

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2025: Bold Program, Big Turnout

By Mark Scardina

We chased the last breath of winter into Monterey Bay for this year's Asilomar. The weather wasn't exactly welcoming, but the company of Great Bookies more than made up for it.



Friday afternoon's "Meet & Greet"

This year's selections sparked plenty of questions—and for good reason. Where else could you have dinner with Carl Jung, Philip K. Dick, and Christopher Marlowe after cocktails with William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, W.B. Yeats, and Châtillon Coque?

So where did this eclectic mix of writers come from? Suspicion has been known to arise that a given year's Asilomar readings share an undisclosed theme. At least once, though, an overtly themed Asilomar event was held: the popular John Steinbeck weekend several years ago.

Hoping to attract younger voices, I took a chance this time. Science fiction has been rare at Great Books discussions, but a recent selection of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* was a hit, so I turned to Philip K. Dick. I chose *Galactic Pot-Healer*, avoiding his works adapted to film to steer away from

preconceived interpretations. The way its wild, imaginative storyline and layered themes connected to other works was intriguing, but might prove a problem with our Shared Inquiry rules. What if I could intentionally weave its references into the weekend's discussions—something we'd not tried before?

With an appropriate version of *Dr. Faustus*, selections from Jung and Yeats, and a nod to interwoven references, the program took shape. Feedback from our veteran GB core was positive—but the real test was attendance.

We passed. For the first time in years, we filled four discussion groups, scrambling for extra meeting space. Even better, many were newcomers—both to Great Books and to Asilomar.

Looking ahead, we've locked in April 17–19, 2026, with only a small rate increase and plans for four meeting rooms. Mid-April promises friendlier weather. Expect registration and the 2026 reading list to be announced this October. Let's make it our best year yet for this unique and immersive weekend!

Motor trip rewards readers: Great Novel, Great Film

By Rick White

The Boys in the Boat by Daniel James Brown, selected by the Auburn Great Books group for the non-fiction 2025 Gold Country Mini-Retreat, culminates in the Berlin Olympics of 1936. That Olympics is best known for Adolph Hitler's humiliation at seeing his country's entry in the 100-meter sprint beaten by the African American Jessie Owens.

This story is about another surprising American victory at those Olympics, the University of Washington team winning the gold medal in the nine-man crew rowing event. This was the Great Depression, and these boys were from the bottom of it, hungry but strong from hard labor. This was survival for them, competing in a

sport where their humble backgrounds were out of place. The odds were against them from the beginning. There was no other such team, nor had there been. This world championship could not have happened, but it did. This is the story of how such a thing could happen.



Cleve Schneider leads

Both discussion group leaders, Cleve Schneider and Deborah Marcus, structured the conversation by challenging the group to interpret what the author intended to suggest by the titles of the four parts into which he'd divided his 18 chapters, "What Seasons They Have Been Through," "Resiliency," "The Parts that Really Matter," and "Touching the Divine." These titles, worded to be ambiguous, served well to stimulate discussion by the weekend's participants.

The friendship and rivalry between the UW coach Al Ulbrikson and UC Berkeley's Ky Ebright was highlighted in both the book and the movie. To get to the Olympics, the UW crew had to and did beat all of the US rowing teams, including and especially Cal.

Ky Ebright's IOU: fact or fiction?

In the movie, Avery Brundage, patrician head of the US Olympic Committee (then and for many years thereafter), knowing that the UW team did not have funds for the trip, declared that it had to pay its own way to the Olympics. The team needed to raise \$5,000 (equivalent to \$116,200 today) within a week to cover expenses, or else the runner-up, the University of Pennsylvania, would take its place. Saving the day, Ky Ebright is shown giving an IOU to Ulbrikson enabling his team to go to the Olympics. This is not in the book.

The narrative of Ebright's financial contribution appears to be a cinematic embellishment, rather than a reflection of historical events. Ebright's actual support was likely moral rather than monetary. According to internet sources, the funds for the Washington crew's Olympic journey came from a "rapid and heartfelt

community-driven effort" spearheaded by local newspapers, including *The Seattle Times* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. The *Times* contributed \$500, and the community rallied, donating amounts ranging from a few cents to several hundred dollars. Within two days, the necessary funds had been secured, allowing the team to compete in Berlin.

On the Road Again:

"If there is a heaven, let it be this!"

By Louise DiMattio

Colby College is in the middle of Maine in the small town of Waterville. West of it are the Belgrades, five interconnected lakes reportedly of year-round stunning beauty.

