

Reading Matters



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



An **A** for Asilomar

And it's a big red "A." Yes, next April we will be reading and discussing Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic *The Scarlet Letter*. You haven't read it? Well, now's your chance. Oh, you have read it? A couple times? Doesn't matter. This novel is so rich in meaning and opportunity that there will always be more to be gleaned from its pages.

Certainly the novel's strict Puritan society no longer exists, but its moral and human questions live on and can readily be applied to the 21st century. Sin and guilt have not gone away. Nor have struggles for individual identity versus the force of society — any society. Hester Prynne, heroic in her way, is one of the great characters of literature. She and her life speak to us now.

(Continued on page 4)

Great Books Leader Training A Day in the Life

Mary Wood

Arriving at Rossmoor in Walnut Creek, I was a little anxious. You see, I am the new leader trainer, so the session was training for me in *how* to lead leader training. I had a chance to relax when I arrived at the clubhouse in time to socialize with the 15 attendees over pastries and coffee. Here's a glimpse of how our day went...

Kay White welcomed us and introduced the resource leaders — **Barbara McConnell, Brent Browning, Rick White**, and me. Kay, who designed the leader training seminar, was there to wrap up her job as leader trainer and move on to her new role as President of the Great Books Council of San Francisco.

I led the opening session focused on the "homework"

(Continued on page 4)

Tell a Friend . . .

We're betting that you have friends who will enjoy Great Books just as you do. You know who they are — folks who enjoy reading and, even more than that, sharing their ideas and listening to what others say on important subjects. More often than not, these are people with wide and varied interests plus a willingness to expand their horizons. They could be any age, either gender and have any level of formal education. In our Gathering of Equals those things don't matter.

And we hope you will tell them about the Asilomar Great Books Weekend. Encourage them to sign up and join you and the rest of us for a spring weekend at one of the most picturesque sites imaginable.

Bring a Friend

Asilomar

The weekend begins with the arrival of around 150 Great Books enthusiasts on Friday afternoon and continues through Sunday lunch. An orientation for new attendees, four discussions — poetry selections, a novel, a nonfiction reading and a play — and a party with entertainment and refreshments are all on the schedule. Lodging, six meals and the books are included in the cost.

This year's reading selections:

Selected Poems
The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne
The Discourses (Selection), Machiavelli
Painting Churches, Tina Howe

In a Nutshell

President's Letter

To the Great Books Council of San Francisco
October 1, 2007

Kay C. White

Brent Browning, as Council President (2005-2007), set us on a good course. Brent transfers an Executive Committee humming with good will and ideas for our coming events. Thank you, Brent, and you, too, **Erma**, (past Council President and wife) for your stewardship and friendship.

The top priority of my presidency is to recruit new readers, and the time is auspicious. The first wave of baby boomers is heading into retirement. Many of our own offspring have passed the intense years of raising small children and launching careers. **Rick** and I have recruited four relatives so far, and many of you in Great Books could probably do the same. As encouragement Great Books of San Francisco is offering a family package for Asilomar 2008. (See page 6 for details.) There are world-class recreational choices in and near Asilomar: the Monterey Aquarium, bicycling, beachcombing, kayaking, and for fourth graders heading into California history curriculum, the Monterey mission. Invite the younger generation to join us.

A profusion of electronic mail has been exchanged in planning a special 50th anniversary spring weekend, Asilomar 2008, April 11-13. Thanks to **Brian Mahoney, Ted Kraus, Chuck Scarcliff, Howard Crane, Barbara McConnell, Lou Alanko, Sheri Kindsvater, and Jim Hall**, we've completed book selections, set the rates, and prepared the announcements, as well as drafting our 2008 Calendar of Events. As e-mail is so much easier than holding meetings, what we do and how we do it is discussed almost continuously and most who wish to can readily participate.

All but a few of us now have computers with internet access. For those who do not, local libraries provide the machines and some assistance. Jim Hall (jimsrhall@earthlink.net) will include you on our e-mail list. Be assured that we are still committed to retaining the executive committee's decision-making role, but preliminary discussions are mostly electronic.

In September, Rick and I visited St. John's College, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Exclusively a great books college, without professors and lectures but with tutors and seminars, St. Johns follows the discussion rules we do, the "method of shared inquiry." The students number about

600. In the campus bookstore we found three, four, maybe five translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. I can imagine students comparing translations, and some of them reaching for the original version in the Tuscan dialect. It is reassuring to see their fresh interest in timeless literature.

We hear repeatedly from Great Bookies in Chicago and Washington that our San Francisco Council is leading the way with our five yearly special events, our website, and our lively newsletters, print and electronic.

What part of the action do you want? Want to write a press release for your local newspaper? Lead a discussion? Give someone a ride to Asilomar? Host newcomers? Take photos? Lead a nature walk? Please call me at (415) 382-1927 or e-mail at kaycleveland@aol.com.

Let's begin the next fifty years of Great Books with an unforgettable Asilomar 2008 weekend.

