

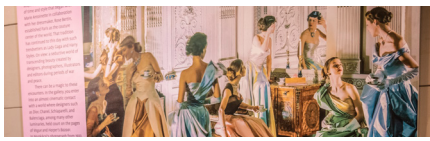


The New York Society Library

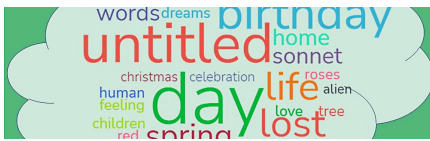
Volume 29, Number 2, Summer 2022

# Books & People

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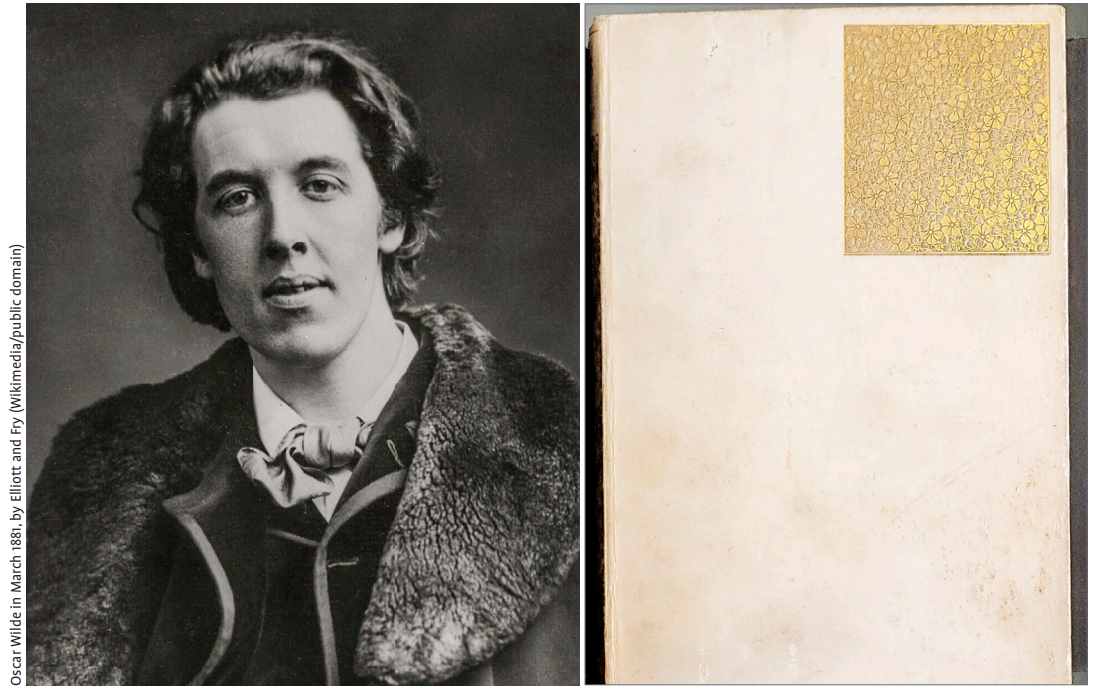
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Oscar Wilde in March 1881, by Elliott and Fry (Wikimedia/public domain)

The cover of the 1881 first edition of *Poems*

# Oscar and the Opera Singer

By Sara Elliott Holliday

In the summer of 1881, Oscar Wilde self-published a major volume of poetry. He was 26 years old and already a celebrity. He had graduated from Oxford University's Magdalen College, taking the prestigious Newdigate Prize; he'd traveled Italy and Greece with the foremost classicist of the day; he'd befriended some of the brightest literary lights of the era; he'd made himself the central figure of the Aesthetic Movement in literature and design, and he'd been parodied for it in theater works by F.C. Burnand and by Gilbert & Sullivan. But this was his first real book.

