

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2014:

Barbara McConnell honored by 73 at GBSF premier event

By Louise Morgan

This year's Asilomar spring conference was given high marks for a variety of reasons—perfect weather, lovely grounds, a fun party, tasty food, and lively discussions. Having our living units and meeting rooms concentrated in one corner of the conference grounds was a bonus; no one had to walk very far to get to a discussion or to the party. Our seventy-three attendees included fifteen first-timers, one of whom was 15-year-old **Scott Shafer** whose contributions to the discussions rivaled those of seasoned veterans. Other newcomers included **Jeffrey** and **Anita Cohen** and **Marge Metcalf** from Harrison Middleton University, and **Julie Brown Smith** and **Bob Herendeen** from Monterey Peninsula College. Participants came from as far as Las Vegas, Iowa, Arizona, and Texas.



The discussions were all spirited and insightful even though two of the readings—*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*—proved to be controversial choices; initially people either loved them or hated them. However, as is often the case at Great Books events, many participants revised their opinions after the reading had been thoroughly discussed. Annie Dillard and Tom Stoppard would be pleased to know that they have more fans now than they had before Asilomar.

Kay White credits the success of discussions largely to the preparation that our discussion leaders voluntarily undergo prior to each conference. This year the leaders were: Poetry—**Theda Firschein**, **Brent Browning**, **Janice White**, and **Mark Scardina**; Essay—**Oscar Firschein**, **Louise DiMattio**, **Louise Morgan**, and **Tony Bushman**; Novel—**Mary Wood**, **Sheri Kindsvater**, **Jim Hall**, and **Ellen Ward**; Play—**Kay White**, **Rick White**, **Nicolee Brorsen**, and **Rob Calvert**.



Triumphant Titans of Team Trivia! **Louis Rutledge**, **Claire Magee**, **Nancy Hight**, **Phil Sheridan**, **Rolf Selvig**

Those happy smiles of satisfaction belong to the team that won a fun and challenging game of Trivia during the Saturday evening party. With a near-perfect score they defeated eight other teams by correctly answering questions relating to the readings discussed during the weekend. **Louise DiMattio**, our dynamic emcee, came up with queries such as, “What was the name of the ship that Leggatt escaped from?” and “What color is ‘a mystical experience shared by everybody’ in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*?” After the winners were announced a cake dedicated to the memory of the late **Barbara McConnell** was shared.

Save the Dates: April 24-26, 2015

Save the date for next year's Asilomar weekend so you don't miss out on the fun! It's planned for April 24-26. Feel free to send suggestions for readings to any member of the council via the “contact us” link on the Great Books Council website.

Conference theme is “Know Thyself”

This spring’s conference made it clearer than ever that there does exist a theme committee under whose instructions the Asilomar book and poetry selection committees operate. This year’s theme was “Know Thyself.”

One would think that the ghostly Theme Committee would have the courtesy to make itself known to the editor of *Reading Matters*, the publication which **Jim Hall**, himself the editor of the celebrated GBSF e-newsletter, refers to as our “premier publication.” Yet in spite of its otherwise commendable behavior, this committee continues to meet in secret and deny its existence. If we may be permitted to invoke a favored concept of the second decade of the new century, this committee fails the test of “transparency.”

Faithful readers know that for many years *RM* has endeavored to find out who is on this committee, if only to thank them for their good work. We remain suspicious that its chairman may be the reclusive **Brent Browning**, who long has refused to play his accordion. This accordion has not been seen, nor has it been heard, for many years—not since Brent played it during the early 1990’s with *The Sentimentals* (also known as the *Seven Mentals*) at Asilomar Saturday evening revels. We have not seen either the instrument or the case, which we take to be very suspicious. It is possible that Browning sold the instrument to help pay for the apartment he recently completed in his basement. If so, he may have kept the case as a repository for Theme Committee files.

Regrettably, we find it the better part of wisdom to suspend our pursuit of the committee for the present. As a retired anesthesiologist, Dr. Browning is familiar with debilitating chemicals and may have kept supplies, perhaps as souvenirs; more important, as a descendant of the inventor of the Browning rifle, who knows what firearms he may have on hand?

Evidence mounts

We feel that the evidence, year after year, is convincing that this committee exists. Observe the uncanny synergy among this year’s readings. Look at the parallel between Conrad’s novel and Stoppard’s play. In *The Secret Sharer*, the young ship’s captain rescues a man accused of murder and henceforth confuses himself with his captive guest, in the process learning more about his own nature. In the Stoppard play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mix up their own identities. In death it is difficult to tell them apart. Is it possible that such a pairing of two sets of “doppelgangers” is coincidental? No. It is a thematic act of genius. Annie Dillard struggles for over

300 pages to determine her place in the great scheme of things. All seven of the poems discussed on Friday evening reek of self-understanding.

