

Dick and Liz Askey's world trip in fall of 1987

Lecture by Tom Koornwinder

Diary texts read by Suzanne Askey

16th International Symposium on Orthogonal Polynomials, Special
Functions and Applications, online, June 13-17, 2022

June 15, 2022 - Richard Askey's Day

Last modified: June 22, 2022

The travel diaries

- During September 1987 – January 1988 Dick and Liz Askey made a trip to U.S.S.R., Japan, Australia and India.
- Liz Askey wrote four travel diaries, one for each country.
- Originally handwritten, then a few typewritten copies.
- Recently edited and annotated versions on <https://staff.fnwi.uva.nl/t.h.koornwinder/specfun/#DickAskey>
- No math in them, but some encounters with (well-known) mathematicians.
- Much description of cultural activities, together or by Liz alone.

Liz Askey

- She passed away on January 29, 2022, at the age of 85.
- Accompanied Dick on many of his trips.
- Undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College majoring in history.
- Master's degree at UW-Madison in urban and regional planning.
- Master's degree at UW-Madison in library and information studies.
- Has always been a good writer and storyteller.
- Children's literature had her special interest.



Dick's achievements and interests by 1987

- Had reached the height of his mathematical power.
- Askey-Wilson (1985) and Askey-Ismaïl (1984) Memoirs.
- Askey-Gasper inequality used by de Branges (1985).
- Very much on q .
- Lecture topics in U.S.S.R, Japan and Australia not known, except for one lecture on Ramanujan.
- He was of course very much focused on the Ramanujan centennial in India, December 1987, where he had to speak at least five times at conferences.

New math developments by 1987

- Quantum groups (Drinfeld, IMC Berkeley, 1986)
- Heckman-Opdam polynomials (1987)
- Macdonald polynomials (1987)
- Dunkl operators (submitted in 1987 to TAMS)
- Gelfand hypergeometric functions (1986)
- Wavelets (ondelettes from 1984 onward)

Embarking on his trip, Dick may not yet have been fully aware of all this, but he will certainly have learnt more about these topics from the people he met during the trip.

Travel schedule (Sept. 1987- Jan. 1988)

- September 1–21: U.S.S.R. (Moscow and Leningrad)
- back in Madison for two weeks
- October 6 – November 14: Japan
- November 15 – December 10: Australia (Sydney and Canberra)
- December 11 – January 8: India (Ramanujan birthday centennial)
- January 9–15: London, UK



Dick and Liz leaving on August 31 from Madison to Moscow

September 1–21: U.S.S.R.

- September 1-2: Moscow (stay in Hotel Akademicheskaya, visit to Israel Gelfand at his home)
- September 3-9: Leningrad (stay in Hotel Moskva, mathematical host: Sergei Krushev, Steklov Institute)
- September 10-21: Moscow (stay in Hotel Akademicheskaya, mathematical hosts: Israel Gelfand, Andrei Zelevinsky and Boris Levitan, all at Moscow State University)

Moscow: Tuesday, September 1



week's stay in Leningrad. We arrived at the Moscow airport on September 1, after the standard 3 hours of sleep on the plane, & inched our way through customs. The man ahead of us, who was evidently visiting Russian relatives & who spoke Russian himself, seemed to have brought in (as Dick phrased it) the contents of a K-Mart store. The customs man removed a tall pile of items including videotapes & a boom box & the visitor tried his best to argue him out of all those questionable items. Finally the discussion, the man, & the stack of "contraband" were taken to some quieter corner. We saw the man rejoin his family later but we never did find out whether he argued Russian customs out of anything. Having whetted his appetite on the man ahead of us, the customs official was ready for us; he went through every thing with the proverbial "fine toothed comb."

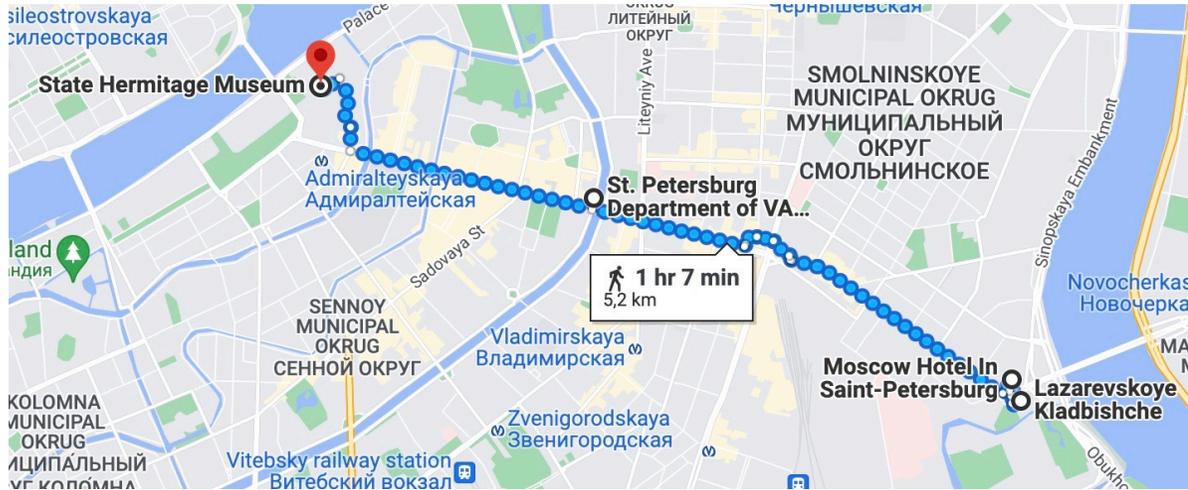
wondered about the hearing aid which Dick had brought for Gelfand, but the sticky point proved to be the anthology of 20th century Russian literature - specifically a story by Nabokov. A supervisor stood reading for some time before letting us take the book into the country.