In his 2018 biography of Wilde, Matthew Sturgis writes, "Wilde conceived the book as a handsome Aesthetic production, a showcase for his taste. The forty-two poems...were to be printed on 'hand-made Dutch paper' with generous margins, the top of the pages gilded, the whole bound in 'white parchment' decorated with panels stamped in gold with a japoneseque design of stylized prunus blossoms. The proposed retail price...marked the book as a choice product for an exclusive readership." Various sources quote the poet declaring, "I was working on the proof of one of my poems all morning and took out a comma. In the afternoon—well, I put it back again."

## Greetings from the Head Librarian



If you're reading at our new tables, take a selfie and tag us @nysoclib on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook!

While I generally use this column to report on the positive changes and news around the building, as we head into our slower summer season, I'd like to begin with a plea. As you know from my previous reports, we have slowly been regaining our membership base after losing nearly 25% early in the pandemic. We are still 11% below our pre-pandemic level, and for the past five months, our membership numbers have remained flat. So if you have friends or family members who love to read or talk about books, who need a quiet place to write or study, who want to be a part of a welcoming, literary-minded community, please tell them about the Library! Joining, renewing, and buying gift memberships is easier than ever on our website, and membership benefits are available immediately.

But *of course* I have positive news as well! We hope that you will enjoy the new bistro tables and chairs we have placed in front of the building as a place to chat with your fellow members and have a coffee or lunch. We're also counting on the activity outside to encourage others to slow down and consider coming inside. So feel free to talk up the Library to passersby on the street, because one thing we know: our members are our best advertisement!

I look forward to hearing what you'll be reading over the summer. If you're stumped for ideas, just ask our staff or pore through some of our excellent Books Recommendations articles on the website. Happy summer!

Carolyn Waters, Head Librarian

The Library owns a beautiful presentation copy of that 1881 first edition, a gift to us in the mid-20th century from frequent donor Christian A. Zabriskie. True to the author's intent, it's elegant inside and out, with the gold blossoms on the white cover and each poem delicately set off on heavy paper, satisfying to the touch and to the eye.



Beautiful endpapers in the 1881 Boston edition of *Poems*

As a decorative object, the book is superb. Its contents, on the other hand, were not well received. It's easy to see why Wilde and his work were so mercilessly satirized: critics found the poems derivative, insincere, and offensively suggestive. *Punch* magazine said, "Aesthete of Aesthetes! What's in a name? The poet is WILDE, but his poetry's tame," and Gilbert & Sullivan's milkmaid Patience complains, "Well, if that's poetry, I don't like poetry." "The reception of this book was very mixed and mostly hostile," Wilde's son Vyvyan Holland would later report, "but it rapidly went into five editions."

It looks like New York Society Library poetry lovers were also reading Wilde's slim volume, whether they liked it or not. Our closed stacks contain a first American edition printed in Boston in the same year. Though some of our original copy's wear and tear may be due to the quality of the paper and binding, it also suggests that it passed through many hands. My favorite part of the U.S. edition is the fabulous endpapers, almost worthy of Wilde's Pre-Raphaelite colleague William Morris.

Despite the negative reviews, Wilde's *Poems* (and their parodies) built a springboard for a major career. In the following year, Wilde would go on a massive American lecture tour—spending time with Walt Whitman, among others—and would ultimately return to London to establish himself afresh with essays, plays, and other works.

Before that, though, the debut poet had to get his verses into the public eye. The summer and autumn of 1881 saw him doing his utter uttermost at self-promotion. This is where the Library's presentation copy of the English-edition *Poems* is particularly special: not only is it signed and inscribed in the poet's medieval hand, it contains the letter he originally enclosed with it—in which the divine Oscar lays it on with a trowel.

