

# Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO  
*Serving Northern California*

## Flashback! It's 1959 all over again at Asilomar

By Louise Morgan

Asilomar is 60 years old.

Of course Asilomar, the place, is much older, but when Great Books people refer to "Asilomar" they're almost always using that word as shorthand for the annual Great Books weekend at the Asilomar conference grounds in Pacific Grove, an event that's officially titled The Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar.

It all began in 1959, ancient history to some of us but well within living memory of others. Think back – what were *you* doing in 1959? (I was starting my sophomore year at a small American armed forces high school in Poitiers, France, where I tasted pizza for the first time thanks to a newcomer from the States whose suitcase was filled with boxes of Chef Boy-R-Dee pizza mix!)

How to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of GB at Asilomar? What readings would be meaningful? How might we salute the past?

Several people suggested taking a fresh look at the books we discussed in 1959, but sadly our record of Asilomar texts extends back only to 1962. (The list is interesting; it's available via a link on our web site's Asilomar page.) So we no longer know which books were the focus of that initial gathering in 1959.

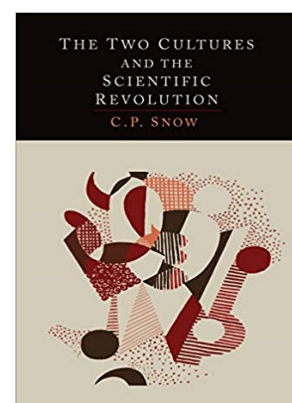
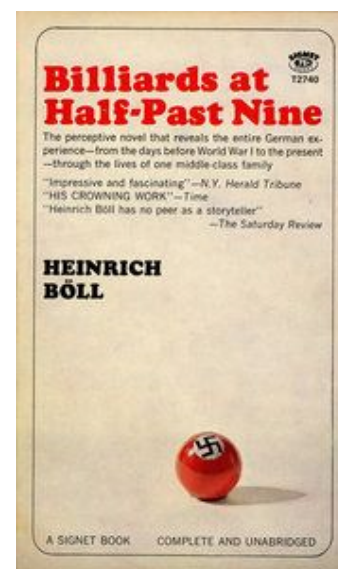
We cast a wider net, considering a list of 200 noteworthy books published in 1959. There were many impressive and familiar titles, including: *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles; *Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs; *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter Miller, Jr.; *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry; *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass; *The Manchurian Candidate* by Richard Condon; *Henderson the Rain King* by Saul Bellow; *Advise and Consent* by Allen Drury; *Mrs. Bridge* by Evan Connell; *Hiroshima Mon Amour* by Marguerite Duras; *Goodbye, Columbus* by Philip Roth; *Becket* by Jean Anouilh; *Snopes* by William Faulkner, and many, many more. What a year for literature!

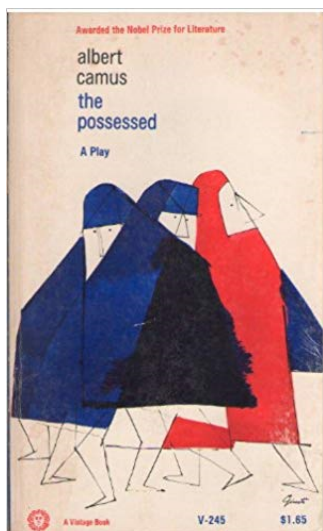
The selection committee was excited at the wealth of possibilities presented by that list. After winnowing out books that were too long or otherwise inappropriate, then engaging in a debate over the relative merits of the remaining candidates, we settled on three texts exploring ideas that still challenge and confound us sixty years later.

For the fiction discussion, we went with Heinrich Böll's *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*. Here's how one reviewer described it: "This novel reads like a puzzle. It examines three generations of architects – the patriarch Heinrich Fame, who built St. Anthony's Abbey; his son Robert, who destroyed it at the end of WWII to protest the church's complicity with the Nazis; and his grandson Joseph, who is now helping to restore it. While the story is set on one single day it explores all of their responses to the Nazi regime and its aftermath through flashbacks and memories." Böll was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1972.

We'll turn to non-fiction with C. P. Snow's *The Two Cultures*. Sixty years after Snow's seminal lecture at Cambridge, is there an unbridgeable gulf between the sciences and the humanities, as he asserted? Has the increasing specialization of the modern world widened that gap? What role does social class play? This is sure to be a lively and perhaps contentious discussion.

