



Reading Matters

The Great Books Council of San Francisco
Serving Northern California

www.greatbooks-sf.com



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The Asilomar Great Books Weekend April 16 - 18, 2010

You'd never guess that the Asilomar Great Books Weekend is planned and put on entirely by volunteers. It has all the appearances of a professionally staged conference. By the time you drive through the conference center's gates a great deal of preparation will have already been done. And for one purpose: Making everyone's Great Books Weekend the most it can be.

To make the most of your own Asilomar experience, there are a few steps you can take. First, if you haven't already registered

for Asilomar, you should do so soon. The sooner you register, the sooner you will receive the books. Having the books early is a big plus; it allows the time we all need for reading and thinking about this year's selections.

The Registration Form (also available on the Council's website, www.greatbooks-sf.com) gives several choices that allow you to tailor the weekend in the ways that suit you best. You'll get to choose the lodging accommodations that are right for you and your budget. If you wish you may request the

roommate of your choice. Vegetarian meals are available and can be requested when you register. In case you're thinking of doing some sight-seeing away from the conference grounds or need to get an early start for your drive home on Sunday box lunches can be ordered. If because of a disability you require a first floor room, you can let us know (on

the form) and we will try to accommodate your needs. Asilomar provides a van service for transportation on the

grounds. A phone call is all that is required. Finally, if you need a ride to Asilomar or would like to offer a ride to someone, you can note that on the form.

The Asilomar weekend can be shared with your family members; call for more information and for discounted family rates. The number to call is on the Registration Form.

If this is your first time at Asilomar, you should plan on attending the brief but helpful orienta-

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This Year's Readings

Selected Poems

Idols of the Mind, Francis Bacon

Beloved, Toni Morrison

Copenhagen, Michael Frayn



President's Message

Jim Hall



I was elected president of the Great Books Council of San Francisco (serving Northern California) in June of 2009. I wish to express my gratitude to all the past presidents and other officers of the Council for keeping this extraordinary organization as lively, relevant and successful as it has been for over a half century. We can only hope, and try, to live up to the standard set by our predecessors. I intend to help us be even more lively, relevant, and successful than ever. I will support our media exposure initiative, more one-day mini-retreats, providing more support to existing discussion groups, and the establishment of new groups in Northern California.

None of this is new. Everything listed above was begun during the tenure of my immediate predecessor, **Kay White**. Serving as her vice-president for two years, I had the opportunity to observe her dynamic style. Kay is more organized and more capable of running an organization like the Great Books Council than anybody I have ever worked with. I have learned a lot from her. I will be content with my tenure as president if I can continue to expand what was started under her watch, which she is still working on. Many thanks, Kay, and husband, Rick, and the rest of the White family who have been so supportive of our programs.

This publication, **Reading Matters**, is our primary publication and will remain so. I would like to plug our other regular publication, the **GBSF E-Newsletter**, which is published monthly or every other month throughout the year. If you are not receiving the E-Newsletter, you may be missing some information about our various activities and a different slant on Great Books as we are not the same people who produce Reading Matters. Many of our members of GBSF did not learn about the **Wine Country Mini-Retreat** in advance because it happened between issues of *Reading Matters*. It was very successful and will be held

again in October 2010. If you subscribed to the E-Newsletter you would already know about the **Gold Country Mini-Retreat** in May 2010 and about the discount available to GB readers for the **Alexander/Alexandria** lectures at the **Herbst Theatre** in February 2010 produced by **Humanities West**. Also, you would know about the new **Great Books Program** at **Monterey Peninsula College**. It is easy to sign up for the E-Newsletter. Just go to our website www.greatbooks-sf.com, enter your email in the little yellow box and click GO. We use a secure service for this and your email address will not be used for any other purpose. If you wish to view already published issues, just click on "Back Issues" and then click on "Link to E-Newsletter Archive." **HAPPY NEW YEAR!**

Great Books Council of San Francisco

Serving Northern California

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Jim Hall, President;
Susana Conde, Vice President;
Rick White, Secretary;
Roy Harvey, Treasurer;
Kay White, Past President.

READING MATTERS:

Tracy Oliver, Editor;
Chuck Scardiff, Publisher.

ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER:

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It's New: The Gold Country Mini Retreat

Kay White

The first **Gold Country Mini Retreat** will be held on **May 8**, Saturday, within the renowned gardens of Mercy Center of Auburn at 535 Sacramento Street, Auburn, CA 95603 from 9:30a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

We will discuss *Longitude* by Dava Sobel, the true story of John Harrison, a genius who developed a method for reckoning longitude at sea. His 18th century story of discovery and invention weaves through a political context of class structure and re-

sistance. While fortunes and lives depended upon a navigational solution, Harrison's quest for the longitude solution prize offered by England's Parliament took 40 years. After lunch (included) we'll watch the movie after lunch, starring Jonathan Coy, Christopher Hodsol and Jeremy Irons.

To Register mail your check for

\$35 to Donna Reynolds, 1133 Ravine View Drive, Roseville, CA 95661. For details, contact Donna at (916) 797-8561. The flier and registration form is available at www.greatbooks-sf.com.

Buy your copy of Dava Sobel's book, *Longitude*, Walker Publishing Company, Inc. ISBN 0-8027-1462-5 (hc).

Poetry Weekend 2009 Kay and Emily at Westminster

Carol Hochberg

The 2009 Westminster Poetry Weekend was a sell-out and, by general agreement, the best ever. The consensus was that we had a great set of poems, which included complex and challenging poems by Robert Hass, Eavon Boland, Wallace Stevens and Philip Levine. We devoted one session to the poems of Kay Ryan, the current United States Poet Laureate and a Marin resident. Someone remarked that Kay Ryan poetry is not her favorite, but acknowledged that it was a good thing for folks to know about our Poet Laureate. Ryan's short lines and prolific rhyming appear very accessible, but discussions of "Surfaces," and "Latents" revealed greater depth and complexity beneath the surfaces. There were some good laughs; some people were moved to tears; the leaders were uniformly praised in mealtime discussions. Especially after Saturday evening solo performances of Emily Dickinson poetry, a group euphoria pervaded the weekend.

Saturday evening's program might have been called Emily's Poetry Slam, as Emily Dickinson was the honored guest and featured poet.

Dickinson's voice, sometimes joyous, sometimes despairing, always personal and original, spoke to us through the voices of the participants, who faced each other in two concentric circles as

both performers and audience. The effect was dramatic and poignant, very like a poetry reading where you can hear the audience's soft moans of pleasure after a powerful poem is read. Such were the sounds of pleasure, and some silent tears, at the reading of poems such as the joyous "Wild Nights Wild Nights!" and the despairing "There is a certain Slant of light." **Carol Hochberg** selected the poetry and directed the performance.

Kay White said, "I am convinced that poetry needs to breathe like a good red wine. We have to aerate it, hear the sounds and rhythms, and slurp in the suggestions, hints and meaning. Reading poems aloud and discussing them with care and full attention gives readers more confidence to try out different interpretations evoked by the poem.

The Shared Inquiry method keeps us on track when we're stumped, and helps our exploration. The weekend was a time out, in the best sense of the term. I came home all tuned up from our discussions. I'm impressed by the range of ideas and informed interpretations that our participants offer, and the courtesy extended to those who differ.

This article was written by Carol Hochberg with reporting from Kay White, Rick White, Theda Firschein, Brent Browning and Jim Hall.



Poet Laureate
Kay Ryan



The Belle of
Amherst
Emily Dickinson

Asilomar Memories

Reading Matters asked several people to tell us about their fondest or favorite memories from past Asilomar weekends. Here is what they told us.

**Create your own
Asilomar Memories**

**Sign up now for the
2010 Asilomar Great
Books Weekend.**

April 16-18

My favorite memory is bringing my daughter to the beach as a three year old and playing in the tide pools on Saturday afternoon during free time. There is no more beautiful place. I also have wonderful memories of hearing Joan Dennison's great laugh emanating from Tide Inn! She made everyone feel so loved. She is still my standard as an example of a wonderful person.



Louise DiMattio

My fondest memory of my Great Books Asilomar experience is being so well received as a new comer. I didn't feel any need to be shy and could interject my opinions. I will always remember one gentleman telling me I was pretty smart for such a nice looking woman.

