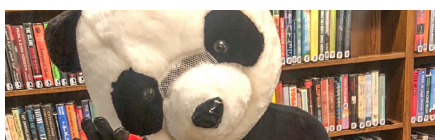
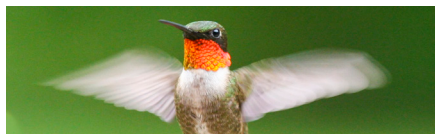


Books & People

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The Remarkable Janet Howard

by Steve McGuirl



In September 2022, Janet Howard celebrated *58 years* as a Library staff member. That's right: She began working here in 1964, when Johnson was President and Wagner was Mayor. The big books of the year were *The Group* by Mary McCarthy (NYSL member), *The Rector of Justin* by Louis Auchincloss (another NYSL member), *Herzog* by Saul Bellow, and *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* by John le Carré.

Recently, a few staff members sat down with Janet to discuss what has changed and what remains the same over the course of her nearly six decades of Library service. The lively conversation was full of laughter, gossip, stories, many digressions, and loads of information pulled from Janet's formidable bank of institutional memory, an irreplaceable resource that we rely on.

Behind the scenes and on the front lines, Janet has donned practically every hat on the NYSL staff rack. She started as a full-time Page and has spent time at most posts in the Circulation Department. Janet also worked in the Cataloging Department and has been an essential part of the Acquisitions Department since about 1981. She remains there four decades later—receiving thousands of books per year, entering orders, processing invoices, and more—and considers her work in Acquisitions second favorite among the positions she has held: “I get to see every book that comes in—what's better than that?” But the fondest memories are at the Circulation Desk, where talking with members and seeing them on their way with the books they want continues to provide constant satisfaction. In 58 years at the front desk, she has seen members grow from toddlers into parents introducing their own children to the pleasures of the Society Library.

Growing up in the Bronx, Janet had two close friends, sisters who attended a private high school on the Upper East Side. Their father, a retired police officer, worked security in a building on 79th street and spent many free hours reading in our Reference Room. One day he asked Head Librarian Sylvia Hilton (known to all, still to this day, as “Miss Hilton”), if they were hiring. The answer was yes, and the two sisters and their older sister were immediately hired. Shortly after, one of her friends said “you know, I think there's a job opening at the Library. Do you want to come and see if you could get it?” Janet, about to graduate from high school, said yes. Her friend came home and said, “my boss will see you tomorrow.”

She was hired on the spot. Although her friends had told her about the Library, Janet was still awestruck by its elegance and vibrant community, “amazed” by the building, the

Greetings from the Head Librarian

We were saddened to learn of the death in September of Edmée Reit, a 31-year Library member and volunteer in our archives. Mrs. Reit was devoted to the Library, and we were devoted to her.



She spent years organizing files, papers, and share certificates in our climate-controlled archive. After working with her there on our 250th Anniversary book, former trustee Jenny Lawrence said, “Mrs. Reit ruled that frigid realm.” She had every item at her fingertips, and woe betide culprits who moved or displaced documents. She would hunt you down to make sure that at least two copies of *everything* were properly saved for history.

She was always known as “Mrs. Reit.” When I was announced as 21st Head Librarian in April 2015, she sidled up to me and whispered, “you know, Toots, you may call me Edmée now.” I was honored. I had arrived! But I never could bring myself to call her Edmée, even after we became good friends and regular lunch pals.

Mrs. Reit was what we call a “super reader,” checking out several books a week, all mysteries, the bloodier the better. She read *Publishers Weekly* religiously with a magnifying glass, a pen, and a stack of request slips at hand, keeping Acquisitions staff busy.

collection, everything, when she arrived on her first day. At that time there were several kids about the same age working at the Library, mostly as full-time Pages, and Miss Hilton and Assistant Head Librarian Helen Ruskell (that’s Miss Ruskell to you) were like den mothers to this brood of young Library workers. The staff at that time was almost entirely female.

