

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

ASILOMAR 2023:

Beyond left and right

By Rick White

The Barbara McConnell Spring Conference at Asilomar is to be held at the Pacific Grove site on the weekend of April 10 – 12. Details and registration info can be found on our web site at <https://www.greatbooksnca.org/asilomar>.

The readings reflect strong differences of outlook. In these times, differences of opinion have interfered with our ability to reason together. In Great Books discussions, following the method of shared inquiry we try to suspend what we may think of the author outside the work. Sometimes this doesn't matter.. For instance, in the Pablo Neruda poem, he expresses something we may all share—feelings about aging and mortality.

Other times it may. Ayn Rand's placing a value on unlimited personal ambition is likely to be divisive. But should her views about the rights and obligations of individuals in society mean that we can't discuss them thoughtfully, impartially? Not in shared inquiry.

Arundhati Roy elsewhere blames the world's injustices on big business, especially that of the United States, especially colonialism. Should this influence your view of *The God of Small Things*? or does the novel stand on its own?

Ayn Rand was a lifetime polemicist for "Objectivism." She saw unbridled human talent and ambition as

the driving force for a good and just society. One may strongly disagree with this view. Should that mean that we should not try to understand it and why a person of good faith might hold it? Should one end a friendship over an opinion?

Pablo Neruda was a lifelong Communist. Does knowing this interfere with your identifying with his feelings in the poem selected for our discussion?

In another of our readings, Gotthold Lessing describes a set of actions where individuals of profoundly different backgrounds of belief were placed in a position where they got to know one another as individuals. This experience led to their mutual acceptance as fellow humans.

Nothing in the method of shared inquiry prevents us from learning on our own what we can about the lives and opinions of those we read. These views should not come into the discussion. Shared inquiry insists that we commit ourselves to listen without preconceptions for what may be of value in an idea or a work. It helps for one to assume that good persons might hold different views.

Poet Dorianne Laux says what poetry is and why

We sometimes kid around in this space and will continue to do so. However, we were serious about our Summer 2022 edition's promise to provide answers to the fundamental queries of poetry's skeptics, "What is poetry and why?" This autumn's Poetry Weekend included the usual stimulating small group discussions of



Julia Morgan's auditorium at Asilomar

the work of noted poets. (See story, page 1, previous edition, for the complete program.) But the focus was on keeping our ambitious promise.

Guest poet Dorianne Laux did this for us, and she has consented to our reproducing excerpts from an essay she drew from in her talk. They are from a collection soon to be published, *Finger Exercises for Poets*.

Why Poetry?

By Dorianne Laux

You may as well ask, Why sunsets? Why bicycles? Why gnats and human beings? Why trees? Why the small and larger things that make up this world? Why stars? Why dust? We swirl around and inside of chaos. The world we're born into is a noisy, messy, confusing place full of moments of boredom and surprise. We are in the center of our lives always, and yet there are times we feel on the outside looking in, a question on our lips, unable to formulate it, or if we do manage to find words, and speak them, we can only hope they can capture some of what that chaotic world inside feels like. And if we do, if we are able, for a moment, both the world without and within simultaneously stills, sits motionless between ourselves and others, ourselves and the world. We feel a semblance of satisfaction and achievement, something like joy.

Alert! San Francisco Mini-Retreat

As of 1/14 openings still exist for this February 11th Zoom event. The book is S. M Coetzee's *Age of Iron* along with two related poems, "Country of Grief and Grace," by Antjie Krog and "His Day is Done" by Maya Angelou. — Contact Parki Hoeschler, phoeschler@aol.com or 415-310-1195.

Any artist knows this feeling, the right color in the right place, the right ascension of notes, one foot leaping into air. This mimics the feeling we all have at a job well done, the loose screw tightened so the whole mechanism now works, the floor shiny, the garden tilled, the columns filled, every number adding up, the dishes glistening in the rack, the children in bed and asleep at last. Artists give us a way to feel those satisfactions in music, art, poetry, again. As Tu Fu said, "Poetry is like being alive, twice."

And poetry is a place set aside in the imagination, in

the soul, for pure making, pure being. Most of our lives are spent in prescribed fashion, where to go, what to wear, who to meet when, to what purpose? Our thoughts are taken mostly with questions of preparation, execution, completion. But what of those days, as Li-Young Lee says, "...We live as if death were nowhere in the background. **From Blossoms** by Li-Young Lee

*From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted Peaches.*

*From laden boughs, from hands,
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.*

*O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilation of peach.*

*There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.*

Those are the days we live for, and for which we cannot be prepared, but that poetry, somehow, prepares for us.

