

# Reading Matters

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL  
Serving Northern California

## **Asilomar 2013: Jane Smiley visit leads to something different**

By Rob Calvert and Rick White

Readings for Asilomar 2013 have been announced by the book selection committee. The play is Wm. Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the novel Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, and the essay Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*.



*A Thousand Acres* and *King Lear* raise fundamental issues about family and society. They were selected with the idea that their combination in a weekend of discussion might prove to be extraordinarily provocative.

The author Jane Smiley's Saturday evening presence at the Long Novel Weekend (see story page 3) provoked us to explore her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. Its story of generational conflict in an Iowa farm family takes its inspiration from *King Lear*, arguably the most profound intergenerational story in literature.

President Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* is particularly apt since 2013 commemorates its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is timely this fall to examine what is meant by a government



The beach at Asilomar

of the people, by the people, and for the people.

These selections provide sweeping ideas and the opportunity to ana-

lyze them. Exploring the issues that arise should help each of us to think more productively about our responsibilities to ourselves, our families, and beyond.

It may prove interesting to see how the Friday evening poetry colors the subsequent discussions.

For a flyer and application for this event, please click this link or type it into a web browser: <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/flyers/asilomar%202013%20flyer%20-%20electronic.pdf>.

*Reading Matters* is published in living color on the GBSF website, <http://www.greatbooks.com>. Readers can save us 60 cents by accepting the publication that way. Write [jimsrhall@earthlink.net](mailto:jimsrhall@earthlink.net)

## **San Francisco Mini-Retreat:**

**Claudia O'Callaghan steps down,  
Clifford Louie takes over**

Event to be held twice

**Claudia O'Callaghan**, who led the increasingly popular GBSF mini-retreat in San Francisco for several years, is stepping down this winter. Since Claudia settled the previously homeless program in a space accommodating 40 at the Mechanics Institute, registrar **Kay Blaney** has had to turn away increasing numbers of applicants. Claudia's successor, **Clifford Louie**, has arranged to repeat the Saturday, January 26, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., event on Sunday the 27th, thereby enlarging its capacity to 80.

The format, a novel discussed in the morning followed by a movie based on it in the afternoon, was established by **Vince Scardina** and **Fiona Humphries** a decade ago. Until Claudia's reign it migrated to a different place each year. Its first venue was the historic Pacific Telephone building, where **Louise DiMattio**, as an employee, was able to arrange rooms. Subsequently it was held at the San Francisco Arboretum and the newly constructed San Francisco Main Library.

The mini-retreat design pioneered in San Francisco has since been replicated and is ongoing in the Gold Country led by **Donna Reynolds** and **Kay White** and in the Wine Country led by **Jim Hall**. These events are posted on the GBSF Calendar on <http://www.greatbooks.com>. This

year's book and movie in San Francisco will be *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates.

A flyer/application can be obtained by clicking this link or typing it into a web browser: <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/flyers/SF%20Mini%20Retreat%20Flyer%202013.pdf>. It describes the story as one of a couple whose suburban life is held together by a dream. They mortgage their hopes and ideals, betraying not only one another but themselves. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* gave the movie, featuring Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio, four out of four stars, calling the film "so good it is devastating."

The Mechanics Institute occupies a beautifully maintained historic building at Post and Market that features an excellent library and a chess room with the oldest continuously operating chess club in the United States. Activities are offered for all levels of players.

According to Wikipedia, the Institute, founded in 1854 to serve the vocational needs of out-of-work gold miners, is a favorite of avid readers, writers, downtown employees, students, film lovers, chess players, and the 21st century nomadic worker who needs a quiet place to plug in a laptop and do research.



In the chess room

Membership in the Mechanics' Institute is open to the public. Each membership offers the full services of the library and chess room, along with free admittance or special member rates to special events, lectures, book discussion groups, classes, and other activities.

A variety of restaurants is located nearby. For those for whom BART and other public transit is not convenient, weekend parking is not prohibitive. On this or any question about the event that is not answered by the flyer/application, please email [clifford.louie@sbcglobal.net](mailto:clifford.louie@sbcglobal.net) or call 415-750-1786.