During these early years, Janet prepared books for circulation and paged books, magazines, and periodicals from the stacks. Circulation Desk activity kept the Pages hopping. A buzzer at the front desk alerted the Pages: one blast meant book retrieval; two blasts meant “I need help.” She was also wrapping books for mail, shelving when needed, and even mending books at a small work bench shared by staff in the circulation room. (That last task likely to send book conservators into fits!) After a short time, Janet was asked to helm the books-by-mail program. Every day, about 20 packages of books were sent to members. Some requested specific titles, but for many others Janet was curating the selection of books to be sent, basing careful choices on her knowledge of members’ reading preferences. Janet also filed *thousands* of cards in our card catalog.

At this time, the primary focus at the Library was loaning books, and the Circulation Desk was humming. It is difficult to comprehend just how busy the circulation desk was with check-outs and returns. Not only did every transaction take much longer before automation—for many years, each checkout was recorded by hand—but the number of loans per day was significantly higher than it is now. The Library had many school memberships, and students came in to work on assignments; area museums and magazine publishers called for books from the stacks; and there was a steady stream of “power readers” checking out 10 or 20 books at a time. Janet recalls that before powerful online databases came on the scene, back issues of periodicals and large, bound, often fragile, newspapers were paged for members regularly. Hold notices and overdue cards were typed out on postcards. Before email, the phones were ringing steadily.

Janet remembers the Library as a more formal place during that era. Among staff and members, Mr., Ms./Miss, and Mrs. were the norm, with first names rarely used. Class differences were more apparent as well. However, a tone of refreshing informality and a familial feeling also emerged from Janet’s fond reminiscences of these first decades at the Library. Miss Hilton, who lived in the building



Janet Howard continued



Previous page: Mark Barlett with Janet, Gayle Feldman with Janet, Harry Abarca with Janet, Marion Cuban with Janet; Top: Acquisitions staff Patrick C. Rayner, Janet Howard, and Steve McGuirl, with Linnea Holman Savapoulas (second from left).

in an apartment on the fourth floor, had staff holiday parties in her Library home, the fireplaces glowing and eggnog being served. Assistant Head Librarian Miss Ruskell—an enthusiastic Mets fan—snuck a TV into the back room to track the 1969 World Series. Noted magazine editor Herbert Mayes, a devoted member, took the entire staff to the Carlyle Hotel for lunch one year. Janet’s young daughter would come to the Library on weekends and would be left in the Children’s Room for hours while Janet worked at the Circulation Desk. There she could read all afternoon under the watchful eye of Library staff, rewarded with french fries from 3 Guys Diner at lunchtime. Janet even recalls that Library member Dick Cavett made an appearance or two in the staff room.

Over 58 years, the Library has both preserved tradition and changed enormously, and Janet has been part of it all. She’s seen building renovations, changes in leadership and management styles, staff restructuring, new technology, and the expansion of hours and services. After the departure of Miss Hilton and Miss Ruskell in the late 1970s, the Library was brought into the 20th and 21st centuries under the steady leadership of Sharon Brown and Mark Piel, Mark Bartlett and Jane Goldstein, and Carolyn Waters. Every book in the collection was barcoded, much of it by Janet and her colleagues. (The word “traumatic” was laughingly used in reference to the latter project.) Starting in the late 1980s, computers, then more computers, entered the building as tasks and processes were automated. We created a Systems Department, built (and rebuilt) a website, added powerful databases to our collection, and put our print catalog online. A thriving Children’s Library was established, and ambitious building renovations called for large portions of the collection to be relocated within the building. There were changes at the Circulation Desk, too, as the Library expanded its services, and members approached the desk with a wider range of questions and needs. But through it all, books and people remain at the core of the Library’s mission. As Janet reflected, “a lot of things happened over the years, but nothing really changed how I felt about the place.”

Many have described the Library as an oasis and refuge in a rapidly changing and noisy world. It is a place where members come to rely on a long tradition of professionalism and friendly, courteous service from its staff, and where books in open stacks promise serendipitous discovery. It is a place where the right book at the right time can change someone’s life. For 58 years, Janet Howard has played a crucial, indelible role in creating and upholding this tradition, building our collection, and making books available to readers. Her good judgment, work ethic, devotion to the institution, and dedication to its members have been invaluable, irreplaceable assets for nearly six decades.