Appreciating Jimmie and Roy Harvey

Note: *This summer the Great Books Council of San Francisco recognized Jimmie and Roy Harvey for their many years of service. Over the years they have done nearly everything the Council needed to have done. This includes Roy's years as Council Secretary and Jimmie's (with Roy's collaboration) work as Registrar for Asilomar. They appreciated the honor and asked that Reading Matters allow them to express their thanks.*

"Jimmie and Roy Harvey want to thank everyone for their thoughtfulness and generosity in sending us the plaque and the crystal bowl, and most especially for the numerous handwritten notes of appreciation. It was our honor to serve in the capacity we did for the past dozen years. Please know that we have not deserted Great Books - we simply took a sabbatical. We'll be back next year with bells on! Thanks for your love and devotion!"

Jimmie and Roy Harvey

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL of SAN FRANCISCO , Serving Northern California

OFFICERS:

Kay White, President;
Jim Hall, Vice President;
Linda Coffin, Secretary;
Roy Harvey, Treasurer;
Brent Browning, Past President.

READING MATTERS:

Chuck Scarcliff, Publisher
Tracy Oliver, Editor

It's Official The Council's Officers for 2007-08

At the Annual Meeting and Picnic in June, **Kay White** was elected President; **Jim Hall**, Vice-President, **Linda Coffin**, Secretary and **Roy Harvey**, Treasurer of the Great Books Council of San Francisco.

We Can Be Proud

Chuck Scarcliff

No other Great Books council from around the country matches for our own Great Books Council of San Francisco. With the Asilomar Great Books Weekend, the Mini-Retreat, the Long Novel and Poetry Weekends plus annual workshops for leaders, we offer our members more activities and more choices than can be found anywhere else. And we do these things with excellence.

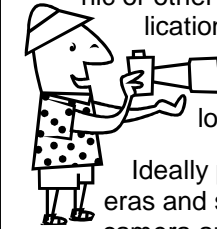
This is not my opinion alone. Earlier this year I was in Chicago and learned that key people with the Great Books Foundation have a high regard for us and the things we do. Also, while there I was able to meet folks from other regions and to learn about and compare their activities with ours. My conclusion? We come out on top.

A tradition of strong leadership has made this so. Recent past presidents of the Council — **Brent Browning**, **Brian Mahoney**, **Barbara McConnell** — and our current president — **Kay White** — prove my point. We always have had the right people in the most important positions. And we have always had many serving the Council well by filling any number of other positions of responsibility. **Lou Alanko**, **Louise DiMattio**, **Mary Wood**, **Roy Harvey** and many others fit that category now. And we are not stopping there. People new to the Council are continuously coming forward and making important contributions. **Sherri Kindsvater**, **Tracy Oliver**, **Linda Coffin** and **Howard Crane** now are doing exactly that and are all relatively new to Council activities. Ours is not a leadership of stodgy old-timers.

To **Rick White's** credit and legacy, *Reading Matters* is certainly the best of the newsletters published by a Great Books council. Rick, who was publisher for several years until 2005, made the newsletter what it is. And once again, we're not stopping there. With the website, under **Rob Calvert's** guidance, and the electronic newsletter created this year by **Jim Hall**, the Council is keeping up with the times and maybe even staying a step ahead. And with more innovations on the horizon, the Great Books Council of San Francisco will remain leader of the pack

Photographers *Reading Matters Needs You!*

Your photos of Great Books activities and people could appear in these pages. There are a couple of possibilities. If you take a few pictures at Asilomar, the Annual Picnic or other events, send some to us for possible publication. Or you could become a regular "staff photographer" for *Reading Matters*. Your photographic contributions can be tailored to whatever works best for you.



Ideally photos will be snapped using digital cameras and sent to us by e-mail but if you use a film camera and send prints, that's fine too. Either way, we are likely to do some minor editing (photoshopping) to pictures we receive.

If you are interested, please get in touch with Chuck Scarcliff (ckdxs@sbcglobal.net or 916-428-4672) for further details.

Classical Pursuits

Learning Vacations with a Difference

Classical Pursuits, based in Toronto and under Ann Kirkland's skillful leadership, is separate from Great Books but works in partnership with The Great Books Foundation in conducting events of interest to anyone who loves books, discussions and a wide array of cultural activities.



Toronto Pursuits is an annual week long event, next year to be held from July 13th to the 18th. Focus for the upcoming event will be upon creativity in the later part of life. Participants have twelve options from which to choose. They include Plays (Shakespeare and O'Neill), The Bible, The Search for Meaning in Later Life (Jung, Campbell, Auden and others), Late Beethoven, Poetry (Yeats, Stevens, Bishop), Hemingway and six other seminars. Additional

(Continued on page 10)

Spread the News!



Nothing is better than *word of mouth* for telling the world about Asilomar and other Great Books activities. So let your friends and relatives know what's going on and encourage them to take part in those things that only Great Books offers.



(Continued from page 1) **An A For Asilomar**

But the weekend begins with Poetry discussions on Friday evening. And it'll be a beginning to remember. Each year the Poetry Committee selects a variety of excellent works that touch upon different aspects of the human experience in varied ways. 2008 continues that tradition. The poets whose works we will be reading include two former American Poets Laureates, one Nobel Prize winner, a former resident of Carmel and the greatest of all 20th Century American poets—not a bad crowd.

