



# Reading Matters

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## Traverse the Ages and the Globe At Asilomar With Sophocles, Twain, Coetzee and Six Great Poets

The Asilomar  
Great Books  
Weekend  
April 3-5, 2009

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If you've ever wondered why the great classics of Greek literature have been around for 2,500 years or longer, *Antigone* by Sophocles will give you some of the answers. The play, first of all, tells a very human story and is populated by characters we can all understand and care about. But Sophocles takes us beyond storytelling into an exploration of profound issues that mankind and civilized culture has eternally faced.

What does it take to make a good poem? For one thing, among many, poems must be interesting. They must capture our imaginations and thoughts in ways that prose fiction and nonfiction can not. This year's selection of traditional and modern poems do exactly that. The poems we will discuss at Asilomar are among the finest written by John Keats, William Shakespeare, Weldon Kees, Rainer Maria Rilke,

Charles Wright and William Wordsworth.

Now that apartheid has ended, life for everyone in South Africa must be going smoothly. Right? Wrong! Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee paints a different picture in his 1999 novel *Disgrace*. But this is not primarily a political novel or one that concerns itself only with a particular nation at a particular moment in its history. Through its flawed main character and those around him, *Disgrace* tells a tale of the difficulties and even misery that can come from coping with a world that continues to change.



An Illustration from an early edition of *Life on the Mississippi*.

*Life on the Mississippi* is about the river and it is about life. It is part history, part autobiography part geography and one-hundred percent a joy to read. It is one of the great American classics to come from Mark Twain's pen and if you have not read or discussed it, this is an opportunity you don't want to miss.

Through this gate, down the road



Main Entrance — Asilomar Conference Center

a memorable weekend is straight ahead.

## The President's Letter

Kay White

**As you begin your new 2009 calendar, put down these dates for your new year:**

**Leader and Reader Workshop on May 2,  
Great Books Weekend at Asilomar, April 3-5,  
Picnic and novel discussion on June 14,  
Long Novel Weekend, August 22-23,  
Poetry Weekend, November 7-8.**

**Y**ou still have time to register for our main event at the Asilomar Conference Center in Monterey County, April 3-5. Everyone is welcome, new or experienced Great Bookies. Our discussions are designed for friendly and easy participation. Just read the selection and stay on the topic. We have four lively discussions including Sophocles' tragedy, *Antigone*, first presented in 441 BC; Twain's 1883 book of a river boat pilot's life, *Life on the Mississippi*; and Coetzee's *Disgrace* his novel examining the changing world of 1999, in post-apartheid South Africa. We also have an evening discussion of six or so poems. We take a break on Saturday night to party. It is a fine opportunity to meet other book lovers. The Asilomar conference grounds give us clean sea air, venerable Julia Morgan buildings, and sounds of Pacific Ocean waves in which to contemplate the human condition.

You may notice that one event is left out of our calendar, the February Mini-Retreat in San Francisco. The program sold out months before this newsletter went to press. We are limited to a capacity of 40 at the Mechanics Institute in San Francisco. A number of you are disappointed about not being able to attend, and I can vouch for the letdown. My hus-

band and I are on the waiting list along with many of you. This is a popular program.

Claudia O'Callaghan, Coordinator, selects a meaty novel for discussion, this year *The Painted Veil* by W. Somerset Maugham. A movie based on the novel is shown in the afternoon. Our San Francisco Executive Committee recognizes the appeal of this single day discussion, and wants to arrange more mini-retreats. Our challenge is to find a venue and volunteers to coordinate the day. Contact me if you want to help. We hope to announce another Mini-Retreat later this year.

The hot topic this season is Alex Beam's current book, *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books*. We are, according to blowback from the book, "latter-day Great Bookies." You can check out discussions and reactions to Beam's treatment on several websites, Great Books Foundation (CHIGAGO): [GBFmail@greatbooks.org](mailto:GBFmail@greatbooks.org), and [www.Brittanica.com](http://www.Brittanica.com) "How Now, Great Books". Responses range from indignation to guffaws. Mr. Beam likes to joke, and his style and comments have triggered attention for Great Books.

