On Campus

Jennifer Crewe Retires from Columbia University Press

Good words flowed at a farewell party for the publisher’s longtime associate provost and director.

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|
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Jennifer Crewe ’79SOA, associate provost and director of Columbia University Press (CUP), was very clear: The speeches at her retirement celebration, held recently in the high-ceilinged, arch-windowed library of the Casa Italiana, would be short. Having steered hundreds of books to publication over her forty-year career at

CUP, Crewe would naturally edit her own party as well.

The guests, a mix of authors, editors, faculty, CUP staff, University leaders, and friends and family of the honoree, chatted amid the library's lofty oak bookcases. A few Crewe-edited books — among them, *The Incredible Need to Believe*, by the Bulgarian French philosopher Julia Kristeva, and *Said on Opera*, by Columbia literary critic Edward W. Said — were stacked on a table, free for the taking.

The speeches were indeed brief — but that didn't limit the praise Crewe received. Haruo Shirane '74CC, '83GSAS, professor of Japanese literature and vice chair of the Department of East Asian Languages, recalled the day in the 1990s when Crewe asked him if he would put together an anthology of traditional Japanese literature. Today, CUP is the "number one press in the world" for Asian literature in English, Shirane said. "In my view, Jennifer deserves the lifetime achievement award for best university press director."

Victoria Rosner '90CC, '99GSAS, who is dean of NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, worked with Crewe for more than twenty years on CUP's Gender and Culture Series, which Nancy K. Miller '61BC, '74GSAS and Carolyn Heilbrun '59GSAS, the first tenured woman professor in Columbia's English department, started in 1983. Rosner has been series coeditor since 2003. She lauded Crewe, who in 2014 became the first woman director of an Ivy League university press, as "a feminist pathbreaker, an influential intellectual, a champion of the humanities and its institutions, a titan of academic publishing, and a wonderful, wonderfully modest friend. As Virginia Woolf wrote about Clarissa Dalloway, 'For there she was.' "

Philip Leventhal, senior executive editor at CUP, hailed Crewe's "generosity and thoughtfulness, as well as care and respect for colleagues," and gave a shout-out to CUP's Black Lives in the Diaspora series, a collaboration with Howard University that was "born out of Jennifer's leadership vision and organizational acumen." Noting, too, Crewe's "groundbreaking role in making food studies an area of serious nonfiction publishing," Leventhal fondly recalled how, at CUP's twice-yearly sales conferences, Crewe would bring in food related to the book she was introducing. "The only possible misstep in this tradition," he said, "was with the publication of *The Insect Cookbook*."

All this came with the big news, delivered by vice provost and University Librarian Ann Thornton, that literary theorist and University Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of several CUP authors in attendance, had just made the largest gift in the history of the press: $3 million for an endowed fund in honor of her parents. The fund, said Thornton, will enable CUP to publish English translations of historical, literary, and philosophical works in Bengali, the language of Spivak's native Calcutta (now Kolkata), which is spoken by some 250 million people.

Such were the tidy encomiums that preceded Crewe, a behind-the-scenes figure now pushed into the spotlight before her admiring colleagues. She spoke — briefly, of course — of her start as an editorial assistant who "loved books and who believed in scholarship"; of her effort to further Columbia's educational mission by fully integrating CUP into the University, which she achieved in 2016, when the press was placed under the Office of the Provost; and of her confidence that her yet-to-be-named successor would be "a leader who cares as much about the place as I do."

She thanked everyone — authors, advisers, staff, publishing friends, and, not least, those who donated to a fundraising campaign in her honor. The campaign's goal is to endow the annual Columbia University Press Distinguished Book Award, which is given to the most important CUP book by a Columbia faculty member, as selected by CUP's faculty publication committee. Now in its twelfth year, the prize has been given a new name: It's called the Jennifer Crewe Distinguished Book Award.

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