*The Possessed* is the last work by Albert Camus and one of his finest achievements, a theatrical adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* (later renamed *Demons*). Camus considered the novel to be a prophecy about the devastating effects of nihilism, which he despised. He directed a production of his play in 1959, financing it in part with money from his 1957 Nobel Prize.





That will be our taste of 1959: two masterworks by Nobel laureates and a classic essay by a physical chemist with his feet in two camps.

But wait: what about the Friday-evening poetry discussion?! Are there thought-provoking, discussion-stimulating poems from 1959 that would complement these texts? We hope so, but we're still mulling over the poetry choices. Stay tuned.

Please mark your calendars for Asilomar 2019 on April

26–28. Event registration is now open. See the flyer and registration form on our [web site](#). We look forward to discussing these works with you and sharing memories of 1959.

## Prizewinning poet Prartho Sereno to speak at Poetry Weekend in Menlo Park

By Paula Weinberger

Poetry Weekend once again is at the lovely Vallombrosa Center. The dates are November 3 – 4.



The mansion at Vallombrosa

We'll discuss an enticing lineup of poems by such classic luminaries as Tagore, Baudelaire, and Rilke as well as esteemed contemporary poets Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Bishop, Louise Glück and more.

You'll find a complete listing of poems on the registration flyer on our [web site](#). Attendees will receive a packet of the selected poems upon registration.

Friends will pay tribute to the late Carol Hochberg and Jan Fussell, both intimately involved with the Great Books Poetry Weekend.

We are delighted to have **Prartho Sereno** as our guest poet on Saturday evening. A gifted teacher as well as prize-winning poet, she served as Marin's poet laureate from 2015-2017. Prartho writes:

*My life has been a pursuit of the lost continent of awe. With pen and brush as my oars, writing and painting take me there....I hope my poems and illustrations might take you there too.*

Naomi Shihab Nye commented on Prartho's most recent book, **Indian Rope Trick**, winner of the 2018 Blue Light Press Book Award:

*The magnificent poems of Prartho Sereno re-ground us in our bodies, in glistening syllables and scenes surrounding us. They retune us to a tender, more palpably luminous world we would prefer to inhabit.*

Melissa Kwasny, on **Elephant Raga**, winner of the 2014 Blue Lynx Prize:

*In this time of justifiable worry for the world...we find hope for a more inventive relation with others and things, and even an unfashionable sense of pure joy.*

Dorianne Laux on **Call from Paris**, winner of the 2007 Word Works Washington Prize:

*There is spark and swing in these poems, a touch of the surreal, and a great gust of soul....*

Jane Hirshfield on **Causing a Stir: The Secret Lives and Loves of Kitchen Utensils**:

*The deep joy findable anywhere—if looked for with poetry's eyes—shines through this book.*

Prartho will be available to answer questions you might have about the poetic process.

## From the president:

*The Great Books Council enjoyed lovely weather in Tilden Park as we gathered for our picnic and annual meeting on June 10. Gentle breezes allowed our pop-ups to remain in place, and Tilden's large trees provided ample shade for the comfort of our discussion groups.*

*Past president and long-time picnic coordinator **Laura Bushman**, dressed as a handmaid, greeted each attendee as they arrived with their potluck offerings. Although we missed a few old friends due to health issues we were pleased to see at least half a dozen new faces in the crowd. First-timers are always welcome at this casual event; it's a chance to get to know others in a relaxed atmosphere and to learn more about how our council operates.*

*I'm happy to report that the council is operating quite well, thank you. Treasurer **Brian Mahoney** reported that thanks to the robust stock market our investment in a Vanguard fund has been paying handsome dividends. These funds, along with a small portion of the income generated from our various annual events, help to offset the administrative costs of the council.*

*I'm also happy to introduce a new officer of the council. It has been traditional for officers to serve two-year terms, but **Elena Schmid** who was elected vice-president in 2017 had a change in family circumstances that caused her to request that we replace her. Happily, **Brian Cunningham** agreed to be put on the ballot to fill the remaining year of Elena's term with the assumption that he will be nominated to serve as president in 2019.*



Brian left his family's farm in Illinois in 1970 to practice law for 35 years with major law firms in New York, Palo Alto, and San Francisco. During the last decade of his career he was a senior executive at a number of Bay Area biotechnology companies. Brian was an adjunct professor at Santa Clara University School of Law and served on the Board of Directors of numerous public and private life sciences companies and of not-for-profit organizations in the Bay Area. He has been retired since 2011. He met his wife, **Martha**, while they were students at Washington University in St. Louis. They served together as Peace Corps volunteers in the Philippines. They have three children and four grandchildren. Welcome, Brian!