From the Head Librarian continued

Mrs. Reit had a wicked sense of humor, sometimes sending thanks “from the bottom of my dark heart.” Her handwritten or typewritten notes to staff are legendary, and have, of course, been saved as archival material in their own right. While I’m fairly certain she would have hated this memorial, I think she’d be secretly pleased that she’s forever a part of the long history of this Library.

Carolyn

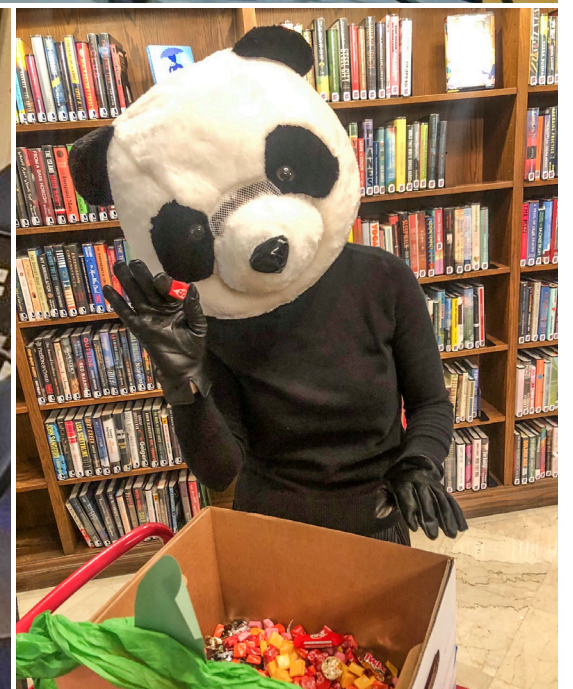
—Carolyn Waters, Head Librarian

Calling young artists! The new Young Cartoonists Awards (YCA) honor excellent cartooning by young members of the Library community. The submission deadline is Monday, December 19, 2022. See the *For Children* tab on our website for details.

Writer Services: The Library is proud to be a home away from home for so many wonderful writers past and present. The Library serves writers with reference and research support, interlibrary loan and library referrals, writing groups, writing workshops, member readings, and a daytime talk series on topics of particular interest to writers. For more information, visit Writer Services under the *For Members* tab on our website.

Did You Join the Library in 2022? Save the date for our New Members’ Party December 6 at 6:00 PM. For more information, please contact Diane Srebnick at dsrebnick@nysoclib.org or 212.288.6900 x207.

Fall Events



Top: Our September 28 panel with the New York City Regional Chapter of the Authors Guild, featuring Gessy Alvarez, Marya Spence, Megan Cummins, Adam Dalva, Hilma Wolitzer, and Diana Altman Middle: Member writer Laurie Rosenwald celebrated the return of Teatime on September 6; Robert Lloyd Parry brought spooky stories to the Members' Room on September 14; Hugh Ryan talked about *The Women's House of Detention* on September 22 Bottom: The Internet Archive brought us a discussion on "Building a More Democratic Internet" on September 21, with Internet Archive founder Brewster Kahle, author Sarah Lamdan, and the incoming president of the American Library Association, Emily Drabinski

Top: Carolyn Fleishman read at Live from the Library, October 18; Nicole Saffold Maskiell presented an online event on *Bound By Bondage* Middle: Conservator Christina Amato taught staff how to treat wet books in case of emergency; *The Falcon's Eyes* author Francesca Stanfill conversed with editor Sara Nelson on September 20 Bottom: Graphic novelist George O'Connor led a lively children's workshop on October 6; our glamorous friend Panda Witch welcomed trick-or-treaters to the lobby on Halloween

There is No Certain Written Future:

A Conversation with the Editors of *The World As We Knew It*

by Sara Elliott Holliday

I was pleased to spend a little time this summer chatting with Amy Brady and Tajja Isen, the co-editors of the remarkable anthology *The World As We Knew It: Dispatches From a Changing Climate*. In it, nineteen leading literary writers from around the globe offer timely, haunting first-person reflections on how climate change has altered their lives. Dr. Brady, Executive Director of *Orion* magazine, is known to Library audiences for organizing and moderating our 2018 conversation series “The Art and Activism of the Anthropocene,” whose recordings are available on our website. Ms. Isen serves as the editor-in-chief of *Catapult* magazine and also recently published a new volume of essays, *Some of My Best Friends: Essays on Lip Service*. Both books are available in the Library’s collection.

