

JAMES AUGUSTUS BAGGETT—CHARMING, DISARMING, ENGAGING EDITOR



James Augustus Baggett's first words to a newbie, "Tell me about you." That's what people remember about him—his interest in them. Genuine interest. Then comes the rapid-fire engagement and the

contagious sense of wonder people share when they're around him. Show and tell, note taking, book lists, kindness and more kindness.

People repeatedly describe James to me as a man with an enormous open heart. His colleague and former GWA President **Debra Prinzing** said, "His accolades are many as a generous editor and mentor. But these accolades pale when measuring him as a human being. He treats everyone he meets with utmost dignity and a true curiosity about who they are and what interests them. That is a gift to our entire profession and to those who call him a friend."

Fellow writer and editor **Susan Applegat Hurst** was struck by his kind and gregarious nature when they traveled together in England. She said, "We were touring in London, often by cab or bus. James always made an effort to engage the driver—someone he had never met—and made them feel valuable. He has an enormous open heart and so much compassion."

GARDENING AT GRANDMOTHER'S KNEE

From his start in his grandmother's garden, dusting roses and whitewashing the birdbath to his current position as editor of *Country Gardens* magazine for Meredith Corporation, he has covered a lot of territory. Fresh out of college, he landed a job as editor at *Science World*, a classroom magazine with a readership of some eight million students. He described the job, "It was an invaluable education, writing about carnivorous plants and dinosaurs and bioluminescence and Chernobyl for an audience of young people."

And what about garden writing? James said, "Garden writing, is, after all, science writing. I



James Baggett at St. Paul's Cathedral during a recent trip to London.

like to say that garden writing is science writing with jazz hands."

MAN OF PASSION

It's as hard to keep up with James as it is to list his passions. I've followed along with him in Vancouver, British Columbia; Tucson, Arizona; Quebec City, Canada and most recently, Pasadena, California. We sought out good food, good people, Frank Lloyd Wright houses, bookstores and The Gamble House by Green and Green.

"I'm a dog-bird-plant guy," he said. "But my interests and passions are wide and varied, and include Maxfield Parrish, vintage dog books, art pottery, J.D. Salinger, Frank Lloyd Wright, baking, "Harold and Maude," girl music, field guides, Beverley Nichols, Arts & Crafts design, the Yankees, Ironstone, birds of prey, agitprop, Roycroft, *Jeopardy*, Hal Borland, terriers great and small, "Food 52" and Paul Smith floral shirts."

James and I are trading book lists. On his nightstand right now: *Lab Girl* by Hope Jahren, *On Dogs* by E.B.White, and anything by Hal Borland. (At this point, James suggested that I write down these titles so I don't forget them.

I promise to send him a list of the stack on my own nightstand).

He has Eudora Welty's rake above his fireplace. James reminisced, "A few years ago, while producing a story on Eudora Welty's modest garden in Jackson, Mississippi, I came home with an awesome souvenir: a rusty, wrought iron rake head from her garage. I didn't steal it. A curator asked me if I wanted it, since it wasn't going to be archived. It now holds a place of honor on my mantle. I suspect it was actually Eudora Welty's mother's, since she was the real gardener in that household."

When asked what makes him giddy, filled with joy, he said, "Peony shoots in spring. Gabrielle Hamilton's grilled shrimp in anchovy butter. Sleeping with dogs. Derek Jeter." Did I mention he has Eudora Welty's rake above his fireplace?

GWA member Mary Ann Newcomer, a native daughter of Idaho, is deeply rooted in the soil of the American West. As a scribe-scout-and-speaker, she blogs at **Gardens of the Wild West**. The American Horticulture Society profiled her as "A member making a difference" in *American Gardener* magazine.