Here is to a good year of reading in 2009!

### *The Time Machine* Selected for June 14 Picnic

Kathleen Conneely

**J**oin us for a potluck, meeting with election of officers and a discussion of *The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells. It will be on Sunday, June 14 at Tilden Park in the hills above Berkeley so mark your calendars.

Hailed as a masterpiece of its genre, H. G. Wells' famous novel about the perils of history and the hubris of modernity comes vividly alive.

When the intrepid Time Traveler finds himself in the year 802,701, he encounters a seemingly utopian society of evolved human beings but then unearths the dark secret that sets mankind on course toward its inevitable destruction. An insightful look into a distant, bleak, and disturbing future, *The Time Machine* goes beyond the reaches of social progress, class struggle and the human condition.

### Great Books Council of San Francisco

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## Performance Poetry Comes to Westminster

Even if you know T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" inside and out, you don't know the poem the way we do — we who attended November's Poetry Weekend, that is. It's a pretty cerebral poem, but became new as the words jumped from the page and came to life when, with **Carol Hochberg's** guidance and coaching, we performed the second part, "East Coker," as a group.

We were divided into four groups, each with a part of the poem to read aloud mixing single voices for some lines and with the choral sounds of the group resounding in others. We took our duties seriously — but not *too* seriously and the result combined the thoughtfulness in conveying the poem's meaning dramatically with the light-heartedness of entertaining an audience with joy and humor. It was tricky. How does one read "In my beginning is my end. In succession/ Houses rise and fall, crumble . . .?" With a somber tone. Or maybe not. And what about "O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark?" A little gusto did a world of

good to that line.

And meaning was not lost nor forgotten. After the choral reading we talked briefly about the verses we had read and made a few comments about their meaning to us. Later we went back to our rooms with Eliot's words still ringing in our ears and the excellence of the evening program in our minds.

Maybe next year it will be a poetry slam. Who knows?

With an excellent selection of poems, well-prepared and knowledgeable leaders, and approximately 40 enthusiastic participants the Poetry Weekend of 2008 proved to be everything we expect from a Great Books event. Our special thanks go to Committee Chair **Brent Browning**, Registrars **Theda** and **Oscar Firschein**, Entertainment and Selection Coordinator **Carol Hochberg** and Leader Preparation Coordinator **Mary Wood**.

"O dark dark dark.  
They all go into the  
dark."

From "The Four  
Quartets" by T.S. Eliot.

### "Can Poetry Matter?"

That's the title of a well-known essay by Dana Gioia, the poet and critic who is now Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The answer to his questions is, Yes, poetry can and does matter. It matters to the Great Books Council of San Francisco and to those who attend its Poetry Weekend or its Asilomar Great Books Weekend.

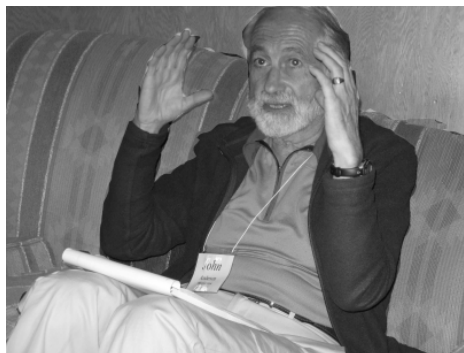


The **Real** discussions:  
On the porch (Above)

John Anderson makes a  
point in discussion. (Right)



Lifting our voices to  
"The Four Quartets."  
(Above)





Few tragedies, either classic or modern, are the equal of *Antigone* by Sophocles. Discussing the play is likely to be a high point of the 2009 Asilomar Great Books Weekend.

