Asilomar 2022:  
Live and in color!  
Pandemic is not forever!  
Is that a promise?  
Just hold your breath!  
If pigs could fly?  
Pigs will fly henceforth!  
Promises, promises.

By Mark Scardina

Getting pigs airborne, along with everything else, has gone up in price. We’ve rethought things to face this reality. Asilomar can be used more effectively as an attraction to bring in new participants and retain our members with selective discounts. Donations and investments have made it feasible to subsidize some of the costs for students, seniors, and first-time attendees. Additional choices in accommodations can and will be made available.

By popular demand, we are returning to the old schedule where we have a discussion on Saturday night. Instead of the after-dinner party, a catered Meet-and-Greet before dinner will let you get to know the first-timers and renew old acquaintances. The afternoon is free to take in the lovely environs which should not be missed.

The weekend is April 22-24. Registration is available at https://www.greatbooksncal.org/asilomar.

This year’s readings, interesting and provocative, have the additional virtue of being completely unacceptable in the past and even today. We have taken a page from our popular Banned Books mini-retreat (see article below). Aristophanes’ Lysistrata was not only banned in ancient Greece but could not be mailed in the U.S until 1955. Our edition of Mark Twain’s Letters from the Earth could not be taught in any but the rarest of university classrooms today, not even with strong warnings. Reading Lolita in Tehran—yikes!—Lolita!—in Tehran!—How did these young women get away with this? Can discussing forbidden literature save us in what some fear to be the end of days?

Longtime participants have seen the cost of the weekend rise ten-fold and out of reach for many. For 2022, the cost for two nights, six full meals, and facilities use, will be $406 per person, taxes included. Asilomar’s weekend rate for just the room is $362. Comparatively, this is a great value, so what if we could pass this through and let everyone make their reservations directly? The only downside is a bit less convenience and a $20 fee the first time for this booking service.

This then raises the question of how much might be charged for the GBSF program of readings, discussions, and socializing? Do we really need to order centrally and send people books in the age of online purchasing? It costs time and money; therefore, if we provide the links and ISBNs, people can purchase, borrow, or even reach into their bookshelves for the correct edition. Other printed material can be emailed, saving postage and trees. In the end, this unbundling improves affordability by up to 25% compared to 2019 and even allows for some off-site participants.

Since taking over the reins from reigning Barbara McConnell Asilomar Weekend coordinator Rob Calvert, I’ve not only had large shoes to fill but the impact of the pandemic to deal with. I took this job as I’ve always loved our Spring weekend in one of the most beautiful settings, even when the accommodations were very rustic in the sixties. This event is really the best way to introduce our friends, family, and co-workers to the joys of what we do as Great Bookies.
This grand plan has had its challenges. We got late notice that Asilomar would not pair up roommates due to COVID concerns, leaving those that did not have partners unable to make reservations. Fortunately, our longtime and devoted registrar, Sheri Kindsvater, stepped up, so please work with her if you have any difficulty with the form or any part of the process. She can be reached at kindsvater@aol.com.

**Coordinator reflects on Fall 2021 Banned Books Mini-Retreat**

By Sheri Kindsvater

I think, for the first time since I started the Banned Books Mini-Retreat, we had the most in depth and interesting discussion about Free Speech. It was hearty and thought-provoking and covered both sides of the issue. It also made me hold fast to my opinion of the need for free speech in this country.

I get it, hate speech or disinformation is terrible and not helpful. But when you let it go, and give thoughtful discussion to it, you show it for what it really is. Banning it does not do that. Banning speakers of it only gives them more credibility. And there will always be, and always have been, believers of hateful or untruthful speech. In fact, one of the best known books, one burned so extensively in Fahrenheit 451 that there was only ONE copy left, is a book that has to be taken on faith. There is no science of any kind to support it. There is no way to know if it's truthful or not. It has speech that is glorious and speech that is hateful. It has fear-mongering and it has hope.

When one group, person or ideology starts down the slippery slope of banning speech, those rules need to apply to all sides’ speech. And that leaves us with the "vanilla" world created in Fahrenheit 451, or a world no better than now—full of double standards and rules that may or may not apply depending on who is talking at the time.

