

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Join the 2025 Leader Class! New Leader Mentor Program

By Paul Smith, President

Have you considered leading a Great Books discussion? Perhaps you'd lead just one poem. Or maybe you're ready to guide an entire session?

If you're interested in taking any of these next steps in leadership, you might be just right for the Great Books Leader Class of 2025. This is the founding class of a new Mentorship Program of the Great Books Council of San Francisco. These select and energetic group of readers are motivated to step up their leadership skills and help create the future of Great Books.

The Magic of Leading

Great Books is special because of those magical moments when a group uncovers new insights through collaborative discussion. "These moments don't arise by chance," says Eileen Coleman, Treasurer. "These moments are induced by a leader applying the shared inquiry method learned at the Leader/Reader workshop."

Nowadays the Leader/Reader Workshop is led by Louise Morgan. In addition to her instruction and that of other veteran leaders, participants take turns running a discussion. They trade observations about what contributes to an insightful and enthusiastic exchange of ideas, what makes a good opening question, how to handle silences, how to keep the discussion among the group members rather than with the leader, and when it is time to move on.

The Mentor Program is built on this workshop. It creates an ongoing network that supports and encourages developing leaders.

The Class of 2025

Six to ten leaders, both new and seasoned, will form the Class of 2025. If you are eager to join a dynamic group of supportive reading enthusiasts, this might be an adventure right for you.

As a member of the Leader Class of 2025 you'll connect monthly with your dedicated mentor. Your mentor will help you find opportunities as a guest leader. Such personalized sessions will include focused coaching before and after your early leading experiences to ensure that you are well prepared to learn from each opportunity.

Mentors offer practical support for starting new groups, such as help with obtaining funding. They in-



roduce you to specialists in matters such as technical guidance for handling virtual sessions, provide marketing help to promote your groups and events, and—if you wish—assist you in collaborating with, say, a library to establish a new group.

Complimentary quarterly social lunches make it easy to develop relationships with Mentor Program classmates.

Get Involved

To join the class or otherwise help with a program, please get in touch with me at

GreatBooksNCal.President@gmail.com.

To register for this summer's Leader/Reader workshop, contact Louise Morgan at

louise-morgan@sbcglobal.net.

This isn't only about creating more discussion leaders, says Louise DiMattio, past GBSF president. It's about building a robust support network to form deep friendships and help Great Books thrive for generations.

Asilomar conference is sold out

By Mark Scardina, Event Coordinator

GBSF's 69th annual Barbara McConnell Spring Conference at Asilomar is sold out as of now, with over 50 attendees. This is its largest attendance in some time, and the problem is not lack of space at the venue. We are trying to enlist more trained discussion leaders for this event from our limited pool.

Many recent GBSF events have sold out quickly and this will continue unless we can increase the number of trained leaders. The importance of the leader to a book discussion is second only to the quality of the book itself. Great Books programs have succeeded in large part because of the unique method of Shared Inquiry developed by the Great Books Foundation and refined over many years.

Readings to be discussed at Asilomar this year are a selection of poetry, an essay by the early psychotherapist Carl Jung, Philip K. Dick's sci-fi novel *Galactic Pot-Healer*, and the classic play *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe. For the latest on this conference

contact greatbooksncal.bmawekend@gmail.com.

Do consider becoming a trained leader, and you will allow us to grow our events and open them up to a new generation of "great bookies"!

Long Novel Weekend 2025:
Book is Announced!

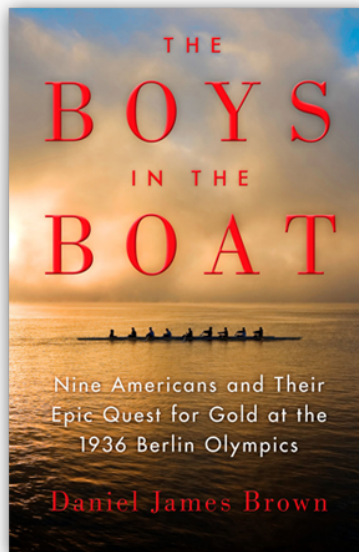
Edna O'Brien
The Country Girls Trilogy
Dates: October 18-19. Zoom



The Boys in the Boat

Book and movie to be discussed in the Gold Country

By Kay White



Saturday, May 17, in Auburn, we'll discuss *The Boys in the Boat*, a nonfiction work by Daniel James Brown. The story describes what happened when teams drawn from the U.S. working class challenged privileged young men of the rowing world in order to qualify for the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.

Our day begins with pastries and coffee for conversation among arrivals. After a two-hour book discussion, a catered luncheon will be served. Then we'll watch the 2023 movie version of *The Boys in the Boat* and compare it with the book.

