

# Books & People

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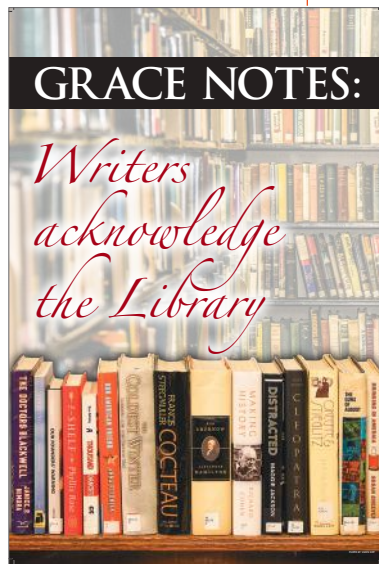
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## Grace Notes: Writers Acknowledge the Library

by Harriet Shapiro



The Library is proud to be a source of inspiration, encouragement, and community for so many wonderful writers. In January and February 2023, our exhibition *Grace Notes* presented volumes by member authors past and present who have thanked the Library in their acknowledgements.

The acknowledgements that follow were displayed in the Peluso Exhibition Gallery alongside editions from our collection.

We are grateful to the many writers who have shared kind words about the Library and for the diverse writing community that has called us a home away from home for generations.

We invite you to share any acknowledgements you find in our stacks with us for future exhibitions!

**Barbara Lazear Ascher, *Ghosting: A Widow's Voyage Out***  
Wainscott, New York: Pushcart Press, 2021

"I am grateful to the New York Society Library for providing a writers' room and brilliant Staff, especially Steve McGuirl, Head of Acquisitions, and Acquisitions Assistant Patrick Rayner who somehow know just the book in the stacks that will shed light on my subject, whatever that might be."

## Greetings from the Head Librarian

### “What is the point of this place?”

The very good news is that Library memberships are increasing again, and while we are still not back to our pre-pandemic level, we are making steady progress. Thanks to all of you who spread the word about the Library, and to our targeted efforts to attract readers, writers, and families, we signed up 558 new memberships in 2022 alone. This is an all-time high.

But despite our best efforts, I continue to wonder about the larger community’s perceptions of us. Due to one of those new members, I was privy to a conversation on a professional listserv where the Library was being discussed. One participant asked: *What is the point of this place?* And I thought, *We still have work to do.*

To me, we are: A community of readers and writers. A refuge for quiet study and contemplation in a chaotic city. A wondrous and accessible treasure trove of new and forgotten books ripe for discovery. An important resource for both scholarly research and for general knowledge. A vibrant stage for literary talks and discussions. A lively and engaging space to encourage children on a path to a lifelong love of reading. An historic cultural landmark in an exceptional city. My list goes on and on.

How would *you* describe the Library to someone who had never heard of us before? What is the Library to you? I’d love to hear from you. And while you’re at it, please provide your latest book recommendation. I just finished—and loved—the epic *The Balkan Trilogy* by Olivia Manning.



—Carolyn Waters, Head Librarian

*A former attorney, Barbara Ascher has written five nonfiction books, including Playing After Dark and Landscape without Gravity. Ghosting, an intense love story leading to death and beyond, was described by Kirkus Reviews as an “elegant, frank and tender memoir.” Ascher is a member of our Library.*

**Laurence Bergreen, *In Search of a Kingdom: Francis Drake, Elizabeth I, and the Perilous Birth of the British Empire* New York: HarperCollins, 2021**

“My search for materials relating to John Dee led me to the New York Society Library, where I am a trustee, with its collection of rare Dee materials, including books from his library containing his extensive marginal notes. My thanks to the head librarian, Carolyn Waters, for her seemingly omniscient knowledge of the library.” *Laurence Bergreen is an award-winning biographer and historian. His books have been translated into more than 25 languages worldwide.*

**Susan Cheever, *Drinking in America: Our Secret History* New York: Twelve/Hachette Book Group, 2015**

“I live in a city where you can run into a writer at the drug store or in a coffee shop, where a nearby library—the New York Society Library—offers open stacks for browsing and helpful staff.” *PEN New England Award-winner Susan Cheever has written extensively about her father, the American writer John Cheever, as well as novels and biographies of other writers. Her memoir Home Before Dark was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award.*

**Richard Cohen, *Making History: The Storytellers Who Shaped the Past* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022**

“I am also indebted to the Society Library of New York (although I do wish they would change the signs above low-slung doorways from ‘Duck or Complain’ to ‘Duck or Grouse’). Both the institution and the people who work there have been helpful beyond the call of duty.”

