

Reading Matters

San Francisco Great Books Council
Serving Northern California

What You Put Into It

Leading Great Books Discussions

Kay White

My father was a quiet man, not very talkative, so when he said something, I listened (like in that E.F. Hutton commercial). He told me the more I put into a project, the more I would get out of it. And I've found that the more I put into preparing to lead Great Books discussions, the more I gain from them.

Reading is my pleasure, and even more so when I prepare to lead a discussion. I admit it: I am project-oriented. I like to focus, analyze; to consider angles, ambiguities and underlying issues. Above all, I want to discuss my reading with others.

In Great Books discussions, I am thrilled when someone comes up with a different understanding of the work. The framework shifts, a new dimension is revealed.

Leaders' Training
Our next leader training workshop will be on February 11, 2005. The cost is \$30. For complete details and to enroll, see the notice and registration form on page 9. You must sign up by January 14th.

In our leader pre-discussion sessions, we dig into the text with abandon. We bounce more questions and interpretations off one another than a pinball machine could handle. We can be far-fetched, baffled, silly, or erudite without shame. We try to sober up before the actual discussion, sifting through the chaff, to find kernels for provocative discussion questions.

A leader's responsibility is to present interpretative questions that can launch a discussion. There are no prescribed questions. The discussion belongs to the group, not to the leader.

(Continued on page 3)

What makes the Asilomar Great Books Weekend

So Special?

Barbara McConnell, Asilomar Chair

You do! The more participants who come, the more varied they are. The more ideas they bring, the better the weekend will be for everyone.

This year we have special plans for welcoming newcomers and helping them feel comfortable. A council member will greet new folks and help them register and find their rooms. A meeting orienting newcomers to the Asilomar grounds and reviewing conference procedures will be later Friday afternoon. Friday dinner will be hosted by council members who will see that you meet the others at your table. After the poetry discussion Friday evening, first-timers will be introduced to the entire group at a coffee and cookie reception.



We have also changed the Saturday format. After the morning session, those who wish may pick up a box lunch and dash off to any of the places listed in the registration packet — the 17 Mile Drive and the famous Monterey Bay Aquarium and many more. Others will prefer strolling along the beach or taking a nap.

The afternoon discussion of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* will be from 4 to 6. After dinner we will all get together for wine and cheese, and hear a speaker or a debate

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For questions about registration, call Jimmie Harvey, Registrar, at 415-383-1319

For all other questions, call Barbara McConnell, Asilomar Chair, at 707-829-5643

From the President Conversations

Brent Browning

Picture this: An idea is dancing around the room. Someone restates the idea. Another adds a slightly different view. The language is crafted. Areas of disagreement are clarified. Discoveries are made.

This is the essence of a focused, collaborative conversation.

There are few role models for focused collaborative discussions in the popular media. Discussions, if they occur at all, are often adversarial and rude. On television's "Crossfire," for example, ideas are rudely interrupted before they can be adequately presented and, in many entertainment programs, the resort to violence to solve problems is discouragingly ubiquitous. Thus, the effort to understand another person's point of view derives little support from the popular media.

Everyday, polite conversations, however, offer useful guidelines for collaborative discussions. They tend to avoid controversial topics and sometimes wander, but can, nonetheless, be delightful. Shared Inquiry conversations, which are collaborative *and focused*, borrow heavily from the traditions of polite conversation. Friendly conversation has commonly accepted rules: everyone knows it is rude to interrupt someone who is talking, that it is impolite to speak disrespectfully of the other person's ideas or to behave in pompous or intimidating ways, and that it is impolite to talk about a topic with which some participants are not familiar. And these are also the basic rules of Shared Inquiry.

Thus, the rules of Shared Inquiry conversations are basically derived from the dictates of common, courteous conversation with an added agreement to stick to the subject at hand.

The hallmark of good conversations of all kinds is an enhanced ability of the participants to listen — really listen — to the other person's point of view.