Never Again the Same by James Tate

*Speaking of sunsets,
last night's was shocking
I mean, sunsets aren't supposed to frighten you, are
they?
Well, this one was terrifying.
Sure, it was beautiful, but far too beautiful.
It wasn't natural.
One climax followed another and then another
until your knees went weak
and you couldn't breathe.*

*The colors were definitely not of this world,
 peaches dripping opium,
 pandemonium of tangerines,
 inferno of irises,
 Plutonian emeralds,
 all swirling and churning, swabbing,
 like it was playing with us,
 like we were nothing,
 as if our whole lives were a preparation for this,
 this for which nothing could have prepared us
 and for which we could not have been less prepared.
 The mockery of it all stung us bitterly.
 And when it was finally over
 we whimpered and cried and howled.
 And then the streetlights came on as always
 and we looked into one another's eyes—
 ancient caves with still pools
 and those little transparent fish
 who have never seen even one ray of light.
 And the calm that returned to us
 was not even our own.*

With Li-young Lee's poem we know near poem's end that death indeed lurks around us at all times, swirling somewhere in the chaos we often can make no sense of, though some days it seems it all makes sense and the chaos settles, one paw over the other, like the lion with the lamb. Other days we are so awe-filled the chaos comes together in the form of a sunset, so beautiful as to be frightening in its perfection.

This is *why poetry*: to carve a moment out of the chaos, to live the moments we are most alive into what we are built to be, sense-making and nonsense making machines, all our powers working together: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, fully being in this world we've been given as a gift, making it ours through art, and then giving it away.

A Color of the Sky by Tony Hoagland

*Windy today and I feel less than brilliant,
 driving over the hills from work.
 There are the dark parts on the road
 when you pass through clumps of wood
 and the bright spots where you have a view of the
 ocean,
 but that doesn't make the road an allegory.*

*I should call Marie and apologize
 for being so boring at dinner last night,*

*but can I really promise not to be that way again?
 And anyway, I'd rather watch the trees, tossing
 in what certainly looks like sexual arousal.*

*Otherwise it's spring, and everything looks frail;
 the sky is baby blue, and the just-unfurling leaves
 are full of infant chlorophyll,
 the very tint of inexperience.*

*Last summer's song is making a comeback on the ra-
 dio,
 and on the highway overpass,
 the only metaphysical vandal in America has written
 MEMORY LOVES TIME
 in big black spraypaint letters,
 which makes us wonder if Time loves Memory back.*

*Last night I dreamed of X again.
 She's like a stain on my subconscious sheets.
 Years ago she penetrated me
 but though I scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed,
 I never got her out,
 but now I'm glad.*

*What I thought was an end turned out to be a middle.
 What I thought was a brick wall turned
 out to be a tunnel.
 What I thought was an injustice
 turned out to be a color of the sky.*

*Outside the youth center, between the liquor store
 and the police station,
 a little dogwood tree is losing its mind;*

*overflowing with blossomfoam,
 like a sudsy mug of beer;
 like a bride ripping off her clothes,*

dropping snow white petals to the ground in clouds,

*so Nature's wastefulness seems quietly obscene.
 It's been doing that all week:
 making beauty,
 and throwing it away,
 and making more.*

Why poetry? To be bewildered. Fully bewildered in the center of the bewildering world. To exist in the swirl, to find the calm in the eye of the storm. Then, to make a kind of beauty of the chaos, then to throw it away, and make more.



Asilomar--the dining hall is ready

About Billy Collins

*He knows all that literature
And he sweeps it all away
Not knowing when it might return.*

By Rick White

Travels with Louise **GBSF president takes to the road**

By Louise DiMattio

As I think about my Great Books activities in 2022, I think about how many new people I know now compared to this time last year. That would seem impossible during a pandemic but it's true. My goal for 2022 was to visit as many local groups as possible during the year. I wanted to visit them all! I found that I had one big problem though: Every time I visited a new group, I bonded immediately with the group and found that I couldn't leave! I loved the people, I loved the readings, I loved the convenience of Zoom. I loved leaving the San Francisco fog for my ride to Rossmoor to meet with one of the two groups that meet out there. Oh Dear! It is an embarrassment of riches.

