

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Shift the date! . . . *Asilomar comes early this year!*

We're only talking a week or two, but those of us who equate the annual spring conference at Asilomar with April will need to tweak our plans a little. This year the Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar will begin **March 31, 2017** and will run through **April 2**. Register soon so that you'll have time to enjoy reading this year's wonderful selections from the oeuvre of John Steinbeck.



A view from Asilomar

Steinbeck is the only native Californian ever to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1962, after having been previously nominated eight times, he finally took the prize although his most influential works had been published decades before. Three of those works will form the backbone of our weekend.

The Swedish Academy gave Steinbeck the award for his "realistic and imaginative writing, combining...sympathetic humor and keen social perception." That description certainly fits *Cannery Row*, our fiction selection. It was published at the end of WWII but features characters that

are still trapped in the Depression. Some have called it a utopian novel. Is it? Let's discuss.

The Log from the Sea of Cortez is one of Steinbeck's relatively few works of non-fiction, recounting his 1940 voyage with Doc Ricketts around the Baja peninsula into the Sea of Cortez. The goal was to collect specimens of marine life, but Steinbeck's musings about science, philosophy, and adventure reveal that he was collecting far more material about the human condition.

Our theatre discussion will be *Of Mice and Men*, first written as a novella but soon adapted by Steinbeck into an award-winning stage play that has been widely produced and made into three acclaimed films. It follows the fortunes of George and Lennie, an unlikely pair who form a bond of friendship in the face of adversity as they struggle to attain their dream of owning a little piece of land.

Steinbeck didn't publish poetry, so for our Friday poetry evening we'll draw instead upon the work of **Robinson Jeffers**, another celebrated writer of the Monterey Peninsula. If you have extra time, you might care to take a docent-led tour of Tor House and Hawk Tower in Carmel, the refuge that Jeffers built in 1918 for his family where he wrote much of his poetry.

We're especially pleased that **Joseph Coulson**, president of the Great Books Foundation, will join us for the weekend. A published novelist himself, Joe's academic background is in twentieth-century American literature. He'll deliver a short talk on Steinbeck, and will be available throughout the weekend to field questions and chat about the work of the Foundation.

As the regular weekend comes to a close after Sunday lunch, those of us who can spare a little extra time will head to Steinbeck's birthplace, Salinas, for a docent-led tour of the National Steinbeck Center.

You can register for Asilomar by going to <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/asilomar.htm> and either filling out and mailing the form which can be downloaded from that page, or by clicking that page's link to register online. Paying via PayPal makes registration easy and quick.

Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it, and it has not changed except to become more needed. [From John Steinbeck's Nobel acceptance address.]

Long Novel Weekend comes to Berkeley

By Paula Weinberger

Concerned about rising prices at Vallombrosa, a search was conducted for a new location for the 2017 [Long Novel Weekend](#). After careful consideration, the Clark Kerr Campus, a lovely Spanish mission-style complex located approximately six blocks southeast of the main UC Berkeley campus, was selected.

The Clark Kerr site includes meeting rooms, a cafeteria, dorms and ample parking. A lovely garden is available for outdoor meetings or dining. Participants will be housed in two or three bedroom suites each with a shared bathroom and common area. Beds are made, rooms are cleaned, and towels are provided prior to arrival. Accommodations are conveniently located near dining facilities and meeting spaces. Participants will have the option of commuting as well as their choice of a single or double room.



Clark Kerr Campus

Caroline Van Howe is new coordinator

We are grateful to **Scott Shafer** and his mother **Kara**, for coming to the rescue of the 2016 Long Novel Weekend. They did a marvelous job in keeping the weekend flowing without a hitch. Scott, who will be applying to colleges, has had to graciously step down; however, to our delight, **Caroline Van Howe**, a relatively new Great Books participant but an avid reader, has agreed to serve as coordinator. **Paula Weinberger** and **Brian Mahoney** will assist her.

