

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2015: *Readings are announced*

By Louise Morgan

April 24-25 – Save these Dates!

Yes, it does seem like only yesterday that we were engaged in animated discussions of works by Conrad, Dillard, and Stoppard and had our memories put to the test during Team Trivia, but your council has already been laying the groundwork for next year's event. Now you can mark your calendars and look forward to even more stimulation and conviviality in 2015.

The dates: April 24-26, 2015.

The place: Asilomar Conference Center on the Monterey Peninsula.

This annual gathering (now officially known as The Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar) is one of the major events of the year for the Great Books Council of San Francisco. The weekend includes provocative discussions of four reading selections—a work of nonfiction, a drama, a work of fiction, and several noteworthy poems. In addition, the Saturday night party offers food, wine, and fun, and there is always ample opportunity to explore the area. The food is delicious, the beauty of the seaside retreat invites contemplation, and the company is most congenial.

Our non-fiction selection for 2015 is *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov. The author's elegant prose style creates for the reader an emotional, tactile, and symbolic reminiscence of the privileged life he led in czarist Russia and his family's flight following the Bolshevik Revolution. Nabokov claims that his first attempt at poetry was inspired by an observation he made during a sudden shower, “. . . the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a chordate leaf, caused its tip to dip, and what looked like a globule of quicksilver performed a sudden glissando down the center vein and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent,” when he felt “for a moment heart and leaf had been one.”

The Picture of Dorian Gray, our choice for fiction, is Oscar Wilde's only novel, a work that explores themes of innocence, good and evil, morality and ethics, youth and old age, beauty, art and aesthetics, culture and society, corruption, death, and friendship. The prose is often florid Victorian and filled with the author's characteristic epigrams and witticisms, for instance, “Faithfulness is to the

emotional life what consistency is to the life of the intellect – simply a confession of failure.” This work was considered so indecent when it was submitted for publication that 500 words were censored, causing Wilde to write a now-famous preface in which he states “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.”

Marat/Sade by Peter Weiss was published in 1964 and received great acclaim in Europe before coming to America. This play within a play, the full title of which is *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of The Marquis de Sade*, examines the nature of revolution and its often unintended consequences. Marat and Sade engage in philosophical debates that leave us a bit skeptical of the asylum director's declaration that “the times have changed; things are done differently now.”

These three books, along with the poetry selections, will be sent to you soon after you send in your registration. You can find a flyer with complete information for the Asilomar weekend on our web site at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/asilomar.htm>.

Do plan to attend. This highly-rated Great Books event is not to be missed!

Poetry Weekend: Registration deadline is extended to October 13

By Carol Hochberg

We're settling in nicely in our new venue, close enough to Stanford that we can get a whiff of academia in the air, but not close enough to hear any lectures on literature. The Shared Inquiry approach to the discussion of ideas makes us bristle at the thought of anyone, not least an authority in his/her field, telling us what something *means*; and what do you mean by *means*?

This, and other interpretive questions, will be wrestled with mightily at our coming November 1-2 weekend. The poetry selection this year was particularly varied and wide-ranging, from the Elizabethan divine John Donne to a number of living poets, some very young, some quite senior like many of our Great Books Poetry attendees. Be not mistaken in any assumption that our aging brains have lost any of their sharpness (yes, some) and our ability to

parse out meaning in difficult texts.

We welcome newcomers to these delicious weekends devoted solely to *ars poetica*.

As Kay Cleveland once said in this publication, we sample poetry as we would a fine wine, sipping, chewing and getting all the flavor notes out of it. We take it in and savor it rather than spit it out, as is the practice among professional tasters.

Instead, we may become a little intoxicated by the rhythm, melody and provocative ideas that we imbibe.

