

Reading Matters



The Great Books Council of San Francisco
Serving Northern California
www.greatbooks-sf.com



A Few Things You Should Know About the Asilomar Great Books Weekend

The Tradition: The first Asilomar Great Books Weekend was in 1959; the 2007 conference will be our 48th. To have lasted that long, something — a lot of things — must be going right.

The Dates and Times: April 13-15, 2007. Plan to arrive, if possible, between 3:00 and 5:00 PM on Friday, April 13th. Your departure will be after lunch on Sunday.

The Cost: Costs vary according to the type of room you select. All costs, however, include the books and the food. And don't forget: *If you sign up before January 1st, you will save \$10.00.*

The Location: The Asilomar Grounds border the ocean (complete with dunes and beach) in Pacific Grove between Monterey and Carmel. With its beach and tree-covered grounds, Asilomar has great natural beauty. The climate is cool. Rain is possible but has seldom been a problem.

The Food and Lodging: You'll like the food. A vegetarian menu is available, but you must make that choice when you sign up. The rooms are comfortable, all with private bathrooms and showers. The more expensive ones are roomier and a bit more upscale. Since the residence buildings, meeting rooms and the dining hall are scattered throughout the grounds, an Asilomar van will provide transportation if you need it and call for it.

The Schedule: You will receive detailed information

Sign Up Early



The Vacancy Sign Won't Be Out Forever

(Continued on page 2)

Discussion Leader Workshop

►Join us on Saturday, February 10, 2007 ◀

Kay White

Readers with all levels of Great Books' experience are invited for a one-day workshop. New and aspiring leaders will have time to practice and ask questions. Experienced leaders will share their best practices.

The workshop will be held in the Board Room at Hilton Homewood Suites, 1103 Embarcadero, Oakland. This is a spacious room with plenty of natural sunlight. Parking is free and, if you need them, overnight accommodations are comfortable and reasonable.

To Register

Send your name, address, phone and email information along with your payment to: Kay White at 10 Oak Forest Road, Novato, CA 94949. Registration is \$30 by December 31, or \$35 from January 1-31, 2007. Make checks payable to The Great Books Council of San Francisco. For more information contact kaycleveland@aol.com.

Why Be a Great Books Discussion Leader?

Turn to page 3 to see what some of our leaders say:

(Continued on page 3)

New And Exciting Plans. . .

. . . are underway for the Great Books Council of San Francisco to bring information of upcoming events and other Great Books news to you sooner and more efficiently. And you could win a \$50.00 gift certificate

For details, see at the article, "From the Publicity Committee," on page 3.

Asilomar Great Books Weekend (Continued from page 1)

about times and places when you arrive. Subject to possible change, this is the way the weekend shapes up:

FRIDAY EVENING — Discussion: Poetry Selections.

SATURDAY MORNING — Discussion: *The Bell*.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON (late) — Discussion: *Rocks of Ages*.

SATURDAY EVENING — Program and party.

SUNDAY MORNING — Discussion: *Anna in the Tropics*.

You will have free time on Saturday afternoon for walking along the beach, shopping in Carmel, taking a nap or doing whatever you choose.

The Books: For more about this year’s books and poetry selections, you will want to read the articles on pages 4 and 8. Each book is thought provoking — well worth reading and talking about.

The Discussions: They are the mainstays of the weekend. No single feature of the Asilomar Weekend accounts for the event’s long life as importantly as do the quality of our discussions. You will find good and well prepared leaders at each session. And you will find a group of not many more than a dozen participants, all ready, willing and able to enter into Great Books discussions.

The People: Seeing old friends is a reason why many regulars return to Asilomar year after year. If this is your first year, you will meet interesting new people with varied ideas and different ways of expressing them. Some of Asilomar’s best discussions and conversations are held in the dining hall or residential buildings after the formal discussions have concluded.

Evaluation Forms

We’ve all seen them, those evaluation forms given to us at Great Books events. We have filled them out and turned them in on the last day. And that’s exactly what we’ll do next April at Asilomar. How we evaluate our experience is important to the several people who plan and stage these events. They tabulate evaluation results and read comments carefully.




Their purpose is to make each event better than the last. So by finding out what went right and what didn’t, they learn what can be done to make improvements. Here are a few things you can do to help make Asilomar, The Long Novel Weekend, Poetry Weekend or other event

even better next time.

- ◆ Please look over the evaluation form when you receive it, usually when you arrive. Keep in mind the questions you are being asked and then fill out the appropriate part of the form shortly after the specific activity (each discussion, for example). Then turn in the form when you leave. The time and place for that will be announced.
- ◆ Most evaluation forms include space for comments. Your written comments are optional, but also bring matters to light that are not otherwise covered by the form. So if you have something to say, please say it.
- ◆ Finally, put your critical skills to work. Some leaders and discussions are better than others. Some are poorer. Give it some thought, and then jot down your honest and accurate appraisal giving both higher and lower scores as deserved. Your evaluation is more useful when you do.