As Chief Operating Officer of the Assistive Technology International Association, Caroline brings considerable expertise in conference planning and event management to her role as LNW coordinator. Her skills have been particularly useful in negotiating the contract for a new location while making sure to include the myriad details necessary for the weekend to run smoothly.

The Long Novel Weekend moves into the 21st century with *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen.

At the end of each Long Novel Weekend, participants are asked for their suggestions for next year's novel. This year, the most votes went to *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen. Since Long Novel Weekends have delved so deeply into the literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries, we hope this book will be a refreshing change.

The Corrections, published in 2001, garnered the National Book Award for fiction, the *Salon* Book Award, a *New York Times* "Best Book of the Year" recognition, and in 2002 the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Participants should get the Picador Press paperback, ISBN 0-312-42127-3.

The focus of the novel is the Lambert family - Alfred, his wife Enid, and their three disaffected adult children who have each tried to escape the lifestyle and values of their parents. In an interview with David Antrim (*Bomb Magazine*, 2010) Franzen says

... the most important experience of my life ... is the experience of growing up in the Midwest with the particular parents I had. I feel as if they couldn't fully speak for themselves, and I feel as if their experience—by which I mean their values, their experience of being alive, of being born at the beginning of the century and dying towards the end of it, that whole American experience they had—[is] part of me. One of my enterprises in the book is to memorialize that experience, to give it real life and form.

The Corrections is so much more than a tale of family life. It is a satirical, seething view of American culture - rich, challenging, funny, provocative, and above all, highly discussable.

National election results set somber tone for 2016 Poetry Weekend

By Carol Hochberg and John Anderson

The themes of this year's poetry selections reflected the times: "The Real World"; "Unanswerable Questions," and "The Life We Live." The authors ranged from William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Emily Dickinson to T.S. Eliot, Jack Gilbert and Adrienne Rich, with only one still living, the Marin poet Prartho Sereno.

Thirty-seven poetry lovers attended. The discussion leaders were **Paula Weinberger, Ginny Saunders, Rob Calvert, Mary Wood, Louise Morgan, Jean Circiello, Pam Loucks, Steve Doherty, and Jim Hall.**

The session that John attended surprised him in that the choice of "Uriel," by Emerson, didn't result in complaints. It struck John that it was too demanding to discuss in 20 minutes and that its understanding required special knowledge. Outside references are to be avoided under the rules "shared inquiry." The Dylan Thomas poem also is very difficult but keeps popping up at poetry sessions. The poem appears later in this issue with an attempt at analysis by John, who feels some chagrin at having selected it as a member of the poetry committee.

At the Saturday evening party emceed by Carol, we recognized the 400th year after William Shakespeare's April 23, 1616, death by dividing into groups to read aloud sonnets, soliloquies, and short scenes from his plays. One group had a member act out their selection wearing an outlandish costume that raised the level to a performance rather than a recitation.



Chapel and grounds at Vallombrosa Retreat

Among sonnets read was the well-known number 30, with its oft-quoted passage

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past...

C. K. Scott Moncrieff considered the sonnet good enough to crib from its second line for the title of his English translation of Marcel Proust's magnum opus. However, according to Rob Calvert, although Moncrieff's translation of the

book was a tremendous achievement Proust was horrified at his choice of title. He thought it to be a highly unfaithful and misleading rendition of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. This led eventually to titling a later English translation *In Search of Lost Time*.*

This sonnet struck me most strongly. It speaks to regrets, disappointments, grievances and losses, be they personal or political.

*An article about the controversy which led eventually to widespread agreement on this re-titling can be found at <http://publicdomainreview.org/2013/11/13/lost-in-translation-proust-and-scott-moncrieff>.