August 2009 is coming and with it The Long Novel Weekend

This year we will be discussing one of the great classics of English literature: *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray.

Walker Creek Ranch in Marin County near Petaluma is the ideal place for a relaxing weekend with good friends, great discussions and a book you will long remember.

Contact Louise DiMattio, Coordinator, ladimat@aol.com for details.

## Why Tragedy?

Chuck Scarcliff

You might think audiences would stay away from plays in which the main character suffers mightily and perhaps dies, but you would be wrong. Tragedies have been attracting crowds for at least twenty-five centuries. So my question is “why?” Why do we attend plays, operas and even Broadway musicals that we know will end unhappily?

For one thing, most tragedies — including *Antigone* which we will discuss at Asilomar in April — are actually uplifting. But how can that be? Great plots, important

themes and powerful use of language give tragedy some of its appeal, but there is more.

Nowadays, I think we would look upon character as most important. We meet Hedda Gabbler, Othello, Willy Loman, Oedipus, Antigone and other great tragic heroes at the theater, take them home with us and remember them always. But what gives tragic heroes their power?

Often they are taking on powers greater than themselves. Antigone confronts the law of the land in King

Creon by demanding a just burial for her dead brother, Ahab strikes out not only against a whale but against a cruel and unjust God, and Hedda Gabler rebels against a society that relegates women to boring and unsatisfying lives. Tragic heroes rarely go half way or settle for less than their goal. They may be quite wrong in their actions, but they show resolve and strength of character we rarely see in the lives of people around us. While we recognize their flaws and may not approve their action, we can not help but admire and learn from them.

## Monterey Bay Aquarium

Kay White

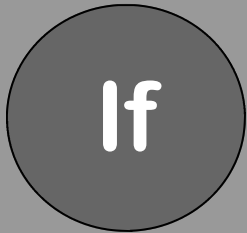
Set aside three hours for a world class treat, and visit the Monterey Bay Aquarium while you're in the area for our Great Books Weekend at Asilomar. You can fit it in on Sunday after our final morning discussion, or you can squeeze it in on Saturday after our morning book discussion. For Saturday, you may want to pre-order a box lunch to go. Benches and space are set aside for Aquarium visitors who bring their lunches.

The sights are beautiful and fascinating. You can watch fish circling through the kelp forest, and divers feeding them in their sea habitat. The jelly fish exhibit is like abstract protoplasmic art. You can watch penguins toddle around for their food, and begin to tell one from another by their head markings. The staff record, by name, how many fish each penguin eats, every meal, every day.

On our recent trip, we reserved, in advance, space for the “Behind-the-Scenes-

Tour.” Our guide provided individual headsets so we could hear her explanations even in the most popular exhibits. We went through Staff Only areas to see labs, a clinic, and food prep areas. We went onto the roof to see the top of the kelp forest tank where divers enter. We saw the industrial sized elevator and crane where the largest sea creatures are brought into the aquarium. Best of all, it is a personal tour to show you the action within this scientific environment. There is a minimum age of six years for the 50 minute tour. It is \$12 in addition to your general admission.

The aquarium is open daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wheelchairs are available and the building is fully accessible. Admission is \$29.95 for adults, \$27.95 for seniors and students, and \$17.95 for children 3 thru 12. You can order tickets at (866) 963-9645, or order online at <http://www.montereybayaquarium.org> Click on Guided Tours for Behind-the-Scenes reservations.



**you attend the 2009  
Asilomar Great Books  
Weekend you will . . .**

**Attend four lively and friendly discussions** led by well-prepared leaders. You'll have the opportunity of sharing your ideas with discussion groups of less than twenty and hear the views of the other participants.

**Spend a weekend** with some of the most interesting people you will ever meet.

**Enjoy six good meals.** Box lunches are available for Saturday and Sunday, so is a vegetarian menu. But you must sign up in advance for both of these options.

