

FROM THE HEAD LIBRARIAN

Past Events, Future Events

Relaxing into summer's rhythms and reading, it's satisfying to look back on another vibrant year of happenings here at the Library. This issue rounds up photos from all our spring receptions and awards ceremonies, including the delightful remarks made by Hilma Wolitzer at our New Members Party and a new essay by Roxana Robinson on the theme of our ongoing exhibition, *Edith Wharton's New York City*.

We were particularly proud of the talented 2011 New York City Book Awards winners. This year included the inaugural presentation of the Hornblower Award for a First Book, to Suleiman Osman for *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*. Teju Cole received the Award for Fiction for *Open City*, and Carla L. Peterson the Award for History for *Black Gotham*. Dr. Peterson has just opened a rich new archive of materials about African-Americans in nineteenth-century New York City, which should be of interest to general readers as well as scholars—www.blackgothamarchive.org. We're also pleased to be hosting a lecture by Dr. Peterson on her book in November. Thanks to Ellen M. Iseman for her support of the New York City Book Awards.

Other fall adult event highlights will include Mark Singer in conversation with Janet Groth about her new memoir *The Receptionist: An Education at The New Yorker*, Peter Carey on his novel *The Chemistry of Tears*, and a jazz evening with singer/composer Nancy Harrow and guitarist Jack Wilkins. These and more will be listed in the September newsletter, in members' mailboxes, and online around Labor Day.

Our Young Writers Awards ceremony was the best-attended yet, and for good reason: the awards celebrated their tenth anniversary with visits from past winners and the publication of a handsome book, *Winning Words*. This collects all the winning and honorable-mention entries from the awards' decade, with beautiful original art (including the sample at right) by children's author/illustrator Robert Quackenbush. The Library heartily thanks Mr. Quackenbush for his contribution of the art, Barbara H. Stanton, Sotheby's, and Susan L. Robbins for their support of the book, and Paul A. Wagner and Jeannette Sarkisian Wagner for their support of both the book and the awards. Copies of the book are available for sale at the circulation desk and via the fold-out form in this issue.

Are Electronic Books in the Library's Future?

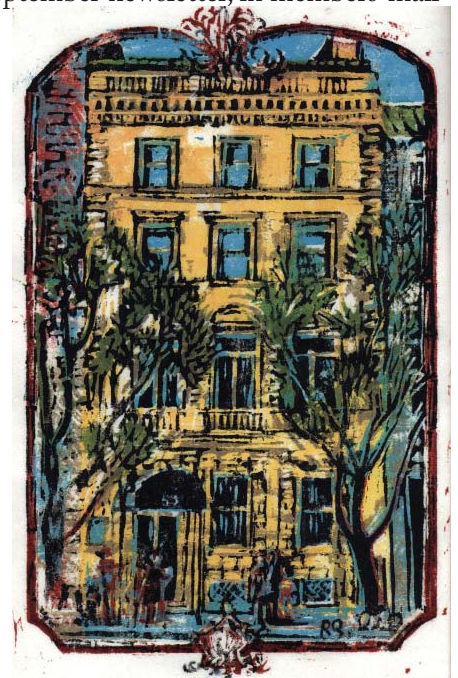
Previously in this column I mused about the place of e-books in the Society Library and explained that we would seek an available e-book collection that would complement our print holdings and our readers' needs. The last issue of our electronic newsletter asked patrons to share details on their use of e-books—thanks to all who participated! A copy of the survey and its results is available by request at the circulation desk if you'd like to take a look.

Out of the more than 4,000 recipients of the e-newsletter, 93 patrons completed the survey. We learned that 48% of them own an Amazon Kindle, and 39% use an e-reader app on an iPad or iPhone. Despite the availability of e-books through the New York Public Library and other library systems, 62% percent of respondents have never used a public library to borrow e-books, although of those who do, 74% use the NYPL's offerings. Most instructively, when we asked respondents to describe the selection of e-books at the library or libraries they use, 61% said it was "disappointing: I am consistently frustrated by e-book titles not being in the library catalog" and only 35% said "good: I can always find an e-book that I want to read, even if it is not what I had in mind."

With these responses as our guide, the Library has been examining the e-book packages that we could license from a variety of vendors. We hope to integrate with our catalog a package that will serve members' interests in everything from classics and literary fiction to recent mysteries.

Thanks and Best Wishes

As I write, I am excited to be traveling to the 20th Annual Conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP), a worldwide association of book historians, librarians, and others in the book world. The Library supports professional development for many staff members annually. This summer, Special Collections Librarian Erin Schreiner attended



the annual meeting of the American Library Association, Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, and Catalog Librarian/Systems Assistant Matthew Bright went to Rare Book School in Virginia. News from these and other corners of the book world will be featured in the fall issue of this newsletter.

In closing, let me thank each and every one of our members for your support over the 2011-2012 season. I hope you are all having a great summer of sunshine and good books. I look forward to seeing you at the reference desk or hearing from you at mbartlett@nysoclib.org.



Mark Bartlett
Head Librarian

THE CHAIRMAN'S CIRCLE

Members of the Library's Chairman's Circle were honored at a special reception on May 15th at the home of Trustee Theodore C. Rogers and his wife, Elizabeth Barlow Rogers. Stacy Schiff, celebrated author and Library member, spoke about her relationship with the Library and its role in her work over the past eighteen years.

Chairman's Circle members are those individual and foundation donors who provide leadership support for the Library and thereby play a critical role in sustaining and nurturing its programs and services. If you are interested in learning more about the Chairman's Circle, please contact Director of Development Joan Zimmitt at 212-288-6900 x207 or jzimmitt@nysoclib.org.