The event will be at the Pioneer Methodist Church, 1338 Lincoln Way, Auburn. Check-in and coffee are at 9 a.m. It will wrap at 4 o'clock. The book is available in paperback, Penguin edition with ISBN-13 978-0143125471.

The registration fee is \$38.

Registration will be circulated online. Donna Reynolds hosts

Placer County Courthouse with the Auburn Great Books group. For more information contact pianogaldonna@gmail.com.



On the road again

By Louise DiMattio

The autumn season has been a busy one. October featured our annual Long Novel Weekend; the tome for this year was *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by 1982 Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez. This epic masterpiece has been on our TBR list for many years. The time had come to discuss it not only because this



Red Maple, Pendle Hill, PA

title appears on many lists of the 100 Greatest Novels of All Time, but also because Netflix announced a television series based on it, scheduled to begin in December 2024. How timely! Our discussions on Zoom (three of them) were lively.

Several new participants registered for the event which always makes me very happy. We grappled with big issues like war, incest, pestilence, colonialism and the ever-present patriarchy in Latin America and around the world. What insights did we gain? I am not entirely sure. Many thanks to Jim Vasser for his support with page references and his amazing memory about all the events in this very complex and lengthy family saga. One hundred years of it! Thanks, Jim!

Hard on the heels of this event, I flew east to attend the annual Philadelphia Great Books Fall Weekend, a very special experience. We stayed at a very quiet and lovely Quaker Retreat Center (www.pendlehill.org) just outside of downtown Philadelphia. The food was delicious, and the autumn leaves were so red that they made my eyes water. The weather was balmy and the setting was peaceful. The best part of the Fall Institute Weekend was the use of a theme that connected all the readings. In this case, the theme was *individuation* – how children, especially at a certain time of life, must separate themselves from their parents and perhaps even from their cultural group. Four discussions featured poetry selections by numerous poets as well as

Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, *The Road from Coorain* by Jill Ker Conway and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. The local leaders were highly skilled, and the participants were invested in the readings and discussions, as well as in having a good time.

I have to say that being in a beautiful place together with warm and welcoming people who are reading great literature is a pretty marvelous experience. I am fortunate indeed.

What's next? The San Francisco Mini-Retreat and the Barbara McConnell Weekend at Asilomar. Join us!

Ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading. – Rainer Maria Rilke

POETRY WEEKEND 2024 The advent of modernism

By Paula Weinberger

Poetry Weekend 2024 began with a talk by Professor Nicholas Jones to orient participants to the forces that led to the radical change in sensibility and aesthetics called "Modernism." Roughly spanning the years 1910 to 1930, the modernist movement was a conscious and explicit effort of a select group of poets and readers to define the new poetry. The harsh social realities of the industrial revolution and the horrors of World War I posed a challenge to the fanciful language and lyricism of the "Romantic" era that preceded it.

Hints of this change can be found in the near blank verse of Tennyson's 1833 elegiac *Dark House, By Which Once More I Stand*, as well as in Emily Dickinson's trim wording camouflaging dark and complex ideas. Discoveries in the sciences such as Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, led to the questioning of the place of humans in the world. Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*, written in about 1851, lamented what he saw as a loss of religious faith in the face of science. In 1855, Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* spoke of his untamed untranslatable self; "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roots of the world." In 1878, Eadweard Muybridge's introduction of motion into photography anticipated the spirit of change emblematic of the modernist era.

New rules for poetic expression articulated by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound had counterparts in music and the visual arts. Charles Ives introduced atonal dissonance into music. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* shocked audiences with a form of dance vastly different from

ballerinas in tutus. Performers such as Jelly Roll Morton explored syncopation and improvisation, moving music out of the concert halls and into clubs. We can hear echoes of Whitman's yawp today in Allen Ginsburg's *Howl*.

After lunch, poems are discussed

After a two-hour break from computer screens, we regrouped to discuss five poems whose authors are representative of the period. The first of these, *The Helmsman*, is by Hilda Doolittle, who went by the name H.D. It begins with the enigmatic lines:

*O be swift
We have always known you wanted us.*

Stanzas that follow relate a flight to woods and hills that seem to have a mesmerizing hold on those who fled. The poem ends by repeating its first lines. The reader is left to ponder who the helmsman is, who were the flock who fled from sea to woods, and what compelled them to return. As in the other poems, we sense yearning for something different, some kind of change.

The second poem, by e.e. cummings, takes its title from the first line, *as freedom is a breakfast food*. The poem features cummings's unique syntax and use of vocabulary. Its three stanzas are composed of paired, mostly conflicting, some just amusing, comparisons. Examples:

*Or truth can live with right or wrong
Or mountains from molehills made*

*Robins never welcome spring
And hornets wail by children stung*

*Or as the seeing are the blind
Down shall go which and up will go who*

What are we to make of them? What sort of resolution is offered in the last lines of the poem?