“The Moose in the Morning” by Mona Van Duyn takes an ordinary event — sighting a moose in northern Maine — and elevates its significance to heights only a fine poet can reach. Irving Feldman’s “The City and its Own” not only describes New York but makes us *feel* the city and life within it. “The Master Speed” is a sonnet by Robert Frost; you can decide what it is “about.” Marriage perhaps? Or maybe something else? The other poems on the agenda are “The Purse Seine” by Robinson Jeffers, “The Naming of the Parts” by Henry Reed, “The Bog Queen” by Seamus Heaney and “Aristotle” by Billy Collins.

When we hear or see the name “Machiavelli” most of us think of devious politicians — the ends justifying the means, etc. But there was more to Niccolo Machiavelli than we'll find by reading only his most well-known work, *The Prince*. *The Discourses*, this year's non-fiction selection, shows a more reflective and analytical side of Machiavelli. It focuses upon the traditions, laws and institutions that work best not only for the rulers but for the populace. It's a practical-minded writing that has never lost its relevance.

And finally, meet the Church family — Gardner, Fanny and Margaret (Mags) of Tina Howe's *Painting Churches*, the play we'll be discussing. These are three interesting and unusual people — they even have a parakeet that recites lines from Gray's “Elegy.” Gardner is a Pulitzer Prize winning poet now in his seventies and lacking some of his former mental abilities. Fanny, his wife, can not be categorized or labeled but she's a character you'll want to meet and know. Their daughter Mags is an up-and-coming artist living in New York. So when the elder Churches relocate from their long-time Boston home to a smaller place on Cape Cod, she comes to help with the move. And to paint her parents' portrait. From this beginning a very poignant and human story develops, sometimes with conflict but always with love.

(Continued from page 1) **Great Books Leader Training**

questions from the pre-meeting mailing which included an essay on leading and developing questions and some short readings. Participants were well-prepared and enthusiastic so a lively discussion and a good review of the basic principles of leading resulted.

Brent spoke on *reading for leading*. He suggested reading the text a number of times with different goals in mind — *first*, identifying key areas of the text with question marks in the margin; *second*, looking for issues and areas of controversy; *finally*, attaching an issue to each question mark and developing actual questions. This orderly process gives a framework for forming good discussion questions.

Barbara used a reading from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in leading a sample discussion that demonstrated leadership principles in action. We compared the questions that she asked with the ones that we had developed on our own. Barbara also demonstrated how to gracefully handle a variety of staged disruptive behaviors, teaching us how to be good leaders by keeping the discussion on track and working for everyone.

After a brief picnic lunch it was the participants' turn to practice leading. We divided into small groups, each with an experienced discussion leader as part of the team. The goal was to help each other have a successful experience leading a small group discussion. For content, we were able to choose from a selection of O' Henry short stories and a selection of short poems. Each participant led two 20-minute discussions followed by 10 minutes of feedback from the group and the resource leader.

Once the small group sessions were complete, we reconvened as a large group for an overall debriefing. Rick spoke about follow-up questions and Barbara covered what participants want out of a discussion. Social time and snacks rounded out a wonderful day.

Great Books Leader Training is open to everyone — so if this day in the life sounds interesting, mark your calendar for **Saturday, May 3, 2008**, the date of our next scheduled training. Registration details will be available later. Anyone who is interested is encouraged to attend. While attending a session does not commit you to lead in the future, it just might help you become a better reader and discussion participant.

I look forward to seeing you at the next Leader Training Workshop.

San Francisco 2008 Mini-Retreat Set for February 2

This annual Mini-Retreat in San Francisco has become a much anticipated event by many Great Books aficionados.

The 2008 gathering will focus on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera. The story revolves around four Prague residents, two men and two women who try to make sense of their existence against the backdrop of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The event will include a two-hour discussion of the book in the morning followed by a lunch break and viewing of the film based on the book in the afternoon. The Mechanics Institute Library at 57 Post Street in San Francisco is easily accessible via BART and offers an intimate setting for the book discussion but the capacity limits of the location makes early registration a necessity.

If you have attended this event in the past, you are already on the mailing list and will automatically receive an announcement flier with registration details; if you have not attended, but would like to receive the announcement, please contact Claudia O'Callaghan, Mini-Retreat Coordinator, at callcoc@aol.com with your name and full mailing address. Fliers will be mailed in November.

Note: *The Mini-Retreat fills quickly every year and receiving the announcement flyer does not guarantee you a spot so be sure to send in your registration as early as possible.*

Innovative New Ways to Receive Great Books News & Info

Since its beginning this summer, many Great Books members have signed up and are receiving news, information of interest and more via the e-newsletter.

