



# The Camel Library

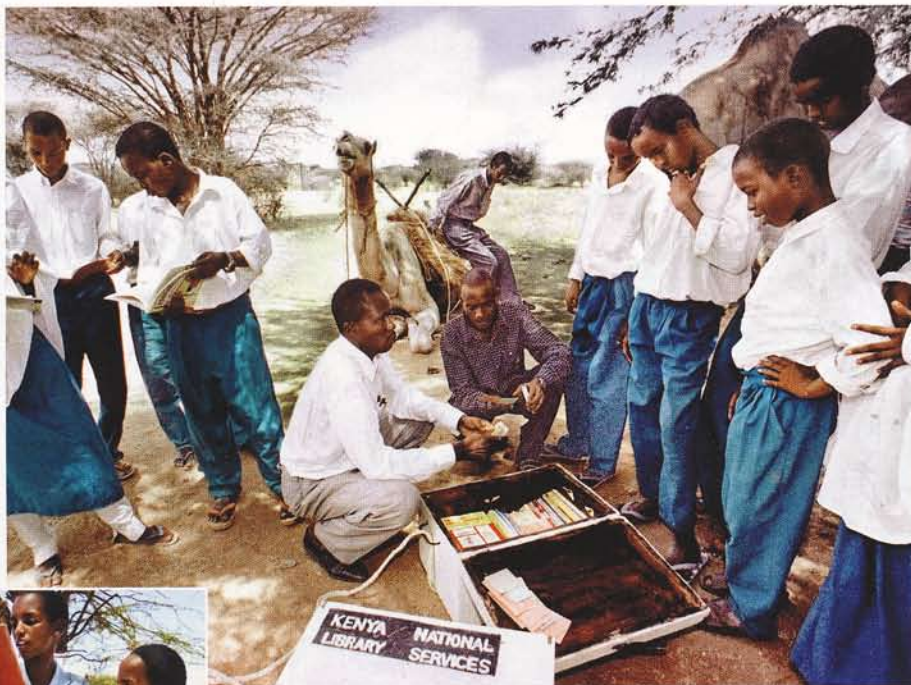
In a hot, remote region of Africa, Somalis will walk a mile for a camel—especially when the beast is delivering a cartonful of books. **MASHA HAMILTON** on a twice-monthly very special delivery.

THE CAMELS HALT UNDER AN ACACIA TREE, grunting, weary from a two-hour trip through the African bush. “*Tob! Tob!*” the herders cry, whipping the beasts’ knees to force them to kneel so their cargo can be unloaded. Then the traveling librarians open a wooden box, revealing its cache: books of fairy tales, novels, atlases, biographies and more in English and Swahili (the official languages in Kenya). Bare-foot children appear as if out of nowhere, sinewy and dusty, leaning against one another as they watch the librarians unroll grass mats and spread out the books. They wait for the moment when they can sit on the ground and hold the books in their own hands. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 276]



Joseph Otieno (top left) and guide Ahmed Khalif bring books to nomadic children like 10-year-old Sahara (above).





A librarian (above center) lends books to schoolchildren; boys (left) discover the joy of reading in Kenya, February 2006.

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Garissa, along the murky Tana River not far from the border with Somalia, is home to the world's only camel-borne library, which travels deep into the bush to bring books to a seminomadic people known as pastoralists who have spent generations roaming in search of water for themselves and their camels, cows, and goats. Though they live in Kenya, most are ethnic Somalis; borders on maps are of little meaning here. Homes are built of grass, paper and pencil are rare, and illiteracy has hovered above 85 percent in this isolated region, where many have a strong attachment to the nomadic lifestyle and are wary of modern ways.

When the camel library began operating in October 1996, "checking out a library book was not a clear concept," Garissa's head librarian, Rashid Farah, explained as we walked through the bush behind the lumbering camels. Farah chose camels to introduce his service in part because much of the bush is otherwise impassable, and in part because he wanted to find a way to make the foreign

familiar. These ships of the desert are as trusted as one's own grandmother here. Still, adapting to the bimonthly appearance of the camel library took time. "Parents would say to me, 'I didn't ask you to give my child this book. Why should I have to return it?'"

But Farah persisted. Since he began, more teachers have arrived in the region, and now 12 camels accompanied by librarians trudge through the bush to four settlements every day, four days a week, despite temperatures that linger around 100 degrees in an arid, undeveloped landscape. It may seem an outsize effort to try to spread a love of literature, but a single trip proves it's worth it. Those who live with chronic poverty in a world almost inconceivably different from our own turn the pages of books with something nearing devotion. Many view these

librarians as heroes in their commitment to education and reading.

My visit to the region came in 2006, during a third year of drought and famine. I gave away maize and cooking oil wherever we stopped. Grown-ups gathered for the food, the women sometimes squatting under a tree and motioning for me to join them. Giggling children, too, were briefly interested in the appearance of a blonde foreigner, but soon they forgot me and became consumed by the books, often reading to themselves in slow, hushed voices. Eighteen-year-old Ismael told me he has been checking out books from the camel library for three years, and he credits it with helping him improve the English he needs for exams he hopes will allow him to continue his education in a city.

**T**O CONTINUE ITS WORK, the camel library needs more books. The bush is hard on paper, and sometimes in these seminomadic communities, readers—moving on before the library can return—take their books with them. So with the help of two author friends, I began to ask for donations. We started by asking fellow writers whose works we love to donate to the library five of their favorite books. The response was immediate, and soon the drive expanded to include not only award-winning writers but librarians, publishers, agents, readers, and bloggers in several languages—an outpouring from those who value literature. We set up a Web site to highlight donors. Contributions have ranged from Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny* to Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* to Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*, as well as books on astronomy and geography, and books in Swahili and Somali. Librarian Rashid Farah responded with thanks and his own e-mail address, and although he checks e-mail infrequently, a link was born, with books serving as the bridge. The camel library continues to awe and inspire by its demonstration of the lengths people will go to share a love of reading. **Q**

Masha Hamilton's novel *The Camel Bookmobile* came out this year from HarperCollins. To donate to the camel library, go to [camelbookdrive.wordpress.com](http://camelbookdrive.wordpress.com).