Whoever is on this theme committee, we hope they will continue their noble work, whether in sunlight or shadow, transparent or not.

Asilomar Diary

By Jim Baird

Friday night

The Poetry:

Two things make the poetry sessions at Asilomar so energetic: good poems and the Great Books technique of shared inquiry. You don’t need specialized training or a lifetime’s worth of study to understand a poem; you just need a group of friends and a commitment to letting the words tell their story.

All of the seven poems we worked with dealt with deeply human subjects. Here are excerpts of the seven, each accompanied by a short reflection.

#1129 by Emily Dickinson

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind—

This is the poem about Truth where Dickinson, in an often-quoted line, orders us to “Tell it Slant.” The poem itself is only eight lines long, and could be memorized in just a few minutes. That would keep it handy in our minds the next time we’re about to give someone “too much information.” Yes, tell the truth, all of it, but truth is like a fireworks show: don’t set everything off at once.

The page one photo is by **Louise Morgan**. Paintings throughout are by **Bernice Hunold**. We introduced her and her work in the Winter-Spring 2013-2014 issue and are pleased to add these. They can be seen in glorious color in the electronic version of this newsletter, at greatbooks-sf.com. Bernice can be reached at bernicehunold@gmail.com. More paintings are at www.flickr.com/photos/bernicehunold.

#657 by Emily Dickinson

*The spreading wide my narrow hands
To gather paradise—*

Visitors to the Dickinson house in 19th Century Amherst very likely asked young Emily, “Yes, we know you’re a poet, dear, but what is it exactly that you *do*?” Her answer: Imagine life as a house. What would a good one be like? The Prose model is the most popular. It’s serviceable, comfortable, not flashy. That’s not for Emily. She’s living in the Possibility model, the one with all the extra windows, timber walls, the very sky for a roof, and a garden where she touches the divine.

“Dockery and Son” by Philip Larkin

*Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
And age, and then the only end of age.*

The poem’s title seems right out of Dickens, doesn’t it? Set in 1960s England, its verses have a British accent, and they place us solidly in English “Public School” society. But the sudden sense that time and opportunity have slipped away is universal. The “son” in the poem is a previously unknown child of the narrator’s deceased classmate. Heading home by train from his funeral, the narrator forlornly realizes that his own childlessness was not some high-minded choice; Fatherhood was just something he never got around to.

“Lighter” by Dorianne Laux

*Call it a gift from the gods of fire.
Call it your due. Sit in the jail of your own
making, the bars built of mirrors and smoke.*

Here’s a poem that’s a tutorial in petty shoplifting, namely the filching of a cigarette lighter from a 7-11. Like the words of a charming but criminal friend, the instructions are crisp and confident: Relax, a little stealing will make you less uptight. See, nothing to it. Nobody noticed, did they? But you did.

“Of Politics and Art” by Norman Dubie

*Sometimes a whole civilization can be dying
Peacefully in one young woman. . .*

The school day is over but snow has blocked the roads, so the students can’t go home yet from their remote New England school. The teacher reads to her class from Moby-Dick, the tender scene where the whalers find themselves, as in a dream, surrounded by mothers nursing their newborn calves. She then reads from Psalms, the ancient songs of God’s mercy. As it happens, she’s dying slowly of tuberculosis, and so is the way of life that welcomes such readings.

“Winter Remembered” by John Crowe Ransom

*Dear love, these fingers that had known your touch,
And tied our separate forces first together,
Were ten poor idiot fingers not worth much,
Ten frozen parsnips hanging in the weather.*

In this haunting poem, with its subtle rhymes and rhythms, could be lyrics to a sad Country song. We don’t know what happened, exactly, but we know it was in the hard-frozen winter, and that it can’t ever be made right. But if you give the poem a second reading, the utter despair of the narrator is striking. Something went wrong, all right, bad wrong.

“Autumn Testament” by Pablo Neruda

*And now I’m going behind
this page, but not disappearing.*

This one, a translation from the original Spanish, is a lot of fun. It’s about facing death, not generally a cheerful subject, but the poet isn’t sitting around waiting for his fate. He’s on the move, through time and space, and even inside the poem itself, where he plays a kind of peek-a-boo with the reader. The good news he has for us is that even if we disappear, we can still go on singing. Disappearing isn’t the same as being gone.