The quality of leaders, the book selections and every other aspect of our annual events has improved greatly over the years. Many of these improvements originated with evaluation scores and comments made by you, the participants. Let’s keep it up





Save this Date

June 3, 2007

Annual Meeting and Picnic

Tilden Park, Berkeley

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL of SAN FRANCISCO ,
Serving Northern California:

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

READING MATTERS:
Chuck Scarcliff, Publisher
Tracy Oliver, Editor
Council Website: www.greatbooks-sf.com;

Discussion Leader Workshop (Continued from page 1)

“I like the dynamics of the group, the surprising insights that develop in the discussion.” – *theater lover*

“It is an intellectual challenge to develop questions that provoke a good group discussion.” – *writer*

“I am a better listener when I’m leading.” – *big talker*

Why Leaders Lead

“I read and think more carefully when I prepare to lead a discussion.” – *trainer*

“I enjoy the camaraderie with other leaders in pre-discussions.

We sort through our early and dimmest interpretations together.” – *manager*

“I like the after-thoughts of a discussion, talking on the drive home with a friend.” – *teacher*

“We keep the discussion on a level playing field. It is a democratic method. – *political scientist*

“Somebody has to do it.” – *pragmatist*

“A good discussion is a team effort. I like being part of the Great Books team.” – *coach*

**From the Publicity Committee
Share Your Love of Reading**

Tracy Oliver

Events Brochure

**Save the Date
April 13-15, 2007**

The Great Books Asilomar Weekend is one of the best ways for you to share your passion for books with others who feel the same way. Mark your calendar now and register before January 1 to take advantage of the early sign up discount.

The 2007 San Francisco Great Books Annual Events Brochure has arrived. This premier issue is sure to become a perennial classic. It provides an eagle-eye view of the main Great Books events scheduled for the coming year. Additional copies of the events brochure are available from our web-

site at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com>.

Gift Certificates

Here is a great new way for you to share your love of reading with your family and friends – gift it. Gift certificates can be purchased to fully or partially cover any event listed in the 2007 San Francisco Great Books Annual Events Brochure.

To purchase a gift certificate, send your name, address, phone and email information along with your payment to: Lou Alanko, 3479 Weaver Place, Reno, NV 89512. Make checks payable to The Great Books Council of San Francisco. For more information refer to our website at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/>.

Keep in Touch: You May Win a Gift Certificate

Please help us keep you informed. Send your email address to ilovetoread@sbcglobal.net and use *Great Books Email* as the subject line. With your permission, we will make sure you have up-to-date information about our San Francisco Council’s Great Books happenings by email. In appreciation, we will enter you in a drawing for a \$50 Great Books Gift Certificate (the winner will be determined by random drawing and notified by email in mid-January). The certificate can be used toward any event listed in the 2007 San Francisco Great Books Annual Events Brochure

Who We Are Not

Members of a debating society: We’re not in Great Books to argue; winners receive no trophy. Others in the room are not our adversaries. We listen to what they say, not to prepare rebuttals but because we benefit from their insight. Certainly we present our opposing points of view as clearly and as persuasively as we can and if others agree, fine. If not, we move on.

Scholars: Literary scholars, bless their hearts, conduct important research using such sources as biographical, social, historic or scientific data. Their work is important, but it is not our work. They study texts and more. We study texts — period.

Critics: Critics usually assess the strengths and weaknesses of a work and evaluate its quality. We may do that too, but on our own time. Not in the discussion. Reviewing a novel, for example, a critic may well consider the author’s background and childhood, and may compare or contrast this one with his or her other books. We don’t do that in Great Books.

Seekers of truth: This is the tricky one. Of course we are looking for truth. But in Great Books, our immediate goals are more modest. We read, discuss and interpret specific texts. We gain insight and may even uncover — or believe we have uncovered — essential truths along the way. But finding them is a bonus, not an objective.

The Books We'll Discuss at Asilomar

You may have seen *Iris*, the film of novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch's life. It starred Judi Dench and



Iris Murdoch

Kate Winslet. *The Bell* is among the best and most satisfying of the many fine novels Murdoch wrote. The title comes from a bell lost long ago from the Imber Abbey and the new bell that is to replace it. Like all good novels, this one is too complex to be summarized in a paragraph or two, but in it

we find compelling characters, emotional depth and moral ambiguity. Iris Murdoch was one of the most important British novelists and thinkers of the late 20th century; you can look forward to reading and discussing this representative work of hers.