Sara Elliott Holliday: So how did *The World As We Knew It* get started?

Amy Brady: I’ve been interested in and occasionally a contributor to the climate storytelling space for some time. And what I had noticed is that there were few personal accounts of how climate change was affecting a person at the level of a single life. Most climate writing is about larger-scale events like hurricanes and wildfires, and for good reason, but it’s affecting us at this other scale as well. So I thought, how interesting it would be if some of my favorite writers came together to write about this topic.

Tajja Isen: I appreciated that Amy’s idea really welcomed writers who worked beyond the climate storytelling space to reflect on this. It did that for me as editor as well. One of the things I’m most excited about in the book is the way that it expands the terms of the conversation and encourages other people to reflect on the personal level in their own creative work.

SEH: What is it like to be publishing these two cutting-edge books at this time of great shifts in the book world, and of the pandemic?

TI: With the anthology, the more time that passes, the more mournful the title becomes—the more power I feel its contents have. It accumulates nostalgia and reflectiveness. The intent was to look toward the past to see how it would inform our actions in the future. Whereas with *Some of My Best Friends*, it was very much about trying to capture an ongoing moment; the approach was very different. It was exciting to me as a writer to have a very present orientation and say, okay, my job is to really map this moment and try and make sense



Amy Brady

Tajja Isen

of something that I know my reader is living through as well.

AB: To put it mildly, the last two years have been chaotic, as so many of the various crises of the world have converged in ways that feel more obvious than ever. They’ve always been related, but now almost nobody can deny it. Realistically, it’s very clear just how much the general pathologies of society exacerbate each other. This started out as a climate change anthology, but it necessarily also became about COVID, and systemic racism, and the fact that there is very little protection and help for mothers, or child care. All of these things became a part of the essays that we published. We wanted to be good stewards of those stories and make sure that they were being treated with the respect that they deserve, while still ensuring that it’s a coherent whole. It’s been a hard two years for all of us.

SEH: The contributors to the anthology are a combination of people who’ve written on related subject matter before and those who aren’t known for that. How did you recruit them?

TI: Bringing together people who have published in this area and those who come at it in a way that is slightly more slant—this was exciting to me. Creating a tapestry of voices that felt global was really important to us, people who thought at different scales and about different ways that lives are affected by climate.

AB: Many writers responded, “Nobody’s asked me to write about this before. But boy do I have a story to tell!” The environmental writing space has historically been pretty homogenous. When we asked people who haven’t traditionally contributed to this genre, it opened my eyes to just how many stories there are to be told about this subject that aren’t getting told because nobody’s inviting them. And that is one of the things that I am most proud about with this anthology, the way it is breaking open the genre.

SEH: As you say in the introduction, we are among the first and perhaps one of the last human populations to have memories of what life was like *before*. What is it like to be thinking, writing, and editing in that position? Elegiac? Poignant?

TI: Difficult in all kinds of ways.

AB: Yes, and also it’s empowering. I’m in my early forties. We think of climate change as being very slow, but it’s actually really fast, because the changes that we’ve seen to the planet have happened in my lifetime. And so to be in this moment for me is to embrace the power and responsibility of paying witness to that change and making sure that it’s a part of the official written record, at least the literary record—to mark that this change happened and to memorialize the past because it’s gone. But to remember also that a transition isn’t a single moment in time. It’s an ongoing thing. There is no certain written future. There are multiple possible futures, and our actions now will shape just how bad things get in the future. So paying witness to this moment feels very important.

