

Reading Matters

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL
Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2014: *Readings are Announced*

By Louise Morgan

After considering many appealing possibilities, the book selection committee is happy to have reached consensus on the readings for the 56th annual Great Books Asilomar Spring Conference, which will take place on April 4-6, 2014. Can you deduce the titles from the following clues?

A mysterious swimmer with a dark secret floats into the life of an inexperienced young sea captain who goes to great lengths to conceal the stranger's presence from his crew.



A young woman muses about the human experience while spending a year in close observation of the natural world.

Two minor characters in a play bicker and banter about the nature of death, fate, and

free will while waiting to go onstage.

Yes, *The Secret Sharer* by Joseph Conrad, a story that has been described as a voyage into the self, will be our fiction selection. Annie Dillard's Pulitzer-Prize-winning classic *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is our non-fiction choice, offering provocative observations such as "The present is a freely given canvas. That it is constantly being ripped apart and washed downstream goes without saying." Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is the play, a drama that will have us alternately chuckling and scratching our heads as we probe for deeper meaning. As usual, a set of poetry selections will round out the weekend's discussions.

A flyer and registration form for the weekend can be found on pages 7 and 8 of this issue, and can be downloaded from the Asilomar page of our web site, <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/asilomar.htm>.



Insanity at the Embarcadero YMCA

Sign up for the mini-retreat! See <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/San%20Francisco%20mini%20retreat.htm>.

From the President:

I prepared for this year's highly-entertaining Long Novel Weekend by reading Moby-Dick on an iPad, while bus-commuting between home and office. The light, thin device was a pleasant alternative to carrying around a 700-page book! The Internet now provides us with a host of modern ways to communicate about the books we've read – email, web sites, e-newsletters, blogs, Skype, social media, instant messages. As president, I'm eager to explore how we as an organization can benefit from new ways of interacting while not abandoning our traditional mode of meeting face-to-face.

For fifty years, the mission of GBSF has been to get people in a room to discuss an interesting book. Such discussions create a wonderful alchemy as we experience ideas from different points of view. Since joining GBSF, I've discovered that magical alchemy time and time again. I plan to use all the tools at my disposal to continue to attract and involve book lovers in our wonderful organization.

I consider myself fortunate to assume the presidency of GBSF at a time when our organization is vigorous, active and healthy. Discussion groups are meeting regularly throughout Northern California, debating the meanings of stories, poems, plays, and essays and learning from each other's insights. Our volunteers continue to give generously of their time and energy to arrange the regional events that bring us together.

Looking ahead, I believe it's important for GBSF to consider the impact of new technologies on our mission. For example, I can imagine a time in the future when the alchemy of person-to-person discussions can be achieved just as effectively in a virtual room. The possibilities intrigue me. While I still maintain a healthy skepticism, as I'm sure many of you do, whenever I observe how adroitly my children manipulate technology, I realize the digital future is here.

May the discussion continue!

--Rob Calvert

Long Novel Weekend tackles Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

This year's Long Novel Weekend was held at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park, August 24-25. The 48 participants enjoyed several excellent meals served buffet style, comfortable accommodations with private baths, and a chance to stroll around the lovely ten-acre park-like setting. The staff at the center was extremely gracious and helpful. Those attending the Poetry Weekend in November, also at Vallombrosa, can look forward to a relaxed and pleasant experience.

Plunging into *Moby-Dick*

Discussion leaders **Rob Calvert, Louise DiMattio, Oscar Firschein, Gary Geltemeyer, Jim Hall, Louise Morgan, Claudia O'Callaghan, and Kay and Rick White** did an excellent job preparing provocative questions to help participants unravel the intricacies of the plot. *Moby-Dick* is a particularly challenging book as it doesn't follow a traditional sequence and its multiple perspectives and levels of meaning are intertwined in the telling of the story. Despite its complexity, and wealth of information on whales and whaling, participants had no problem in generating hours of animated discussion. The three sessions were divided as follows: **Session I** focused on the unusual narrative style and an exploration of the main characters. **Session II** focused on the whaling ship, the Pequod, as a microcosm of 19th century America. **Session III** was reserved for putting things together in order to look at the big questions and broader themes of the novel. For more details of what went on in each session, see **Jim Baird's** Diary of the Weekend in a nearby column.

