

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2015:

Event co-chair Louise Morgan says
“Don’t keep this a secret!”

Secrets abound in Great Books literature. Joseph Conrad’s young sea captain hid his mysterious doppelgänger aboard ship; Ginny and Rose shared a terrible family secret in *A Thousand Acres*; Annie Dillard discovered some of nature’s secrets during her pilgrimage to Tinker Creek; and Dorian Gray suffered in mind and spirit as he tried to hide his dreadful deed from the world. (We’ll learn more about Mr. Gray’s tribulations in April.)

Secrets are intended to be kept, of course, but one secret we are all privy to *must* be revealed to a larger audience—the annual Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar.

Regulars at the event know how enjoyable it is. The Monterey coast is serene and beautiful, the accommodations are comfortable (how many other hotels have rooms with sacks of kindling on the hearth and helpful instructions on starting a fire?), the food is bountiful and excellent, and the discussions are always highly rated by participants. Those who choose to attend the Saturday social enjoy wine, cheese, good music, and great camaraderie.

While so many of us drive away from Asilomar with pleasant memories and plans to return the following year, how many share our experience once we get home? We may encourage our local group to send in their applications, but do we make the effort to reach out to those who may not be aware of Great Books and would enjoy the experience?

Introducing new participants to the Great Books program is crucial to its continued success and to the success of the Asilomar weekend in particular. Attrition occurs naturally in any organization and new faces are always welcome. If you love the Great Books program and want it to continue, please invite friends and relatives to attend a Great Books function. Help by reaching out to those who may not receive this newsletter. Leave flyers at your local library. Submit a blurb for publication in your local newspaper. Encourage friends to “like” Great Books on Facebook.

Those attending the upcoming Asilomar weekend (April 24-26, 2015) will discuss Vladimir Nabokov’s fascinating memoir, *Invitation of a Beheading*; Oscar Wilde’s ironic novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Peter Weiss’s controversial play, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, usually shortened to *Marat/Sade*; and a selection of poetry. A registration form can be found on this page: <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/asilomar.htm>.

Please feel free to copy it and distribute it to your recruits.

See you at Asilomar in April!



From left, Man Grover, Jean Circiello, Helen Burke, Carolyn Yale, Rob Calvert, Wallis Leslie (Photo by Mary-Anna Rae at 2014 Long Novel Weekend. See story in this issue.)

Annual Poetry Weekend celebrates, ruins poetry

By Rick White

A record number of poetry lovers gathered on the weekend of November 1-2 at the Vallombrosa Retreat in Menlo Park to decipher and enjoy challenging poems by mostly 20th century authors. Howard Nemerov, Louise Glück, John Donne, Jack Gilbert, Billy Collins, Tony Hoagland, J.D. McClatchy, Gillian Clarke, Karl Shapiro, Adam Zagajewski, and Naomi Shihab Nye were among those whose work was discussed.

An attendance of 56 surpassed all previous GBSF poetry events. We were fortunate that Vallombrosa is able to accommodate the growing number of interested participants.

As has become our custom, Saturday evening was devoted to a poetic excursion. This year, under the inspired direction of Carol Hochberg, the Vallombrosa Versifiers presented an evening of nonsense verse. Participants recited “Jabberwocky,” the famous nonsense poem in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice through the Looking Glass*, in several languages, as well as other humorous verse. The culminating event was a contest to compose the best, as well as the most ridiculous, limerick. The group was divided into teams and the winner chosen by vote. The winning team’s limerick was read by Roger Ellman. It had perfect meter and rhyme; its subject was, oddly enough, the writing of a limerick. Unfortunately, Carol reports, unlike her usual “keeper” habits, she inadvertently tossed the results of that contest. All that remains is the winner of the most ridiculous limerick, metrically sloppy and with no apparent point of view. It was the following piece, read aloud by Phil Sheridan.

There was a man who wrote limericks
Or *thought* that he could write limericks
But he couldn’t rhyme
So every time
He wrote a word that wasn’t appropriate.

For an encore, Phil was invited to read a more serious poem of his.

I’ve Become Wanton as I Wither

I’ve become wanton as I wither.
Why?
Because old age
is not a time for growing.
It is a time of leaving
of letting go

unbridling all the love
I’ve held in check since childhood
and sending it to places where hearts
are dry. I do it wantonly, before I die.

When next you see a withered leaf
fluttering like a newborn in a tree,
stop and say hello: that’s me.
and if your heart is dry, come close
and hold me in your hand

I’ll send some love to you.

—Phil Sheridan

Othello dies four times in Calistoga

By Jim Baird

This is a condensation of a lengthier piece which can be read on Jim Hall’s blog at www.greatbooks-sf.com.