This does not occur in adversarial conversations, but only in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. In everyday, friendly conversation, the participants collaborate to allow everyone to simply enjoy themselves. If we add to that an agreement to stick to the subject, we have the essentials of Shared Inquiry. In such an environment, real ideas can be exchanged; people can grow. It is the reason Great Books exists.

This is not merely technical nit-picking. People have left Great Books because of the atmosphere of the group. The rules of Shared Inquiry discussions spell out the prohibition of outside references and admonish us to avoid interrupting other people, but do not speak to the atmosphere of the group. A group that has a tradition of collaborating to bring out the meanings of the readings will retain more members than a group with an adversarial tradition where members try to win arguments. Winning arguments in an adversarial environment does not require listening and is counter-productive to growing a group. A group with an *atmosphere* of collaboration will have a tradition of listening to one another and is much more likely to retain its members.

In (a Shared Inquiry) environment, real ideas can be exchanged; people can grow. It is the reason Great Books exists.



Did You Know?

Back issues of *Reading Matters* (Fall 1996 to the present) are posted on the Council's website.

**SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL,
Serving Northern California:**

**Brent Browning, President;
Kay White, Vice President;
Gary Geltemeyer, Secretary;
Grace Apple Dennison, Treasurer;
Brian Mahoney, Past President.**

**READING MATTERS:
Chuck Scarcliff; Publisher
Paul Ortega and Lucy Whybrow-Ortega, Editors**

**SF Council Website: www.greatbooks-sf.com;
Great Books Foundation Website: www.greatbooks.org**

Leading Great Books Discussions (Continued from page 1)

Ideas and topics should flow from the group, with the leader making sure everyone has a chance to contribute ideas, and to explore the author's work.

You are invited to join us for the day, Saturday, February 11, 2006. We will talk



about discussion techniques, prepare interpretive questions, practice leading, and help critique sessions.

Above all, we'll have a good time together, a relaxed lunch, and come away with more insight than ever from our reading. Experienced leaders and people new to leading are invited for the day. We want a mix of experience.

What Makes Asilomar So Special? (Continued from page 1)

focused on the *current* democracy in America.

Our final discussion on Sunday morning will be followed by a farewell lunch and a chance for you to evaluate the weekend and tell us how it can be improved. And you will be able suggest future Asilomar read-

NOTE: In his most recent book, *A Man Without a Country*, Kurt Vonnegut writes: "I consider anybody a twerp who hasn't read *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville. There can never be a better book than that one on the strengths and vulnerability inherent in our form of government."



Mini-Retreat — 2005

**Graham Greene's
*The End of The Affair***

Claudia O'Callaghan

On the first page of the novel, set in post WW II London, we are told "this is a record of hate far more than love."

Initially it appears to be a simple story of infidelity between Bendrix, the main character, and Sarah, the wife of his best friend. Then without explanation, Sarah breaks off the affair.

Bendrix is devastated and hires a private detective to find out why.

Subsequently, in the best tradition of 19th century tales of adultery, Sarah dies. After her death Bendrix gets his hands on her diary which reveals an intense struggle between her love for Bendrix and her love for his rival — a fourth party to the affair:

God. Bendrix is stunned to realize that though he felt confident he could defeat all obstacles, God was too much of a force in Sarah's life for him to overcome. In the last sentence of the book, Bendrix utters an angry warning in the form of a prayer: "O God, You've done enough. You've robbed me of enough, I'm too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone forever."

For Greene, a Roman Catholic convert, the novel was inspired by his longer than twenty year affair with

Catherine Walston, the wife of a wealthy businessman. In the introduction to a 2004 edition (marking the 100th anniversary of Greene's birth), Professor Michael Gorra states that this is a "religious novel in a fundamentally secular age."

We may ask ourselves, "Is the moral dilemma of the novel relevant today?" "Does it still inspire the suffering experienced by Bendrix and Sarah?"

Since we must limit Mini-Retreat attendance to forty participants, notices are not sent to all Great Books members. If you did not receive a notice about this year's event and would like to attend next year (February in San Francisco) please e-mail Claudia O'Callaghan at callcoc@aol.com and your name will be added to our special mailing list.

