

Volume 26, Number 3, Fall 2019

Books & People

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History Used as a Bookmark: A Snapshot of July 1954

by Steven McGuirl, Head of Acquisitions

Occasionally we find things left behind by members in Library books. Mostly, it's along the lines of receipts, bills, coupons, the occasional snapshot—the detritus of everyday life repurposed as bookmarks. Sometimes, what we find is more entertaining and interesting.

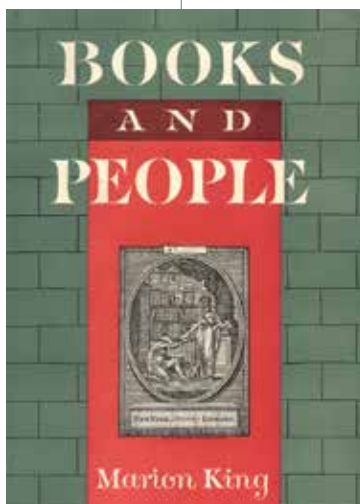
Recently a member asked for a January 1955 issue of *Fortune* to be brought up from Closed Stacks. It contained a note saying “Halberstam owes \$2.40 for Xeroxing.” Bestselling, internationally known historian David Halberstam was a longtime Library member and vocal advocate for the institution. He published his book *The Fifties* in 1993 while a member. Sure enough, in the bibliography of *The Fifties*, this issue of *Fortune* is cited. The archives do not reveal whether Mr. Halberstam made good on his photocopying bill.

More intriguing from a history perspective was a new books list from July 1954 recently found in a returned book. In my eighteen years as Acquisitions Librarian, I have compiled over 200 monthly new books lists, and this is, as they say in the music business, “loaded.” The range of books on the list is impressive. Well-known authors appear frequently, including a few at the beginning of prolific and long careers, such as Iris Murdoch with her first novel and the second poetry collection by W.S. Merwin. Books on the list also reflect the zeitgeist of American culture at large in 1954.

Best of all, the list includes *Books and People*, a history of the New York Society Library written by former Assistant Librarian **Marion King**, who was on staff for about fifty years.

If you haven't read *Books and People*, it is both charming and informative. Current staff still consult King's book on a regular basis, and this newsletter is named after it. In 1954, Marion King herself was handling much of our collection development, along with librarian Helen Ruskell.

My experience as a librarian begins in the very late 20th century, and it is frankly difficult for me to imagine the job of Acquisitions Librarian before the internet. True, the Acquisitions Department still finds much of what we order the old-fashioned way, via print reviews and catalogs, publisher announcements, and so much more depend on the speed and efficiency permitted by digital technology. The volume (and quality) of acquisitions indicated by the July '54 list, which includes about 240 books selected and purchased *long* before the advent of the internet, is striking. It is even more remarkable considering that July usually marks a summer slowdown in publishing activity. I am struck by how good my librarian



Greetings from the Head Librarian

By now I hope you've had the opportunity to stop by and see the new space we've carved out for members. My former office on the Third Floor, now called "Little Whit," is open for business. The furniture is temporary; we're taking time to source furnishings that are flexible, functional, and also beautiful, as befits the room. But we're not done yet—we're currently considering options for making even more space available, and I hope to have more to share on that in the coming months.

As I write this column, I'm recently back from a conference hosted by the London Library with directors of membership libraries from both the United States and the United Kingdom. The libraries that participated in the conference were founded as early as 1748 (Charleston Library Society) and as recently as 2015 (Folio: The Seattle Athenaeum). We are large (The London Library, 1 million books!), small (The Portico Library, 25,000 books), and everything in between. It amazes me that despite the differences in our size, location, or age, we share very similar challenges. One thing is clear: we are all flourishing today by offering creative, exciting and forward-thinking programs and exhibitions; expanding our digital resources; sharing our history and our archives through digitization; providing quiet havens for readers and writers; and building community through our membership. But, at our core, we're all about our book collections. In a session imagining the future of our libraries, we were remarkably clear in our belief that our strength is in staying true to who we are while adapting to the times.

predecessors were at collection development nearly every time I check our catalog for titles from decades past, and looking at old book lists like July 1954 illuminates even further just how skilled and hardworking they were. Current Library members reap the benefits of that hard work every time we wander into the stacks.