This year our Wine Country Mini-Retreat featured Shakespeare’s *Othello*, with discussion of the play in the morning, and the Orson Welles film after lunch. The program was repeated on Sunday with a smaller group in attendance. As predicted by event coordinator Jim Hall, Othello died both mornings and both afternoons.

My experience with *Othello* until reading the play for Great Books this September was limited to seeing a performance at San Diego’s Old Globe Theater in 1967, and speed-reading the play for a college class later. Along with some famous lines (“Green-eyed monster” and “Loved not wisely but too well”), here’s all I remembered:

A Moorish general in 17th Century Venice, after a brief courtship, marries the teenage daughter of a prominent citizen. She’s the perfect wife for him, and he’s the ideal husband for her. They have no hidden faults, no sordid secrets. They are, in fact, good people. But within days both of them are dead in a murder/suicide. A scheming character named Iago is responsible for the tragedy.

Not a bad summary, but I soon learned *Othello* is much greater than its plot. I was pleasantly surprised—as usually happens during Shared Inquiry—to see themes I hadn’t suspected. Jim Hall made that happen with his selection of passages for us to read aloud that highlighted key issues in the play. Lively discussions included the real character of Iago, the nature of the relationship between Iago and Othello, the role of women versus men, methods of persuasion and their effectiveness, and much more.

We departed Calistoga with an appreciation of how contemporary a play *Othello* is, in spite of its age. We learned to recognize the characters onstage as people we know, and their tragedy to be as relevant to us as today’s news. Sadly, we are all too familiar with the transformative power of envy and jealousy and its dire consequences.

Othello (the movie)

While Welles’s interpretation of Shakespeare is always controversial, here are reasons why I think it is worthwhile to watch this film. You can find it by searching “Welles Othello” on YouTube.

The first four and a half minutes are pure Welles. The film opens with the view of a man laid out for a funeral. First, only his head is shown, from above. He’s lifted and carried by hooded monks. We see two other caskets, each

with a woman's body draped in black lace. Religious imagery is everywhere: crosses, a bishop in cope and miter, men making the sign of the cross. People's clothes appear to be medieval. The bodies are carried through a crowd apparently to be taken aboard a ship. A man, under custody of armed guards, is pushed and shoved in the opposite direction. He's locked in a square iron cage suspended from a chain and winched upward next to a dungeon wall. Throughout there is eerie music and unintelligible chanting. The scene concludes with a title card and a brief spoken introduction, then we're taken to Venice, and the story begins.

In addition to Welles at his prime, the talented cast includes Michael MacLiammoir as Iago and Robert Coote (Colonel Pickering in *My Fair Lady*) as Roderigo. Detroit native Doris Dowling (from *The Lost Weekend*) plays Bianca, and she's a hoot. Fay Compton, a BBC-TV veteran, is appropriately in-your-face as Iago's wife Emilia. Canadian actress Suzanne Cloutier is perfect as Desdemona. She projects a strong-willed innocence and devotion to her husband. The camera loves her.

Filmed on location in Morocco, Venice, Tuscany, and Rome, the scenery, especially the Moroccan seaside castle, becomes an added character in the drama.

Long Novel Weekend:

***The Man Without Qualities* stirs controversy about the rules for Shared Inquiry**

Following Long Novel Weekend, a spontaneous colloquium took place by email about the experience of reading and discussing this difficult book. A key issue was the Shared Inquiry prohibition against resorting to outside material either before or during the discussion. Other matters relating to the book and the discussions were also raised.

The book got very low ratings by participants on the evaluation forms circulated at the event. However, the discussions and the leaders got very high ratings. Go figure.

The excerpts that appear below focus on the outside references issue.

Rick White writes:

Maybe it is worth it for us to think seriously about building in a historical context for a book such as *The Man Without Qualities*. If so, let us structure it properly into the weekend or into the reading assignment. Some participants could not resist inserting it into the discussions. I spent significant time in advance trying to figure out the situation from the text alone. In such cases, shouldn't we recommend permissible resources? Not every book is the same and needs to be subjected to the same rules.

Louise DiMattio writes:

When Bill [*Louise's husband Wm. Corbett-Jones*] and I had lunch earlier with Sean Forester, our guest speaker for the event, he told us that Mark Cwik, in setting up the Great Discussions program [see story later in this issue], is struggling with the matter of background history and outside references. Surely there is a middle ground where such references do not detract/distract from the text! I tend to be pretty conservative because I am married to the King of Outside References, who drives me nuts most of the time. (Good thing he's a nice person...grrrrrrr.....)