*But love is the sky and I am for you
Just so long and long enough*

The third poem, *Tea at the Palaz of Hoon* by Wallace Stevens, invites readers to reflect on the poem's title and its relation to the author's interest in Eastern philosophy. As do many modernist poems, it offers an alternate way to cope with contradictions and confusions at the time of its writing. The poem asks that we step outside our normal mode of perception:

*I was the world in which I walked and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly
and more strange.*

Spring is All by William Carlos Williams takes a different tack. It begins with:

By the road to the contagious hospital

The remaining lines describe winter turning into spring by the use of adjectives such as mottled, twiggy, dazed, masked, stiff, bleak and stark, offering little relief from the change of season.

*Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches –*

The coming of spring is not blossoms and sunshine. Yet in the face of devastation and illness there is a life force that enters the world, *naked, cold, uncertain*, that knows only that it enters.

Our final poem, *The Wild Swans at Coole* by W.B. Yeats, may seem to belong to an earlier era. While it is lyrical in rhyme and meter, it is modernist in its feeling of gloom and dispiriting change. The poet has observed the swans at Coole for 19 years. He reflects that although the hearts of the swans have not grown old, his heart is sore because of all that has changed inside and outside himself.

Sunday morning: the apogee of modernism?

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock has everything we expect of a modernist poem. It rhymes creatively and then it doesn't. It is confusing and clear, romantic and stark. The language is fresh and bouncy, blunt and tender, ribald and contained. The imagery is startling and hackneyed. Some descriptions are comic, others are sober, but all are intriguing. Starting with its first lines, the poet combines *Let us go then, you and I* with the unsettling image

*When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table.*

one of many indelible passages. What kind of *love song* is the poet contriving?

On some level the poem suggests an aging, indecisive man afraid to ask an important question, but it delves much deeper. From the first, we are asked to question who the "you" is and what type of journey we are going on.

Time is woven throughout the poem, as both spacious and fickle:

*And time yet for a hundred indecisions
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

The poet continually asks whether to presume in ways that are both petty and global, from disturbing the universe to interrupting the conventional world of tea and toast and coffee spoons. The appearance of mermaids shifts the tone of the poem. How then should we, in the light of what precedes, interpret these final lines?

*We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown—
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*

...and we drown: Modernism dies without a whimper

By Rick White

Professor Jones's commitment was to talk with us about the modernist movement in poetry. One of us in 1947 was sold on the modernists by his junior high art teacher. Mr. Harrison's favorite painter was Georges Braque, a collaborator and friend of Pablo Picasso, who liked to take everyday objects and imagine them into different forms. However, this was not to last. Modern art began to be pushed aside as world views changed again. A movement commonly dubbed "contemporary" has largely displaced "modern" in the titles of galleries and museums. An advertisement told us "This is not your father's Oldsmobile." Soon thereafter the Oldsmobile itself was discontinued. Today's art is no longer "modern."

Poetry and other "high culture" has relaxed its standards. For some, the standard is that there shall be no standards. Meter is loosened or eliminated, rhyming becomes fully optional as are punctuation and capital letters. What makes art "art" is a question. Is it intended to send a message—or is the message that there is no message? Perhaps the criterion is that it might provoke a question, an "insight," in the mind of the visitor. Suddenly the idea of a Campbell's Soup can, or perhaps overlapping images of Marilyn Monroe's face, even a bag of cat food at the base of a gallery wall, is art. A cacophony of radio sounds becomes music, as does an insipid theme repeated over and over.

Just as many feel bewildered by today's arts, readers of modernist poetry might have reacted in similar

fashion. Then as now, artists explore new directions, discover new limits. That's the fascination of art, also its mystery.

See you next year

Those who participated in this weekend left with much to think about. Don't miss Poetry Weekend 2025!

Great Books Groups in Northern California

By Jan Vargo, Database Manager

Editor's note: The following article was written after completion of the Summer 2024 census of groups. For an up-to-date list of Great Books groups in Northern California, please see <https://www.greatbooksncal.org/find-a-group>.

Results of 2024 survey

Each year, GBSF conducts a census of our affiliated reading groups and programs throughout Northern California. For the 2024 census I was able to locate 31 that were active. I acquired up-to-date information, in person, from most of them. Some didn't respond to my inquiries, but most of these were affiliated with organizations having websites and I was able to get current information from these sites.

I discovered that several groups are no longer meeting. One in the Central Valley started 49 years ago and had a 102-year-old member. Although it can be difficult to learn about new groups, we did encounter some that weren't on our list in 2023.

My contact at one group informed me that it was no longer a Great Books group, that it had become a therapy group. Two groups felt that they were not technically Great Books groups because they weren't reading anthologies published by the Great Books Foundation. I explained that we consider them a Great Books discussion group if they read literature of quality and depth, they follow the Great Books "shared inquiry" method, and they choose to call themselves a Great Books group.

