

Reading Matters

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL
Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2012: *A theme is suspected*

Added Feature:

Results of two- vs. three-day survey

By Rob Calvert



Beach Looking North (All photos by Jim Hall)

Preparations are in full swing for the Asilomar Spring Conference, GBSF's largest and longest-standing annual event. It takes place on April 20-22, in Pacific Grove. As is the custom for Asilomar weekends, discussions will cover a wide range of literary genres including selected poems, an essay, a work of fiction, and a play.

This year's essay is Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, an account by an early 20th Century German philosopher of his journey into Japanese Zen Buddhism by way of the study of archery.

The play will be Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, a work that exerted a profound influence on both the theatre and the philosophy of the 20th century.

The work of fiction will be James Joyce's "The Dead," a short story that depicts an annual holiday party. The story is packed with lovingly-portrayed characters. It's the final chapter in the set of linked stories that Joyce assembled and published as *Dubliners*.

"The Dead," following in the wake of last year's *Mrs. Dalloway*, will be Asilomar's second consecutive work of fiction in which a party forms the central event. (Do I detect a Theme?)



Boardwalk to the Beach

Registration for Asilomar is under way. A registration form is available on the Council's web site at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/asilomar.htm>. Books and poems are mailed soon after each registration is received.

Three-day format receives support

In the fall issue of *Reading Matters*, I asked for thoughts about changing the format of the Asilomar Weekend from three days to two. This is GBSF's longest and most expensive event, and with rental fees continuing to escalate we are looking for ways to keep a lid on costs.

Many thanks to those who replied to rob@rob-calvert.com. It's always gratifying to learn what a special experience Asilomar is for so many of you, as it is for me.

While opinions were not unanimous (What would be the fun in that?), responses were heavily in favor of keeping the three-day format.

Mini-Retreats expand options

GBSF has expanded its annual schedule of events to include mini-retreats in the Wine Country and in the Gold Country. These one-day programs have been well-received as a shorter, less-expensive counterpoint to the more intensive Asilomar experience.

David Copperfield is the book for 2012 Long Novel Weekend

Event is moved to Menlo Park

By Rick White

David Copperfield, by Charles Dickens, has been chosen by chair Louise DiMattio for GBSF's 2012 Long Novel Weekend. This year's event will be held August 18 – 19 at Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park. More complete information and an application can be found inside.



Returning to Asilomar

When it was launched in 1990, the Weekend was held at the Ralston White Retreat on Mt. Tamalpais and later moved to the Walker Creek Ranch to accommodate a greater number of people. Since western Marin has proven to be a driving challenge for many, the event is newly being held at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park, southern San Mateo County, close to public transportation and we hope more convenient for the majority of attendees.

The Vallombrosa Center offers a private bath with each room at rates comparable to those of Walker Creek Ranch. Registration is \$160 per person and includes four fine meals, overnight lodging, three two-hour discussions, a Saturday night party with entertainment, and free time for relaxing or exploring. Plan to arrive about 9 a.m. on Saturday for bagels, juice, coffee, etc. The program concludes with lunch on Sunday.

Why Dickens?

This is the two hundredth anniversary of the author's birth with a wide variety of celebratory events scheduled. We thought it only fitting to mark the occasion by reading a Dickens novel. Charles Dickens is one of only two authors whose books we have discussed more than once in the history of our Long Novel Weekend.

The other is Thomas Mann, whose novel *The Magic Mountain* was the very first we discussed, more than 20 years ago. We discussed it again last year. In the mid-1990s we discussed Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. We've chosen *David Copperfield*, one of Dickens' most quoted and best loved works, as this year's selection.

According to biography.com, *David Copperfield*, more than any other of his works, is modeled on Dickens' own life. His only novel to be narrated in the first person, it follows its hero's life from early childhood to the discovery of his vocation as a successful novelist. Among the novel's memorable characters are Betsey Trotwood, David's only relative; Peggotty, his mother's faithful servant; and Uriah Heep, the scurrilous clerk whose misdeeds are finally revealed. Mr. Micawber, David's sometime mentor who is sent to debtors' prison after going bankrupt, is believed to be a portrait of Dickens' own father, a figure that evoked in him a mixture of love, nostalgia and guilt.

Those interested in learning more about Charles Dickens' life might wish to refer to two new biographies that were well reviewed in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In *Charles Dickens: A Life*, the author, Claire Tomalin, sheds light on Dickens' tumultuous lifestyle that eventually resulted in the stroke that killed him at age 58 at the height of his literary powers. In *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist*, author Robert Douglas-Fairhurst focuses on how Dickens consciously invented himself as a new kind of novelist.