Oscar Firschein writes:

I have long been an advocate of outside references in a written form, provided beforehand to all participants. For example, if a reading of *The Iliad* depended on some understanding of the Trojan War, a handout describing what the Trojan War was about could be provided. Also, the idea that participants can do their own googling fails when participants don't even know when a seemingly familiar word has an alternate, perhaps archaic, meaning. In a case on point, at a recent poetry weekend, a poem used a New Testament reference that many of us were unaware of and thus missed some of the import of the poem.

Wallis Leslie writes:

Nothing prevents each reader from doing as much research and attending as many graduate seminars as desired to enlarge his or her understanding of a subject. While we may bring enhanced understanding to the material, a two hour Great Books' discussion still should focus on the text everyone has read.

One of my greatest joys in reading is the vast network of associations and personal experiences evoked. While highly relevant to me, I doubt others would regard them with the same interest or value as I do. Plus, if we all launched out on our individual seas, we'd still be at our first Long Novel Weekend—or drowned.

Chuck Scarcliff wraps it up:

My thoughts come down to a sliding scale. There are times leaders can accept a "no harm, no foul" rule and other times when outside references should be nipped in the bud. These decisions should be guided by two essential considerations:

First, Great Books has long called itself "A Gathering of Equals." One aspect of our equality is that we all have read, for this discussion, the same text — no more, no less.

A second tenet is staying on-topic, remembering that the text is the subject of the discussion. An example I like to give is Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Though there's a tendency to discuss

the civil rights movement or Dr. King's life, I have to remind folks that our job is to focus on what is written in the letter.

There are times when the "no outside references" rule, if carried too far, can interrupt the flow of a good discussion. Naturally, there are other times when it's necessary to stop an outside reference dead in its tracks. If one must interrupt, do it diplomatically and decisively and then get back to business.

At times outside information can actually facilitate a discussion. A few years ago I led one at Asilomar of the Euripides play "The Trojan Women." To my surprise, many participants were clueless about the Trojan War. They lacked basic information known to Euripides' original audience. Without that background our discussion stalled. In that instance, I felt it was appropriate to interrupt and give a five minute Cliff Notes version of Iliad 101.

I believe that local groups should be flexible in finding and figuring out what works best for their members. I also feel it's important for Great Books to adopt a uniform policy so that Asilomar, Poetry Weekend, Long Novel Weekend, and mini-retreats follow the same practices.

A visit with Brent Browning

By Louise DiMattio

"Shared Inquiry has a magic, especially when it comes to discussing poetry."

This sentence, coming at the end of an afternoon spent with Brent Browning, summarizes what has motivated this outgoing Poetry Weekend chair over the course of his ten-year tenure. Relaxing with wife Erma in the spacious living room of the Santa Cruz mountains house they rebuilt after the Loma Prieta earthquake, Brent waxes ecstatic about the duties he performed in this crucial position. "How often, these days, do people work with an art form that has the sweep of poetry?" Brent, a retired anesthesiologist who disliked poetry before exposure to it in Great Books discussions, muses, "Poems start with a few words, take you from before you were even here, all the way through to long after you are gone, sometimes in just a few lines. Now that is magic."

Brent has greatly enjoyed working with the poetry selection chair, Carol Hochberg, and members of the poetry committee in winnowing, from countless choices, poems just right for the annual two-day Poetry Weekend held annually in November. The trick, he remarks, is to find poems with enough ambiguity to make them discussable while still being deeply meaningful.

Brent plans, after stepping down, to stay on as a member indefinitely. He wishes to give a special thank you to helpers Theda and Oscar Firschein, who for many

years have ably handled registration and room assignments.

Among Brent's favorite memories are an evening at Poetry Weekend featuring poet/translator Stephen Mitchell, and at another seeing Kim Addonizio pull up to the event on her motorcycle, outfitted in punk leather. He also fondly recalls an afternoon devoted entirely to Irish poetry.

Two years ago, the longtime site of the weekend, Westminster Retreat House, in Alamo, was put up for sale. This lovely old mansion had been its meeting place for decades, ever since Jan Fussell was its leader. Under Brent's watchful eye, following the lead of the Long Novel Weekend, the poetry event successfully transitioned to the Vallombrosa Retreat Center in Menlo Park.

Thanks go to Brent for his devoted stewardship of the Poetry Weekend. We are fortunate to welcome poetry selection committee member, John Anderson, who is taking the reins from Brent. Expect to learn more about John in future issues of this newsletter.

**Great Books enthusiasts seeking
"More, Please!"
find it at GreatDiscourses.com**

By Mark Cwik, Marketing Director

Your professionally-led, interactive Great Books discussion is now in session with thoughtful participants from around the world.

The "Information Age" has reached Great Books, permitting enthusiasts to participate in collaborative close readings of classics more easily, more frequently—and in some cases more intensively—than ever before. Great Discourses, a new startup headquartered in Chicago, is offering intellectually curious adults opportunities for personal enrichment through participation in a wide range of convenient, online, professionally designed and led Great Books discussion courses. The site also serves as an online community of lifelong learners devoted to the collaborative close reading of classics.