*Keats House, Tite Street, Chelsea.*

*Chère Diva,*

*Allow me the privilege of presenting you with the first copy of my volume of poems, as a small tribute of the delight and wonder which the strength and splendour of your illustrious genius has always given me; no one could be more disappointed with my work than myself—I had wished to do so much—still, boyish work as it is, accept it, had I known more really noble women, such as you are, it would have been better: women like you are made to make men great. Ah! I think you could make me so if you chose.*

*Believe me, chère madame,*

*Votre toujours dévoté [your always devoted]*

*Oscar Wilde*

The inscription declares this

*To Madame Christine Nilsson, in art supreme and illustrious, in friendship noble and sincere, Homage de l'auteur [the author's tribute], July '81*

## Oscar and the Opera Singer continued

## A Visit from the Frick Library Committee



Title page of the English first edition of *Poems*, with its “homage de l’auteur”

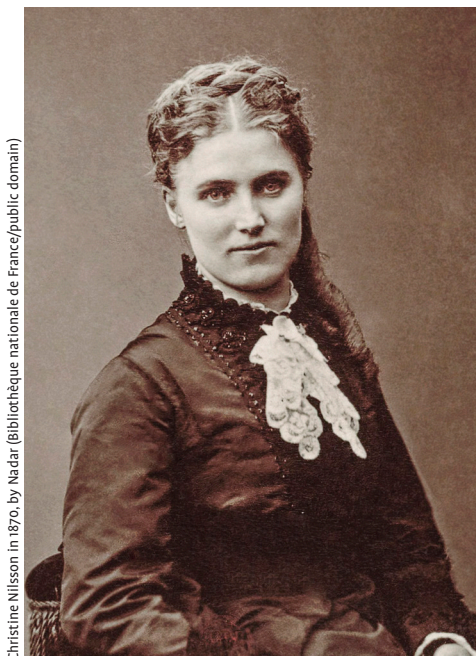
The addressee, Christine Nilsson, was a celebrated operatic soprano who performed around the world through the 1870s, including in London and Paris. Wilde may have seen her in either country, but the record doesn’t mention any personal acquaintance between them; the young poet was probably buttering up High Art on as many fronts as he could.

The extra-spicy item about La Nilsson is that this dedication is far from her only brush with literature. Born in Sweden, Nilsson was a beautiful and gifted artist, one of whose best-loved roles was as Marguerite in Charles Gounod’s *Faust*. She sang this role in London in 1867, in Paris in 1869 (displacing a more established diva in the part), in Boston in 1871, and even at the 1883 inauguration of New York’s Metropolitan Opera House.

If some of these details—the Paris Opera, the Swedish soprano named Christine bumping an older prima donna from the lead in *Faust*—are ringing a bell, that’s because French thriller scribe Gaston Leroux used Christine Nilsson as a model for Christine Daaé in his 1910 potboiler *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra* (*The Phantom of the Opera*). Set around the same year as Wilde’s poetic publication, Leroux’s gothic novel draws on many specifics of the Paris opera house’s architecture, history, and legend, including the rivalries and romances of its company’s Swedish star.

Christine Nilsson lived until 1921, long enough to see the rise, fall, and premature death of Oscar Wilde as well as the publication of Leroux’s *Phantom*. Presumably the “Chère Diva” received many handsome gifts and dedications throughout her glamorous travels, and history doesn’t tell us whether she treasured or ignored Wilde’s over-the-top address.

It’s also hard to say whether either author’s portrayal flattered or insulted Nilsson. Would you rather be cast as the *idée fixe* of a homicidal sub-basement organist or as Wilde’s pedestal’d goddess “made to make men great”? This may be the very rare occasion where the book is best served when you judge it by its cover.



Christine Nilsson in 1870, by Nadar (Bibliothèque nationale de France/public domain)

On Monday, April 25, members of the Frick Collection Library Committee visited for an after-hours tour, a look at a selection of treasures from our Special Collections, and behind-the-scenes insights about our *Black Literature Matters* exhibition. The tour was arranged in collaboration with Stephen J. Bury, Andrew W. Mellon Chief Librarian of the Frick Art Reference Library.