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Leningrad (September 3-9)



a walk along Nevsky Prospekt: Lazarevskoe Cemetery – Moscow Hotel – Steklov Institute – Hermitage Museum

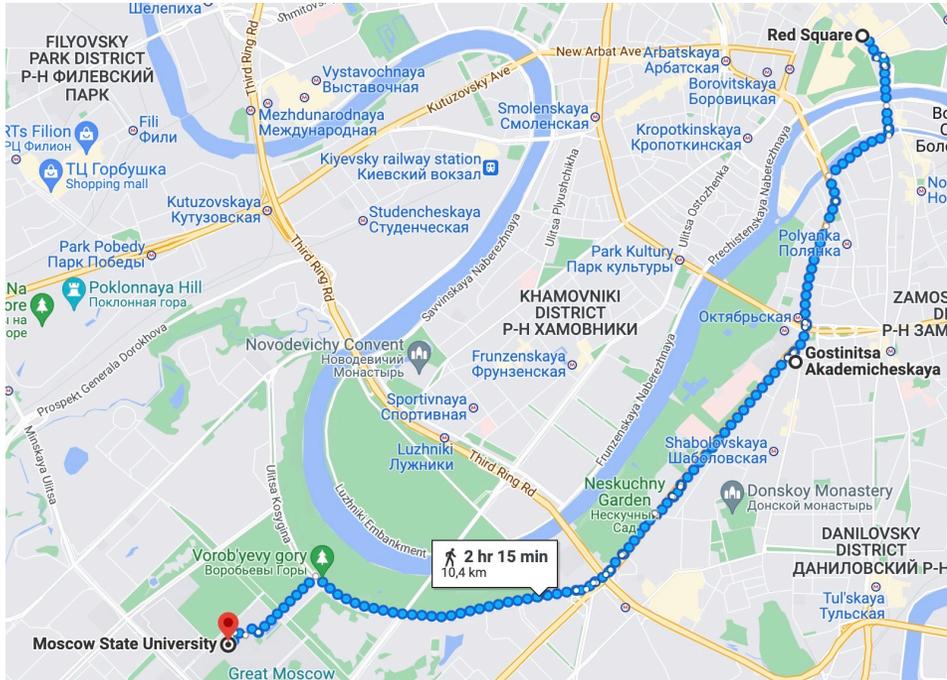


Dick Askey and Sergei Kruschev in front of Euler's grave at Lazarevskoe Cemetery

Steklov Institute at 27, Fontanka River embankment

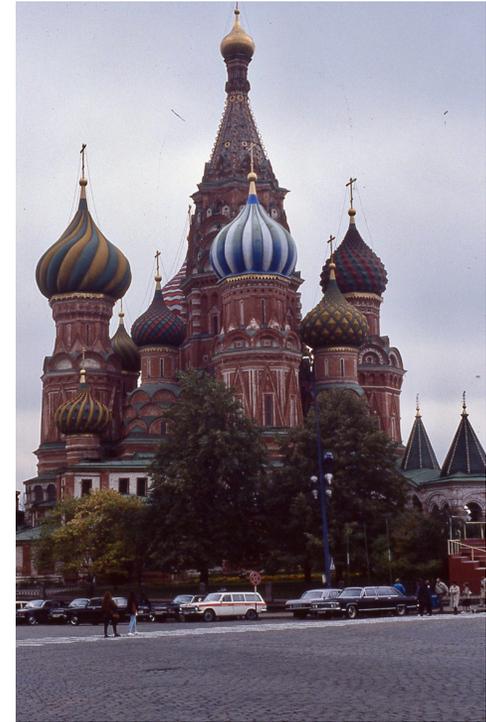


Moscow (Sept. 1-2 and 10-21)



Red Square - Hotel Akademicheskaya -
Leninskiy Prospekt - МГУ имени М.В.
Ломоносова (in Moscow State University)