The Colby campus is beautiful too, with ivy-covered brick buildings, sprawling lawns, world-class sports arenas and a new performing arts center said to rival most others both architecturally and acoustically. The Colby College Museum of Art contains a stunning and diverse collection of American art. It is on this bucolic New England campus that the Philadelphia Great Books Council hosts its annual conference week, now in its 69th summer. The theme for 2025 is "Existential Perspectives," exploring the complexities people face as they move through the vicissitudes of life. Our readings were challenging, replete with the sort of ambiguities that make Great Books discussions great. The first morning began with what served as a primer, *At the Existentialist Café* by Sarah Bakewell. This nonfiction book provided a foundation for the rest of the week, introducing us to the philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and others who, writing of their experiences from the beginning through middle of the 20th Century, are still influential.

The daily readings that followed related to ideas introduced during the first day. They included *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera, *An Artist in the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro, and two short stories, "Love" by Clarice Lispector and "Pigeon Feathers" by John Updike. As if those were not enough, we were treated to movies following Existentialist themes. These were *The Graduate*, *Harold and Maude*, *The Big Chill*, *A Complete Unknown*, and *The Last Waltz*. There was time for hiking, walking and a daily swim in the Olympic-size pool at the Colby Sports Center. Food in the dining hall was plentiful, always including a vegetarian option and featuring Maine specialties such as blueberry cobbler and fresh fish. A

traditional lobster bake in the meadow with wine and cheese capped the week.

“Existentialism.” Existence. I wish that everyone in the world could have this kind of life. And, if there is a heaven, I hope that its days are like the days we had at Colby, discussing great books with kindred spirits under the warm New England summer sun.

Irish writers today from Joyce to Keegan

By Louise DiMattio

One of my earliest experiences as a new Great Books leader, and most likely the worst, was my attempt to lead *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce (1882-1941) at our Asilomar weekend years ago. Barbara McConnell, our beloved late leader coordinator, did not ask us *if* we would lead a session. She forthrightly said, “Which session would you like to lead?”. Leading wasn’t optional.

Naively, I chose the James Joyce memoir/novel. I shudder when I think of it now. Years later, while culling paper to clean up the GBSF archives, I discovered a document containing the leader evaluations from that year at Asilomar. Under my name was written, “probably too difficult a selection for this leader” (very kind) to “the session was a complete disaster” (probably closer to the truth). I’m glad I didn’t read those comments until many years after the event!

Happier memories of James Joyce at Asilomar were the discussions of *The Dead* followed by a lovely musical performance of Irish songs by Rob Calvert accompanied by my husband, pianist William Corbett-Jones. I remember that Barbara McConnell was with us that year, too. I know she was thrilled. I can never read *The Dead* without the shivering that is caused by the beauty, the poignancy and the depth of Joyce’s writing. I feel fortunate that Barbara never gave up on me as a leader and I never gave up on James Joyce.

Fast forward to today, when many Irish writers follow the short story and novel tradition that propelled James Joyce onto the literary stage years ago. In fact, we discussed the superb novella *Foster* by Claire Keegan at our Annual Meeting in July. Keegan is clearly a descendant, literarily speaking, of Joyce. Many Irish authors today can make that claim: Mary Lavin, Elizabeth Bowen, Edna O’Brien, Frank O’Connor, William Trevor, John Banville, Anne Enright and Emma Donoghue, to name some. Sally Rooney has captured younger readers, as well she should. William Faulkner is noted to have claimed influence by James Joyce.

This brings me to Long Novel Weekend 2025, which will feature a trilogy by Edna O’Brien (1930–2024). *The Country Girls Trilogy* is a view into the early writings of O’Brien. They were banned by the Irish Catholic Church and conservative elements of society. O’Brien presents characters grappling with sexual repression and lack of opportunity. They lived in a closed hierarchical society, beset by alcoholism, illiteracy, and hard-scrabble farm life or struggles in bleak cities.

The three novels are easy to read and show us a place and time that exist no longer. They are *The Country Girls* (1960), *The Lonely Girls* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964). An epilogue was added in 1987.

We’ll meet for three Zoom sessions, one novel per session, on October 18th and 19th, 2025. The ISBN is 978-0-571-35290. For further information and to register, please visit www.greatbooksncal.org.