### ***From the President's Desk:***

*Thanks to all of you for the vote of confidence in reelecting our 2011 slate of officers to a second term. We could not have accomplished anything without the dedicated effort of our Executive Committee (ExCom) of more than 20 active volunteers. Each has a specific responsibility and acts within broad latitude. We have no paid staff, only devoted volunteers. This and a modest bequest many years ago have enabled us to get by without active fund raising.*

*We welcome contributions to help cover Great Books events. "Remembrances" are included in this newsletter to mark the passing of friends and loved ones. Gifts can be*

*made in their honor, perhaps in lieu of flowers, and noting their experiences with Great Books. Contributions can be made to Great Books Council of San Francisco and mailed to: Marge Johnson, GBSF President, 5655 Black Avenue, Pleasanton, CA 94566. I would like the opportunity to send you personal thanks and to arrange acknowledgment of your honored friend or loved one.*

*Our officers lead with a light hand, counting on other ExCom members and outside volunteers to come up with the ideas and energy for success. Perhaps because the love of literature is strong, perhaps because of our record of more than a half century of excellent programs, the motivation is there to go with the talent we attract.*

*In addition to our ongoing programs, the last couple of years have seen a significant increase in the number of local discussion groups. Our experimental one-day "mini-retreats," featuring a book and related movie, have so often been sold out that another day is being added to accommodate more participants. Instead of 40 at the San Francisco event, we will be able to provide a program for 80, perhaps more. The Wine Country event will be doubled, from a capacity of 20 to 40.*

*We will continue to recruit outstanding literary figures to spend an evening with us at our major events--Asilomar, Long Novel Weekend, Poetry Weekend. A high point this year was our evening with novelist Jane Smiley at Long Novel Weekend.*

*Because of you, the Great Books Council of San Francisco continues to thrive.*

*--Marge Johnson, president*

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## **27<sup>th</sup> annual Poetry Weekend to feature three themes**

**19 poems, 19 poets**

*Sonnets, ancient and modern, *The Generations*, and *Our Higher Nature* will be discussed at Westminster House, Alamo, this November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, announced reading selection chair **Brent Browning**.*

Three two-hour sessions will include 19 poems by 19 poets: first Petrarch, Wordsworth, Keats, Drayton, Addonizio, Shakespeare, and Sidney; next Boland,



**The Manor**

Laux, Plath, Pratt, Duncan, and Olds;

and on Sunday morning: Hicok, Hoover, Hirshfield, Peacock, Howe, Coleridge. There will be a wine and cheese party before dinner on Saturday, followed by an after-

dinner interactive program of fun with sonnets led by **Carol Hochberg**.

The price is \$175 for room, board, and books for those staying overnight, and \$135 for commuters. Deadline for applications to registrars **Oscar and Theda Firschein** is October 17. For more details and an application form, please click this link or type it into a web browser: <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/flyers/Poetry%20weekend%202012%20WEB.pdf>.

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## GBSF officers are reelected at Annual Meeting/Picnic

*The Tortilla Curtain is discussed*

In perfect weather, the SF Great Books Council held its 2012 picnic/annual meeting at the Padre picnic area of Tilden Regional Park in the hills above Berkeley. The 41 participants were greeted with Mexican and American flags to set the mood for a discussion of T. C. Boyle's novel *The Tortilla Curtain*, a story about the tribulations of a Mexican couple who cross the United States border illegally.



**Brent and Erma Browning**

After lunch, the barbecue pit readied as usual by **Brent Browning**, President **Marge Johnson** introduced the candidates for the board. The slate offered by the nominating committee was made up of the same officers who were elected in 2011, the custom being for officers to

serve two one-year terms at the pleasure of the membership.

The vote was unanimous for Marge Johnson, president; **Rob Calvert**, vice president; **Rick White**, secretary; and **Brian Mahoney**, treasurer.

Marge Johnson gave her annual report orally. The Executive Committee (ExCom) has decided to continue the print version of *Reading Matters*, publishing three 12-page issues during the year timed to report on GBSF-sponsored events. A box on the front page of the current issue will encourage those willing to forego the printed edition and access it on the GBSF website to notify **Jim Hall**, [jimsrhall@earthlink.net](mailto:jimsrhall@earthlink.net). Each hard copy costs the Council

about 60 cents for printing and postage. Jim publishes a separate GBSF e-newsletter intermittently, also accessible on the website.

Marge reported on the special events throughout the year and the formation of several new groups. In the absence of the treasurer, Brian Mahoney, she reported that GBSF is in good financial shape. There is no need to hold fundraising activities but, to increase the margin of safety, memorial gifts are now being encouraged.