For more about the novelist, see the centenary biography, *The Life of Graham Greene* by Norman Sherry

London Tour for Thinkers III 2005

Spending a week in London, attending six plays and then discussing them — this was the October agenda for Ted Kraus and the group he led on this, his third annual London Tour for Thinkers.

In our usual Great Books discussions, we discuss the text, interpreting it and at times evaluating it. But Ted's London discussions go beyond the usual. Not only is the play discussed—its themes, ideas and meanings—but the entire experience of viewing it is considered and commented upon.

For example, one of the six plays was a revival of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. We discussed this play at Asilomar three years ago, but Ted and the group in London discussed it somewhat differently. Matters of staging, of director's choices, actor's interpretations and even technical features are parts of the entire experience and therefore fair game for discussion.

Yet the underlying principles of these discussions

are no different from those of Great Books as we know and practice them. In Great Books, we enhance our reading experience through discussion. In the London Tour for Thinkers, Ted and the participants enhance their theatre going experience through discussion.

In addition to *Death of a Salesman*, the group attended a revival of *Epitaph for George Dillon*, an early play by John Osborne written and first performed before *Look Back in Anger* made the playwright well known in Britain and the United States. *Mary Stuart*, a historical play by Frederick von Schiller (1759-1805) was another

of the group's plays. Schiller, some-times called "the German Shakespeare," may not be as well known in the United States as he deserves to be and his plays are not performed frequently. Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup With Barley* revived a 1958 play covering many years of a family's domestic and political strife.

In addition to these older and more familiar plays, the group took in a new black comedy by Sam Shepard, *God is Hell* (a play that has since opened Off-Broadway in New York), and *Playing With Fire* by David Edgar. Clearly the London Tour for Thinkers III group had the opportunity to see and talk about plays of wide variety. And Ted will do it all again — with different plays, of course — in 2006.



THE KITE RUNNER WILL BE AT THE ANNUAL MEETING AND PICNIC ON JUNE 25TH AT TILDEN PARK

This is a story, by Khaled Hosseini, of friendship and betrayal between two boyhood friends amidst Afghanistan's upheaval,



Mark your calendars.

What do we Call Ourselves?

Chuck Scarcliff

Are we "Great Bookies?" Maybe, but I've never cared for that one. "Great Books Members?" Better, but not quite right. Formalities often go along with membership. Members may take vows or be sworn in (as members of churches or the armed forces are), pay dues (which we don't) or have cards in their wallets testifying to membership in good standing (NRA and Sierra Club members have cards; we don't.) Or are we "Great Books Participants?" But we also use that word to distinguish participants from discussion leaders. Besides, "participants" sounds altogether too impersonal for me.

This is not entirely an idle question. In writing or reviewing articles for *Reading Matters*, I sometimes seek a word that identifies all of us who take part in Great Books activities and events. So far, I've not found one I like.

About the Foundation

Chuck Scarcliff

Anyone active in Great Books will tell you that Chicago is more than the “Hog butcher for the world,” and that the city has more than a very large airport and a very tall skyscraper. Chicago is the home of the Great Books Foundation — where, we presume, the intellectual descendents of Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler now walk the halls. But if asked exactly what the Foundation does, some of us might say that we order books from them and be hard pressed to think of anything further. The Foundation, of course, is the source of many of the books we use in our discussions, but its activities go far beyond that.

With Adult and Junior Great Books as its two principle programs, the Foundation is a national non-profit educational foundation helping people make reading and discussion of literature a lifelong resource for personal growth and social interaction. It publishes books and anthologies, and conducts professional development workshops in the shared inquiry method.

The number of students, kindergarten through 12th grade, in Junior Great Books is astounding. One million are enrolled annually and 35,000 to 50,000 teachers use the program each year. Some of the largest school districts in the United States use Junior Great Books.