Moscow State University

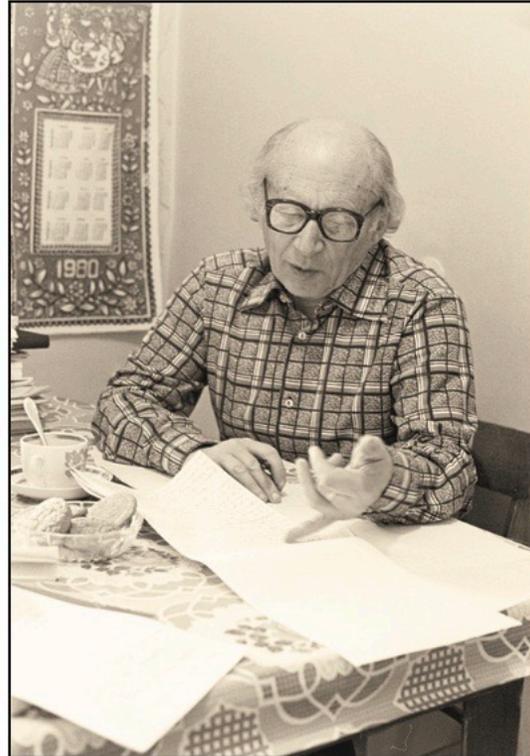


St. Basil's Cathedral



Gelfand

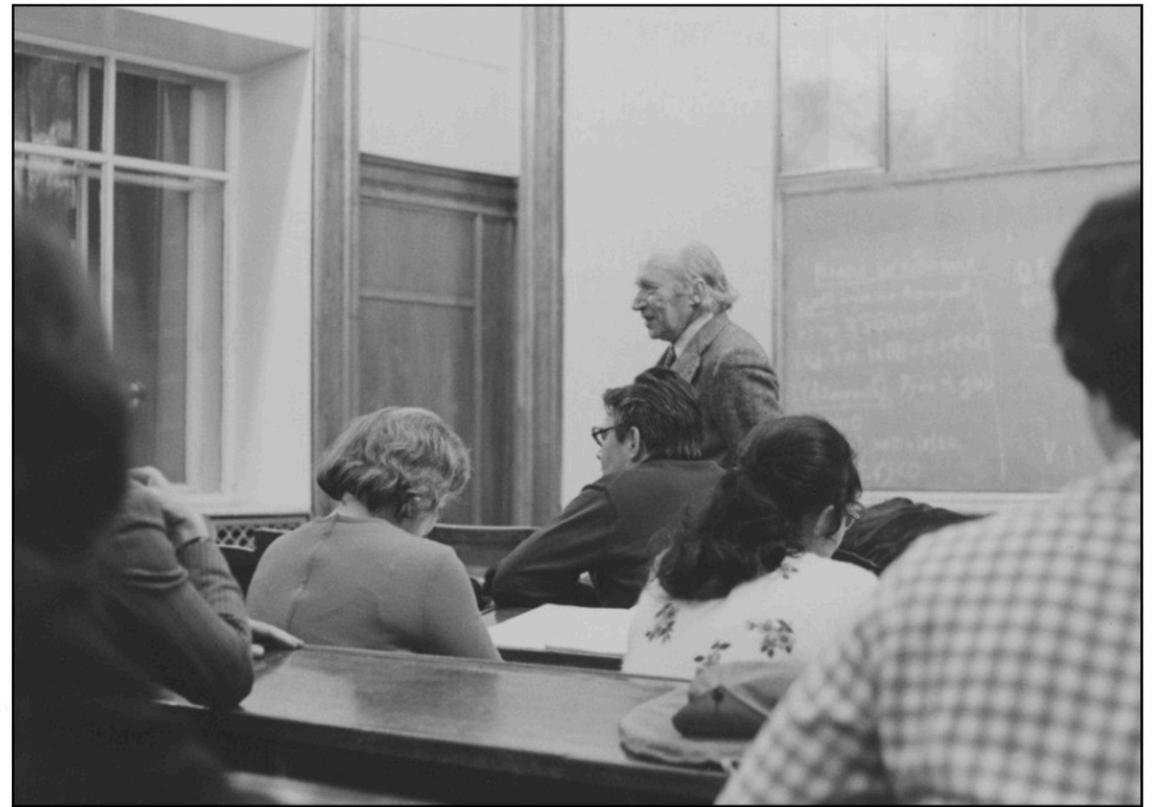
“Our guide from the night before found us a taxi and took us to the apartment building in which Gelfand and his family lived. We were only going to stay fifteen minutes since Gelfand’s wife was ill. He was delighted to see Dick and the conversation went on much longer than 15 minutes. He was interrupted constantly to answer the telephone and we eventually learned that it was his 74th birthday.”



Math in the kitchen, 1982.

Photograph by Carol Tate.

Photograph by Carol Tate.



At the Monday night seminar.

“And bed bugs it is! Dick was up at 2:30 a.m. with six new bites and he wasn’t about to crawl back in there with the beasties who were making a meal out of him. Can’t blame him. However he just left to give his presentation at the Gelfand seminar and that’s a strenuous evening ahead for him with only three hours of sleep last night. Since talking mathematics is what he’s here for, that may be enough to keep him going.”

Zelevinsky and Levitan

“The **Zelevinskys** invited us back to their apartment for a meal, which was the culinary high point of our stay in Russia. We had borsht, a mushroom and onion pie, a cheese pie, a potato and meat dish which reminded me somewhat of scalloped potatoes, a vegetable "sauce" which included eggplant and tomatoes and was eaten on a slice of bread, fresh sweet watermelon, and, for dessert, three kinds of cakes – two made with red currants and one with strawberries – and tea. It was absolutely delicious and we enjoyed every bite.”



“We had dinner with the **Levitans**, their daughter-in-law and Zelevinsky last night. It was a lavish meal with desserts that never stopped, served in front of a window high over the Moskva River with a marvelous view of Moscow spread out on the other side of the river. ”

Evaluation

“An historian from the University of Pennsylvania with whom we talked this morning had some interesting comments to make on this society. He feels most American Soviet-watchers, including the press, look too much at the politics of what goes on in the upper echelons and not enough at public opinion and the movement of and within society on the lower levels – and there is movement according to him. He feels that changes in the economy like those **Gorbachev** is pushing will be necessary for this economy to go anywhere, but that the bureaucracy is scared of these measures because, as paper pushers with no skills, they will be out of a job.”



