

# Books & People

IN THIS ISSUE



The New York City Book Awards  
PAGE 4



Are You an Expert?  
PAGE 6

One More Picture  
PAGE 8

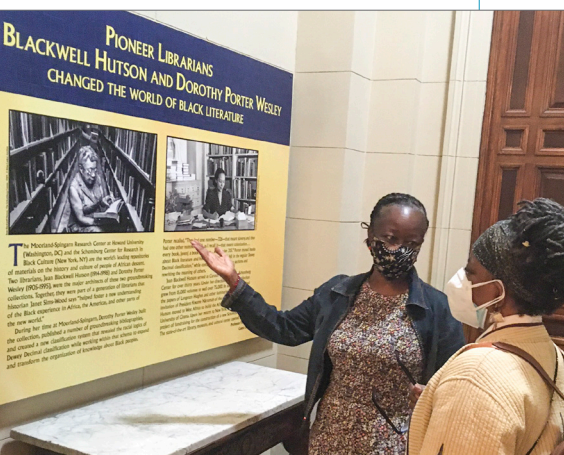
## BLACK LITERATURE MATTERS: A Q&A with Dr. Farah Jasmine Griffin

In the busy days before the opening of *Black Literature Matters*, Farah Jasmine Griffin found time to answer questions about her role as guest curator of the exhibition. Professor Griffin is the William B. Ransford Professor of English and Comparative Literature and African American Studies and the chair of the African Diaspora Studies Department at Columbia University. Professor Griffin has written widely on race and gender, feminism, jazz, and cultural politics. She is the author of numerous books, including *Who Set You Flowin?: The African American Migration Narrative*; *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*, and *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II*. Professor Griffin was recently awarded a 2021 Guggenheim Fellowship. Her latest book, *Read Until You Understand: The Profound Wisdom of Black Life and Literature*, will be published this fall by W.W. Norton & Company. *Questions for the Q&A prepared by Harriet Shapiro, Head of Exhibitions*

**How did the Black Lives Matter movement and the current political climate affect your work on *Black Literature Matters*?** I think you'd actually come up with idea of doing an exhibition titled *Black Literature Matters*, and Library trustee Adrienne Ingram reached out to me about serving as a guest curator. I jumped at the opportunity because I knew that much of Black literary history speaks directly to the context that has given birth to the Black Lives Matter movement. Last spring, after the killing of George Floyd and the global protests that followed, many people turned to books and articles by contemporary Black writers to gain insight. I thought this would be an opportunity to introduce them to generations of writers for whom Black lives have always mattered.

**With room for relatively few books in the display cases, what were your selection criteria? I notice you didn't include Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Were there any others you particularly regretted not including?** Leaving out Wright and Ellison was especially difficult, but I thought that, because they are among the best-known and most widely read African American authors, I would not include them. That left space for lesser-known but important figures like Marita Bonner (who may have influenced a young Richard Wright), or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

**Not to corner you—but maybe yes! How did you find the Library's collection of Black writers and related materials, its strength, its weaknesses?** I actually was surprised by the richness of the collection! The well-known writers are there, but so are some of those with whom readers might be less familiar. I was also surprised to learn that many of these books were acquired at the time of publication and that members checked them out at that time.



## Greetings from the Head Librarian

In my Spring 2020 *Books & People* column, I introduced the outline of a transformative renovation project we are planning that would create a new multi-functional space for reading and study, events, and receptions; increase storage space for our book collection (which grows by 4,000 books a year); and improve staff workspaces.

Of course, it was not long after that newsletter landed in mailboxes that the pandemic upended all our plans and we turned our attention to managing the day-to-day demands of the crisis, including, significantly, encouraging new memberships and renewals through each phase of the city's reopening.