**Read three important books** — *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain , *Antigone* by Sophocles, and *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee — plus a fine selection of classic and modern poems. Your readings will come in the mail shortly after you register.

**Be able to bring your family** if you wish. Asilomar is a great place for family members of all ages. Please Call 916-852-0615 for more information including the discounted family rates.

**Find time to relax** — walk along the beach or on the boardwalk through the dunes, investigate tide pools, fly a kite, chat with old and new friends, take a nap.

**Enjoy entertainment, friendship and refreshments** at the Saturday evening party.

**Receive pointers** about Asilomar and Great Books at the reception and orientation for newcomers late Friday afternoon.

**Fit right in** with the company of interesting people like yourself.

**Take off**, if you wish, during your free time for sight-seeing and adventure in Monterey, Carmel or along the Pacific. Few localities offer as much as the Monterey Bay area.

**Catch rides** on the Asilomar van for transportation around the grounds. If you need some help getting from one place to another, the van is only a phone call away.

**We're  
Lucky!**

**(But it's not just  
luck)**

**Within the Great Books Council of San Francisco we have many good discussion leaders. You'll meet some of them at Asilomar.**

**But there's always room for more. Opportunities to lead at one of the annual events or in your own hometown group are many. And the rewards are great. Little is more satisfying than knowing you've done a good job as a Great Books leader.**

**So take the next step. Sign up for the next Leaders' Training Workshop. It's on May 2, 2009.**

**You'll not regret it.**



The dining hall at Asilomar.

## The 2009 Leaders' Training Workshop Questions You Might Ask

**Who should attend?** The short answer is anyone genuinely interested in Great Books discussions. The workshop is for leaders and readers alike. It's not just for those who haven't led discussions before; the workshop is a welcome refresher for experienced leaders. Even those who do not lead and have no intention of doing so will pick up some pointers to help them become better and more confident participants.

**What can I expect at the workshop?** A short writing about shared inquiry discussions is sent to be read in advance. It will be discussed first. Then there will be presentations from successful leaders about techniques of leading and participating in Great Books discussions. Next everyone will be engaged in short practice sessions which afterwards will be critiqued and discussed.

**Why would anyone want to lead discussions?** Different leaders certainly have different reasons for doing what they do. Most find it rewarding to facilitate the efforts of a group of participants as they work their way through a reading selection. Leading can often be more enlightening than simply reading and discussing a book. Leaders may get a perspective others might not receive. Finally, being a discussion leader adds a valuable new dimension to the Great Books experience.

The Leaders Workshop is a one-day event to be held at Rossmoor in Walnut Creek on May 2, 2009.

The cost is \$20 per person.

For more information, contact Training Coordinator Mary Wood at 510-865-3481 or [marywood@prodigy.net](mailto:marywood@prodigy.net)



### Key People



#### Louise DiMattio

Twenty-eight years in Great Books and counting. That's how long it's been since Louise DiMattio attended her first Great Books discussion. She has been a member of the Executive Committee for twenty-five years and has served as council president. Louise now coordinates the Long Novel Weekend. In recent years, she has also read and discussed Flannery O'Connor's fiction in Savannah and George Eliot's in Toronto, both at events sponsored by Classical Pursuits.

So it should come as no surprise that Louise tells us her favorite readings are novels. *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Sound and the Fury* are two past Long Novel Weekend selections that are especially memorable for her. But when asked her favorite writers, she listed three poets (T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings and Billy Collins) along with one novelist (Wallace Stegner).

By profession, Louise is a nurse — currently a nurse manager at San Francisco General's Labor and Delivery Unit supervising seventy-five nurses and ancillary staff members. She calls it a great job but exhausting. In addition to her nursing education, Louise has a degree in theology and philosophy from Webster College in St. Louis.

Many of us know Louise's husband **William Corbett Jones** and have enjoyed his lectures at Walker Creek Ranch or we may have heard him play. Bill is a concert pianist and a professor at San Francisco State. Their daughter Laura is a senior at Barnard College in New York where she majors in philosophy.