Dickens lovers should be on the alert for the many Dickens-related activities offered throughout this bicentennial year.

Marge Johnson is seriously injured

Marge Johnson, president of the Great Books Council of San Francisco, is recovering from a fall she took in early December at a local supermarket. Marge banged up her legs and effectively destroyed her left shoulder. Fortunately, she is right-handed. The doctors constructed and installed a new shoulder for her. Now, Marge says bravely, she is on her way toward becoming the bionic woman.



Marge was largely immobilized for several weeks, first in hospital then in a convalescent facility. During that period, her husband Rudy visited her twice daily to assist in physical therapy as well as provide companionship. Marge returned home on December 16 and will require an extensive period of rehabilitation to get her muscles back into proper working condition. She intends to carry out her executive responsibilities while recovering but will not continue her practice of hosting meetings of the executive committee at her home.

Local discussion groups are thriving

By Jan Vargo

The GBSF 2012 census found 43 Great Books reading groups in Northern California, up from 39 in 2011. Most groups welcome new members, although several maintain a waiting list. If you are interested in joining a group, it's best to call for information. A complete roster of local discussion groups follows this article.

Most report their groups are thriving. Some in rural areas have difficulty finding new members. Many participants are seniors who have been active in Great Books for decades. There's an interest in attracting younger members.

Most groups use anthologies published by the Great Books Foundation.

We are saddened to learn of the deaths of two leaders, Beverly Gross and Ralph Kunkee, but can report that their groups will continue.

Ginni through the looking glass

By Ginni Saunders

*There once was a house named Westminster
Which was said not to look very sinister.
But once you're inside,
This impression's belied
By words you would not tell your minister.*

Poetry Weekend was a memorable experience for a first-timer. Sleeping in a horse stall in what used to be a barn but is now referred to as The Lodge, I got an inkling that “Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore!”



Carriage House Lodge



In the Lodge

In The Manor, an ample and delightfully served breakfast was a pleasant surprise before our first poetry session. Placed in one of three groups, I was impressed by the skill of our leader and the insightful comments of participants. As the weekend went on, I had rich encounters and met many interesting people.



Manor Patio

Saturday evening's entertainment sparked with off-color limericks and recitations of “Jabberwocky” from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* in several languages. These and our amazing little skits were the toothsome morsels that provided the evening's tasty, and sometimes racy, fare.



Fall Colors (Colors can be seen in e-version at www.greatbooks-sf.com)

As with any good entertainment, I was left wanting more at the next Poetry Weekend, and looking forward to other events of the Great Books Council. Well done!

Potpourri

By Rick White

“The proof is in the pudding.” Oh? In my time the proof of the pudding was in the eating.

“I could care less.” Actually, I couldn't. I heard this version every day in the fall of 1961 from my drill instructor Sgt Catron at Ft. Ord, and I couldn't care less where he is now.

“Killing the golden goose.” If your memory goes back as far as mine, it used to be, “Killing the goose who laid the golden egg.” Egad!

A curious reader explores an American author's rise and fall in popularity:

Crying Wolfe

By Walter Mosley

During Thomas Wolfe's lifetime he was regarded as the equal of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner. Faulkner went so far as to suggest that Wolfe might have been the most gifted of them all. Despite this early acclaim, you won't find Wolfe listed in The Library of America, the definitive source for this country's most important writers. With some sleuthing, the reasons for his exclusion are revealed.

When Thomas Wolfe submitted the manuscript that would become *Look Homeward, Angel* to Scribner's, he was placed under the tutelage of Maxwell Perkins, one of Scribner's most distinguished editors, who had worked with many of the most popular writers of Wolfe's generation. Perkins succeeded in making Wolfe's voluminous work more commercially appealing by making significant cuts. In fact, he played such an important role in the development of Wolfe's second book, *The Web and the Rock*, (later called *Of Time and the River*) that Wolfe published a volume describing Perkins' assistance entitled *The Story of a Novel*. Wolfe's book gave fuel to rumors already brewing about Perkins' influence and cast a shadow on Wolfe's integrity as a writer. In fact, the damage was such that Wolfe, who regarded Perkins as a friend and something of a father figure, felt it necessary to terminate their relationship. He moved from Scribner to Harper where his new editor was Edward Aswell.