While we haven't yet reached our pre-pandemic level, I am pleased to report that memberships *are* on the rebound, and members are once again filling up our reading and study spaces. Our new exhibition, *Black Literature Matters*, opened to the public on April 28, attracting a steady stream of visitors. In early June, in response to updated state guidelines, we were able to increase the capacity in the Hornblower Room on the Fifth Floor. And we are looking forward to the fall, when we hope to welcome members and visitors back for in-person events.

We are hopeful about the prospects for both the Library's and the city's post-pandemic recovery, which is why we are continuing the exploratory phase of our proposed renovation project including the long process of filings and submittals required by the city. We have many hurdles to cross, and much more to consider before any actual work might begin. We will keep you updated as the discussion about the Library's future plans continues.

Hope you all have some good books lined up for the summer. Happy reading!



Carolyn Waters, Head Librarian

**Can you describe your experience of creating this exhibition during the pandemic?**

It was odd, but it also made me appreciate the technology we had available. We were able to meet weekly over Zoom to discuss the exhibition. Had we not been in the midst of the pandemic, our meetings likely would have been in person and, given our schedules, it is unlikely that we would have been able to meet with such regularity. There was also the uncertainty about whether or not the work we did would be seen by people who visited the Library, or if we would have to focus on the virtual components of the exhibition. Finally, the pandemic and the protest movement certainly informed my selection of the material, as I hoped they would provide a kind of historical and aesthetic grounding for what we were experiencing in real time.

This was my first experience as a curator, and I come away from it with a newfound appreciation for the intellectual and creative labor that goes into the work of bringing an exhibition to the public.

**Do you remember the first book you read? How old were you?** The first book I remember reading was *Ann Likes Red*. I think I was three years old. My father taught me to read when I was three. That's when I got my first library card. But *Ann Likes Red* was one of those little books that they sold in the supermarket. I loved that book. It recently has been republished, so I purchased a new copy.

**Can you tell me a little bit about your first visit to a library and its importance for you?** I don't think I can remember my first visit to the library. I think the first book I took out of the library with my own card was *The Lonely Doll*. It seems that for as long as I can remember I went to our neighborhood branch, the Queen Memorial Branch of the Philadelphia Free Library. I often visited with my father, then later by myself. In middle school I accompanied my mother to the South Philadelphia Branch in the Italian neighborhood, because she was taking a class there. I would do my homework or read while she was in class. I think I initially loved libraries because going and getting a book was an activity I did with my father. But later I came to love them...just because. And I loved librarians. My middle school librarian was Mrs. Pickett. She was wonderful, as were those at my high school, especially Mrs. Reath.

**What were your other favorite books growing up? Did you write when you were a little girl? Or keep a diary?** My goodness, that is an impossible question! I could not pick my favorite book. There were so many. Once I discovered Toni Morrison (I read *Sula* first) it was life-changing. But I can't even pick my favorite Morrison book.

I always wrote. I loved to write even more than I loved to read. I would tear pictures out of magazines and write stories about them. Yes, I kept a diary. And then a journal. It's a lifelong habit.

**When did you realize that Black literature was to become the center of your life? And how did your university career take shape, first at Harvard and then at Yale?** I don't think I realized it would be a career choice for me. I thought I was going to law school, and then when I went to graduate school I was torn between being a literary scholar and a historian. But literature in general by writers of all races—I knew that would have a prominent place in my life, because it was just so important to me. I wanted to be around books and bookish people. It wasn't until my junior year in college that I began to think about a career as a college professor, and that is because two professors I loved and respected—the historian Nathan Huggins and the literary scholar Werner Sollors—encouraged me to consider it as a possibility. Prior to that I longed to write literature more than to teach or study it formally.

Now returning to the exhibition: Paule Marshall once remarked that she writes primarily for Black people. And Toni Morrison, echoing W.E.B. Du Bois and other writers, talked about the pressure to write for the “white gaze.” What are some of white readers’ barriers to understanding Black literature? And some of the ways Black writers have thrived in spite of the pervasiveness of the white perspective? I don’t think white readers have barriers to understanding Black literature. Books are available and open to anyone who will take the time to engage them. All readers are welcome.