And it serves these students, teachers and schools well. Junior Great Books was recognized by the Panel for Comprehensive School Reform for “demonstrating significant gains in critical reading skills, reading comprehension, constructing meaning, vocabulary and positive attitudes toward reading.” A study sponsored by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation called it “the only exemplary language arts materials currently available” for middle schools. The California Department of Education is one of several agencies that recommends Junior Great Books.

These results come from the efforts of the Foundation and its professional staff who are in contact with

from 12,000 to 16,000 teachers and parents in 400 to 500 training courses each year. And of course it is the Foundation that plans Junior Great Books materials and curriculums and makes them available to hundreds of schools.

According to Foundation sources, 15,000 adults now participate in the more 850 Great Books discussion groups nationwide. The San Francisco Great Books council is one of nine independent councils in several major metropolitan areas.

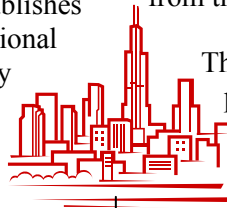
The councils and discussion groups are independent organizations but act, thrive and grow in part because of assistance provided by the Foundation. For example, professional help is available in matters such as training leaders and forming new groups. And groups rely heavily on the wide variety of books and other publications available from the Foundation at reasonable costs.

The scope of Foundation activities is probably greater than most of us realize. For example, the Foundation:

- Publishes *The Common Review*, a quarterly now reaching 10,000 subscribers.
- In partnership with Penguin Books, the “Recommended for Discussion by the Great Books Foundation” seal appears on dozens of Penguin titles with more than 2 million books bearing the seal.
- Has collaborated with a variety of organizations such as the One Book, One Chicago reading program; Milwaukee Museum of Art; The Lyric Opera and The Institute for Environmental Science and Policy in seminar style discussions.
- Is now engaged in a program that brings Great Books discussions to prisons.

We all know that the Foundation publishes the books with the selections our groups read and discuss, but do we know that adding to

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these publications and making revisions is an ongoing activity in Chicago? And are we aware of recent additions? The *Great Conversations I* anthology has met with great success. And *Great Conversations II* is on the way. For poetry readers, a 500 page anthology of *Modern American Poems* came out in 2002.

Finally, in different ways we all value Great Books and what it brings to our lives. The Foundation is the glue that holds Great Books together.

Reading Matters thanks Brian Gaul, Adult Programs Coordinator of the Great Books Foundation for supplying information used in this article.

The 2005 Annual Meeting and Picnic was a great success. Committee Chair Kathleen Conneely would have had it no other way. But she had help from the committee: Bob McConnell, Jan & Tom Vargo, Vince Scardina, Tom Cox, Rob Calvert, and Dorothy Jansizian. Kathryn Sugrue. Brian Mahoney & Mary Wood led discussions of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

Thank You All



An American in Paris ...



And the American's name is Lambert Strether. He's the unlikely hero of *The Ambassadors* by Henry James. We'll be talking about him and the book's other characters at this year's Long Novel Weekend.

... comes to Walker Creek Ranch

August 26-27, 2006

Long Novel Weekend — 2005

Louise DiMatteo

Wispy fog was filling the beautiful Marin County valleys as the sun shown on the light tan hill tops. The lush scenery on our ride to the Long Novel Weekend this year was a far cry from the dank, gray mining towns and villages of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*.



Yet, as we often commented over the course of two days, Lawrence wrote about a splendid countryside too as he contrasted the grim industrial age with the bucolic English farming life of the past.

This was one of the weekend's main themes — the uneasiness of the psyche when traditional values come in conflict with a highly insistent trend toward change. The fact that great authors capture the essence of their times so well never ceases to amaze me. I wonder if they realize they are creating a picture of their age as they write their fiction. Perhaps the collective unconscious is speaking through the intuition of the few who have the talent to express it.

Sons and Lovers, our reading selection this year, posed the big questions: love vs. hate, class, poverty, sexual repression, the condition of women, cruelty, guilt, shame, alienation and ambition to name but a few. It is much easier for us to ask the simpler questions. For instance, our group wondered if Gertrude Morel was named after Hamlet's mother. We spent time musing over the choice of Morel as the last name. Morel —Moral? Was Gertrude moral? And, of course, did Lawrence know Freud?

