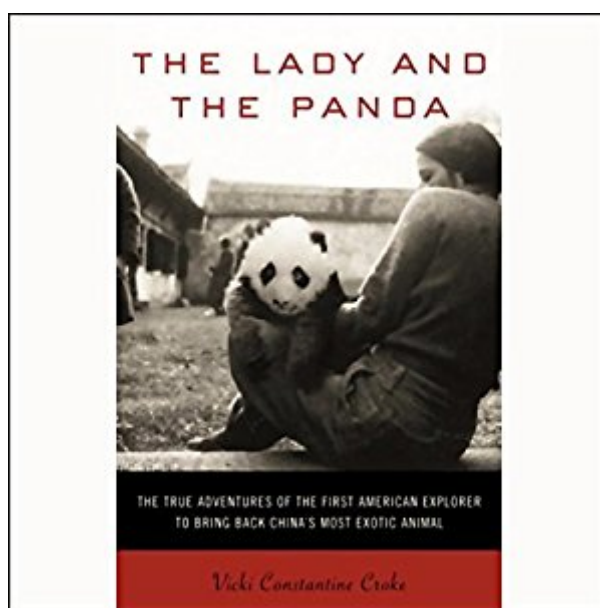


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The Lady And The Panda: The First American Explorer To Bring Back China's Most Exotic Animal



Synopsis

Here is the astonishing true story of Ruth Harkness, the Manhattan bohemian socialite who, against all but impossible odds, trekked to Tibet in 1936 to capture the most mysterious animal of the day: a bear that had for countless centuries lived in secret in the labyrinth of lonely cold mountains. In *The Lady and the Panda*, Vicki Constantine Croke gives us the remarkable account of Ruth Harkness and her extraordinary journey, and restores Harkness to her rightful place along with Sacajawea, Nellie Bly, and Amelia Earhart as one of the great woman adventurers of all time. Ruth was the toast of 1930s New York, a dress designer newly married to a wealthy adventurer, Bill Harkness. Just weeks after their wedding, however, Bill decamped for China in hopes of becoming the first Westerner to capture a giant panda. He led an expedition on which many had embarked and failed miserably. Bill was also to fail in his quest, dying horribly alone in China and leaving his widow heartbroken and adrift. And so Ruth made the fateful decision to adopt her husband's dream as her own and set off on the adventure of a lifetime. It was not easy. Indeed, everything was against Ruth Harkness. In decadent Shanghai, the exclusive fraternity of white male explorers patronized her, scorned her, and joked about her softness, her lack of experience and money. But Ruth ignored them, organizing, outfitting, and leading a bare-bones campaign into the majestic but treacherous hinterlands where China borders Tibet. As her partner she chose Quentin Young, a twenty-two-year-old Chinese explorer as unconventional as she was, who would join her in a romance as torrid as it was taboo. Traveling across some of the toughest terrain in the world—nearly impenetrable bamboo forests, slick and perilous mountain slopes, and boulder-strewn passages—the team raced against a traitorous rival, and was constantly threatened by hordes of bandits and hostile natives. The voyage took months to complete and cost Ruth everything she had. But when, almost miraculously, she returned from her journey with a baby panda named Su Lin in her arms, the story became an international sensation and made the front pages of newspapers around the world. No animal in history had gotten such attention. And Ruth Harkness became a hero. Drawing extensively on American and Chinese sources, including diaries, scores of interviews, and previously unseen intimate letters from Ruth Harkness, Vicki Constantine Croke has fashioned a captivating and richly textured narrative about a woman ahead of her time. Part Myrna Loy, part Jane Goodall, by turns wisecracking and poetic, practical and spiritual, Ruth Harkness is a trailblazing figure. And her story makes for an unforgettable, deeply moving adventure. From the Hardcover edition. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

I love reading about the exploits of interesting people traversing parts of the world