**Will Great Books work for Gen Z?**

By Lydia Osborn

The position of Student Liaison to the Great Books Council has presented me with several challenges, the most important being how to stimulate interest in Great Books among younger generations. I’ve often been asked “What are young people looking for?” or “How can we appeal to an audience of your age?” While I by no means speak for an entire generation, I’m going to attempt to address some of those questions here.

My generation is facing a world where success is measured in material possessions, and where simply surviving is a daunting task. The cost of housing has skyrocketed, college admissions have become something of a lottery, and finding a satisfying and supportive job feels extremely difficult. Consequently, we’ve become dispassionate, possibly to a fault, in how we look at our lives and make our decisions. At this stage of our lives, we take a very practical perspective and focus on activities with measurable benefit.

I’m taking economics this year, so I’ll try to put this in terms that I’ve learned so far. Resources such as time are scarce, so people choose how to use their limited time based on the projected utility of each activity. Utility is how much benefit a person gets out of choosing a certain activity - in other words, the activity with the least opportunity cost has the highest utility. The best way to ensure financial and personal security is to maximize utility and minimize opportunity cost.

For this example, utility can be split into two categories: carrots and sticks. The fact that participating in Great Books has neither a carrot nor a stick means that the younger generation may see little utility in joining. They may want to participate in Great Books for intellectual or personal benefits, but they may feel that other priorities come first in ensuring their survival, so may decide to wait until they have more security.

That being said, it’s not as if there’s nothing we can do. There are always going to be some people who deeply love reading and discussion, and they might be more likely to prioritize those interests if there were a few key changes to the current GB structure.

From my perspective, one important change Great Books could make is to always offer some events in virtual format. Zoom is the ideal platform to reach people who are in school or beginning their professional lives because it saves them time and money, thus minimizing the opportunity costs. It would also be beneficial to offer shorter and more contemporary readings that would take less time to understand well enough to discuss and yet still provide a worthwhile discussion of one or two hours. In my experience, reading the more formal English that is common in the traditional classics is becoming less common in high school and university, so
selections in modern English would have more appeal to a younger audience.

In conclusion, while it may not be realistic to hope for a deluge of new young members, making a few changes to the events and selections could attract dedicated readers in younger age cohorts who would enjoy participating in virtual events and who could support the long-term future of the organization.

**Extra! Read all about it!**

*Gold is found at bottom of GBSF website*

By Rick White

Enter the GBSF website [https://www.greatbooks-sncal.org](https://www.greatbooks-sncal.org) at a sign that says “About” and click “Shared Inquiry.” Enlist your mouse and team up to dig to the bottom. There you discover a rich yield of gold nuggets on how to lead a book discussion. You have happened upon the Morgan-Osborn vein. Exploring it has lifted my enthusiasm for leading to a new level. I am not only inspired but entertained. Louise Morgan and her granddaughter Lydia Osborn have found the mother lode of leading strategies and tactics and revealed it in a series of videos.

The first three sketches in their video series are way down there. For 30 years as a discussion leader I have struggled to develop good opening questions. The second sketch is the best thing I have seen on this.

Clicking on any of the three you encounter an entertaining whiteboard animation where Louise and Lydia explain things. This stuff is so good that even though I can’t show you the animation I asked them for permission to print the narrative. Here it is for the video on opening questions.

**What makes a good opening question?**

1. To get the discussion started you’ll want to use an open-ended, interpretive question—think of it as something that will start to “unzip” the story. So save questions like “What is the author’s message?” or “Why does the story end the way it does?” for later in the discussion.

2. Those questions are open-ended and interpretive, all right, but they’re too broad. Questions like “What is the author’s message?” run the risk of having someone jump in and interpret the whole story before the discussion can get underway.

3. It’s often effective to select a detail near the beginning and allow the story to unfold from there. You might focus on an unusual word or phrase — “What did Lincoln mean when he said this nation was ‘conceived in liberty?’” “Why does Keats describe the nightingale as having a ‘happy lot?’”

4. Or perhaps the setting. “Why does the author dwell on the colors of the countryside as the story begins?”

5. Or an unexpected action. “Why does Chaucer have the Pardoner reveal his entire bag of tricks at the very beginning of his tale?”