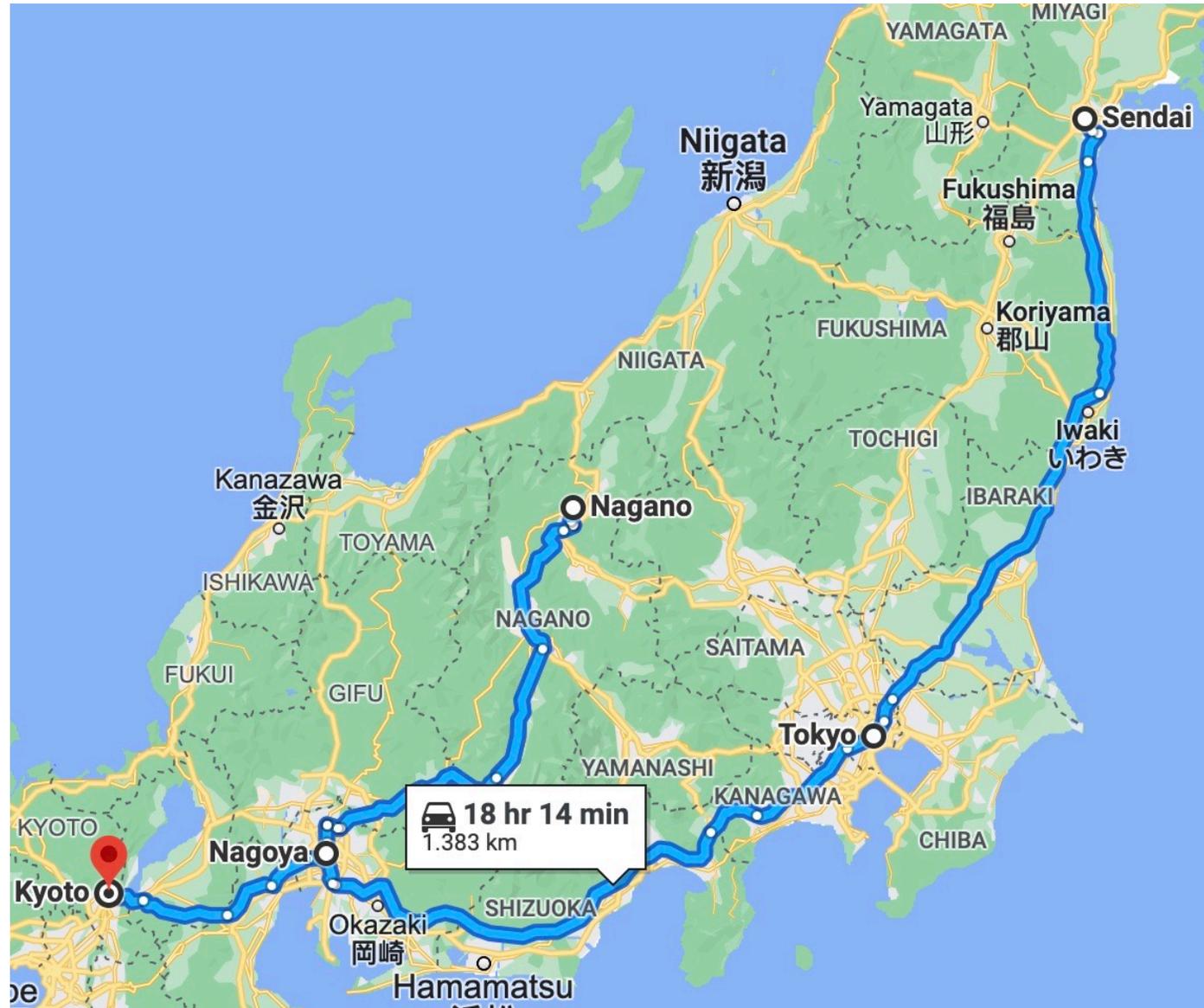
перестройка

“Our visit was a valuable experience in many ways – good mathematically and in terms of an introduction to Russian culture (emphasis on Russian rather than Soviet) and to the hospitality of individual Russians. There’s nothing to fault there!”

October 6 – November 14: Japan

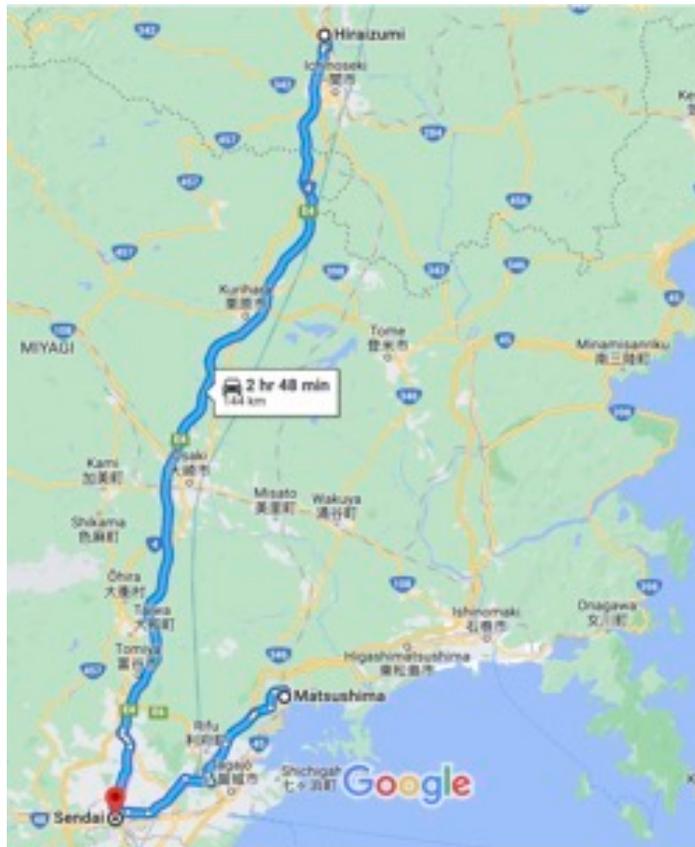
- October 6-12: Sendai (mathematical host: Satoru Igari, Tohoku University)
- October 12-18: Tokyo (host: Suki Kubo; mathematical host: Reiji Takahashi, Sophia University)
- October 18-23: Nagoya (mathematical hosts: Kazuhiko Aomoto, Nagoya University and Toshihiro Watanabe, Gifu University)
- October 23-26: Nagano (conference and excursions with the Aomotos)
- October 26-28: Nagoya
- October 28 - November 12: Kyoto (mathematical host: Michio Jimbo, Kyoto University)
- November 12-14: Tokyo (host: Suki Kubo)

Sendai-Tokyo-Nagoya-Nagano-Nagoya-Kyoto-Tokyo



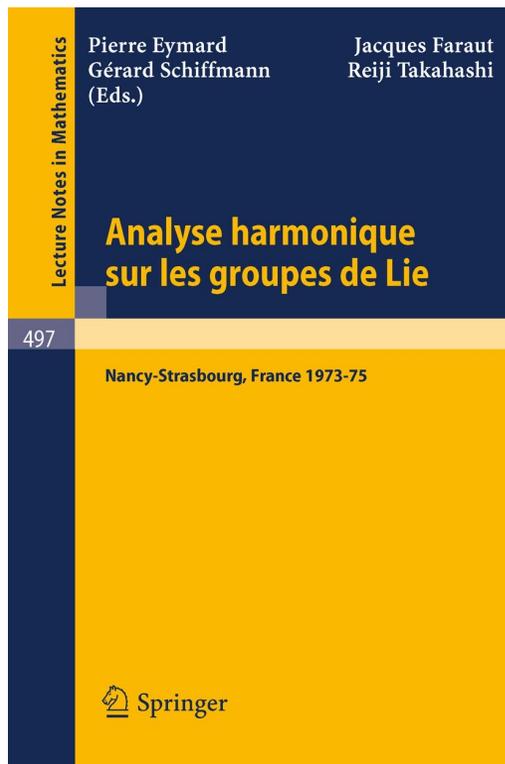
Sendai, hosted by Satoru Igari and his wife

“The kidney stone is gradually making its way through Dick’s system but, unfortunately, it’s not a pain free process. Since the X-ray showed a small stone all he can do is to wait it out.”