#### Theda and Oscar Firschein

Here are two lifelong readers.

Both began at libraries in Brooklyn. As a child, Theda went from the children's section of the library to the fiction section as they were the ones located on the library's first floor. No one told her about the second floor where the nonfiction was shelved so she read only fiction believing, in her own words, that it "contained all of the wisdom in the world." Oscar read more widely, but he went for the shiniest, newest looking books and brought home books by the likes of Plato and Aristotle, books that didn't often leave the shelves so kept their new book look for a long time. As a teenager, Oscar did odd jobs and could afford to buy books. One was a paperback of *War and Peace*. He and his brother sliced the book in two; Oscar read the first half, his brother the last. Both boys fell in love with Natasha (Who wouldn't?).

Books have always been part of Theda and Oscar's life together; they read and discuss. Some of their book dialogue takes place in the margins. In response to one marginal note she had written, Theda once thought she could decipher the word "hogwash" written by Oscar and then erased. As they put it, "The Great Books organization finally came to the rescue. Under the system of 'shared inquiry' Theda and Oscar happily found a socially acceptable outlet for their opposing literary opinions."

Oscar has retired from a career in artificial intelligence research and completed a Masters degree in liberal arts at Stanford. Both lead discussions at Great Books events and are registrars of the Poetry Weekend. They often travel to Washington DC to visit their children, Ben and Joseph, and read to the two year old granddaughter Jennifer Rose.

## A Reading Matters Book Review

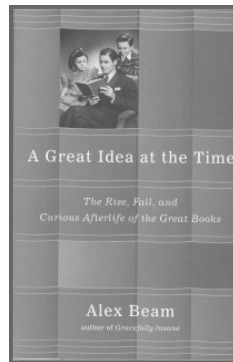
### *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books*

It's like reading the biography of a loved and revered uncle. In addition to everything you already knew and a recitation of his great and his admirable qualities, you find that the biographer has uncovered facts about your uncle that are new to you. You see the eccentricities and shortcomings that you and your relatives chose not to speak of aloud. And as you read, you sense a tone of sadness in the biographer's words as he tells the world that your uncle's grand achievements are behind him; he has weakened and is not the man he once was.

Alex Beam's book traces the great books movement from the 1930s to the present and includes the Great Books Foundation, the discussion groups and events with which we are all acquainted, but also reading and discussing the great books in university curricula, and creating and marketing the Great Books of the Western World (GBWW) published by Encyclopedia Britannica. This movement thrived and grew after WWII, peaked during the 1960s and has declined ever since.

Much of Beam's book is about Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler. They were very different men, both with flaws and eccentricities, but both truly remarkable in their intellects and achievements. The calling they shared was to put the great books of the canon into every educated person's hands and its ideas into their minds. I found most of this interesting and worth knowing, but if Beam had omitted some of the gossipy tidbits about the two men I wouldn't have felt deprived. For me, Adler came across as a mildly comic figure; Hutchins as a tragic one. Sadly as they neared their deaths both men believed their lives had been failures.

According to Beam everything that could go wrong with



the Great Books of the Western World set did—odd selections, poor translations, small hard-to-read print and the commercialization of its marketing and hard-ball sales tactics. Many sets were sold, few were ever read and sales dropped off during the 1960s. The goals Hutchins and Adler had of making the great books education a standard for American universities was never realized. Now only a few institutions, St. Johns College among them, still follow such a curriculum. And the number of Great Books discussion groups and estimates of their membership significantly declined since

the 60s. For the Great Books groups, events and active now and in anthologies of readings published by the Foundation, the great books of the canon are not the mainstay they once were or that Hutchins and Adler envisioned. To make matters worse, at times the Foundation has flirted with bankruptcy.

So why the decline in the great books movement? Beam has some thoughts on the subject but does not, I believe, quite hit the mark.