But I think readers have to be prepared to not be the center of the story, not the focus. They should see the act of reading as an opportunity and invitation to experience the world anew. None of us in the twenty-first century, no matter our race, live as Ovid did, but we can and should read *The Metamorphoses*. And if we want to appreciate it even more we can learn something about the context, the culture and the writer that produced it.

So when Morrison said she was writing without the “white gaze,” she didn’t mean she didn’t welcome white readers. She wanted everyone to read her work. She meant that she wasn’t writing to, for, or about white readers. She wasn’t trying to explain or make sense of Black life for a white audience; she wasn’t trying to change a white person’s mind about Black people.

You bridge two disciplines, one as a professor of literature and the other as a writer. Have you ever wanted to write poetry or fiction? I tried to write both poetry and fiction through graduate school. Then I decided I was a bad poet. I didn’t decide that about fiction, but I stopped trying to be a poet or a fiction writer because I found a home in nonfiction prose, especially in the essay. It felt like home. Since that time I have written a few short theatrical pieces at the request of my dear friend the late composer Geri Allen. I’ve written song lyrics as well.

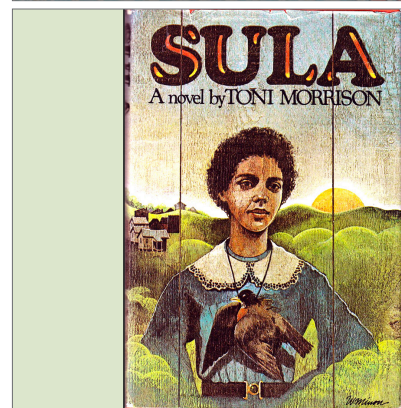
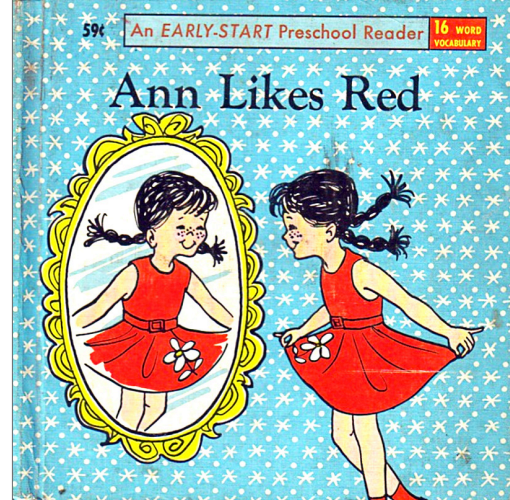
You have selected *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe for display in the exhibition. In the novel’s introduction, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie cites Achebe’s response to Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*, which had been described by *Time Magazine* as “the best book ever written about Africa.” Achebe writes of its description of Nigerians as “an undertow of uncharitableness... a contagion of distaste, hatred and mockery.” Can you speak to the area of colonial literature about Africans? Do any novels by writers not of African origin capture African complexity without caricature? I am actually not that familiar with colonial literature about Africans. My introduction to, and ongoing relationship with, African literature is primarily that written by Black African writers. The exceptions include Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, and Breyten Breytenbach.

The title of your next book is *Read Until You Understand: The Profound Wisdom of Black Life and Literature*. How did you come to choose that title? It comes from a note that my father wrote me on the inside front cover of a book, *Black Struggle: A History of the Negro in America* by Bryan Fuls.

And finally, as the guest curator of *Black Literature Matters*, what do you hope viewers will understand from this exhibition? What will they take away? I hope they will gain appreciation for the long, rich history of writing by people of African descent, not only in the U.S. but in the Caribbean and on the continent of Africa. I hope they will explore the authors we include but also seek out many of those we could not. Among these are Black European writers as well. I hope they will keep reading.

And what will you take away? I will take away reinforcement for my sense of the importance of books, reading, libraries, and librarians and the pleasure I take in all four.