I have been thinking about my Asilomar experience and what I can say about it. I cannot come up with one single instance or revelatory moment. I can only say that the entire experience, from each one of the meetings that I attended, to the people that I met and befriended, to the congenial meals, to the unequalled landscape surrounding us have been, and will continue to be, I'm sure, the allure of Asilomar. I look forward to Asilomar every year. In preparation, I read the selections with interest and with the anticipation of the discussions, where, I know, my hesitant interpretations and tentative musings will be fleshed out and revealed to me by other participants' and, if I am lucky, by my own unexpected epiphanies.

Susana Conde

I also remember the 50th anniversary year where we had everyone gather around for a group photograph. That crazy photographer on his ladder trying to get everyone in some sort of position. Even being registrar, you don't realize the amount of people who attend Asilomar until you have them trying to line up for a photograph; and everyone was smiling!

Sheri Kindsvater

Well, of course, it was when Jimmie, Jan (and was it Louise DiMattio?) and I enacted the Red Dress poem. We had such fun dressing and acting and everyone had so much fun laughing.

Anne Pym

Note: The Red Dress poem Anne refers to is Kim Addonizio's "What do Women Want?" Of the hundreds of poems that have been discussed at Asilomar, this one has to be the most memorable.



Ted Kraus remembers leading a Sunday discussion of *The Price* by Arthur Miller several years ago. At the end he asked if anyone recalled the opening and closing recordings played by Mr. Solomon. The opening song "Mr. Sheehan and; Mr. Cohen" was given a rousing outburst and followed the strange "Laughter" recording at the end. Ted tells us It was fun for everyone.



The 2009 Leaders' Training Workshop From a Participants Point of View

Ralph Petri

I still have all of the preparation materials that were sent prior to the workshop and the materials that were passed out on the morning of the workshop. By actual count there were 52 pages of preparation materials and an additional 37 pages of material handed out at the beginning of the workshop. My initial reaction was, "Boy, these people have lotsa rules!"

As I recall, the day began with each of the three workshop leaders giving a presentation on their individual view and approach to being a leader. The first leader said, "Here's how I do it." The second leader said, "I do it differently." The third leader said, "I don't agree with either of those approaches; here's what works for me." At that point I thought, "This might be all right; they sound like real people who have different approaches to the same problem based on their individual skill sets and experience... and that seems to be OK."

Next came two discussion groups with half of the workshop participants being discussion participants and the other half being observers. We switched roles for the second discussion. Good stuff!

Then there was a panel discussion on handling problem participants.

After lunch we broke up into three smaller discussion groups consisting of workshop participants and one of the three leaders. Each participant in turn had an opportunity to lead a discussion. That continued for the balance of the afternoon. Also, very useful stuff, although not all of the participants were interested in being group leaders; some were there to understand the process more fully in order to be better discussion participants. Consequently, not all participants chose to lead a discussion, and no one was forced to do so. Also, a good thing. Nobody felt pressured that I am aware of.

Spread throughout the day was significant discussion on how to develop questions appropriate to a given piece. We spent a lot of

time on approaches, techniques, etc. It became increasingly clear to me as the day progressed that this was a core skill in being an effective discussion leader. This point was the epiphany of the workshop for me.

The practice discussions all went very well and were most enjoyable, probably a tribute to the quality of the people who chose to pursue advanced skills in the area of highlighting and discussing the ambiguous areas and ideas incorporated in all classical, timeless literature.

As a relatively new participant in the Great Books process, I didn't understand what they were looking for; I just had these pages and pages of rules. I really did not understand what they were trying to accomplish until I had completed the workshop, e.g., the epiphany about the importance of asking the effective question(s) to begin and sustain a discussion.

It was worthwhile and I would attend other future workshops. I think a good approach from your point of view would/should be that this is continuing education for GB participants who are considering leading a group and/or starting a new group. Hence, there should be educational/developmental elements for the relative newcomer and for the old hands who are in need of a refresher course.

We seemed to spend a lot of time on approaches to dealing with problem participants. I'm sure that it happens, but I suspect (hope) that it's relatively infrequent. It's a negative aspect of the process, and only a potential aspect at that. As such, I would encourage you to focus more on the positive aspects of the GB process. We're all adults; we shouldn't have to start out by assuming the worst about anybody. If it happens, then deal with it.