**Jim Hall holds megaphone as Laura Bushman convenes discussion groups** meeting over to picnic chair **Laura Bushman** who introduced those who would lead discussion of the Boyle novel—**Wallis Leslie, Claudia O'Callaghan, Karen Schneider, and Kay White**.

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## Long Novel Weekend features Dickens and Smiley

*A Dickens Weekend Diary*

By **Jim Baird**

### I. Book Discussions

Here's some math: an 882-page novel can be read in two months if you have a normal life, one month if you read 30 pages every day (no weekends off), and one week if you do nothing else. The reading and the caffeine produce a side effect: you've got to talk about the book. No one can hope to process thirty hours of Dickensian England without some help. Like the character of Agnes in David Copperfield, the Long Novel Weekend is designed to enrich understanding.

We convened on Saturday morning, August 17<sup>th</sup>, at Vallombrosa retreat center, a quiet ten-acre estate in Menlo Park a couple of miles from Stanford Stadium.

We divided into groups for three two-hour discussions. We stuck to the text and the leader asked only interpretive questions, providing no answers. Those came from the group. We travelled with David Copperfield from youth to maturity, experiencing Victorian England as eyewitnesses.

#### Session 1: Chapters 1 to 18 (Saturday Morning)

David is introduced writing this book, his "autobiography." This tells us that he has survived and become a writer. What shaped him? Who helped him?

His life is full of Murdstones, Steerforths, Uriah Heeps, people who take advantage of him, perhaps wish him harm. We recognize these people in our own lives. And we also meet good people; Peggotty, Betsey, and Dr. Strong provide safety and a sense of family. The central character in David's success, Peggotty, fills the vacuum left vacant by the death of his parents. Family can be seen as the major theme of the book, and David's salvation. This is an optimistic novel. It is also very funny.



Diarist Jim Baird is third from left

to figure things out and getting taken advantage of at every turn. Steerforth is his mentor, a master raconteur and man-about-town, who gets David to host a dinner party and alcohol-fueled trip to the theater that culminates in a classic and comical drunken scene. It's easy to spot how Dickens's theatrical training comes through. Here are the "fallen" women: Rosa with scar and anger; Annie, falsely suspected of adultery; Martha who seeks work in London but finds prostitution; Emily, who runs off with Steerforth after he learns sailing to be close to her. Steerforth, arguably the principal figure in this part of the book, senses his destructive character but has no desire to change. Unforgettably, we have Miss Mowcher, a dwarf, the least-inhibited, most fearless character in the book, self-propelled, unconcerned with the opinions of others, bringing life, homemade medicine (and hair restoration) to those around her.

### Section 3: Chapter 39 to End of Book (Sunday morning)

Following Dickens's theater experience, this section resembles a third act. It begins with Dora dying, a woman-child, like Clara at the beginning. Traddles comes into his own, a schoolmate of David's like Steerforth, but generous, self-controlled, competent. The "mistaken impulse of an undisciplined heart," a comment of Annie Strong's, provides an explanation for much of the mischief in the novel. It is this undisciplined heart, perhaps the libido (Freud was an admirer of Dickens), an inner chemistry that, unguided, leads us astray. The Micawber marriage is a lesson in perseverance prevailing and that people can change. It is Micawber, the deadbeat, who builds the case against Uriah Heep, and then leaves for a new life in Australia.

Dickens the novelist, by writing the story in David's voice, assures the reader he will survive. Agnes tips him

off that she isn't going to marry Uriah Heep. Not to worry, she says, and through her Dickens is telling us the same thing.

### Session 2: Chapters 19 to 38 (Saturday afternoon)

David is 17 and out of school. Dickens captures the comic awkwardness of a

post-adolescent young man trying

There you have it. For those who attended the Weekend, I hope these notes add to your memories. If you couldn't make it this time, I hope you'll agree that reading and discussing a great novel is time well spent. Heck, let's do it again next year.



Meeting House

## II. An Evening with Jane Smiley

We've read and discussed *David Copperfield*, loved it, and now it's time to meet Jane Smiley, the author of 13 novels (one a Pulitzer winner). She loves Dickens, too, and knows him well. She has written a highly readable Dickens biography.