A Musical Tribute to the Sea

Following the afternoon session on Saturday, participants were treated to a lovely concert performed by pianist **William Corbett-Jones**, Professor Emeritus of Music at San Francisco State University and husband of Long Novel Weekend organizer, **Louise DiMattio**. Bill talked about and played several compositions on water themes by Ernest Bloch, Franz Liszt, and Claude Debussy that he chose especially to compliment our discussion of things nautical.

Cal professor gives whale of a lecture

While Herman Melville's timeless classic, *Moby-Dick*, provided three lively two-hour discussions and much between-times conversation, the highlight of the weekend for many was the extraordinary lecture by invited Saturday evening speaker, UC Berkeley Professor of English Literature, **Samuel Otter**. Typically, a 50-minute lecture is followed by a brief question and answer session. In this case, Professor Otter seemed to really get into stride as he answered questions, collectively and individually, for

more than two hours. Dr. Otter is passionate about his subject and brought to his interactions with the group a broad range of background knowledge and years of reflection. I think I can speak for everyone when I say how grateful we all are for the opportunity to engage with Dr. Otter on aspects of the novel that perplexed or fascinated each of us.



Prof. Samuel Otter

An example of Dr. Otter's provocative style - when asked about the famous opening line of *Moby-Dick*, "Call me Ishmael," he related a discussion with a Japanese translator who was struggling to find the right word in Japanese to express the multiplicity of meanings in that one sentence. It turns out, there is no such word. Then of course, he went on to explore possible interpretations, which typical of Melville, are all valid and contribute to the depth and meaning of the novel. For more on Dr. Otter's presentation, please see Jim Baird's "*Moby-Dick* Diary" later in this newsletter.

The group would like to extend a special thank you to **Joanna Kraus** whose contribution, in remembrance of her late husband, Ted, has allowed GBSF to increase the modest honorarium it gives to guest speakers.

A fond farewell

Despite the many hours of conversation and reflection, there always seems more to be said, but such is the nature of the Long Novel Weekend. With *Moby-Dick* still buzzing in our heads, some of us have already begun anticipating, with pleasure, next year's Long Novel Weekend. Organizer, Louise DiMattio, is thinking about choosing a novel focusing on World War I as 2014 marks the 100th anniversary of the war. Suggestions are welcome.

Annual Meeting and Picnic:

**Rob Calvert is elected president,
Laura Bushman VP**

***The Sense of an Ending*
makes great discussion**

Rob Calvert, 55, was elected president unanimously at GBSF's annual meeting/picnic on June 9. Rob, the son of **Bob and Carol Calvert**, has participated in Council activities since 1997. Rob, his wife Katie, and his parents, all live in Berkeley. The senior Calverts began their participation in Great Books in Los Angeles in the mid-1960s and continued, until recently, to attend Asilomar and other events.

Gold Country Nonfiction Mini-Retreat 2013

By David Briggs

On Saturday, May 11, 2013, 27 members of Great Books groups from around Northern California gathered at the Mercy Center in Auburn for the fourth Gold Country Nonfiction Mini-Retreat. Book enthusiasts discussed *In the Garden of Beasts* by Erik Larson - the true story of William Dodd, the novice American ambassador serving in Germany during the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party. It recounts the growth of anti-Jewish sentiment including in our own State Department and Dodd's growing frustration at his inability to convince the American government of the brutality of the Nazi regime.

Larson also recounts the adventures of Dodd's daughter, Martha, who became romantically involved with elite members of the Gestapo and Russian Intelligence. Martha's journal gave Larson a unique perspective on the changing political climate in Berlin.

Participants enjoyed Larson's style and the book engendered a lively discussion about Dodd's effectiveness and whether Hitler's rise could have been prevented. While Dodd was admired for opposing the savagery of the Nazis at a time when many Americans preferred to look the other way, some participants felt that his efforts were undermined by his persistent criticism of State Department hiring and spending practices. Many thought that Martha's extravagant lifestyle also contributed to her father's lack of success.

After an excellent lunch prepared by the Mercy Center staff and a rousing sing along of "Der Fuehrer's Face," an anti-Nazi novelty song led by Donna Reynolds, the group viewed the 1972 film, "Cabaret." Set in Berlin during the same time period as *In the Garden of Beasts*, the film reveals through its scathing musical numbers, a society increasingly degraded by scapegoating and intimidation. Bob Fosse's direction and choreography was highly praised as was the music by Kander and Ebb. The delightful cast included Liza Minelli, as the irresponsible and charismatic Sally Bowles and Joel Grey, as the enigmatic emcee.