Fiction

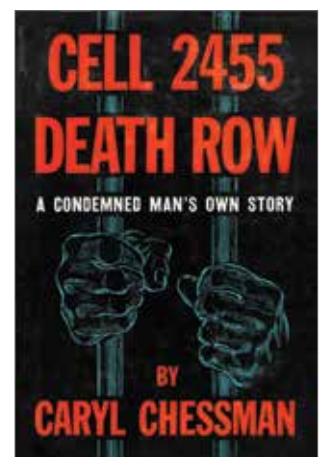
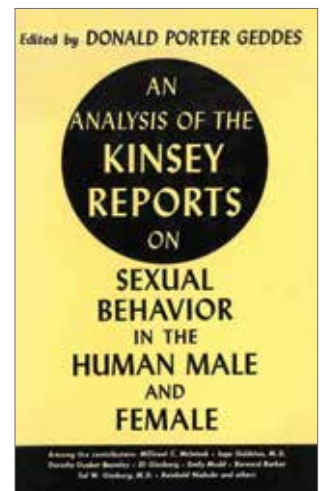
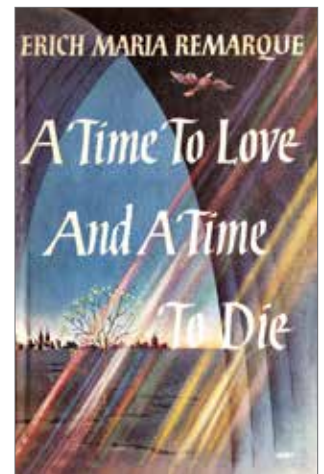
The fiction section includes several well-known authors still read today (and, alas, many more that are not), including:

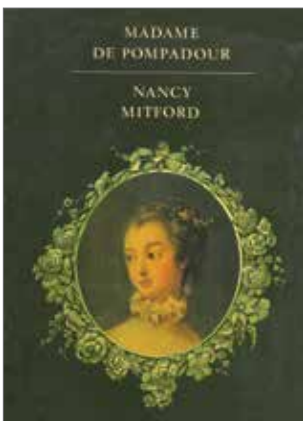
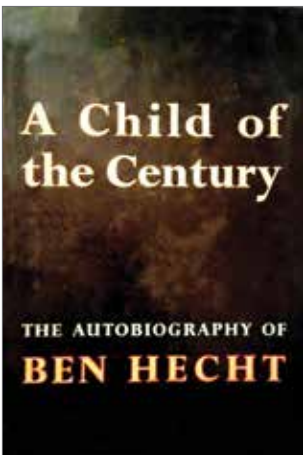
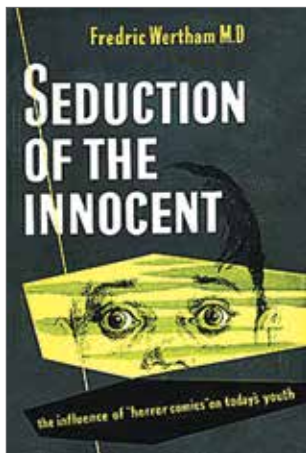
Louis Auchincloss (*The Romantic Egoists*, an early story collection from a future Library trustee in a career that produced more than 60 books); **Daphne Du Maurier** (*Mary Anne*, #2 on *Publishers Weekly's* bestselling fiction list for 1954); **Shelby Foote** (*Jordan County*); **Christopher Isherwood** (*The World in the Evening*); **E.M. Remarque** (*A Time to Love and a Time to Die*); **Randall Jarrell** (*Pictures from an Institution*); **Thomas Mann** (*The Black Swan*); **Margaret Millar** (*Wives and Lovers*); **Iris Murdoch** (*Under the Net*, her first novel); **Anais Nin** (*A Spy in the House of Love*); **J.B. Priestley** (*The Magicians*); **John Steinbeck** (*Sweet Thursday*, #7 on *Publishers Weekly's* bestselling fiction list for 1954); **Taylor Caldwell** (*Never Victorious, Never Defeated*, #9 on that list); **Gore Vidal** (*Messiah*); and **P.G. Wodehouse** (*The Return of Jeeves*), a Library member at the time, frequent visitor, and prolific borrower. I imagine that the circulation desk was positively buzzing with activity after this list appeared.