The business portion of our meeting was concluded with the approval of the following slate of officers who will serve until June 2019: **Louise Morgan**, president; **Brian Cunningham**, vice-president; **Brian Mahoney**, treasurer; and **Carol Edlund**, secretary. We would like to thank **Elena Schmid** for her year of service as vice-president, and we're very happy that she has promised to remain actively involved with our program as much as her time permits.

Following the characteristically brief business meeting we broke into three groups to participate in lively discussions of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, discussions of such interest that they were continued in smaller groups as we broke up to head home. Special thanks go to those who led discussions: **Kay White**, **Carol Edlund**, **Louise Morgan**, and **Brian Cunningham**.

—Louise Morgan, president, GBSF

## East of Eden draws record attendance

**Steinbeck's magnum opus and the movie are discussed at Long Novel Weekend**

By Caroline Van Howe

A compelling family saga and a poetic tribute to the Salinas Valley in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *East of Eden* is John Steinbeck's fascinating take on the biblical tale of Cain and Abel. A host of complex and colorful characters made for many hours of animated discussion at the annual Long Novel Weekend, held at Vallombrosa in Menlo Park on July 14-15.

### Classic 1955 film is viewed

The 51 attendees were treated to a showing of the 1955 film based on the book. It starred James Dean, Julie Harris, and Raymond Massey and was directed by Elia Kazan. Steinbeck consulted on the film and praised it. Though it was critically acclaimed and brilliantly acted, some of us expressed disappointment because the novel's back story had been mostly left out.

## Guest Speaker provides intimate portrait of Steinbeck

Professor of English at San Jose State University and former director of the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, guest speaker **Susan Shillinglaw** has taught, researched, and written about Steinbeck for over 30 years. Personally acquainted with members of the Steinbeck family, including his two sons, she gave us fascinating background on the author's life and relationships. Question and answers went well into the evening.



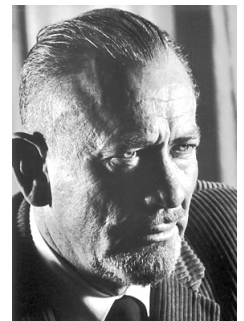
Susan Shillinglaw

### Group discussions go deep

Discussions on Saturday morning focused on the setting and characters. Steinbeck grew up in the Salinas Valley and its physical features play a vital role in the story. The landscape prefigures the dominant themes of good and evil, the cycles of nature, and resilience in the face of adversity.

A principal character in this novel is Samuel Hamilton, the author's

grandfather, the admired head of a large family. Their story is largely true. In contrast, two generations of a fictional family, the Trasks, are created. Adam Trask and his brother Charles are the first iteration of Cain and Abel, to be followed by a second generation of such twins, Aron and Cal, born to Adam's wife, Cathy. She is a captivating woman whom Adam is blind to see is the embodiment of evil. She heartlessly abandons Adam and her sons and disappears, later reappearing as Kate, the cruel madam of a Salinas whore house. Her ultimate discovery by Adam and the two boys is a major turning point in the story.



John Steinbeck

The afternoon session delved into the Bible story of Cain and Abel and Steinbeck's retelling of it. God rejects Cain's offering and favors Abel's gift. Angry and jealous, Cain kills Abel.

According to Lee, a character in *East of Eden*, the King James "thou shalt" in this verse comes from the Hebrew *timshel*, which Lee translates instead as "thou mayest." The message "thou shalt" is unambiguous: "thou shalt" do this or that. Learning the free will message of *timshel* from Lee is important to Cal because he has believed that he is fated, like his mother, to be bad. Late in the story he awakens to the possibility that he can change.

Sunday's session focused on the broader issues of a book rich in thought about how the world works or should work. Participants explored such issues as: Is good immutable while evil must continuously recreate itself? Is there

even such a thing as good and evil? Is greatness superior to mediocrity? Is the measure of a person what he or she leaves behind even if the foundations are faulty? Does evil ever generate good? Is change possible, and if so, for whom? In the Great Books tradition, there are no final answers but lots of spirited discussion.