*Above: Stacy Schiff; Kathryn Berry and Chairman of the Board Charles G. Berry; Trustee Jeannette Watson Sanger
Below: Trustee Barbara Goldsmith and Nancy Newman Elghanayan; Trustee Theodore C. Rogers and Elizabeth Barlow Rogers*



This year's events and features newsletters are generously underwritten by Ada Peluso and Romano I. Peluso in memory of Assunta Sommella and Ignazio Peluso.

THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY YOUNG WRITERS AWARDS

The annual Young Writers Awards, honoring excellent writing by students in the Library community, celebrated its tenth anniversary this year with a published collection, *Winning Words*. The 2012 winners and other participants were honored at a ceremony and reception on May 16, which included remarks from author judges Robert Quackenbush, Dave Johnson, Carol Weston, and Edra Ziesk. The winning entries can be read at www.nysoclib.org/kids/ywa/index.html.

Winners:

“Ode to the Person Who Created Nonsense” by Kaelin Suh
 “The few boxes, that resemble me” by Ethan Duncan He-Li Hellman
 “Out of Thin Eyre” by Claire Rose Kozak
 “Littered with Lights” by Lucie Fleming

“A Dream?” by Emily Gaw
 “Dream Catcher” by Oliver Rein
 “Dolls” by John Watson

Honorable Mentions:

“Joy” by Eeshan Tripathii
 “Mayonnaise” by David Herzig

“Light and Dark” by Callie Jacobson
 “Three Girls” by Noa Berkowitz



The winning young writers with Paul A. Wagner and Jeanette Sarkisian Wagner

THE 2012 YOUNG WRITERS AWARDS ARE GENEROUSLY UNDERWRITTEN BY JEANETTE SARKISIAN WAGNER AND PAUL A. WAGNER.

THE GOODHUE SOCIETY

The Library hosted its annual celebration for members of the bequest society named for one of our most generous benefactors, Sarah Goodhue. A special reception preceded Sally Bedell Smith's March 22 lecture on *Elizabeth the Queen*.



Goodhue Society Chairman William J. Dean with Sally Bedell Smith; Valerie Thaler, Kimi Puntillo, Robert Petrie, and Jean Guilder

EXHIBITION: *EDITH WHARTON'S NEW YORK CITY: A BACKWARD GLANCE*

The Library's current exhibition opened on March 14 with Library members and guests and members of Wharton's family in attendance. Roxana Robinson, author of the novels *Cost* and *Sweetwater*, among others, gave remarks and contributed an essay to the exhibition catalog. She also shared these reflections about Wharton's writings and legacy. *Photos by Karen Smul.*

EDITH WHARTON: A WRITER'S REFLECTION

by Roxana Robinson

Born in New York City in 1862, one hundred and fifty years ago, Edith Jones was part of a small, wealthy, patrician community. She was well-born, but she was not born rich. Socially, her family dwelt in the innermost circles, but financially they were somewhere closer to the outer rim. During the post-Civil War recession, more than once the Joneses had to rent out their property in America and move to the Continent. There they lived cheaply while they waited for their finances to recover.

Edith married within her circle and led an affluent life, which was latterly true because of her writing: she made more money from royalties than she ever inherited. But she never forgot the threat of being poor, and the risk of expulsion it carried, from the only world she knew. Her work echoes with the subversive powers of wealth, and of the chilling presence of its counterpart, poverty.

Much of Wharton's work is set among the crystal chandeliers and gold plate of the very rich. Because she knew that community so well, and because she wrote so tellingly of its mandarin complexities, Wharton has been called a novelist of manners. But manners—and money—were never the point.

Wharton's deepest concern was morality. She wrote about the struggle between the body and the mind, that battlefield from which morality emerges. Central to her work are stifled and illicit passions, manifested in divorce, adultery, incest, and illegitimacy. She wrote about the struggle to integrate the life of the emotions within the life of the world. Her writing was stylistically decorous but socially transgressive: her prose is so elegant that her message comes as a shock, like a sword wrapped in satin.

All of Wharton's most important novels—*The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*—take place, partly or entirely, in New York. This city was central to Wharton's understanding of the world.

Lily Bart, brave and vital, is at the heart of Wharton's greatest tragedy and arguably her greatest book, *The House of Mirth*. Lily is beautiful and well-born, but she is orphaned and impecunious. At twenty-nine, time is running out, and she knows she must marry. The New York world in which she lives is shrill and materialistic, but Lily is a woman of principle, which makes for a dilemma. How should she choose her future? Should she marry for love or for money? Tempted by luxury and practicality, Lily plans to marry Percy Bryce, who is unthinkably rich and unspeakably dull. But her principles interfere, and so begins her downfall. Wharton asks what all great writers ask: how should we make the choices that will shape our lives?

It's a deeply American story, and one that shows the conflict between market and morals, glitter and bedrock. It's as true now as it was then: we choose continually between emotional veracity—life in the deeps—and getting and spending—life in the shallows. *The House of Mirth* shows the consequences of our choices.

Wharton's work is part of the story of how we became the people we are. Money, idealism and morality are central to our national chronicle, and Wharton's novels remind us of the roles they have always played. She maintains that personal morality and emotional truth are essential for survival, which is still true today.