Must religion and science be at odds with one another? In *Rocks of Ages*, Stephen Jay Gould says no. As separate domains, the two can and should coexist without unnecessary conflict. According to Gould, both have important places in human affairs and neither is to be ignored. Gould is a scientist whose writing is smooth, clear and readily understandable to the lay person.



In 2003, Nilo Cruz's *Anna in the Tropics* received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama; in 2007, we are discussing it at Asilomar.

This is a touching play set in a 1929 Tampa cigar factory where lectors (readers) read the news and novels to the employees as they work. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is among the novels one lector reads to the workers. In addition to a great story, this play is alive with social, moral and economic issues.



Moderator Barbara McConnell and Panel Members Sheri Kindsvater, Brent Browning and Anne Pym at the 2006 Saturday evening program at Asilomar.

Surprise at the Picnic

Kathleen Conneely

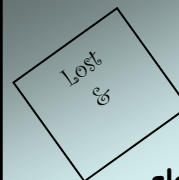
At the 2006 Picnic and Annual Meeting, Tom and Jan Vargo were surprised when they were singled out for recognition and received a Trader Joe's gift card and the crowd's applause.

It was a moment of appreciation for Tom and Jan who arrive an hour early at the Tilden Park picnic area and set up an intricate array of pipes, ropes and anchors and pipes to erect our two beautiful blue canopies above the food tables. And then afterwards, they spend 45 minutes taking it all down and packing it up for next year.



Tom also takes care of bulk mailing for the Council and Jan manages the database of members, addresses, etc. What a couple!

Other volunteers included Rob Calvert (flier design and registrar), Brent Browning (barbecue chef) and Vince Scardina and Tom Cox (book selection). Next year another person who is vital to the Picnic's success will be chosen for a moment of recognition and appreciation.



Attention 2006 Picnic-Goers
Missing any spoons or knives?
How about a white, cotton, long-sleeved sweatshirt or a single car key? They were left behind. Contact Kathleen Conneely (510) 530-2344.



Gary Geltemeyer makes his point in a 2006 Asilomar discussion

From the Foundation

Note: Don Whitfield, Director of Higher Education Programs, recently told us of three programs which are new or which the Foundation wishes to draw to our attention.

Learning in Retirement: How many Great Books groups have a waiting list of people hoping to get in? The group Jean Cawood leads does. It's offered through the Renaissance Society the Learning in Retirement program of Sacramento State University.

Non-credit Learning In Retirement programs (ILRs) can be found on college campuses throughout the United States and are offered by several northern California colleges and universities. For the past two years the Foundation has encouraged ILRs to include Great Books discussions in their offerings. IRLs have an organizational structure and membership conducive to starting and sustaining Great Books groups. If you are interested in starting a group in an ILR near your home, the Council and the Foundation will be happy to help.

The Civically Engaged Reader: In August 2006, the Foundation published a new anthology, *The Civically Engaged Reader*. Information about it can be found in the latest catalogue and on the Foundation's website. It is intended for use by those involved in volunteer activities of all kinds (however, upon skimming its contents, the anthology appears suitable for other discussions) and was edited by AmeriCorps and other such organizations. If you are active in a volunteer organization, you may find *The Civically Engaged Reader* useful as a focus for on-going discussion groups.

Discussion Programs in Prisons: During the past year, the Foundation — under Dan Born's leadership — has made progress bringing Great Books to prisons. There are four well-established groups (three in Mississippi and one in Tennessee) with a total of eighty members. Donations to the annual fund will enable the Foundation to provide books for this underserved population, men and women in prison

Great Books Chicago 2007 Weekend

Rick White

Know Thyself is the theme for Great Books Chicago 2007. Each year, held downtown and timed to the spring tulip bloom, the Great Books Foundation mounts a program whose core is three book discussions thoughtfully interwoven with cultural offerings of the city. This time, Friday, May 4, through Sunday, May 6, 2007, the books will be Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King*, Sherwood Anderson's series of stories, *Winesburg, Ohio*, and "A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms," from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. In addition to books and discussions, the \$230 price includes a Chicago Art Institute screening of Stravinsky's 55-minute opera *Oedipus the King*, the Joffrey Ballet production of *Light Rain* at Louis Sullivan's Auditorium Theatre, the Chicago Architecture Foundation river tour, and other activities to be announced. Transportation and hotel are not included.

Book discussions are held at the conference site, the Hilton Garden Inn. Rooms are \$188 single or double. Mentioning your AAA or AARP card when you call may lead to a further reduction in the rate.

