

Books & People

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Remembering Robert

by Katie Fricas

In early 2023 Margery Quackenbush sat with Events Assistant Katie Fricas to discuss her husband's habits, quirks, and legacy. Our exhibition Quack! Quack! The Wonderful World of Robert Quackenbush is open to the public in the Peluso Family Exhibition Gallery through December 31.

KF: Do you know when Robert started making art?

He grew up in Arizona, where it was very dusty, and as a boy he had bad allergies. When other children were outside playing, he just stayed inside drawing. His father was an engineer and encouraged him to draw like an engineer, to measure, to learn perspective.

The family lived in Arizona because his father was commissioned to do the air conditioning for a department store in Phoenix. His father built a house with a plan to start selling the first houses with air conditioning in Arizona. But then the Depression hit, so his father couldn't sell what he had built and instead the family moved in. Robert loved that house, he had his own room. I always think of Van Gogh's painting of his bedroom – that's like Robert's room. That's a nice thing for kids: if they have their own room.

Tragically, his father died when he was 9. So the family finances were not always so good. He had a wonderful aunt who paid for part of his education, then later the Army paid the rest.

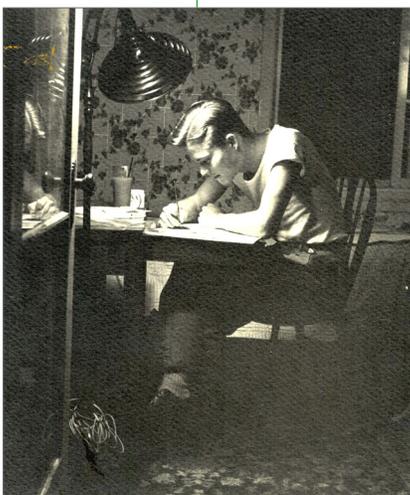
KF: Was his mother artistic, too?

MQ: His mother was a Southern belle. She was very sweet, but strict. During the Depression Robert's maternal grandmother came to live with them. She helped with money for a bit, then she made his mother go to work. She ended up rising to become a Vice President of an insurance company. In those days, it was hard for women. She had three kids. But she was gutsy. I can still see her—when my son Piet was little, she would sit and tell him stories. He was fascinated. You know, people used to *tell* stories. Robert's mother was a storyteller.



Margery Quackenbush at the opening of the exhibition *Quack! Quack!*

Photo by Karen Simul



Robert Quackenbush as a student in Los Angeles, circa 1950

Greetings from the Head Librarian

In my role as Director & Head Librarian, I spend a lot of time working with a very enthusiastic and dedicated volunteer cohort: the Board of Trustees of the New York Society Library. This outstanding—and extraordinarily generous—group of members spends countless hours overseeing the strategic direction of the Library, ensuring good governance, and managing the Library's assets.

The Board saw a number of changes this past spring:

In May, **Ellen M. Iseman** (trustee since 2006) stepped down as Board Chair and we thank her for her exceptional leadership; she will remain on the Board of Trustees.

In June, the following trustees were elected to serve as officers of the Board:

George L.K. Frelinghuysen, Chair (trustee since 2003 and formerly Treasurer of the Board)

Susan L. Robbins, Secretary (trustee since 2004)

Timothy N. Wallach, Treasurer (trustee since 2013 and formerly Secretary of the Board)

We also thank the following trustees who resigned from the Board of Trustees at our April meeting: **Charles Berry** (trustee 1993-2023) formerly served as Chair of the Board (2005-2012) and was unanimously elected Trustee Emeritus by his peers;

Laurence Bergreen (trustee 2006-2023); and **Akosua Asamoah** (trustee 2021-2023).

Emily Madison and **Lisa W. Hess** were elected to the Board this year, and you will learn more about them in this issue.

Carolyn Waters, Head Librarian



Margery and Robert with their son Piet; right: Robert in the Army during the Korean War

KF: What was his life like as a young artist?

MQ: Robert got drafted into the Army during the Korean War. He started drawing pictures of the officers, and they liked having their portraits done so much they decided that they needed him stateside. So they did not send him to Korea. He stayed in the US and gave lectures on being patriotic and joining the war effort instead. He saved his own life by being a great speaker and artist! The military needed artists. After the war, Robert worked for the Department of Defense; he travelled around doing paintings for them.

KF: What was it like when you first met Robert?