Roxana Robinson



Edith Wharton's cousin Jonathan LeRoy King (second from right) and his family at the March 14 exhibition opening

The Custom of the Country is not just a great novel, but a great problem novel. It's great in its ambition and intensity, but it never achieves true greatness because it's fueled by rage and untempered by compassion; it's driven by judgment without understanding. At the center of this novel lies Wharton's own understanding of marriage: she saw the institution as part of the most fundamental underpinnings of society. She believed that marriage vows were a pledge that were given not only to the spouse, but to the entire community. She saw divorce as a betrayal of that community. These beliefs made Wharton's own decision to leave her husband agonizing, since it made her a traitor to her own world. Divorce was an act she'd felt compelled to perform, but for which she could not forgive herself.

This sense of failure and self-contempt play a large part in the formation of *The Custom of the Country*, in which Wharton created a character she could despise for doing just as she had done. Undine Spragg outperforms Wharton, of course, by producing not one but a spectacular crescendo of divorces. And it's not just the divorces that make Undine Spragg so unsavory: this woman typifies everything that Wharton holds in contempt. She's shallow, vulgar, ignorant, narrow-minded, and grasping. Undine is Wharton's loathed alter-ego, someone she can wholeheartedly despise. In this raging, contemptuous, furious novel, the protagonist's immoral behavior threatens the whole of civilization, just as Wharton felt she had, in her own colossal and public failure at marriage, the great stabilizing linchpin of society.

Wharton's self-rage is expressed by her rage at Undine, and it's this unmediated fury that keeps *The Custom of the Country* from greatness. Rage can be used as a narrative engine to drive a novel, but in order for the novel to achieve greatness the rage must be tempered by compassion—a deep understanding of the characters, despite their flaws. Wharton feels no compassion for the shallow, heartless Undine. The book is like a melody played only on the brasses—it's shrill and relentless, without the deep mellow notes of understanding.

The Age of Innocence shows a profoundly different view of Wharton's New York. Written in 1921, after World War I, it derives from Wharton's meditations on the New York of her youth, and the view it presents is a far cry from the cold and grasping New York of Lily Bart. By now Wharton has come to admire this earlier world. This is one that celebrates family, rewards commitment, and requires morality. Newland Archer obeys the social codes, and, when he falls in love with the mesmerizing Ellen Olenska, he does not abandon his dull and conventional wife, May. He lives up to the promises he has made, to May and to the society in which he lives. And we admire him for his principles, despite their heartbreaking consequences. *The Age of Innocence* celebrates a society in which passion and romance are subordinated to an overarching moral code of great exigency, supporting family and community. It is a world Wharton respects and cherishes.

Edith Wharton's work has been part of my own world for many years. My first connection, as a reader and writer, came in my senior year at boarding school, when I first read *The Age of Innocence*. It was then that Wharton's work took up residence in my mind. I was mesmerized by the elegance of her style and the acuity of her intellect, by her courage and her compassion.

One of the brave things that Wharton does is to recognize the co-existence of the world of passion and the world of strictures. I don't know another writer of her era who felt so seriously bound by the rules of society, and who took so seriously the great forces of emotion that were aligned against those rules. Since one of these rules was silence, it took great courage merely to declare the conflict, merely to write it down and speak it out.

I was also struck by Wharton's courage in declaring a woman's story to be a tragedy. I don't mean the story of a beautiful woman betrayed by her lover, for many writers have made that into a tragedy. I mean the story of a woman on her own, forging her own way, and making her own terrible mistakes. Lily Bart is beautiful, but her story is hers alone, and depends on no one else for its outcome. She is the tragic hero of her own narrative, the sole agent of her own downfall, just as King Lear was, or Oedipus, and this is remarkable.

But most important to Wharton's work is her own sense of compassion, something essential to all great fiction. It is Wharton's empathy for her characters that makes our own possible. Wharton allows us to know them, to admire them, to understand their flaws and to forgive them—in short, to love them—as she does. For a writer, there is no greater skill.

The way a young writer learns what is possible is by reading what other people have done. Wharton showed me that it was possible to write about the collision between passion and responsibility, about the complexities of class. That it was possible to write about a society in a way that was both ruthlessly observant and fundamentally forgiving. That it was possible to write beautifully and cleanly and intelligently. I aspired to all those things, and the awareness of what she accomplished has entered into my own sense of possibility.

Virginia Woolf once said, "We think back through our mothers, if we are women." This is also true for those of us who are not only women, but writers. Edith Wharton is one of my mothers, and for that I am grateful.



Part of the exhibition, with portrait of Wharton's father George Frederic Jones

HENRY S.F. COOPER JR.: LIVING THE LIBRARY'S HISTORY

by Andrew Corbin, Acquisitions and Reference Librarian

If the New York Society Library could be said to have an *éminence grise*, it would most certainly be Henry S.F. Cooper. Since his election to the Board of Trustees in 1971, Mr. Cooper has been animated by both a love for the traditions of the Library and an eagerness to help it meet the challenges of the day. It is a balancing act for sure, requiring both diplomacy and humor, qualities Mr. Cooper clearly has in abundance. One afternoon this spring, he sat down with me to discuss his forty years (and counting) serving the Library, as generous with his time as ever.

Mr. Cooper is characteristically warm when remembering his early days on the Board of Trustees, when he served alongside such distinguished figures as historian Arnold Whitridge, grandson of Matthew Arnold, and Walter Lord, author of the classic account of the Titanic disaster, *A Night to Remember*. He also speaks fondly and at length about Sylvia Hilton, Head Librarian of the Society Library from 1954 to 1977, taking a devilish delight in recounting one particular disagreement they had. It seems the Library was bequeathed several pieces of fine china by Sarah Goodhue, whose funds purchased the Library's current location, then a private residence called the Rogers House, and converted it into a functioning library. Mr. Cooper and Mr. Lord were entrusted with the task of finding a suitable home for the china, which had been tucked away in storage, and proposed to the Board that it be placed on display in the Members' Room. The Board members were delighted. Miss Hilton was not: "This horrified Miss Hilton, who came out with a memorable statement: 'Books and art do not go together.' We went ahead and did it anyway." To this day, selections from the Goodhue Collection line the eastern wall of the Members' Room.