The planning and coordination of this annual event are of the highest quality and thoroughness, as it is staffed by Foundation professionals and shaped and led by Foundation vice president Gary Schoepfel. A co-sponsor is Great Books-based Harrison Middleton University which helps with the costs and provides gifts for attendees. In 2006, gifts included a complete CD set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* with the *Merriam Webster Dictionary & Thesaurus* and an atlas.

After December 1st call 800-222-5870, and press 1 to register. For more information call 800-222-5870, ext. 345.

New in 2007



Next year the Great Books Foundation will publish



three new volumes for use in our discussion groups and for our reading. Months of publication are shown in parenthesis. Read more about these books in the next issue of *Reading*

Matters.

What's the Matter? Readings in Physics. (January)

Great Conversations 3. (April)

The Seven Deadly Sins Sampler. (August)

Dana Gioia: On the Importance of Reading

Note: On April 10, 2005 Poet and Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, Dana Gioia addressed the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco. A complete transcript of his speech is available from the Club. Quoted here are a few of

Mr. Gioia's remarks. Reading Matters thanks Claudia O'Callaghan for bringing this address to our attention.



The value of fiction: “Franz Kafka once said that the book is the axe by which we break open the frozen seas within us. That metaphor is very true.

We tend, by our very own nature, to be encased in our own egos. What literature does — nowhere more powerfully than in fiction — is to put us in the inner lives of other people, in the dailyness of their psychological, social, economic and imaginative existence.”

By-products of reading. “If you are a reader, you are overwhelmingly more likely to engage in positive social and civic behavior versus non-readers,”

Readers and other media. “Readers play video games, watch television; but they do them in a balanced way, versus people who are, increasingly, simply passive consumers of electronic entertainment.”

Intellectual and spiritual value. “I believe there is something fundamentally intellectual and spiritual that happens to readers through the combination of the sustained focused attention that you bring to reading, the use of your imagination to create pictures of the scenes, characters and situations, and also the use of your memory to draw those pictures out, versus being passive and having the images, pacing, tone and everything given to you.”

The decline of readers. In the last 20 years, the number of adult readers in the United States has stayed the same. The number of non-readers has increased by 40 million. There are more non-readers than readers.”
(Note: By “readers,” Mr. Gioia is referring to adults who read regularly; he is not speaking of literacy rates.)

Television now. “I was raised in an immigrant household where the adults did not speak English. I would see Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg on television — in-

conceivable now for a network show. The vision that the media gives us of ourselves is narrower and more commercial than ever.”

No Child Left Behind. “What I will say is that ‘No Child Left Behind’ has been surprisingly effective. Children involved in the program have increased their reading and math scores. African-American children most of all, Hispanic children next and white children, too.” *(Note: This quotation and all that follow are from Mr. Gioia's responses to questions from the audience.)*

The Internet. “The Internet is an extraordinary, powerful tool of communication, but it does operate, cognitively, rather differently from reading — in the same way that television differs from reading. The Internet is changing the nature of the American attention span, especially among the younger generation.”

Popular poetry. “There has been an explosion of popular poetry in the last quarter-century. You see it in rap and in the hip-hop culture. You see it in cowboy poetry. You see it in cafes and bars and bookstores taking poetry outside of the university. This is all good. The more diversity we have, the more avenues we have to bring people into the art form.”

“What literature does — nowhere more powerfully than in fiction — is to put us in the inner lives of other people in the dailyness of their psychological, social, economic and imaginative existence.”

Poetry Slams. “What I particularly like about poetry slams is that they do something that was unthinkable, un-genteel and rude; have a winner. The funny thing is that all the Greek arts — be

they drama, poetry or athletics — were done in competition, because the Greeks felt the drive for individual excellence was best stimulated through competition.”

Reciting poetry. “Over the past 50 years we have been teaching poetry as a problematic, difficult text you had to unravel and explain. Some poems *are* difficult texts you want to unravel and explain, but poetry is primarily a performative art. There is a very holistic thrill about getting up and reciting a poem — this great construction of language of emotion and imagery — and bringing it to the center of your being.”

Books and writers Mr. Gioia has read recently. “The book that I'm proudest to have finally read is *War and Peace*. The finest new novel I've read is Mario Vargas Llosa's *The War of the End of the World*, an absolute masterpiece. . . . The poet I've read most recently is a woman who lives in Greece named A. E. Stallings.”

Personal Profiles

Barbara McConnell

In Great Books since the 1960s . . . Active in Council, off and on, for thirty years . . . Currently Asilomar Committee Chair . . . Has been Vice President and President (twice) . . . Has led groups in Bay Area and Denver. Now lives in Ashland, Oregon . . . Husband Bob also Great Books member . . . Three sons and six perfect grandchildren.