It's off to a great start and will only get better as more features are added — tips for discussion leaders, writings from and about Great Books people, book reviews and other materials of interest. The e-newsletter is usually sent out monthly and you will continue to receive *Reading Matters* twice a year. To receive this new way of staying informed, please send your name and e-mail address to Jim Hall, jim-



If you have not attended Great Books events sponsored by the Council, the Mini-Retreat is an excellent starting point.

shall@earthlink.net. We will never share your e-mail address or any personal information with others

About *Reading Matters*, our printed newsletter, you can elect to receive it by e-mail rather than from your mail carrier. That means you would be receiving your copy a few days earlier and with photographs in color. And The Great Books Council of San Francisco will save in printing and mailing costs. Who knows? Before long we may even save a tree or two. For this option, also contact Jim Hall, jimshall@earthlink.net.

No god but God Featured at the 2007 Annual Picnic

Kathleen Conneely

Under a sparkling summer sun, 45 picnickers sat together to enjoy an appetizing barbeque lunch. After a brief meeting with election of officers, groups were formed for lively discussions of *No god but God* by Reza Aslan.

Though it is the fastest-growing religion in the world, Islam remains, for much of the West, shrouded in ignorance and fear. What is the essence of this ancient faith? How does Allah differ from the God of the Jews and Christians? Can an Islamic state be founded on democratic values such as pluralism and human rights? A writer and scholar of comparative religions, Reza Aslan has earned international acclaim for the passion and clarity he brings to these questions. In the introduction to *No god but God* he challenges the argument that the world is embroiled in a "clash of civilizations" between the modern, democratic societies of the West and the archaic, autocratic societies of the Middle East.

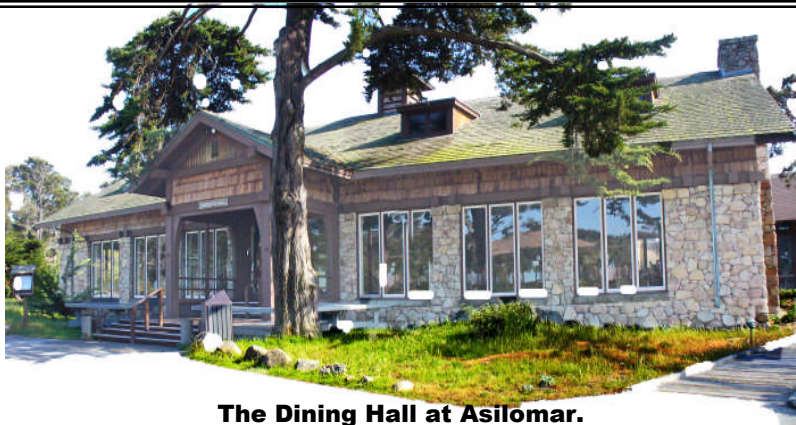
No god but God examines how, in the shadow of European colonialism, Muslims developed conflicting strategies to reconcile traditional Islamic values with the social and political realities of the modern world. This contest over the future of Islam has become a battle between those who seek to enforce a rigid and archaic legal code and those who struggle to harmonize the teachings of the Prophet with contemporary ideals of democracy and human rights. According to the author, we are now living in the era of "the Islamic Reformation." *No god but God* is a persuasive and elegantly written account of the roots of the reformation and the hopeful future of Islamic faith.



Pioneer Great Bookie?

This carved stone in the Old City Cemetery of Sacramento marks the grave of Harry R. Snow who died in 1882 at age 26. In case the photo is unclear, the stone has a stack of books with the one on top open.

Sights of Asilomar



The Dining Hall at Asilomar.



A discussion, lunch, registration and the beach.



A sign that isn't (or is) for us.

Asilomar is for Families Too

Kay White

Invoke your family to join you at Asilomar.

Great Books is celebrating its 50th weekend at Asilomar, April 11-13, 2008. What a perfect time to start an annual Great Books tradition in your family. Bring your children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces. Involve your family in Great Books and let them share the experience this year and for many years to come.



Special family lodging rates are available for rooms that accommodate four or more people. Family registrants will be housed in a common building to make it easier to meet other great books families – come make new friends and perhaps plan an outing together.

Our Asilomar weekend schedule allows enough free time for afternoon excursions on both Saturday and Sunday. You can even arrange to have box picnic lunches available by indicating your preference on the registration form.

Bicycles, helmets, locks, and trail maps are available for full or half day rental at the Asilomar social hall. You can play pool and ping-pong in the social hall too.

(Continued on page 11)

Asilomar Memories

Chuck Scarcliff

Note: Reading Matters asked several members to tell us about a few of their memories of past Asilomar Great Books Weekends. Here, plus a few memories of my own, are some of our responses.

Now here's a memory you won't top. A past Asilomar registrar tells of a time several years ago when **Barbara McConnell**, the program chair, asked if she could come up with a 4'x8' sheet of plywood. It seems that **Roy Harvey** who was on the program needed the plywood as a platform for his tap dancing routine. The registrar knew Roy at the time but became better acquainted after his performance when she told him how impressed she was with his dancing. A short time later he called and asked her to go out with him. And the rest is, well, you know — a couple of years later this registrar (first name, **Jimmie**) became **Jimmie Harvey**.

