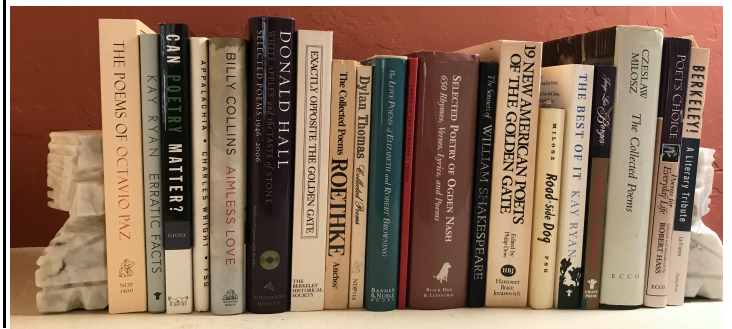


GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
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PST), she will read a selection of her poems. As always, there will be lots of time for questions.

About Dorianne Laux Dorianne Laux's sixth collection, *Only as the Day is Long: New and Selected Poems* was named a finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her fifth collection, *The Book of Men*, was



Dorianne Laux awarded The Paterson Prize. Her fourth book of poems, *Facts About the Moon*, won the Oregon Book Award and was short-listed for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. Laux is also the author of *Awake* and *What We Carry*, a finalist for the National Book Critic's Circle Award; and *Smoke*, as well as a fine small press edition, *The Book of Women*. She is co-author of the celebrated text *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*.

You can also download an interview by Paul Martone done when Dorianne was interim director of the creative writing program at the University of Oregon in 2006. See [Facts About the Poet](#) (PDF). Literary Reference. Winter 2006.

Click www.greatbooksncal.org/poetry-weekend to register. Tuition \$50.

Coming--Long Novel Weekend 2022:

Charles Dickens,

A Tale of Two Cities

A novel reason for reading a novel

By Louise DiMattio

As a life-long book lover, I have participated in many casual conversations about novels, especially novels considered to be classics. Novels by Charles Dickens come up almost immediately. *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House* are always mentioned as favorites. Very

soon thereafter, however, someone in the group invariably says "I had to read *A Tale of Two Cities* in high school and I absolutely hated it." Since I was not one of the "put upon" high school students, I have always wondered what was so bad about that particular Dickens work.

Admittedly, I am a johnny-come-lately where Dickens novels are concerned. My only exposure has been to *Our Mutual Friend* and *David Copperfield* at events hosted by Great Books. The *David Copperfield* weekend was especially memorable because Jane Smiley was our guest speaker. Hearing from her was a special treat for all of us who attended that year.

During the pandemic, my thoughts turned again to the classics. Once I realized and understood the benefits of Zoom, I registered for a Classical Pursuits seminar on *Bleak House*

led by Nancy Carr. That was a wonderful experience. For six Thursday evenings, I was transported to another age and time and could stop my obsessive electronic doomscrolling, at least temporarily. Victorian London was quite bad enough! In some respects, it was the best of times. In others it was the worst of times.

When it was time to choose the novel for this year's Long Novel Weekend, the choice was easy. Why not read *A Tale of*

Two Cities and find out why my colleagues and friends disliked it so much? Was it too hard for a teenager to read? Was it a bad choice for high school students?

(By the way, the

book is rarely assigned in high school anymore. Interesting, right?) I wondered if some who hated it the first time would read it again just to be willing to give it another try. After all, wasn't their first reading at least forty or fifty years ago?



Flag of London



Flag of Paris

A Tale of Two Cities is one of only two historical novels written by Charles Dickens. (The other is *Bar-naby Rudge*.) The two cities are London and Paris in the late 18th Century. The French Revolution is under way and its effects are felt by all the characters in the novel. As in all Dickens novels, there are many wonderfully described characters. I've come to expect this in a Dickens masterpiece. By the way, if you haven't read this one yet, be sure to avoid reading a synopsis. It will certainly contain unnecessary "spoilers" and will not enhance your reading experience.

Long Novel Weekend will take place during one weekend this year instead of split into two as last year. The dates are October 1st and 2nd. We will meet on Zoom. There will be two sessions on Saturday and a final session on Sunday morning. We are very fortunate to have Nancy Carr from the Great Books Foundation headquarters in Chicago join us for the final session on Sunday. Nancy has her PhD in Victorian Literature from the University of Virginia and is a marvelous discussion leader. We have asked Nancy to share her personal thoughts about this novel as well as lead an interactive discussion on the novel's overarching themes.

