

FROM THE HEAD LIBRARIAN

MARK BARTLETT

I want to take this opportunity to thank all Library members for your ongoing support, which you demonstrate in so many ways: through your membership; your participation in events; your support in underwriting collections and programs; and your contributions throughout the year. 2010 began with the remarkable news that last year's contributions were the highest in our long history. The generosity of everyone listed in this newsletter enables us to provide our 3,100+ members with the services, collections, and programs we all want and enjoy.

Barbara Stern was a professor at Rutgers University and a long-time Library member. Aside from her academic interests, she loved the Library's offerings in mystery and contemporary fiction. The Barbara B. Stern Fund, established by her daughter in 2009, supports our acquisitions in these areas in her memory. Member Frederick J. Iseman established the Claude Labouret Book Collection to support French works in English translation. In addition to these print-book projects, an anonymous donor established a new archives and digitization fund to support this increasingly important area.

We are also very pleased with last year's support for special projects from two foundations. The new exhibition *Literary Lives: The World of Francis Steegmuller and Shirley Hazzard* is supported in part by The Bodman Foundation, and Newman's Own Foundation is supporting the Library's collection of quality nonfiction books. Last but not far from least, Jeanette Sarkisian Wagner and Paul S. Wagner are supporting the May 2010 Young Writers Awards, and Jenny Lawrence is underwriting the daytime "The Writing Life" series organized by writers services librarian Carolyn Waters.

It has been extremely satisfying to see the Library represented in several recent print and online publications. Christopher Gray's Streetscapes column "Where Fusty is Fabulous" (*The New York Times*, March 7, 2010) drew welcome attention to the present-day Library in the context of its long institutional and architectural history. Since that weekend, we have been busy giving tours to prospective members and registering those who choose to stay. (At \$225 a year for a household, or \$175 for an individual, I still believe it is one of the best bargains in town.) In "After Hours at the Library, City Secrets," Deidre Foley-Mendelsohn of the *New Yorker's* "The Book Bench" blogged about the Library's January 28 Literary Magazine Salon. *Huffington Post* writer Matt McCue's column "Buzz Bissinger, On the Future of Long-Form Journalism in a Blogger's World" featured Mr. Bissinger's energizing talk on February 25. (Thanks to trustee Ellen Iseman for arranging that event.)

My last *Library Notes* message mused about the place of electronic books at the Society Library. My musing continues, with the influence of many perspectives from members, staff, trustees, and recent publications. One thing that is increasingly clear is the role of the printed book in the lives of Library members. Our 2009 circulation rose 9% from the total in 2008--88,659 to 97,589 items. Children's Library borrowing accounted for a healthy 15% of the year's total. Although the increase has no single cause, it seems obvious that some readers are choosing to borrow rather than buy--a good option for the Library, the environment, and their wallets. I hope that our various methods of getting books into members' hands--through reader's advisory at the front desk, the monthly *New Book* list, *Library Notes* articles like the one by Andrew Corbin in this issue, e-newsletter updates (new in 2009), books by mail and interlibrary loan services, and a variety of engaging lectures, readings, and discussion groups--are keeping the book alive.

Thank you so much for your commitment to the Society Library. Enjoy the benefits of your membership, and I'll see you at the reference desk.



At the January 28 Literary Magazine Salon: Hannah Tinti, Brigid Hughes, Rob Casper, Jenny Lawrence, John Wray, Cathy Park Hong, Terese Svoboda.

Mark Bartlett

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Head Librarian

OFF THE SHELF: A READER'S REVIEW

ANDREW CORBIN

"This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists." Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

In the eighty-one years since Virginia Woolf published *A Room of One's Own*, change has come slowly in terms of how women's literature is viewed. With some notable exceptions, unless they tackle the "Big Issues," women writers are either ignored or dismissed as lightweight. This is particularly true of the so-called "domestic novel," a term typically applied to novels written by English women which are largely concerned, as novelist Amanda Craig notes, with "love, marriage, and property." In recent years, however, the critical tide has begun to turn—women's fiction and the domestic novel are finally being taken seriously as literature in their own right. What follows is a brief introduction to three women's novelists who deserve wider recognition: Barbara Pym, Elizabeth Taylor, and Rosamond Lehmann.