When asked about his most memorable experience as a Trustee, however, Mr. Cooper has a less cheery tale to tell. In March 1973, the Library was shocked to discover that its set of the first edition of Audubon's *Birds of America* had gone missing from one of the locked stacks. Comprised of four volumes of considerable dimensions (40" x 24") and dubbed the "Elephant folios" because of their size, this extremely rare and highly sought-after set contained a total of 435 bird prints. The attempt to recover the stolen folios is a fantastic tale involving the New York Police Department, the FBI, and Interpol, as well as two very unlikely but formidable sleuths: the aforementioned Sylvia Hilton and Jean Burnham, the Library's head cataloger and rare books librarian. Miss Hilton wrote a vivid and delightful record of the entire adventure in her diary, selections of which are included in the book published to commemorate our 250th anniversary of the Library, edited by Mr. Cooper and Jenny Lawrence. In the end, the culprit was identified, though sadly not all of the 435 prints were recovered—some 84 were never returned and are presumed destroyed.

The saga of the Audubon prints doesn't end there, however. As Mr. Cooper recalls it, the Library's fundraising efforts during that time were distinctly underwhelming: "In the late 70s, early 80s, we decided that there were things that needed to be done to the building, and so we had a fund drive. The first fund drive the Library ever had. We were not very good at fundraising. We needed to raise something like 1.5 million dollars and we only raised about \$200,000 and the work was already being done in the building!" In the end, because the remaining Audubon prints were no longer bound and in book form, the Board voted to sell the majority of them at auction to raise the much-needed funds.

Mr. Cooper's years on the board also coincided with the advent of computerized card catalogs. The introduction of an online catalog at the Society Library was, as he remembers it, not without its problems: "You could almost draw a line by age. Which is to say everybody who was under 60, which I would've been at that time, wanted to automate the card catalog—digitize it, computerize it—and virtually everybody over 60 was appalled at the idea. Blood ran in the scuppers. Our Board has always been a very collegial group—or at least in recent decades, we all get along very well and have a very nice time when we meet. But there was this brief period when we were totally looking daggers at each other. The reasons against doing it were that the older hands, and indeed all of us at that time, were very accustomed to the card catalog, and the argument was that some of those cards had been there for 50 years or a hundred years or two hundred years and they were all annotated. Librarians and others over the years had written comments about the books on the cards and we didn't want to lose them. Finally we did arrive at a middle ground, which is we computerized the catalog but we also kept the old card files. A lot of members still use it."

In 1993, Mr. Cooper retired from his professional life as a journalist at the *New Yorker*, where he had worked as a staff writer covering the NASA space program since 1958. As he remembers it, his fascination with the subject was likely sparked,

HENRY S.F. COOPER JR.: LIVING THE LIBRARY'S HISTORY CONT.

appropriately enough, by a book: "It probably all began with a book that I read when I was in elementary school, a Jules Verne book called *From the Earth to the Moon*. It caught my fancy at a very early age." Aside from his regular contributions to the magazine, Cooper wrote eight books about NASA and space exploration beginning with *Apollo on the Moon* in 1969 (New York: Dial Press) and most recently *Venus Observed* in 1993 (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

These days Mr. Cooper spends a great deal of his time in Cooperstown, NY. He remains an avid and eclectic reader, though like many people who frequently travel back and forth from the city, he does now own a Kindle. We end our visit with Mr. Cooper by asking him about the very friendly black cat who sat in on our entire conversation, purring contentedly through it all: "Kit Kat adopted us in the country. Some people who go to the country and rent a house for the summer, they get a kitten when they arrive and when they go back to the city in the fall they dump the cat. If they have any heart they'll drop the cat near a house where it might be rescued. This cat came around and kept trying to follow us into the house. We wouldn't let it. And then one day in October when the temperature was down around 20 we let it in for one night. That was the end." There you have it. A testimony to the warmth and kindness of one of the Library's most beloved and respected Trustees.

THE 2012 NEW MEMBERS PARTY**Remarks by Hilma Wolitzer**

Members who joined within the year got a festive introduction to the Library on June 5, with keynote remarks by longtime Library member Hilma Wolitzer. Ms. Wolitzer is the author of several novels, including An Available Man, Summer Reading, The Doctor's Daughter, and Tunnel of Love, as well as a nonfiction book, The Company of Writers. She is also the mother of novelist Meg Wolitzer and mother-in-law of nonfiction writer Richard Panek. Photos by Karen Smul.

Good evening, welcome, and congratulations. You've made an excellent decision in joining the New York Society Library. I hope you will cherish, as I do, the lovely solitude to be found here, as well as the rousing company of so many writers, living and dead.

The other day I heard an anecdote somewhat relevant to this occasion that sounded apocryphal, but is bizarre enough to probably be true. A wealthy American woman became an ardent Anglophile after a visit to London. She was particularly obsessed with a baronial manor she'd seen and decided to have it precisely reproduced, room by room, in her home town. But to her dismay, the bookshelves in the library of her majestic new house proved too short to accommodate her collection of American books, which are generally taller than those produced in Great Britain. No problem! She simply had the bottom inch of every book sawed off. Clearly she liked the notion of a library more than the real thing.

