

# Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO  
*Serving Northern California*

## ***Shocking!*** **Local author to be discussed at Asilomar!**

By Louise Morgan

It took 55 years for the Great Books Council of San Francisco to get the idea that the work of celebrated Monterey County author John Steinbeck ought to be featured at the Barbara McConnell Asilomar Great Books Weekend.

For nearly six decades we've held annual gatherings at [Asilomar](#) to explore the works of great writers. Unaccountably, we've neglected Steinbeck, a Nobel laureate who spent years of his life living in and writing about this part of California. That oversight will be righted by us next spring when we focus on three Steinbeck books set in the 1930s and '40s. It was righted by the National Park Service, albeit belatedly, by the 1998 opening of the [National Steinbeck Center](#) in nearby Salinas.

*Cannery Row* is our fiction selection. Published in 1945 and based on the author's memories of inhabitants of Monterey, the work is both humorous and poignant, exploring as it does both personal loneliness and community exuberance.

Less well-known is our choice for non-fiction, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. It is the log of a four thousand mile voyage from Monterey to the south by Steinbeck and his drinking buddy Ed "Doc" Ricketts. They rounded the Baja peninsula into the Sea of Cortez to collect, preserve, and catalog marine specimens. No ordinary tavern tippler was this man Ricketts. A textbook of his is still consulted in university marine biology courses.

Along the way, the account provides much in the way of philosophical speculation. "There is a strange duality in the human which makes for an ethical paradox.... Perhaps...his species is not set...but is still in a state of becoming, bound by his physical memories to a past of struggle and survival, limited in his futures by the uneasiness of thought and consciousness."

Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men*, published in 1937, was adapted by him for the stage and in 1938 took the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as the best American play. In the play a pair of migrant field workers traveling through California during the Great Depression hope to attain their shared dream of owning a piece of land and settling down to raise rabbits.

Friendship is a thread common in all these works. We'll remember and reflect upon the bonds shared by Lenny and George (*Of Mice and Men*), Mack and the boys (*Cannery Row*), as well as Steinbeck's and Ricketts's own attachment.

To complement the Steinbeck texts, we'll spend an evening discussing short poems by Robinson Jeffers whose home, [Tor House](#), at 26304 Ocean Avenue in Carmel-by-the-Sea, is still a remarkable showplace open to the public.

Dates for the 2017 Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar are set, so mark your calendars for **March 31—April 2** and stay tuned—plans are afoot for activities and events to enhance your experience during this special Steinbeck weekend. Registration is open, and available on our web site at <http://www.great-books-sf.com/events/asilomar.htm>.

## **Poetry Weekend: move fast!**

Poetry Weekend 2016 is weeks away. On November 19-20 an erudite breed of esoterists (you know who you are) plus a smattering of individuals ready for a literary adventure adjourn to the [Vallombrosa Retreat Center](#) in Menlo Park once again to discuss challenging poetry.



Vallombrosa Retreat Center

Poems are suggested and scored by members of a committee. Finalists are chosen and sorted into three themes by the selection chair, Carol Hochberg. Each theme, consisting of five poems, is the basis of a two-hour discussion at Poetry Weekend.

The three themes are “The Real World,” “Unanswerable Questions,” and “The Life We Live.” Poets include Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robinson Jeffers, Prartho Sereno, T. S. Eliot, Jack Gilbert, William Blake, Dylan Thomas, Delmore Schwartz, Thomas Hardy, and A. R. Ammons. Works to be discussed are listed on the registration flyer, which is available on our web site at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/poetry.htm>.

**Registration deadline is October 19.**

## Difficult Henry James novel makes for exciting discussion

By Scott Shafer

Henry James’s last great novel of control, love, adultery, and wealth, *The Golden Bowl*, confronted 38 active readers at the Vallombrosa Retreat Center in Menlo Park August 27-28. Leading the three two-hour discussions were Jim Baird, Rick White, Louise Morgan, Kay White, Brian Mahoney, and Paula Weinberger with Jim Hall as backup. Brian Mahoney was registrar. This was my first time coordinating such an event and the support I received from Brian, my mom, and many other volunteers helped to make it a pleasure.



