dates that Edna died two weeks later, of a heart attack.

But the major frustration is how incomplete everything is, how incomplete *people* are if you try to meet them this way. The great-aunt who wanted to sue only happened to write it down; maybe she gave up the idea. Maybe she was suffering otherwise—her life was continually tragic in small ways, I know that. Some of the great-aunts I barely know, because they barely wrote. Or rather, I *think* they barely wrote—my grandmother saved every letter some years, and selected letters others. Perhaps those great-aunts simply never made it into the collection.

And then there's my grandmother Jacobson herself. She was a wonderful and complex woman, an attorney and small businessperson who died at home at the age of 90. The pieces of paper I have from her don't conjure her up at all. Her diary (which I don't own but have read) is a very careful record of daily events, nothing more. She doesn't detail worries or doubts, and the fact is she was a worried and somewhat doubtful person. I think she knew that we'd read it, eventually, and didn't want to tell us in her diary anything she hadn't told us already.

One piece of paper I do have: a post-it note from late in her life, which she used to mark a recipe in *The Jewish Cookbook*. It says:

coffee
bananas

Vocabulary Development

vindictive (vin DIK tiv) *adj.* revengeful; inclined to seek revenge

lamented (luh MEN tid) *v.* expressed sadness and disappointment

2. **li igi us** (li TIJ uhs) *adj.* given to carrying out lawsuits; quarrelsome.

bread
milk
wax beans?
and then, in the corner, written diagonally and underlined,
lottery ticket.

I know that this dates to a time when she was both worried about money and had become very serious about luck. I don't know how superstitious she'd previously been, but about two years before she died, she began to see luck good and bad, in everything: she read her horoscope, her children's horoscope, the horoscope of everyone who might touch her life that day. She believed in fortune cookies. She told her own fortune playing solitaire. And she bought lottery tickets, not so much because she believed she might win but because not playing meant she did not believe that sudden good things could happen. She was a businessperson, after all: she knew what a bad investment that weekly dollar was.

I love that little green piece of paper. *Desideratum* to me, though less than ephemera³ to anyone else.

I could tell dozens of other stories from the pages of family papers: my aunt Blanche's pell-mell record of taking care of her favorite sister, Elizabeth, who was dying of Alzheimer's; Blanche has that disease herself now, and you can see the early signs in these notes. My great-uncles' cheery letters from Europe during World War II. A letter my brother wrote to my grandmother when I was four and he was six, thanking her for a gift and then recording that I was resisting writing a thank-you note myself.

Here's a last story. My father's parents were, when I knew them, quiet people. I know now that my version of them is different from anyone else's, but they were my grandparents and I never questioned who I understood them to be. After their deaths, I inherited a cherry chest-of-drawers from their house. I owned this imposing piece of furniture for a few years before I lifted some paper lining from one of the drawers and found a letter. Part of a letter, actually, written by my grandfather to my grandmother before their marriage.

Nonfiction 

The author says that grandmother Jacobson thought about good and bad luck. Which facts in the first bracketed paragraph support that statement?

Nonfiction 

What do you think McCracken's **purpose** is in using the example of her brother's thank-you note?

Nonfiction 

How does McCracken see her grandparents in the second bracketed paragraph? Underline the groups of words that tell you.

Vocabulary Development

horoscope (HAWR uh scohp) *n.* a description of character and prediction of future events for someone that is based on the positions of the stars and planets when that person was born

pell-mell (pel mel) *adj.* jumbled

3. **ephemera** (e FEM er uh) *n.* something, often printed material, meant to last for only a short time.

TAKE NOTES

Nonfiction

Literary nonfiction shows the author's thoughts and feelings. Circle the feelings and thoughts the author expresses in the bracketed paragraph.

Reading Check

Why was the author's father less excited about the love letter than the author was? Underline the text that tells you.

Stop to Reflect

Why is the letter about her grandparents important to the author?

It was one of the most beautiful love letters I've ever read, full of delight for her person and for their love together. It was passionate and thrilled and almost disbelieving of his great fortune, to have found her. I never imagined my grandfather, my quiet careful grandfather, was the sort of man who'd write any kind of love letter, never mind this kind. Wrong again. And my grandmother had saved it for more than fifty years. I wondered whether she took it out and reread it from time to time, or whether she'd forgotten where she'd put it.

My parents were out of town that weekend, and as it happened I'd agreed to pick them up at the airport. I brought the letter to give to my father—if it meant that much to me, I couldn't imagine what it would mean to him. And so, sitting on a bench in Logan,⁴ I gave it to him. "Look what I found," I said.

"Oh," he said, perfectly pleased but not surprised. "Another letter. I'll put it with the others."

Turns out there were many more—my grandparents had written each other several times a day during their courtship. Which makes it, of course, a happier story.

My question is: was that letter more a *desideratum* for me, or my father? He had the collection, I didn't. Sometimes I regret giving it to him. I've forgotten the exact words my grandfather used, but it doesn't seem right to ask for someone else's love letter back. Someday I'll see it again, I know. Meanwhile, I need it and desire it. I need and desire everything that belongs to my family, and in some ways, I think, that's what I do with my days, writing fiction. I am writing love letters to diaries and post-it notes and telegrams and birthday cards. I am writing love letters to love letters.

Reader's Response: Does this essay affect your ideas about family photographs and writings? Why or why not?

Vocabulary Development

courtship (KAWRT ship) *n.* period of a romantic relationship before marriage

4. **Logan** Boston's Logan International Airport, named for General Edward Lawrence Logan.

from *The Giant's House* • *Desiderata*

1. **Analyze:** Does Peggy feel as if she is being a helpful librarian to James? Why or why not?

2. **Speculate:** Help James find information about his condition in our more scientifically advanced world. Complete the chart by writing research questions and possible sources (including the Internet and the library) that he might use.

| Research Question | Possible Source |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| | |

3. **Fiction:** How does the **setting** of *The Giant's House* affect James's problem?

4. **Nonfiction:** In her **nonfiction** essay, is McCracken's main **purpose** to persuade, to inform, or to reflect? Explain.