Note: *Reading Matters* asked those who attended the May 2009 Leaders' Training Workshop to send us their thoughts about the one-day event. We thank Ralph Petri of Auburn for sending the comments we see here.

The 2010 Leaders Training Workshop is planned for May 15 at Rossmoor, Walnut Creek.

Contact Mary Wood, marlwood@prodigy.net for information

Events Elsewhere

Chicago 2010 April 30 – May 2

Read, discuss and see Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* on stage. Also, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and "Sorrow-Acre" by Isak Dinesen. Call 800-222-5870 ext 7136 or visit www.greatbookschicago.org.

Pacific Northwest Great Books Institute Bellingham, WA June 18-20

The Man Who Would Be King, Kipling; *The History of Love*, Nicole Kraus; *Phaedra*, Racine; *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Anne Fadiman. nwgb.org/events.

Toronto Pursuits July 11-16

Nine options to choose from including Homer's *Odyssey*, *The Middle and Mystery of India*, stories by Alice Monroe, poems by Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens, fiction by Kafka and Conrad. www.classicalpursuit.com

Wachs Great Books Summer Institute Waterville, MA August 1-7

Theme: Cultural Collisions. www.greatbooksdiscussionprograms.Org/GBDPColby.

The Asilomar Great Books Weekend

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tion meeting. It will be held shortly before dinner on Friday. You'll receive exact information of the time and place when you arrive.

Arriving between 3:00 and 5:00 pm on Friday should give the time you need to settle into your Asilomar room and possibly relax for a few minutes before the orientation meeting, dinner and the Friday evening poetry discussion. When you get to Asilomar you will first need to go to the main building — the Phoebe Hearst Social Center (it's not hard to find) — where Great Books will have a table set up to welcome you and give you your packet of information for the weekend. Among other things, the packet will include your room assignment and schedule for the weekend. In that same building you will receive your room key and meal ticket. *Don't lose that meal ticket.* The nearest McDonalds is a couple of miles away.

The event's cornerstones are the four discussion sessions — Friday evening, Saturday morning and afternoon and Sunday morning. You'll find well-prepared and enthusiastic leaders and will have both the opportunity to express your views and interpretations of the texts and listen to the insights of other participants.

You can look forward to the Saturday evening party with entertainment, refreshments and time to socialize with Great Books friends. You won't want to miss that.

The opportunity to talk with and enjoy the company of other Great Books enthusiasts is a big plus. It is a great place to make friends; many Asilomar friendships made have endured for years, even decades. And to get everyone off to a good start, at Friday's dinner a host will be at your table to be sure that everyone is welcomed and introduced to one another, and to keep friendly conversations going while you dine.

If other activities appeal to you, there's not a lot of unscheduled time during the weekend, but there is time enough on Saturday afternoon to drive along the nearby scenic 17 Mile Drive, visit the shops in Carmel or Cannery Row, or walk along Asilomar Beach inspecting tide pools if you wish. The beach is a great place to fly a kite or watch the surfers in their wet suits. The Monterey Peninsula offers more things to do than can be done in a single weekend. There's the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Point Lobos State Park, golf, tennis, shopping and much more. The John Steinbeck Museum in Salinas is a short drive away. Information about the area's many attractions will be available in the Phoebe Hearst Social Building where you check-in.

Since you may not have the time to both take advantage of some of these attractions and participate fully in the Great Books Weekend, staying an extra day, either before or after the conference, is a possibility you might consider. Depending on available accommodations, you can arrange to stay at Asilomar for an extra night or two. You'll need to make your own reservations and arrangements with the Conference Center by booking online at www.visitasilomar.com or by calling 831-372-8016.

Although the weekend has been planned for you, you will have plenty of flexibility in making it the most and the best it can be for you.

Meet the Executive Committee

The Great Books Council of San Francisco has many volunteers who are committed to making Great Books events and activities successful in Northern California. The Executive Committee (EC) establishes Council policies and innovations, and EC members are instrumental in planning and conducting our events. Without the devoted efforts of these willing volunteers there could be no Asilomar Great Books Weekend, no Poetry or Long Novel Weekend and we would be without the electronic newsletter, this printed newsletter or a website. Just in case you'd like to say thank-you to the people who make it all possible, here are the Council officers and EC members.