Loves plays — especially Tom Stoppard’s — and the challenges of philosophical essays . . . Attended UC Berkeley during Pappy Waldorf’s time . . . Hobbies — “Working with people for the common good” a joy. Served on hospital Foundation’s board, Sonoma County Grand Jury and the Human Services Commissions . . . Enjoys Great Books discussions with well-prepared participants and insightful questions . . . Amazed and charmed by the power of group thinking . . . And an accomplished Great Books discussion leader.

Three Key People Of The Council

Lou Alanko

Formerly of East Bay, now living in Reno and active in Great Books there. . . In Great Books twenty years . . . Council, nine . . . Past Area Coordinator Tri-Valley (580-680 corridor) . . . Served as Council Vice President . . . Now active with Publicity Committee and Asilomar Publicity.

Most unforgettable Great Books event — commemoration of Martin Luther King Day at Allen Temple in Oakland . . . Learned to understand poetry at Poetry Weekend; now it is favorite annual event . . . Some of the best discussions came from book selections she didn’t particularly enjoy reading

Brent Browning

Thirty-one years Great Books experience . . . Twenty-eight, active with Council . . . Currently President, Acting Chair of Poetry Committee and Chair of By-Laws Committee. Home is in Santa Cruz Mountains . . . Brent and wife, Erma, “Supremely happy because we know what to ignore” . . . retired physician specializing in Anesthesiology . . . Graduated from UC Riverside, M.D. from UC Irvine. Taught physics and cardiovascular physiology to residents.

Prefers reading and discussing books on science and other non fiction subjects . . . Favorite reading: *A General Theory of Love* . . . “It talks about development and function of the parts of the brain that tell you who to trust, who to love and what to believe.” . . . A Shakespeare fan.

Never happier than when building something for the house — does carpentry, plumbing, electrical, landscaping and gardening. Works with all metals and wood

Not Just Another Bookstore

Briana Saussy

Reading and learning about a specific time, battle, philosophy, or question can be the origin point for increasing our knowledge of universal and archetypal ideas. Great books are not dry tomes written for another time, place, and people; rather they are living works that are relevant for our world today. We read them because they delight and inspire us, and can reveal pieces of ourselves that previously may have been unnoticed.

With this in mind, two St. John’s College graduates, Roxana Zirakzadeh and Briana Saussy, have opened a Great Books Institute called Symposium in Hayes Valley in San

The Symposium opens in November 2006. Its address is 235 Hayes Street, San Francisco. The telephone number is 415/437-0400 and the website, www.symposiumgbi.org

Francisco. The institute is a bookstore that also offers evening discussion classes for adults. Classes, typically once a week for 4-6 weeks, focus on specific books or themes. The institute is named after Plato’s Symposium the dialogue revered for its discussion of love which ultimately becomes a discussion about wisdom. It is inspiring because it claims that the desire for knowledge cannot exist in a vacuum—it needs community to thrive. Symposium, like the Great Books Foundation, believes that a great book is made greater through conversations as Ms. Zirakzadeh and Mrs. Saussy came to appreciate through St. Johns — a great books college where students learn by reading and discussing primary texts in small groups. While the focus there is upon the great books of western civilization, the college also offers a Masters in the great books of India, China and Japan. Ms. Zirakzadeh and Mrs. Saussy have completed both programs. Their experience at St. Johns inspired them to create a place where adults from all walks of life can come to-

(Continued on page 11)

Poems for Asilomar in 2007

You can count on your Asilomar weekend getting off to a good start with poetry discussions on Friday evening. This year the Poetry Committee has again selected poems you will surely find excellent to reading and discuss.

Exquisite is a word to be used sparingly when talking about poems. But is there an adjective that better describes “First Death in Nova Scotia,” one of this Billy Collins’ poetry is always fun to face, serious business is being done. His poem, “Litany” may be about a relationship. Or it may be a light hearted spoof of the images and metaphors of poetry. Or something altogether different. You decide. “Illuminations” by Stanley Kunitz, a former Poet Laureate who died recently at age 100 is on the agenda. For those unacquainted with the poetry of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, her poem “Going Home Day,” the experience of a girl leaving a Catholic boarding school, will be a treat. And many of us will be introduced to a poet who is new to us — Novalis, an 18th century German romantic — through a short but intriguing work of his. Finally, we have one of Wilfred Owens’ powerful World War I poems.



Elizabeth Bishop’s year’s choices?

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Awaiting you is a varied selection of fine and discussible poems. And quite accessible ones. You won’t want to miss it.

The Perfect Balance

The planners of the 2006 Poetry Weekend found the right balance between the joys and the serious sides of poetry.

For the evening program, attendees were invited to read or recite a favorite poem to the crowd. Many volunteered and offerings varied from the light-hearted to the dramatic. Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” (in both English and German, no less), Whitman’s “O Captain, My Captain,” two poems by Sylvia Plath and one by A. E. Houseman were among the ones read or recited. And to cap it off, participants were divided into groups for a choral reading of “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” by Robert Service.

