



LIBRARY NOTES

THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY NEWSLETTER
VOLUME 5, NUMBER 2, APRIL 1998

CONVERSATIONS ON GREAT BOOKS

Keats: The Making of a Poet
Aileen Ward

Members' Room, The Library
May 6, 13, and 20, 5:30 P.M.

Aileen Ward recently retired from New York University where she was Schweitzer Professor of Humanities. Her biography, *John Keats: The Making of a Poet* (rev. ed. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987), won the National Book Award in Arts and Letters and also the Duff Cooper Prize for Non-Fiction in London. Over the years she has published a number of articles and reviews on the English Romantic writers and is currently working on a life of William Blake.



Pencil drawing by Charles Brown, 1819

John Keats seems to have been a wonderful conversationalist as well as a great poet. His remark on conversation in a letter of February 1818 is a prose poem in itself: "Man should not dispute or assert but whisper results to his neighbor, and thus by every germ of Spirit sucking the Sap from mould ethereal every human might become great, and Humanity instead of being a wide heath of Furse and Briars with here or there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees."

We will share the "results" of our reading of a wide range of his writing drawn from his sonnets, epistles, odes, and narrative poems from *Endymion* and *Hyperion* to *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *Lamia*, as well as a broad selection of his letters. Our conversation will move back and forth between close reading of his poetic texture--diction, imagery, lyric patterning, and narrative structure--to a broader discussion of Keats's ideas, especially in his letters. These contain some of the most memorable comments on poetry and the poet in English; they also offer remarkable insights into the human condition itself. We will trace his miraculous development from the tentative utterance of his first volume of *Poems* (1817) to the assured mastery of his *annus mirabilis* (from the autumn of 1818 to the autumn of 1819). Keats died at twenty-five in Rome in

February 1821, convinced he was a failure; but he was closer to the mark in 1818 when he wrote, in response to some devastating reviews of *Endymion*, "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death."

The series costs \$60. Each of the "Conversations" begins at 5:30 P.M. in the Members' Room. Early registration is recommended as enrollment is limited to 50 people. To reserve a seat, send a check made out to the Library to the attention of Nancy McCartney. For questions, call her at (212) 717-0357. No reservations will be taken by telephone or at the circulation desk.

Recommended texts are *Selected Poems of John Keats*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford World Classics, 1996) and *Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1978), but other available books will do.



Miniature by Joseph Severn, 1819

CALENDAR

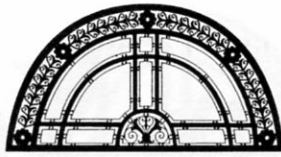
Author Series
Mystery Writers
of America
"Donald Westlake
and
the 1998 Edgar
Award Nominees"
Tuesday
April 28
6:30 P.M.
Temple Israel
112 East 75th St.

Conversations
"Keats: The
Making of a Poet"
with
Aileen Ward
Wednesdays
May 6, 13, and 20
5:30 P.M.
Members' Room
The Library

Exhibition
"Collecting
Readers"
May 12- June 30
Second Floor
Gallery
The Library

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Service**
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delivery, or both,
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(212) 288-6900.





COLLECTING READERS

Donald Oresman

An Exhibition, Second Floor Gallery, The Library

May 12-June 30



Nancy Reading, by Jim Dine, 1973

Subject collections are common enough among book and art collectors--cookbooks, artist self-portraits, Bibles, landscapes. But images of people reading, hardly an esoteric subject, appear not to have attracted much interest. My collection, largely works on paper and restricted to the twentieth century, may not be unique but is probably unusual.

Like most matters, it started accidentally. My wife and I have always been art collectors in a hit-or-miss way, from time to time buying what we liked when we wandered through the art dealers' galleries. That eclectic approach left me slightly uneasy, addicted as I am to orderly ways. What's the point of collecting without focus?

Sometime in 1980, we saw Jim Dine's portrait of his wife reading and bought it, continuing our aimless pattern. A few weeks later, we bought Larry Rivers's portrait of the poet Frank O'Hara reading. Something clicked. Readers became the focus from then on. The collection now runs to over 700 pieces.