The selection chair had her hands, and head, quite full of difficulty in creating discussion themes for this year's discussions. The topics were all over the place, with no immediately discernible themes suggesting themselves. Finally, however, she took the bit and organized the selection into some very general categories:

Other Times, Other Places, with poems by Howard Nemerov, Louise Glück and John Donne, among others, evokes the verities of love, memory, and the cosmos;

Mixed Metaphors is just that: poems by Jack Gilbert, Billy Collins and Tony Hoagland (and two more) that suggest profound meanings on a deeper level than their topics initially suggest. Our final, Sunday morning session, is a

Potpourri of five poems that defied classification but command our attention with their subject matter: a male mammogram (J.D. McClatchy), a meditation on a painting (Gillian Clarke), a disturbing dream (Karl Shapiro), a critique of how we look at art (Adam Zagajewski) and a meditation on the virtue of kindness (Naomi Shihab Nye).

The discussions are planned to be lively and challenging.

A flyer with registration details is available on our web site at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/poetry.htm>.

From the President:

By Rob Calvert

In July I had the distinct pleasure of attending the Great Books at Colby Summer Institute in Maine, a week-long event with a different book discussion each day. Like our spring Asilomar Weekend, the Colby event has a rich, 50+ year history, and many people have attended it faithfully for decades. John Dalton and the Philadelphia Great Books Council do a wonderful job in putting it together. As far as I know, it's currently the largest annual Great Books event in the country. There were 120 adults in attendance this year, along with a dozen or so youngsters who met separately to discuss different books.

This year's Colby selections were (Euripides) Hippolytus; (Dostoevsky) Crime and Punishment; (Wilde) De Profundis and The Ballad of Reading Gaol; (Rawls) Justice as Fairness; (Camus) The Fall; and (Oates) I Lock My Door Upon Myself. The animated dis-

ussions performed their expected Great Books alchemy, leaving me illuminated and grateful for the insights of others. They also gave me a chance to compare "Colby style" shared inquiry with our "California style." The differences were minimal and perhaps insignificant, but I found them to be interesting. One difference is group composition. Weekend events in Northern California use a "rotating groups" method of arranging people. The groups shift for each discussion, exposing each attendee to a maximum number of points of view. At Colby, you stick with the same group all week, although there's plenty of opportunity to socialize with others outside the discussions. After a week of discussing multiple books with the same 15-20 people, I had become familiar with each person's outlook, and familiarity breeds... well, it's hoped to foster deeper insights (and it often did).

The other noteworthy style difference is that, in many California groups and events, it is routine to "open up" the discussion during the last fifteen minutes, relaxing or even completely suspending the shared inquiry rules. Not so at Colby; the rules laid down by Adler and Hutchins remain in force throughout (although evaluative questions may get introduced late in the discussion). But Colby has another tradition, which is linked to the permanent-groups strategy. After two hours, the discussion leader leaves the room, and the group spends some time talking about the mechanics of the discussion—what worked, what didn't. Since we stayed together all week, this let us develop our discussion chops, improving at working with each other as the week progressed.

The Colby week benefits from a happy coincidence. For the last several years, the Atlantic Music Festival has been in residence at Colby while Great Books is happening. So in addition to the Great Books entertainment—an excursion to Boothbay Harbor, a talent show, a lobster bake, some film screenings—each evening we could attend a free classical music performance, featuring orchestra, chamber music, piano, opera, electronic, and experimental music. The young musicians were superbly talented and well coached; some of their performances were flat-out breathtaking. For me, the musical evenings were a perfect complement to the morning book discussions. I also arranged to arrive a day early, and made a two-hour drive to enjoy a day hike at Acadia National Park on the Maine coast. I'm hoping to return next year and combine the Colby week with a visit to Quebec.

Interested in going next year? Plans are already starting to form for Colby 2015, which will take place during the last week in July. Its theme is "The Fall," and the readings are: (Shelley) Frankenstein; (Milton) Paradise Lost; (Hume) Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion; (Faulkner) Absalom, Absalom; and (Achebe) Things Fall Apart. For further information, check out <http://greatbooks-atcolby.org>.

Long Novel Weekend: Tussling with a difficult novel

By Oscar Firschein

Long Novel Weekend took place at the lovely Vallombrosa retreat in Menlo Park on September 14th and 15th. The weather was beautiful as usual.