Alex Appell recalls not just a book but a line from it. The book was Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. Buber's admonition was that the words "should" and "ought" be used only in the first person singular. For Alex, this was a life lesson that came from an Asilomar reading and discussion. It's a good lesson. The book that stands out in **Louise DiMattio's** memory is a novel, *Celestial Navigation* by Anne Tyler. People talked about that one for hours after the formal discussions were over — even for a group which, after leaving Asilomar, stopped for dinner on the way home and kept on discussing the novel. **Bob Calvert** remembers a year when there was a theme for the weekend. Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia* and Skinner's *Walden II* were read and discussed that year. **Lucy Whybrow Ortega** remembers Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* at least partly because it was one of the times she led an Asilomar discussion. The three books that made their impacts on **Lou Alanko** were *The Undiscovered Self* (Carl Jung), *Ethics* (Aristotle) and *Madame Bovary* (Gustav Flaubert). **Beatrice Petrocchi** mentioned two plays — *J.B* (MacLeish), *M. Butterfly* (Hwang) and two novels — *Woman of the Dunes* (Abe), *Age of Iron* (Coetzee). Good and memorable choices, Bea.

Sooner or later in a survey like this, someone was bound to bring up *The Universe is a Green Dragon*. Most of us who were there have tried to forget that one. But **Kyra** and **Hal Hubis** remember it. And maybe it's a good sign. Over the years so few books have truly bombed that we remember those that did.

When I thought back to the books that are my most memorable, I faced a couple of surprises. The first was that both were non-fiction works (Usually I prefer the

novels and poems.). Second in decidedly different ways, both dealt with spiritual issues (I'm generally not drawn to them either.) One was *Saviors of God* a strange, strange book by Nikos Kazantzakis (who also wrote *Zorba the Greek*) and the other, and one of the most beautiful little books I've ever read, was *Zen and the Art of Archery*, by Eugen Herrigel. I've re-read both books several times since and I shudder thinking that had it not been for Asilomar I wouldn't have read either one.

Louise recalls Saturday evening entertainment, both recent and distant. Last year's program staged by **Karen Schneider** (with assists from others) hit the spot with her. But also Louise remembers the ballroom dancing exhibitions of **Mark** and **Lydia Scardina** and watching them glide across the Merrill Hall floor. And how about **The Sentimentals**? This was a musical group — **Earl Mortenson** on the sax, **Bob Calvert** at the piano, **Bob McConnell** on drums and **Brent Browning** playing the accordion (and others from time to time). — and they were good. One year they were joined by a young man, a college underclassman with a background and training in music. He, as I recall, possessed the measure of humility we expect of a person his age. And did he have an eye-opener! After practicing and playing with The Sentimentals for a while, he found he couldn't keep up.

Lou Alanko came to Asilomar after a number of years as a member of **Jan** and **Larry Fussell's** well-led groups in Pleasanton. She remembers encountering new Great Books leaders, not better ones but different in their approaches and techniques.

Many who answered my inquiry mentioned the names of memorable people they met and came to know at Asilomar. I'm not going to recite the names, but will say that Asilomar has always been — and still is — home to some of the most interesting and loveable people we can be fortunate enough to know.

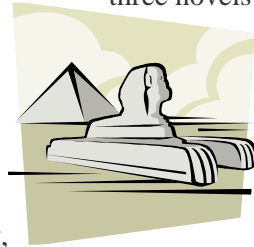
The name of a building, **Tide Inn**, came up frequently in the responses too. For many years it was the late night gathering place for a few dozen of the faithful. I could add a few things about that, but as the revelers said at the time, "What happens at Tide Inn stays at Tide Inn."

Egypt, Cairo And The 2008 Long Novel Weekend

Louise DiMattio

The Chicago Sun-Times calls *Palace Walk* by Naguib Mahfouz “a magnificent work;” the Boston Globe calls it “rich in psychological insight and cultural observation, a majestic and capacious accomplishment.”

Palace Walk is the first novel of *The Cairo Trilogy* by Mahfouz, the Egyptian author and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988. The three novels of the trilogy — *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire* and *Sugar Street* — have been selected for discussion at the Long Novel Weekend on August 23 and 24, 2008 at Walker Creek Ranch in lovely northern Marin County. The story, rich in cultural insight and humor, traces the lives of an extended family in Cairo through several generations from 1919 to 1944, a period of great social change in Egypt.

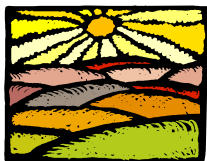


Our weekend will consist of three discussions, one on each novel with time to pull the themes together at the end. And a real treat is in store for Saturday evening. **William Corbett-Jones** will return for a delightful presentation, accompanied by slides and music, of “Egypt since the Mamaleuks”. We’ll feast on baklava and pistachios while being treated to the belly-dancing of the lovely Jazihah. In the grand tradition of the Long Novel Weekend, this is an event not to miss.

It Worked!

Chuck Scarcliff

At this year’s Long Novel Weekend we successfully tackled one of the most difficult and confusing books — William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* — we know. Fifty Great Books enthusiasts came to Walker Creek Ranch and joined in some of the most productive discussions in memory. The nine discussion leaders deserve a good deal of credit for the weekend’s success, but the participants who came well-prepared and anxious to discuss this challenging novel are the ones who really made the event work.