*A former director of two leading London publishing houses, Richard Cohen turned to the Library when writing Making History. Outside his publishing career, he is a five-time British fencing champion and a three-time Olympian.*

**David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* New York: Hyperion, 2007**

“I was welcomed and treated with uncommon kindness at a number of libraries. As ever, the entire staff of the New York Society Library was helpful and helped create what is an oasis for me and other writers in the city.”

*In 1964, David Halberstam won the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting. The New York Society Library counts 23 titles by Halberstam in its catalog, written throughout his remarkable career. A longtime member of our Library, Halberstam was killed in a car crash in 2007.*

**Janice P. Nimura, *The Doctors Blackwell: How Two Pioneering Sisters Brought Medicine to Women and Women to Medicine* New York: W.W. Norton, 2021**

“Profound thanks to Carolyn Waters, Catherine McGowan, Barbara Bieck, and the entire staff of the New York Society Library, my second home.” *Library member Janice Nimura’s biography The Doctors Blackwell was a 2022 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her earlier book, Daughters of the Samurai, was*



Janice P. Nimura with her book *The Doctors Blackwell*



*inspired by and references a dusty copy of A Daughter of the Samurai she found in the sub-basement of the Library. She later wrote, "I never imagined the voyage it would send me on, or the extraordinary people I would meet along the way."*

**Anna Pitoniak, *Our American Friend***

New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022

"Writing this novel gave me the chance to let my mind roam free in a new way. Which leads me to the New York Society Library. Thank you to the Society Library for the dozens (and dozens and dozens!) of books that helped shape my thinking around this novel. Thank you to Carolyn Waters and to all of the people who make the Society Library what it is. It's the most beautiful home-away-from-home that a writer could dream up." *Anna Pitoniak, a former senior editor at Random House, lives and works in New York*

*City. A lively political thriller, Our American Friend was a New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice. Pitoniak is a member of our Library.*

**Phyllis Rose, *The Shelf: From LEQ to LES: Adventures in Extreme Reading***

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014

"Warm thanks to [New York Society Library staff members] Mark Bartlett, Susan Chan [and] Steve McGuirl for help that ranged from inspirational to forbearance and from useful remarks to generous participation and invaluable editorial readings."

*Phyllis Rose's experiment in democratic reading led her into the New York Society Library's stacks, where she chose a shelf of fiction at random and read her way through it, creating a portrait of literature that bucks the preselected canon. Recently, a librarian from Austin, Texas stopped by the Library on a visit to New York in order to take a picture of the eponymous shelf.*

**Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau: A Biography***

Boston: Little, Brown, 1970

"I wish to express my gratitude to the New York Society Library."

*French scholar Francis Steegmuller won the 1971 National Book Award for his biography of Jean Cocteau. A longtime member of our Library, he expressed his recognition of an institution he valued in a few deeply felt words.*

**Elswyth Thane, *The Fighting Quaker: Nathanael Green***

New York: Hawthorn Books, 1972

"As always, the prompt and efficient service of the New York Society Library has been of enormous assistance."

*Library member Elswyth Thane was also a close friend of longtime staff member Marion King, who in turn documented her time here in Books and People. In Reluctant Farmer, Thane writes more fully about our institution.*

**Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August: The Outbreak of World War I***

New York: Macmillan, 1962

"My thanks go to the New York Society Library for the continuing hospitality of its stacks and the haven of a place to write."

*A masterful history of the run-up to World War I, The Guns of August won the 1963 Pulitzer Prize. Barbara Tuchman was a longtime trustee of our Library.*

For more, see [nysoclib.org/events/grace-notes-writers-acknowledge-library](https://nysoclib.org/events/grace-notes-writers-acknowledge-library).