6. A word repeated with unusual frequency is often a hint as to what the author is wanting us to notice. “Why does the word ‘darkness’ appear three times on the first page?”

7. Having someone read a short passage before you ask the opening question is a good way to draw everyone into the story. Of course, that passage should include the word or phrase that you will then ask about.

8. What happens if your opening question results in a long pause? That’s OK. Give your group time to consider the question you’ve asked. But if there’s no sign of a response after a few more uncomfortable seconds you might want to rephrase the question or ask a question that’s closely related.

9. Whenever you read a text for the first time, questions will usually pop out at you, so remember, anything that you don’t understand at first is probably good material for a discussion question.

---

**The Iliad! SF Mini-Retreat 2/19 is still open. See below, page 9, for information.**
What are the “great books”?  
By Rick White

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) famously referred to the “great books” as “the best that has been thought and said,” as passed along since the beginning of recorded history. They are called “the classics,” the “central and challenging writings of universal and lasting importance,” about “the human condition and the meaning of life.” They include the great written works of imaginative literature, philosophy, and science. Parallel bodies of work exist in other fine arts such as music, visual art and architecture. Together they can be read, seen, and listened to as a permanent conversation among the generations of humankind. To be educated can be defined as the ability to take part in this conversation.

This explanation does not imply that written works falling outside of it are necessarily unsuitable for a great books discussion. A “discussable book” is one that presents original content on matters of enduring importance in a way that challenges interpretation.

My immersion in a sea of paper  
“Auld acquaintances” will not be forgot  
By Louise DiMattio

On a rainy mid-December afternoon, Elena Schmid and I were greeted at the Novato home of Rick and Kay White to undertake a difficult and perhaps tedious task—purging Great Books files from years past. Why difficult? It was like clearing out the effects of a beloved family.

Having Elena with me that day was especially helpful for the four of us. She is relatively new to Great Books. She can look at an Asilomar roster from 1985 and not have a struggle throwing it away. When I looked at the same printed roster, I saw faces to go with the names. I saw smiling images of Jan and Larry Fussell, Shirley and Earl Mortenson, Vince Scardina, Bob and especially Barbara McConnell, in whose memory we have renamed our major annual event the Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference.

When I saw their addresses in Pleasanton, San Francisco, and Mill Valley, I envisioned the welcoming homes where they hosted mailing and holiday parties and especially leader pre-discussions. Those were days when a serious discussion of challenging books and essays, poems and plays was great fun. Immersing myself in this sea of paper I was reminded that it was commitment to the Method of Shared Inquiry that brought us together. A delightful byproduct was that it helped generate fondness for one another.

We four plowed through cartons of documents, many typewritten and faded by the passage of time. They had been saved by such historian/archivists as Duke Edwards and Vince Scardina. These documents represented time and effort by scores of dedicated volunteers. Asilomar registrars struggled to match the right roommates in just-right rooms. We came upon plans laid to recognize the contributions of discussion leaders and for social events often based on themes suggested by the books for the year.

Who remembers discussing The Woman in the Dunes by Kobo Abe? What about discussing the poem “What Do Women Want?” by Kim Addonizio; the woman in the poem wants nothing more than a red dress. Then Jimmie Harvey swans into the room in a stunning red dress. Who could forget Roy Harvey’s barbershop quartet or his tap dancing? the (not intentionally) rustic instrumental music of the Sentimentals (or was it, as some claim, the Seven Mentals?) led by Bob Calvert, Rob’s dad, Duncan’s grandad, at the piano; Bob could play the standards from memory in any key. How about the elegant ballroom dancing displayed by Mark and Lydia Scardina? I am surely not the only one who remembers discussing The Brothers Karamazov on the side of Mt. Tam? Poetry Weekends in Alamo, as lovingly planned by Brent Browning and his poetry committee?
My heart broke a little each time I moved a document into the recycling pile. Elena reassures us GBSF has an electronic archive maintained by Rob Calvert where much of this material is stored. This is the end of the cartons of paper method. Who’d shed a tear for that?

I could hear our treasurer Brian Mahoney’s voice admonishing me that we don’t need to save decades old financial reports by Lee Jordan and expense reports by Marion Shepardson. Get a grip, Louise, and join the 21st Century.