We began assembling the collection by visiting art dealers, alerting them to our special interest, and reading auction catalogs. The dealers have been critical. Without them, we could never have ferreted out most of our holdings. What are the criteria used? Actually only one--do we like the image? No attempt has been made to limit our collection to a Who's Who in Art. There are more relatively unknown names than known.

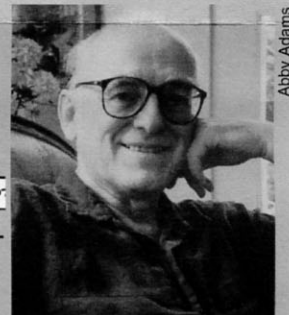
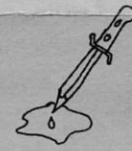
One of the largest groups represented is 1930s prints by American artists who were among the more than 5,000 painters whose work was supported by the New Deal Federal Artists Project. The readers we collect don't have to be reading books or newspapers. There are bulletin board readers, movie marquee readers, soup can label readers, ticker tape readers. Most of the works are lithographs. There are also watercolors, drawings, and oils, as well as works on plastic, wood, metal, and newsprint.

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA

Donald Westlake and the 1998 Edgar Award Nominees

Tuesday, April 28, 6:30 P.M.

Temple Israel 112 East 75th Street

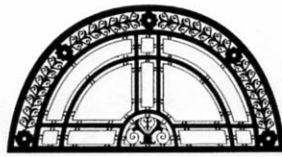


Abby Adams

CROSS POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS POLICE LINE DO NOT

Author of more than 40 mystery novels, Donald E. Westlake will host a panel discussion of the mystery novel genre. The participating authors are all nominees for the Edgar Award, the prestigious annual award for mystery writers, to be granted by Mystery Writers of America on April 30. Mr. Westlake has won four Edgar Awards, as well as the organization's highest honor, the Grand Master Award. Aply, the names of the panel participants must remain a mystery until Edgar Award nominations are announced to the public. The program is free for members and guests of the Library, Thirteen/WNET Patrons and Associates, and guests of Mystery Writers of America and The Chase Manhattan Bank. Tickets can be picked up at the Library's circulation desk or at the door. For the general public, tickets are \$10 and can be purchased at the door.

The 1997-1998 Author Series is sponsored by Thirteen/WNET and The New York Society Library, with the cooperation of the Mystery Writers of America and with the generous underwriting support of The Chase Manhattan Bank.



REFLECTIONS ON TWENTY YEARS AT THE LIBRARY

Mark Piel started his career as administrative assistant to the librarian at Mount Holyoke College. From there he moved to Finch College and then to Upsala College. When Ms. Sylvia Hilton announced her retirement from the New York Society Library, he applied for the position. He had known both Ms. Hilton and the Library well from his years at Finch College, which was located only one block away.

What are the differences between your previous posts and this?

For an administrator, one difference between an academic library and this library is the freedom to take an active part in book selection. In a college this privilege resides mostly with the department heads. Also, the trustees have a far more important role here than their counterparts do in college libraries. Happily, there have never been the same budget constraints here as I experienced in academia.

What was the Library like when you arrived?

Physically, it seemed more intimate and, at the same time, more spacious. There were fewer card cabinets, a smaller circulation desk, less shelving, and fewer books in the reference room and circulation hall. This changed with the 1980-1983 renovation. Fortunately, the Library was able to retain its ambience throughout.

Has the membership changed noticeably?