This place is the real thing, a bastion of civility, enlightenment, and peace. Although some of the books in its stacks are weathered by age and handling, they're intact and contain the world. The Library's extraordinary staff maintains a steady, reassuring pulse. And its many rooms, as you will discover, offer a thrilling sense of history and a practical environment in which to read, do research, write, or simply daydream. This is my favorite room in this great house, just as the kitchen is my favorite room at home, maybe because they both make me feel safe and well-nourished, like a member of a happy, functional family.

I once saw Alfred Kazin sitting right there, near that window, reading the newspaper. He was a member then, too, and may have lived in the neighborhood, but I wouldn't have been completely surprised to see Edith Wharton or Henry James.

I didn't grow up in a particularly literary household. Our meager shelves held an ancient set of the *Book of Knowledge* and a battered copy of Dr. Morris Fischbein's *Home Medical Advisor*. I think I became a hypochondriac long before I became a writer. But when I wrote my first precociously terrible poems, my mother and father interrupted their weekly gin rummy game to have me read them aloud to their friends, who always clapped politely before dealing out the next hand. The riffing of the cards seemed like an echo of that applause.

And my sisters and I all had library cards; no one ever said that too much reading might damage our eyes. Maybe our parents intuitively knew that not enough reading might deprive our brains and our hearts. I remember checking out a book called *Penrod*, by Booth Tarkington, and sitting at our kitchen table to read it. The opening line was "Penrod sat morosely upon the back fence and gazed with envy at Duke, his wistful dog." I had absolutely no idea what "morosely" or "wistful" meant, but I was instantly,



Hilma Wolitzer

indelibly in love.

Of course my husband and I saw that our children always had the same early and easy access to books. And on one of our daughter and son-in-law's wedding anniversaries, we gave them a membership to the Society Library, and have renewed it every year since. Richard and Meg, both writers themselves, still often work here. And their young sons made good use of the charming children's room until they graduated to the Library's adult collection. As Meg put it, this was a "far better present than flatware." It can also serve for birthdays and Christmas and Hannukah, by the way, and never has to be gift-wrapped. I hope the passing down of memberships will become a tradition in your own families.

Despite my affinity for tradition, I'm not exactly a Luddite. I have a computer, an iPhone, a flat-screen, high-definition TV, and even a Kindle. I compose directly on my laptop and I often surf the Web, trying to identify the rash on my leg or find the perfect recipe for butternut squash soup. We live in a digital age, and I've come to accept what's touted as (and often actually is) progress. But there's something about a literal, material book in hand—the very heft of it, the texture of its pages, the actual (not the virtual) act of turning those pages, the smells of ink and glue—that's irreplaceable in its various pleasures. And you can never be electrocuted reading a real book in the bathtub.

Those early awful poems aside, I was a late bloomer. My first novel was published when I was forty-four and sometimes billed as *The Great Middle-aged Hope*. I like to tell myself that I was just too busy reading to write. When the very first copy of that novel arrived in the mail, I was delighted. I looked it over carefully, removing the dust jacket, checking to see that it had the right number of fingers and toes. Comparing publication to childbirth isn't just a cliché. But it wasn't until I saw another copy on a library shelf, looking like a regular book, resting casually between Thomas Wolfe and Virginia Woolf, that I truly felt like a writer. I've always felt like a reader, though, and the two occupations are inextricably entwined in my mind. Perhaps that's because I write for the same reasons that I read, to discover what I know and what I don't know, and to find out what happens next.

There are many wonderful quotes related to reading and writing. Madonna once said, "Everyone probably thinks that I'm a raving nymphomaniac, that I have an insatiable sexual appetite, when the truth is I'd rather read a book." And when asked if the university stifles writers, Flannery O'Connor replied, "In my opinion they don't stifle them enough."

The novelist Stanley Elkin wrote, in an essay on reading, "It is, I think, not so much a way of forgetting ourselves as of engaging the totality of our attentions, as racing-car drivers and mountain climbers engage them, as surgeons and chess masters do." Thomas Jefferson said, more succinctly, "I cannot live without books." But perhaps the best lines come from Groucho Marx: "Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read."

I always find that there's just the right amount of light here in the New York Society Library, in both the real and metaphorical sense. Thank you for being drawn to that light, for being avid readers in a culture that's becoming increasingly aliterate. I wish you all a long and lively relationship with this splendid institution.



Andrea King, guest host Adrienne Ingram, and Harriet Bell



Conservator George Muñoz discusses his craft



Linda Yang

EDITH WHARTON'S FATHER: A GENTLEMAN READER

by Alan Behler, Systems Assistant

The wide response to our exhibition *Edith Wharton's New York City: A Backward Glance* shows the place the classic author holds in the hearts of New Yorkers. Among the paintings, photographs and books, one exhibition item that may get overlooked is the borrowing record of George Frederic Jones, Wharton's father. It is a fascinating picture of an educated gentleman's reading habits.

The record's transcription, due to be published in the *Edith Wharton Review* this fall, covers the years 1856-1857, before Edith's birth, and 1872-1880, when she was in her teens. In their original handwritten form, the entries are hard to decipher. The librarian often entered only a shorthand word suggesting each book's identity—for instance, an item that looks like "Thalaka" turned out to be *Thalaba the Destroyer: A Rhythmical Romance* by Robert Southey. Many hours of work with the Library catalog, Google Books, and cataloging databases filled in 94% of the entries. Some highlights:

Elsie Venner by Oliver Wendell Holmes, borrowed April 20-May 24, 1872. Still in the Library's collection, this first edition of Holmes's first novel was published in 1861 while Holmes was a professor at Harvard Medical School. Called a "medicated novel" by Holmes because the main character's health or mental problems are diagnosed in the text, *Elsie Venner* is an odd mix of the gothic supernatural and modern medicine. Although not Holmes's most distinguished work, the book gave us the term "Boston Brahmin."