As a youngster, she reports, he was healthy, not a big guy, fun to be around but not malicious, noticeably smart, deliberately informal in his wardrobe. Friends talked about how the playful Charles made up his own or pretended to speak a foreign language. He loved words. He made up tales on walks with friends.

Dickens was a keen observer of people. His parents loved to put on family shows, and he made up dialogue and created characters as soon as he could walk. Ear and experience made Dickens superb at representing speech, the best since Shakespeare.

After her talk it was question time, and as a rookie I got first-date jitters. Nearly nine hundred pages provided material for a thousand questions, but I couldn't think of one. Veterans knew what to ask, and Ms. Smiley's answers were cogent, often humorous. Answers led to more questions. The ninety minutes passed too soon.

Here are some of the questions and answers. A fuller account of the session can be found in Jim Hall's blog at [www.greatbooks-sf.com](http://www.greatbooks-sf.com)

Q. Was Dora, David's "child wife," an autobiographical character?

A. Dickens met such a girl during a stint as a stenographer at Parliament. (He had learned shorthand after leaving school.) They were attracted to one another but her father rejected him because this young man seemed not to have much of a future.

When the book came out, she remembered him, and got in touch. Their meeting was a disappointment; she was shallow, a non-stop talker, no longer pretty. She appears as Flora in *Little Dorrit*, with the latter traits, but with a kind nature, emerging as the wisest character in that book.

Q. Was Dickens good company?

A. Yes, and a great observer and eavesdropper. He would walk as many as 30 miles in a day, watching and listening, getting material for his stories.

Q. Wasn't Dickens a provocateur, a troublemaker?

A. London in 1824 to 1832 was a sewer, nice enclaves surrounded by filth. Graveyards overflowed with bodies. Dickens, an insomniac, walked all over London at night seeing horrors and injustice.

During his childhood his family was sent to the poorhouse. He was sent to work in a blacking factory, putting labels on cans of shoe polish. The other boys at the factory were stuck there; he resolved this would not happen to him.

Q. How did Dickens write? Lots of drafts?

A. His books were first published in serial form, therefore the text could be improved before publishing the book. Dickens didn't have to get it right the first time and he was not a perfectionist.

He would jump up and go to a mirror, act out dialogue and emotions, then rush back to the desk to write it down. He acted in London plays, letting the feelings flow into his writing.

Q. Who was influenced by Dickens?

A. Kafka and Tolstoy loved him. But Dickens fell from favor in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, his name omitted from an authoritative list of great novelists published in the 1940s. He was remembered then as a "children's author." The UC Santa Cruz "Dickens Project" in the 1960s brought his reputation back.



The grounds at Vallombrosa

Recently the same kind of thing has happened to Jane Austen. In Dickens's own time it was Shakespeare!

Q. What about Jane Smiley? Any books in

the works?

A. Always: a project based on her grandfather, a Mare Island genius who gets in trouble then disproves Einstein; a children's novel about a character who brings horses to California from Oklahoma; a trilogy of adult novels.

Suited to the period, the evening finished with wine, and plum pudding thanks to **Breda Courtney**. The pudding reminded one of a Dickens novel: large, colorful, and rich.

## John Adams in the Gold Country

By Kay White

Thirty-two book enthusiasts gathered at the Mercy Retreat and Conference Center in Auburn on a sunny Saturday, May 19, 2012, to discuss David McCullough's biography, *John Adams*. To make the discussion of this book manageable, we limited our discussion to Parts I and II, the first 385 pages.



Within these chapters we considered the issues and fierce debate in the first Congressional meetings in Philadelphia while British troops fired on patriots in the north. Our reading covered ten years, through 1788, ending with Adams's diplomatic trips to France, Holland, and London, to obtain critical loans from the Dutch, and to work on the Paris Peace Treaty. In the meantime, while Adams was abroad, the new Constitution of the United States was signed in 1787.

In 1774, Congress was equally divided in three ways: those who opposed independence (Tories at heart); those who were too cautious to take a position one way or the other; and the "true blue" who were ready to declare independence right away. At the beginning, voices for independence were decidedly in the minority.

While Adams had strong feelings against slavery, he did not let the issue jeopardize the Declaration of Independence. Virginia was the leading force in Congress, and Thomas Jefferson, youngest delegate from Virginia, ultimately prepared the Declaration.