Poetry Weekend 2025:

Pastoral — More Than Meets the Eye

Introduction by Nicholas Jones, guest speaker

Poetry Weekend, taking place November 15-16 on Zoom, focuses on pastoral poetry, the rich history of which begins in Greek and Latin, flourishes in the Renaissance, and continues to evolve up through Modernist and contemporary poetry. Going beyond shepherds complaining about their girl- or boyfriends (there’s some of that too), pastoral poetry looks at rural life to express complex ideas about many of the complex facets of human life.

Oddly, pastoral poets, who write about nature, are generally city-dwellers who wrote for other urbanites (or courtiers, in the old days). When they talk about sheep, absentee landowners, and predatory wolves, they want us to think about the complicated problems that faced the cities of ancient Rome or Elizabethan England (or even 21st century San Francisco): poverty, displacements, homelessness, divisions of class and wealth, corruption and lawlessness.

These deceptively simple poems about apparently simple lives can be read for themselves, and as coded interventions into matters of interest to both urban and rural readers—topics as complex as politics, economics, aesthetics, love and death. The pastoral is full of coded meanings; in pastoral, a sheep is not just a sheep.

Take, for example, the well-known pastoral by Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

One can read this poem on its surface, as a sweet tale about a quiet rural scene. But the "lovely woods" are "dark and deep," as is the temptation they offer the narrator—to stop, perhaps to stay; to sleep, perhaps to dream. Frost's Currier and Ives picture suggests an emotional turning-point, when responsibility ("miles to go") conflicts with an urge to pause—or perhaps even more, to reject—responsibility and just let go. We might ask what's entailed in the very first phrase, "Whose woods": who owns the woods, and why might that worry the narrator? What's "queer" about this moment, which the horse immediately recognizes as a break in routine? What human anxieties are suggested by ending the poem with two identical lines, a gesture that is at once rustic (think of ballads) and complicatedly Freudian. Pastoral is a way of addressing such issues without using sophisticated citified jargon. The complexity comes in reading in both registers at once.

Overview of Poetry Weekend 2025

By Paula Weinberger

Our guest speaker, Professor Jones, penned the above Introduction to this year's coming Poetry Weekend. We are fortunate indeed to welcome him again this year after his marvelous job in 2024, guiding us through the intricacies of Modernist verse and its historical precedents. Pastoral poetry is a genre that is also close to his heart. He recently completed the first English translation of *Arcadia* by the great Italian Pastoral poet Sannazaro. On Saturday morning Professor Jones will be our guide once again, leading us through the early roots of pastoral verse to the contemporary, including close readings of two or three poems as preparation for our small-group discussions on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning, when participants will discuss pastoral poems chosen by the Poetry Selection Committee. These include:

Saturday p.m.

Twilight by Louise Glück

Directions by Billy Collins

Fern Hill by Dylan Thomas

The Lake Isle of Innisfree by W.B. Yeats

Boat Stealing, excerpt from *The Prelude Book 1* by William Wordsworth

Sunday a.m.

On the Fifth Day by Jane Hirshfield

Meditation at Lagunitas by Robert Hass

Ode on a Grecian Urn by John Keats

Postscript by Seamus Heaney

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota by James Wright

Following the afternoon session, Poetry Selection Committee member Cathy Shea will read from her recently published book *Ghost Matinee*. After the reading, there will be an Open Mic where participants can read a poem of their own or share a favorite.

For more details and to register, go to www.great-booksncal.org. Under Events select Poetry Weekend. We hope you will join us for what will be an edifying and delightful journey into a rarely visited genre.

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### **Thank you, Brian**

It is with great sadness that we share news of the passing of Brian Cunningham.

Brian was an integral part of Great Books for many years, serving as President from 2019 to 2021, and founding and leading our STEM Reading Group (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Under his guidance, the group



explored a wide array of topics — ecology, physics, mathematics, and lately cosmology, about which he was especially curious: cosmological models and current ideas about the origin of the universe.

We are deeply grateful for Brian's many contributions, his wry sense of humor, and his unwavering dedication to Great Books. His leadership, insight, and warmth will be deeply missed. — Paul Smith

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We hope to see you next year at the 2026 Barbara McConnell Spring Conference at Asilomar!

Business before pleasure: **GBSF 2025 Annual Meeting**

By Paul Smith, president

On July 20, we gathered via Zoom for an efficient Annual Meeting, followed by an engaging discussion of *Foster* by Claire Keegan. During the business portion of the meeting, we renominated and approved the current slate of Officers, including me as President, Elena Schmid as Vice President, Rob Calvert as Secretary, and Eileen Coleman as Treasurer.