The group exchanged literate goodbyes but we can all look forward to the May 2014 Great Books Gold Country Mini-Retreat featuring the book *Seabiscuit* by Laura Hillenbrand and the film of the same name.

Rob, following his father, is both an avid reader and an accomplished musical performer. The senior Calvert plays piano while his son sings along. The two have performed publicly, Rob most recently, at the Asilomar Spring Conference.

The council has solicited Rob for years to seek out the top position. Now that his eldest child has graduated from university and his youngest is newly matriculated, he's agreed to take on the job. (See Rob's remarks on assuming the presidency in a nearby column.)

Laura Bushman, elected vice president, has administered the GBSF annual meeting/picnic for several years and provided leadership to the El Cerrito discussion group. As vice president she is the likely successor to Rob in June 2015. Laura and her husband, **Tony Bushman**, frequently host musical evenings at their home high in the Berkeley hills.

Marge Johnson assumes the role of past president on the executive committee, **Brian Mahoney** continues as treasurer and **Rick White** as secretary. **Louise Morgan** has joined the committee and will serve as co-chair of the Asilomar event.

Finances are solid

Rob presented the annual report in lieu of Marge Johnson and Brian Mahoney who could not make the meeting. He reported that attendance at events during the year has been satisfactory and that the council is in excellent financial shape due primarily to a generous bequest of \$40,000 from the estate of Donald F. Casey, a prior participant in the San Rafael discussion group. This bequest doubled the GBSF fund balance. A financial report is available for anyone who wishes to review it.

The Sense of an Ending

Business completed, participants were assigned to one of four groups to discuss the contemporary novel *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes. Leaders were **Niki Brorsen**, **Oscar Firschein**, and **Kay and Rick White**. **Louise DiMattio** had been scheduled to lead but was called to the bedside of her daughter and new granddaughter.

The nature of history was one of the many themes raised in the book. Among the topics discussed were the need to know the history of the historian and history as the "certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation." A lively debate ensued about the meaning of the title. No matter what their point of view, everyone agreed that this short novel provided lots of food for thought.



Rob's Coronation

Music astonishes at Great Books week

Colby Summer Program

Rick and Kay White were the only Northern Californians at the 57th Annual Wachs Great Books Summer Institute at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, July 28 – August 3.

“The Coming of Age” was the book theme for the 118 adults who attended. Thirty-one children attended separate sessions for grades 1 – 5 and 6 and up. The adult books were Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*; Willa Cather, *The Professor’s House*; Vita Sackville-West, *All Passion Spent*; Anton Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*; and Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*. *Heidi* was one of the children’s readings.

Additional attractions included two movies: “Wild Strawberries” by Ingmar Bergman, and “Vanya on 42nd Street,” directed by Louis Malle; a lecture on Anton Chekhov by Colby professor Julie de Sherbinin; and a tale show MC’d by Maine humorist Gary Crocker. Participants also had a chance to tour the Yeats collection at Miller Library, attend a lobster bake, and partake of a virtually free bar in the evenings.

This summer, as well as the outstanding two-hour book discussions each day, the Whites had the pleasure of attending concerts every evening by talented young musicians attending the Atlantic Music Festival also held on campus. Among the week’s outstanding solo performances were Beethoven’s 3rd sonata for cello and piano played by Jonah Kim and Sang Woo Kang, and the same composer’s 3rd piano concerto performed by Alice Sara Ott with full orchestra. Surprisingly tonal and romantic was *Verklaerte Nacht*, Op. 4, by Arnold Schoenberg. In 2014 the Great Books event and the music festival will again be scheduled together.

Colby has an extraordinary art collection which they claim to be the largest in any American college. Consisting primarily of works by 19th and 20th century American artists, it is housed in an architecturally outstanding new building. Admission is free of charge.

Next year’s book discussion theme (they have a theme) is Judgment. The readings are *Justice as Fairness*, by John Rawls; *Crime and Punishment*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky; *Hippolytus*, by Euripides; *De Profundis*, by Oscar Wilde; *The Fall*, by Albert Camus; and *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, by Joyce Carol Oates. There will be two age-graded junior Great Books discussion groups as well.

The price for this event-filled week, including room, board, books and everything above, is \$685 double occupancy.