Scott Shafer

A highlight of the event was the presentation Saturday evening by Henry James scholar Susan Gunter, late of Westminster College in Utah. She has devoted many years to studying Henry James, currently serving on the Complete Henry James Letter Project, compiling and examining the more than 11,000 letters James wrote over a lifetime. Dr. Gunter’s presentation warrants more than a summary and

is reported below in an article by James Baird.

Whether drawn from real life or purely from Henry James’s imagination, *The Golden Bowl* is undeniably challenging. Some felt it “a slog.” Others enjoyed it, admitting that it needed to be read more than once and maintaining that the second time was more enjoyable.

The weekend got an excellent score on written evaluations from nearly all attendees for the quality of discussion, the performance of the leaders, and the literary merit of the novel. It was said to be worth it to read the book even if it was a struggle, or—for some—perhaps especially if it was. In order to generate two days of intense discussion, a novel must force readers to explore and question—there can be no easy answers. Like it or hate it, the unique writing style of Henry James brilliantly meets our discussion criteria.

By the end of the weekend, we had yet to come to a consensus on many of the questions raised by the novel. In the Great Books program, consensus is not the goal. It is to discuss, explore, analyze, and think about great literary works together, respectfully. On this basis, the 2016 Long novel Weekend was a great success.

Here’s wishing all another year of Great Books!



Scott Shafer and mom Kara signing in Louise Morgan



Jim Hall, Jim Baird, Louise Morgan, Kay White, Rick White, discussion leaders; Scott Shafer is lurking in the back.

## My take on Henry James lecture at 2016 Long Novel Weekend

By Jim Baird

Susan Gunter began our Saturday evening talk by reciting this poem by an anonymous aficionado of love for the work of Henry James.

In Heaven there’ll be no algebra,  
No knowing dates or names,  
But only playing golden harps  
And reading Henry James.

*The Golden Bowl* (TGB) is the most difficult modernist novel to read. Gunter re-read it for the 20<sup>th</sup> time in preparing for the weekend. Marcel Proust (*Remembrance of Things Past*) and James Joyce (*Ulysses*) are easier to read, because in their books: something happens (cheers and laughs from the audience). James himself considered TGB to be “the best book I’ve ever written.” It certainly took a vast amount of work since James carefully revised every page.



Brian Mahoney and Paula Weinberger also led discussions.

When Henry James died on February 27, 1916, the novelist Edith Wharton commissioned a brass facsimile of the golden bowl itself as a gift to his estate. The bowl—actually an ornate brass cup—now resides, along with a James portrait by John Singer Sargent, in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. A word about the Houghton: it’s open to the public; show two forms of ID, put on the white gloves they provide, and they will bring you whatever James notebook or letter you request. (Forget the Red Sox next time you’re in Boston; meet Henry James at the Houghton.)

Harvard has a ten-story building dedicated to William James, but just a one-story structure for Henry. Both were Harvard men; William attended the medical school, Henry law, mostly to be near his elder brother.

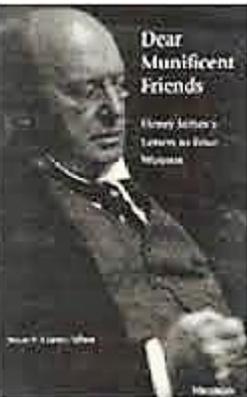
The 11,356 extant letters from Henry James are housed in locations around the world. Of these, only 1,500 have been published.

Professor Gunter has edited two books of James’s letters: *Dear Munificent Friends: Henry James's Letters to Four Women*—hardcover, January 13, 2000; and *Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James's Letters to Younger Men*—January 5, 2004.

Of the two volumes, the second sold out when the word got out in the gay community. Yes, Henry had a bisexual outlook, though it may have been Platonic. After years of writing in longhand, beginning in 1897 he dictated to an “amanuensis,” a secretary who used a

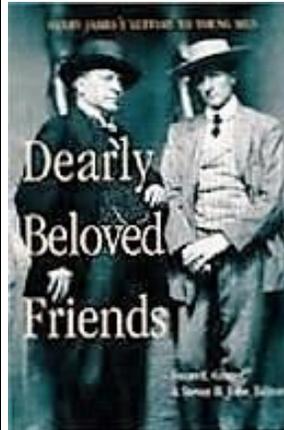
typewriter. Near the end of his life, his letters were long, sometimes 40 pages or so. It’s best to view his letters in person, since he would write on the back and in the margins, sometimes writing around corners in the typewritten text. Digital images often miss these handwritten gems. One thing of interest: near the end of his life, James slipped a bit mentally, signing his letters “Napoleon.”