From what I have written here and even from the title and subtitle—*A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books*—you might think the book to be highly critical, even negative toward Great Books. That would be incorrect. Alex Beam shows respect and admiration for Great Books, its goals, accomplishments and people. While he does not focus on problems or incongruities within Great Books, he also doesn't look the other way.

This is a book that should be required reading for anyone interested in Great Books' past, is active in its present day and cares about its future.

## An Essay to Read, Discuss and Remember

### *Life on the Mississippi*

We will discuss *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain as our Asilomar essay this year, although it could just as well be described as autobiography, fiction, or history. The essay has been noted as mandatory reading

for anyone who appreciates American history.

Twain recounts life on the great river both as a trainee riverboat pilot and also 20 years later (1882). He speaks with humor and authentic

insight about life along the great river. Whether you are a lover of the works of Mark Twain or simply interested in the Mississippi River during the time period just before and after the Civil War, you will enjoy this reading.

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## *Coming Events*

<b>Asilomar Great Books Weekend</b>	<b>April 3-5, 2009</b> at Asilomar Conference Center, Pacific Grove. Discussions of Selected Poems, <i>Life on the Mississippi</i> by Twain, <i>Antigone</i> by Sophocles and <i>Disgrace</i> by Coetzee. See pages 1 & 5 of this issue and contact Sheri Kindsvater kindsvater@aol.com or 916-852-0615 for more information.
<b>Leaders' Training Workshop</b>	<b>May 2, 2009</b> at Rossmoor. A day of learning shared inquiry discussion skills for new and experienced leaders and Great Books participants. Contact Mary Wood, marylwood@prodigy.net or 510-865-3481.
<b>Annual Meeting and Picnic</b>	<b>June 14, 2009</b> at Tilden Park, Berkeley. Picnic and potluck, meeting with election of officers and a discussion of <i>The Time Machine</i> by H. G. Wells. Look for more information in the spring issue of <i>Reading Matters</i> . Contact Kathleen Conneely 510-530-2344 for information.
<b>Long Novel Weekend</b>	<b>August 22-23, 2009</b> at Walker Creek Ranch, Petaluma. Three discussions of <i>Vanity Fair</i> by William Makepeace Thackeray. Look for more information in the spring issue of <i>Reading Matters</i> . Contact Louise DiMattio ladimat@aol.com or 415-587-0398.
<b>Poetry Weekend</b>	<b>November 7-8 2009</b> at Westminster Retreat, Alamo. Three discussions of selected poetry. Contact Theda & Oscar Firschein, oscarf@earthlink.net or 650-854-3980.

<b>Chicago</b>	<b>Bellingham</b>	<b>Toronto</b>	<b>Colby College</b>
<b>May, 1-3.</b> Theme is "Eye of the Beholder." Readings: <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , <i>The Unexpected Universe</i> , Eiseley and "A Still Moment," Welty. Call 800-222-5870, ext. 259 or visit <a href="http://www.greatbooks.org">www.greatbooks.org</a> .	<b>June 19-21.</b> Readings include <i>The Just War</i> , Peter Temes, <i>Saint Joan</i> , Shaw and two more. Visit <a href="http://www.nwgb.org">www.nwgb.org</a> or contact mastark@att.net.	<b>July 12-17</b> Twelve options to choose from including <i>War &amp; Peace</i> , Auden's poetry, <i>Magic Mountain</i> & Legacy of Citizen Kane. Visit <a href="http://www.classicalpursuits.com">www.classicalpursuits.com</a> or call 1-877-633-2555.	<b>August 2-8</b> Waterville, ME. Theme "Art of War." Includes <i>War and Peace</i> , writings by Sun Tzu, V. Woolf and Tim O'Brien. Call Tom Beam 215-836-2380 or e-mail <a href="mailto:agreatbook@aol.com">agreatbook@aol.com</a> .