We will read the Penguin Classics edition. This book has excellent notes and illustrations. The ISBN is 978-0-141-43960-0. You can register now for this event. We hope to see you there! Sign up at www.greatbooksncal.org/long-novel-weekend.

Coming--Banned Books Mini-Retreat 2022:

By Sheri Kindsvater

1. Why have a "banned books" event?

Last October's Banned Books Mini-Retreat discussion of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* may be the best we have had since I launched the program years ago. The book is about banning books, so it was, of course, banned. When I was in junior high school, and suffering from a broken neck, I was assigned to spend my outdoors time in the school library. When I ran out of books that interested me the librarian showed me to a back room with books that were restricted to those "ready for them." I started with Bradbury's short story *The Illustrated Man* then took up his *Fahrenheit 451*. This is likely where my interest in banned books started.

Our conversation about Bradbury's book was energetic and thought-provoking, covering more than one side of the issue. It reinforced my belief in the need for free speech, in our time, in this country.

Don't worry, I get it. Hate speech is terrible and disinformation is a serious problem. Banning offensive speakers or books can be self-defeating by provoking interest in them, thereby increasing their audience. It has made more than one book into a best-seller.

There always will be, and always have been, believers of hateful or untruthful speech. It cannot be extinguished by censorship.

The systematic censorship described in *Fahrenheit 451* led to a "vanilla" society, boring because it was insulated from controversy. This led to sometimes precious ironies. For example, instead of putting fires out, the fire department is assigned to burning up all the books it can find. They'll torch a house if it helps the process. Hearing their siren does not signal that property or lives will be protected.

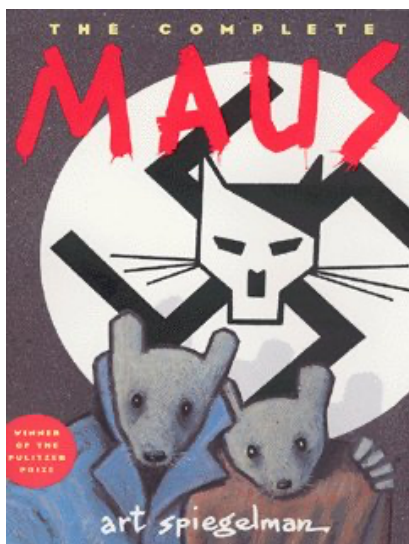
The best-known book in our civilization was burned so extensively in *Fahrenheit 451* society that there was finally only one copy left and it had to be concealed to survive. It contained speech both glorious and hateful, reports of horror and of hope. Many persons were certain of its truth. Others were just as certain this book did not tell truth that was safe, that it no less than any other book was a danger to be eradicated. In this place, the latter view ruled.

Banning speech is a slippery slope. Over time the result can be a plain vanilla world such as that described in *Fahrenheit 451* where standards and rules are applied arbitrarily to serve the interests of whomever holds sufficient power.

2. GBSF 2022 selection was banned in January!

Great Books Banned Books breaks new ground, reading and discussing the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. Undertaking discussion of this newly-recognized form of writing is a first-time event for the Council. Participants should know the book won the Pulitzer. It deals with the horrific reign of Nazi Germany, focusing on their efforts to exterminate all persons with any degree of Jewish extraction. Jews are represented by mice (*Maus* in German) and Nazis by cats. By reducing the story members to animals, it makes the atrocities that much worse.

In January 2022 *Maus* gained its spot on the ever-increasing list of banned books. The McMinn County School Board in Tennessee banned it with a vote of 10-0 because of a complaint that the novel contains profanity and displays female nudity in its depiction of Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust. One school board member stated “It shows people hanging, it shows them killing kids,” and asked “Why does the educational system promote this kind of stuff; it is not wise or healthy.” This incident of banning followed the banning of



the novel in Germany and Russia.

I'm excited to present the entire book, Parts I and II, for discussion at the Banned Books event, so keep your eye on the email for your invite. I'm hoping it's the kind of discussion that would set the Tennessee school board's hair on fire.

Sign up at www.greatbooksncal.org.

Report--Barbara McConnell Spring Conference 2022:

Pigs fly at Asilomar!

By Mark Scardina

As promised in our headline for this publication's previous edition, pigs did fly. GBSF put on an honest-to-goodness live event, our first in three years. It happened, as advertised, at Asilomar, where this annual event was launched in 1959, which was six years after our incorporation as a not-for-profit educational institution.

Almost 40 witnessed the aerial porcine performance, celebrating it by discussing dangerous literature. Happily, none of the porkers crashed.

