



# The Lady and the Panda: The True Adventures of the First American Explorer to Bring Back China's Most Exotic Animal

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## **The Lady and the Panda: The True Adventures of the First American Explorer to Bring Back China's Most Exotic Animal** Vicki Constantine Croke

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—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.*

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## **From Reader Review The Lady and the Panda: The True Adventures of the First American Explorer to Bring Back China's Most Exotic Animal for online ebook**

### **Kim says**

This one really bothered me a lot. I like memoirs, and this one sounded like it would be fascinating, since the woman managed to bring back a baby panda, alive. She was the first one to do so, and the passion & love she had for the pandas is amazing. But her lifestyle was quite destructive, her choices were also destructive, and I think she changed people's lives not for the better. Very sad story in a lot of ways. I also found it interesting that her young husband who was 35 years old died from lung cancer, which had spread. He was a heavy smoker, drank heavily, and it seemed fairly evident that his (and hers!) dissipated lifestyles contributed to their early deaths. One other aspect of this story that was interesting is that the men who travelled with her did their best to diminish the value of her contributions. She funded the trips, she saved the pandas and got them successfully back to the USA, and while it is clear she could not have gotten to the panda habitat without the men, it is also clear that she did some amazing things that no one before her did. Worth reading about the pandas, but not so much the people themselves.

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### **Mindy says**

Very interesting look at China in the 1930's. Definitely made me want to spend a few years exploring that country.

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### **Ali Elenbaas says**

I've had this one on my shelf for a while, and I finally got around to reading it. Like pretty much everyone else I think giant pandas are the cutest. I love visiting the ones at the San Diego Zoo. This book chronicles the life of the woman who first brought pandas to the US, and outside of China for that matter. It's a little dry but the pursuit is interesting, especially for the 1930's. China was changing so much at the time and the search for a panda makes it sound like the wild west. If you're interested, it's a good read.

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### **Lisa says**

interesting subject matter. didn't care for author's writing style.

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### **Jason Chiang says**

Started this book earlier, but had to return to the library. Putting this on pause.

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## Becky B says

Ruth Harkness was a dress designer living in New York City when she got word her explorer husband had died before even getting off in earnest on his expedition to bring back a live panda. In a shocking move, especially for the 1930s, she decided to go and finish what he started. With no exploration experience, only some of her husband's contacts, and her own charm and stubbornness, Harkness set out for China. Everyone was sure she'd fail horribly, or die trying. But with the help of an experienced young explorer, Quentin Young, Harkness succeeded in bringing back the first live panda out of panda country and to the US. Panda fever was ignited and Harkness had a long road to travel in figuring out what her next role would be.

I read a picture book about Harkness and the first panda to the US and had to read more about this woman who succeeded where all the men failed and who helped spur on panda conservation. To say that the picture book sugar coats Ruth Harkness' tale is a huge understatement. It gets the facts right, but the full story is not exactly little kid material. She had an affair with her guide on the first trek she went on (even though she knew he was engaged), had no problem trying out opium (even after her guide had to fire several porters for their addictions), developed a serious problem with depression and alcohol on the 2nd trek she went on, and eventually ended up committing suicide. Harkness was noble in her fearlessness in heading into the interior of China and daring to do what everyone kept telling her should be left to the men. I also really appreciated that she saw the Chinese people as people of equal standing (not a common attitude of the day) and treated them with respect. She made sure to give her guide equal credit for the find, though you're less likely to have heard of Quentin Young. I did find it fascinating to learn about what life was like in China at this time from the perspective of internationals. This isn't necessarily a happy story. It does start off that way with grand success, but then Harkness' life after that starts to spiral out of control with depression and alcohol. It takes her two more treks (returning with one more panda) to realize that pandas need to be protected because the area was being decimated in the frenzy her find had created. (She actually released the 3rd panda she caught instead of taking it to the States.) Each time Harkness returns to the States and tries to return to normal life she seems more and more pitiful. Which I get as an expat. Re-entry is not easy, and they didn't have any counseling for that back then. She also didn't seem to really deal with her husband's death ever and it glared at her when she returned to the States. All that to say, the story gets more and more pitiful. Recommended if you want to learn about panda conservation history and unconventional women explorers. Not recommended if you like safe and happy stories.

Notes on content: Occasional mild swear words. No sex scenes, but the fact that sexual activity happened is stated. Some hunting violence mentioned. Deaths in precursor battles of WWII are somewhat gorily described. Opium use described. Alcohol addiction. As per the times, more moderate drinking and smoking are frequently part of social gatherings.

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## Scott Taylor says

She floats through the air with the greatest of ease, the young fashionista on the flying trapeze. Or, a young, attractive rich girl who never worked a day in her life goes on fun jaunts in China and lucks herself into bringing a panda back to the United States. I have to respect the author for laying out an unvarnished book about a woman who was about as unrelateable to me as possible, and making me care.