BARBARA PYM (1913–1980)

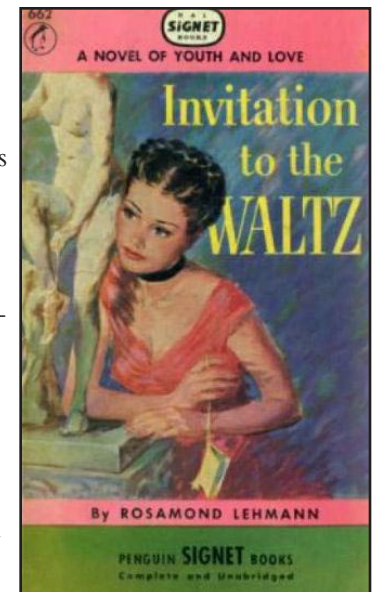
As a chronicler of quiet, unassuming lives, Barbara Pym has no equal. Peopled largely by Anglican clergymen and their wives, minor academics, and unattached women of all ages unfeelingly called "spinsters," Pym's novels are hymns to humility. They are also eloquent testimonies to the power of everyday things, a cup of tea perhaps, or an evening prayer service, to comfort and console the lonely and the loveless. But while the unconverted dismiss her as "naïve" or "trivial," her many devoted readers see in her a writer unafraid to find the raw material of art in the commonplace, and a shrewd yet compassionate observer of human nature with a gentle sense of humor. Anyone tempted to read Barbara Pym should pick up her 1977 novel *Quartet in Autumn*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. What begins as a seemingly simple story about four office workers on the verge of retirement slowly becomes a masterful tragicomedy about the devastating effects of isolation on the elderly and the stubborn resilience of the human spirit.

ELIZABETH TAYLOR (1912–1975)

Although she achieved some modest commercial and critical success early in her career, Elizabeth Taylor is largely unknown today. In the words of Kingsley Amis, "she never received her due as one of the best English novelists born in this century." This despite the fact that she left behind a body of work which abundantly demonstrates her mastery of a particular kind of writing—sharply observed, ironic, and emotionally rich stories about middle-class English life. Perhaps it was the unfashionable aura of gentility that permeates her writing or her pathological shyness when it came to discussing her work publicly, or simply that she shared a name with one of the most famous film stars of the twentieth century. Whatever the reason, Taylor's writing has rarely been given the serious consideration it deserves. Readers should start with *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont*, a surprisingly comic and moving novel about life at a London residential hotel for the elderly.

ROSAMOND LEHMANN (1901–1990)

Of all the authors marginalized as writers of "women's fiction," Rosamond Lehmann is the one whose neglect is perhaps most surprising. Her first novel, 1927's *Dusty Answer*, was a publishing sensation. It brought the 26-year-old Lehmann considerable attention and established her as an astute observer of women's lives in England during the years between the two world wars. In terms of portraying women torn between the desire for independence and the need for love, Lehmann remains peerless. Her masterpiece is her fourth novel, published in 1936. In many ways the literary progenitor of novels like Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *The Weather in the Streets* is the strikingly modern story of an intensely romantic young woman who, while living a bohemian life in 1930's London, falls in love with a married man. What in the hands of a lesser writer could easily have devolved into a maudlin soap opera is transformed by Lehmann's consummate artistry into a haunting study of self-deception and self-discovery, as well a wonderfully evocative depiction of the agonies and ecstasies of love.



