



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Rubik’s Cube (1980-1981): Game fad involving a cube made up of smaller cubes...The object of the game (which more than a hundred million people tried to solve) was to twist the sides of the cube until each side was a solid color.”

-From *Bellwether* by
Connie Willis

One of my favorite authors to reread is the science fiction writer Connie Willis. I enjoy all of her novels, even though I don’t usually read much of that genre. Because of the extensive research she puts into each one, her books are much like history disguised as fiction. Some people dislike this aspect of her writing, since sometimes the books seem to be more about the information than the people.

This may be true, but I find her books absorbing, entertaining and intelligently written. My favorite Willis book is *Doomsday Book*, which is about the Middle Ages and the Black Death. When I finish it, I always feel as if I’ve been there, suffering and frightened and saddened by all that happened to people at that time.

Her first book, *Lincoln’s Dreams*, is about the Civil War. In it, a young woman has recurring dreams, and she comes to realize she is dreaming as if she is Robert E. Lee, trying desperately to save his men. In

contrast, much of her light-hearted and entertaining novel *To Say Nothing of the Dog* takes place during the Victorian era and it gives a wonderful feel for the dress, the manners and the speech of the time.

The latest one I read again was *Bellwether*, which is about fads. Each chapter begins with a description of a popular one, such as hula hoops, hot pants and miniature golf. The main character in the book is trying to understand fads – who starts them, why they catch on and why they end.

The biggest impact this book has on me when I am reading it is an extreme awareness of the way trends affect all of us. They are apparently inescapable, even when we are conscious they exist. Clothing styles, house colors and even food have trends. Red velvet cake, for instance, seems to have been rediscovered, although the one I saw the other day was impressively red, much more so than the red velvet cakes of my childhood. I

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don't know if any of the other ones mentioned in the book, like the 1374 dance mania and the kewpie dolls of 1909 to 1915 will ever reappear, but who knows?

The one trend I'm really sorry I missed was the diorama wigs of 1750 to 1760: "Hair was draped over a frame stuffed with cotton wool or straw and cemented with a paste that hardened...Hairdos had waterfalls, cupids and scenes from novels. Naval battles, complete with ships and smoke, were waged on top of women's heads." Now that must have been quite a sight, even more spectacular than the beehive hairdos I do remember.

What is disconcerting about fads, as Willis demonstrates in her novel, is the idea that you can participate in one without even knowing it. Baby names are a great example of

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this. When my first child was born, she probably would have been named Benjamin if she had been a boy. I didn't know anyone named Benjamin but I liked the sound of it and the potential it has for nicknames. Amazingly, it turned out to be one of the most common boy's names of that time. Why is that? I've always wondered. How did I come to choose it?

After reading *Bellwether*, I wonder if the solution lies in what Willis calls the "bellwether theory of chaotic systems." That's probably as good an answer as any.