



Masha with (from left) Cheney, Daylon and Bri; (inset) book lovers in Kenya.



One afternoon in the spring of 1999, Masha Hamilton was driving her three kids to the library in Tucson, Arizona. While her sons, Cheney, then 8, and Daylon, 4, played in the back seat, her 10-year-old daughter, Briana, started telling her about a magazine story she'd just read on a library in Kenya that uses camels to deliver books to children living in remote desert villages. One detail had stuck in Bri's mind: If someone failed to return a book when the camels came back a few weeks later, the library would never visit again. "It blew her mind that one little kid's mistake could have such a severe consequence, and I felt the same," recalls Masha, 51, a novelist and a journalist.

As she kept driving, Masha began spinning a tale about an American woman who goes to Kenya and befriends a young boy. She stopped as she pulled into the library parking lot, even though her kids begged her to continue. "I'm superstitious when I have a great idea for a story," Masha says. "I'm afraid that if I talk too much, I'll use up my imagination by the time I sit down at the computer."

**It was a year and a half later** before Masha could continue her story. Her husband, David Orr, now 57, a television news editor, was changing jobs, and they had to move the family from Tucson to New York. But when Masha began

# special DELIVERY

AFTER MASHA HAMILTON VISITED KENYA AND SAW CAMELS DELIVERING LIBRARY BOOKS TO CHILDREN IN POOR, REMOTE VILLAGES, SHE WANTED TO LEND A HAND—AND SO DID HER CHILDREN. THE RESULT? THOUSANDS OF BOOKS FROM AMERICA TO AFRICA, WITH LOVE. **BY GWENDA BLAIR**



Masha arrives at a Kenyan village with a driver and camel bearing boxes of books.

writing, the story poured out of her, and she finished *The Camel Bookmobile* (HarperCollins) in 2005. The following year she and Bri visited Kenya to see the real thing. They trekked through the sand with the beasts in tow and visited several settlements near the Somali border, where the people are poor and mostly illiterate. Masha was so inspired by the mobile library that last year she launched a drive to collect books from fellow writers, schools, stores and anyone who wanted to help. So far, supporters have sent 2,500 books to Kenya, where the camels are ferrying the precious cargo to delighted readers. "There are so many huge problems, like the war in Iraq, that are totally out of our control," says Masha. "It feels great to do something that's making a difference for people, especially children."

**The journey to Africa** wasn't mother and daughter's first adventure abroad. Masha has spent time living in Moscow, Afghanistan and Israel, where Bri was born. "I'd always intended to visit Kenya,



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and I'd gotten to know the people involved with the camel library while researching my novel, so I had to see it all firsthand," Masha says. A teacher at the Gotham Writers' Workshop in Manhattan, she planned to make the two-week trip between semesters as a solo expedition. But Bri, then a high school senior, had other plans. "She got down on her knees and begged to come along, arguing that she'd be on spring break too," Masha recalls. "I had to say yes. This was her story, and it was poetic justice that she be allowed to go."

**Masha and Bri flew to Nairobi**, then drove five hours to Garissa in the North Eastern Province, where they met the head of the regional library, Rashid Farah. It had been his idea to have camels bring books to nearby nomadic villages, where nearly half of elementary-age children don't attend school and the overall illiteracy rate is 85%. The mobile library was launched in 1996 with three dromedaries; now there are 12, which visit various

settlements four days a week. The next morning, Masha and Bri set out with Farah, two assistants, four camels and a driver, bound for a one-room schoolhouse 10 miles away. With no roads in the desert, that meant a grueling three-hour walk each way in 100-degree heat. "We're both in pretty good shape, but those

duced themselves to the teachers, then the children. The smaller ones held back, but after a few brave souls reached out and stroked the visitors' skin and hair, everyone rushed forward. "They gathered all around, laughing, touching us and shaking hands," Masha recalls. "But once the books were spread out on straw mats

**"WHEN THE VILLAGE CHILDREN FIRST SAW US, THEY GATHERED AROUND, LAUGHING, TOUCHING US AND SHAKING HANDS," MASHA SAYS.**

camels move fast, and we were exhausted trying to keep up," says Masha. "We got burned, blistered and parched, no matter how much water we drank." **By the time they arrived** at their destination, nearly 100 kids, ranging from toddlers to teenagers, were waiting under a leafy acacia tree. As the librarians unloaded the camels, Masha and Bri intro-

duced themselves to the teachers, then the children. The smaller ones held back, but after a few brave souls reached out and stroked the visitors' skin and hair, everyone rushed forward. "They gathered all around, laughing, touching us and shaking hands," Masha recalls. "But once the books were spread out on straw mats

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geography, math and history texts to help them prepare for college entrance exams. After three hours it was time to bid goodbye to the teachers and kids, and make the long walk back to Garissa.