The Heir of Redclyffe by Charlotte Mary Yonge, borrowed February 5-20, 1875. Unknown today, this Byronic tale of fall and redemption was a runaway bestseller, yielding the author enough funds to cover much of building cost for the *Southern Cross*, a missionary ship bound for Melanesia. The book makes several appearances in the writing of other authors. Meg finds her sister Jo crying over a copy of it in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Not everyone was as enraptured, however: when Oscar Wilde met a condemned criminal in a Nebraska jail during his 1883 American tour, he wrote, "My heart was turned by the eyes of the doomed man, but if he reads *The Heir of Red Clyffe* it's perhaps as well to let the law take its course."

Descent of Man by Charles Darwin, borrowed March 5-14, 1873. First published in 1871, *Descent of Man* is Darwin's second book of evolutionary theory and the place he first ventured his hypothesis of sexual selection. It met with much less outcry than his previous book, *On the Origin of Species*. The *Annual Register* magazine's review of *Descent of Man* observed, "As it happens, the year 1871 was remarkably fertile in discussions which may be described as lying on the border-land between scientific and moral speculation, and in which, therefore, men of science obtain a far larger audience than usual. We refer especially to the long controversy which has been excited by the latest developments of Mr. Darwin's theory."

Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets by William Howitt, borrowed May 17-26, 1875. In her autobiographical sketches, Edith Wharton describes her father as having a "rudimentary love of verse" and a "baffled love of poetry." Howitt's book on the homes of the English poets would be perfect reading for a well-traveled gentleman who may have visited some of its sites. Samples of its beautiful colored plates can be found in the Library's catalog entry for the book.

Madame Bovary and *Salammbô* by Gustave Flaubert, and *Abelard and Heloise* by Mr. and Mrs. Guizot, borrowed between 1873 and 1876. These entries demonstrate Mr. Jones's fluent command of French. Out of the 101 books he borrowed, seventeen were in French and one in German (poet Heinrich Heine's *Travel Sketches* or *Reisebilder*). Among other books he read in the original French were Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* and *Joseph Balsamo*.

It is hard to judge whether Wharton read any of the books her father checked out from the Society Library. Nevertheless, his reading list makes it clear that her description of her childhood as an "intellectual desert" is relative, if not exaggerated. George Frederic Jones's borrowing records stand as independent fact, painting a portrait as distinct as his author daughter's competing depiction of him.



Fig. 78. *Cercopithecus diana* (from Brehm).

Illustrations from Darwin's *Descent of Man* and Howitt's *Homes and Haunts*



EDMUND SPENSER.

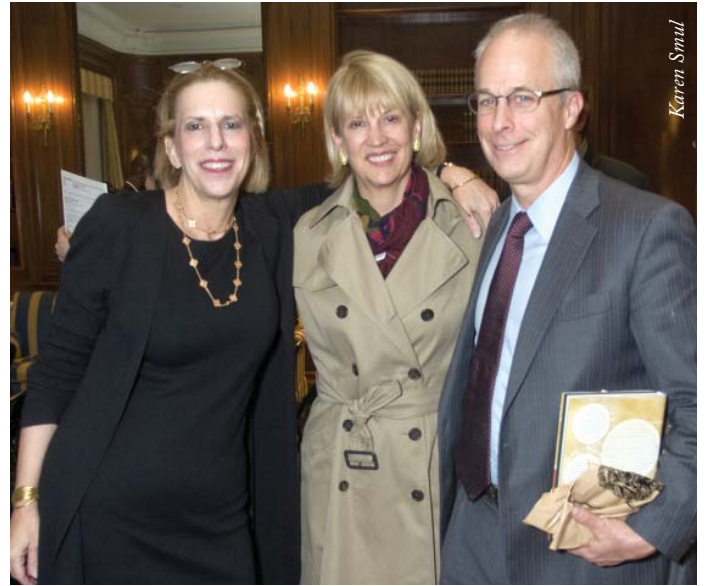
THE NEW YORK CITY BOOK AWARDS CEREMONY

Award for History: Carla L. Peterson for *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City* (Yale University Press)

Award for Fiction: Teju Cole for *Open City: A Novel* (Random House)

The Hornblower Award for a First Book: Suleiman Osman for *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York* (Oxford University Press)

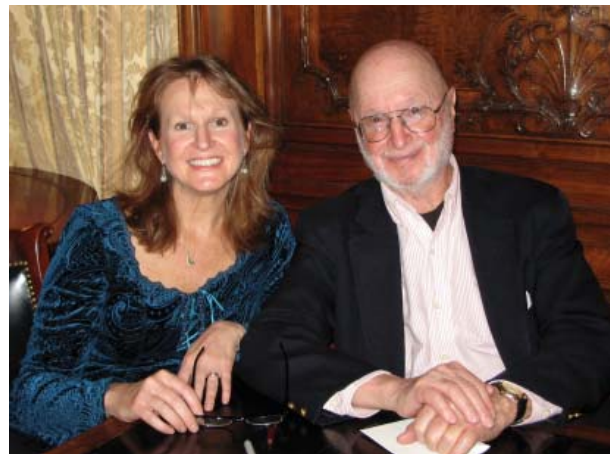
The Hornblower Award, for an excellent New York City-related book by a first-time author, was given for the first time this year.



Left: Winning authors Teju Cole, Carla L. Peterson and Suleiman Osman.
 Right: Trustee Ellen M. Iseman, Kathryn Berry, and Chairman of the Board Charles G. Berry.