The second volume of two-volume *The Golden Bowl*, entitled “The Princess” differs from the first, “The Prince,” in its depth of ideas. The prince, Amerigo, is a less complex thinker than Maggie, his princess, who is the focus of Volume II. “How we know what we know” is a major theme in the book. The philosophical term for this kind of inquiry is “epistemology,” which can also be translated as “Who knows what?” Since the novel concentrates on what’s going on in the characters’ minds, there can’t be a whole lot of external actions. This exploration of the inner mind is called “stream of consciousness,” a term coined by William James in 1890. The James brothers rejected the so-called Mind-Body Split of early modern philosophy in favor of an “embodied” outlook where the mind operates with the body, not on some shelf outside. So, consciousness flows; it isn’t chopped up into little bits. When William stayed in Baden, Germany in 1899-1901 for medical treatment, Henry joined him, and they discussed Knowing.



When TGB was published, William was puzzled by the states of mind of his brother’s characters and the matter of adultery and pitched the idea of a book to Henry. If Henry would write the book and publish it in William’s name, since it was his idea, they could split the royalties 50-50. Here’s the passage from William’s 1905 letter:

I read your Golden Bowl a month or more ago, and it put me, as most of your recent long stories have put me, in a very puzzled state of mind. I don't enjoy the kind of 'problem,' especially when as in this case it is treated as problematic (viz. the adulterous relations betw. Ch. & the P.), and the method of narration by interminable elaboration of suggestive reference (I don't know



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what to call it, but you know what I mean) goes against the grain of all my own impulses in writing; and yet in spite of it all, there is a brilliancy and cleanness of effect, and in this book especially a high toned social atmosphere that are unique and extraordinary. Your methods & my ideals seem the reverse, the one of the other—and yet I have to admit your extreme success in this book. But why won't you, just to please Brother, sit down and write a new book, with no twilight or mustiness in the plot, with great vigor and decisiveness in the action, no fencing in the dialogue, no psychological commentaries, and absolute straightness in the style?

Henry wrote plays for the English stage from 1893 to 1895, a craft that didn't suit him. One play, for example, based on a short story, was booed off the stage. This experience ended his career as a playwright and threw him into a period of introspection. His meditations on marriage, money, love, and power led directly to the big themes of TGB.



Professor Susan Gunter

This was heavy stuff for his time: adultery and hints of incest. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was full of sentimental novels—soap operas, really—most of them penned by female authors. Henry would not allow himself to be seen writing “those kinds of books.” Here's Nathaniel Hawthorne's opinion on the subject, from an 1855 letter to his publisher:

America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of the 'Lamplighter,' and other books neither better nor worse? Worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the 100,000.

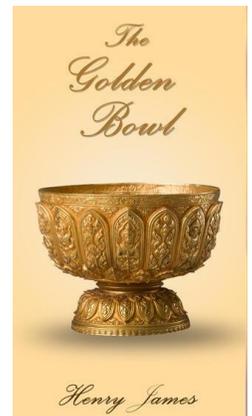
James began work on *The Golden Bowl* in 1903. Its working title was *The Marriages*, and it initially featured powerful women and young gay men. One of the “Four Women” whose letters appear in James's *Dear Munificent Friends* was Lady Louisa Wolseley. Her husband headed the armed forces in Africa. James was

interested in power and liked to be close to powerful people, so he watched these people closely. One hundred thirteen of his letters to Lady L are in the Brighton & Howe library in England. She and her husband are the basis for Fanny and Bob in TGB. “Power” meant power over others, exemplified by the figurative silken cord that Adam ties to Charlotte.

When it comes to Henry James's sexuality, we know from his letters that he couldn't form lasting relationships and was often lonely. There are rumors of an affair with Oliver Wendell Holmes but it's unlikely that James took action on his desires. In the Jamesian canon the great sin is using others.

Another influence in James's life is F. Morton Fullerton, a bisexual libertine James met in London. Fullerton was a dashing man-about-town James enjoyed watching. His letters to Fullerton have a bossy tone. Fullerton had a long affair with Edith Wharton and was engaged to marry his adopted sister/cousin. The “incestuous” plot line in TGB is based on Fullerton's antics.