Dana Gioia (See his comments on page 6) would have approved. This was poetry performed and brought to life through the spoken word.

But during the daytime on Saturday and Sunday participants enjoyed the serious and thought-provoking discussions we expect from Great Books. This year’s agenda included poems following the theme of “Nature as Metaphor.” Poems included a beautiful and thoughtful ode to moss (of all things) by W. S. Merwin and one by Jane

Hirschfield that compared the now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t sighting of a deer with some of life’s experiences. The Saturday afternoon discussion was a tribute to Stanley Kunitz, the former Poet Laureate who died earlier this year. The final discussion, the potpourri session, included — among an array of fine poems — a sonnet by Shakespeare, a poetic lecture on love by John Donne and a dark and powerful holocaust poem by Paul Celan.



Once again, the Poetry Committee recognized the pleasures that can only come from reading and hearing poems read aloud, and the fascination that comes from delving into their serious content. And they did it with perfect balance.

Obscenity Authenticated

There is a place that releases
dirty words.

It lies
under the skin,
under the skull,
under the brain’s convolutions.

Rising from the spinal chord,
rising from its stem,
this dark and ancient place
holds rage and lust.

From its depths
reptilian shadows hiss,
chemical voltage storms
across membranes into consciousness.

Gossamer neural pathways
still transmit
the grunting terror
Of primordial memories.

Charlotte Stark

A Gift of Words

The Century House Poetry Reading Series is holding a reading that should interest many of us. Numerous poets have written poems to be sent translated into Arabic and sent to the Iraqi people as personal and poetic words from our country to theirs. Hosted by Pleasanton Poet Laureate Cynthia Bryant, a reading of these poems (in English) will be held on December 3rd from 1:00 to 5:00 pm at The Century House, 2401 Santa Rita Rd., Pleasanton. Admission is \$5.00.

Irish Theater Comes to the Bay Area

By Breda Courtney

Wilde Irish Productions was established in 2002 by founders who have been actively involved in theatrical production for over 20 years. The company, which has already garnered awards and excellent reviews, promotes cultural richness and diversity using the Irish experience and Irish authors and artists as point of departure.

Through its theatrical, literary and other artistic activities, Wilde Irish encourages integration, and the dissolution of cultural and ethnic barriers on local, national and international levels.



Filtered through an Irish sensibility but with resonance far beyond the confines of nationality, it produces rich and provocative works which throw light on issues of personal, political, religious,

racial and social concern.

In its first year (2003) the company produced two plays. *The Importance of Being Oscar* by Irish playwright Micheal mac Liammoir won two Dean Goodman awards, one for Best Actor (Arthur Scappaticci) one for Best Director (Gemma Whelan). The other was *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett. Both were performed at the Berkeley City Club to great critical acclaim.

In 2004 Wilde Irish was honored to produce the West Coast Premiere of Patricia Burke Brogan's award winning *Eclipsed*, the harrowing play about women confined to the Magdalene laundries in Ireland from the 1850's to the 1980's. This production played to rave reviews at the Berkeley City Club for the month of May, and was remounted at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in July.

Our 2005 U.S. premiere production of Marina Carr's *Ariel*, a powerful contemporary tale of passion, power and destruction, was well received by critics and public alike. *Ariel* is a fiercely theatrical re-imagining of Iphigenia infused with the language and idiom of the Irish Midlands. Our second 2005 production, *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* by Frank McGuinness, also received excellent reviews.

In addition to our theatrical work, in 2004 we produced the first Bloomsday Festival in Berkeley, a day-long celebration of the centennial of Leopold Bloom's famous one day walk through the streets of Dublin as de-

tailed in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In collaboration with the Berkeley City Club, the event included a Joycean lunch and dinner accompanied by readings from *Ulysses* and live music by Shay Black, a renowned Irish singer and musician. By popular demand, we repeated the Festival in 2005, and 2006. It is now an annual event. In June, the San Francisco Bay Guardian awarded us The Best of The Bay Award as "The Best Bloomin' Thespians" for our 2006 Bloomsday presentation.

Wilde Irish also participates in Bay Area Cultural events including, the Annual Crossroads Celebration sponsored by the Irish Arts Foundation and the International Cultural Celebration at U.C. Berkeley. Our involvement includes staged readings, poetry recitations and panel discussions. For the month-long San Francisco Labor Fest, we performed two staged readings at the United Irish Cultural Center; one an original piece based on the life of Irish born Mother Jones and the second a tribute to the heroes of the 1916 Easter Rising particularly labor leader James Connolly.

