

[It pays to go to parties](#)

In the mid-late-1910s, Isabel Cooper was living in Greenwich Village and working at artistic odd jobs, looking for something different.ⁱ [For that part of her story, see: "[Resisting the homely snout of commercialism](#)"]

Chance led her to find her way to entirely new experiences. And her story carries a lesson: you don't know whom you'll meet who might deliver you opportunity, adventure, or love. People Isabel met socially and through her work led her to all of those. It pays, it seems, to go to parties.



Isabel Cooper (r) with Ruth Rose in British Guiana about 1922

Isabel Cooper (r) with Ruth Rose in British Guiana, about 1922

Isabel was an artist, raised well-off and well-educated by Victorian aunts on the Upper West Side of New York City. At 21, she set off to make her own way, and worked in different design and art jobs in the city. But by 25 she was living for months at a time in jungle camps, painting reptiles for the naturalist William Beebe's scientific expeditions.

How did this happen? Isabel recalled "an odd assortment of men and women to be instruments of fate" in her memoir she wrote when she was in her 80s. William Beebe is part of that chain of seven who led her to meet her future husband, Charles Mahaffie on Christmas Eve, 1924.

The memoir gives thumbnails about of these drivers of fate, but she does not

name them. Here is the sequence. Some we can identify, and their names are here:

1. "A quaint little painter...who couldn't paint" – likely Alon Bement, who taught at Columbia and led summer art institutes at Old Lyme, Connecticut. He also taught Georgia O'Keeffe.
2. "A flighty young woman with one blue and one brown eye," whom she met in the summer art class.
3. "A visionary—a philosopher way ahead of her time, incomprehensible, whom I came to appreciate and understand as the years went on."
4. A man "notable for one thing," he introduced her to:
5. "A debonair character who seemed to have no special occupation or means of support
6. "A famous biologist, part scientist and park faker..." "Faker" is a strong word, but William Beebe was more adventurer than credentialed scientist.
7. Dorothy B. Putnam, "a festive lady who loved people, giving parties, and matchmaking." Dorothy and her husband George P. Putnam introduced Isabel to Charles Mahaffie, who became her husband.



William Beebe in 1925

But first, Isabel had nine years of adventures in the tropics, living a life nearly unique for her times, let alone for young, single woman. Isabel met Beebe just as he was mounting the first his Department of Tropical Research scientific expeditions. Experienced with nature exploration, he knew the value of a gifted artist to his work.

Isabel knew of Beebe's incredible knowledge of nature and was fascinated with his globe-spanning exploration. And "he was an enthusiast, and he cared nothing about money,"ⁱⁱ So he could help her move her are clear of excess commercialism.

Isabel had told an *American Magazine* interviewer, "You must be enthusiastic," she says; "it's the enthusiasts who do things."ⁱⁱⁱ She saw that in Beebe, and surely he saw it in her.

Having met him, "one word led to another," and Beebe hired Isabel to bring her skills along on his 1917 expedition to British Guiana. She ultimately traveled as scientific artist with Beebe on nine expeditions, including seven to British Guiana and two to the Galapagos. The adventures she had colored her interests and her art from then forward.

ⁱ John Monk Saunders, "Jungle Creatures 'Sit' for Her in Their Own Back Yards," *American Magazine*, February 1926, Vol. 101, p. 26.

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