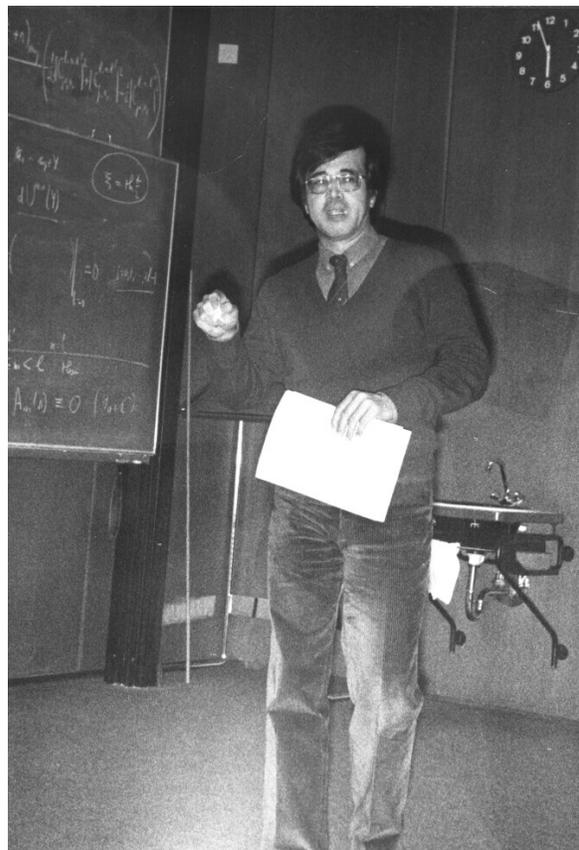


Weekend excursions to Hiraizumi and Matsushima

Tokyo: hosted by Takahashi (Sophia Univ.)



Takahashi worked during the seventies in Nancy, France.



Takahashi in Oberwolfach, 1983



In 1987 Noumi (photo 1989) also worked at Sophia University, and he met Dick Askey then.

Tokyo, hosted by Liz' old college friend Suki

- Suki Kubo, born Watanabe, studied together with Liz Askey at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, see photo.
- They were good friends.
- Liz, whose parents lived in Washington state, could not afford to go home for all of the school breaks.
- Sometimes she went with Suki to Suki's parents.
- Suki's father Takeshi Watanabe was a Japanese diplomat who then lived with his family in the U.S.



Tokyo: Monday, October 12



Suki met us at our hotel; it was so good to see her again. She looks just the same but

different - something I can say about myself as well. She gave us a packed lunch & said,

“Suki met us at our hotel; it was so good to see her again. She looks just the same but different – something I can say about myself as well.”



Tokyo: Saturday, October 17



Saturday evening we joined Suki & her husband & the Watanabes for drinks at the International House of Japan of which ^(Mr. Watanabe) he is a member. They are grayer but they look pretty much the same - Mr. Watanabe especially. We had a Western style meal with a huge army of knives, forks & spoons - our first Western dinner in almost 2 weeks in Japan. We learned some interesting things during conversation. Mr. Watanabe led the Japanese delegation to the Trilateral Commission. Suki's brother Hiroshi's wife has a library

degree from UW-Madison & does storytelling all over Japan - & abroad, I think Suki said. Suki's husband, Mr. Kubo, showed us a tie clasp made of a computer chip - a Toshiba chip which he helped to develop. He, of course, commented on ASCII code. Mr. Watanabe gave me a lovely Japanese



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Tokyo, Saturday, October 17



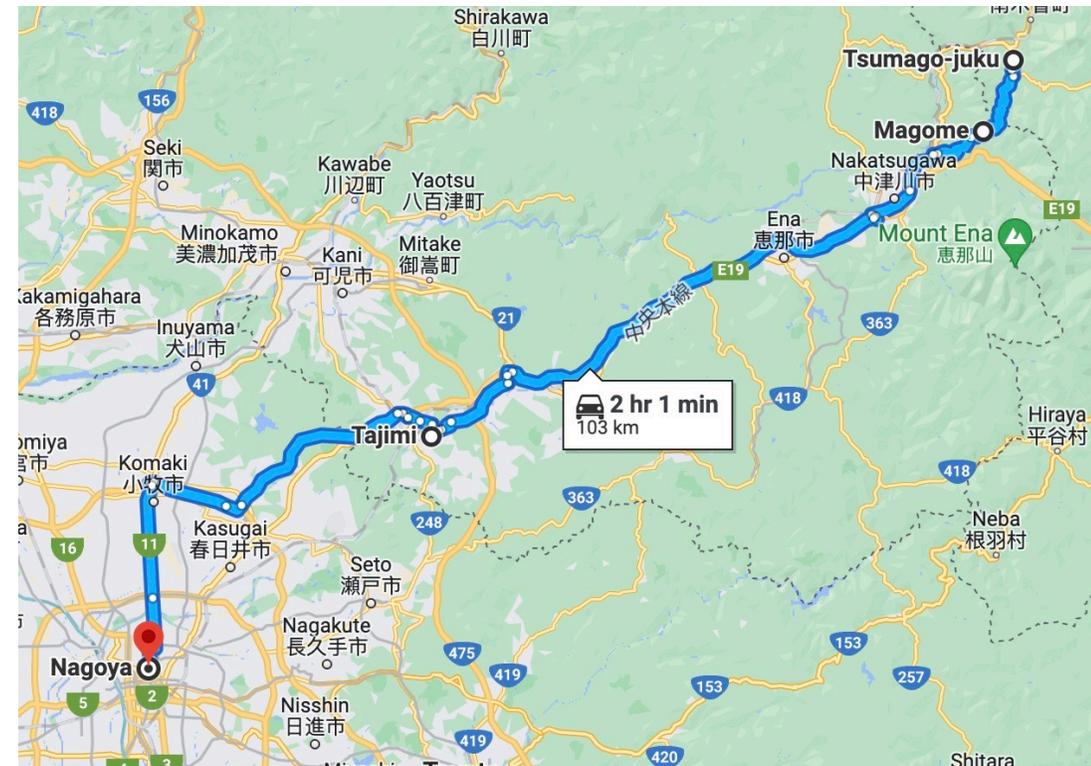
code. Mrs. Watanabe gave me a lovely Japanese doll. I don't know whether we'll try to mail it back or carry it with us for the next 3 months. If we get settled in a hotel room long enough I'll take her out of her box & sit her on her pillow to keep me company. In the next 10

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Nagoya and Nagano

- Math hosts in Nagoya: Aomoto and Toshihiro Watanabe.
- Conference in Nagano.
- From there trip with Aomotos to Tsumago, Magome and Tajimi.
- Then back to Nagoya.