**The Library is glad to welcome Warren St. John to the Board of Trustees.**

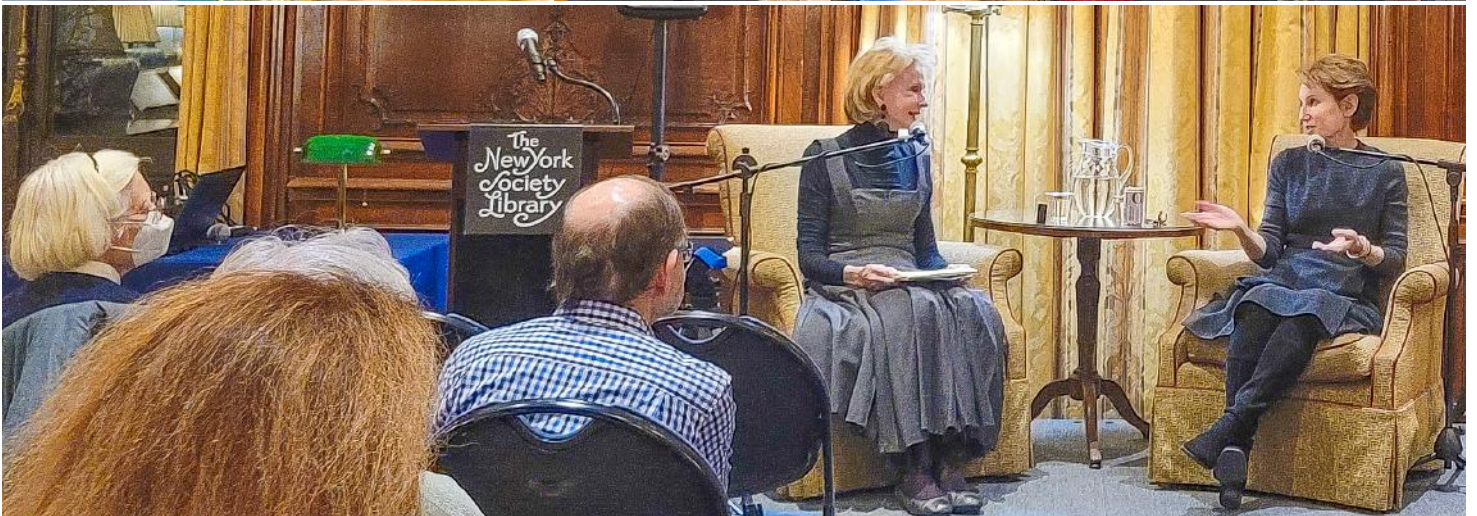


Mr. St. John is the author of the national bestsellers *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer: A Journey Into the Heart of Fan Mania* (currently in development for television by Amazon Studios) and *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference*. For seven years he was a reporter for the *New York Times*, and, before that, a writer for the *New Yorker* magazine, the *New York Observer*, and *Wired*.