A Repeat Performance For the Long Novel Weekend

Louise DiMattio is the Chair for the Long Novel Weekend coming up August 23 & 24, 2008. This is a job she has held in past years with great success.

Transitions In Mill Valley

Jimmie Harvey

The Mill Valley Great Books Group, under the leadership of **Marjorie Scott**, has been one of the most enduring groups in the Bay Area (more than 40 years), so when she decided to retire from leading in 2006, we were faced with a challenge. We held a meeting and decided to ask for volunteer leaders from the group. One year later, we can report that this turned out to be quite successful. We plan to continue this format for the 2007/2008 year. Also, we are happy to report that Marjorie has continued as an active participant.

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November, December Classes from CLASSES, STARTING DATES, NUMBER OF SESSIONS

Jason and the Golden Fleece & Euripides, Medea — Nov 7; (2)
Beowulf — Nov. 13, (3)
Jonathon Swift: *Gulliver’s Travels* — Nov. 29, (4)
Albert Camus: *The Plague* — Dec.1, (3)
The Bible: The Story of King David — Dec. 4, (3)
Marcus Aurelius: *Meditations* — Dec. 5, (3)

The Symposium is located at 325 Hayes Street in San Francisco. For more information and additional details, please call 415-437-0400 or visit the website www.symposiumgbi.org.

Note: The Symposium is not affiliated with the Great Books Council of San Francisco but offers programs we believe to be of interest to our members.

London Theatre Tour for Thinkers IV

October 20-25, 2008

Five Plays—Five Discussions



Contact Ted Kraus at (925)939-3658
Or tedmkraus@yahoo.com.

Getting the Most Out of Literature (for Cleanth Brooks)

By John Agresto

We groaned and we grimaced and we made all the ugly noises a class of high school sophomore boys could make without being sent to the principal. We did not want to read any book about some woman, a preacher, and an out-of-wedlock baby in ye olde New England. It was probably a stupid book. It was surely an embarrassing book. We knew we would hate it.

Then, one day, we got a special treat: a guest lecturer. One of the other teachers had taken a course, a college course, just on Hawthorne. He knew everything there was to know about *The Scarlet Letter*. He told us about the various influences on Hawthorne's prose style, the man's life and times, incidents in his career that led him to write as he did, etc., etc. Our papers were to be on "The Roots of Transcendentalism," or "The Influence of Emerson," or "Hawthorne, Man of His Times," or topics of like academic weightiness. By the time he had finished, the book was effectively dead.

Read what Dr. Agresto writes about *The Scarlet Letter*, this year's Asilomar novel.

I want to propose a little academic heresy in the name of common sense. Contrary to all high-blown "academic" teachings, a work of literature

is great not because it has relationships to other texts that need to be explored, not because it has a long pedigree of precursors influencing its writing, not because it reveals to us even so much about its time and place, and not because its author is a fit study for numberless biographical or psychological musings. Great literature is great because it talks about great things. And our first task as teachers is not to hide this truth, not to reduce it, not to minimize it. Our first task is to let the books we teach speak openly to our students. In some quarters, this view rubs against the grain of high scholarship. Surely it flies in the face of views that hold that all literature is merely a covert vehicle of class bias, or that there is nothing objective in texts, or that a text is whatever we make it to be, or that no one interpretation can be superior to any other. Luckily, these ideas are believed only in select universities and have not yet had much of an impact on schools.

But my suggestion also means rejecting as educationally unimportant some of the rules of interpretation many of us learned when we were younger. For example, putting an author "in his time and place" may not be the most instructive thing we can do. In fact, I offer that it is positively deadly. Authors, both great and second-rate, probably can tell us more about their "historical context" than surmises about historical influences can tell us about an author. Besides, of what value is it to reduce Hawthorne, or Shakespeare, or Donne, or Dickinson to his or her time and place? When we bind the words to their particular setting, do they mean more to us today? Are they more instructive? Generally, no.

Historical, social, or economic reductions—using history, society, or social status as an explanatory vehicle for a text—distances that text for our students. It makes it other, a curio, a museum piece. My hunch is that only second-class books are truly captives of their time; great works are more universal; they speak to us effectively as timeless. First-class works would mean no less if their authors were known only as "anonymous" and their date listed as "unknown."

There is, in other words, a sure point at which much that passes for scholarship is a kind of smug pedantry that simply kills literature. Our students, of course, know that.

As students we knew that *The Scarlet Letter* wasn't written for us to guess at who influenced the author. We knew it wasn't about the historical context or the climate of opinion of the times when Hawthorne wrote. It was about devotion and hypocrisy and fear of being found out. It was about evil and sin and loyalty. It was about community needs, community standards, and the demands of conscience. It was about the different and conflicting parts of the human soul.

Hawthorne raised these issues of character and morals not in the context of a treatise or essay but in a novel, a particular work of art. In it all the devices of literature come into play: What is the connotation of the rosebush outside the prison door? Why the contrast between the city and the forest? Why is the child named "Pearl"? Any question that helps us see more clearly what the story or poem or play is attempting to say to us is legitimate inquiry. Anything that pigeonholes, caricatures, reduces, or diminishes the text is not. Even as students we sensed deep down that Hawthorne didn't write to be analyzed—he had something to say and he wrote to be understood.