We also renominated and approved the current slate of Executive Committee members, including Rob Calvert, Eileen Coleman, Lillian Dabney, Louise DiMattio, Jim Hall, Kathy Keers, Dorothy McHale, Louise Morgan, Mark Scardina, Elena Schmid, Paul Smith, Jan Vargo, Paula Weinberger, Kay White, and Rick White.

We reviewed recent events and shared a preview of upcoming activities including Long Novel Weekend on October 18-19 and Poetry Weekend on November 15-16.

Afterward we turned to the good stuff. At Louise DiMattio's suggestion we discussed *Foster*, led by Eileen Coleman, me, and making her debut as a Great Books

discussion leader, Wendy Burton, a recent graduate of Louise Morgan's Leader/Reader Workshop.

At first glance, *Foster* is the simple story of a child spending a summer in rural Ireland with relatives. But that would be like saying Michelangelo's David is a sculpture of a man. Beneath its spare prose, it is a work of profound subtlety, empathy, and quiet revelation—a story of secrets spoken and unspoken.

The conversations were rich and varied, with surprising breadth in the interpretation of both minor details and critical events.

My thanks go to Rob Calvert for helping organize and document the gathering, Louise for the excellent book suggestion, and Wendy and Eileen for leading a rewarding discussion.

You may ask: How many Great Books groups are there in Northern California?

By Jan Vargo

Good question! Every year I do a census to determine how many reading groups our Council sponsors in Northern California. Many groups switched from in-person to Zoom during the pandemic, which enabled

them to attract readers from all over the country. I started listing groups as long as their main contact was in Northern California. This year I managed to get in touch with 25 such groups. In 1958 GBSF had 56 groups, so the number has dwindled considerably over the years. Some groups didn't respond to my calls and emails, although they're listed on the websites of their sponsoring organizations. Websites aren't always current, raising doubts about whether all of those groups are still meeting.

Many groups I contacted were eager to attract new members. How can we encourage new participants and new groups? One of our members, our former president Louise DiMattio, has been busy forming new groups and supporting existing ones. She actively participates in six groups, five of which she helped found. She attends many of our reading events and has just returned from the annual Great Books conference at Colby

College. How does she find time to do all this reading and lead so many discussions? One of her groups spends an hour a week discussing "flash fiction" -- very short stories. She also arranges "pop up" events during some months when our Council doesn't put on another event.

Here's an interesting question: what *is* a "Great Books" group? One group told me this year that they aren't a Great Books group because they no longer read *books*, they read only articles from *The Atlantic Monthly*. According to The Great Books Foundation, a Great Books group uses Shared Inquiry, a text-based Socratic learning method that helps participants read actively, pose evocative questions, and listen and respond to others effectively in dialogue. The Foundation's definition doesn't require that the readings be books.

I encourage you to inspire more readers to join your groups, and to form new groups.

Great Books Council of San Francisco Roster of Groups July 2025

<i>Central Valley</i>	<i>Group Contact</i>			<i>Readings</i>
Auburn: Pioneer United Methodist Church 2nd Tues, 1:00	Donna Reynolds	(916) 420-1979	pianogaldonna@gmail.com	The Norton Reader, 14th edition
Davis & Woodland: homes 3rd Wed or Thurs, 1:30	Pat Dearborn	(530) 758-0108	dearborn@cal.net	GBF: Great Conversations 6
Fair Oaks: In person 3rd Wed or Thurs, 1:30	Sheri Kindsvater	(916) 761-7349	kindsvater@aol.com	GBF: Great Conversations 1
Sacramento: Renaissance Society, Sac. State Thursdays. 2:00. Zoom. Wait list	Jean Cawood	(916) 396-8431	jccawood@comcast.net	GBF: Civically Engaged Reader, Counterparts, etc.
<i>East Bay/Tri-Valley</i>	<i>Group Contact</i>			<i>Readings</i>
Alameda: Main Library, 1550 Oak St. 2nd Tues, 6:30. In person	Jeff Hitchings	(240) 893-0325	jeffhitchings.jh@gmail.com	GBF: First Series and various
Berkeley Poetry Group: home 1st Thurs, 7:00. Zoom	Nina Gibson	(510) 919-5058	ngibson11@comcast.net	Poetry
Oakland, East Bay 3rd Fri. 3:30. Zoom	Jan Vargo	(510) 849-1824	vargopack@cs.com	GBF: Citizens of the World, Her Own Accord, Nature of Life
Pleasanton (Tri-Valley): Zoom 4th Mon, 7:30	Claudia Iota Herbei	(510) 388-9963	cherbei@ebnmg.org	GBF: What's the Matter? Readings in Physics
Walnut Creek. Zoom Fridays 2:00	Louise DiMattio	(415) 244-2461	ladimat@aol.com	Flash fiction
Walnut Creek: Rossmoor First Friday, 10:00	Louise DiMattio	(415) 244-2461	ladimat@aol.com	Short classic novels