Front cover: Dr. Farah Jasmine Griffin with a visitor at *Black Literature Matters*, photograph by Harriet Shapiro; Above: Collection of Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Ann Likes Red*; collection of Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Sula* by Toni Morrison; The Queen Memorial Branch, courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia, Print and Picture Collection; Photo of Dr. Farah Jasmine Griffin, photograph by Anne Blake



# The New York City Book Awards

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the New York City Book Awards, and the 10th anniversary of the Hornblower Award! Founded in 1995, these awards honor the best books about New York City published in a given year, regardless of genre. As New York City's oldest cultural institution, the Library is uniquely suited to present the New York City Book Awards.

The New York Society Library is proud to announce the winners of the 2020 New York City Book Awards.

- **Johanna Fernández**, *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (University of North Carolina Press)
- **Bill Hayes**, *How We Live Now: Scenes from the Pandemic* (Bloomsbury)
- **N.K. Jemisin**, *The City We Became* (Orbit)
- **James McBride**, *Deacon King Kong* (Riverhead)
- **Jonathan Daniel Wells**, *The Kidnapping Club: Wall Street, Slavery, and Resistance on the Eve of Civil War* (Bold Type Books)

## The Hornblower Award for a First Book

- **Stephen Haff**, *Kid Quixotes: A Group of Students, Their Teacher, and the One-Room School Where Everything is Possible*
- **Sarah Sierra and Stephen Haff**, *Becoming Kid Quixote: A True Story of Belonging in America* (HarperCollins)



THE 2020-2021 NEW YORK CITY BOOK AWARDS WERE GENEROUSLY UNDERWRITTEN BY ELLEN M. ISEMAN.

# The Young Writers Awards

On Tuesday, May 25, the Society Library honored stellar writing by children and teens in grades three through twelve at the 19th Annual Young Writers Awards ceremony, held on Zoom. This year's winning and honorable-mention stories, essays, and poems covered a range of topics from gelato to mythology and from antiracism to pandemic life. Competition judges poet Dave Johnson and authors Carol Weston and Edra Ziesk noted the resilience of the writers who entered the competition during this challenging year and urged them to continue expressing their creativity and sharing their writing with the world. Longtime competition judge and Library member author and illustrator Robert Quackenbush (*at right*) passed away shortly after judging this year's entries. We will honor his love for the Library and for the Young Writers Awards competition by continuing to encourage young writers and their winning words. We invite you to read the winning entries at [tinyurl.com/ywanysl](https://tinyurl.com/ywanysl).



## Winners

### Poetry

Alice Campbell, *Only Two* (Grades 3-4)

Lily Panero, *Distance Learning* (Grades 5-6)

Arreyana Khaliq, *Reflections on 2020* (Grades 7-8)

Georgia Kirshenbaum, *In Which She Begs* (Grades 9-12)

### Prose

Joshua Kuruvilla, *The Alien and Me* (Grades 3-4)

Carrington Scully Long, *Thorns: A Blessing in Disguise* (Grades 5-6)

Casimir Couison, *The Language of Gelato* (Grades 7-8)

Ines Alto, *I Am Waiting for the Door to Break Down* (Grades 9-12)

## Honorable Mentions

### Poetry

Raymond Go, *Birds* (Grades 3-4)

Bodhi Pickering, *A Secret's Journey* (Grades 3-4)

Clover Demos, 'E' (Grades 5-6)

Mika Higgins-Woo, *Pesto* (Grades 5-6)

Raana Thacker, *2020: Every Joy, Every Sorrow* (Grades 7-8)

### Prose

Rae-Ann Chee, *A Cat's Tale* (Grades 3-4)

Cole Stopnik, *Greek Mythology Surrounds Us* (Grades 5-6)

Iago Macknik-Conde, *Keep on Rolling* (Grades 7-8)



Illustrations from *A Cat's Tale* by Rae-Ann Chee, honorable mention, grades 3 & 4 Prose



## Are You an Expert?

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), and comparative religion. 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.