2006 ends with a Centennial Celebration of Samuel Beckett with readings from his work and viewing a film on his life in Berkeley on November 19th and at the Koret Auditorium of the San Francisco Library at 2:00 PM on December 2nd.

Plans for 2007 include *Sisters* starring Tony Award winner Anna Manahan (Beauty Queen of Leenane) in the spring and later, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* by Martin McDonagh

Please visit www.wildeirish.org for reviews of past shows or call 510-841-7287 for information on current productions.

Note: Breda Courtney of Berkeley, Executive Director and a founder of Wilde Irish Productions, is active in Great Books. .

Reading Matters is pleased to let you know that Tracy Oliver has become its Editor. You can look forward to seeing Tracy's work and ideas in the newsletter.

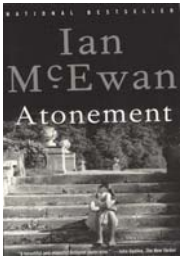
We also welcome Sheri Kindsvater to the Asilomar team. As the new registrar, Sheri is the person you will be in touch with when you sign up.

Two Books Reviewed and Recommended

Atonement

by Ian McEwan

A question mark could have been included after the title of Ian McEwan's haunting look at one person's attempt to make reparation for a lie that destroyed two lives and brought misery to more than one family. McEwan begins his story in 1935 England at the Tallis manor house where we meet thirteen year old Briony (youngest daughter of Emily and Jack Tallis) who, early in the novel, does a bad, thing, a "crime" that causes great suffering. *Atonement's* cast of characters includes, Briony's older sister Cecelia and her brother Leon, both just returning from Cambridge; and Robbie Turner, their childhood friend and char woman's son who owes his Cambridge education to the benevolence of Jack Tallis. The family fortune made by Grandfather Tallis with his patents on padlocks and hasps, brings "new money" and class distinctions to the forefront.



Atonement covers six decades in Briony's life — the havoc World War II brings to England, the war zone in France, replete with the horrors involved in the allies' retreat to Dunkirk, and her long lasting attempt to make up for the crime she committed. With psychological insight, McEwan slices into the personalities, first of Briony, her flair for the dramatic, her imagination, her stories which make her an acclaimed author; Cecelia and Robbie and the tragedy that besets them; the cousins Lola and her twin brothers; Leon and his wealthy friend Paul Marshall as well as Briony's parents, Emily and Jack, leaving the reader, at the novel's end, to grapple with the question the title itself raises. With a double-edged ironic twist, McEwan provides adds yet another dimension to this complex tale, bringing not only astonishment, but also new questions about human nature itself and the need to find restitution for what may indeed be unforgivable. This is Ian McEwan at his finest — thought provoking, compelling and unforgettable.

Recommended and Reviewed by Mary Lentz

Read any good books lately? *Reading Matters* would like to hear about them. Contact Chuck Scarcliff, 916/428-4672, ckdxs@sbcglobal.net or at 7738 Quinby Way, Sacramento, CA 95823

The Penelopiad

by Margaret Atwood

We've all heard Odysseus' story. Now with Margaret Atwood's recent novel, we hear Penelope's side. What really happened while her husband was away, and what was their reunion really like? What did she think of the Trojan War? Of Helen? Atwood tells the familiar tale but from Penelope's point of view with the maids who served her speaking as the chorus. They give a woman's perspective to a myth originally and traditionally told by men. And Atwood adds a contemporary twist.



To her credit, Atwood sticks to the story told in *The Odyssey* and elsewhere in Greek myth. This limits the novel somewhat — Penelope's life while Odysseus was away wasn't always exciting and some of her attitudes are predictable. And there is little suspense; we already know how the story must end. But if that is a limitation, the author makes up for it. And more. She does it with witty prose that often places contemporary idiom into Penelope's mouth. And she adds a reflective wisdom we do not find in the original.

But Atwood's stroke of brilliance comes from elevating the "twelve maids" to importance and letting them have their say. They are twelve slaves who served Penelope while her husband was away, but who Odysseus ordered to be hanged when he returned. (*The Odyssey*, Book 22, lines 470-73). Why did he order their execution? Possibly from sheer cruelty or from blindly asserting his power. Or maybe it was no more than a domestic misunderstanding.

