

Reading Matters

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL
Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2014: GBSF premier event is renamed to honor Barbara McConnell

The GBSF Executive Committee at its October meeting decided to rename the Asilomar Spring Conference in honor of Barbara McConnell. The new, permanent name, The Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar, will help us remember this beloved woman, a stalwart in front or behind the scenes in everything that GBSF has accomplished in the past several decades. Barbara's obituary from the *San Francisco Chronicle* is reprinted inside.

Barbara trained those of us who train leaders. One of her key roles was identifying talent. Her judgment about individuals and in general made her the Mother Superior to many in the GBSF leadership. We relied upon her advice time after time.

Barbara was number one.



"Waves," by Bernice Hunold

It's true!

***The Asilomar Great Books weekend
will make you a better person.***

By Louise Morgan

Scientific evidence has just been published supporting a notion that many of us have suspected, that reading literary fiction enhances important social skills.

In case you missed the Oct. 18 edition of the journal *Science*, here's the scoop: two social psychologists at The New School for Social Research in New York City conducted five separate experiments on subjects who were paid to read excerpts from either a) award-winning literary fiction; b) popular bestsellers such as romances and science fiction; c) serious nonfiction (not memoirs); or d) nothing at all.

After reading for only three to five minutes subjects were given tests measuring empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence—our capacity to understand and appreciate the mental states of others. The results were strong and consistent. People who read the literary fiction selections scored significantly better than those who read popular fiction, nonfiction, or nothing at all.

Why should this be? The researchers (Kidd and Castano) believe that literary fiction encourages readers to be more sensitive to the emotional nuances of characters who offer a different version of reality. These characters tend to lead more complex lives than those portrayed in popular fiction, a form which tends to focus more on plot rather than character development. Literary fiction often demands that the reader get into another person's head, while in popular fiction and nonfiction the reader plays a more passive role.

Questions remain: How long do these effects last? If we read for three weeks instead of three minutes would the effects be even larger? Does the level of difficulty of literary fiction make a difference—James Joyce instead of Dickens? More research is needed. But in the meantime it is gratifying to have scientific validation for something that most of us deeply believe in. And as for those poor souls we occasionally encounter who emphatically state that "reading fiction is a waste of time," we now have a solid rebuttal.

If you need further convincing, here is another reason to attend the 2014 Asilomar Great Books Weekend! The jacket blurb on my copy of *An Introduction to Fiction* says that literature "provides a forum for exploration and an opportunity to emerge beyond one's self, see through another's eyes, and live as someone else" and "helps readers develop sensitivities to language, gender, race, and culture." That pretty much encapsulates the Great Books Asilomar experience . . . and we're all the better for it.

To sign up for the Weekend, please visit our Asilomar page, www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/asilomar.htm.

It's never too late:

At 95, Great Books alumna takes up painting

By Rick White

Bernice Hunold and her husband Ray were active in Great Books from 1975 to 2000. She stopped attending after Ray died and she became confined to a wheelchair. However, **Claudia O'Callaghan** stayed in touch with her. Claudia recently told us about Bernice's adventures in art. Claudia sent us the web address where we could look at Bernice's paintings. We were captivated.

Bernice moved to the Jewish Home of San Francisco on May 3, 2010, when she no longer could get around without assistance. In her own words, she was "pushed" into an art class. At first she disliked it because it felt too much like painting "by the numbers." Gary Tanner, the art instructor, noticed that she showed unusual alertness, intelligence, and energy. Rather than let her quit, he encouraged her to "just paint," and not concern herself with what the class was doing. She took his advice.

Bernice fell in love with color. She draws her inspiration from artists and paintings that she googles, and employs tempera water colors, the medium used in the class. Once she gets an idea, her imagination takes over. Her seaside images, she says, reflect her times at Asilomar.

She has come to "see things differently." "Shadows in the trees, colors in the sky are not just blue and white." Trees are all different colors of green. Colors are *exuberant!* At 95, after only one year of painting, Bernice has developed a rich, almost explosive palette. You will see this in her paintings, offered throughout this lucky newsletter.