THE 2011-2012 NEW YORK CITY BOOK AWARDS ARE GENEROUSLY UNDERWRITTEN BY ELLEN M. ISEMAN.

THE SPRING SEASON



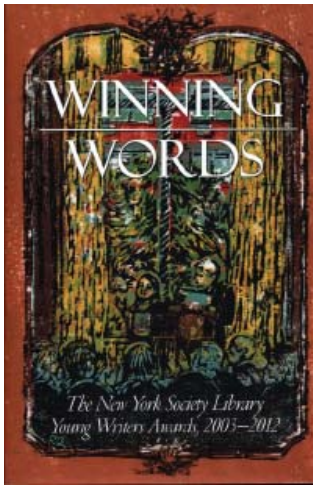
Above: Lyn Chase, speaker William Jay Smith, and Mrs. Smith at his National Poetry Month event on My Friend Tom, April; Kate Feiffer and Jules Feiffer introduce their children's book No Go Sleep!, March

Right: Hermione Lee lectures on her biography of Edith Wharton, March; Judy Collins speaks on her memoir Sweet Judy Blue Eyes, May.



BOOKS FOR YOUR COLLECTION

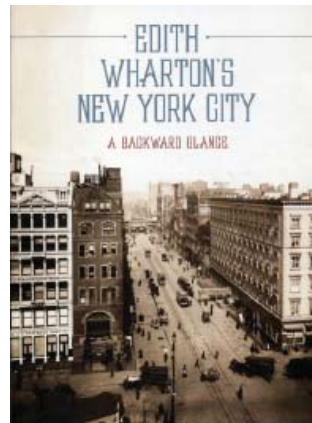
Publications for which the Library is a publisher or contributor are available for purchase at the circulation desk or using this form.



*Winning Words:
The New York Society Library
Young Writers Awards,
2003-2012*

_____ COPIES X \$10 = _____

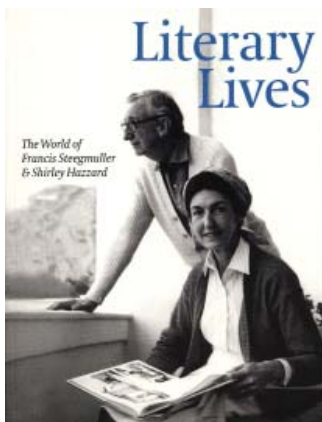
All the winning entries by children in third through twelfth grades, with art by author/illustrator Robert Quackenbush. (2012)



*Edith Wharton's
New York City:
A Backward Glance*

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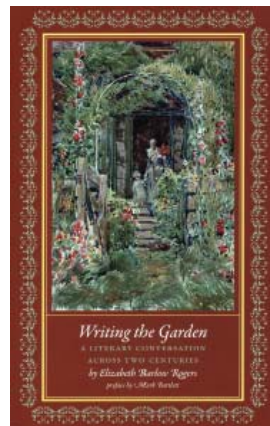
With many rare images and original essays by Roxana Robinson, David Garrard Lowe, and Head of Exhibitions Harriet Shapiro. (2012)



*Literary Lives:
The World of Francis Steegmuller
and Shirley Hazzard*

_____ COPIES X \$10 = _____

Exhibition catalog with contributions by Jonathan Galassi, Richard Howard, and Caroline Weber, and an interview with Shirley Hazzard. (2010)



*Writing the Garden:
A Literary Conversation
Across Two Centuries*

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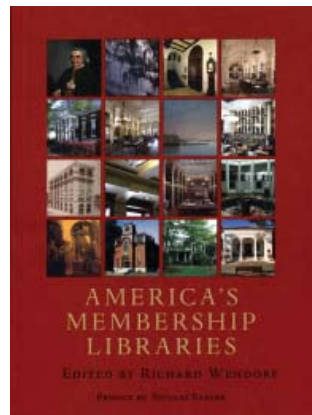
Acclaimed author Elizabeth Barlow Rogers introduces the writing of gardeners from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Michael Pollan. (David R. Godine, 2011)



*The President's Wife
and the Librarian*

_____ COPIES X \$10 = _____

Exhibition catalog about Edith Kermit Roosevelt, First Lady of Theodore Roosevelt, and her relationship to the Library, with an essay by Sylvia Jukes Morris. (2009)



*America's Membership
Libraries*

_____ COPIES X \$35 = _____

A majestic full-color survey of sixteen of America's historic subscription libraries. (Edited by Richard Wendorf; Oak Knoll Press, 2007)

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CREDIT CARD NUMBER

EXPIRATION DATE

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New York, NY 10075

Orders may also be placed by phone at 212-288-6900 x230.

OFF THE SHELF: A READER'S REVIEW

SHORT STORIES: KNOWN AND REDISCOVERED

by Andrew Corbin, Acquisitions and Reference Librarian

"A good short story should not have less meaning than a novel, nor should its action be less complete. Nothing essential to the main experience can be left out of a short story....A short story should be long in depth and should give us an experience of meaning."

—Flannery O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories"

The short story has its devotees, to be sure, but it also has its detractors, those who feel it can never attain the emotional depth or structural sophistication of the novel. There are also those readers who are perfectly happy to dip into short stories as an interim measure while deciding what novel to read next. With the following suggestions, we hope to convince any doubters that the short story is as flexible and satisfying an art form as the novel, and also hopefully introduce the already converted to some lesser-known writers.