As always, I thoroughly enjoyed the weekend. I have often thought that the Long Novel weekend is among the best offerings of the Adult Great Books program anywhere.

And how can you top the discussions and the setting? The unbelievable repast prepared and served by Linda Coffin and Lana Dilger might have done

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just that. They outdid themselves this year.

For our Saturday evening entertainment, we saw the film of *Women in Love*, another Lawrence novel. (We tried to obtain a tape of *Sons and Lovers*, but it was not available to us.) I went away grateful that movie making has progressed as an art form since the late sixties, that Glenda Jackson has probably retired by now, and that I don't know any really rich and decadent people.

The Publicity Committee

Kathleen Conneely

On February 5, 2005, at their own expense, seven Books volunteers at all day workshop at Positas College. The Great Books tended an at Los in Livermore. workshop title was "Getting the Word Out," and the volunteers' goal was to learn professional public relations techniques to spread the word about Great Books. Under the leadership of Barbara McConnell, Kay White and Lou Alanko, accompanied by Brent and Erma Browning, Rick White and Kathleen Conneely, the newly formed committee met throughout the year at members' homes and at such unlikely spots as a bus company and the IKEA cafeteria in Emeryville.

Over the months, the committee developed a public relations plan and a strategy to accomplish it. The committee produced press releases, taglines, flyers, brochures, used the website, contacted libraries and area coordinators and purchased extra-large professional color posters.

Now the committee is focusing its energies on getting the word out about our biggest annual

event — the Asilomar Great Books Weekend.

If you have talent or experience in writing, publicity, designing posters, signs or brochures or are willing to contact your local libraries or bookstores, please consider joining the committee and contributing to the growth and good health of Great Books. To volunteer, contact: Barbara McConnell at barbaramcconnell@comcast.net or Kay White at kaycleveland@aol.com

Uncle Max Does Poetry

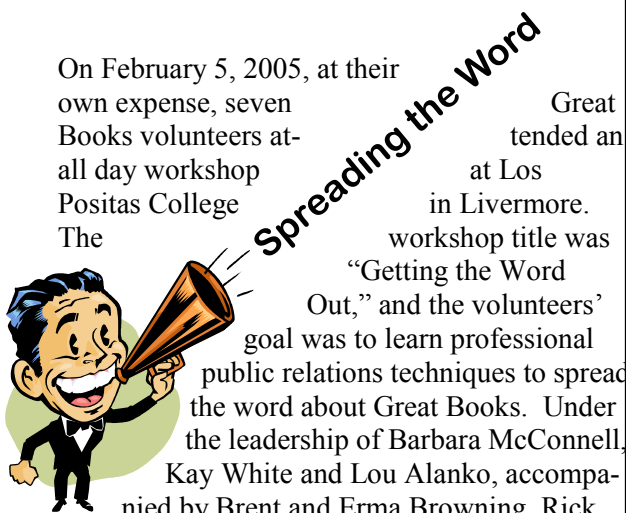
I just got back from this Great Books Poetry Weekend and now I'll have to tell the gang at the Old Bucks Club all about it. We hang out at Starbucks. You can't miss us — the old guys that don't bring laptop computers or drink pumpkin pie flavor frappuccino. A while back, one of the guys was saying that he'd heard about this poetry thing and I'd ought to go. Women-folks, he said, like poems so plenty of them would be there. Nothing else was working for me so I signed myself up and a few days later they sent me this batch of poems to read. One look and I knew I was in over my head.

They have that Poetry Weekend at a really nice place over in the East Bay. Trees and hills all around. And good food too — kinds that are good for you. I'd live to a hundred and ten if I ate there all the time. I didn't even miss my chicken nuggets, but suppose I wouldn't have objected to a little Jell-O. Even the wine at the party was first rate — best I've had since Trader Joe started selling that Two-Buck Chuck Merlot.