My first Asilomar was in the 1960s. This spring's intimate, thought-provoking event took me back there. The accommodations were more rustic then, but we had



Meet and Greet

the run of the place as if it were our private retreat. This year we did too because for most of the weekend we were the only group there. The food and accommodations have improved notably.

We returned to an event schedule from those early days. Saturday afternoons were free to explore and socialize, and the book discussion was in the evening.

This time we put on a special Meet and Greet in the late afternoon. Judging by the full attendance and engagement, it was a hit. Seasoned attendees introduced new ones to this special weekend. Asilomar catering provided a lavish feast of comestibles and potables. When a sumptuous dinner was served in the dining hall



Saturday Evening

at the usual time, it hardly seemed necessary.

As coordinator, I get the final say (and blame) on the readings. I've long held that five or six poems were too many for two hours. We have had to rush the process.

Four challenging ones would be better than the up to seven we've had in the past. Judging from feedback the change worked. We comfortably filled the two hours with works by Jean Valentine, Dylan Thomas, Emily Dickinson, and Anne Sexton.

Saturday morning came in gorgeously as we delved deeply into modern Iran and the difficulty and danger posed there when reading and discussing western literature. Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita in Iran* proved to be provocative and disturbing. Relevance to what's happening today in the US was readily drawn. Discussion continued over lunch.

Mark Twain proved polarizing in his controversial satire on the human condition *Letters from Earth*. Was this an essay or a parable? While we'll never know, since it was published posthumously, the lively discussions proved to be a fitting bookend for the day while throwing theme hunters for a loop. For an unknown reason, Sunday mornings have been traditionally reserved for our dramatic work. High drama was not on Aristophanes' mind when he wrote what could be consid-

decided on "death." Death of one sort or another came up in all four sessions---poetry, novel, essay, play. It used to be rumored that Brent Browning headed this apocryphal committee. With his passing, I'm sorry to say, some are rumoring that I am now in the chair. I couldn't possibly comment.

Returning to reality, a big thank you goes out to all of the leaders who spent hours making this weekend memorable. I'm especially appreciative of Sheri's assistance as registrar. COVID posed its challenges, undermining roommate matching and limiting Asilomar services such as the shuttle. However, the feedback was very positive with most looking forward to joining us next year. We have begun the planning, and if you have reading suggestions, please pass them to me at great-booksncal.bmaweekend@gmail.com.

About Tehran: Recollections and thoughts

By Carolyn Yale



Reading is not really all that we do.

ered the first feminist work, *Lysistrata*. The discussion proved to be as bawdy as this scandalous play depicted.

When someone noticed that most of the weekend's selections had been banned somewhere, the suspicion inevitably was raised that a secret committee had set "banning" as this year's theme. Other misbegotten believers speculated that the "Theme Committee" had

tellectual heritage the supreme accomplishment of human endeavor. (Need I observe that the political analog is "democracy" as it is idealized.) An Iranian-American scholar reviewing the catechism of Western philosophy has asked "Can non-Europeans think?" and has written a book with that title where he provides his own response.

I handed in my brief evaluation form after our group's April 23 Asilomar discussion of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, but I had more to say. I'll take advantage of this opportunity.

As did countless college students of the baby boom generation, I spent many hours absorbing the Western classics presented in a way suggesting that the Western in-

I visited Tehran in 2018. Political conditions there have apparently deteriorated since then. So too, the Iranian economy. Western media reporting on that country is limited both in coverage and interpretation. The misunderstandings go both ways. After a few years spent in cultures different from our own, I have realized there is a lot more than Western Europe, and that "culture" (music, technology, etc.) itself travels in boats and along trade routes and by migrations, and these are not one-way transfers. The contours are known but often overlooked and poorly researched. If for no other reason than expanding our perspective, we can do better in reaching out to cultures beyond the West with both their differences and commonalities.

I get the most mileage out of shared inquiry when, included with our reading, some grounding in context is provided. Perhaps that would take too much of our limited time during shared inquiry, but why not supplements prepared in advance? Perhaps my perspective here violates the principle that we are looking for or into universal truths. If not, when readings come from unfamiliar cultures or times, might there be a way to provide context for those who are interested?

I thank all the organizers, discussion leaders, and Asilomar participants for a wonderful weekend. Having myself focused in the past on poetry—plus one brush with the long novel weekend—I greatly appreciated the opportunity to branch out a bit.