Saturday Morning

The Essay: Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

This is a fairly easy book to read but a tough one to get through. It is simultaneously a nature study, a personal diary, a commentary on Scripture, a mystical theology, a field observation manual, and a blank-verse poem. Annie Dillard was just 27 when she wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and it is very much a young writer’s book, poetic and enthusiastic. At times the poetry can be a bit ornate, and the multitude of facts daunting, however the rewards for those who persevere are significant. Guaranteed, you will not see the world in the same way after reading this book.

The word “pilgrim” in the title suggests a long-distance trek to a holy place. But from the very first chapter Dillard is *already* at her creekside cabin in Virginia, where she will stay for a full year. If we’re to join her as *pilgrims*, we seem to be at the destination without even setting out. She calls her cabin an anchorite’s hermitage. Studying and writing by night, silently watching by day, she is more hermit than pilgrim. We soon realize the journey won’t be measurable in miles. The road we’re on goes inward.

How strenuous will this journey be? Dillard answers with a story from Genesis, the one where Jacob wrestles with God on the bank of a stream. The contest goes on all night. Like Jacob, Dillard waits by a stream, and for one strenuous page after another, she wrestles with creation and its workings. We watch horrified as an outsized water

bug liquefies a frog, as mother insects devour their freshly-laid eggs, as reindeer are driven mad by clouds of flies. This will not be an easy trip.

What will we see along the way? Before we can answer that, we have to confront a key fact about Creation: It may seem like an extravagant, intricate machine, set in motion and then left to run on its own; but it really resembles, once everything is examined carefully, a thought, a series of ideas made real. There is Mind behind what we see. Much of the book explores all the amazing stuff that there is in the world. Say what you will, the Creator loves variety and “pizzazz.”

Is there a reward in such a journey? Death is what awaits us, of course; life seems to require it, making room for what’s next. Dillard leaves us in the final chapter with a message of joy and hope: “I think that the dying pray at the last not ‘please,’ but ‘thank you,’ as a guest thanks his host at the door.”

Saturday Afternoon

The Novel: *The Secret Sharer*

From one point of view, this famous Joseph Conrad story is a high seas adventure that starts mysteriously, builds suspense, and ends with a narrow escape. From another vantage point, we see a kind of courtroom drama, with conflicting testimony and ourselves as the jury. Only 52 pages, the story stays in the mind long after the book is back on its shelf.

Here’s what stayed with me: *The Secret Sharer* can be seen as a re-telling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Leggatt, the first mate of the *Sephora*, has strangled a seaman who failed to respond to his orders during a storm that threatened to destroy the ship. Rather than return to England for trial, he jumps ship, expecting to drown. He talks his way aboard another ship, and is hidden by its rookie captain, the narrator of the story. Leggatt sums up his motive:

What can they [a judge and jury back home] know whether I am guilty or not—or of what I am guilty, either? That’s my affair. What does the Bible say? ‘Driven off the face of the earth.’ Very well, I am off the face of the earth now. As I came at night so I shall go.

We recall God’s words to Cain in the biblical story:

You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.

This sounds like a death sentence, but Leggatt, like Cain, lives by his own set of rules. His Abel, a shipmate he despised, got what was coming to him. To prove that point, Leggatt defiantly accepts a life on the run. Leggatt will leave the ship once it is under way, to be marooned on an island in the open sea.

As readers, we might be satisfied if the story ended here, with Leggatt in the water, swimming toward an island in the distance. Instead, with the man still aboard, the captain has his helmsman steer directly toward the island. The ship gets so close that it’s all but certain it will go aground and sink. Luckily, it doesn’t. Seizing the moment, the captain orders full sail and the ship is saved, as is his career.

Leggatt, who had become a kind of Abel, dependent for his life upon another man, is saved by the dangerous maneuver. The captain, risking everything, refuses to

become another Cain. We are left wondering why the captain has taken such a chance, why he has so identified with Leggatt leading him to endanger his career, his life, and the lives of his men. Does he see himself as Cain and Leggatt as Abel?

Sunday Morning

The Play: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

The Player asserts: “We’re actors—we’re the opposite of people.”

[Disclosure: In the late 1960s, I played a lead character in a college production. The school was small, all male, and had a tradition of putting on a school play every year,



so in 1969 we took on *R & G*. We also had another tradition, that of writing skits and songfests where we satirized our professors and each other in any way we could. So, when it came to adapting

Tom Stoppard’s hit to our stage, we felt at home. And, no, I don’t remember which character I played, I think it was *Rosencrantz*.]