Bernice would be happy to hear from our readers. Her email address is bernicehunold@gmail.com. Her work can be seen as it should be, in glorious color, at www.flickr.com/photos/bernicehunold. Some of her paintings have been sold, but we have her permission to show them all here. She is still painting, so we can look forward to viewing new works. You can view the paintings that appear in this newsletter in the full-color edition at the GBSF website, www.greatbooks-sf.com.

A video gift to us:

"Introduction to Great Books"

David Clemens teaches the Great Books at Monterey Peninsula College (MPC), one of two community colleges in California where this course is offered. Professor

Clemens generously has made available to GBSF a video of his course, "Introduction to Great Books." To access this video, go to www.udemy.com, click the Discover button and select Humanities, scroll down through several pages of course listings and click on "Introduction to Great Books." You'll be asked to enter your email address and a password, **greatbooks0**. (If you have difficulty accessing this website effectively, use the Google Chrome browser. Our AOL browser, for example, did not work.) There's a \$15 charge without the password.



The eight half-hour sessions are titled:

- An Apology (with reference to Socrates)
- The Cognitive Style of Reading
- Why Read?
- What Makes a Great Book Great?
- Books and Democracy
- Answering the Critics
- How to Read Great Books
- Billy Budd, Billy Budd

Additionally:

A series of videos featuring well-known poets and writers is available through MPC's Guest Authors Series, including the poet-journalist Tess Taylor, surrealist novelist and short story writer Aimee Bender, travelogue writer Peter Chilson, comic fantasy author Christopher Moore and novelists Jennifer Gilmore and Jane Smiley. They can be viewed reading from their work and taking questions about writing at www.mpc.edu, click on **Guest Authors Series**. The poets Brenda Hillman, Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky, Dana Gioia, and others spoke earlier. They can be seen at <http://www.mpc.edu/academics/Humanities/GreatBooks/Pages/Videos.aspx>

NEWS FLASH! The book has been selected for Long Novel Weekend: *The Man Without Qualities, vol. 1*, by Robert Musil, will be discussed September 13-14, 2014 at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park. For details and a registration form, see <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com>.

Poetry Weekend 2013 succeeds at new site

By Brent Browning,
Poetry Weekend Chair

The Westminster Retreat facility in Alamo, California has been sold and will no longer be available for our annual Poetry Weekend so the event was held at a new venue, the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park. This new facility has lovely grounds and all of the rooms have their own private bathrooms instead of dormitory-style facilities. We will not miss the pitter-patter of urgent little feet running to the bathroom down the hallway in the wee hours of the morning. According to the weekend evaluation forms the participants filled out, the food and wine was good, as were the discussions; the vast majority of those attending indicated that their overall experience was excellent.

Leading the several discussions were **Jean Circiello, Louise DiMattio, Rob Calvert, Ginni Saunders, Mary Wood, Paula Weinberger, Brent Browning, Theda Firschein, and John Anderson. Kay White, Rick White, and Steve Doherty** were prepared to substitute.



We were, of course, concerned that many people would not follow us across the bay to this new facility, but our fears proved to be unfounded; we had the same number of attendees at Vallombrosa

as we had at Westminster.

A debate about the appropriateness of adding explanatory material to difficult poetry enlivened one of the Sunday morning sessions. It is continued in the article following.

The weather was wonderful. We prayed for no rain, but we must have overdone it a bit; the Bay Area is now facing drought conditions.

Leading Matters:

Use of outside references is debated at Poetry Weekend

At the end of one Sunday discussion at the November Poetry Weekend, a debate arose whether it was ever acceptable to use outside references, in this case, to clarify the meaning of a poem. There were strong feelings on both sides, so sharing the pros and cons might be of interest to readers in clarifying their own thinking about this issue.

Jean Circiello agreed to make the case against while **Oscar Firschein** takes up the verbal rapier in favor. Readers are invited to join the debate.

AGAINST by Jean Circiello

I oppose the introduction of outside references at Great Books discussions.