I'll admit some really nice ladies were there, but they were all business — they came to talk poetry — and didn't pay me no nevermind. But that's okay; I knew before I went that this wasn't a Club-Med for Pete's sake. And I did learn a thing or two about poetry so the weekend turned out to be worth something — quite a bit, I'd say

I learned a some of those things from a lady by the name of Roxanne — a young thing, hardly old enough to have her own Medicare card.. We struck up a conversation right after I got there when everybody was standing around drinking coffee and eating blueberry

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muffins. She asked what I thought of this year's poems and I told her I didn't know beans about poems but I thought some of them poets went to too darn much trouble hiding their Easter eggs and I felt like the kid with the empty basket.

"What happens," she said, "Is that poets often are trying to express the inexpressible."

"And I'm stuck with trying to comprehend the incomprehensible," I said. "I just wish they would come right out and say what they mean."

"Maybe you did better than you think," she said.

"Well," I said, "I got along okay with a couple poems about old age. Like the one where this old lady said 'I've had it all and I want it back.' I sure know that feeling. And another one started out, 'This is no country for old men. Now tell me what country *is* for old men? Florida maybe, but that's not a real country. Then this poem up and said that an old man is a 'paltry thing'. I didn't much like the sound of that. Then the poem got really tough and I didn't understand it all. What's a guy like me supposed to know about a 'perne in a gyre?' Even so, I figure that this was a heck of a good poem. I just didn't get most of it."

"But the real humdinger was by this Shakespeare fellow. He talked about an old guy whose lady-love could just look at him and see he was getting old, and even though she knew he wasn't going to be around much longer, she still loved him. Now that's my kind of poem."

They had these three discussions, the first one being of poems about love and such and the next one about dreams. Nowadays for me, "love" and "dreams" are two words meaning the same thing. The last one was called "potpourri, and the first thing I learned was not to pronounce the "t" in potpourri.

So I went to the discussions thinking I'd better just shut up and listen, but that didn't last. They talked about this poem with a guy saying that since this flea had bit both him and his sweetie they were someway united now and that made it okay for them to hit the sack together. That's what he said. Well, a fellow who was wearing an earring but

looked old enough to know better, said he didn't think any girl would fall for a line like that. So I opened my yap and said that this John Donne fellow most likely wasn't writing an honest-to-goodness *billy-doo*, just a poem to get a few laughs. Roxanne, said that was kind of what she thought too. So as the discussions wore on, I did put my two cents in once in a while and be darned if people didn't tell me I had interesting ideas. But nobody said I knew what I was talking about. I guess that didn't matter to them.

Later on when I was talking to Roxanne and sharing my Gummy Bears with her, I found out it was okay for me to like some poems and not others. One I didn't care for had this woman at the zoo whining about how bad her life was. I said it didn't take long before I had my fill of her "poor me" frame of mind. Roxanne said that was a valid way of looking at the poem, but she "didn't quite agree." According to her, readers often don't agree on these things.

As the weekend was winding down and we were all starting to head for home, Roxanne said "Max, reading poetry isn't easy. It takes practice, but you'll do okay You're figuring some of them out pretty well.."

"Maybe I'm just lucky. Back where I come from," I told her, "They say that even a blind pig sometimes finds an acorn."

All in all the Poetry Weekend went really good. I liked the discussions. The people there knew what it was all about. Except, maybe, the guy with the earring. And the leaders were sharp too. Real sharp.

Now I'm going to try reading a poem or two on my own. I've got a long way to go but maybe with some practice I'll get the hang of it. It'll be a handful, but I'll make it. And who knows? I might even go back next year and not just to see the ladies.

Reviewing *The Review*

Chuck Scarcliff

One reason among many for reading *The Common Review*, the Foundation's quarterly, is their reviews of recent books. The fall 2005 edition reviewed a new collection of selected letters of John Keats, two novels, an analysis of *The Wasteland*, a study of democracy and society and a critical analysis of poetry. In

THE GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

LEADER WORKSHOP — Saturday, February 11, 2006

The San Francisco Great Books Council invites readers and leaders for a workshop on February 11, 2006. This is a day to practice your skills in reading, listening, and leading.