When I first started to read Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, the selection for the Long Novel Weekend, I began to doubt the sanity of the organizers of the weekend to take on a book of this length and complexity. The novel, translated from the German, is more than 700 pages long, and the first of a series of three books of which only two volumes were completed. I have nothing against a long novel, but to select an incomplete long novel seemed strange. However, I let my curiosity get the best of me and signed up for the weekend to see how the Great Bookies were going to handle such challenging material. Would they stick to the plot and the characters, or would they also try to tussle with the many philosophical digressions?

I found that despite its weighty content, the novel can be witty and keenly observant. In one of my favorite passages, one of the characters asks the librarian at the Imperial Library how he finds his way in all these books. The librarian replies,

"The secret of a good librarian is that he never reads anything more of the literature in his charge than the title and tables of contents. Anyone who lets himself go and starts reading a book is lost as a librarian," he explained. "He's bound to lose perspective."

"So I said, trying to catch my breath, "you never read a single book?"

"Never. Only the catalogs."

To be sure, the book also has many, many "My Dinner with Andre"-type philosophical discussions that can be quite difficult to follow. Almost every time character A meets character B, there's likely to be some talk of truth, beauty, or love.

The novel begins in 1913, in the shadow of the First World War. The plot revolves around the "Parallel Campaign," an unwieldy project whose mission is to come up with an inspiring symbol to put Austria in the vanguard again and recapture the spirit of the "true Austria." The book is a satire on such vague efforts, and may be relevant to many of us who have worked for government or industry, and may have engaged in equally vaporous efforts. The participants don't dare to tell the leader promoting the project that the "emperor has no clothes," and endless meetings ensue until the project slowly vaporizes.

The large cast of characters concerned with the Parallel Campaign includes the intriguing Count Leinsdorf, who thinks up the goals of the project; the beautiful Diotima,

hostess of the enterprise; Dr. Paul Arnheim, a rich, powerful German Jewish financier, an alien amidst the Austrians; Ulrich, an often-cynical ex-military, ex-engineer, ex-mathematician, in search of himself; General Stumm von Bordwehr, a military man totally confused by the civilians, and many, many others. Out in left field is the murderer Moosbrugger, used by the author to explore the problem of applying strict moral laws to a complicated world.

Discussion covered the waterfront from pre World War I Austria to tackling some of the thornier philosophical issues. The thirty brave souls who turned up, united in their completion of this tome, congratulated one other, as survivors of a long and difficult trek tend to do, amazed and perhaps grateful for having climbed to such heights.

For the most part, the discussion avoided the six or seven chapters that were heavy-duty philosophy, and instead dealt with the characters and the situations.

On Saturday afternoon, the GB group attended a very enlightening slide lecture on "European Art before World War I" by Sean Forester. The evening presentation on *The Man Without Qualities* was given by Philip Beard, PhD, emeritus professor from Sonoma State University.

To top the day off, Edith Newton provided three different types of *gugelhupf*, a southern German, Austrian, Swiss and Alsatian term for a marble or Bundt cake. Supposedly the root "*gugel*" is a variation of the Middle High German word *gugel* (hood). Folk etymology says that the "*hupf*" part comes from the German word *hüpfen* (to jump), as the yeast dough literally "jumps out of" the cake pan.

The lecture by Beard provided a preview of Volume 2 of *The Man Without Qualities*. It begins with Ulrich, the central character in both volumes, attending his father's funeral. The GB group was intrigued to discover that Ulrich is reunited with his sister, Agathe, and the two explore books on mysticism as they continue their search for a deeper and more meaningful life. Ulrich engages with her in a "sympathetic union" which involves a strong sexual tension.



Louise DiMattio and Wm Corbett Jones

The lecture caused problems the next day, when some participants tried to use Volume 2 material in the discussion of Volume 1. Others felt that this was outside information, involving a book that was related to the current book, but that none of us had read. The GB Shared Inquiry experts will have to rule on that one. Although *The Man Without Qualities* was one of the most challenging long novels in the series, most partici-

pants felt a sense of accomplishment in completing and discussing it. We thank the leaders and the organizers, Louise DiMattio and Kay White, for this intellectually stimulating and delightful weekend.