The keys to understanding TGB are all on page one (page 27 in our edition) of the book. Read and understand page 1 and it provides a guide to the novel. We see the Prince looking at empires past and present as he window-shops in London. He's also looking at the reflections of women as they walk by. He comes from a race that once ruled the world, and he sees its artifacts for sale. Someone who could buy them could buy the world, as he sees when he encounters Adam Verver.



He's unable to understand the culture he lives in, even though he is fluent in conversational English. Maggie and the Prince are more different than they seem. To navigate this impenetrable world, the Prince goes to the social striver Fanny for advice, a big mistake. He ends up marrying into a culture he doesn't understand. When he first goes to her, the ship (marriage) is ready to sail. He must keep Fanny's sail in sight. She says, “How can you be sure where I shall take you.” Fanny is there to keep him quiet. In the end he becomes a domesticated lamb, tied up with a pink ribbon. It is of a kind to Adam's silken noose around Charlotte's neck to which, as needed, Adam gives a “twitch.” In this world, those on top keep whom they wish to on a leash.

Does Adam and Maggie's relationship represent an Electra complex? We're not sure, but they are closer than a father and a daughter should be. Henry burned 5,000 of his letters in 1909 in a bonfire. The Oscar Wilde case had broken in 1895, and he didn't want a similar fate.

Just before he wrote the book, he lived with William and wife Alice. A major topic of their philosophical conversation was German Idealism, the dominant European school of thought, versus the ascendant American Pragmatism. William James is often credited as the founder of Pragmatism but its original theoretician was Charles Sanders Peirce (pronounced Purse), a Harvard man like William and Henry. Charles was less than graceful as a writer, so both Henry and William outwrote and out-famed him.

Near the end of TGB, the characters reach a kind of consensus opinion that "this has got to stop." As a pragmatist would say, "This isn't working, so let's fix it." A quick summary of Pragmatism might say: "What does this idea or thought contribute? Is there a practical good (or a "cash payout" as William James would say)? Maggie takes steps to save her marriage (to the Prince) and end her "marriage" to Adam. So we get an ending instead of the endless-seeming circles of discussion and observation that fill the book. This ending, however, is open-ended, almost as if the writing of Volume III is up to us. One thing we know is that the hard work, for Maggie and the Prince, is only beginning. The final paragraph is a masterpiece of novelistic power; James does not let us go. Marriage is a lifelong challenge.

We can also see the story as an indictment of the capitalism of the time. Money talks, and Adam Verver has an amazing amount of it. He can buy anything he wants, including a prince, a beautiful wife, and the artifacts of ancient civilizations that he collects. So, where did he get this fortune? We don't know, though it was made in America, possibly in real estate. James's sympathy is for women, like Charlotte, who are poor and have limited choices in the capitalism of the day.

Adultery actually takes place, and repeatedly, so the story isn't totally interior. "Solipsistic" is a word that comes to mind. At the end is anyone redeemed? Nobody in the novel is innocent, though Maggie is certainly naïve. We all live by artifice. James never portrays morality as black or white in the novel. For example, Fanny, who causes so much trouble, is also good at watching people and sizing them up. She and Bob intermittently

do a wonderful service for the reader by clearing up the confusion about what's going on.

The James family owned property in Albany, New York, that paid a regular income. That's good, because, for all his literary prowess, Henry didn't make much money. Only *Daisy Miller* sold lots of copies, and not even that made him much money; there weren't international copyright laws at the time. The book was pirated in the United States and there was nothing James could do about it. In examining the novel, it's important for the reader to understand where he was in his life—powerful, but lonely, and broke.

A final thought: what if Maggie had exposed everyone and their schemes?

## Ugh! Those awful commas!

Carol Hochberg

Emily Dickinson fervently abjured conventional punctuation and usage. She refused opportunities for publication because she knew that her poetry would never be printed as she wrote it—slant rhymes would be straightened, dashes replaced by commas, and capitalized nouns "restored" to lower case.

Some of the poems she sent to her close friend and sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, found their way to Sam Bowles's *Springfield Republican*. They appeared in print in edited form to make them more conventional and acceptable to the reader. Dickinson's response to the edited versions was so strong it may have caused a rift between the two women.