Yes, Hamlet is a serious play. And yes, the stage is full of dead bodies at the end, and the Player tells us it must be a tragedy.

But—and you had to see this coming—if you can't have fun with death, you're just not using your imagination. Let's say it another way: forget that you're part of an audience when you read R & G; pretend that you're an actor. How would you play it? Would you go for laughs and leave the tragic stuff to Hamlet and Horatio? If you're going to compete with Shakespeare for two hours, with nothing but dialogue and some stage tricks, you'd better go for the funny bone.

You need to read this play out loud. Reading it with a friend is an even better way to appreciate the dueling dialogue scenes in the first act that resemble verbal tennis matches. Or those frantic moments when the actual scenes from Hamlet surround you, swirl you around, then leave you dizzy from all the things you don't understand. Try it and I think you'll see things much differently—you'll see things *much* differently.

Finally, let's have fun by casting the two leads. We'll pretend that we could hire any Hollywood actors, alive or dead. With the right ones the show could almost play itself. Charlton Heston would probably not do. Too serious, too many chariot races and burning bushes. Arnold Schwarzenegger, ditto, though the accent would be interesting. Laurel and Hardy are recommended on the dust jacket of our book, and the tone of the dialogue suits them. They'd be perfect doing the Lost Souls bit, but could Stan and Ollie handle all that highfalutin' dialogue? It would be fascinating to see them try.

Let's try on these pairs:

Cleese and Idle from Monty Python's Flying Circus.

Jerry and George from Seinfeld.

Sheldon and Leonard from The Big Bang Theory.

Sarandon and Davis from Thelma and Louise.

Leno and Letterman, for a good retirement gig.

Other ideas are welcome.

CLASSICAL PURSUITS:

Adventure for the Mind. Travel for the Soul.

By Ann Kirkland

You are invited to our Global Party, July 13-18, on the garden campus of the University of Toronto.

For our 16th year, we are turning our attention to THE WEST GIVES WAY TO THE REST, literary, artistic, musical, and film masterpieces from parts of the world we may be less familiar with. We'll take full advantage of being located in the most happily diverse city on the

planet. In small discussion groups, using the Great Books method of Shared Inquiry, we'll probe enduring questions and big ideas. We hope you will come to the party.

For more information, check out our website at <http://www.classicalpursuits.com> and click on Toronto Pursuits.

Courthouse is returned to Placer County!

In the Fall-Winter 2013-2014 issue of *Reading Matters*, the courthouse appearing on page 6 was inadvertently located in Auburn, Nevada County. Both this fine old building and the historic City of Auburn have since rightfully been returned to Placer County.



Placer County Courthouse

The dialogue continues: should outside references be allowed?

This continues a discussion begun in our Winter-Spring 2013-2014 issue between Jean Circiello and Oscar Firschein. It concerns using references from outside the assigned text in Great Books discussions. Oscar had argued in the affirmative and Jean in the negative.

Kay Blaney, kayblane@att.net, writes:

The first time I went to Great Books I was sure I was going to shine in the discussion. I had an MA in English Literature while the other participants were a motley crew—careers in marketing, technology, medicine. Some didn't even have a college degree! What could they know about fiction and poetry? Initially I thought their observations were bizarre: they didn't know what they were talking about. Then as I listened more closely, I saw that some of their insights made sense. Not only that but they gave me new perspectives and insights into texts I had read in an academic setting. By the end of that first meeting my mind had opened to the many ways to look at a text. That was 35 years ago and I am still coming back.

At the November 2013 Poetry Weekend our group delved into the New Testament in discussing its use of the word "talent" in a poem by John Milton. Discussing a poem by Sylvia Plath, we brought in her marital life with Ted, fertile ground for extraneous gossip. Not only were their lives and loves on the table but even the house where they lived. Wow! These were heavy loads for any poem to carry. In a similar vein, the dying and death of another of our poets, not mentioned in her text, was deemed relevant to understanding the poem. Would it not have been more interesting to make our own discoveries from the poem about death and dying? We are not talking about simple explanatory footnotes here, we were talking about all sorts of background info we seemed to think we needed before approaching the poem.

The use of outside references also plagued the Long Novel Weekend. *Moby-Dick* was a tough read, and I will admit to reading an essay or two about the book to keep myself moving. But some came to the discussion with full critical theories and firmly laid them on the text. (On the other hand, our excellent evening speaker provoked our thinking by posing stimulating questions.) Who needs a discussion, when everything is already figured out for us?