I am reminded of an incident that took place a few years ago at the National Endowment for the Humanities. We were trying to set up a summer school program for teachers. We hoped to reintroduce teachers to those seminal books they read, or wished they had read, when they were in school—Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, de Tocqueville. Each seminar would be led by a noted college professor. The classes would center on reading one major work thoroughly. They would not be concerned with secondary sources, the latest scholarly articles on the topic, or anything that would detract from an open and careful reading of the primary text.

During the orientation session for the professors, it was clear that one was uncomfortable with the format. No, we told him, he could not assign his various articles interpreting the text for class. No, we did not think it necessary to spend much time on the historical context of the work. No, we did not want the teachers to do extensive research into the scholarly literature written about the text. In desperation he threw up his hands and said, "But after they read the book, what will they do with it?" He simply had no idea that, with the greatest books, we don't do anything to them; they do something to us.

(Continued on page 10)

(Continued from page 9) **Getting the Most out of Literature**
Along these lines, let me suggest something frightening and liberating: Do not be afraid of naïve questions. Why does Othello kill Desdemona? Why is Iago so hateful a creature? Why does Jim trust Huck? Why does Huck never betray Jim? Why is Lear so foolish? Why does Cordelia have to die? These are the questions that live embedded in our books, embedded in ways that move both the heart and the mind. These are the reasons the author wrote. No matter what else we do, we should do the author the honor of asking what it is he or she was trying to say. If I could sum it up in one short rule, it would be this: We should all try to learn from books, not just about books.

This is a plea for taking literature seriously. It assumes that authors have something to say; even, perhaps, something to teach. It also begins with the view that great literature is always new, always contemporary, always relevant—that it can transform our view of ourselves and the world. But it can only do this if we approach our books fresh—as if they were written today, and for us. We must ask, as naively as we can, "Why does our author say this?" And then we should listen for reasons, not search for impersonal causes in the Zeitgeist or the subconscious or the irrational. Yes, Wordsworth is a great poet. But he's great because he has something to say, and in a manner worthy of our attention—not because he's a good example of Romanticism.

If we begin with the sense that each book, poem, or play we teach contains something relevant and worth our learning, then each encounter is the chance to grapple with the soul of a great author. Learning all "about" an author can make us feel academic, smug, and ever-so-smart. Learning all we can from our authors will help us see again that Hester Prynne can still talk to sophomores.

John Agresto is president-emeritus of St. John's College, Santa Fe; Senior Research Scholar in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College; and head of an educational consulting company in the liberal arts for colleges and schools. He previously served as Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Meet the Registrar

Sherri Kindsvater

Now here's a busy and challenging life!

Sherri Kindsvater has been in Great Books for four years, a member of the Sacramento group led by Dorothy McHale, and on the Executive Committee of

the Council for two. When the word went out that a successor for **Jimmie Harvey** was needed, Sherri volunteered to become Registrar for the Asilomar Great Books Weekend. She is also active in the Publicity Committee.

Sherri tells *Reading Matters* that her favorite readings are of fiction, but that through Great Books she rekindled her interest in essays and philosophy and has especially found Greek and Eastern thought interesting and rewarding. Outside of Great Books, a favorite novel is John Kennedy O'Toole's *The Confederacy of Dunces*. She also is a collector of Stephen King books and memorabilia and went to Las Vegas last year for the 20th Anniversary Convention of *Star Trek, the Next Generation*. Sherri tells us that for her "a great Saturday would be in San Francisco taking in the latest horror movie at the Metreon followed by a stroll through SFMOMA and ending on a wonderful coffee and pastry with Mozart in the background. Now these are eclectic tastes at their best.

The University of San Francisco where she graduated cum laude is Sherri's alma mater. Her degree is in Communication Arts with a minor in Philosophy (specializing in Plato, no less). Sherri has a career with a "stuff dealer" where they make and sell the stuff given away at trade shows so if you need a few thousand tote bags, she's the person to see.

Sherri lives in Rancho Cordova (near Sacramento) with her husband (an attorney), twelve year-old daughter, one dog, one cat and two horses.

(Continued from page 3) **Classical Pursuits**

cultural activities will be on the schedule. This is held at The University of St. Michael's College in Toronto.

Travel Pursuits offers opportunities in 2008 for travel to Savannah, GA; Cornwall, England; Lyon, France; Galicia, Spain, and Montreal and Bayfield in Canada. These events vary from four to seven nights always with discussions of readings and enjoyment of the cultures of these locales.

Most of your questions of detailed and specific information about these programs will be answered at the Classical Pursuits website: www.classicalpursuits.com.

Observations

Chuck Scarcliff

During a discussion at the Long Novel Weekend the subject of free will vs. fate or destiny came up. The question was whether or not the characters acted according to free will. It's an important question but not a line of discussion that works well in Great Books.