THE CLASSICS

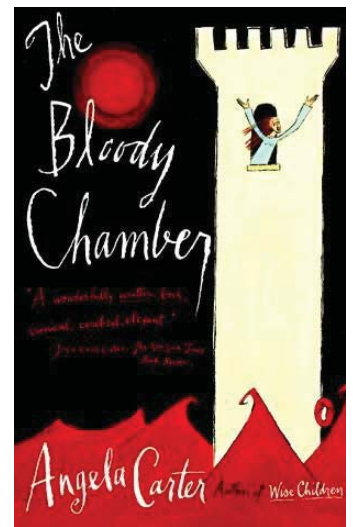
Like any literary genre, the short story has its own canon, writers whose mastery of the form is beyond dispute and with whom our members are undoubtedly familiar: Anton Chekhov ("The Lady With the Little Dog"), Flannery O'Connor ("A Good Man is Hard to Find"), Katherine Mansfield ("The Daughters of the Late Colonel"), James Joyce ("The Dead"), Alice Munro ("Runaway"), William Trevor ("The Piano-Tuner's Wives"). These writers all produced bodies of work as complex, emotionally resonant, and intellectually engaging as the weightiest of novels, and like all great works of art, they are well worth revisiting. I guarantee that if it has been a while since you have read any Edgar Allan Poe or O. Henry, just pick up "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Gift of the Magi" and you will be amazed at how fresh and affecting they still are.

ELIZABETH TAYLOR (1912-1975)

Sharing a name with one of the world's most famous movie stars can't have made the writing career of the English writer Elizabeth Taylor easy, and it hasn't exactly helped her posthumous reputation either. In a recent appreciation of Taylor's work written for the *Telegraph*, contemporary novelist Philip Hensher notes: "Even now, one always has to refer to her as Elizabeth-Taylor-the-novelist in conversation." And while Taylor's novels, particularly the sublime *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont*, have more than their fair share of enthusiasts among the Library's membership, her collections of short stories, most of which were published in the *New Yorker*, are perhaps less well-known. This is a shame, as they exhibit every bit as much of the wit, keen observation, and emotional subtlety that Taylor's novels are known for. Her 1972 collection *The Devastating Boys* is particularly strong and would be a good place to start. Though her work was often dismissed during her lifetime as too polite and genteel, Taylor's sly irony and sharp eye for human folly, both of which are abundantly on display in her stories, are appreciated by more discerning readers.

ANGELA CARTER (1940-1992)

When Angela Carter died in 1992, the literary world lost one of its most unique and challenging voices. Like Elizabeth Taylor, Carter was also a successful novelist; her 1991 *Wise Children* is a comic masterpiece about twin chorus girls Dora and Nora Chance and their endlessly bizarre family. Unlike Taylor, however, it is her short stories for which Carter is best known. Her most famous collection is undoubtedly *The Bloody Chamber*, which generated considerable attention when it was first published in 1979 and has become a staple in literature courses ever since. The ten stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are frequently described as feminist retellings of folktales, though as Carter notes, she had something far more ambitious in mind: "My intention was not to do 'versions' or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, 'adult' fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories." And while they do have echoes of the familiar and archetypal, her stories are never quaint or charming. They are subversive, gorgeously written, and fiercely intelligent meditations on the violent sexuality lurking beneath the surface of some of our most cherished childhood stories. To read Angela Carter is to enter her world, and what a fascinating world it is.



BREECE D'J PANCAKE (1952-1979)

The name Breece D'J Pancake is distinctive enough that once heard, it is impossible to forget. The problem is, as the author of just one collection of short stories, his name rarely comes up in literary conversations. Pancake was born and raised in coal-mining country in West Virginia, a region which features prominently in his work. During his lifetime he published only six stories, the

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The New York Society Library

Notes Vol. 19 #2, Summer 2012

FEATURES

SHORT STORIES: KNOWN AND REDISCOVERED *CONT.*

majority of which appeared in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*. He is perhaps best known for “Trilobytes,” the story of a young man trying to convince his widowed mother not to sell the family farm. It is typical of his style—lean yet dense with vivid poetic imagery, and with a tense awareness of the constant threat of violence in hardscrabble West Virginia. Sadly, Pancake committed suicide in 1979 at the age of 27, but his reputation has grown with the passing of time.

HELEN SIMPSON (1957–PRESENT)

Already celebrated as a master of the short story in her native England, Helen Simpson is only just beginning to attract wide attention in the United States. Starting with her first collection in 1990, *Four Bare Legs in a Bed*, Simpson has been writing drily humorous, perfectly pitched short stories, many of which are about contemporary women navigating—usually unsuccessfully—the fraught waters of love, motherhood, career, and marriage. These are not cheery, cozy stories, however, and they should not be dismissed as lightweight simply because they deal primarily with domestic matters. Simpson has an uncanny eye for absurdity and a knack for uncovering the bleakly comic aspects of the most ordinary situations. Anyone who values razor-sharp, unsentimental writing can find something to love in Simpson’s work, particularly her 2007 collection, *In the Driver’s Seat*.

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE (1962–2008)

There is no shame in finding the prospect of reading David Foster Wallace’s 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, daunting; at over a thousand pages, almost four hundred of which are endnotes, it is nothing if not intimidating. As critically-lauded and commercially successful as that massive tome is, however, Wallace also produced three collections of short stories that are every bit as inventive, complex, funny, and moving as *Infinite Jest*. Readers interested in exploring his work would do well to check out his 1989 debut collection, *The Girl With Curious Hair*. Like *Infinite Jest*, Wallace’s stories deftly merge the ridiculous with the sublime and the familiar with the deeply strange. With references to or appearances from a variety of real-life figures, including David Letterman and Lyndon Johnson, the stories in *The Girl With Curious Hair* are as entertaining as they are intelligent, with an undercurrent of sadness that makes them far more than an exercise in post-modern trickery.



Breece DJ Pancake