Abigail Adams, John's wife, added strength and courage to the political and personal experiences. John depended on her guidance, and her ability to shoulder most of the family responsibilities while he worked in Congress. She was named in our discussion as one of the most outstanding characters in the book, with one admirer suggesting the book be retitled *Abigail Adams*.

The Auburn Great Books members arranged a fine reception for those of us commuting to the Gold Country.



Mercy Center gardens

We had two discussion groups for our 32 attendees, with **Ginni Saunders** and **Rick White** leading the discussions. Having the library and dining room all to ourselves gave us plenty of space to debate and discuss, as well as to enjoy our musician hostess, **Donna Reynolds**, who played and sang a medley of American patriotic songs.

Joining our discussion with our eight Auburn/Roseville hosts were three from Reno, Nevada, four from Citrus Heights/Sacramento, sixteen from the San Francisco Bay Area and Daly City, and one from Sunnyvale. Lunch was served by the Retreat Center staff, and we took advantage of the beautiful gardens for a mid-day stretch before the afternoon movie. The setting offered us sound insulation from the quieter groups at the Retreat Center, and their prayers were undisturbed by our enthusiastic discussions.

We finished the day watching the award-winning movie, "John Adams," starring Paul Giamatti as John Adams, Laura Linney as Abigail, Stephen Dillane as Thomas Jefferson, and Tom Wilkinson as Benjamin Franklin. The film showed the strong regional and emotional differences among the representatives in Philadelphia. Ultimately, Benjamin Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson brokered the differences. Franklin insisted that slavery must not be an issue for Congress in the Declaration of Independence. Thanks to Franklin's advice, Adams managed to be a model of civility and self-restraint with those he most opposed. The unanimous vote for independence came on July 2, 1776, with the New York delegation abstaining and John Dickinson from Pennsylvania voluntarily but strategically absent from the Congress.

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## Potpourri

By Rick White

When a mistake is made often enough, it becomes part of the language. It drives some of us nuts, but apparently there is nothing we can do about it. An historical example in our politics was Republican presidential candidate Warren Harding's phrase, "Back to Normalcy," instead of the correct "Back to Normality." These days one more often sees "normalcy" than "normality." The American Heritage Dictionary comments,

[T]here were language purists among Harding's supporters too, and they found *normalcy* lurking in dictionaries and articles as far back as 1857, attracting no criticism (or attention of any sort) before Harding used it. The *normalcy* debate of the 1920s is now long gone, and *normalcy* is now more normal than *normality* to describe the way things usually are or the way we think they ought to be.

One mistake is so common these days that it was missed by all of our vice president's speechwriters. In praising our Democratic president in his speech at the recent nominating convention, he celebrated "the enormity of his heart." Here is the definition of "enormity."

- 1. (**the enormity of**) the great or extreme scale, seriousness, or extent of something perceived as bad or morally wrong: *a thorough search disclosed the full enormity of the crime*
- 2. a grave crime or sin: *the enormities of the regime*

The speechwriters confused "enormity" with "enormous." Recognizing how common is this usage, my dictionary concedes what it calls a "neutral" definition:

- (in neutral use) the large size or scale of something: *I began to get a sense of the enormity of the task*

Lexicographical errors know no party. Another losing battle, I'm afraid.

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## RIP Howard Will 1927-2012

Howard Christian Will died here last month. We remember him as the man who led our children in Great Books discussions at Highlands Elementary in San Mateo during the 1960s. After successfully launching children's and adult groups throughout the western United States he rose to the position of executive vice president of the Great Books Foundation. He trained dozens if not hundreds of discussion leaders. In the view of some, without his work it is unlikely that the Great Books Council of San Francisco would have come into existence. Upon leaving his position in Chicago, he and Ilana moved to Castro Valley and he lectured on the opera for several years to assisted living groups. Howard is survived by his wife Ilana and many children and grandchildren dear to him who came ready-made from three marriages. Gifts in memory of Howard are invited to the Great Books Council of San Francisco care of Marge Johnson, president. —Rick White

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Letter to the Editor:

I was required to read Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* in my senior year in college (1952). It was all downhill after that. I am now 82 years and still a Wolfe freak. I recently purchased *Oh Lost: A Story of the Buried Life* which I had no idea existed until reading Walter Mosley's "Crying Wolfe" article in *Reading Matters*.

--Pat Fleming, Walnut Creek