After discussing *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in my session, I suggested that anyone interested in getting a broader perspective on Iranians and their government might take in the 2018 PBS documentary "Our Man in Tehran." (PBS, not the Canadian film). The documentary continues to be available free online at www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/our-man-in-tehran.

Report--Gold Country Mini-Retreat 2022:

Book and movie about Tibet are discussed in Auburn

By Kay White

With donuts and coffee on a sunny day in Auburn, nineteen Great Bookies considered the challenges of Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet*. The author had to escape twice from a British prisoner of war camp to reach the Himalayas and make his way through Tibet.



Flag of Free Tibet

Endurance, wit, and preparation helped him reach Lhasa, the Forbidden City, to settle into a productive and modest life during and after World War II. Harrer was able to bring a view of the world beyond Buddhist life to the young Dalai Lama. Harrer's observations offer a glimpse into the Dalai Lama's early life. Thanks to the Auburn Gold Country book group and Donna Reynolds as co-coordinator, we met for the first time in three years to renew friendships and to discuss Harrer's nonfiction adventure. Sheri Kindsvater and Kay White led two enthusiastic discussion groups. Jim Hall remarked that he liked the book because it was an eyewitness view of history.



Chinese work camp in Tibet

In the afternoon we watched the movie version of *Seven Years in Tibet*. The film embroidered relationships beyond the author's version. It offered a colorful view of the region and of Brad Pitt's blonde hair, in deliberate contrast to his Tibetan hosts. Thanks to Jim Vasser who led the movie discussion, we closed the day with a greater but sad appreciation of *Seven Years in Tibet*, a halcyon time before the Communist Chinese invasion, which led in 1950 to the Maoist suppression of their Buddhist way of life.

Harrer's book and the movie have lent valuable support to the Dalai Lama's ongoing fight to free Tibet.

Don't Cancel the Classics, Broaden and Diversify Them

Black Americans in past centuries fought for the right to be educated in Western civilization.

By Angel Adams Parham

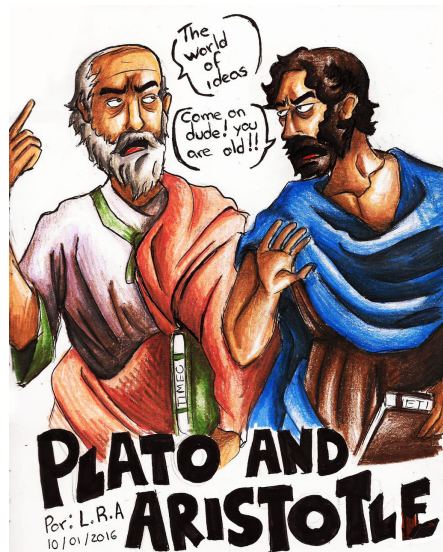
The knives are out for Julius Caesar again—and Homer too.

As Tennessee expands possibilities for new charter schools, critics are assailing classical education. Some of these schools teach students about the sages and scoundrels of ancient Greece and Rome. In the New Republic, Annie Abrams, a public-school teacher from New York, complains that these schools promote “retreat from the public sphere” along with “Christian humanism” and “nationalistic exaltation of ‘Western civilization.’ ”

Other critics link the classics to white nationalism, implying that proponents are demagogues and bigots, and object to classical educators touting their subjects as “great” and “most important,” since all things are equal to all others (unless those critics dislike them).

Excellence and diversity, however, can coexist with an education in the classics. The classics should be

elevated and broadened, diversified through context and accumulated knowledge. And they have much to teach us, with a proven record of lifting the performance of students, especially the disadvantaged.



In Chicago, the Cambridge Classical Academy's mostly African-American students learn through a model that integrates the methodological tradition of Marva Collins, an outstanding black educator profiled on “60 Minutes” for her work with disadvantaged students, with instruction based on the Socratic approach. Virginia's Living Water School, led by Anika Prather, uses an online model to reach parents and children across the country. Ms. Prather combines classical learning with the study of the black intellectual tradition. My own organization, Nyansa Classical Community, develops curricula that weave together diverse voices, artists and texts with the classical canon.

These three organizations, all led by black women, are part of a growing group of classical schools—public, charter, private and religious—that provide a rich, deep and broad education. Instead of reducing the presence of canonical works in our curricula or eclectically mixing in diverse writers, we build on the classical core by bringing diverse voices and stories to the fore. These were already present in the tradition, but they haven't been adequately heard. Many later great writers, including people of color, were inspired by and built on the classics.