Here are comments from past participants:

"I enjoyed asking, sharing, and listening."

"I found the training most useful for formulating questions on the reading."

"I liked ...ways to keep the discussion open-ended and continuously interesting."

"I found the small group session most useful."



Good book discussions are no accident. We hope you will join us for a full day with other leaders, experienced and new.

Registration, \$30, covers advance materials, lunch, morning and afternoon refreshments, and reference notes for leading Great Books discussions.

Please send your registration (\$30 check payable to San Francisco Great Books Council) by January 14, 2006 to:

Kay White
10 Oak Forest Road
Novato, CA 94949

Yes, I want to attend the leaders' group on February 11th:

Name _____

Address _____

THE BULLETIN BOARD

Mini Retreat 2006 February 4, 2006

Discuss *Lolita*, the 1955 novel by Vladimir Nabokov
And
View the film starring James Mason and directed by Stanley Kubrick
At
Mechanics Institute Library
57 Post Street, San Francisco
Space is limited. Call Kay Blaney, (805)

Some *Lolita* Trivia:

Nabokov originally planned to title his novel "A Kingdom by the Sea." That comes from Poe's poem "Annabel Lee." After you read *Lolita*, you might want to spend a few minutes with the poem.

(It pays to watch *Jeopardy*. This bit of information came from a recent final question and its answer.)

Help Wanted: Your help. Please let me know what you think of *Reading Matters*. What kinds of articles do you like most? Least? What would you like to see added to the newsletter? What are your complaints? My e-mail address is ckdxs@sbcglobal.net, and my mailing address is 7738 Quinby Way, Sacramento, CA 95823. I hope to hear from you.

Chuck Scarcliff, Publisher



SURPRISE AT THE PICNIC!

At the June 2005 picnic, Bob McConnell, our barbeque chef extraordinaire was surprised when presented with a professional white Chef's hat.

It was a moment of appreciation to Bob who, for many years has driven from Sebastopol to Tilden Park, Berkeley arriving early so he can clean the barbeque pit, pile on the coals (he brought from home) and start the fire before the first picnickers arrive. Then he barbeques steaks, hot dogs and hamburgers to perfection.

WHO WILL BE SURPRISED IN 2006?

Join us on June 25th and find out

Reviewing the Review (Continued from page 8)
addition to the complete reviews, the “Editor’s Choice” section comments briefly on four of the “Best of Recent Books.”

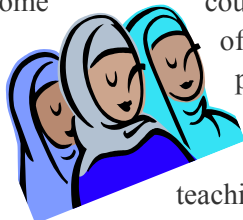
The books are all well chosen and should appeal to the varied interests of Great Books members, but the one that caught my eye was the analysis of poetry — *Break, Blow, Burn*, by Camille Paglia (her title comes from Donne’s Holy Sonnet 14). I went right out and purchased a copy. Paglia studies “forty-three of the world’s best poems” from Shakespeare’s sonnets to the lyrics of a Joni Mitchell song.

Break, Blow, Burn is for anyone seriously interested in poetry. Paglia teaches how to read, analyze, understand and appreciate poems, and she does it well — largely through close textual reading, the approach taken by the New Critics but with added flexibility.

Reading *Lolita* in Tehran

A Review
Mary Wood

After the Iranian revolution, Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (the book discussed at the 2005 Annual Meeting and Picnic), returned to Iran to teach English literature. Her love of her home country is strong, but by the end



of the book, her personal experience of repression had driven her into exile again. She is passionate about teaching. We see her magnetism at the university where her students include revolutionaries who oppose her democratic ideas, but apparently respect her as a teacher, even helping her when she gets into trouble.

Nafisi vacillates between taking a stand against the revolution and deciding to teach at any cost. And after taking us through autobiography, revolution, and literary criticism, she shows us that literature has its own power to create change, because reading changes the reader.