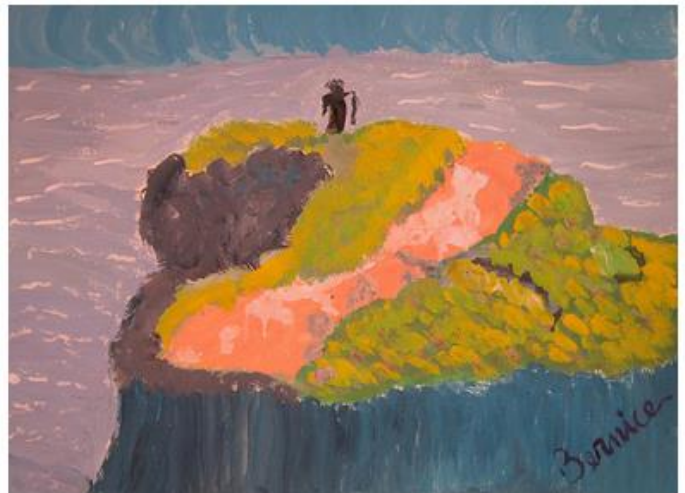
The inclusion of an outside reference, focusing on accuracy, may drive the discussion prematurely to conclusions instead of exploration. This goes against the concept of shared inquiry, the core of any Great Books discussion.

Many poems, especially those selected for a Great Books discussion, include sufficient clues to what they're about. For example, in Milton's poem, *On His Blindness*, it may be interesting to know that the word "talent" had a different meaning in Milton's time, but the poem may still work with its new-made meaning. We should stay away from poems that are meant to be read only by those with particular knowledge.

Narrowing the context of a poem also restricts how we think about it. If we begin the discussion of the Milton poem by focusing on his blindness, we are likely to learn more about the poet's life and less about what the poem can tell us about our own lives. We would be depriving ourselves of that personal "aha" when a poem speaks to us directly. In the case of the Milton poem, a more powerful inquiry might be about ways the poem helps us respond when we find we cannot carry on our own life's purpose.

The meaning or importance of a poem can vary from person to person. Our task in discussing a poem is not to find its true meaning but to consider jointly what the words on the page are saying. If we can be clear about that, we will have a good start in divining wisdom the poem might have for us.

Trust the poem, trust the reader.



IN FAVOR by Oscar Firschein

There are two types of poetry readers, those who want to understand what the poet intended, and those who like to take the words of the poet to make up their own understanding of the poem.

The first reader welcomes footnotes to explain biblical, foreign or classical words and phrases, while the second balks at such aids, citing the Great Books dogma of “no outside references.”

An example of this came up at the recent Poetry Weekend. In the poem “On his Blindness,” Milton has the lines:

When I consider how my light is spent
E're half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide ...

The phrase, “And that one Talent which is death to hide” refers to a parable in Matthew relating to Jesus, which has varied interpretations, one of which concerns the need to put an investment to work. In the “no outside reference” tradition, no mention of the Jesus parable was made. “Do it yourself” readers came up with an interpretation of “talent” on their own and were quite happy. These readers were cheated of the pertinence of the Jesus reference in the poem.

At the 2011 Poetry Weekend the group discussed the poem, “David, King of Israel, Thou Art the Man,” by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. The poem assumes familiarity with the Bible story of David that many readers lacked. While some of the group’s interpretations were quite creative, they missed the meaning that the poet intended.

As the Milton and Amichai poems illustrate, the need for explanatory material is even greater for text in translation because readers lack knowledge of foreign folk tales, history, and cultural references. The need for notes is especially important when the translator misses the meaning of the original. For example, the Greek word *eudaemonia* is commonly translated as “happiness,” or “welfare,” both of which miss the idea of human flourishing in the original Greek.

While Jean feels we should avoid poems that have or require notes, it is sometimes interesting, even chastening, to discover the difference between our thinking and that of other times and cultures. Milton’s readers knew their Bible and would have instantly recognized the reference to the Jesus parable. They would be charmed by the double meanings of the parable and the word “talent.”