Special Collections materials on display included pages from our first charging ledgers featuring the borrowing histories of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and John Jay; the oldest item in our collection, the *Psalterium Davidis Carmine*; John Dee and John Winthrop marginalia in a 1566 edition of Paracelsus’s *Baderbuchlin*; Herman Melville’s 1850 share and borrowing history, alongside a volume on whaling that he borrowed during the writing of *Moby-Dick*; and a letter from Lord Byron to Sir Walter Scott.

The Frick hosted several NYSL trustees for a private tour last fall. Many thanks to Mr. Bury and his colleagues Rowan Moody, Nicole Martin, and Samuel Wicks for working with us to plan these visits. If your organization is interested in arranging a group tour of the Library, please contact our Events Department at [events@nysoclib.org](mailto:events@nysoclib.org) for more details.

## Spring Events

On April 3, 2022, the Library hosted our annual reception for the Goodhue Society, a community of supporters who have included the Library in their will or estate planning. This year, Goodhue Chair Laura Whitman (*left*) welcomed the group to its first in-person gathering since 2019 and Goodhue member C.S. Hanson (*right*) led a love-letter writing activity inspired by Sarah Parker Goodhue. Thank you to all members of the Goodhue Society for your generous support of the Library!

*Photos by Karen Smul*



Above left, Head Librarian Carolyn Waters welcomes new Library members at our June 23, 2022 reception for those who joined this past year. Above right, member writer Anna Pitoniak shares her experience exploring the Library's collection and writing *Our American Friend*. *Photos by Joe Gilberg*



At left, Edmund White converses with Bill Goldstein about his new book *A Previous Life*; at right, Quincy Troupe signs a copy of his monumental collection *Duende* for Events Assistant Marialuisa Monda. Mr. Troupe appeared in conversation with poet Willie Perdomo.

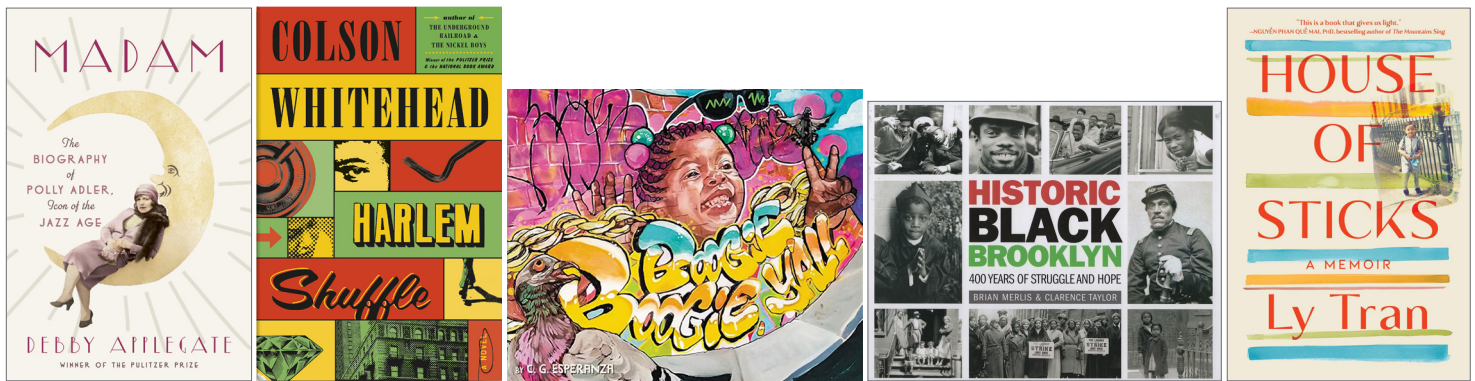
## Fabulous Fashion Opens

Our new exhibition, *Fabulous Fashion*, opened June 9 and runs through mid-January 2023 in the Peluso Family Exhibition Gallery. The opening reception included remarks from trustee Jeannette Watson Sanger and guest curator Wayne Mahler, plus many elegantly dressed visitors. Visit the gallery whenever the Library is open or on alternating Tuesdays and Thursdays for a free, public talk with Head of Exhibitions Harriet Shapiro. *Photos by Karen Smul. Fabulous Fashion* is generously supported by The Arthur F. and Alice E. Adams Foundation, Bloomingdale's, and The Felicia Fund.