Moby-Dick Diary

By Jim Baird

A line sung in the 1940 musical *Wonderful Town* goes
"I was re-reading *Moby-Dick* the other day [dead
silence]. It's about this
[beat] whale."

It gets a sure-fire laugh, perhaps because it is on target. This is a tough book to summarize. It's about a whale, yes, but much more.

My selections here represent a few of the ideas discussed. For those who made it to Vallombrosa, I hope they jog memories. If you are among those who did not, perhaps they'll motivate you to read the story.

Session One: Introducing the Characters Saturday Morning

Moby-Dick is a process of discovery. The inner workings of the characters are revealed over the the course of the novel. The voyage of the whaling ship, the Pequod, becomes a reflection of the world in which Melville lived. We grapple with many of the same issues still.

Ishmael is the narrator and the only survivor of the disastrous voyage of the Pequod. The novel opens with the famous line, “Call me Ishmael.” We start at the end of the story and experience its unfolding from Ishmael’s perspective.

Ahab is the troubled captain of the Pequod who on a previous voyage lost a leg to *Moby-Dick*, the elusive white whale. Ahab’s monomaniacal obsession for vengeance is a strand woven throughout the novel. Ahab’s chilling baptism-by-blood ceremony to christen his newly forged harpoon is believed by many to mark his descent into devil-worship. He states, “I baptize you in the name of the devil (*in nomine diaboli*).”

Father Mapple, who appears in the beginning of the novel, represents one of the moral pillars of the story. His sermon on the Old Testament story of Jonah stresses repentance as the path toward salvation. Inside the whale, Jonah does not pray for deliverance but asks God to forgive his arrogance for attempting to flee. Father Mapple, in sharp contrast to Ahab, thinks that men must accept their fate; Ahab is determined to take fate into his own hands.

Other important characters are mates Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask, and harpooners Queequeg, Tashtego and Daggoo.

Session Two: Whales and Whalers Saturday Afternoon

Chapter 87 (The Grand Armada) In the midst of a tumultuous chase, Starbuck and crew find themselves in the center of a circle of nursing whales. An unseen universe

unfolds before their eyes as the crew is touched by the purity and innocence of the baby whales. This scene is in stark contrast to Ahab's belief in the inherent wickedness of Moby-Dick.

Chapter 47 (The Mat Maker) Ishmael ponders the concept of free will vs. chance as he and Queequeg weave a sword-mat to lash to their boat. He sees the warp, the vertical strands, as fate because they are unchanging; the woof, the horizontal strands, represent free will--each thread must individually be set. When Queequeg carelessly pounds the woof of his new mat with a sword thereby creating deviations in the pattern, Ishmael realizes this action mirrors life with all its imperfections.

Chapter 53 (The Gam) When two whaling ships meet in mid-ocean officers and crew mingle. The only contacts whalers have on their long voyages, games provide opportunities to exchange information, pass letters, and the like. Ahab ignores this communal ritual. His interest is getting information about Moby-Dick. Another time the Pequod meets a vessel whose captain lost an arm to Moby-Dick. Unlike Ahab, this captain has learned from his loss and has no further interest in pursuing the white whale. He thinks pursuit is crazy and is happy to be heading home alive. Ahab, however, is not discouraged.

Chapter 60 (The Line) Whaling depends on ropes, especially the specialized lines that connect harpoon boats to the whale once harpoons are thrown. These ropes, which can spell death for the whale, can also be fatal to any sailor who gets tangled in one. Ironically, Ahab meets his end when attempting to unsnag such a rope after harpooning Moby-Dick. The hemp coil gets wrapped around his neck and pulls him into the sea. Ahab dies by his own hand without physically challenging Moby-Dick.

Saturday Evening Session *Moby-Dick* with Samuel Otter

Late 19th Century America had a form of public entertainment called a "cyclorama." These monumental paintings, usually depicting some historical event, were housed in round buildings and viewed by the public from a platform in the middle. One can still view such a cyclorama at Gettysburg. There the 27 feet high, 359 feet around, painting depicts the famous Civil War battle. A viewer, like a reader confronting Melville's 600-page masterpiece, looks at the mass of detail and asks, "How can I hope to take all this in?"

Fortunately, there are solutions for both. In the 1800s, cyclorama operators distributed cardboard tubes to help viewers focus on a small section of the painting. Our guest, UC Berkeley professor Samuel Otter, provided the same effect. By focusing on a few choice passages he

brought the book into focus. Here are some of his observations that I hope will whet your appetite. You can find lecture notes from his talk on the GBSF website at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/LongNovel.htm>.