Emily Dickinson also sent poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the abolitionist and long-time contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly* who became her frequent correspondent and "preceptor." He never advised her to publish, perhaps because he may not have known what to do with her unconventional punctuation, diction, and rhyming. After her death, Wentworth, along with Mabel Loomis Todd, served as co-editors of the first edition of Dickinson's poetry, published in 1890. Considerable liberty was taken to make the poems acceptable to the readers they hoped to attract.

Dickinson's friend, Helen (Fiske) Hunt Jackson, a poet and American Indian activist, urged her to publish, but was refused. Jackson eventually published a selection of anonymous poetry, *A Masque of Poets*, which included a poem by Emily Dickinson. Many attributed her poem to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Of the nearly 1800 poems Dickinson wrote, fewer than a dozen were published, all without attribution.

Some of her poems were written to her brother or to her sister-in-law, mentioning them by name.

It wasn't until 1955 that an edition of Dickinson's poetry, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, was published in its original form including the dashes, capitalization of nouns, and the off-rhymes that characterize her innovative poetic voice.

An enhanced version of Dickinson's poetry appeared in 1981, edited by Ralph W. Franklin, derived from her "fascicles," little sewn-together books found in a trunk after her death. In 1998, Franklin published a definitive edition of all of her poems.

Emily Dickinson is now regarded, along with Walt Whitman, as the first of America's "modern" poets. Whitman's long lines and sometimes erotic subject matter stand in strong contrast to Dickinson's cryptic style. The two never met and likely would not have cared for each other; however, today they are both hailed as voices of the modern age.

## Shimer: A Great Books College

*Occasionally Reading Matters identifies institutions or programs that embody the values of the Great Books movement. One of these is [Shimer College](#) in the city of Chicago. The following description is provided by its alumni president, Steve Zolno. He can be reached at [stevezolno12@yahoo.com](mailto:stevezolno12@yahoo.com) for more information or to give a local presentation.*

Shimer is no ordinary college. It is intentionally small. Subjects include the Great Books curriculum plus diverse writers from around the globe. Classes are limited to 12 students. Individual attention is given by the faculty to each student, who emerges with analytical and team building skills they take with them and use for a lifetime.

Shimer is not for everyone. It attracts students who want to define a sense of purpose, create a vision, and work with others toward its fulfillment. These qualities are increasingly valued by employers. According to an article in the Wall Street Journal, "Employers complain that colleges are not producing graduates who can solve problems and connect the dots on complex issues."

Shimer teaches its students not only to connect the dots but to solve problems based on the understanding that rarely is there only one solution to a problem. A

novel solution may be possible. Seminars emphasize original readings and critical thinking—not interpretations embodied in textbooks.

Shimer students go on to graduate school and careers in areas of their choosing. They take with them an ability to work with others toward finding unique solutions to the problems they face in their careers—and in their lives. This is why the school has a loyal following among its alumni.

The college enrolls many early entrants, students who seek a greater intellectual challenge or a better fit and matriculate following their sophomore or junior year of high school. Students are admitted on a rolling basis throughout the year.

### *Special for San Francisco groups:*

#### **Leader-Participant Workshop**

**Saturday, October 15, 12:00 to 4:30 p.m., to be held at Anza Branch Library, 550 37th Ave. (between Geary Blvd. and Anza St.), San Francisco**

The purpose of this workshop is to give basic guidelines for becoming a Great Books discussion leader, a better participant, and/or a better critical reader. Even if you don't wish to become a discussion leader, you will benefit by becoming a more skillful reader and participant. The workshop will give you the tools to develop your own style of leading, participating, and/or reading. For those who currently lead Great Books discussions, you are especially invited to participate and give us the benefit of your experience.

The focus will be primarily on ways to encourage open discussion and exchange of ideas. Participants will receive a packet of materials prior to the workshop. It is recommended that the materials be read beforehand as the discussion moves at a fast pace.

At the end of the workshop its leaders, Clifford Louie and Jim Hall, invite attendees to join them at dinner in a nearby restaurant.