Walnut Creek: Rossmoor 4th Mon, 10:00, not Dec. In person	Louise DiMattio	(415) 244-2461	ladimat@aol.com	Art of the Short Story, Daniel Halpern, ed.
Walnut Creek: Rossmoor Multipurpose Rm 1 4th Mon, 7:00. Limited to Members	Paul Giurlanda		vallejo1@icloud.com	GBF: Seven Deadly Sins
Walnut Creek: Zoom 1st Wed	Ronald Kihara		rkihara@comcast.net	Various
Walnut Creek: Rossmoor Gateway Bldg 4th Fri., 1:30. In person/Zoom	Joe Ficarelli	(925) 210-1840	ficurelli@hotmail.com	GBF: Great Conversations 6
<i>Marin</i>	<i>Group Contact</i>			<i>Readings</i>
Kentfield: College of Marin 4th Tues, 2:00. Zoom	Norman Nayfach	(415) 488-7823	normansn@hotmail.com	Various
<i>San Francisco</i>	<i>Group Contact</i>			<i>Readings</i>
San Francisco: STEM reading group 1st Thurs, 5:30. Zoom	Paul Smith		gbsf_stem @paulsmith.com	GBF: Keeping Things Whole
San Francisco: Zoom 2nd Wed, 6:30.	Elena Schmid	(415) 550-9065	eschmid@sonic.net	GBF: Great Conversations 5
San Francisco: Anza Branch Library 3th Sun., 1:30. In person	Clifford Louie	(415) 750-1786	clifford.louie@sbcglobal.net	Various. Contact for information
San Francisco: Older Women's League (OWL) 2nd Tues., 10:00. Zoom	Louise DiMattio	(415) 244-2461	ladimat@aol.com	Contact for information
San Francisco: The Sequoias Zoom 2nd Tues, 3:00	Jan Elvee	(415) 767-8431	elvee215542@gmail.com	GBF: Great Conversations 3
San Francisco: Virtual Great Books Group 2nd Tues, 2:00. Zoom	Albert Eng	(415) 269-4646	alberteng333@gmail.com	The Art of the Short Story
San Francisco: West Portal Branch Library Last Wed, 6:30, not Dec. Zoom	Louise DiMattio	(415) 244-2461	ladimat@aol.com	GBF: Short Story Omnibus
<i>South Bay, Santa Cruz</i>	<i>Group Contact</i>			<i>Readings</i>
Los Altos: Public Library, San Antonio Rd. 3rd Tues, 7:00. Zoom	Norman Roth	(650) 823-1444	nmroth@gmail.com	GBF: Great Conversations 1, Imperfect Ideal
Santa Cruz (OLLI) 1st Wed, Noon. Zoom	Susan Gorsky	(831) 234-4590	sgorsky@sbcglobal.net	Contact for information

For more information on an individual group, call or email the group contact. Most groups welcome new members. Some groups have a waiting list or are part of a membership organization. Some groups are on hold during the pandemic. To make corrections or additions, contact Jan Vargo (510) 849-1824 or vargopack@cs.com.

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2025-2026 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

July-August 2025	September-October	November-December
7/20 Annual Meeting Zoom Reading: Claire Keegan, <i>Foster</i>	10/18-19 Long Novel Weekend Zoom Reading: Edna O'Brien, <i>The Country Girls Trilogy</i>	11/15-16 Poetry Weekend Zoom
January-February 2026	March-April	May-June
(TBD) San Francisco Mini-Retreat Zoom	4/17-19 Barbara McConnell Weekend at Asilomar Pacific Grove, CA	(TBD) Gold Country Mini-Retreat Auburn, CA (TBD) Leader-Reader Workshop Zoom

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.

Reading Matters: Editor and Publisher, Rick White; E-letter Editor and Publisher, Jim Hall; Database, Jan Vargo.

Website: www.greatbooksncal.org **Great Books Foundation:** www.greatbooks.org

The GBSF annual financial report one-page summary can be seen on our website. The full report can be obtained by contacting greatbooksncal.treasurer@gmail.com