Kyoto: hosted by Jimbo

Jimbo wrote:

“According to my diary (just a memorandum, nothing comparable to Mrs. Askey’s), we went together to Shugakuin Imperial Villa in the morning of October 30. It was a bit rainy day, Prof. Askey was carrying a long umbrella. Mrs. Askey said he should watch out not to lose his balance. I said he was well-poised, a poor joke which he pretended to appreciate.”



Liz wrote:

“One morning Jimbo took us to the gardens of Shugakuin Imperial Villa. The gardens are on three levels connected by avenues lined with pines. The tea house at the highest level of the villa overlooks a beautifully landscaped pond – all views walking around this large pond are beautiful views – a Japanese garden at its very best.”

Tokyo: Friday, Nov. 13

of the hotel before going to bed. Our day at the Kabuki theater, which turned out to be a birthday gift to me from Suki, was marvelous. The performance started at 11 AM & went on until 3:30 PM. There were 4 pieces with 20 to 30 minute breaks for scene changes - & so the audience could eat lunch, which they did either in their seats or elsewhere in the theater. One of the pieces was a "modern" one written in 1916; another was written in ¹⁹⁰⁵~~1895~~, but its subject was the fall of Osaka Castle in the early 1600s; & the other 2 were written in the 1700s, one with an historical theme & the other a romantic theme based on a bunraku puppet play. We bought an English language

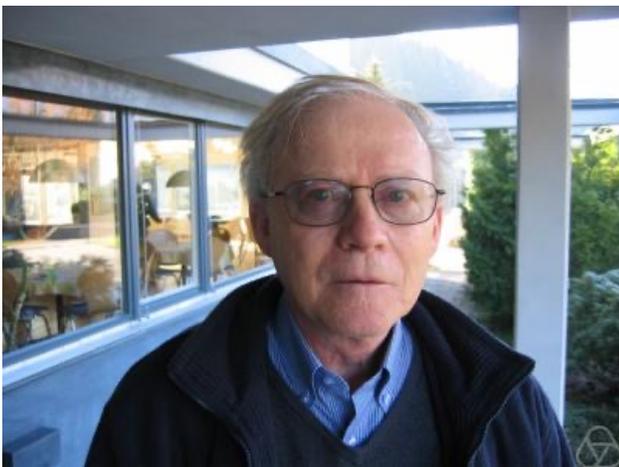
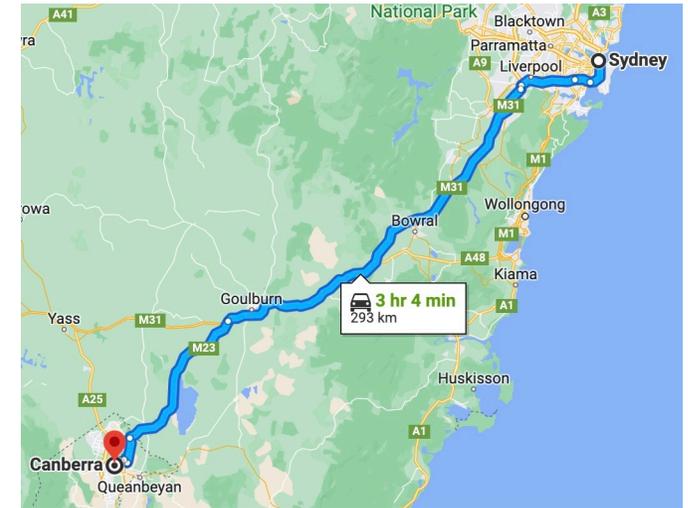


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November 15 – December 10: Australia

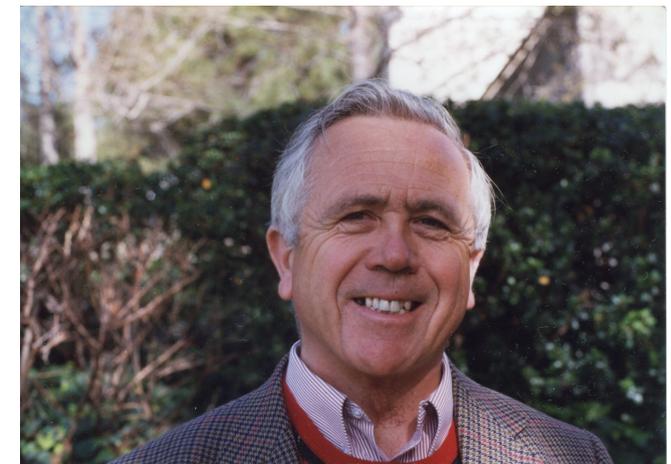
- November 15-26: Sydney (mathematical hosts: Alfred van der Poorten, Macquarie University, and David Hunt, University of New South Wales)
- November 26 - December 10: Canberra (mathematical host: Rodney Baxter, Australian National University)