Signs of the Times

As noted above, some books reflect the cultural concerns of the era. For example, *An Analysis of the Kinsey Reports on Sexual Behavior in the Human Male and Female* appears on the list. The second of the two controversial and influential Kinsey reports was published in late 1953, and people everywhere were talking about them. By summer 1954, the Library owned this early analysis of their contents.

Caryl Chessman was sentenced by the state of California to die in 1948. His book *Cell 2455 Death Row* appeared in the Biography section of the July 1954 list. It was the first of four books that he wrote while on death row in San Quentin. Chessman was finally executed in 1960—his twelve years was the longest stay on death row in history. When the Library bought this book in 1954, Chessman was internationally famous for his own legal battle to fight his conviction and death sentence, and he had already become a cause célèbre for the anti-capital punishment movement. His case was of interest to everyone from New York intellectuals (see Elizabeth Hardwick on Chessman in the great Library of America collection *True Crime: an American Anthology*) to second-tier country singers (see "Country" Johnny Mathis's song "Chessman" on D Records).





Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* appears in the Sciences section of the July list. This infamous analysis of comic books concluded that comics encouraged violent behavior in readers and contributed significantly to juvenile delinquency. Wertham, a psychiatrist, also found hidden sexual themes in cartoons and concluded that Superman was fascist and un-American. Most of Wertham's findings were soon debunked as sloppy science, alarmist, and misleading, and the book has come to embody worn clichés about the Eisenhower years as an oppressively conservative and neurotic era. But the book was a bestseller in 1954 and Wertham was invited to appear before a televised hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. His testimony caused a furor over comic books and was apparently devastating to the comic book industry. The notoriety of *Seduction of the Innocent* still generates interest, and the book was checked out from our stacks quite recently.

Following the Second World War, mainstream America was increasingly intrigued by the ideas of Sigmund Freud and his followers and by the practice of psychoanalysis generally (*Time* magazine ran a 1948 cover story on Freud). Recent acquisitions on the July 1954 list reflect that growing awareness and interest: **Sigmund Freud's** *Origins of Psychoanalysis*; **C.G. Jung's** *Practice of Psychotherapy*; and **Erich Neumann's** *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (first published in English translation in 1954).

And speaking of WWII, it is notable how few books about the war appear on this list only nine years after the Allied victory. One can only conclude that Americans—or at least Library members—wanted to forget the recent tragedy and enjoy peace and postwar prosperity while it lasted. By contrast, eight books on the October 2019 new books list focus on some aspect of World War II.

Other Authors, Other Books

And here is what else we found new on the shelves of the Society Library in the summer of 1954.

Ben Hecht – *A Child of the Century*

The screenwriter's acclaimed autobiography. A new biography, Adina Hoffman's *Ben Hecht: Fighting Words, Moving Pictures*, and a February 2019 *New Yorker* article have brought Hecht's work and life back into the public eye, and our copy of *A Child of the Century* is checked out as I write this, 65 years after publication.

Christian Dior – *Talking about Fashion*

Published seven years after Dior's New Look began to influence postwar fashion.

Nancy Mitford – *Madame du Pompadour*

A biography written by the acclaimed author of novels like *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*. *Madame du Pompadour* was reissued by New York Review Books in 2001, but the copy listed on the July 1954 is still in our stacks. This happens all the time—an out-of-print book is reprinted by an esteemed publishing house (often as a “neglected classic”), but the Library purchased a



That has certainly served us well in our 265 years. Check my recent blog post for more on our fellow membership institutions and what I learned from our meetings.

These past few months, to my dismay, I've found that the time I have for pleasure reading has really dwindled. So I've taken to browsing the stacks for books with thin spines—under about 150 pages—and I've been delighted with my findings. True, I'm judging the books by their covers! But that's the joy of our Library, isn't it? The thrill of discovery. So I'd love to hear how you are using the Library. Drop me a line at cwaters@nysoclib.org or visit me at the Reference Desk and share your Library stories and discoveries.