I wondered whether a graduate student would want to write a master’s thesis on Great Books Northern California. Rick observed that it might be a good case study of an all-volunteer cultural organization that has mostly thrived for almost 70 years. A study of “What works?” as it were. As I took another roster from my pile, I answered my own question. “Even so, probably not.”

Long ago Novel Weekend names got me remembering the forested campus of Vallombrosa retreat in the midst of Menlo Park. Its spacious library was full of Melville fans energetically airing conflicting views about Moby Dick. I was “blown away,” I mused, by someone claiming this was his tenth reading of the book. That was a classical Great Books “moment.” I dropped the roster into the recycle bin.

Its leader, John Dalton, informs us that the annual Great Books week at Colby College is set to be held live on the campus this summer. GBSF plans to meet this spring at Asilomar. Registration is under way. We will surely recapture our pre-Covid delight in the joint interpretation of literature. Discovery and the added fun that goes with it when we are face to face will be back. New readers will be welcomed warmly at their first Great Books event as I was 31 years ago.

Gimlet-eyed editor asks:
Was fiction excluded?

By Rick White

In the rummaging of files reported above by Louise DiMattio no one identified an instance where there was not a substantial work of fiction in the Asilomar program. Ordinarily this would have been a novel of modest length. *

In spring 2022 we plan to discuss not a novel but a memoir, Reading Lolita in Tehran. Arguably the play Lysistrata we are discussing is imaginative fiction, but who is to stop classicists from insisting that the events described in the play were true? Accounts of the period leave unexplained gaps in the timeline of wars and battles.**

Given the greater powers of the female sex than those of the male, as confidently asserted in the Mark Twain essay “Letters from the Earth,” occurrence of the events described by Aristophanes in the play would seem to have a nontrivial level of probability.

We doubt that any exclusion of fiction by our Asilomar committee this year was intentional.

*But not always, it turns out. Our fact checker, not present at the rummaging, located references in the official archives to one play being substituted for the novel in 1962 and another in 1964. See GBSF website.

**See, for instance, Victor Davis Hanson, A War Like No Other, Random House, New York, 2005. It seems unlikely Mark Twain had access to Professor Hanson’s scholarship.

Ekphrasis is revealed!

By Paula Weinberger

Any confusion about the term “ekphrastic” was delightfully clarified for attendees at the 2021 Poetry Weekend by guest presenter, Janée Baugher.

While many art forms have served as poetic inspirations, the term “ekphrasis” refers exclusively to the visual arts - painting, drawing, photography, sculpture – as portals for poems. In her Sunday morning seminar, Baugher discussed some of the many ways poets have used the visual arts as stepping stones for their own work including literal descriptions, interpretive
descriptions, associative leaps, even giving voice to the artist. While it’s possible to write an ekphrastic poem about any piece of visual art, the true impetus comes when a piece of art calls out to you and stimulates something that wants to be expressed. Whatever the approach, Baugher believes the process begins with deep looking – spending time with a work of art to observe how the artist uses space and color, what is depicted and what isn’t, what might lie beyond the frame of the painting, or what emotions are elicited.

In compiling her guide, The Ekphrastic Writer, Baugher asked various poets to share their processes in writing an ekphrastic poem. Among her examples, she included a poem “After the Fall” by Becky Foust, last year’s guest presenter, based on an engraving by Albrecht Dürer. Her poem was also one of the selections discussed in the Saturday afternoon session. Foust was drawn to the engraving by its theme. She noted the unusual way the artist signed the work as though it were a calling card as well as the “not quite right” depictions of Adam and Eve and the various creatures in the garden. These unexpected renderings got her thinking about alternative understandings of The Fall. Baugher also discussed poems in response to a sandbox installation, a painting of an empty room, and a self-portrait that became a vehicle for consideration of the poet’s own life.

In the afternoon, Baugher shared how she became involved with ekphrastic poetry beginning with her early inspirations (art and poems) to her current poems based on her fascination with the artist, Andrew Wyeth. In these, she is talking in the imagined voice of the artist – what drew him to particular settings, the use of specific colors, his general thoughts and observations. Baugher calls these poems “footnotes” and is in the process of compiling them into a book.