van der Poorten

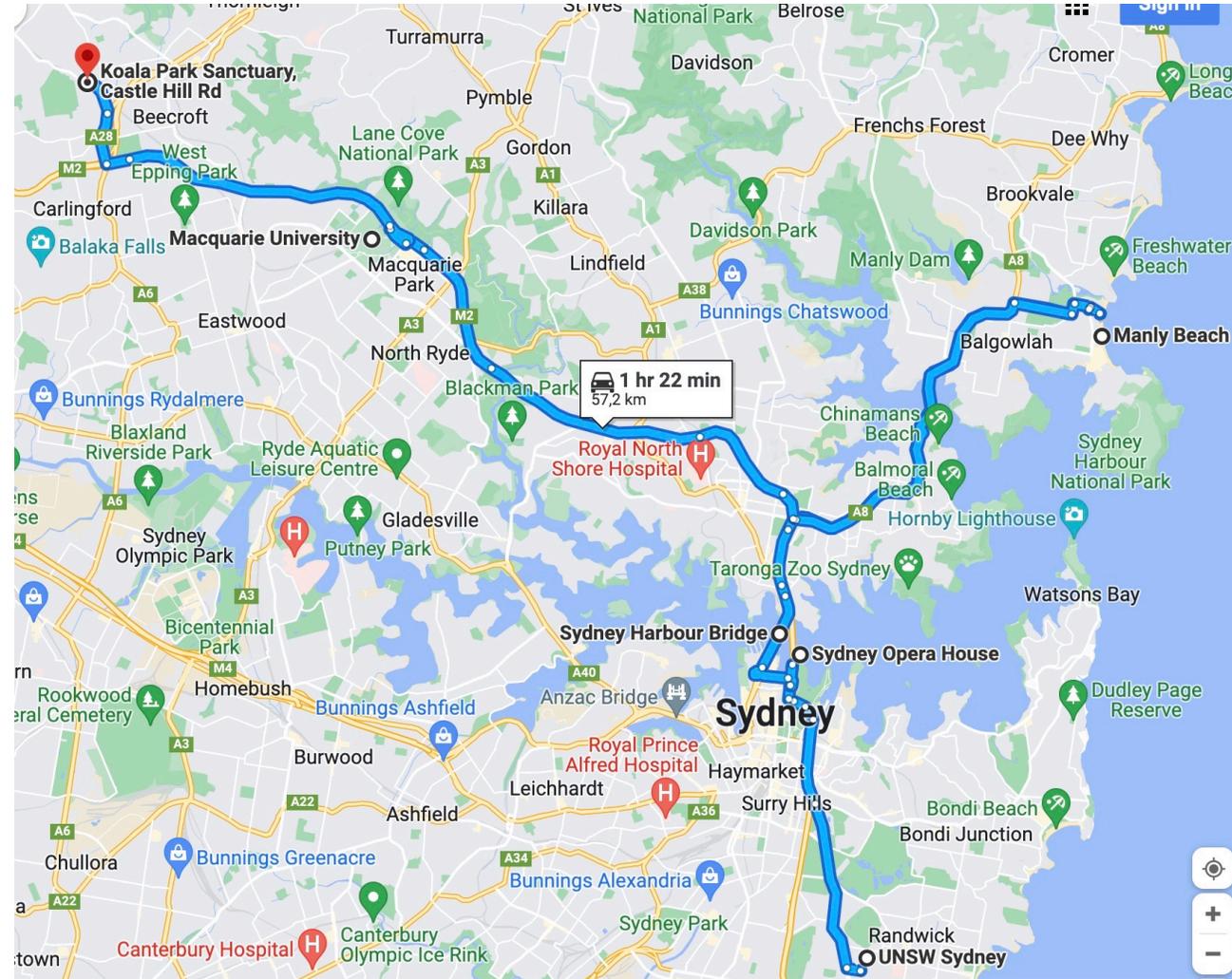
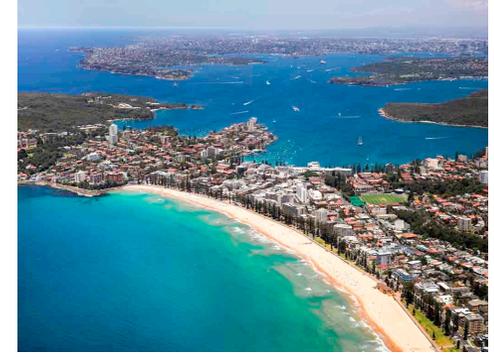


Hunt



Baxter

Sydney



Koala Park, Sydney: Tuesday, November 17



addition! Alf van der Poorten took us to Koala Park where we petted a koala (their fur is rather wiry feeling, which surprised me), fed potato chips to the kangaroos & saw emus, echidnas, dingoes, wombats & an assortment of birds we've never seen before, like the kookaburra. None of the birds sound familiar either. And for that matter very little that grows looks familiar. The jacaranda trees with their beautiful blue blossoms are in full bloom - & I only know the name of that tree because Alf van der Poorten told us. Today we took a bus



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Manly Beach: Sunday, November 22