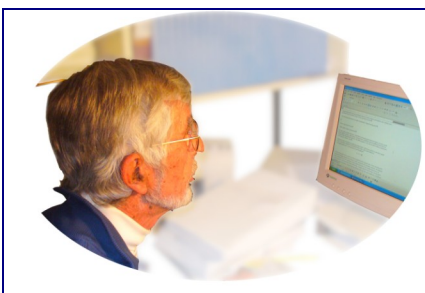
Jim Hall	Santa Rosa	President, Electronic Newsletter, Asilomar Readings Chair, Area Coordinator
Susana Conde	Emeryville	Vice-President, Publicity Committee
Roy Harvey	Mill Valley	Treasurer
Rick White	Novato	Secretary, Nominations Chair, Asilomar Readings Committee
Kay White	Novato	Past President, Publicity Committee
Brent Browning	Los Gatos	Past President, Poetry Chair, Bylaws Chair
Erma Browning	Los Gatos	Area Coordinator
Rob Calvert	Berkeley	Asilomar Chair, Webmaster, Publicity
Louis DiMattio	San Francisco	Long Novel Weekend Chair
Einar Enevoldson	Emeryville	
Oscar & Theda Firschein	Menlo Park	Poetry Weekend Registrars
Gary Geltemeyer	Oakland	
Jimmie Harvey	Mill Valley	
Carol Hochberg-Holker	Berkeley	Poetry Selection Chair
Rudy & Marge Johnson	Pleasanton	
Ted Kraus	Walnut Creek	
Sheri Kindsvater	Rancho Cordova	Asilomar Registrar
Barbara McConnell	Walnut Creek	
Claudia O'Callaghan	San Francisco	San Francisco Mini-Retreat Chair
Tracy Oliver	San Jose	Reading Matters Editor, Publicity, Long Novel Registrar
Vince Scardina	San Francisco	Historian & Calendar
Mary Stuart	Santa Rosa	Asilomar Book Selection Committee
Tom Vargo	Berkeley	Bulk Mail Manager
Jan Vargo	Berkeley	Database Manager
Mary Wood	Alameda	Leader Training Chair

My Parting Shot

Chuck Scarcliff

Since this is my final issue as publisher of *Reading Matters* and my last opportunity to write pretty much what I please, I'd better get it right this time. Here are some things that cross my mind when I think about Great Books.

Forty years ago, I joined a Sacramento Great Books group because they were reading the kinds of books I wanted to read. I stuck with Great Books for pretty much that same reason. More than anything else, the books we read and discuss distinguish us from other book clubs. Without great books we can't have great discussions so I've never understood what people mean when they say, "The book wasn't very good but we had a great discussion." It's a lot like saying, "The food wasn't good but we had a great dinner."



"I hate to be the one telling you this, but our fiction discussions — especially of full-length novels — are seldom as good as they should be."

In stressing the greatness of our books, I don't mean we should be reading only the classics that Hutchins and Adler had in mind, but rather that our books must present significant ideas for our consideration and interpretation. Both in our selections for Asilomar and in recent publications (Great Conversations) from the Foundation we're

doing a good job of keeping the classics among our readings. My one complaint about our books is that we (and "we" includes the Foundation) haven't done enough to bring Eastern thought into our selections. We should work on that.

We also read more fiction — novels, short stories, plays — these days and we see less nonfiction, particularly fewer writings from the great philosophers than we once did. I liked the good old days when Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and the others were more standard fare in Great Books but I enjoy reading good novels or short stories and believe most of our members do too.

Discussing fiction is another matter. I hate to be the one telling you this, but our fiction discussions — especially

full-length novels — are seldom as good as they should be. In fact, until recently I had given up on novels and had reached the conclusion that most of them were simply too much for us to handle in two-hour discussions. But that conclusion was proven wrong by an excellent discussion of *Jane Eyre* in which I recently participated. But that discussion, led by **Jean Cawood** of the Sacramento group I attend, was the exception.

Too often we skim a novel's surface without probing its depths and we typically pay too much attention to characters and their motivations. We can talk about those things but we need to go beyond them.