For me, the joy of exploration is what we do with a poem once we understand it correctly. I am interested in knowing what words meant at the time they were written and I believe we do the poet a disservice by inserting a meaning that was never there.

Jean’s ADDENDUM

I believe the poet, Robert Pinsky, has stated my position more elegantly than I can. He says:

I will not outright forbid the student to look up old or unfamiliar words. But the most promising poetry student will skip along relishing the unfamiliarity and the sounds, confident in the meanings that emerge from contexts, sound and smell.

Robert Pinsky, *Singing School: learning to write (and read) poetry by studying with the masters*, 2013, p.5

Oscar’s FINAL WORD

Pinsky is wrong if he thinks he can get “meanings that emerge from context, sound and smell.” He can smell a poem by Yehuda Amichai all he wants, but he won’t get meaning unless he knows the biblical references.



Gold Country:

Auburn to host its fifth nonfiction mini-retreat May 10

By Kay White

America was fascinated by the race horse Seabiscuit during the late years of the 1930s Great Depression. The stunning victories of an unlikely horse and a hard luck jockey matched the country’s hope for an escape from tough times.

I found the story’s setting as interesting as the horse competition. Radio was the medium for the country. It unified attention on sports in a way we shall never see or hear again. With today’s multiplicity of media, national unity of focus is impossible.

Author Laura Hillenbrand researched her characters and facts for four years before publishing in 2001. She provides first-hand stories and documents her references. This book is about horses, trainers, owners, jockeys, and the United States in another time.



Placer County Courthouse

Take this opportunity to visit Auburn, Placer County, a historic California town in the gold country, to discuss the book and film, *Seabiscuit*. The roads will be clear and spring will have reached the gardens of Mercy Center. We meet for the day, Saturday, May 10th, starting at 9:30 and discuss the book. An excellent lunch is provided on site, then we view and discuss the film. We adjourn at 4:30 p.m.

If you're so inclined, join some of us for dinner in a local restaurant. **Donna Reynolds** is registrar for our hosts, the Auburn Great Books group. See the [Gold Country flier on the web site](#) for registration, \$35 per person including lunch.

Survey finds discussion group diversity

By Jan Vargo

Each year, the San Francisco Great Books Council conducts a survey of the over forty Great Books discussion groups in Northern California (see the web site's [Groups](#) page). This year's survey, completed in December 2013, found that several groups formerly listed are no longer active while the addition of new groups in San Francisco has kept the total number of groups in the area stable.

Group settings are diverse. Several are connected with academia, including Monterey Peninsula College and College of the Sequoias, in Visalia. Both offer Great Books programs and discussion groups. Other groups meet in homes, libraries, and community centers. The SIRs discussion group (Sons in Retirement) convenes at a former U.S. Air Force base in Marin County.

Most groups welcome new members. The few that are full usually maintain a waiting list.

Although anthologies from the Great Books Foundation are the preferred reading of most, local groups are free to choose their own reading materials and set their own schedules. For example, one well-attended group in Berkeley meets once a month to read poetry, while another group, active in the San Jose area, meets twice a month, alternating discussions between poetry and Shakespeare.

Technology has changed how the Council conducts the survey. Formerly, **Jan Vargo**, the Council's data coordinator, communicated with groups via telephone and the U.S. mail. This year, cell phones and email have made it easier to keep up-to-date with local groups.

New groups thrive in SF: Who knew?

By Jim Hall

No one would have guessed that San Francisco would now have seven Great Books discussion groups, when for many years there had been only one. So many efforts in the past had failed that we locals had begun believing it was impossible to get new groups going in the city.

Undaunted, in May 2009, **Clifford Louie** and I began talking about starting a second group and, remarkably, held our first meeting in August of that year at the Richmond Branch of the San Francisco Public Library. To our surprise, the group was an immediate success and is still going strong. Newly confident, a year later, Clifford and I started two more groups—one at the Main Library and another at the Noe Valley Branch. Then, in 2013, we added groups at the Presidio, West Portal, and Sunset branches and are happy to report that all groups are doing well.