Seventy percent rated the event excellent and 30 percent very good. Attendees commented on the beauty of the setting. More first timers came than in past years. For several it was their first experience of a Great Books event.

Warm thanks to our session leaders: **Claudia O'Callaghan, Brian Cunningham, Caroline Van Howe, Brian Mahoney, Louise Morgan, Ellen Ward, Paula Weinberger, Kay White, and Rick White.** Gratitude also to **Caroline Van Howe and Paula Weinberger** for organizing and running the weekend and **Brian Mahoney** as registrar.

## Sea of Cortez fishing boat is found and restored

Those who attended Asilomar 2017 will remember reading *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. The fishing boat, Western Flyer, in which Doc Ricketts and John Steinbeck took



their journey has been located and is being restored in Anacortes, Washington. When the job is completed, perhaps by 2020, the boat is to be returned to Monterey Bay and devoted to scientific and historical study. An illustrated article can be found at

<http://www.montereyherald.com/article/NF/20171226/SPO RTS/171229903>

## For and about Great Books leaders

by Kay White, leader trainer

*Leaders, please send your experiences and quandaries to [kay-cleveland@aol.com](mailto:kay-cleveland@aol.com).*

To prepare for book discussions at Great Books Council of San Francisco events, discussion leaders get together for a “prediscussion.” By the time we’re together, we have each read the selected text at least once (preferably twice) and have developed preliminary discussion questions along the way.

This year, in preparing for John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, we had a trove of notes and interpretive questions. Steinbeck’s novel gave us more ideas, themes, and possible interpretations than we could cover. After considering many ideas and testing out questions, the leaders agreed on an approach for three two-hour sessions. Because shared inquiry depends on open-ended questions, leaders do not have a script. We agree to cover topics in a general sequence. However, it is a creative and individual dynamic with each discussion group.

A good discussion, for me, feels like a dance with many partners. You have the music of the words, the rhythm of emotions, and the pace of the author’s themes. After opening the discussion, the leader adjusts and follows the dance partners, watches for new steps, explores conflicts, tries improvised moves, yet keeps time within the session. Each person is part of the dance.

Our leaders can choose how to approach the discussion. We exchange ideas, share outlines, and agree on a flexible protocol to coordinate among three discussion sessions.

The prediscussion gives us the chance to test ideas with flying leaps into the imagination of fellow leaders. It is the most fun of all.

Ordering through <https://smile.amazon.com> will send a small amount of the sale price to your favorite charity. Ours is Great Books Council of San Francisco.

## Remembering Jan and Larry Fussell

By Lou Alanko

Sadly, Jan and Larry Fussell passed away this year, Jan on February 24, 2018 and Larry on May 1, 2018. They met at Asilomar, and our own Brian Mahoney officiated at their wedding in December 1977. Jan and Larry went on to become one of the great leadership couples who helped make GBSF what it is today. They and the other great pioneers of GBSF were enthusiastic supporters of shared inquiry and worked tirelessly to expand its reach in the Bay Area and beyond.

Larry was behind the idea to create the Long Novel Weekend, which was originally designed for training Asilomar discussion leaders. It was the start of our ongoing leader training program. Jan founded Poetry Weekend and began both the Pleasanton GB group and a women’s group featuring women authors.

For some, their greatest legacy is how they conducted their book groups, a model of the shared inquiry method. They challenged us with thought-provoking interpretive questions and brought out the best in us. Each discussion was deeply satisfying.

Jan and Larry focused on helping everyone to become excellent participants. They felt that led to the best leaders.

They encouraged everyone to attend GB events, and when they recognized potential, they mentored those qualities. A list of the Pleasanton group members who became leaders includes Brian Mahoney, Jimmie Faris Harvey, Anne Pym, and me.

In 1996, Jan and Larry moved to Hudson, Wisconsin, to take care of Jan's mother, leaving the Pleasanton group in the capable hands of Brian and Jimmie. Then, after Jimmie moved to Mill Valley, Brian and I continued the work started by Jan and Larry. Since my 2003 move to Reno, Brian has continued to lead the Pleasanton group, and also serves as GBSF treasurer and Long Novel Weekend registrar. I lead a book discussion group for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute in Reno.