If you are interested, please contact Steven McGuirl at [smcguirl@nysoclib.org](mailto:smcguirl@nysoclib.org).

## New Assistant Head Librarian

We are delighted to announce that Margaret (Meg) Donabedian has joined the staff as Assistant Head Librarian.

For the past ten years, Meg has worked in various librarian capacities at the New York School of Interior Design, where she was responsible for the day-to-day operations of circulation and public services, including circulation and reference service. Appointed as Senior Librarian in 2018, she worked closely with NYSID's Director of the Library and served as the director's primary backup and point person. In that role, she was responsible for determining levels of Library services, formulating and documenting library procedures and policies, and recommending and implementing new service models. Her wide-ranging experience also includes acquisitions, cataloging, instructional programming and services, web content, vendor management, and budgeting. Meg holds a BFA in Art History from the Massachusetts College of Art & Design and a Masters of Library Science from Queens College, CUNY.

Outside work, Meg enjoys reading classic literature, with a special interest in 19th-century studies and Victorian culture, traveling, the visual and performing arts, and her creative pursuits as a visual artist.

At the Library, Meg will support the Head Librarian in all aspects of the administration of the Library and will directly supervise the Circulation Department. Look for her at the front desk!



# Meet Edith Hall Crowell

by Carolyn Waters, Head Librarian



Edith Hall Crowell was the first woman to hold the position of Head Librarian and took over at a momentous time for the institution. She joined the Library on December 1, 1936, and the responsibility of packing up and moving the collection—artwork, furniture, and approximately 140,000 books—from University Place to our new home at 53 East 79th Street fell to her.

Under her able leadership, the Library settled comfortably into the new neighborhood. She undertook a massive project to catalog the collection according to the Dewey Decimal System, plus several major weeding projects “made necessary by time and change,” as Marion King explains in her history of the Library, *Books and People*. Our archives show that Edith’s time was heavily focused on boosting memberships, marketing the Library to local schools, recording a bit for a WMCA radio program called *Round the Town with Nancy Turner*, and introducing well-attended book talks by eminent English literature professors. She served the NYSL for seventeen years, until her retirement in 1954.

My interest in Edith was further piqued when I learned, quite by accident, that she must have been acquainted with my grandfather. As the Perth Amboy (N.J.) City Commissioner, he was responsible for the public library, where she worked until, as my father recalled it, “she left to take a big job in the city.”

Earlier this year, I got an intriguing email from Jean Moore, the granddaughter of Edith’s aunt, who is now her family’s historian. She shared family photos and news clippings she had gathered. It turns out that Edith’s life had been well documented in the local press.

Edith was born in Perth Amboy in 1889. After graduating from the Library School at the New York Public Library, she took over as the librarian in Bernardsville, N.J., where she managed through the library’s closure due to the flu epidemic and seems to have honed her fundraising—and musical—chops as a contralto for the library’s Book Fund benefit. As World War I broke out, however, she joined the T.A. Gillespie Company as director of personnel. Long-forgotten now is the story of the massive explosion at the company’s munitions plant (at the time, one of the largest in the world), which killed one hundred people and injured hundreds more. According to a later profile of her published in the *Central New Jersey Home News*, Edith was working at the plant when it exploded. Undaunted, she joined the American Red Cross and shipped off to serve the war effort in France. After the war, she took over at the Perth Amboy Public Library and got her Master’s in Education from Rutgers University.

Given her life to that point, one can’t help but smile when she is quoted in the same article, upon her appointment at the prestigious NYSL, as saying “When somebody drops a catalogue drawer on the floor—that’s a bad day.”



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## One More Picture



Shirley Hazzard served as a Library trustee from 1974 to 2016. Her National Book Award for *The Great Fire* (2003) is now on display in the Members' Room.