If we are to improve our fiction discussions we first need to remind ourselves that we are in Great Books to discuss ideas — the writers' ideas and our own as we interpret their texts. Next we must understand that

writers present their ideas through the stories they tell using characters and events plus any number of literary devices (irony, point-of-view, etc.) they choose to take from their toolboxes. In their different ways they are presenting the themes we should be identifying and ideas we should be exploring. As participants or leaders we don't want to lose the pleasures of the stories we read but we should be diving deeper into the themes and ideas the author is presenting.

Here's something to think about: *You can have a good discussion with a mediocre to poor leader and good participants, but you'll never have one with poor or unprepared participants and a good leader.* Over the years it's been my good fortune to be a participant in discussions led by the best leaders imaginable. The last thing I would ever do is say anything to slight their efforts and talents, but I've also found that it is the participants

"You can have a good discussion with a mediocre to poor leader and good participants, but you'll never have one with poor or unprepared participants and a good leader."

who have the power to make a discussion go very well or very badly. Thank heaven for all of the good Great Books participants we have in northern California.

I've attended nearly all of the Asilomar Weekends since 1971 and most Long Novel and Poetry Weekends. I

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(My Parting Shot —Continued from page 8)

wouldn't have missed them for anything. But I'm convinced that the *real* Great Books takes place in the local group meetings throughout the year and scattered around the country. Those monthly or bi-monthly meetings are often an important part of the lives of group members. I have no crystal ball. I don't know what the future will bring. But I truly believe that if Great Books is to survive and thrive it will be because of the strength and vitality of its local groups.

And finally, I wonder if that *other* Chicago book club will be ending its run

"I'm convinced that the *real* Great Books takes place in the local group meetings throughout the year and scattered around the country."

before long. That would be Oprah's Book Club. Don't laugh. Oprah Winfrey is the most trusted television personality since Walter Cronkite and in recent years has recommended books by Toni Morrison, William Faulkner, Elie Wiesel, Carson McCullers, Leo Tolstoy John Steinbeck, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and other serious writers. I have no idea how many people took her advice and read those books (and how many of them made it through the Benjy chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*) but given her influence you can bet that, a lot of people read important literature they would have otherwise missed. It's impossible to find fault with that. But — as nearly everyone on the planet must know — the end of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is coming and with that, I presume, the end of Oprah's Book Club.

***Justice: What's The Right Thing to do?*
A Reading Matters Book Review**

Chuck Scarcliff

In an important speech of his 1960 presidential campaign, John Kennedy stated that he believed in a president whose religious views were a private affair and that, if elected, his own religious beliefs would have no bearing on his public responsibility or decision-making. But in 2008 Barack Obama, in an equally important campaign speech, said very much the opposite. It is wrong, he stated, to ask believers to leave their religion at the door "before entering into the public square." He went on to mention great reformers including Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King who were motivated by faith and used religious language in arguing their causes. Also, according to Obama, "Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition."

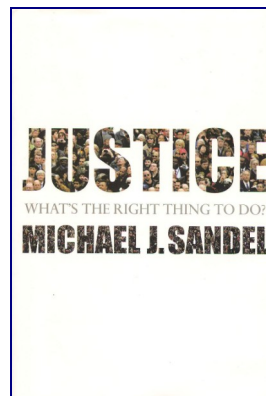
The difference between these two views is vital to Harvard political philosophy professor Michael J. Sandel whose recent book *Justice: What's the Right Thing to do?* explores different philosophies underlying policy making in a just society.

In the course of the book Sandel comments upon utilitarianism (advocacy for the greatest pleasure and the least pain for the most people), libertarianism (calling for the greatest

individual freedom of choice) and examines writings by Aristotle, Immanuel Kant and 20th century American philosopher John Hawes. He shows aspects of these divergent views that are valid and useful, but also points out the places where each fall short of the mark he has set for reasoned, public philosophy discourse. For Sandel, the main thing missing from these earlier views is their neglect of personal morality, some of which come from religious tradition, in public discourse.