—Carolyn Waters, Head Librarian

first edition upon original publication, and, more importantly, retained it through the years.

Dylan Thomas – *Under Milk Wood*

Publication of a play first performed in New York in 1953, but best known as a 1954 BBC radio drama with Richard Burton. Thomas had died in November 1953 while working on the play in New York.

Sigrid Undset - *Catherine of Siena*

A biography of the saint written by a Nobel Prize winning (1928) Norwegian novelist, best known for the trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Undset's work—particularly the trilogy—still has a devoted following and her book on Catherine remains in print. Judging by Amazon and Goodreads, it is still read a lot, too.

Gustave Flaubert – *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas* (translated by Jacques Barzun)

This is the first translation of this Flaubert work. The translator, Jacques Barzun, became a trustee of The Library in 1968 and served on the Board for twenty-seven years.

W.S. Merwin – *The Dancing Bears*

This was Merwin's second collection after he won the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1952 (selected, by the way, by W.H. Auden, another future Library member). Merwin went on to publish about fifty more collections of poetry.

V.S. Pritchett – *Spanish Temper*

Pritchett was primarily known for his talents as a short story writer. *Spanish Temper* is a book of travel sketches of Spain, where he lived in the 1920s.

Jane Bowles – *In the Summer House*

Jane Bowles wrote one excellent novel in 1943, *Two Serious Ladies*, that has amassed a well-deserved cult following over the years. *In the Summer House* is her only full-length play and was performed on Broadway (with music by her husband Paul Bowles) to mixed reviews in 1953; it closed after three weeks. It was revived in 1993.

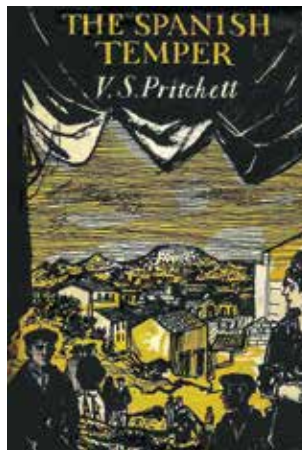
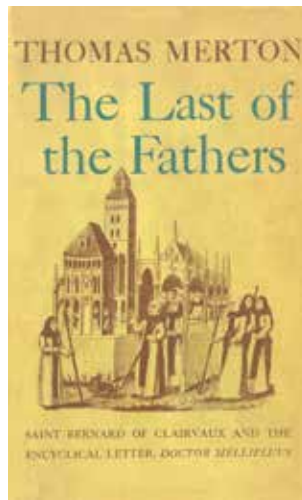
Graham Greene – *The Living Room, a Play*

Greene's first play debuted in 1953 in the UK. In 1954, it was performed in New York. It was described by the *New York Times* as part horror play, part religious drama.

Thomas Merton - *The Last of the Fathers:*

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical Letter, Doctor Mellifluus

The prolific religion writer and memoirist presents an encyclical letter by Pope Pius XII



The July 1954 New Books List. The four-panel format and pocket size continues today. And members still mark it up, and ask that books be put on their holds list.

commemorating the eighth centenary of the death of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, and provides an introduction to the saint's life and teachings.

Edna St. Vincent Millay - *Mine the Harvest: New Poems*

A posthumous collection of never-before collected works, published four years after the author's death.

Harold L. Ickes - *The Secret Diary*

A three-volume insider account of the New Deal from Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior that is still consulted today.

Edmund Wilson – *Five Plays*

A collection of drama from the influential literary critic.

Herman Wouk – *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*

A play based on the author's well-known novel.

J. Robert Oppenheimer – *Science and the Common Understanding*

A published collection of 1953 BBC lectures by the principal scientist on the Manhattan Project. In 1954, Oppenheimer's security clearance was revoked due to his outspoken views during the Red Scare.

David Garnett - *Golden Echo*

The autobiography of a prominent Bloomsbury

Group member and writer of some wonderful novels such as *Beany-Eye* and *Lady Into Fox*.