Dr. Otter chose to discuss Chapter 44 (The Chart) and Chapter 59 (Squid). In The Chart we see Ahab alone in his cabin obsessively studying a trove of nautical charts and logbooks as he tries to deduce the precise location for his encounter with Moby-Dick. Maury's remarkable map, used by Melville and included in the handout, is also available at our website.

While Ahab has the tools and the skill to logically track Moby-Dick, we also see the side of him that is demonic and skewed. Unable to sleep or any longer bear the obsessive, corrosive nature of his passions, Ahab nightly flees from his cabin to pace the deck. Ishmael, musing on Ahab's behavior, says "God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee. . ." He is like Prometheus except that the vulture that feeds upon Ahab is one that he himself has created.

Otter compares Chapter 44 with Chapter 59. The harpooner Daggoo on lookout duty thinks he's spotted Moby-Dick. The Pequod lowers her boats in pursuit only to find that the white mass in the water is not Moby-Dick but a giant white squid. This "vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth ... without eyes or face ... undulated there on the billows, an earthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life." Though enormous in size, the sailors are not terrified. Instead, they are struck with a sense of wonder at this Medusa-like being that unlike the whale is an apparition with no interior life or character. There is nothing to pursue or conquer. Starbuck speaking about the squid says, "The great live squid, which, they say, few whale-ships ever beheld, and returned to their ports to tell of it." Melville seems to equate the blank formless pacing of Ahab and the white formlessness of the squid with death, implying that Ahab's quest for the ineffable can only lead to his annihilation. Melville raises more questions than he answers. Like the cyclorama, he presents all views and lets the reader decide where to look.

While the evening discussion touched on other things, including an extended question and answer session, our careful exploration of chapters 44 and 59 allowed us to appreciate the many layers of human experience and why this book is worth reading multiple times. Like all great works, *Moby-Dick* tells a different story each time it's read because we, the readers, are different.

Session Three: Malevolent Ahab Sunday Morning

Chapter 42 (The Whiteness of the Whale) Ishmael reflects on the color white. It can signify purity as well as fear and abhorrence. Ishmael would argue that whiteness in nature (sharks, polar bears, squid) typically inspires awe

and fear. Moby-Dick embodies this contradiction: he can be seen either as an angelic messenger or a malignant force. When Ahab finally encounters Moby-Dick, despite the whale's destructive power the captain remains undaunted in his mission to the end.

Chapter 41 (Moby-Dick) Ishmael is surprised that Ahab's obsession has become his own. "A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine." He wonders whether it was Fate or God's hand that gave power to Ahab's "mad" quest. "Here, then, was this grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals.... Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge."

Chapter 132 (The Symphony) On a particularly beautiful day, Ahab appears overcome with regret about his lonely and loveless life. He confides in Starbuck about his wife and son. Starbuck, sensing a shift in Ahab, answers, "Let us fly these deadly waters! Let us home! Wife and child, too, are Starbuck's.... How cheerily, how hilariously, O my Captain, would we bow on our way to see old Nantucket again!" Despite the attractiveness of Starbuck's appeal, something holds Ahab back. Starbuck, sensing there is nothing more to do, retreats. Could Starbuck have done more to persuade Ahab? Could this story have ended differently?

At the novel's close we wonder about the wives and children of the drowned whalers. New England houses in the 19th century were built with a railed platform on the roof called a "widow's walk" that provided a clear view of the sea. Wives would go there to watch for the return of their seafaring husbands. How long did Ahab's and Starbuck's wives keep watch for their return?

LEADING QUESTIONS

By Kay White, GBSF Leader Trainer

We had a rousing discussion about Rudyard Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" in Calistoga this October. As a bonus, I met up again with participants from our earlier Leader Training group (March). I realized how I miss seeing and hearing from you all about your Great Books' experiences after we spend an intense day together on the *shared inquiry* method. This column will be ours to exchange questions, tips, and experiences about leading in the Great Books method.

How do you feel about leading now? What is helpful, or troublesome, in your discussions? This is your chance for feedback and exchange with other leaders.

I'll start with my radical statement: **The discussion belongs to the group.** What does that mean? How does it look in action? What can go wrong with that approach?

As usual, the leader starts with an interpretive question. If the group is lively and motivated, they may pass around the discussion with little intervention by the leader for the next two hours. They may discuss the beginning of the story, and then jump to the end. What's wrong with that?