Although they gave up their leadership roles in GBSF when they moved, Jan and Larry continued to stay in touch and traveled to GB events when they could. In 1997, they bought a second home in Calistoga and later a condo in St. Paul. For years they divided their time between Calistoga and St. Paul. They organized weekend getaways in Calistoga for Great Books friends, and many visited them in Hudson and St. Paul before they moved permanently back to California in 2011. We shall ever be grateful for the gift of their leadership.

## Would you like to start a Great Books group?

By Clifford Louie and Brian Cunningham

Do you get pleasure and satisfaction from belonging to a Great Books group? Have you ever thought about starting a group of your own? Are you an experienced discussion leader? If so, we'll help you get off to a spectacular start. We'll help you find a meeting place, show you how to publicize the group, mentor you in how to lead discussions, and guide you on how to run a successful Great Books group.

What are the benefits? You get the pleasure and satisfaction of giving back to your community, introducing new people to the wonderful world of Great Books, helping people become critical readers and thinkers, and having the opportunity to make new friends with people who like to read and discuss ideas.

Who is going to help you? There will be plenty of experienced people, including **Brian Cunningham**, GBSF vice-president, and **Clifford Louie**, who has started five successful Great Books groups in San Francisco.

Questions? Contact Brian at (415) 567-1457 or Clifford at (415) 750-1786.

## When does a book become "Great"?

By Sheri Kindsvater

I read a meme on Facebook the other day that said "30 years ago it was the 1990s and to me it was the 1970s!" It made me think that it was long ago that Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins founded Great Books. And while we are still enjoying the books of yesteryear, I began to think, when does a book reach the age that it can be a "Great Book"?

Do you realize the 1970's was 48 years ago? Do books like *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Doug Adams or *The World According to Garp* by John Irving deserve to be put on the list? They still seem fresh. They are still talked about.

When will Stephen King's *The Stand* or *The Shining* be classified as a Great Book? Both are superbly written and deserve better recognition. So should the work of other quality writers in King's genre.

*The Stand* takes on the world's end and the struggle of people in a world where it's down to good and bad. In vivid detail, it takes us all over the country. *The Shining* is a study of one man's dive into insanity and the toll it takes on his family. We are invited into a world where reality and fantasy are so closely intertwined that it is hard to tell the difference.

What about stream of consciousness writing such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* or *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*. These books are chock full of questions posed by the Greeks, Russian novelists, and other profound thinkers. Surely this writing deserves a place in the Great Books library.

Then there are books that deal with modern life, such as *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*. These examine, at times humorously, the perils of living with machines in urban life, the middle class condition and its challenges.

In our quest to continue as an active and growing organization and our search for new members young or old we should consider turning to more recent literature. I've heard younger reading lovers say that Great Books focus on "ancient white guys with beards" and they may be right.

I joined Great Books to encourage—nay force—myself to read things I normally wouldn't. I'd like to encourage us to do the same and pick up books written 50 or 60 years ago that may resonate with us, even astound us and others we'd like to attract. To diversify our authors will give us a better chance to diversify our members.

Read on Bookies!

*Our readers are invited to join this discussion. Please send your remarks to [rwwhite@aol.com](mailto:rwwhite@aol.com) for inclusion in a future issue.*

# GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

## 2018-2019 CALENDAR

OCTOBER 2018	NOVEMBER	FEBRUARY 2019
<b>10/6:</b> Wine Country Mini-Retreat	<b>11/3-4:</b> Poetry Weekend Vallombrosa Retreat Center Menlo Park	<b>2/6:</b> San Francisco Mini-Retreat
MARCH - APRIL	MAY - JUNE	JULY - AUGUST
TBD: Leader-Reader Training 4/26-28: Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference	TBD: Gold Country Mini-Retreat TBD: Picnic/Annual Meeting	TBD: Long Novel Weekend

**SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL**, Serving Northern California:  
**President**, Louise Morgan; **Vice President**, Brian Cunningham; **Secretary**, Carol Edlund;  
**Treasurer**, Brian Mahoney; **Past President**, Laura Bushman.

*Reading Matters*: **Editor and Publisher**, Rick White; **Database**, Jan Vargo.

**Website**: [www.greatbooks-sf.com](http://www.greatbooks-sf.com).

**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](mailto:gbbrianmahoney@gmail.com).