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Some thoughts on Dylan Thomas, from John Anderson

DYLAN THOMAS

1914 – 1953

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouth of streams
Turns mine to wax

And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.
And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

The Poem

I felt Sunday morning while discussing this well-known poem that there were aspects we really weren't touching on. I invite you to join me now in pushing a little further into its interpretation. We can start by taking a quick look at the first three stanzas; yes, we've done this already, but it will refresh our feel for the Thomas style. Then we'll move on to the fourth and fifth stanzas, which present more challenges. I make no claim that I will be able to sweep aside all difficulty. I'm hoping that you will take up the challenge and reach further insights you will share.*

The first three lines of each stanza

I vividly remember my first reading—the astonishing first line about a flower driven by a green fuse. It seems at first too violent a metaphor, but then one sees the flower exploding into life. And just as the force drives the flower, so it drives the life of all the young Thomases, *i.e.* of green age. But there is a converse. Filling out the ellipsis, second half, second line: *(the force) that blasts the roots of trees is my destroyer*.

Skipping to the second stanza: again Thomas draws the parallel: the water moves through the rocks as if alive, and also drives his living blood through him. But, as before, what lives also dies—this time, when the stream runs dry.

In the third stanza, the force appears as a hand that is stirring, indeed *whirling*, the water in the pool, turning the sand into quicksand. The word *quick*, in this context, means *alive*, so the water and the sand come alive but in becoming quick, sand may entrap and kill; we know this—Thomas doesn't have to tell us—still, it blurs what is unequivocally life-giving. And the following two half lines that in the two previous stanzas identified an unequivocally deathly form are now less clear: *(The hand) that ropes the blowing wind – Hauls my shroud sail*. In this transition, it seems clear, that we've gone from wet land with quicksand to a sailing ship, one bending before the wind. *Roping the blowing wind* would seem to be an image for raising sail to capture the wind for driving the ship forward and little concerned with death, but the same hand *hauls my shroud sail*. Now

we need to puzzle this out a little. The shroud sail usually refers to a pair of double sails mounted on the rails at or near midship to stiffen or even prevent movement of the mainmast. But “shroud” in nautical usage has the same meaning as in land dwellers' speech: the canvas in which the remains of the dead are wrapped for burial. On board ship, the body in its shroud did indeed need to be hauled from the carpenters shop to the rail. It seems to me that in this third stanza, Thomas is blurring the life–death transition: the quicksand may be quick but it can bring death; and the rope raises the sail to capture (rope) the wind but also hauls the body in its shroud sail, where? It can only be to burial at sea. Now let's go back to the beginning and see what we can make of being dumb.

Four stanzas of being dumb in the last two lines

In the first stanza, the poet examines first the force that drives the flower, then the seemingly separate force that blasts the roots of trees, each force being equally forces of nature. Similarly, the second and third stanzas each present first, the life giving or sustaining force, followed by a separate and distinct death dealing force. But in the two lines that complete each stanza, all five of them, the poet seems to say that it's really the same force that both gives life and destroys life. In three of the five stanzas, the force is specifically identified as being the same.

But why is the poet dumb? Why are we, made of the same stuff, dumb? The simple answer is almost certainly the right one. In the first stanza, the poet's talking to a rose. He is quickly going to give up. So here are the poet and the rose, sharing the same fate, and totally unable to communicate and talk about their common condition: their being bent by the same wintry fever. In the second stanza, he tries talking to his veins, but they too remain dumb despite being an organic part of himself. So in the third stanza, he tries talking to “the hanging man.” Who is this? Is it a hangman or a man who is hanging? I would argue that, because there is a hangman in the line following, the hanging man has been hanged and, somewhat implausibly, the poet turned to lime, and therefore dumb.

You may have noticed that I've tended to skip stanza four. I'm going to do it one more time. It is the most difficult of the stanzas and it makes sense to save it to last when we may be able to get a better handle on it. Meanwhile, stanza five: now the poet is talking to *the* lover's tomb – presumably *his* lover generalized. He says that the same crooked worm that has consumed her is going to consume his sheet and implies that it will not stop with that. There is no reply; the conversation doesn't stop – it never starts.

Once again, the poet shows us that we are dumb of necessity when trying to communicate with non-human nature, living or dead, or with non-living humans.