My organization's curriculum pairs Homer's “Odyssey” with African-American artist Romare Bearden's paintings that reinterpret the tale as an allegory for the trans-Atlantic African diaspora. To understand novelist Toni Morrison (herself a classics minor at Howard University), one must read her work alongside her influences: Ovid and Euripides.

Critics, including some progressive university administrators, heap scorn on the movement's principal exam, the Classic Learning Test, for its alleged “worship of hierarchy” and fetishization of whiteness. In fact, the CLT has begun to diversify the voices it features (a process I helped lead as the president of the CLT's board of academic advisers). The classical world included a great diversity and many people of color, as the scholar of ancient Rome Mary Beard has documented. The exam's source material and viewpoints are growing more inclusive and complex, as they should.

While the older forms of classical education weren't perfect, the foundations were sound and provided a rich feast for debate and intellectual formation. Arabic-speaking scholars carried out a centuries-long intellectual engagement with Greek writers of antiquity, creating their own classics and enriching both Western and

Islamic intellectual traditions. Thomas Aquinas, for example, often cites Avicenna and Averroes.

The renowned Renaissance mathematician Fibonacci was educated in North Africa, where he was exposed to breakthroughs from India and the Middle East.

His seminal work, “Liber Abaci,” introduced Europe to a system of numerals based on the sophisticated Indian system using the figures 1 through 9, and the Arabic numeral 0.

Many people of African descent in the 18th and 19th centuries used classical texts to argue against their enslavement and fight for their freedom. These luminaries include Phillis Wheatley, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper and W.E.B. DuBois. It is ironic that critics deem the classics racially exclusive when black people fought so hard after the Civil War for the right to a classical education.

And now black students are being told yet again a classical education isn’t for them. “The Apology,” Plato’s account of the death of Socrates, is cited by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” King repurposed the works of a dead white male to lift up and liberate his people—and all of us. Still today we must learn, as so many have before, what the classics have to teach.

Ms. Parham is a sociology professor at the University of Virginia, a senior fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, and co-author with Anika Prather of “The Black Intellectual Tradition: Reading Freedom in Classical Literature” coming in June from Classical Academic Press. This article appeared in the May 21, 2022 Wall Street Journal print edition. Used with permission.

MY FAVORITE CORRECTIONS

By the editor

My favorite misused word is “reticent.” “Reticent” is special for me because it is often misused but is not on lists I have seen of commonly misused words. “Reticent” means quiet, not hesitant; the correct word for that would be “reluctant.” “Fortuitous” means “accidental,” not “fortunate.” “Enormity” does not refer to size; an “enormity” is something that is terrible. “Miniscule” is correctly spelled “minuscule.” As a person who goes around correcting others, the correct word for me is “irritating.”

Do you have questions about asking questions?



One of the concerns that is often voiced by discussion leaders is how to formulate the best questions to stimulate discussion. For some groups, the role of discussion leader is shared amongst the group, while with other groups one or two members may lead. It is usually the role of the discussion leader to kick off the discussion with an opening question and then to broaden the discussion with interpretive questions.

Louise Morgan, a member of the Great Books San Francisco Executive Committee who heads up the Great Books Leader/Reader Workshop team, has been working on creating resources to help with the tricky topic of “asking questions”. Louise, along with her granddaughter Lydia (recently an Executive Committee member) have developed a series of short videos on this topic which are available for viewing on our new [YouTube Channel](#).

Please check out these informative videos for help in getting some of your questions answered.

Fact questions vs. interpretive questions

Opening questions

If you have any feedback or would like to suggest other topics for other videos, please contact Louise at: louise-morgan@sbcglobal.net

Caroline Van Howe, Publicity Chair February 6, 2022

2022-23 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

July	August	September - October
Leader-Reader Workshop 7/9 via Zoom 10 am – 4 pm Annual Meeting 7/16 via Zoom 10 am – 1 pm Book Discussion: <i>The House on Mango Street</i>	Banned Books 8/6 via Zoom 10 am – 4 pm Book Discussion: <i>Maus, Parts I and II</i> , by Art Siegelman	Long Novel Weekend 10/1 – 10/2 via Zoom 10 am – 1 pm each day. Book Discussion: <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> , by Charles Dickens
November	December – February	March - May
Poetry Weekend 11/12 – 11/13 via Zoom Theme: <i>Why Poetry</i>	San Francisco Mini-Retreat 2/? date TBD	Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference 4/? Date TBD Gold Country Mini-Retreat 5/? date TBD

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The GBSF annual financial report one-page summary can be seen on our website. The full report can be obtained from Brian Mahoney, Treasurer, at gbbrianmahoney@gmail.com.