My first stop was to invite myself to attend leader Jean Cawood's Great Books group in Sacramento. This group, one of two Great Books groups, meets under the auspices of the Renaissance Society, a senior learning organization associated with Sacramento State University. Wow! I learned that this group has been meeting for years and years. One of the most active members of this group was our dear friend and superb Great Bookie,

the late Chuck Scarcliff. I asked Jean to provide me the upcoming readings and she graciously sent me the Zoom link and an invitation to sit in and participate in the upcoming discussion. The books that they were reading were selections from *The Civically Engaged Reader*, *Immigrant Voices*, and *Counterparts*, all books that can be obtained from the Foundation's Store in Chicago. The discussion was dynamic with great participation by every member of the group. My problem began there. I asked to join! I couldn't leave.

My second stop was to try to sort out what group or groups were meeting at Rossmoor. I found that both Rossmoor groups had experienced some change in leadership because long time leaders had had to retire due to health reasons. One of the groups was trying to carry on but felt "leaderless" with no real connection to the larger Great Books organization in the San Francisco Bay Area. I asked if I might attend a meeting and they were happy to have me stop by. They had just begun to meet in person again and were working from a book of short stories that had been selected by a previous leader. Since they indicated that they were without a leader, I offered to lead a group when I visited. I was welcome with open arms and, guess what, I just couldn't leave. I had to stay. They are a wonderful group of people with an amazing perspective on each and every story. We never run out of things to talk about.

My third stop was to visit Cliff Louie's great books group that meets at the Anza Branch of the SF Public Library. Cliff, a long-time experienced leader, loves to meet in person. He says he was never quite comfortable or enamored with Zoom. As soon as he could, Cliff arranged to meet in person. I found that his group is a well-established group that really meshes with Cliff as the leader and with each other. It was so rewarding to discuss Guy de Maupassant's story *The Necklace* and mine every possible meaning of that story with others. As soon as the formal part of the meeting was over, we all repaired to a great coffee shop directly across from the Balboa Theater. The discussion continued until the shop closed. And, yes, I will go back to that group, too, just as often as I can.

Stay tuned for my next installment. I already have two meetings set up in the next few months....the Marin Group and a group in the South Bay. I feel so lucky to know that there are people all over the Bay Area and beyond who are dedicated to keeping the Great Books tradition alive. And, as Cliff reminded me, they have fun at the same time.

There are lots of plans for 2023. Stay tuned for announcements sent to you via Constant Contact. And please check our website if you would like to join a local group or start a group of your own. By this time next year, you, too, may know many new people just as I did this year!

South Bay group seeks members

Meets on Zoom 3rd Tuesdays 7:00 p.m. Reads from Great Books Imperfect Ideal, Utopian and Dystopian Visions, and Great Conversations, available at www.greatbooks.org. Contact Norman at nmroth@gmail.com.

STEM Group is challenged

A cozy group of six stalwarts meets on the first Thursday of the month, by Zoom, to discuss STEM selections, i.e. readings from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. More participants are sought. Curiosity is the only requirement for participation.

The group is currently discussing the Great Books Foundation volume of readings on environmental science, *Keeping Things Whole*, and is eager to expand. If this challenge appeals to you, please contact Brian Cunningham at briancnngnam@gmail.com.

Discussing this non-fiction differs considerably from the usual GBSF fare. Leading **Non-Fiction** selections is a special case. It is especially challenging because texts usually lack ambiguity and, therefore, do not offer many opportunities for interpretation. However, there are questions to put to the group to help delve more deeply into what the author is saying and enhance their appreciation of his arguments. Here is a short outline distributed during a recent annual Leader/Reader Workshop:

Non-Fiction is about issues and ideas

1. Reading requires understanding the author's terms and following his arguments.

2. Authors often draw parallels, develop contrasts or variations, and make restatements or summaries.

3. Ask about:

-steps in the author's argument that you don't follow.

-what is the author's point of view?

-what is the problem the author is presenting?

-who is the author's audience?

-is the author's premise accurate?

-are there inconsistencies in the author's argument?

-is the author trying to be persuasive; does he succeed?

-are the author's analogies valid?

-ask what assumptions the author is making,

-if the text is very old then the meaning of some words may have changed. Try replacing them with modern language to see if that helps.

-ask why we read this. Why is it important?

Leader-Reader Workshop is set: July 15th, all day, via Zoom.

This event is open to readers everywhere. A small fee is charged to cover expenses.

Learn how to read for questions. Brush up on your leading style, discover new ideas, and practice discussion leading in a supportive setting. Bring friends from your discussion group.

Hey readers!

Visit the podcast world!