Reminiscent of the world of explorers pictured in the boyhood dreams of the old man in "Up," the world of "The Lady and the Panda" is every bit as mysterious and romantic. Harkness finds romance in the dashing

Quentin Young, who helps her realize her deceased husband's goal of capturing a live panda. Little did she expect that the act would touch off a storm of panda hunting that would essentially cause them to become endangered. To her credit, Harkness realized this and regretted her actions.

Along the way, Croke fashions a picturesque if a bit claustrophobic at times, image of China in the 1930s. I wanted to know more about life in China at the time, rather than just the parties and hoity toity circles where Harkness found herself. And it would have been good to hear more about the last panda, rather than Harkness's descent into depression. And I could have gone without the author's use of the terms Coolie and Mulatto.

Though I found the main character a little repulsive due to her rich girl attitudes and slight depravity, the book still was interesting.

Thanks for reading.

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### **Brenna says**

Obviously I needed to read this book. After watching the movie some time ago and learning it was made after this book, I finally got to read it and it did not disappoint. It breaks my heart how many people were only after pandas for their skins, and in so doing, it makes me all the more grateful for this woman Ruth Harkness and her desire to catch them and keep them safe and healthy. It is because of her that I get to see them in person. And also because of her that I will one day hold a baby in China, right there in the very mountains that she journeyed so long ago for the first. What a fascinating read, to learn also about all kinds of things that happened in China back in the 1930s. I am thankful the world is a different place now.

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### **Marietje says**

This is a thoroughly researched travelogue about an unconventional flapper woman turned explorer and panda baby mama.

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### **Jacqie says**

Got about 125 pages into the book before it was put away for keeps. I was enjoying the book okay, just not eager to pick it up again when I put it down. The style of writing is dramatic and engaging, and apparently the author is doing a LOT of quoting from sources. She definitely seems to be a big fan of Ruth Harkness, who does seem to be an incredible woman. But coming from a history research background, I wonder about the objective truth of the story she's telling. Authors must always decide what to include and what to leave out, and she's such a Harkness fangirl that I wonder what's being left out. However, Ruth Harkness is definitely a badass, heading off into China alone except for almost-strangers. I had hoped to get to at least something about her interacting with a panda before we got more than 1/3 through the book, but perhaps all that backstory was necessary in order to understand future events.

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## Lilian says

The story of the first expedition was interesting, except after all that buildup, it was such a letdown how "easy" Harkness & co. got their first panda. It's also strange to say that they shot over 700 photographs but none came out because a piece of film got stuck in the camera. I'm really confused about this. Didn't they notice that everytime they opened the camera to load film?

I'll have to agree with some things pointed out by other reviewers. This book was more about the lady than the panda. I'm also curious as to what happened to Mei Mei. It is also hypocritical for Harkness to go on her second expedition, but not actually search for pandas.

This book read better compared to another nonfiction book I just finished. There was that balance in setting the scene to give readers an idea what was happening at the time, Harkness' physical actions, and her state of mind through the letters she sent.

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## Zeb says

Somewhat interesting book about a woman venturing into what was considered a man's occupation. Ruth Harkness wanted to capture an elusive panda in the memory of her husband and bring it back alive to the states. She may have inadvertently caused a shift from the appeal of sending back only skins and parts to institutions to live specimens. But in doing so more pandas were killed or kept alive in inhumane conditions. With all the interest generated in capturing a live panda, China learned quickly that pandas could be a lucrative national treasure. Light read overall with a glimpse in the explorer/collector world of the early 20th century when there were areas of the world still fairly untouched by humans.

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## Jaylia3 says

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 1930's 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.

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### **Catherine says**

Made me want to look for Ruth Harkness' book with the same title - she must have been a very interesting woman

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### **Helen says**

True story of a novice explorer and game hunter, Ruth Harkness, who brings back the first live panda to the western world in 1936. Her idea of capturing a baby panda proved to be the correct call, as mature pandas all died. I admired her pluck and courage, she was however supported by her team and Quentin Young and others who made her first foray into the wilds of China possible. Other trips she made and explorations in other countries, paled in comparison.

While I first found myself championing her (unexperienced woman versus seasoned, but awful, male big game hunters), her later trips filled me with dismay. Success in capturing a panda seemed wrong, forcing the poor creature to live elsewhere, depriving it of its native habitat all in the name of money and fame. However, I am looking at this from present day sensibilities.

For me the only reason to have animals in captivity is to breed them to save them from extinction (which we humans have brought about), ala Gerald Durrell. Hard to read about the callous, self-serving hunters who thought nothing of taking an animal's life.

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