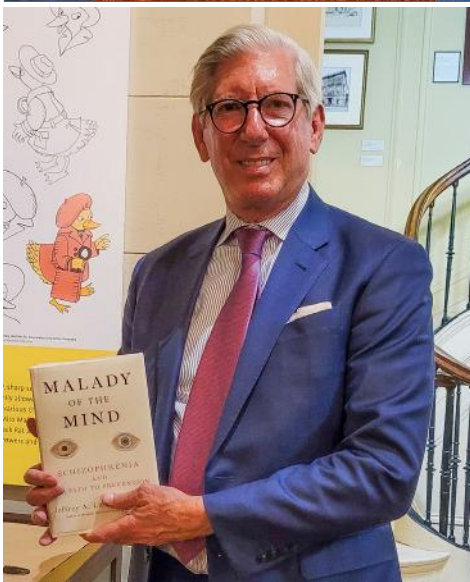
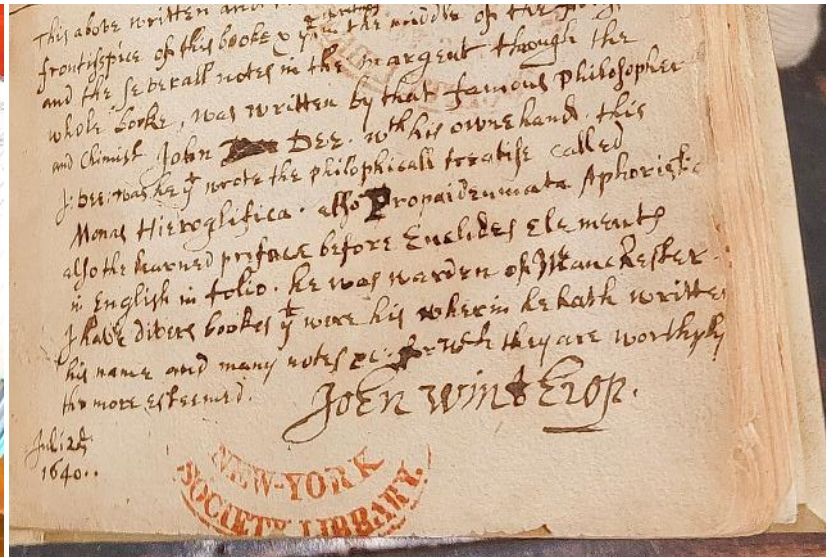
For the last nine years, he has been a member of the executive team of Patch, the hyperlocal news platform, serving at various points as Editor-in-Chief, CEO, President, and now Chairman. Patch employs over 125 full-time local news reporters and is the largest platform in the U.S. dedicated to original hyperlocal news coverage.

Mr. St. John attended the Altamont School in Birmingham, AL, and Columbia College in New York City. He lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan with his wife Nicole and two children, Serena and Henry.

# Winter Events



**Top:** the judges and honorees celebrate our first Young Cartoonists Awards, February 6; **Middle:** Bob “Bobaloo” Basey brings his musical storytelling to children, January 21; Authors from the Harlem Writers Guild joined us in a festive celebration of the Roaring Twenties, December 1; **Bottom:** Jeannette Watson Sanger conversed with *The Revolutionary: Samuel Adams* author Stacy Schiff, January 23



Top: Our earliest charging ledger and one of our rare books from the Winthrop Collection on display at our event with the Bibliographical Society of America, January 26 Middle: Visitors from the Bibliographical Society of America in the Members' Room; Beloved children's author James Howe spoke on December 5; Bottom: author Dr. Jeffrey A. Lieberman presented his new book *Malady of the Mind* on February 27; Priscilla Gilman discussed her new memoir *The Critic's Daughter* on February 13; and David N. Gellman presented our annual Henry S.F. Cooper Jr. lecture on American history on January 17

# Recovering Women Readers at the New York Society Library

by Dr. Sophie H. Jones

For Women's History Month, I wanted to reflect on some of the women who played important roles in the history of the Library. For the large part, subscription libraries were male-dominated spaces, with female membership a minority. Our project database currently holds the names of more than 9,500 individuals who were members at social libraries within North America and the British Isles; only 5% of these names belong to women.

Although women were not formally excluded from becoming members of the New York Society Library, social and legal convention in eighteenth-century New York meant that women were structurally excluded from becoming members. Under the common practice of *coverture*, upon marriage, women's wealth and property became that of their husbands. It was therefore unusual for colonial women to be property-holders in their own right; this included purchasing shares in joint-stock library companies such as the Library. Subsequently, when the Library's co-founders put out their call for subscribers in 1754, none of the 121 individuals who signed their names were women, nor were there any women listed on the earliest surviving membership list from 1758.

While we strongly suspect that women were closely linked to social libraries from their very beginnings, the historical practice of excluding women from formal records meant that women have for too long been relegated to the background. Fortunately, this perception is now changing. For instance, Carolyn Waters credits Mary ("Polly") Spratt Provoost Alexander – the wife of James Alexander, and associate of Library co-founder William Smith Jr.—with inspiring the creation of the Library, as she expressed to Smith her difficulty in procuring good books. Meanwhile, our project team's work on borrowing records—including the charging ledgers from the *City Readers* website—leads us to believe that male heads of households became Library members, with their wives, sons, daughters (and anyone else living in their household) borrowing against their account. As my students described it, "a bit like eighteenth-century Netflix."