# The New York City Book Awards 2021-2022

The New York City Book Awards, founded in 1996, honor each year's best books about the city. We celebrated this year's winners in a ceremony at the Library on May 19. The 2021 winners are Debby Applegate for *Madam: The Biography of Polly Adler, Icon of the Jazz Age*; Colson Whitehead for *Harlem Shuffle*; C.G. Esperanza for *Boogie Boogie Y'all*; and Brian Merlis and Clarence Taylor for *Historic Black Brooklyn: 400 Years of Struggle and Hope*. The Hornblower Award for a first book went to Ly Tran for *House of Sticks: A Memoir*. The New York City Book Awards were generously underwritten by Ellen M. Iseman. The Hornblower Award was generously underwritten by Jenny Lawrence.



Ceremony photos clockwise from upper left: C.G. Esperanza accepts his award for *Boogie Boogie Y'all*; winner Debby Applegate with awards juror Tracy Quan; jury chair Bianca Calabresi with jurors Christine Kendall and Gessy Alvarez; juror Nikhil Iyengar presents the award to Ly Tran for *House of Sticks*; Clarence Taylor and Brian Merlis with their *Historic Black Brooklyn*. Photos by Karen Smul



The bigger the word appears, the more it appeared in titles of this year's 344 Young Writers Awards entries.

# The 20th Annual Young Writers Awards

2022 marked the 20th Annual Young Writers Awards competition. On Monday, May 16, the Society Library honored stellar writing by aspiring authors and poets in grades three through twelve at the Young Writers Awards ceremony, held virtually for a third year, allowing participation from as far away as Florence, Italy. This year's competition yielded 344 entries by NYSL members as well as students at NYSL member and invited schools. Longtime competition judges poet Dave Johnson and authors Carol Weston and Edra Ziesk were joined by first-time competition judge author Karina Yan Glaser in selecting the winning entries. The twelve winning and honorable mention stories, essays, and poems touched on an array of topics from tables to clocks and from dandelions to cows, along with birthdays and the true feeling of home. At the ceremony Karina Yan Glaser noted that "writing is an act of bravery." Each of the authors urged all the brave writers who submitted their work to continue writing, tomorrow and the next day and the day after that! After the ceremony, the judges and the honorees they selected connected in breakout rooms to discuss reading, writing, and what inspires them, including soccer, travel, and reading great writing.

We are sure to read more work from these remarkable young writers in the future. In the meantime, we urge you to read their winning words and to view the awards ceremony at [nysoclib.org/children/young-writers-awards](https://nysoclib.org/children/young-writers-awards).

## Winners

### Poetry

Joshua Kuruvilla, *The Unknown* (Grades 3-4)

Anna Sedlock-Reiner, *Renewal* (Grades 5-6)

Graydon Ramsey, *Dandelion: A Sonnet* (Grades 7-8)

Soleil Wizman, *to disappear* (Grades 9-12)

### Prose

Parker Anderson, *The Table Naming* (Grades 3-4)

Neva Ilica, *The True Meaning of Home* (Grades 5-6)

Cassidy Aickin, *The Lady of the Lake* (Grades 7-8)

Inika Agrawal, *A Language Unspoken* (Grades 9-12)

## Honorable Mentions

### Poetry

Cia Gonzalez, *Untitled* (Grades 3-4)

Sophie Krupp, *Those Last Words on Thanksgiving Night* (Grades 5-6)

### Prose

Elisabetta Yuvienco, *The Birthday* (Grades 5-6)

Ela Kini, *Kimmy Bell* (Grades 7-8)



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## One More Picture



NYC public school teachers select donated books for their classrooms at the annual book drive organized by Project Cicero.