Wolfe produced a mountain of a manuscript for Harper that he titled, *You Can't Go Home, Again*, but left it to Edward Aswell to cobble together a coherent structure. Unlike Perkins, who never added or changed words, Aswell ended up writing whole sections of the book to link the disparate parts. *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home, Again*, although commercial successes, served to complete the demolition of Wolfe's reputation. Aswell's creativity may have justified Harper's investment, but ultimately helped to bury the author.

Wolfe's work was rescued from oblivion by Matthew Bruccoli, a literary scholar whose research focused on Scribner's authors. With his wife, Arlyn, they were able to reconstruct the original manuscript that became *Look Homeward, Angel* and to publish it under its original title, *O Lost: A Story of the Buried Life*. Published by The University of South Carolina in 2000, it is a monumental record of American life. Indeed, Bruccoli considers *O Lost* "a greater work than *Look Homeward, Angel*."¹ Perhaps, one day, The Library of America will republish it.

Readers interested in pursuing this story might consult: Bruccoli, Matthew J. and Park Buckner, Editors, *To Loot My Life Clean: The Thomas Wolfe-Maxwell Perkins Correspondence* (U. of South Carolina Press: Columbia, SC, 2000).

Donald, David Herbert, *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe* (Ballantine Books: New York, 1987).

Mitchell, Ted, Editor, *Thomas Wolfe: An Illustrated Biography* (Pegasus Books: New York, 2006).

Remembering Ralph Kunkee

By Cathy Vigran

Ralph Kunkee died on November 12, 2011, leaving long-time friends a lot to think about and remember.

Ralph's colleagues at UC Davis will recall his contributions in the oenology department to the development of the California wine industry.

A select group will not forget Ralph's passionate contribution to the Great Books movement. My own introduction to Great Books came during the 1960s when Ralph led a group at my parents' house in Davis.

I was too young to participate, but I listened from my bedroom to adults talking with fervor and animation about books and ideas. I could only conclude that this was important business.

I treasure those Great Books boxed collections from the '60s that have become a special part of our family library.

Visiting Ralph in a nursing home shortly before his death, I had a chance to meet and share memories with people who knew him from those long-ago Great Books' conversations.

I resumed my acquaintance with Ralph a decade ago when I sought his help in starting a Great Books group in my home. He made the monthly trip to Sacramento to lead and to participate in our Great Books group until he was too sick to do so.

Ralph was our best and most faithful observer of the rules of shared inquiry, and kept us on the straight and narrow during engaging and absorbing hours of discussion. During one of our last visits, when Ralph was quite ill, he asked what we were reading next. I told him Plato's *Apology*.



Ralph smiled. Perhaps he was remembering Socrates' defense of his teaching, and how the Socratic Method became the model for Great Books discussions.

¹ Introduction, *O Lost*, p. xvi.

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO · 2012 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

| JANUARY | FEBRUARY | MARCH |
|---|--|--|
| Jan 7 – Executive Committee (ExCom) meeting and <i>Reading Matters (RM)</i> mailing party. | Feb 4 – SF Mini-Retreat: <i>Kiss of the Spider Woman</i>, by Manuel Puig. Sold out. | Mar 10 – Leader-Reader Workshop. Appl. deadline 2/29/12. Contact Kay White, kaycleveland@aol.com |
| APRIL | MAY | JUNE - JULY |
| Apr 9 – Deadline for May 5 <i>RM</i> . Apr 20-22 – Asilomar Spring Conference: “The Dead,” from <i>Dubliners</i>, by James Joyce; <i>No Exit</i>, by J-P Sartre; <i>Zen in the Art of Archery</i>, by Eugen Herrigel; <i>Poetry selections</i>. | May 5 – ExCom/ <i>RM</i> Mailing. May 19 – Gold Country Mini-Retreat: <i>John Adams</i>, by David McCullough , followed by film. Contact Donna Reynolds pianogal@comcast.net . | Jun 10 – Picnic/Annual Meeting Tilden Park, Berkeley. <i>The Tortilla Curtain</i>, by T.C. Boyle. Contact Laura Bushman, laurabushman@yahoo.com . |
| AUGUST | SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER-DECEMBER |
| Aug 4 – Prediscussion for Long Novel. Aug 18-19 – Long Novel Weekend , Menlo Park. <i>David Copperfield</i>, by Charles Dickens. Contact Louise DiMattio, ladimat@aol.com . | Sep 3 – Deadline for Sep 29 <i>RM</i> . Sep 29 – ExCom/ <i>RM</i> Mailing Party. | Oct 6 – Wine Country Mini-Retreat (tent.) Nov 3-4 (tent.) – Poetry Weekend |

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