Lillian Roth – *I'll Cry Tomorrow*

Roth made her name on Broadway and in Hollywood in the 1930s. *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, a memoir primarily about her struggles with alcoholism, was a bestseller in 1954 (#6 on *Publishers Weekly's* nonfiction list), selling 115,000 copies and inspiring a major Hollywood film the following year starring Susan Hayward. It was eventually translated into eighteen languages, and is considered a pioneering work, both as celebrity confession and for a frank treatment of alcoholism that helped change the way Americans view addiction.

Herman Melville at The Rosenbach

On September 20, our Conservator, Christina Amato, traveled to Philadelphia to help with the installation of some of our materials in The Rosenbach Museum's new exhibit *American Voyager: Herman Melville at 200*. The exhibition opened October 3 and features Melville's New York Society Library share certificate, the log book recording his checkouts, and one of our books he used while researching *Moby-Dick*. The exhibition will run until April 2020.



Celebrating Joan Zimmert

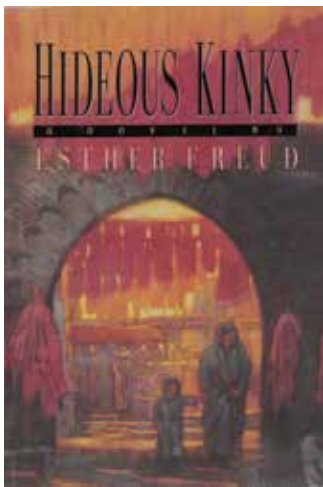
We were pleased to honor Joan Zimmert on July 9 for her retirement. Joan joined the Library's staff as Director of Development in 2008, after an equally distinguished career in development at 92Y. Library staff, trustees, and friends were joined by Joan's husband, daughters, and other family.



Left to right: Diane Srebnick and Joan have been our dream team in Development for eleven years. Joan with her daughters Nora and Lili, her husband Mark, and her sister Gail Geronemus.

Wanderlust: Your Favorite Travel Books

Our short-term exhibition *Wanderlust: Your Favorite Travel Books* is on display in the Peluso Family Exhibition Gallery through December 31. Browse all the recommended books at cityreaders.nysoclib.org.



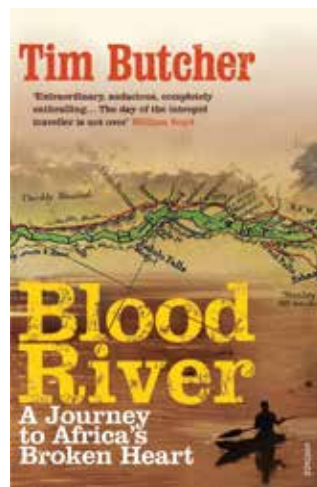
Esther Freud (1963–)

Hideous Kinky

New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1992

If writing memoirs of my failings as a parent and a traveler means Kate Winslet plays me in the movie version, I'm on the next plane to Morocco!

[Ayun Halliday \(member\)](#)



Tim Butcher (1967–)

Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart

London: Chatto & Windus, 2007

The author follows the route of explorer H.M. Stanley along the Congo River by canoe, motorbike, and on foot, contrasting the explorer's experiences with his own throughout this devastated, fascinating, and danger-filled land.

[Constance Vidor \(member\)](#)

Blue Guide to Belgium and Luxembourg

L. Russell Muirhead (Ed.)

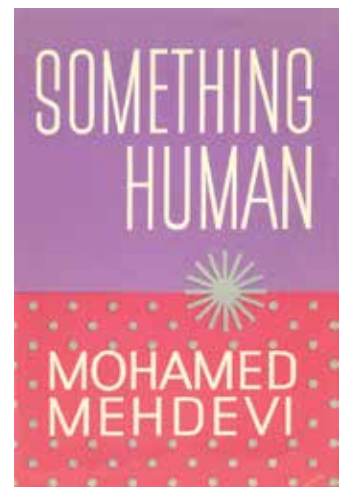
London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1963

The 1963 *Blue Guide to Belgium and Luxembourg* follows the 1929 edition and thus refers to Belgium's role in World War II. These accounts, plus the well-researched changes in art, architecture and public spaces resulting



from the bombings, have particular significance for us. We were born in Antwerp, Belgium during WWII and lived in that city until the end of the war. The book includes a fascinating, very little-known history of Belgium, from Roman times up to 1962, as well as a sketch of the development of Belgian art. The numerous foldout maps have been specially prepared for this edition.