MQ: When we were dating, I remember that he told me his name, and I thought, *I can't have a name like that!* But people remembered it. When I was working, it was a good name to have for business, and it was good for an author, too.

KF: Were you together when his first book came out?

MQ: Yes, but what was really exciting was when his agent, Gordon Martin, got the Miss Mallard books made into a film. I remember when Miss Mallard became a movie star, we went out to dinner to celebrate with a bunch of people—and they ordered duck! Our son said, *You're ordering duck and we're celebrating Miss Mallard.* Robert would have nothing to do with it. He did not have the duck.

KF: Where did Robert get his ideas?

MQ: Robert pulled from things that happened in real life. Our son Piet would have friends come over to the house when he was little, and they'd all have to figure out how to share. Then Robert would write a book about sharing. Sometimes the characters were people and sometimes they were animals.

Robert called his mother every week, he was a good son. On one call his mother said, *A terrible thing happened, there were ants in my house and I called the exterminator, and he tore the place apart to get rid of them!* That turned into the plot of *Henry's Awful Mistake*. Robert said *Thank you, Mother. Henry's Awful Mistake* was a book everyone loved—I went to the dentist, and the book was in the waiting room!

KF: I know you are also an artist—fashion design and painting. Did you and Robert collaborate?

MQ: Robert would run things by me. I was his reader. I'd come up with stuff that sparked things to go in a certain direction. The idea for a mole character came from me. And the duck character, too. As a kid I had a pet duck named Fuzzy.



Photo by Karen Simul

Piet Quackenbush in 1982 and with his family at the March 1 exhibition opening

Ducks are really wonderful—they imprint on people. My duck thought I was his mother, he followed me around.

I did research for him, too, a lot of it at the New York Public Library’s picture collection.

KF: I remember seeing Robert all the time at the Library in a suit and beret. I take it you had a love for fashion in common?

MQ: Yes, Robert always commented on what I wore. He liked to buy me clothes, and he’d tell me if something didn’t work. He’d sometimes pick things that seemed really odd to me, but when I wore them, people complimented me. Robert always dressed appropriately. He didn’t wear his hat to dinner.

KF: During his career, did Robert follow a daily work routine?

MQ: Yes, he was always in the studio. He would start every day at about 4 PM, then work straight through to night. He used watercolor, ink, pastels, oil paints, acrylic, a lot of different materials. He was very disorderly. But I don’t know if an artist can be orderly at work, creativity breeds chaos (or vice versa). And he was chaotic—he had big chests full of art. I’m still finding things in them—and there were little bottles of ink all over the house. I’d open a drawer or cupboard and there’s another bottle.

KF: Did Robert have any favorite authors?

MQ: In Phoenix he went to a prestigious high school where he liked all the classics, James Joyce, whatever. They had a good curriculum. As an adult, Robert was very friendly with some other children’s book writers. One time we went to hear Maurice Sendak speak, and I went up to ask him to autograph a book for my husband, Robert Quackenbush, and Maurice said, *Oh I’m a great admirer of his work.*

KF: Is there anything else you’d like to tell us about Robert and his art?

MQ: You know, some people try to be funny and can’t really do it, but he could. He was really funny and was very charming. Not me! He was the charming one. And his books are funny. Above all, he wanted kids to be happy. He wanted kids to understand that you can figure things out in life, there are solutions to problems—if you work, you can figure anything out.



Lisa W. Hess

Investment professional Lisa W. Hess has been engaged in the finance industry for more than 40 years and is currently a director of TIAA and the Radian Corporation. She holds a degree in Hispanic Literature from Harvard University and an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago, and is a former columnist for Forbes magazine. She enjoys reading 19th- and early 20th-century English literature and looks forward to getting lost in the marvelously atmospheric stacks of the Library.



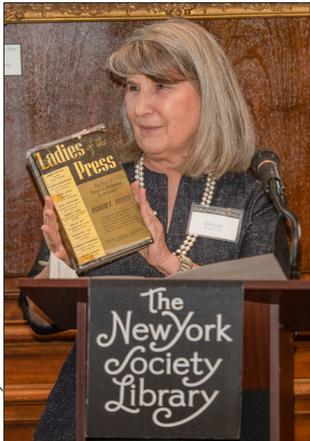
Emily Madison

Emily Madison is a Lecturer in Literature Humanities at Columbia University, having previously taught at Barnard College and SUNY Purchase. At Columbia she gained her M.F.A. in Dramaturgy and Ph.D. in Theatre and Performance, with a focus on modern and historical Shakespeare performance. She is excited to explore the Library’s theater books.