Finally, stanza four

For comparison, let's take a quick look at how the first three are constructed: Each is made up of five lines that carry three stories; the stories end, in order, at a semicolon, a period and a period. Stanza four keeps to this pattern but with the first story reduced to one line and the second expanded to a line and a half. This causes a striking shift in the stress pattern of the first three lines of the stanza. We also have to guess a lot more at whom and what is being talked about.

The lips of time leech to the fountainhead. As a consequence, it seems that Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood – Shall calm her sores. Love is the fountainhead perhaps. The lips of time in leeching to the fountainhead cause Love to bleed, but far from distressing her, the fallen blood shall calm her sores. Perhaps Love, clearly personified, is in fact Christ, but then it would have to be *his* sores.

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind ... this serves to reassert man's inability to commune with nature, but if the poet could commune with nature why would he wish to tell a weather's wind *How time has ticked a heaven round the stars?* The ticking of time has created a heaven around the stars? Here's a challenge for someone.

A poem in depth: one session at Poetry Weekend? or a separate meeting?

One model for such a session might be a single poem session held perhaps on Sunday morning at Poetry Weekend. The usual rules on outside references, etc. would not apply to this session; in fact, bringing high-powered references would be encouraged. After all, the time usually devoted to five poems would be devoted to one. Also, it would be perfectly acceptable to have studied assiduously for as long before the meeting as one wished.

If such a meeting turns out to be too difficult to manage as a subset of Poetry Weekend, then some other Saturday or Sunday morning might be possible, especially as it would not involve accommodation. If people brought their own food, it would be even simpler and cheaper.

Please let me know what you think—email address below. I'll post opinions as they come in.

*Please send comments to pjohna@sbcglobal.net

And, from Carol Hochberg:

When I read a poem, if I respond with a pleasurable sigh, think it lovely, and nothing more, then no, it is not discussable. If a poem leaves me wondering what the poet meant by...a phrase or line...then it is discussable. My guidance for the poetry committee has this structure: What didn't you understand? What was the poet trying to "say"? The formal structure may give rise to questions: Let's look at the rhyme scheme. Why do you think the poet chose the sonnet or sestina form? What is a sonnet anyway?

LEADER-READER WORKSHOP:

Registration ends February 4.

Information and sign-up form are available on the web at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/leaderTraining.htm>.

All leaders' questions should be open-ended and begin with: who, what, where, when, how, or why. For example, why did Kunitz title his poem "Layers"? or in the Sharon Olds poem "Looking at my Father," why does her father continue to fascinate her?

Carol remembers thoughts expressed by Chuck Scarcliff in a past edition of Reading Matters. We looked in the Past Issues section of our website, <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/news/newsIndex.htm>, and found it in the [Spring-Summer 2008](#) issue. We also found an advisory poem by Karen Schneider on leading book discussions in the [Spring-Summer 2012](#) issue.

There's lots that's new for 2017 [Long Novel Weekend.](#)

- *New date: July 22 – 23*
- *New location:
Clark Kerr Campus, UC
Berkeley*

2017 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2017	MARCH-APRIL 2017	MAY
2/12: San Francisco Mini-Retreat (Embarcadero YMCA) <i>(Doubt: A Parable)</i> 2/25: SFGB Leader Training (Greenbrae)	3/31-4/2: Barbara McConnell Asilomar Great Books Weekend <i>(Of Mice and Men, Cannery Row, The Log from the Sea of Cortez; Poetry by Robinson Jeffers)</i>	5/13: Gold Country Mini-Retreat <i>(The Lady in Gold)</i>
JUNE	JULY	SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER
6/4: Annual Meeting/Picnic (Tilden Park, Berkeley) <i>(Frankenstein)</i>	7/22-23: Long Novel Weekend (New venue: UC Berkeley) <i>(The Corrections)</i>	10/7: Wine Country Mini-Retreat TBD: Poetry Weekend

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