Very quickly and inevitably we reach a point of diminishing returns. The most we can find from the text is how the characters acted and something of what motivated them to behave as they did. But we can not discover whether they acted as free agents or as some sort of puppets on strings. Notable exceptions are *Oedipus Rex* and many of the great Greek tragedies where fate is clearly all-powerful. But it makes no difference if we are speaking of Ahab, Gatsby or Holden Caulfield, the best we can do is use our personal views about the nature of mankind (and about the gods or whatever) to speculate about their free will or lack thereof. We seldom get any guidance from the authors and almost never can resolve different views with evidence from the text. (Arguing nature vs. nurture is similar and no better.)

* * *

In May I went to Chicago for their Great Books weekend event. It is a little different from anything we do here, but the leaders, participants and discussions are very much like our own. I wouldn't judge them as either better or worse than we find among our best at the Asilomar Great Books Weekend. This is a first rate event. I plan to return sometime and I recommend it to any Great Books enthusiast who has a few \$\$\$ to spend on such things. Besides, Chicago is an interesting city to visit.

What I want to mention is their theme — "Know Thyself," this year. We don't have stated themes for Asilomar and it's an idea whose time may have come. This theme (carefully chosen, I'm sure) gave focus to all three discussions and cohesion to the overall weekend experience. I truly believe it was a better Great Books event with the theme than it would have been without.

* * *

One of the worst mistakes I ever made as a Great Books discussion leader was to clamp down on a participant when I shouldn't have. Quite a few years ago we were discussing Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at Asilomar and **Robert Scott** said that its character Gonzalo was a lot like Polonius. He was right, of course. But I said that bringing in Polonius was

an outside reference. I may have been technically correct but in every other way, I was dead wrong. I've regretted my misstep for years — both because I offended a friend and because jumping in when I did hurt the discussion more than it helped.

First, most of us are acquainted with *Hamlet*; we've read and talked about it in other Great Books discussions. And, if not, we've read or seen the play on stage or in film. We know who Polonius is and what he's like. So there was no harm, no foul. If Robert had digressed with an extensive discourse about Polonius or if another participant had argued by saying Gonzalo and Polonius aren't at all alike, I would have been within my rights (and duties) to have intervened. But none of that happened and I should have kept my mouth shut.

(Continued from page 6) **Asilomar is for Families Too**

Nearby attractions include: the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the Point Pinos Lighthouse, Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo, and the Pacific Grove Municipal Golf Course. Suggested activity ideas include: beach combing, kite flying, and renting a four wheeled surrey cycle to ride along the water's edge.

On the Asilomar registration form you will be asked to note how many in your group are registering for the book discussions; more information will be available in the February mailing.

Looking forward to meeting your family and growing our community of great books readers over the next 50 years!

Sin and Chicago!



The Perfect Combination
Great Books Chicago 2008
April 25-27 2008.

This year's theme is Deadly Sins with readings from *The 7 Deadly Sins Sampler*.

In addition to three book discussions, you can enjoy The Chicago Art Institute, a world-class museum with (among its other attractions) one of the finest collections of American art to be seen anywhere. Plus you can count on other activities you'll remember for a long time afterward.

Contact Gary Schoepfel, GSShoepfel@chumsci.edu.

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Great Books Events – Coming in 2008

Northern California Events

February 2. Mini-Retreat. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera. Contact Claudia O’Callaghan, call-coc@aol.com.

April 11-13. Asilomar Great Books Weekend. *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne; *The Discourses*, Machiavelli, *Painting Churches*, Howe, Selected Poems. Contact Howard Crane, Chair, cranehow@aol.com; or Sheri Kindsvater, Registrar, kindsvater@aol.com.

May 3. Leaders’ Workshop. Contact Mary Wood, marylwood@prodigy.net.

August 23-24. Long Novel Weekend. *The Cairo Trilogy*, Naguib Mahfouz. Contact Louise DiMattio, Chair, ladimatt@aol.com.

November 15-16. Poetry Weekend. Three discussions of selected poems. Contact Theda & Oscar Firschein, oscarf1@earthlink.net.

Events Elsewhere

January 18-20. Tampa Bay Great Books Conference. Theme: 19th Century Russia. Readings include *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky, *Resurrection*, Tolstoy and *Fathers & Sons*, Turgenev. Contact Patrick DeMarco, reader1021@juno.com.

April 25-27. Great Books Chicago 2008, Theme: Deadly Sins. Readings from recent anthology, *The 7 Deadly Sins Sampler*. Contact Gary Schoepfel, GSSchoepfel@chumsci.edu.

July 13-18. Toronto Pursuits. Focus: Creativity in Later Life. Options include *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Education of Henry Adams*, Poetry of Yeats, Stevens, Bishop and more. Contact info@classicalpursuits.com. (For information about other Classical Pursuits’ events in the United States, Canada and Europe visit the website www.classicalpursuits.com.)

August 3-9. Wachs Great Books Institute. Colby College, Waterville, Maine. Theme: “The Morality of the Self;” Readings include *Middlemarch*, Eliot, *Ethics Part IV*, Spinoza and others. Contact agreatbook@aol.com.

Oct 20-25. London Theatre Tour for Thinkers VI. Contact Ted Kraus, 925-939-3658 or tedmkraus@yahoo.com.