"Web conferencing technology has now evolved to the point where we can conduct traditional, high-quality, fully-interactive discussion courses while greatly reducing the geographic and cost barriers to access," says Adam Rose, president and education director of Great Discourses. However, while technology provides critical access, it does not—by itself—create great educational experiences. The difference, Rose insists, "is our approach to Great Books education, our experienced, professional instructors who bring this approach to life, and the global community of lifelong learners who value this approach."

Great Discourses operates year-round to offer multi-week discussion courses devoted to the collaborative close

reading of classics of Western and world literature. Courses combine texts in unusual ways to highlight each work's unique characteristics. Most are offered in a variety of schedules to accommodate participants from widely varied time zones and life styles.

Topics range from ancient to modern and from secular to sacred.

- “Ancient Philosophy, Modern Issues” juxtaposes ancient and modern classics on perennial topics such as love, friendship, old age, and death.
- “Essential Socrates” offers the opportunity for close reading of Platonic dialogues and related literature about Socrates—both the man and the myth.
- “Shakespeare” tackles the Bard’s works, sometimes in isolation and sometimes in conjunction with other relevant works.
- “Abrahamic Scriptures as Literature” explores the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), New Testament and Qur’an from secular, nonsectarian perspectives.

Courses are open to adults and mature adolescents with parental consent and do not require specialized knowledge or experience. They do, however, require of students a modest amount of reading in preparation for each live online class session. There are no writing assignments or exams, and no grades are given—although Course Completion Certificates and Continuing Education Unit (CEU) credit are available. All readings and discussions are in English.

In line with its goal of making high-quality lifelong learning widely available, Great Discourses charges a modest tuition for its courses and offers early, group, and multi-course discounts. Persons of limited means are eligible for a 75% tuition waiver on one course per term. Free introductory classes allow prospective students to learn more about the Great Discourses approach to Great Books discussion, experience the online classroom firsthand, and meet the faculty as well as one another.

The hub of Great Discourses is an online learning environment called the Collaboratory, at the web address Collaboratory.GreatDiscourses.com, offering participants course news and materials, forum discussions with fellow students, and recordings of missed class sessions, as well as access to the online classrooms used for live sessions. When it is time for class, students gain video and audio access to the online classroom via their computer or mobile device. The first thing that appears is the faces of their instructor and classmates as in a traditional classroom environment. The instructor then leads the class in a discussion that unfolds dynamically.

“The organic nature of this is key,” says Rose, an award-winning teacher with over 20 years of experience designing and leading Great Books courses at the University of Chicago and elsewhere. “As they gain

traction, students move around in the text, exploring for themselves, raising their own questions and responding directly to each other. That’s where the magic comes in—a bond forms that turns this from a series of discussions



into a community sharing ideas and a love of learning.”

In addition to offering discussion courses, Great Discourses partners with other Great Books organizations to provide Great Books study opportunities greater than the sum of their parts. For instance, participants in select literary travel vacations offered by Great Discourses’ partners can prepare for their trips through pre-trip online courses from Great Discourses, later building on what they learned during their trips through post-trip online courses.

Great Discourses makes its expertise in designing and leading Great Books discussions available to other Great Books educators through professional development courses and by hosting an ongoing educator support community. An important goal is to support high-quality instruction in Great Books programs across the board by sharing what we’ve learned through our collective experience working in some of the best Great Books programs in the world, as well as what we are continuing to learn through the ongoing development of Great Discourses. Another way is by helping educators talk to each other about what they do.

Rose believes there are many adults interested in Great Books discussions scattered around the world, and says that Great Discourses’ immediate focus is bringing them together. “They’re out there, kind of like needles in the proverbial haystack,” he says. “That doesn’t have to be the case any longer. The Internet allows people to connect in ways they never could before, and that’s tremendous news for the Great Books community.”

More information about Great Discourses and its professionally designed and led Great Books discussion courses is available at GreatDiscourses.com, as well as on Facebook and YouTube.

2015 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

		JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2015
		1/24 and 1/25: San Francisco Mini-Retreats <i>(The Kite Runner)</i>
MARCH	APRIL	MAY
3/14: Leader Training	4/24-4/26: Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar	5/9: Gold Country Mini-Retreat <i>(Invictus)</i>
JUNE - JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER
6/7: Picnic/Annual Meeting <i>(The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie)</i>	8/29-8/30: Long Novel Weekend <i>(Middlemarch)</i>	
OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
TBD: Wine Country Mini-Retreats	11/14-11/15: Poetry Weekend	

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