So long as everyone gets a chance to speak, and can follow their thoughts through, linking with others, there is no rule that you must discuss the story in a linear way. The group may set the pace and direction of the discussion. The conversation must stay centered on the selected reading. If it does not, the leader needs to pull it back into focus.

What could go wrong? The discussion may leap over important passages, but participants can draw the focus back to them, or the leader can draw attention to essential parts that are critical for a fuller understanding.

Some people may get confused by a fast romp around story. The leader and others in the group have a responsibility to locate the section for one another. We're together to help one another with the book. This is an open-book exploration.

What if someone feels lost? That is when he or she must say, "I'm sorry but don't know what part of the book, or character, you are talking about." The leader and others in the group have an obligation to help people get on the same page. Most of all, participants need to take responsibility to speak out.

What does this look like in action? We listen to one another. We offer page references. A free-flowing discussion requires care and courtesy. Quiet or shy people may need encouragement to get into the conversation. That is not only the leader's responsibility, but also that of everyone in the group.

The leader may have topics he thinks are important, but the group may pace the conversation in another direction. That is okay. Leaders' notes are possible discussion points, but not necessary agenda items. Leaders should not work from a list of questions.

What if the discussion stalls? This is when the leader comes to the fore with a provocative question that moves the discussion forward. A leader needs to be nimble and to improvise.

Some people like to have a captive audience. What if one person dominates the discussion? This is the cue for the leader to intervene and say with a smile, "It is time to hear some other viewpoints: How about this side of the room?" The leader is responsible for making space for others to speak, and for passing around the discussion.

Yes, the leader needs to have a good understanding of the reading but if others have strong understandings of the story, let them take it forward. The leader may be more of a crossing guard than a path finder. Above all, the leader should have a light footprint. The best discussions remind

me of the Cheshire cat's smile—with the leader fading within the flow of conversation.

What is your leading question? What would you like to talk about with other leaders? Send me a note at kay-cleveland@aol.com. We'll follow up with your experiences.

My quibble of the season: demur vs. demure

By Carol Hochberg

One of my pet peeves may be esoteric, but I promised myself that if I heard **demured** for **demurred** one more time on the radio, I would scream. And I did.

According to the dictionary *Demur* is primarily a [verb](#) meaning (1) *to object*, or (2) *to hesitate because of doubt*. As a [noun](#), it refers to the act of objecting or hesitating. *Demure* becomes *demurred*, *demurring*, and *demurs*.

Demure, on the other hand, is an adjective that means (1) *modest and reserved*, or (2) *affectedly shy*. *Demurely* is *demure*'s corresponding [adverb](#).

The distinction is subtle, but my ire goes up every time I hear the wrong word used. Though similar, the words are not homophones. *Demure* is pronounced *de-MYUUR*, and *demur* is pronounced *di-MUR*.

Just recently, I heard a journalist, in recounting his meeting with Bolivian president Evo Morales, say, and this was on NPR, that Morales demured and would not answer questions about NSA leaker, Edward Snowden. What should he have said?

Test your Demur/Demure acumen by trying your hand at the quiz below!

- Her _____ pose with her arms held across her chest helped preserve her modesty.
- They have local addresses, but if you call and ask to visit, they _____.
- Canadians are known as a _____ lot, none too comfortable with blowing their own horns.
- Every time our chat even hovered near the boundaries of this man's fame, he _____ and flapped his hands to indicate he didn't want to talk on those terms.
- She held her hands _____ in her lap, a still presence with an air of vulnerability.

2013-14 CALENDAR

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

OCTOBER 2013	NOVEMBER 2013	DECEMBER 2013
	11/3 - 11/4: Poetry Weekend Menlo Park	
JANUARY 2014	FEBRUARY	MARCH
	2/8 and 2/9: San Francisco Mini-Retreats <i>(One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest)</i>	No Leader Training in 2014
APRIL	MAY	JUNE
4/4 - 4/6: Asilomar Spring Conference	5/10: Gold Country Mini-Retreat <i>(Seabiscuit)</i>	6/22 (tent.): Picnic/Annual Meeting
JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER
		9/13 - 14: Long Novel Weekend
OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
10/4 and 10/5: Wine Country Mini-Retreats	11/1 - 11/2: Poetry Weekend	

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California: Rob Calvert, President; Laura Bushman, Vice President; Rick White, Secretary; Brian Mahoney, Treasurer; Marge Johnson, Past President.