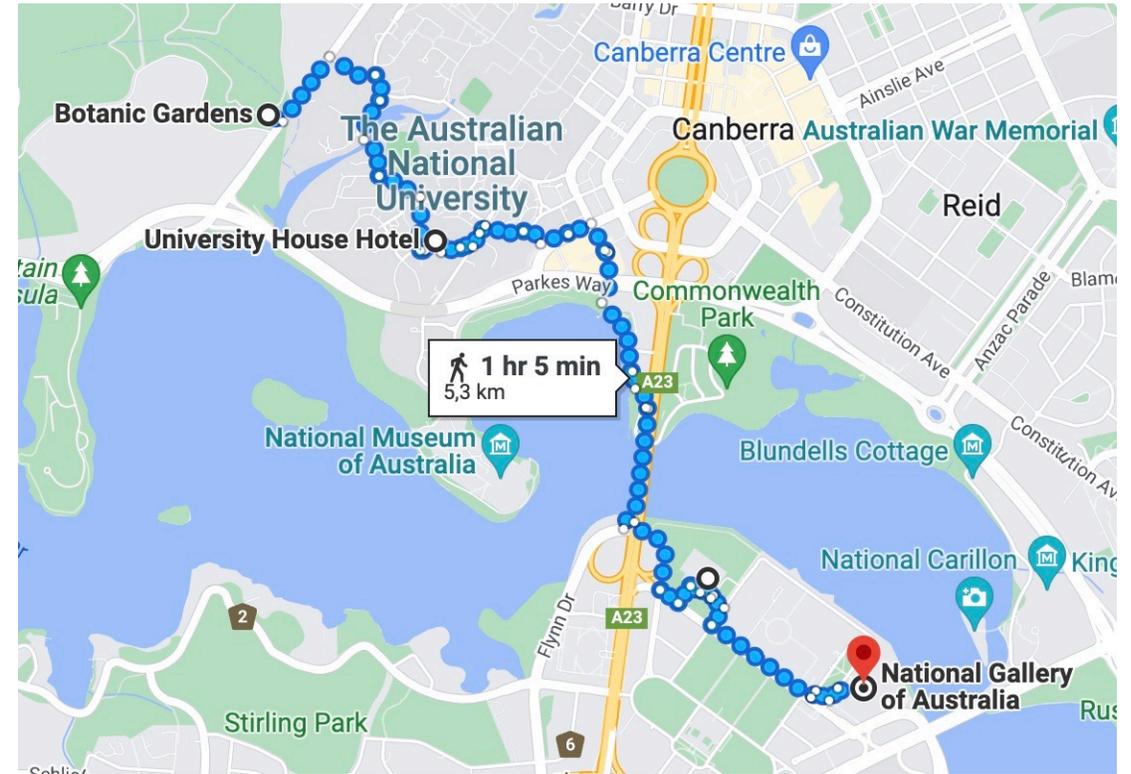
passersby as we ate. A woman passed us with a cockatoo attached to her wrist by a thin chain - out for an airing, we supposed. Then a bull terrier went zipping past on his skateboard. When it slowed down, the dog pushed with his hind legs to pick up speed again. (The dog did have his master along to help, but it really makes a better story when no attendant human being is mentioned!) After



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Canberra



Canberra: Saturday, December 5

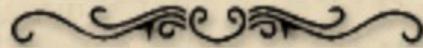


But to backtrack a week + a half - we did go to the Botanic Gardens, + returned the following week-end because we think it's the best thing in Canberra. It has only been open since 1970 but plantings were begun 20 years earlier than that on the site, so there are many well grown gum + other trees. The gardens are limited to native shrubs + trees which gives a concentrated image of what grows in Australia rather than a hybrid mix of what is indigenous to this continent + what's been brought in from other parts of the world. One effect this has is to attract all kinds of birds + we've enjoyed looking at + listening to them as much as we have enjoyed the plantings. Kookaburra does sit laughing in the old gum tree, just as that old Girl Scout camp song says! This



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Kookaburra sits on the old gum tree



Kookaburra sits on the old gum tree,
Merry merry king of the bush is he.
Laugh, Kookaburra, laugh, Kookaburra,
Gay your life must be!

Kookaburra sits on the old gum tree,
Eating all the gum drops he can see.
Stop Kookaburra, stop Kookaburra
Save some there for me!

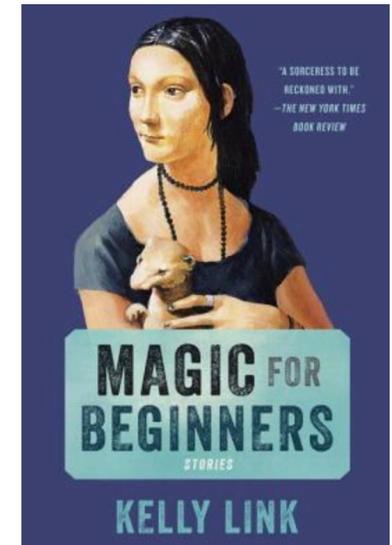
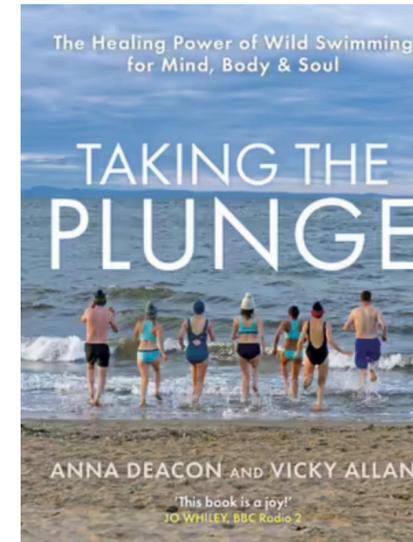
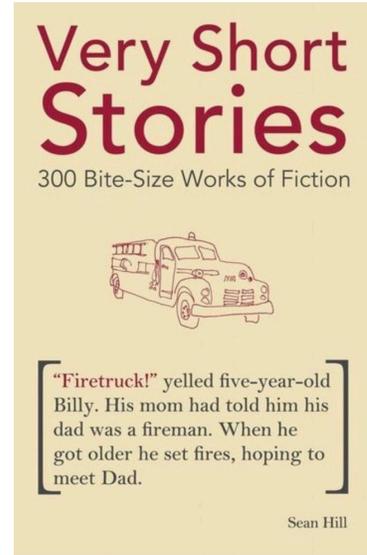
Kookaburra sits on the old gum tree,
Counting all the monkeys he can see.
Laugh Kookaburra, laugh Kookaburra
That's not a monkey, that's me!



Canberra National Library: Monday, December 7



art work owned by the National Library. I was greatly tempted to buy one of the posters put out by the Australian Library Association on the theme of "Everyone Needs Libraries." The most appealing one showed a maiden-in-distress tied to a railroad track with a train bearing down on her; she's reading a volume entitled Very Short Stories. Another poster has a man standing on a platform high off the ground ready to do a high dive; the book in his hand is entitled Taking the Plunge. The third poster depicts a man pulling out of a top hat a giant, spotted green monster; the book of instruction he's reading is called Magic for Beginners. Ah, the opportunities, one misses!



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Thanks for listening



photos:

- by Dick and Liz Askey
- from Suzanne Askey's archive
- from Wikimedia
- elsewhere from the web