We found that some groups are reading material on specific topics, including a "STEM group" that reads science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, a group that reads banned books only, and a group that is devoted to poetry.

Plans for 2025 survey

From the 2024 survey we know that most groups continue to meet on Zoom while others formerly on Zoom have returned to meeting in person, or alternate between. Before the pandemic pushed us to Zoom it was our practice to identify groups by where they met. But where does a Zoom group meet? The group I belong to has members in California, Florida and Texas.

With members all over the country, which groups should be described as meeting in Northern California? Some groups are back to meeting in person in Northern California, but if a group meets on Zoom and its main contact lives in Northern California, I consider it one of ours.

We post the list of our reading groups (in-person and virtual) on our website www.greatbooksncal.org and publish it annually in this newsletter. We also send the group list to the Great Books Foundation's headquarters in Chicago. The Foundation posts our groups along with others on its website www.greatbooks.org. These listings are an excellent way to attract new members, but they are published only with permission, so the list may be incomplete. The group contact will be emailed or called in April as we update.

Our inquiry will include where and when the group meets, what they are reading, where and if they would like the group listed, how they are faring, and especially if they know anyone who might be interested in leader training or who feels ready for the new mentor program.

We also would like to hear of any groups that might be unknown to us. Readers are encouraged to form new groups and we are always eager to help them get under way. Please let us know any plans for new groups.

ChatGPT -- Just for fun:

We asked the ChatGPT robot of OpenAI to "Write a three paragraph article for the Great Books newsletter, focusing on what makes an effective Shared Inquiry question when leading a discussion about a work of literature. Add some examples of what to do, and what not to do." The robot provides answers instantaneously from a vast and growing aggregate of information. Amazingly, it will answer almost any question. One can play with it for free at ChatGPT.com.

Here is ChatGPT's response to our question, verbatim:

"An effective Shared Inquiry question is one that invites participants to delve deeply into the themes, characters, and structure of a work of literature. Such questions are open-ended, allowing for multiple interpretations and encouraging thoughtful dialogue. For instance, instead of asking, "Did the main character make the right decision?" a more effective inquiry question would be, "What motivations might have influenced the main character's decision, and how can we relate them to our own experiences?" This type of question does not have a straightforward answer, thus fostering a richer discussion where participants can explore various perspectives and insights.

"To craft a valuable Shared Inquiry question, it is crucial to focus on the text itself. Questions should be grounded in specific passages or elements of the work to ensure that the discussion remains anchored in the literature. A good example would be, "How does the author use symbolism to convey the protagonist's inner conflict?" Conversely, a question that strays too far from the text, such as "What does this story teach us about life?" can lead to broad and unfocused discussions. While philosophical or thematic discussions are valuable, they should always be tied back to the text to maintain a strong connection with the material.

"Lastly, an effective Shared Inquiry question should inspire curiosity and debate. It should challenge participants to think critically and to consider different viewpoints. Questions that are too leading or that suggest a "correct" answer can stifle discussion. A question like "Is the antagonist purely evil?" invites participants to explore complexity and nuance, prompting them to look beyond surface-level interpretations. In contrast, a question such as "Why is the antagonist the villain?" might limit the conversation to predefined notions. By crafting questions that promote exploration and critical thinking, discussion leaders can facilitate engaging and meaningful literary discussions.

Ready to up your Group Leadership game?
Interested in leading a session, helping at
an event, or starting a new group?
Contact Paul Smith about the
Leader Class of 2025 at
GreatBooksNCal.President@gmail.com

2025 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

January-February	March-April	May-June
<p>2/8 San Francisco Mini-Retreat Zoom</p> <p>Readings: Willa Cather, <i>O Pioneers!</i> and Julie Otsuka, <i>The Buddha in the Attic</i></p>	<p>3/14-16 Barbara McConnell Weekend at Asilomar</p> <p>Readings: Carl Jung: <i>The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man</i>; Philip K. Dick: <i>Galactic Pot-Healer</i>; Christopher Marlowe: <i>Doctor Faustus</i>; Poetry</p>	<p>5/17 Gold Country Mini-Retreat Auburn</p> <p>Reading and film, <i>The Boys in the Boat</i></p> <p>6/28 Leader-Reader Workshop Zoom</p>
July-August	September-October	November-December
<p>(date TBD) Annual Meeting Zoom</p>	<p>10/18-19 Long Novel Weekend Zoom</p> <p>Reading: Edna O'Brien, <i>The Country Girls Trilogy</i></p>	<p>11/15-16 Poetry Weekend</p>

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL Serving Northern California: President, Paul Smith; Vice President, Elena Schmid; Secretary, Rob Calvert; Treasurer, Eileen Coleman; Past President, Louise DiMattio.

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