The title refers to a woman’s book group that meets in Nafisi’s home to discuss literature. In order to protect the real women in the group, the characters in the book are composites. I never felt they were clearly defined, and had trouble keeping them straight. Moreover, Nafisi’s passionate, nervous personality drowns out the characters.

Through the women’s stories we learn of horrors such as jail and beatings. But shocking too are indignities like Nafisi having her face scrubbed by the school guard because she appears to be wearing makeup.

For a woman to read *Lolita* in Iran is to read about one’s own possible fate, or the fate of sisters and friends. Just as Humbert of Nabokov’s novel blames *Lolita* for attracting him, women in Iran are blamed for sexually attracting men and are forced to cover themselves.

Nafisi doesn’t say that the experience of a book is conditioned by one’s culture. But that is a conclusion I draw.

Note: This article is an excerpt taken from a longer piece. Because of limited space, we were not able to print the entire review. Mary goes on to comment upon literary issues raised by Nafisi’s study of fiction by Nabokov and Henry James. Contact me, Chuck Scarcliff, for a complete copy. My e-mail address is ckdxs@sbcglobal.net, and my phone number is (916) 428-4672.

Area Coordinators And What They Do

The eight area coordinators are the communication links between the San Francisco Great Books Council and the forty local discussion groups within the region. Here are some of the things they can do:

- Help start new groups and possibly find mentors to guide them as they get going.
- Answer questions, provide or obtain information and publicity materials for groups.
- Contact groups for information or making inquiries as requested by the council.

For the Coordinator for your area, please see the 2006 Roster of Groups that is enclosed.

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL
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Great Books Events—Coming In 2006

Northern California Events

February 4: Mini-Retreat *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. Contact Claudia O'Callaghan; callcoc@aol.com.

February 11: Great Books Leaders' Training. Contact Kay White, kaycleveland@aol.com

April 7-9: Asilomar Great Books Weekend Selected poems, *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville and *The Price* by Arthur Miller. Contact Barbara McConnell, barbaramcconnell@comcast.net or Jimmie Harvey, milarca01@comcast.net.

June 25: Annual Meeting and Picnic *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. Contact Kathleen Conneely, krconneely@yahoo.com.

August 26-27: Long Novel Weekend *The Ambassadors* by Henry James. Contact Chuck Scarcliff, ckdxs@sbcglobal.net or Mary Stuart, mlstu@aol.com.

November 11-12 : Poetry Weekend

Events Elsewhere

April 28-30: Great Books Chicago, Theme: City in a Garden. Contact Gary Schoepfel, Schoepfel-g@greatbooks.org.

June 16-18: Great Books Bellingham Institute (Bellingham,

WA). *Enemy of the People*, Ibsen; *Darwin's Black Box*, Behe; *Winter of our Discontent*, Steinbeck and *River out of Eden*, Dawkins. Contact Steve Blair, stevenrblair@hotmail.com.

July 16-21: Toronto Pursuits. Choice of various readings including *War and Peace*, *Lord of the Rings*, Hannah Arendt, African-American Literature and others. Contact Ann Kirkland, ann.kirkland@classicalpursuits.com.

August 6-12: Wachs Great Books Week (Colby College, Maine) Readings include works by Kafka, Buber, Plato, Shakespeare, Woolf and Whitman. Contact agreatbook@aol.com.

October 23-28: London Tour for Thinkers IV. Six plays in London to be determined.

Contact Ted Kraus, tmktheatretrours@hotmail.com.

November 3-5: Philadelphia Fall Institute Weekend. Readings to be announced. Contact John Dalton, jd5258875@aol.com.

Classical Pursuits, a Toronto-based organization that works cooperatively with the Great Books Foundation sponsors several events which, in 2006, are planned for Merida, Mexico, New York City, Savannah, GA, Quebec City, Paris, New Orleans (depending on local conditions) Greece and Krakow, Poland.

Website, www.classicalpursuits.com.

Contact ann.kirkland@classicalpursuits.com.