By Louise DiMattio

If you are a book loving person like me, you may have gotten hooked on listening to podcasts. If not, then, perhaps you ask, "what is a podcast"? The easiest way to explain it is by saying that a podcast is a program that you listen to by pressing an icon on your iPhone or iPad, an icon that is purple with a white figure on it surrounded by two circles. Under the icon is the word "Podcasts". I am sure that you have this icon! Under that icon is an entire world of entertainment, news and information about every topic you can possibly imagine. For a book lover, the discovery of podcasts is, literally (forgive the bad pun), an extravaganza.



Asilomar--sign in here for the weekend

So, why am I hooked? The reason is because, under that icon, you will find marvelous podcasts about literature. I want to bring attention to a few of those podcasts that I find to be real treasures. The first of these and my personal favorite is *The History of Literature* with host and creator Jacke Wilson whose byline is, "Amateur enthusiast Jacke Wilson journeys through the history of literature, from ancient epics to contemporary classics." Wilson's background in literature and the lives of authors is vast and his approach is unique. He regularly pairs each topic with a guest speaker who brings additional light to a particular author or subject. There are a total of about 451 podcasts so far and each one is a gem. Wilson releases a new episode almost every week. Amazing.

Another terrific podcast, Backlisted, was introduced to me by fellow Great Bookie, Chris Hammer, at the Great Books Weekend at Asilomar last year. Chris urged me simply to try it knowing that one session would do the trick. It did. Backlisted bills itself as "Giving New Life to Old Books." But Backlisted is so much more than that. The team of British hosts and their guests are funny, erudite and in awe of the power of great literature. A recent episode highlighted works by Irish writer Maeve Brennan. Others have focused on Elizabeth Gaskell, Annie Dillard and Helen DeWitt. The focus is on great works you may have missed while

being caught up by the distraction of the New York Times' Ten Best List that comes out around this time every year. (Have you noticed how that NYT list fades from view in an incredibly short period of time?)

Other good literary podcasts are the BBC's "Books and Authors", "Just the Right Book" with Roxanne Cody and, if you are a poetry lover, try the sublime podcast "Poetry Unbound" hosted by poet Padraig O'Tuama. Listening to this podcast is a spiritual experience. Close your eyes and bask in the beauty.

Of course, like anything else in cyberspace, there is a huge range in the quality of the programming offered by podcasts. For a book lover, that is particularly true. Believe it or not, you can find many podcasts where the speakers spend an inordinate amount of time talking about romance novels. If you doubt me, check out "What Should I read Next?" with Anne Bogel and her on-show guests. I had no idea that romance novels were such a "thing", so much so that they have their own *genre*. Oh, by the way, the word *genre* is very much in the literary news so be sure to use it when you want to impress. Another podcast that is heavy on the romance novels is "Sarah's Bookshelf Live". As a Great Books person I shouldn't even mention this last program because the show hosts summarily put down the classics genre while praising multiple titles in the romance genre. Good grief!

Oh, did I tell you that there is a "search" function that appears when you click on the purple podcast app? There's a little spyglass symbol on the bottom right of your screen. You can find all of these and many, many more right there on your iPhone. I hope you experience the thrill of discovery just as I did. Have I missed one? I'd love to hear about it

Lexicographical query: How come now I hear even from "experts" the word "homogenous" where "homogeneous" should be used? Homogenous can mean from a common origin; homogeneous means undifferentiated. If you don't care about this, perhaps you are not interested, or maybe uninterested, but you are not necessarily disinterested, i.e. impartial. I am not.

2023 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

January - February	March - April	May - June
2/11 San Francisco Mini-Retreat: via Zoom. Novel: <i>Age of Iron</i> by J.M. Coetzee; Poems: "Country of Grief and Grace" by Antjie Krog; "His Day is Done" by Maya Angelou	4/28 – 4/30 Barbara McConnell Spring Conference at Asilomar. Selected Poetry; Novel, <i>The God of Small Things</i> by Arundhati Roy; Essays by Ayn Rand; Play, "Nathan the Wise" by Gotthold Lessing	5/20 Gold Country Mini-Retreat (tentative) In Auburn; program TBD
July - August	September - October	November - December
7/15 Leader-Reader Workshop: via Zoom. 7/8 Annual Meeting: via Zoom. Election of Officers. Discuss "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry	10/7 – 10/8 Long Novel Weekend: via Zoom. Novel: <i>Wuthering Heights</i> by Emily Brontë	Poetry Weekend: TBD via Zoom. Poetry TBD; Guest Speaker TBD

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL

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Website: www.greatbooksnca.org

Great Books Foundation: 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.