The Season in Events



Photos by Karen Smul



Photos by Karen Smul

Usandra Maderna Photography

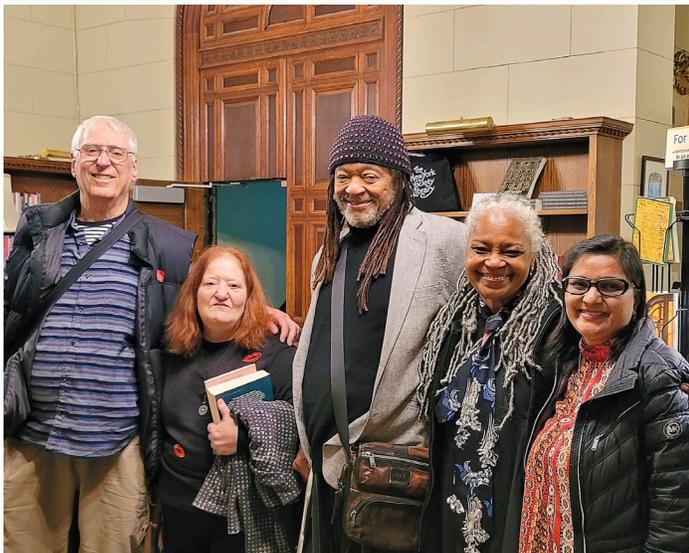


Photo by Cynthia Kitt

Top: Our exhibition *Quack! Quack! The Wonderful World of Robert Quackenbush* opened March 1 and runs through the end of the year. Middle left: We celebrated major donors on March 20, with remarks by Brooke Kroeger on the Library research for her new book *Undaunted: How Women Changed American Journalism*. Attendees included (left to right) Carole Lynne Shear, Sheila Wolfe, Stacy Schiff, and trustee Jeanette Watson Sanger. Middle right: Teachers selected books at the annual Project Cicero Book Drive in March. Bottom: John Curl, Joanie HF Zosike, Quincy Troupe, Margaret Porter Troupe, and Megha Sood presented Earth Day poetry in April; May 13 saw a special conversation co-sponsored by the Harlem Writers Guild, featuring Voza Rivers, Woodie King Jr., and Michael Dinwiddie.



Photo by Will Goertzel

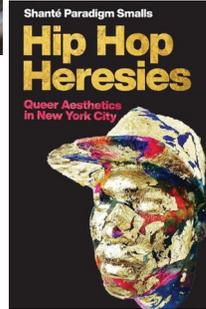
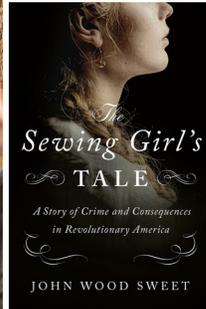
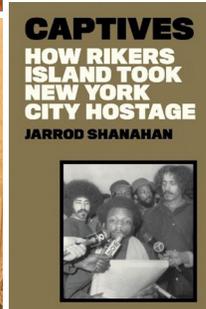
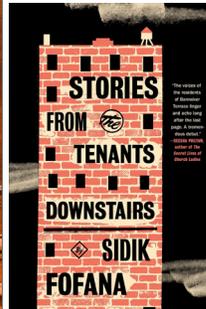
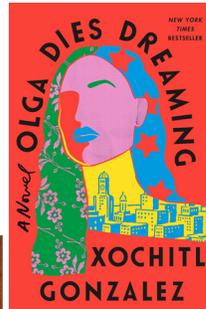
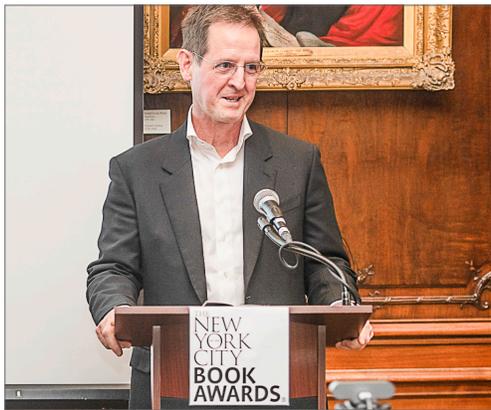
Photos by Karen Smul