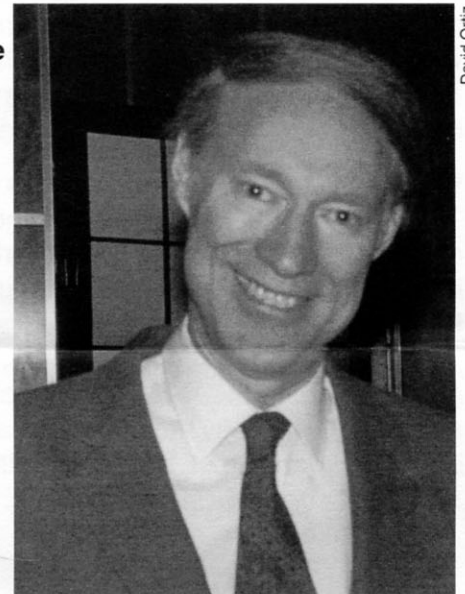
We have a greater number of members with young children. You see baby carriages parked in the cloakroom every day now. Apart from this, the demographics haven't altered.

What do you enjoy doing at the Library? And what do you find the hardest?

What I particularly love is book selection. As satisfactory as it is to be able to work with an existing excellent collection, it's even more fun to be able to add to it. Jacques Barzun (who was a trustee from 1968-1997) gave me some useful precepts for acquisitions. My own selections are *not* usually new books but the worthy older titles we somehow missed getting, such as Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, works of Leopardi, the nineteenth-century Italian poet, and Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. I also relish the discovery of special books in the circulating stacks. We recently turned up the first edition of a book by Ann Radcliffe, an English Gothic novelist. *Journey through Holland and the Western Frontier of Germany* is an account of a trip she took with her husband in 1794.

And then there's work at the Reference Desk, helping our readers find their way through our collection. It's rewarding to see the successful use of the Library's holdings acknowledged each year in serious publications. Most recently, I've come across acknowledgments in Barbara Goldsmith's biography of Victoria Woodhull, *Other Powers*, and in Thomas Fleming's *Liberty! The American Revolution*, based upon the PBS series. He writes--quite correctly--about our "superb staff"!

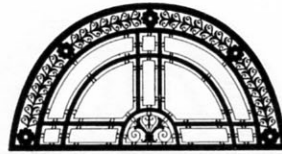
Anything to do with numbers is a hardship for me. What a great help it is that we now have a part-time bookkeeper. With this bookkeeping burden removed there had, of course, to be a new one. It's Emerson's Law of Compensation at work. The book space problem has been solved only temporarily by compact storage. I'm back to dealing with numbers--of volumes and linear feet.



David Ortiz

Madelaine Gill

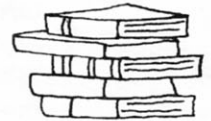




What was an important success for you? And what was a failure?

Let me start with the latter question. I'm glad you only asked for one. It was a disappointment that the position of Children's Librarian, which we started in my first year, somehow didn't pan out. However, the Library is redoing the children's area this summer and we do have ongoing children's programs both within and outside the Library. It's the right time to re-evaluate this section of the Library.

I'm proud of the grant the Library received from New York State to conserve the Hammond Circulating Library Collection. It has books not available in any other library.



Madelaine Gill

What are some of the big events of the past twenty years?

Three come immediately to mind. First, there was the complete renovation of the building in the beginning of the 1980s. Then came computerized cataloging. We're now about to complete the third major event--the introduction of an on-line catalog and computerized circulation. And so we join other libraries, like The Boston Athenaeum, in availing ourselves of the new technology.

But that's not all. Other major innovations have been the literary lectures and programs. We've been able to attract notable speakers. And this is the third year the annual prize will be awarded for the year's best book about New York City. An important addition to the Library operation is the employment of a part-time book binder, Howard Stein, on the premises. One should also mention the Annual Appeal. Our members' response has made this a great success, which allows the Library to do all the other things I've talked about.

Dan Piel



What do you see in the future for the Library?

I trust we will continue to expand and conserve our holdings and carry on the literary lectures and programs. We should be able, through further computerization, to make our holdings known to more non-member readers in other parts of America--and perhaps the world. The existence of the Library, let alone the quality of its collections, is still not sufficiently known. Our participation in "New York Is Book Country" on Fifth Avenue in September and David Halberstam's recent *New York Times* article have introduced us to people who live a block away and to others all over the country.

Please write to Jenny Lawrence, editor of *Library Notes*, care of the Library, with any comments and suggestions.

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