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Pursuing the Classics

By Ann Kirkland

For our spring-summer issue we invited Harrison Middleton University, an institutional partner with the Great Books Foundation, to tell us what they do. The following is another invited article about a Great Books partner, Classical Pursuits of Toronto.

Ann Kirkland

Harrison Middleton University, an institutional

Like many parents, I've tried to nudge my children toward a style of learning I wish I'd had. Classes at the Ivy League university I attended were usually held in large lecture halls where I too often found myself seated in the rear, doodling and daydreaming. For this reason, I encouraged my daughter to attend St John's, a small liberal arts college in Santa Fe, New Mexico that I learned about through participating in Great Books. Her experience at St. John's was marvelous, but it is mine that I write about here.

At my first parents' weekend, in the fall of 1994, "Johnnies" and parents were placed in small seminars to discuss Sophocles' *Antigone*. The way "shared inquiry" worked gave me an appetite to read and discuss more great works of literature this way. I was thrilled to learn that St John's offered a Summer Classics program and attended it for many years. Alas, an unfavorable exchange rate between the U.S. and Canada, where I live, ended my annual trips to Santa Fe.

A few years later, in a flash of inspiration, I realized that I could bring the concept of Summer Classics to Toronto. The idea so excited me that I abandoned a 30-year career in health administration and set out to create such a program. The result was Classical Pursuits, an outgrowth of my happy experiences at St. John's aided by guidance and support from the Great Books Foundation in Chicago. Classical Pursuits enabled me, at last, to turn a passion for great literature into a satisfying vocation.

Classical Pursuits brings adults from across North America together in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere to read, discuss, and reflect on the enduring ideas in great works of literature, music, and art. The first program, offered in July of 1999, featured Plato's *Republic*, Dante's *Inferno*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Fifteen years later, the program attracts over 100 participants during the year with a dozen seminar options.

In 2002, I added travel as a dimension to our discussions, launching Travel Pursuits with a group trip to Italy where we discussed Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and explored facets of Medieval Italian life, arts, and thought. Since then we have traveled through time and

space from Flannery O'Connor's Savannah to Garcia Lorca's Andalucía to Sophocles' Greece, and Naguib Mahfouz's Egypt. In 2014, we return to Northern India (Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and the Jaipur Literary Festival), Russia (Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in Moscow and St. Petersburg), Iceland (several sagas, Hall-dor Laxness's *The Fish Can Sing* and a detective novel), and New Orleans (short works by Tennessee Williams, Kate Chopin, Ernest Gaines, and Julie Smith).

On the home front, in keeping with our efforts to explore new territory, in July 2014, Classical Pursuits will devote the entire week to literary riches originating outside the European/North American axis. Entitled, "The West Gives Way to the Rest," it will include books from China, Japan, India, the African continent, pre-European Iceland, Turkey, Egypt, and the Caribbean, as well as related film, art and architecture, and music.

Whether it is Odysseus trying to get home to his high-roofed house in Ithaca, Aeneas dutifully pursuing a quest that was not initially his own, Parsifal seeking the Holy Grail, the pilgrim Dante trying to save himself, or Faust in search of eternity, enduring literature recognizes that we are creatures whose natures cause us to long, to seek. My quest to make Classical Pursuits a reality, like those of our literary heroes, has been fraught with obstacles and rewards. One challenge was identifying leaders skilled in guiding discussions based on genuine questioning and probing. We were aided in this endeavor by partnering with the Great Books Foundation in Chicago which provided talented leaders and training in the Shared Inquiry method.

While the program has had its personal costs in money and time, encouragement and support from our participants has made it worthwhile. After two decades I retain the zeal of the missionary – secure that what I am doing contributes in a small way to reflective thinking and public discourse – essential ingredients for meaningful lives in a civilized society.

Since most quest stories are ultimately circular, beginning and ending with home, albeit transformed, I will end mine with a childhood memory of my grandfather, a classicist and Lucretius scholar. I remember him as an old and formidable man, sitting in our front porch swing in a three-piece suit, instructing my brother, my sister, and me to recite what seemed to us a lot of nonsense syllables – "hic, haec, hoc, huius, huius, huius." "Veni, vedi, veci." I would love to be back beside him on that swing talking about the pursuit of wisdom and pleasure to be found in the classics.