Photo by Alexander Sanger

Top: The Artist Anubis performed as part of the May 13 event; authors Catherine Martinez Torigian, Roberto Carlos García, Jennifer Shyue, Maité Iracheta, and SJ Rozan spoke in a May 20 panel co-sponsored with the New York City Regional Chapter of the Authors Guild; Middle: The June 5 New Members Party included greetings from member writer Greer Hendricks, lively conversation with guest hosts including trustee Charles G. Berry, and a visit to the Conservation studio; Bottom: Students from the Gender, Sexuality Alliance at PS 89 in the Bronx made a Pride Month visit, and trustee Jeannette Watson Sanger invited casual conversation about books outside the building.

The New York City Book Awards 2022-2023

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 10. The 2022 winners are Xochitl Gonzalez for *Olga Dies Dreaming*; Shanté Paradigm Smalls for *Hip Hop Heresies: Queer Aesthetics in New York City*; Jarrod Shanahan for *Captives: How Rikers Island Took New York City Hostage*; and John Wood Sweet for *The Sewing Girl's Tale: A Story of Crime and Consequences in Revolutionary America*. The Hornblower Award for a first book went to Sidik Fofana for *Stories from the Tenants Downstairs*. The New York City Book Awards were generously underwritten by Ellen M. Iseman. The Hornblower Award was generously underwritten by Jenny Lawrence. *Event photos by Karen Smul*



Top: Winners Sidik Fofana and John Wood Sweet; Middle: Winner Xochitl Gonzalez, and winner Shanté Paradigm Smalls with Carolyn Waters; Lower left: Lucienne Bloch with the awards' sponsor Ellen M. Iseman



The 21st Annual Young Writers Awards

After three years of Zoomed ceremonies, we were thrilled to host the 21st Annual Young Writers Awards ceremony at the Library once again! We gathered together on Tuesday, May 16 in the Members' Room. Over 150 children and teens had submitted poetry or prose entries, and the judges selected thirteen winners and honorable mentions. All the winners were able to join us and brought their families and friends along to enjoy the spectacle. Our team of judges includes poet Dave Johnson, children's author Karina Yan Glaser, children's & YA author (as well as adult Prompt leader) Carol Weston, and writer Edra Ziesk.

Once the certificates were handed out, we got to feast upon cupcakes! Several were festooned with toppers of miniature *Winning Words*, the book that collected the first ten years of YWA entries, featuring cover and interior art by judge emeritus author-illustrator Robert Quackenbush. Be sure to check out the exhibition chronicling his life's work now through December 31, 2023, in the gallery just outside the Members' Room.

Our thanks to everyone who joined us at the resumed in-person ceremony this year. We invite you to read the award-winning entries: nysoclib.org/children/young-writers-awards. We encourage all young writers to keep writing and look forward to reading a new slate of entries destined for the 22nd annual event next year. And if you like to draw comics, keep an eye out for our Young Cartoonists Awards season opening in the fall!

Winning Entries

- Out in the meadow* by Mishka Mehla, 3rd-4th Grade Poetry
- Whispers* by Martina Catino, 3rd-4th Grade Prose
- Outshine* by Georgia Steib, 5th-6th Grade Poetry
- The Weaver's Tale* by Nova Macknik-Conde, 5th-6th Grade Prose
- The Bigger Picture* by Oscar Paduano, 7th-8th Grade Poetry
- Typhoon* by Araceli Flores, 7th-8th Grade Prose
- Now My People are Moist Brown Sand* by Caroline Gordon, 9th-12th Grade Poetry
- A Glowing Worm Called Pork Cutlet* by Lucie Coeny, 9th-12th Grade Prose

Honorable Mentions

- The Storm* by Everleigh Rotunno, 3rd-4th Grade Poetry
- The Magic Bean* by Leon Yuan, 3rd-4th Grade Prose
- The Ancestral Burden* by Annabel Feng, 5th-6th Grade Poetry
- A Holiday of Choices* by Syeda Hossain, 7th-8th Grade Poetry
- Chasing Memories* by Lily Kim-Yatter, 7th-8th Grade Prose



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

One More Picture



The Library was honored to host the first public event with The Human Library NYC, which breaks down social barriers by loaning human “Books” to “Readers” who can hear their stories firsthand. Six Books and five Librarians met with Readers in the Members’ Room on Saturday, April 1.