TI: For me, that part of the introduction—that we’re the generation who remembers what it was like before—includes a recognition of the past and what it means for the present and the future. Working on this book cultivated in me that kind of attention to my own surroundings, my own relationship to the natural world. That definitely changed over the course of this book, in part because we were just cooped up inside for so much of the editorial process due to the pandemic. So in its way that was empowering, to think about just how I feel when I go outside, how I interact with the environment around me on a micro level, retroactively thinking about what it meant for me as a child. As a younger person, I didn’t have this vocabulary to articulate what experiencing a changing climate felt like. So that was really powerful for me as well.

SEH: Tajja, congratulations also on *Some of My Best Friends*. One of the things you speak of there is this sense that some books *are good for you*, whether or not they’re actually *good*. Unfortunately, I think that could be said of both *Some of My Best Friends* and *The World As We Knew It*. Where do you feel public perception of your work is on that right now?

TI: There’s a tendency, when the work is by a writer from a group that has been in some way marginalized or minoritized, to read the work predominantly through the lens of that identity, even if it’s not invoked at all or is invoked in a passing way. I always like to describe *Some of My Best Friends* as a book about the world, a book about the present moment. I hope both books put words to a feeling that readers have but might not have seen articulated in quite that way before—and that it sparks this little *aha!* moment

that they will then carry into the rest of their lives.

AB: To add something else that’s related between the anthology and *Some of My Best Friends*: when people think of the subject of the climate crisis or they think of racism—just one of many topics in your book—there’s this tendency to think that you can only talk about those things in a certain mode. You have to be deadly serious. And that’s such an over-simplification. I mean, yes, these are serious subjects, but there are so many different ways in, and different tones. I mean, Tajja’s book is hilarious. The two books have that kind of boundary-breaking in common, and it’s good for literature in general for more books to do that.

SEH: Do you feel that the people more likely to pick up your books are those wanting to change their minds, or those seeking guidance on what to do next, or those who want to find more words for their own feelings?

AB: First and foremost I hope it’s people who like good writing! This is a very literary anthology. It’s not a bunch of scientific papers.

TI: It’s unlikely that we are going to change the minds of a staunch climate denialist, but I do think that reflecting on the fact that the world has changed and that how we experience

it on an individual level has changed is an easy on-ramp to talking about these questions in a way that other books don’t.

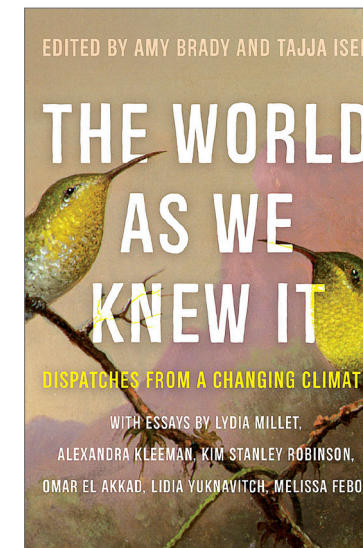
SEH: Anything else you’ve got in the works that you’d like to mention?

AB: I’m working on a book tentatively titled *Ice and American Obsession*. It’s a look at how ice has been used in our everyday lives in the United States since the dawn of the ice trade about 200 years ago. It’s been a real joy to write

and research and put together this arc of how ice has utterly transformed almost every aspect of our lives.

TI: I joined *Catapult* about a year ago as a staff editor for the magazine, and before that, I was a freelance contributing editor. And then about eight months ago, my former supervisor, Nicole Chung—she used to be editor-in-chief of the magazine—she was hired by *The Atlantic* as a contributing writer, and I succeeded her in the editor-in-chief role. So now I run the magazine.

SEH: Excellent. Many exciting things in the works. It’s been a delight and an honor to speak to you.



See the Library’s blog for an expanded version of this interview.



The
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This newsletter is available
in electronic form at
nysoclib.org/about/newsletters

One More Picture



Dede Thompson Bartlett (left), whose 6th great-grandmother, Anne Kirten Waddell, signed the New York Society Library's charter in 1772, visited the Library with several of her cousins on October 4.