Another perspective

By Kay White

Only because of chance permutations and combinations, did I not have the opportunity to discuss *The Man Without Qualities* with Oscar Firschein at our recent Long Novel Weekend. We were shuffled into different discussions for each of the three sessions. Our experiences and conversations about Robert Musil's novel took a slightly different slant.

Early in our Saturday morning discussion, the tension and interplay among the members of the Parallel Campaign Committee began to take shape. Musil gives his readers a packed bazaar of intellectual ideas by underwriting his characters with a range of political, psychological, economic, and social vectors at the turn of the twentieth century. He draws from Hegel, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Freud, Kant, and others in ways that I can only guess. Musil gave his readers a packed bazaar of intellectual ideas. Because we honored the Shared Inquiry rule to stay within the text, we did not name the motivating intellectual forces in his characters unless they were specifically mentioned.

The fact that parallel lines never intersect proved to be a giveaway for the ultimate fate of the Parallel Campaign. Although there was an explanation in the text of the source of the made-up and only occasional naming of Austria as Kakania (*kaiserlich-koeniglich*, imperial-royal, k.k. or k & k), we had a laugh at the potty talk it suggested. "Kaka" means the same thing in German as in English.

Much time was spent pondering the terms reality and pseudo-reality as related to the Campaign's search for a unifying theme for the Austro-Hungarian state celebration. We noted how this quest was infused by Diotima, the Campaign's beautiful hostess, with romantic idealism, her version of unreality. She expected to find a unifying theme for the celebration as a flash of lightning...an intuition, a synthesis.

Ulrich's obstinate search for truth and authenticity engendered impatience in both his associates and the reader. Ulrich refused to follow conventional expectations. Convention is comforting. Ambiguities are unsettling, especially if they go on for 700 pages.

As we explored the definition of "qualities" and considered Ulrich in comparison to his father's conventional qualities, our readers divided into camps for and against Ulrich. About one-third admired his independence and named his intellectual search, his unique reactions, and his loyalty as being a different set of qualities. Another third saw him as indecisive, living off his father's contacts, as being inconsistent, contradictory, and equivocating. The

remaining readers were tired or baffled by the never-ending controversies such as this in the novel and wanted some resolution.

As we went on to name other kinds of qualities, Ulrich's incorruptible core was identified. Aha—that led us to explore soul, spirit, *geist*, and perhaps, the search for truth. Is one character's truth valid for another? Even Plato's shadows on the wall of the cave slipped into our discussion.

Another character, Count Leinsdorf, represented the fading aristocracy, but he wasn't aware of its weakening force. The younger generation, in their 20's, were characterized by Gerda Fischel and her friends, especially Hans Sepp, who reacted against an authority they believed to be dominated by capitalists and Jews.

In contrast, Dr. Arnheim, another dominant figure in the story, who is both a Prussian and a Jew, represents the success of capitalism in a quickly expanding world of industry.

General Stumm von Bordwehr, a surprise addition to the Campaign, provides an ironic view of the country's military by trying to use his military training to bring order to the civilian minds in this gathering of intellectuals. What he finds in his research, however, is that every great idea is diametrically opposed by another great school of thought.