[Ada Peluso \(Trustee Emerita\)](#), [Romano I. Peluso \(member\)](#)



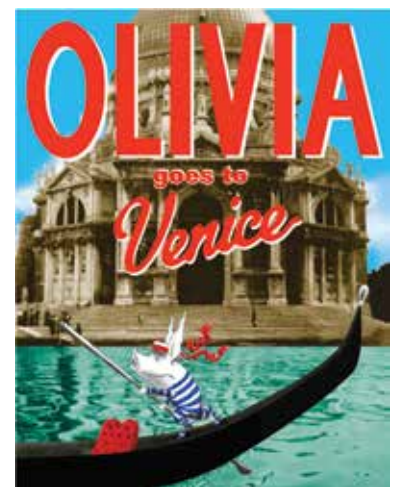
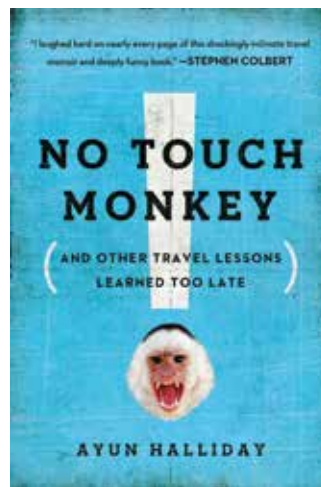
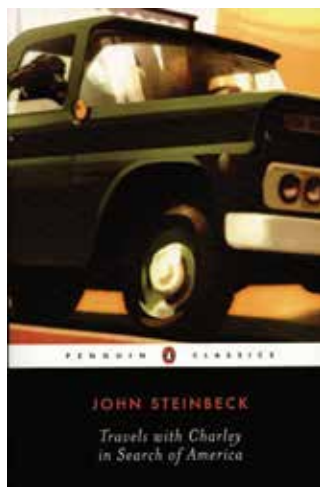
Mohamed Mehdevi (1918–?)

Something Human

New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962

Something Human is one of my favorite travel books. It is the memoir of a young Iranian man's first trip to the U.S. in the 1960s, and his observations are artful and fascinating. We rarely hear from a young Middle Easterner traveling to the U.S. for pleasure in the swingin' 60s. The book is such a gem. It's quite obscure, for no good reason.

[Katie Fricas \(Events Assistant\)](#)



Jan Morris (1926–)

Last Letters from Hav

New York: Random House, 1985

Last Letters from Hav by our preeminent and much-celebrated travel writer Jan Morris is a superb summons to an extraordinary, obscure and welcoming destination. Morris's passion for off-beat locales is on full display. She writes with persuasive attention to detail and lapidary verve. If you've already read this masterpiece, I need say no more. But if you haven't, I'll shut up and encourage you to commence this journey. Today.

[David W. Bloom \(member\)](#)

John Steinbeck (1902–1968)

Travels with Charley: In Search of America

New York: The Viking Press, 1962

This is Steinbeck's last full-length book, the chronicle of his eleven-week American road trip by truck in 1960, accompanied only by his idiosyncratic poodle Charley. Steinbeck's purpose was primarily to get in touch with the country he felt he no longer knew. But the author also wanted to prove that he still had creative and physical power, despite setbacks in his writing and health.

[Timothy R. Burroughs \(member\)](#)

Ayun Halliday (1965–)

No Touch Monkey!

And Other Travel Lessons Learned Too Late

Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2015

My book is a warts-and-all account of my shoestring travels through Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia in the pre-digital age.

[Ayun Halliday \(member\)](#)

Ian Falconer (1959–)

Olivia Goes to Venice

New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2010

Falconer, of *New Yorker* cartoon fame, sends his precocious pig over to the Boot, specifically the magical Venice. Copious amounts of gelato are consumed as she gets lost in the floating city, enjoys a gondola ride, and sighs over bridges. Pick this one up to see what "special" souvenir she finds to remember her spring break vacation. Viva Olivia!

[Susan Vincent Molinaro \(Children's Librarian\)](#)



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One More Picture



Photo by Peri Pignetti

Add a cheery note of color to your current read! Bookmarks available free at the Reference Desk.