What, you may wonder, made the difference? For one, the San Francisco Public Library has been instrumental in our expansion by publicizing meetings as well as printing flyers and posters to display in the branch libraries. We are also grateful to the many experienced Great Bookies who have led discussions including **Rick** and **Kay White**, **Louise DiMattio**, **Nancy Wortman**, **Sandra Green**, **Vince Scardina** and his son **Mark**, and **Chris Hammer**. In fact, our need for discussion leaders became so great that in November Clifford organized a Leader/Reader training seminar at the Noe Valley Branch

Library and we are looking forward to working with the participants from that seminar.

Just a few short years ago, none of us knew any of this was possible. It took time, imagination, legwork and persistence to make it all happen. In 2014, we will be starting three more groups and providing additional leader training seminars. The first of these new groups is already scheduled to start at the Anza Branch Library in March, where Clifford will be offering a mid-day Saturday meeting.

With the addition of the three new groups, we will have a total of ten GB groups in San Francisco this year. A list of groups is posted on the GBSF website where you can also subscribe to our e-newsletter, the best way to keep up-to-date on GB activities in Northern CA. Simply go to www.greatbooks-sf.com and put your email address in the little yellow box and click GO. If our successes have inspired you and you want to start a new GB discussion group, we are ready to provide information and support. Phone **Jim Hall** at 415-387-2125 or email at jimsrhall@earthlink.net.

Sixteen attend GBSF leader-reader workshop at SF library

By Clifford Louie

On November 16, a Great Books leader-reader workshop was held at the Noe Valley Branch Library in San Francisco. Instruction was provided by **Rob Calvert, Mark Scardina, Louise DiMattio, Chris Hammer, Jim Hall, and Clifford Louie**. There were 16 participants.

The workshop was designed to teach participants:

- How to lead a Great Books discussion
- How to become a better Great Books participant
- How to become a better reader

One highlight of the day was Mark Scardina's demonstration discussion of the poem, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," by Randall Jarrell.



From my mother's sleep I fell
into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till
my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed
from the dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the
nightmare fighters. When I
died they washed me out of
the turret with a hose.

Mark asked a few engaging questions then stepped back to let the group own the discussion. In good fun,

Rob Calvert and Jim Hall tried to disrupt the discussion by telling personal stories. The group observed how Mark tactfully handled these disruptions while keeping the discussion on track. He also helped the group see the importance of every word in the poem and how changing even a single word can alter its meaning. Another highlight occurred when each of eight participants led a discussion of a poem or short story. The group's constructive feedback provided a great learning experience for everyone.

Great Books Foundation makes big changes

By Don Whitfield

Vice President for Great Books Discussions
Great Books Foundation

Over the last two years, the 66-year-old Great Books Foundation has been undergoing many changes that we believe will help the organization to be more effective. Prior to this reorganization, the greater part of the Foundation's resources have supported its K-12 school based programs whose revenues have helped fund the smaller adult program, Great Books Discussions. As a result of this extensive company-wide assessment, Great Books Discussions will play a more prominent role in the Foundation's growth while still retaining its distinct identity.

In early 2012, I worked with our Board of Directors to develop a multi-year business plan for Great Books Discussions that was adopted in June of that year. More than just a projection of revenues



and marketing tactics, the plan broadens the scope of Great Books Discussions by adding programs and publications that will appeal to a wider audience. To facilitate these efforts, the Board approved the hiring of two full-time staff members for Great Books Discussions, a Senior Content Developer and a Market Development Assistant. They are, respectively, Louise Galpine and Audrey Schlofner who have been with us for almost a year. In addition, the business plan mandates the development of discussion-group leader training to be delivered online and through webinars to reach the many potential participants who cannot attend live courses. This endeavor will get underway in early 2014. In the near future, we will be soliciting your ideas about the best format and content for these courses.