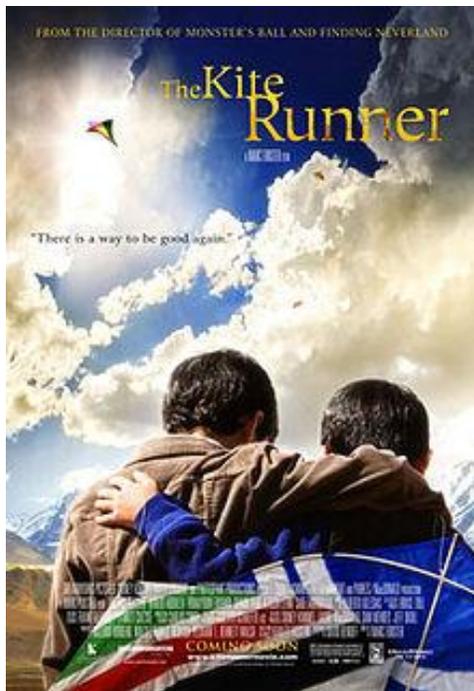
Finally, in our Sunday morning discussion, we considered Moosbrugger, a convicted murderer with diminished capacity, a psychopath. Both Ulrich and his boyhood friend's wife Clarisse are drawn to Moosbrugger, whose case raises questions about individual responsibility and the extent to which free will governs our actions. Moosbrugger faces capital punishment. How responsible are humans for their behavior? How far removed are any of us from violence? Where do individuals land on the continuum between sanity and insanity? That between intelligence and imbecility? What happens, for example, if someone is born without "normal" impulse control or has not learned the social filters we count on to govern behavior? How does law fit individual circumstances? Ulrich perceived Moosbrugger's case as a rampant metaphor for moral ambiguity.

In the last 100 pages of the story, Ulrich realizes he has stunted his own development by his rigorous insistence on logic, left-brain thinking. His dreams have given him insight into himself and helped him to see a connection between dreams, art, and life. By valuing only the rational, he has gained knowledge but killed off feeling. Experiencing the poverty of lovelessness, Ulrich resolves to embrace both halves of life, the emotional and the rational.

His quest in the next volume, as we learned from Philip Beard, turns to mysticism and the soul upon a rediscovered relationship with his sister Agathe.

Discussing *The Man Without Qualities* at Vallombrosa was like working on a giant 3-D thought puzzle. With help from the many careful readers in our discussions, I was able to distinguish and relate the complexities and major concepts in this rich and compelling novel. It was an invigorating challenge, and the method of Shared Inquiry worked again. A wonderful weekend of thought and friends.

San Francisco Mini-Retreat: *The Kite Runner*, the book and the movie



American theatrical release

To be held once again at the Embarcadero YMCA, the Winter 2015 San Francisco Mini-Retreat will be on Saturday, January 24 and repeated on Sunday, January 25. The book is Khaled Hosseini's touching story about a boy coming of age in contemporary Afghanistan. It will be discussed for two hours in the morning and, after lunch at a local restaurant of one's choice, the movie will be shown and discussed in relation to the book. Coordinator of the event is Clifford Louie. Further information on this popular event will be posted on our website, www.greatbooks-sf.com and in our e-newsletter published by Jim Hall. For those who can't wait, Cliff's email address is clifford.louie@sbcglobal.net.

HOLD THE DUCT TAPE !

Lessons from an Advanced Leaders Workshop

By Kay White

How do you handle someone who takes over the discussion and intends to give everyone the final word on the book?

What happens when you read a passage and ask "What does this mean?" and everyone says, "I don't know." "I haven't the foggiest!" "I have no clue." How do you find questions to ask about a book when everything in it seems obvious?

Twenty Great Books leaders swapped ideas on how to lead good book discussions on July 12th in Walnut Creek. Participants worked through the day trying out interpretive questions on their fellow leaders, and helping one another practice leading discussions.

Leaders came from around the San Francisco Bay Area, from Santa Rosa to Portola Valley. It was an opportunity to talk over the thrills and spills of leading a Great Books discussion. Leaders shared ideas over a delicious lunch of pasta, fresh fruit, and green salad prepared by Karen Schneider, a special bonus provided by the Great Books Council of San Francisco, serving Northern California.

In our "speed dating" mixer, each person spent twenty minutes in a small group on each of these topics: "Being a Good Traffic Cop," "How to Prepare Good Interpretive Questions," and "The Seven Traits of an Effective Leader."