I've never seen, and this exuberant biography of a Manhattan dress designer turned international explorer held me rapt with one caveat that I'll explain at the end. Ruth Harkness did not come from a wealthy, sophisticated family, but with determination, a flair for design, and a savvy intelligence that allowed her to read people Harkness managed to create a cosmopolitan New York City life for herself, even in the midst of the 1930s Great Depression. She fell in love with then married a rich boy adventurer who hoped to be the first to bring a live panda out of China and into the US. When he died in the process, Harkness surprised all her high fashion, socialite friends by deciding she would be the one to take on his mission. Harkness ended up loving China, especially the wild, rugged, mountainous, densely forested, far western areas where the giant panda makes its home, and it's thrilling to read about her rough and tumble travels, the variety of local people she spent time with, and the off-the-map exotic places she visited. But Harkness didn't avoid China's urban areas entirely. There was plenty of Euro-American drinking and partying when she stopped in international cities like Shanghai to gather the team, funds, and provisions needed for her venture, but unlike many contemporary Westerners she respected the Chinese culture and treated her Chinese expedition guide like a partner, even briefly having a love affair with him. When Harkness successfully brought a baby panda out of China much was made of the fact that though she was "just a woman" she succeeded where many men had failed--so far the men had been shooting pandas and bringing back their pelts.

Harkness treated her panda with great care, trying to understand its needs and sacrificing her own comforts, but the caveat I mentioned in the first sentence is that it makes me uncomfortable and sad to read about a baby animal being taken from its mother and native habitat to be put in a zoo. Harkness agonized about this too, even releasing back into the wild another panda she captured. Other than that, I totally fell under the spell of this lively, enthusiastically written book. The author had access to a trove of personal letters written by Harkness, and retraced some of Harkness's journey herself, so while reading it was easy to imagine I was right there, experiencing it all myself.

This book is a page turner for sure. I really had a hard time putting it down. It's the fascinating story of Ruth Harness, whose husband went to China with the idea of bringing back a Giant Panda. He dies and Ruth decides to travel there to check out his partners and where his money has gone with perhaps a thought way in the back of her mind to continue his quest. She is fearless in her pursuit of the Panda and attracts a number of people determined to help her get her Panda. This is all happening during the days of Chaing Kai-Shek just before the communists take over China so the atmosphere is turbulent. Ruth is considered somewhat of a dilettante because she is a dress designer by profession so at times it is difficult for people to take her seriously. She is part American Indian so this may explain her determination and fearlessness. Up to this time, no woman had gone into the wild hunting game. She trusts her female instincts in caring for this baby Panda and it works. Great writing by Vicki Croke.

Am only half way through the book, but am pleasantly surprised by how well crafted the writing is. I've recently been sucked into the little black & white world of panda worship so am reading everything possible on the topic. This true story takes place in the 1930s when our understanding of and behavior towards wild animals was very different than what it is today. Would NEVER want to see that type of behavior again, but this story is an important part of panda history. As mentioned earlier, I'm only about halfway through, but so far would highly recommend this book to panda lovers as well as anyone with an interest in the history of zoos or adventures in China in the 1930s.

This is just a terrific read. The true story of the first giant panda brought to the United States and the lady that ventured out to bring them. Chicago's Brookfield Zoo housed the precious animal. Really great story-a must read!

An interesting story for me because I lived not too far from Brookfield Zoo, in the suburbs of Chicago. The name of the lady headlined in the title was slightly familiar to me altho she was in the generation ahead of me. I want to ask my aunt, who is in her 90's if she remembers reading about her. I will recommend this book to her. So much of the story takes place in China, which is always interesting to read about.

This is a difficult book for me to rate, because the story is at odds with ethical treatment of animals. I found the story of who Ruth Harkness was, the era she lived in, and what she did, interesting. Not riveting, but definitely interesting. The writing is okay, but not really gripping. However, as I read this I felt as if the author had put aside any thoughts of ethical treatment of animals and did not want to address them in this book, in which Ruth Harkness is pictured as a hero for capturing the first panda to be brought to the U.S. When an author leaves out half of the story in this manner, I feel that something is being withheld from me, the reader. I do think that the author had a difficult task in front of her in choosing this subject. How do you write a book about a person and subject that many people now consider unethical and reactionary? It's a difficult thing to do. I wonder, though, if there were, back in the 1930s, any groups who considered Harkness's actions wrong. If so, it would have been better, in my opinion, if the author included this side of the story as well, so that readers could consider Harkness's actions in another light.

This was a difficult book for me. The history of pandas being sent out of China is disturbing. Any mistreatment of animals is disturbing to me. Also the lifestyle of the Americans and Europeans in China during that time period isn't terribly appealing. Still, given that, it was very interesting and well-written.

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