Rosamond Lehmann
and one of her books

FURTHER READING: NONFICTION

- Beumann, Nicola. *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*, 2009. Lobby
 Beumann, Nicola. *A Very Great Profession*, 2008. 823.09 B
 Craig, Amanda. "In Defense of the Domestic Novel," from www.amandacraig.com
 Hastings, Selina. *Rosamond Lehmann*, 2002. 92 L5238 H
 Holt, Hazel. *A Lot to Ask: A Life of Barbara Pym*, 1991. 92 P9964 H
 Humble, Nicola. *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*, 2004. 823.09 H
 Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, 1977. 823.09 S
 Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 828 W

FURTHER READING: OTHER RECOMMENDED NOVELS

- Jenkins, Elizabeth. *The Tortoise and the Hare*, 1954. F J
 Laski, Margharita. *The Village*, 1951. F L
 Sharp, Margery. *The Eye of Love*, 1957. F S
 Strachey, Julia. *Cheerful Weather for the Wedding*, 1932. F S
 Whipple, Dorothy. *Someone at a Distance*, 1953. F W



Author Elizabeth Taylor

WORDS FROM WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY**LAURA O'KEEFE, HEAD OF CATALOGING**

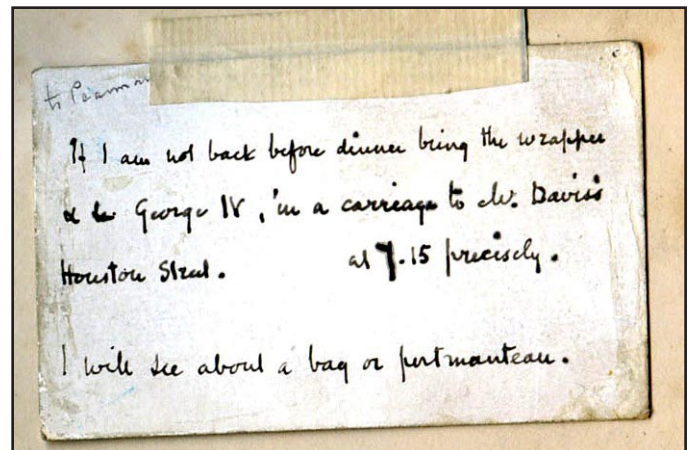
What began as a routine task for the Cataloging Department—enhancing the record of a rare volume by Victorian canon author Thackeray—provoked excitement when two handwritten notes stuck into the book turned out to be in Thackeray's hand. The volume is a first edition of *The Four Georges* (1861), and the two notes were affixed to its half-title page. One is unsigned; the other bears the initials WMT. Illustrations in a published collection of Thackeray's letters and online images confirm that Thackeray wrote both notes himself.

The notes were written in late 1855 when Thackeray was giving lectures across the United States about the first four Hanoverian kings of England. The lectures would become the book *The Four Georges*. The unsigned note is on the back of a printed card that reads "Philolexian Society/Metropolitan Theatre/Tuesday evening, December 6th 1855." It contains instructions for items to be brought to "Mr. Davis's Houston Street," and was addressed to Charles Pearman, Thackeray's valet and secretary. The second item, dated "Nov. 9/55" in another hand, is to "Mr. Grant," probably Seth Hastings Grant of the Mercantile Library of New York (now the Center for Fiction). Thackeray asks for assistance in finding material pertinent to his research on George IV, and requests two books. Also attached to a preliminary leaf of our *Four Georges* copy are a book dealer's description of these notes and of the volume itself.

Neither note appears in Gordon Ray's comprehensive four-volume compilation of Thackeray's correspondence, published in 1945–46, so at first cataloging staffers thought we might be in possession of two previously unknown Thackeray letters. Those hopes were dashed when we learned that they are included in the 1994 supplement to Ray's work. That supplement's editor, Edgar Harden, reproduced them from a 1927 catalog of the Anderson Galleries, a Manhattan auction house. At the time, he stated that the whereabouts of the notes themselves was unknown; thus, we have solved a minor literary mystery by bringing their current location to light.

A bookplate says that the volume was a gift from Christian A. Zabriskie, a generous donor in the early 1950s to whom we owe several dozen items in our rare collection, mostly pertaining to English literature. The book and the letters are part of that collection; they are now cataloged and available to researchers by appointment.

For a closer look at the digital images of the letters, see their catalog page, <http://library.nysoclib.org/record=b1240963>.



The note for Charles Pearman