Some of the ideas that came out:

- Review the shared inquiry method before every discussion.
- Stop individuals from dominating the discussion with a smile, and direct the conversation to someone else. "Okay, now I'd like to hear from someone on this side. Point away, swing your body and eyes to the other side of the room. "Who else has some ideas?" And no, don't pull out the duct tape yet.
- A leader should stop side conversations, and keep everyone in the same discussion. Participants appreciate having a leader control interruptions, and help quieter people get into the discussion.
- It is okay to disagree on points of the book, courteously. The goal in Shared Inquiry is to explore ideas, not to build a consensus. It's nice if it happens, but it is not necessary.
- Leaders can collaborate with others beforehand to generate discussion questions. The Great Books method is an open book discussion.

- Start with a page reference and quote for specific questions. Help build understanding. “What does this paragraph mean?” might prove to be inadequately focused.
- Trust the group to find insights and different meanings. Give participants some quiet time to think after you ask a question.

Clifford Louie and Kay White coordinated the class materials and workshop, with help from Brent Browning, Rob Calvert, Karen Schneider, Jim Hall, and Mary Wood.

Participants were invited to the Advanced Workshop if they had taken at least one basic course in shared inquiry, and had some experience in leading discussions. Our leaders included Terry and Yale Abrams from Santa Rosa, Nicolee Brorsen from Oakland, Albert Eng, Sandra Green, Chris Hammer from San Francisco, Linda Fletcher, John Marsyla from Walnut Creek, Carol Hochberg from Berkeley, Paula Weinberger, Rick White, Ginni Saunders from Novato, and Janie MacArthur from Portola Valley.

We met in the Hillside Club in Rossmoor, Walnut Creek, thanks to Betty Cash, resident and Great Books Coordinator at Rossmoor. The next Leader Workshop will be a basic course on March 14, 2015. Contact Kay White, kaycleveland@aol.com, for more information.

Review Essay:

Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*

By Mary Wood

Reading Joseph Conrad's novella *The Secret Sharer* for the 2014 Asilomar spring conference, I became aware of moral issues that I had not focused on in earlier readings. The story is intensely psychological, and it's easy for readers, including myself, to be seduced by those aspects. My experience at Asilomar opened a new and exciting dimension for me, but first, a brief summary of the story.

An unnamed narrator is recounting his first assignment as captain many years ago when he was 25. He joined a ship whose crew has worked together for 18 months. The night before the ship sails the captain tells the crew he will stand watch. Late that night he is leaning over the rail when he sees a man in the water attempting to climb onto the ship. Feeling a mysterious sense of communication, the captain takes the man, whose name is Leggatt, to his cabin and gives him some clothes. As he looks at Leggatt, the captain feels that he is looking at his own double. It turns out that they had both attended the same school.

Leggatt had just escaped from another ship in the harbor, the *Sephora*, where he had been imprisoned for killing a man. He explains that during a hurricane, his captain froze. To save the ship, Leggatt took over and ordered a sail brought down, a hazardous but necessary operation. One of the sailors, a troublemaker, tried to inter-

vene. As Leggatt fought to stop him, they were both caught up in the swell of the storm. When the crew discovered them, Leggatt's hands had to be pried from the man's throat.

He says the crewman he killed was “one of those creatures that are just simmering all the time with a silly sort of wickedness. Miserable devils that have no business to live at all. He wouldn't do his duty and wouldn't let anybody else do theirs. But what's the good of talking! You know well enough the sort of ill-conditioned snarling cur.”

To his surprise, Leggatt is imprisoned. “God only knows why they locked me in every night. To see some of their faces you'd have thought they were afraid I'd go about at night strangling people. Am I a murdering brute? Do I look it?” Hearing the story, our captain feels sure that his double is no homicidal ruffian and killed the man in a fit of temper.

Leggatt says he doesn't see “the necessity” of standing trial. He is willing, like Cain, to go off wandering on the face of the earth— “and that was price enough to pay for an Abel of that sort. You don't suppose I am afraid of what can be done to me? Prison or gallows or whatever they may please. But you don't see me coming back to explain such things to an old fellow in a wig and twelve respectable tradesmen, do you? What can they know whether I am guilty or not—or of what I am guilty, either?”