**During their stay,** Masha and Bri—who were happy to learn that the camel library now returns to villages even when books are lost—went on two other treks. “Our visit to Kenya seemed so brief,” says Masha. “But we had these wonderful moments of connection with the villagers, and I was grateful that Bri could see a place that hasn’t changed for generations.” The trip certainly got Bri thinking. “Kids my age take for granted a world where everyone has TV and the Internet,” she says. “It was amazing to see what life is like when you don’t have these luxuries. Maybe without them you have a stronger sense of your country, your ancestral history and of your own identity than we have in America.”

**Back home in Brooklyn,** Masha and Bri couldn’t wait to send a literary care package to their new friends in Garissa. They gathered the family for a trip to the local bookstore, where they selected a

few dozen classics like *Goodnight Moon* and *Where the Wild Things Are*. “We picked books we loved when we were young to share with the kids in Kenya,” says Cheney, 17. “But I also chose *A Farewell to Arms*, one of my favorites now.” Because the teachers Masha had met told

her that the children love reading inscriptions from donors, Daylon, 13, penned a greeting in each volume. “I wrote something about these books connecting two different worlds,” he says, “and that I hoped they would read them and like them as much as I did.”

**Shipping off that first box** only made Masha yearn to do more. So she tapped the group she knew best—writers. She began sending them e-mails announcing the Camel Book Drive and asking for a donation of five books of their choice—or

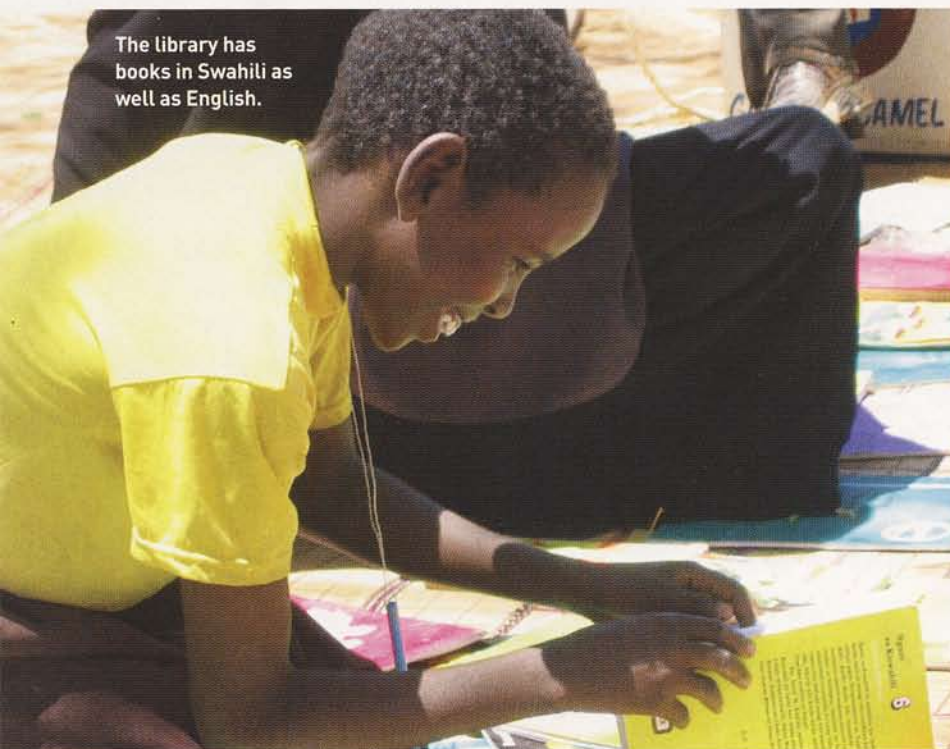
from the Garissa library’s wish list, which she had compiled with Farah’s help. On her website she listed the names of those who contributed, and as news of her charity spread and links to the site started appearing on blogs, she heard from hundreds of authors, agents, bookstores and

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readers who were eager to get involved. They included best-selling writers like Amy Tan, Terry McMillan, Judy Blume, Isabel Allende, Chris Bohjalian and Dave Eggers. Powell’s Books, in Oregon, which had invited Masha to do a reading of *The Camel Bookmobile*, posted the wish list on its website and is sending as many books as its customers will pay shipping for. A librarian in Connecticut got local teens to collect donations and is picking up the tab for the postage. And a shopping mall in California’s Manhattan Beach announced plans to collect money to buy a new she-camel for Farah’s regional library (estimated cost: \$350).

**With all the donations,** the camel library has boosted its collection from 7,000 volumes to more than 10,000, as many as its shelves can hold. But more books are needed for a second mobile library, which has been set up 15 miles north of Garissa. Every few months Masha and her family sign, seal and mail a new box of books, and she’s determined to make sure others do the same. “I think of books as the greatest gift because they let us imagine, encourage us to dream and give us hope,” she says. “I’ll keep sending them until the camel mobile tells me they have enough.” ●

The library has books in Swahili as well as English.



**Want to donate new or used books to Kenya’s camel library? Go to [camelbookdrive.wordpress.com](http://camelbookdrive.wordpress.com).**