Great Books Discussions has continued to publish new titles designed for our discussion groups, including *Consuming Interests: Great Ideas in Economics*, a 6th volume in the *Great Conversations* series, and a new series, *Vital Ideas*. In addition, *Immigrant Voices*, a collection of eighteen short stories by contemporary writers from around the world will be released in March 2014.

Finally, I want to let you know about Talking Service, a Great Books Discussions publishing project that we hope will become a model for future programs. Talking Service, an outreach to veterans of the United States Armed Forces, aims to extend Shared Inquiry discussion activities to a population that has faced enormous challenges in making the transition from military to civilian life. Its centerpiece is a special anthology, *Standing Down: From Warrior to Civilian*, to be published in September 2013. It consists of a collection of forty-four writings about military experience ranging from Homer's *Iliad* through memoirs by veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The production of this book was funded by a large grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. We have also been successful in getting a number of other grants from veterans' organizations such as the Wounded Warrior Project to help underwrite the cost of this initiative. Talking Service's dedicated website, www.talkingservice.greatbooks.org, will foster communication among veterans.

The positive response to Talking Service from across the country has been excellent and the program will continue to grow in the coming years. Its success, however, will ultimately depend on the dedication and skill of those who will implement it as discussion leaders and organizers at the local level. For more information about this exciting program, you are invited to go to www.talkingservice.greatbooks.org. Anyone with active military experience who would like to help advance this work is encouraged to contact me. More generally, I welcome your comments and ideas for what Great Books Discussions can do to enhance the discussion activities that we all value so highly.



Barbara McConnell

Barbara June (Lawrence) McConnell
1929-2013

Barbara June McConnell passed away on October 29, 2013 at the age of 84. Born in San Francisco to Dr. Walter and Eleanor Lawrence in 1929, she graduated from Lowell High School in 1946 and U.C. Berkeley in 1950, where she was a member of Phi Mu Sorority. She married George Robert (Bob) McConnell in 1954, and they had three sons, Michael, David and William. While they lived in Marin she was Executive Secretary for the American Cancer Society and worked with the Girl Scouts in San Mateo and San Francisco. In Mill Valley she began her lifelong association with the Great Books Foundation.

After two years in Colorado the family returned to California in 1971, making their home in Alameda, and Barbara returned to the Girl Scouts. In 1978 they moved to Sonoma County, and Barbara took a position as Program Coordinator in the Healdsburg School District where she worked until she retired in 1993. When Bob retired in 1983, they bought a ranch in Sebastopol. After Bob's death in 2008, Barbara moved to their Rossmoor home.



She was preceded in death by her parents; a daughter, Kathleen; and her devoted husband of 54 years, Bob. She is survived by her three sons and their loving wives, Lisa, Jenny and Sherri; six grandchildren whom she adored; a sister, Mary Clark (Cottage Grove OR); and her many friends throughout the Bay Area and beyond. A celebration of her life [took] place at the Fireside Room at Rossmoor in Walnut Creek on Sunday, January 5, 2014 from 3:30 to 7 pm.

As published in the San Francisco Chronicle on Nov. 17, 2013

See more at:

<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/sfgate/obituary.aspx?pid=167977260#sthash.FJnyffd9.dpuf>

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California: Rob Calvert, President; Laura Bushman, Vice President; Rick White, Secretary; Brian Mahoney, Treasurer; Marge Johnson, Past President

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2014 CALENDAR
GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

JANUARY	FEBRUARY
	2/8 and 2/9: San Francisco Mini-Retreats <i>(One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest)</i>
MARCH	APRIL
No Leader Training in 2014	4/4–6: Barbara McConnell Spring Conference at Asilomar
MAY	JUNE
5/10: Gold Country Mini-Retreat <i>(Seabiscuit)</i>	6/8: Picnic/Annual Meeting
JULY	AUGUST
SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER
9/13–14: Long Novel Weekend <i>(The Man Without Qualities, vol.1)</i>	10/4 and 10/5: Wine Country Mini-Retreats
NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
11/1–2 : Poetry Weekend	