Professor Sandel writes with a remarkable ability for making complex, abstract ideas understandable, concrete and specific to current issues including affirmative action, abortion, physician-assisted suicide and even bank bail-outs. He doesn't, though, make them easy as these are not always easy ideas to grasp. And he is not an advocate for his own personal beliefs on these issues. For example, he does not take a pro or con position on embryonic stem cell research but rather argues that public discourse is inadequate if it detaches itself from moral and religious thought on the subject.

This is a book worth reading.



Michael J. Sandel

Justice: What's the Right Thing to do?, Michael J. Sandel, 2009 is published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. It is available in hardcover and costs \$25.00.

Potpourri

Rick White



Potpourri – Being a compilation of random thoughts, small pleasures, and sometimes peeves. Readers are invited to respond or contribute their own items.

“I” versus “Me” continued – This space ended last time complaining about the increasing employment of the subject pronoun “I” where “me,” the object pronoun, should be used. I would like to go even further in advocating the use of “me.” Sometimes “I” is pompous and stilted. As such, it is wrong. The French do it better. They have two words for “me,” *je* and *moi*. Their answer to “Who’s there?” is “C’est moi, not “C’est je,” their word for “I.” When accused of burning the beans, the defendant answers, “Moi? Moi? Mais non!” *Webster’s New World Dictionary, Third College Edition* (1988), says that “me” is “also used as a predicate complement with a linking verb, although the usage is objected to by some. (Ex.: that’s *me*).”

Am I inconsistent? – Rarely does one hear the word “err” pronounced correctly. The correct pronunciation rhymes with “grrrrr” not “hair.” My *Webster’s* says that while it is supposed to rhyme with “grrrr” the “hair” version is “widely used.” Yes, but that does not make it right. I would claim that the “grrrr” version is not stilted, but simply correct.

Again – “All right, already!” is the correct spelling. My dictionary lists “alright” as “... var. sp. of ALL RIGHT: a disputed usage.” I wonder how long it will continue to be disputed. I guess the same goes for “err.” Grrrrrrr.

Texas Hold’em takes hold – As 2009 came to a close, poker language increased its contribution to media punditry. We hear that Barack Obama has gone “all in” with his decision on troop levels in Afghanistan. He has “doubled down” on health care legislation.

If poker strategy doesn’t work, he can “hit the reset button,” and “reboot.” That’s if he “can’t put lipstick on this pig.” Then again, he might have to “walk it back.” Otherwise, it may be a “game changer.”

Ralph H. Petri writes from Auburn to recommend *Eye on Cavett* by Dick Cavett and Christopher Porterfield (1883), especially his chapter, “Is English a Dying Language?” Some of Cavett’s favorites: infer v. imply, disinterested v. uninterested, fortuitous v. fortunate, flout v. flaunt.

Chuck Scarcliff nominates so-and-so “made some bad choices,” when he murdered his family with an ax, or chose a necktie that did not match his shirt. The phrase “seems to almost, but not quite, excuse all manner of bad behavior for which the doer should be morally responsible... Adolph Hitler made some bad choices.”

What are your favorites?

Discussion Controversy (continued)

– Four letters were received from members of the Renaissance Society of Cal State Sacramento three clearly declaring that raising a hand to speak is the only way to conduct a satisfactory Great Books discussion. Otherwise, writes Dan Keller, “groups often are dominated and the discussions often trail off into extraneous, out of focus, areas.” Coby Bonner writes, “To allow for free flowing discussion effectively eliminates those participants who are easily intimidated by others who ‘hog’ the floor.” Frances Wright reports that the group has around 20 members, and “In a group this size, this method has worked to include everyone who wants to contribute to the discussion in a timely manner.” The concern they raise is an important one. It takes skilled and attentive leading in the free flowing method to ensure that everyone gets an equal chance to speak and that they listen to one another. As Irma Monkman writes, “...[It] is the responsibility of the discussion leader to conduct an orderly (but not inflexible) session....The leader... sees that every group member wishing to comment finds a voice and all comments are awarded equal value and

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Potpurri (Continued from page 10)

respect...When more than one person wishes to comment, the leader will provide a queue by stating their names in the order that hands were raised.”