I thought a classic was supposed to have inherent value, potentially accessible to all. Its value transcends eras, epochs, cultures. If not, either the text isn't a classic or else it is one not suitable for the method Great Books has followed for decades.

As I write this, I am reading *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* for a book/movie "mini-retreat." I wonder, am I going to have three hours of Ken Kesey and his bus, the CIA, LSD, and the Menlo Park VA hospital? I hope not. I would prefer to speculate about Chief Bromden's future and whether McMurphy was a loser or a hero. I wonder if Edward Snowden will figure in our discussion.

Stay tuned. These days in a Great Books discussion anything can happen. We should settle on a disciplined approach with very limited outside references.

Kay Blaney

Sheri Kindsvater kindsvater@aol.com responds:

My thoughts exactly!

As a discussion leader, I try to steer away from the sort of thing Kay is describing until the end. I like to begin by explaining that while our life experiences influence our response to a text, bringing up such connections is best left for the last 15 minutes or even lunch time. Keeping to the text is what makes the discussion interesting and lively.

Sheri Kindsvater

Kay White kaycleveland@aol.com writes:

Great thoughts! I agree with Kay B and Sheri. I want the chance to explore our own ideas and responses, unadulterated by circumstantial facts. Only the dictionary is an acceptable reference. I am in GB discussions to learn and search with our fellow discussants--not to know an author's biography that tends to a "correct" interpretation.

This is a hearty continuation of the conversation between Jean C. and Oscar in the Winter-Spring 2013-2014 *Reading Matters*. I think staying within the text is tried and true. So much is available online that we begin to stop thinking for ourselves.

Kay White

Oscar Firschein oscarf1@earthlink.net concludes:

While I support the limited use of outside references, I do agree that the author's life and analyses of the work by others should not be discussed. My argument in favor of outside references allows only the mention of items in a poem or work that the reader of the poet's time could be assumed to have known. These might include references to the Bible, classic works of literature, major historical incidents, cultural items, or famous persons of the time.

I also support defining foreign words for which there is no simple English translation, e.g., the Greek *eudaimonia* usually is incorrectly translated as *happiness*. If we are to avoid works that contain esoteric words, we will sacrifice access to much important literature from other times and places.

Oscar Firschein

GBSF annual picnic June 8 will discuss an outrageous satire

The Magic Christian, by Terry Southern, will be discussed at the GBSF annual picnic on June 8 at Tilden Park, Berkeley. Southern, best-known for his irreverent satire, is the author of the screenplay for the movie *Dr. Strangelove: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.

This free event, to be held in Padre Picnic Area, begins at noon. A barbecue is provided. Please bring a dish for four and whatever you wish to barbecue.

For a flyer with directions to the event, please go to <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/picnic.htm>.

The book discussion will follow lunch and a brief business meeting which is the official annual meeting of this 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.

Some may find the level of cynicism in the book excessive. Blame your editor. He suggested the book.

Comma Controversy:

To my mother, and Ayn Rand, and God

By Rob Calvert

There's a lovely Wikipedia article, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/serial_comma, that lays out the arguments for and against the "serial comma" (the comma after a list's penultimate item and preceding the "and"). It indicates that many experts recommend a nuanced approach in which the serial comma is used sparingly. It seems to be a dispute in which the grammarians are on one side and the journalists are on the other. My people are journalists, which might help to explain why I instinctively omit the comma.

Some of the article's examples are wonderful, for instance the following two "dedications" which

explore the ambiguity that can arise if the last two listed elements might be construed as a couple.

Argument in favor of including the serial comma because it *avoids* ambiguity:

To my parents, Ayn Rand and God.

i.e., my mother is Ayn Rand and my father is God.

Argument against using the serial comma because it *introduces* ambiguity:

To my mother, Ayn Rand, and God.

i.e., my mother is Ayn Rand.

I also liked this quote from Lynn Truss: "There are people who embrace the Oxford comma, and people who don't, and I'll just say this: *never* get between these people when drink has been taken."

2014-15 CALENDAR

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

JUNE - JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER
6/8: Picnic/Annual Meeting <i>(The Magic Christian)</i>		9/13-14: Long Novel Weekend <i>(The Man Without Qualities, Vol.1)</i>
OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
10/4 and 10/5: Wine Country Mini-Retreats	11/1-2 : Poetry Weekend	
JANUARY-MARCH	APRIL	MAY
Date TBA: SF Mini-Retreat	4/24-26: Asilomar Spring Conference	Date TBA: Gold Country Mini-Retreat
JUNE-JULY		
Date TBA: Annual Meeting/Picnic		

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