**If you plan to attend, please respond by Saturday, Oct. 5<sup>th</sup> to coordinator Clifford Louie at [cliffordlouie@sbcglobal.net](mailto:cliffordlouie@sbcglobal.net) or (415) 750-1786.**

We should have a fun-filled and interesting day.

New GBSF Executive Committee Members:



Caroline Van Howe



Paula Weinberger



Steven White



Carol Edlund

**2016-17 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO**

OCTOBER 2016	NOVEMBER-DECEMBER	JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2017
<b>10/8: Wine Country Mini-Retreat</b> <i>(Lord of the Flies)</i> <b>10/15: Leader Training</b> <i>(for San Francisco Groups)</i>	<b>11/19-20: Poetry Weekend</b> <i>(Vallombrosa Retreat, Menlo Park)</i>	<b>2/25: SFGB Leader Training</b> <i>(Greenbrae)</i> <b>TBD: San Francisco Mini-Retreat</b>
MARCH-APRIL 2017	MAY-JULY	SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER
<b>3/31-4/2: Barbara McConnell Asilomar Great Books Weekend</b> <i>(Of Mice and Men, Cannery Row, The Log from the Sea of Cortez; Poetry by Robinson Jeffers)</i>	<b>5/13: Gold Country Mini-Retreat</b> <b>6/4: Annual Meeting/Picnic</b> <i>(Tilden Park, Berkeley)</i> <b>7/15-16: Long Novel Weekend</b> <i>(New venue: UC Berkeley)</i>	<b>TBD: Wine Country Mini-Retreat</b> <b>TBD: Poetry Weekend</b>

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California:

Laura Bushman, President; Louise Morgan, Vice President; Mary Wood, Secretary; Brian Mahoney, Treasurer; Rob Calvert, Past President.  
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Great Books Foundation: [www.greatbooks.org](http://www.greatbooks.org)

**GBSF End-Of-Year Report**  
**July 1, 2015 - June 30, 2016**

Great Books Council of San Francisco Fiscal Year 7/1/2015 - June 30, 2016			
Events	Revenue	Expense	Net
Aullomar Conference	30,448.00	28,314.00	2,132.00
Vallombrosa Long Novel Weekend	7,455.00	8,557.00	-1,102.00
Vallombrosa Poetry Weekend	8,958.00	8,171.00	788.00
Books/Films Gatherings	2,740.00	1,439.00	1,301.00
Leader training	700.00	643.00	57.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>50,301.00</b>	<b>47,124.00</b>	<b>3,176.00</b>

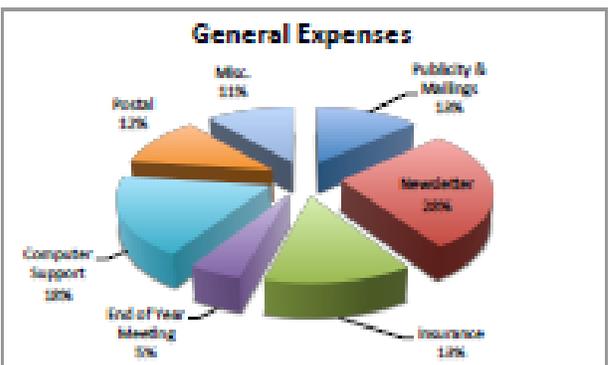


General Expenses	
Publicity & Mailings	685.00
Newletter	1,431.00
Insurance	689.00
End of Year Meeting	248.00
Computer Support	939.00
Postal	606.00
Misc.	580.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,178.00</b>



Unexp'd Assets	Assets	Liabilities
Aullomar Initial Advanced Deposit	5,355.00	0.00
LNW 25% Deposit	1,504.00	0.00
LNW 2016 Deferred Revenue	0.00	3,240.00
Depletion 2015 LNW Deferred Revenue	0.00	325.00
Depletion LNW Deposit	0.00	1,625.00
Poetry 25% Deposit	1,336.00	0.00
Depletion Poetry Deposit	0.00	1,385.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,195.00</b>	<b>6,475.00</b>

Summary	
Total Expenses	60,777.00
Interest	1,673.00
Total Revenue	60,567.00
Net Assets Excess/Deficit	-410.00



Assets Report	
Wells Fargo Operations	25,653.00
Wells Fargo Savings	35,480.00
Vanguard 500 Index Admiral	26,838.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>87,971.00</b>