Based on attendee comments, Baugher’s presentation and reading provided a stimulating and illuminating experience for all.

Planning for Poetry Weekend 2022 has begun. The big question, which will be decided soon, is whether the Weekend should be on Zoom or in person. Whatever the decision, the Weekend will be in mid-November. The theme we are considering is Why Poetry, an exploration of what makes poetry unique. Stay tuned for details.

If a Great Books reading group in Northern California is meeting on Zoom and now has members in California, New York, and Hawaii, should we still list the group as located in Oakland? If the current contacts for a “Northern California” Zoom group now live in New Jersey and San Diego, how should we list the group’s location? Is the group still part of our Northern California Great Books family? The pandemic and Zoom meetings have complicated the task of evaluating our Northern California Great Books community.

As manager of the GBSF database, in December I try to contact all the Great Books discussion groups in Northern California to update the information on the list we publish. This year I was able to identify 36 groups and gather oral or written responses from 33. For the three I couldn’t reach I drew on information posted on their websites.

How are they doing during the pandemic? Alas, we lost three groups in 2021 due to the deaths of their leaders, low attendance, or the retirement of a library supervisor. Several groups say they are eager to find new members, but some others are no longer accepting new members or adding their names to a waiting list.

Of the 33 existing groups, 27 meet on Zoom, three groups meet in person, and three are on hold. Most report very positive experiences with discussions on Zoom. Christina Lynch, new director of the Great Books program at College of the Sequoias in Visalia says “the Zoom format has allowed for more participation and deeper conversations, in some ways. The pandemic has definitely allowed us to bond more deeply as well.”

Most groups are accepting new members. Some of them require membership in an organization that is their sponsor. If you decide to start a new group, let us know. When our group census began in 1998, we had 56 groups in Northern California. We strongly encourage the formation of new groups and will help them get going. Listing your group on the GBSF website (http://www.greatbooksncal.org/) and that of the Great Books Foundation (http://www.greatbooks.org/) are excellent ways to attract new members. It’s always a pleasure to catch up with our groups with the annual census every December. Happy reading in 2022!
You are invited to join us on Zoom Saturday, February 19, 2022, for a day of Shared Inquiry. Join us with King Priam, Achilles, and their friends and enemies in Homer’s *The Iliad*, one of the earliest and still greatest adventure stories in the culture of the West. In the morning Zoom session we discuss the final three books, 22, 23, and 24, using the Stephen Mitchell translation.

“Mitchell…captures the fierce energy, rhythms, and powerful narrative…The poetry rocks and has a macho cast to it, like rap music.” A PDF of these chapters will be sent to you by email upon registration.

In the afternoon, award-winning author and poet David Malouf will join us on a deep dive into the human implications of a father’s love of his son and a man’s love of a lifelong friend. Malouf reimagines *The Iliad* in unforgottably in his novel *Ransom*.

“Exquisite…lovely…moving…lyrical…witty, gentle, this is above all a story of transformation…”

You can acquire either the hardback or paperback edition. Here’s hoping you’ll join us in this literary adventure!

Questions?  phoeschler@aol.com

Register at
https://greatbooksncal.org
## 2022 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January-February</th>
<th>March-April</th>
<th>May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>June-July</strong></td>
<td><strong>August-September-October</strong></td>
<td><strong>November-December</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TBA:</strong> Banned Books Mini-Retreat</td>
<td><strong>8/TBA:</strong> Long Novel Weekend</td>
<td><strong>11/TBA:</strong> Poetry Weekend. Theme: <em>Why Poetry?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TBA:</strong> Leader-Reader Workshop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7/16:</strong> Annual Meeting. Zoom. No picnic.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL**, Serving Northern California:
- President, Louise DiMattio
- Vice President, Elena Schmid
- Secretary, Dorothy McHale
- Treasurer, Brian Mahoney
- Past President, Brian Cunningham
- *Reading Matters*: Editor and Publisher, Rick White
- E-letter Editor and Publisher, Jim Hall
- Database, Jan Vargo
- Website: [www.greatbooksncal.org](http://www.greatbooksncal.org)
- Great Books Foundation: [www.greatbooks.org](http://www.greatbooks.org)

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.