I had neglected to say that in a free flowing discussion the leader needs to watch for signs – body language, a hand gesture – to make certain everyone who wishes to gets to speak. When that happens, it is both appropriate and necessary for the leader to do as Irma says -- provide a queue. That commonly happens in a large group, less frequently in a smaller one. Foundation instructors urge that participants address one another rather than the leader. When required to raise a hand and get the leader's permission to speak, this focuses them on the leader rather than one another. The hand-raising method is safer. Managing the free flowing method is riskier but it should also be more rewarding. Recognizing this risk, St. John's College uses co-leaders to ensure that everyone gets to speak.

The letter writers are under the impression

that the free flowing method departs from the traditional Great Books method of shared inquiry. Throughout 20 years in the program, including about a dozen different discussion groups and a hundred special events, many of them conducted by Great Books Foundation staff, I have found nearly all of the sessions to have been free flowing. Repairing to Foundation material on shared inquiry, I find no reference to raising hands. The 1991 version of *An Introduction to Shared Inquiry* leaves the impression that the normal way is for the leader to call on individuals at will rather than at the initiative of the members. Apparently this manual was written with the classroom in mind. A more recent version, accessible through the foundation's website, is mute on this issue.

It is clear from their letters that the members of the Cal State Sacramento group are happy with it and find it to be effective. The method of requiring everyone to raise a hand works better than non-Great Books discussion methods, but it is not the full monty. Calling on students at the will of the teacher works too, but that method may not be suitable for non-credit adult discussion groups.

Who Was Francis Bacon?

Chuck Scarcliff

Francis Bacon has been called a philosopher, scientist, statesman, lawyer, jurist and author. He was all of those things. Maybe more. A relatively small group believes he wrote the body of literature attributed to William Shakespeare. That claim seems unlikely, but the fact that it the belief is held by some responsible scholars attests to the intellectual and creative abilities of the man.

In his public life, Bacon held the positions of Attorney General and Lord Chancellor of England. In those positions he was influential in creating the English colonies of Virginia, the Carolinas and Newfoundland. Although he later professed his innocence, Bacon left office in disgrace after charges of corruption and bribery were made against him.

As a scientist, Bacon made no important discoveries — unless we count his formulation of what has become known as the “Baconian” method or more widely known as “the scientific method” as being important. That method was

then a new system of logic using strict practices of inductive reasoning for scientific inquiry. The beginning of the Age of Enlightenment is, by different scholars, dated at different times and according to different events. 1637 with publication of *A Discourse on Method* by Descartes is a commonly held starting point for the Age. But 1620 when Bacon published the *Novum Organum* is also a good choice. It laid the groundwork for the scientific advances that followed.

This year at Asilomar we will be reading and discussing Bacon's “Idols of the Mind,” a very short but highly influential selection from the *Novum Organum*. In addition to its importance to the emergence of scientific inquiry at the time, this essay continues to teach valuable lessons of clear thinking.



Francis Bacon

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Coming Events

Asilomar Great Books Weekend, April 16-18, 2010

Asilomar State Conference Center
Pacific Grove. Selected poems, *Be-
loved* by Toni Morrison, *Idols of the
Mind* by Francis Bacon, *Copenhagen*
by Michael Frayn.

Contact Rob Calvert, rob@rob-
calvert.com or Sheri Kindsvater,
Kindsvater@aol.com

Long Novel Weekend, August 21-22, 2010

Walker Creek Ranch, Marin County.
The Magic Mountain by Thomas
Mann. Contact Louise DiMattio, ladi-
mat@aol.com.

Wine Country Mini-Retreat October, October 2, 2010

Additional information will be avail-
able in future issues of *Reading Mat-
ters*, through the electronic newslet-
ter and from the Great Books Coun-
cil Website.

Gold Country Mini-Retreat May 8, 2010

Gardens of Mercy Center of Au-
burn.
Discussion of *Longitude* by Dava
Sobel and viewing the film. Con-
tact Donna Reynolds at (916) 797-

Leaders Training Workshop, May 15, 2010

Rossmoor, Walnut Creek. Contact
Mary Wood,
marylwood@prodigy.net.

Poetry Weekend November 6-7, 2010

Westminster Retreat, Alamo. Three
discussions of selected classic and
modern poems.
Contact Theda & Oscar Firschein,
oscarf1@earthlink.net.

We're on the Web
www.greatbooks-sf.com