The first time that a woman was listed amongst the New York Society Library's members was in 1772, on the Royal Charter issued by George III. That woman was Anne Waddell: the



The record of Anne Waddell's share in the Library's Shareholders' Register

widow of Library member Captain John Waddell, a ship's commander and merchant who had joined in 1754. From his store in King's Street (and later in Dock Street), John supplied general goods from Europe and India. The couple had seven children.

When John died c.1762, he left all of his property—including his share in the Library—to Anne. This was quite unusual, as property was usually left to a surviving male relative. As John's will makes explicit, Anne was responsible for 'support and maintenance and the bringing up and nurture and education of my children... after a credible and genteel manner'. The New York Society Library provided access to the very books that would support the children's education. The executors of John's will—fellow Library members John Vanderspeigel and Peter Van Brugh Livingston—were explicitly instructed to support Anne in complying with his instructions, and may well have persuaded the Library's trustees to admit her as a member.

Anne's membership, however, was only ever meant to be temporary. She was to have full access to John's property only 'until the youngest of [the children] shall be of age to marry'. Little is known of Anne's brief period of membership. No borrowing records survive from the period, and when she died in 1773, her share was taken by her eldest son, William. Nevertheless, she remains the sole named female member of the Library during the colonial period and the only woman to be named on the charter. Anne's experience serves as an important reminder of the presence of other, undocumented, women who were important supporters of the New York Society Library, and whose stories we have yet to uncover.

Dr. Sophie H. Jones is a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Liverpool, working on the 'Libraries, Reading Communities and Cultural Formation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic' project (funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council), of which the New York Society Library is a key partner institution. Her research focuses on colonial North America, particularly New York.



## Wanted: Enthusiastic Subject Experts

Do you have expertise in a particular subject? Do you use the Library's collection frequently?

The Library is looking for volunteers with advanced degrees or a record of independent scholarship to help critically review our adult nonfiction collection. You will help us by recommending improvements to our collection to guarantee its relevance to readers for decades to come.

Volunteers should have well-rounded knowledge of publishing trends and standard works in their subject area—recent and historical, scholarly and popular. Familiarity with the Library's collection is a bonus.

We are seeking experts in various disciplines in the social sciences, the history of fine and decorative arts, U.S. and world history (all eras). But no specialty is too small.

If you have a passion for a subject and for the gems to be found in the Library's stacks, this is a rewarding opportunity to spend time immersed in our collection and the literature of a subject you know well. Projects will be designed to accommodate volunteers' schedules and preferred modes of working.

Interested? Please contact Steven McGuirl at [smcguirl@nysoclib.org](mailto:smcguirl@nysoclib.org).

## New Electronic Resource



The Library is pleased to announce the latest addition to our collection of electronic resources: The digital edition of the *Financial Times*.

Access to FT is available in the Library and remotely for members who are logged in to our website. If you don't have your username and password for [nysoclib.org](http://nysoclib.org), please contact the help desk at [help@nysoclib.org](mailto:help@nysoclib.org).

To use FT, go to the Electronic Resources tab at the top of our website and then click the *Financial Times* link under "Journals, Newspapers, and Periodicals."

FT is one of our most popular Members' Room publications and a trusted news source with 700 journalists based in 40 countries. Although best-known for their reporting on

business and economic current affairs, do not miss their fine book review section. The digital edition allows members to read articles back to 2005 and is updated daily, so you will not miss the morning's latest, breaking news from the UK.

The Library now offers over 20 electronic resources, including ebooks, digital magazines, databases of scholarly material like JSTOR and Project Muse, reference resources such as the Chicago Manual of Style and the OED, plus book reviews (*New York Review*, *London Review*), the Loeb Classical Library, historical newspapers, and much more. Most of these resources offer remote access.

Please email [reference@nysoclib.org](mailto:reference@nysoclib.org) if you have questions about any of our electronic resources.



53 East 79th Street  
New York, NY 10075

T. 212.288.6900

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## One More Picture



We're pleased to add these handsome and comfortable new chairs to the Whitridge Room on the third floor. Drop in to read or write there!