The captain hides Leggatt in his cabin. The captain of the *Sephora* comes looking for Leggatt and tells a similar story, but he takes credit for ordering the sail lowered. After he leaves our captain tells us: “The same strung-up force which had given twenty-four men a chance, at least, for their lives, had, in a sort of recoil, crushed an unworthy mutinous existence.”

The ship sets sail, and for four days the captain hides Leggatt in his cabin, difficult because a steward comes in daily to clean. Leggatt is ready to make a jump for his freedom. The captain pulls up at night close to land so Leggatt won't have far to swim. He feels it is an act of conscience to get Leggatt as close as possible to shore. But he doesn't know his ship yet, and he brings the ship dangerously close to shore—“my heart flew into my mouth at the nearness of the land on the bow. The captain's nerves start unraveling, and he yells at his crew for no apparent reason, whispering in broad daylight to the crew. He sees one of the mates talking to someone and tapping his forehead with a forefinger, and he is sure the crew is talking about him.

So here are the moral questions: Why do both characters agree Leggatt's crewman deserved to die? Morally, who are the captain and Leggatt that they can judge this man as worthless. Leggatt says the man was insolent, but does that justify killing him? Our captain says it was an “unworthy mutinous existence”. Is insolence mutiny? In fact, it is Leggatt who mutinies, because he acts without

his captain's approval in ordering the sail pulled down. Leggatt is the superior officer; if the sailor had killed Leggatt, would our reaction be the same? Insolence justifies a beating perhaps; not death. And Leggatt never questions his own action: he never says "I blew my top and lost control."

And who are they to determine justice? Society is set up with laws created by one branch of government and justice meted out by judge and jury. Leggatt is arrogant; he doesn't think that he should stand trial before a group of landmen. He is also surprised that people look at him as if he were a murdering brute. Would you be scared of someone so angry that his hands had to be pried off another man's throat?

And the final moral question; why is it an act of conscience for the captain to risk his ship—and perhaps his crew—to get close to shore to let Leggatt off? Where does conscience come into it?

What I found in discussions of this novel was that people want to discuss why the captain identifies with Leggatt, why he helps him, and why he risks the ship. And these were my interests on my first two readings. But on the third I started wondering: isn't choking a guy to death kind of an overreaction? And should our captain have aided Leggatt and risked his ship? I realized then that Conrad does not take a moral stance. He places himself in the mind of the captain. In most discussion of the book, readers wonder why the captain identifies so closely with Leggatt, a stranger. That is what I wondered in my earlier readings. Conrad, as narrator, has given the captain his voice, and the reader is never given any reason for the captain's actions. All the author gives us is how he thinks two men might have behaved. The only information we have is what the captain tell us. Conrad doesn't take a moral stance. That doesn't mean the reader shouldn't.

Should the captain have risked his ship and its crew for this man? There is a problem in some novels with an unreliable narrator. I don't think the captain is an unreliable narrator. He is wholeheartedly on Leggatt's side from the beginning, and we are swept along with him. We cannot assume that Conrad agrees—or disagrees—with the captain.

Our readers are encouraged to contribute articles relevant to Great Books events or issues.

2014-15 CALENDAR GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

OCTOBER 2014	NOV-DEC 2014	JAN-FEB 2015
10/4 and 10/5: Wine Country Mini-Retreats <i>(Othello)</i>	11/1-11/2: Poetry Weekend Menlo Park	1/24 and 1/25: San Francisco Mini-Retreats <i>(The Kite Runner)</i>
MARCH	APRIL	MAY
3/14: Leader Training	4/24-4/26: Asilomar Spring Conference	5/9: Gold Country Mini-Retreat
JUNE - JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER
6/7: Picnic and Annual Meeting	8/29-8/30 Long Novel Weekend <i>(Middlemarch)</i>	
OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
TBD: Wine Country Mini-Retreats	TBD: Poetry Weekend	

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