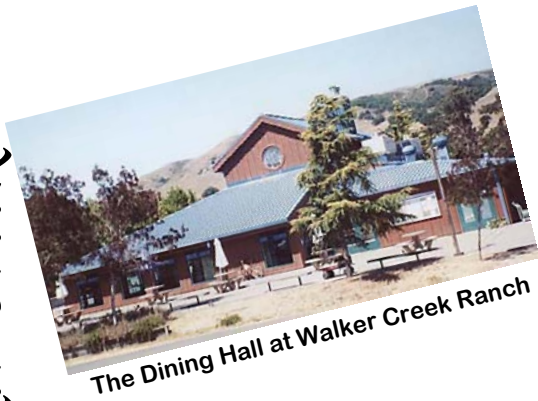
But the maids have a thing or two to say about their cruel death, and about what really occurred while Odysseus was away. Was Penelope really the faithful wife (and thereby a model for all other wives) that the myth proclaims? She insists that she was, but the maids tell a different story.

The Penelopiad is a short, gracefully and cleverly written entertaining and intelligent novel. It's well worth reading — even for those who are not especially interested in *The Odyssey* or Greek myth.

Recommended and Reviewed by Chuck Scarcliff

And The Long Novel Weekend of

Walker Creek



The Dining Hall at Walker Creek Ranch



Discussing *The Ambassadors*



Participants from another Conference



William Corbett Jones Speaks at the Evening Program



Walker Creek Ranch From Above



Inside the Dining Hall

Not Just Another Bookstore (Continued from page 7)

gether to learn about, read, and discuss some of the best works of philosophy, history, theology, science, and literature in the world.

Symposium provides a space for adults to read and discuss classics they have always wanted to read and to discover new ones. Symposium is unique in that it carries not only the best works within the Western tradition, but it also recognizes great books from other great civilizations — China, Japan, India, the Middle East, as well as collections of Celtic legends and Norse sagas. By including great books from these cultures there will always be something new. Even for seasoned great books readers. For those who like Aristotle's outlook on things, it may be time to investigate the Analects of Confucius. Fans of the *Iliad* will see Achilles' situation echoed in the Indian epic the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

When we read a great book we open up to a new world, we recollect and remember ideas that make us more complete as individuals. But when we sit and discuss them with others, our community becomes a richer place in which to work and live.

Long Novel Weekend
2007
The Sound and the Fury
By William Faulkner
August 25 & 26, 2007
Walker Creek Ranch, Marin County
Look for more information in the 2007 Spring-Summer issue of *Reading Matters*.

London Theatre Tour for Thinkers V
6 Handpicked Plays. 5 Discussions.
October 22-27, 2007



Contact Ted Kraus at (925)939-3658
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Great Books Events — Coming In 2007

Northern California Events

February 3: Mini-Retreat 1984, George Orwell. Contact Claudia O'Callaghan; callcoc@aol.com.

February 10: Great Books Leaders' Workshop. Contact Kay White, kaycleveland@aol.com

April 13-15: Asilomar Great Books Weekend *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* Stephen Jay Gould; *The Bell*: Iris Murdoch; *Anna of the Tropics*: Nilo Cruz; selected poetry. Contact Barbara McConnell, Chair, barbaramcc29@msn.com, or Sheri Kindsvater, Registrar, kindsvater@aol.com.

June 3: Annual Meeting and Picnic Reading Selection to be announced. Contact Kathleen Conneely, (510) 530-2344.

August 25-26: Long Novel Weekend *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner. Contact Chuck Scarcliff, ckdxs@sbcglobal.net or Mary Stuart, mlstu@aol.com.

November 10-11: Poetry Weekend Contact Theda & Oscar Firschein, RegistrarsOscarfl@earthlink.net

Events Elsewhere

January 19-21: Florida Great Books Winter Confer-

ence, Longboat Key (near Sarasota) Fl. Theme: "The Latin American Experience." Readings *100 Years of Solitude* (Marquez), *House of the Spirits* (Allende) & *Pedro Paramo*, (Rulfo). Contact Patrick DeMarco, reader102@juno.com

May 4-6: Great Books Chicago. Please see the article on Page 5 for complete information.

June 22-24: Pacific Northwest 48th Great Books Institute. Readings include *Candide* (Voltaire), *The End of Faith* (Sam Harris), *Richard III* (Shakespeare), *Disgrace* (Coetzee). Contact mthomamurray@comcast.net.

July 15-20: Toronto Pursuits. Readings include *Moby Dick*, *Faust* (Goethe) *Julius Caesar & Coriolanus*, *Children of the Alley* (Mahfouz) and more. Contact Ann Kirkland, ann.kirkland@classicalpursuits.com for information about this or other Classical Pursuits programs.

August 5-11: Wachs Great Books Week (Colby College, Maine) Theme: "Thresholds of Science." Readings include *Walden* (Thoreau), Selections from *The Origin of Species & The Descent of Man* (Darwin), *Enemy of the People* (Ibsen) and others. Contact agreatbook@aol.com.

October 22-27: London Theatre Tour for Thinkers V. Contact Ted Kraus. (925)939-3658 or tmktheatretours@hotmail.com.