

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Where we are: Reflections from the president

By Brian Cunningham

We are in a season of change. Will our national government change or remain the same? Will we transition to a new regime? Or adapt further to the present regime. Of equal importance, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced



Brian Cunningham

Great Books San Francisco, suddenly and without warning, to stop meeting in person and begin electronic meetings via Zoom. Is Great Books transitioning to a new reality? Are the changes with which we are dealing long term? Permanent? If so, what are the contours of that new reality? Are there additional changes in society underway simultaneously which will influence that new reality? Or are we just adapting to a temporary change of conditions? When will we feel safe to gather in groups? We don't know the answers to any of these questions.

By coincidence, the self-evaluation that Elena Schmid introduced in the last Executive Committee meeting focused our attention on GBSF's future. The self-evaluation asked who we are, what our strengths and values are, what we want to be? Three new committees resulted from the discussion. The Governance Committee is updating our Bylaws to better conform with the reality of our current practices and to state more clearly the rules governing our organization. Concurrently, it is creating a "Handbook" in which the Committee intends to capture the details of GBSF's practices and traditions. The Events Committee is examining what is working well in our weekend Events,

what needs to be changed, and what new Events merit exploring. The Local Groups Committee is evaluating the needs of the nearly 40 groups of readers in Northern California who meet monthly to use the Shared Inquiry Method, the relationship of those groups to the GBSF Executive Committee and strategies to attract new members and maintain the vitality of the groups.

How should the pandemic, the shutdown, the transition, or the adaptation guide those Committees' deliberations? The Committees are considering the fact of change as they consider whether to revise or retain traditional activities and plan for new or modified events. They must look over the horizon for what may be coming. You, the reader of this, can help. What do you foresee over the horizon? Let the Committees know: Caroline Van Howe for the Governance Committee, cvanhowe@gmail.com; Melanie Blake for the Local Groups Committee, melanieb50@gmail.com; Louise DiMattio for the Events Committee, ladimat@aol.com.

GBSF bookies are affected differently by the shutdown and pandemic depending on whether they are employed and working from home, unemployed because of the shutdown, students, or retired. All of us share a health risk and increased social isolation, at least if we are adhering to the guidelines of public health officials. But Zoom levels the playing field to a large degree. Pandemic or not, Zoom permits everyone to participate - even if they test positive for Covid-19! For that reason alone, it seems likely Zoom will continue to play a role for Great Books - unless, of course, a better technology comes along.

In addition to the exploration of literature using the Shared Inquiry Method, many bookies treasure the social interaction that GBSF affords. It is fun to meet, chat, joke and reminisce while exploring the many meanings of a reading, meanings brought to life by our different educations and life experiences. We enjoy the social interaction which is an inherent part of the book discussion - at least when we are face to face together. But it



is different when done by Zoom. In some ways Zoom meetings are more convenient: we don't have to leave home; we can participate from great distances. But it doesn't seem quite the same, sitting isolated looking at a computer screen, dealing with the seemingly unavoidable audio problems, flickering images, connectivity issues and others. Some way needs to be found to restore the social element to Great Books meetings. Perhaps in time, as we become more skilled and more comfortable using electronic media, social interactions will return. Or maybe an improved version of Zoom will present features that better enable social interaction. Or maybe one of you bookies will come up with a good idea. If so, let's hear from you.

Whether GBSF will continue Zoom meetings after the pandemic or return to in person meetings is uncertain. The pandemic is temporary, we pray. The electronic age is permanent. The need to adapt to new technology is permanent. Today's technology is temporary. The human need for social interaction is permanent but constantly adapting to a changing reality.

Change is inevitable. The conditions on March 31, 1953 when the Great Books Council of San Francisco was organized were quite different from today's conditions. Electronics have transformed our communities: television, computers, email, the internet, scanning capabilities and more. All these changes precipitate changes in the way we interact, in the subjects of our discourse, in our expectations.

Some of us love change. We approach change with enthusiasm. Others of us dread change. We just don't want the bother; things are fine as they are. Most of us are somewhere in between. We deal with change all the time, but we don't like having it put in our face. Change can be a convenience or a bother. It just depends...

How do we plan to adapt GBSF to a constantly changing world? Where is the crystal ball that will show us the pathway into our future? And the answer is ... it's hard, it's uncertain, it's likely our choices will not be perfect. But it is the nature of the human condition that we must keep on keeping on.

Only time will tell whether we are dealing with transition or adaptation. And, with that said,

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

McConnell Weekend Redux

By Mark Scardina, coordinator

I'm sure we all shared the sadness of our annual Monterey Peninsula retreat being canceled for the first time in its 60+ year run. Well, along with Sheri Kindsvater, our dedicated registrar, I am pleased to report that this is not going to let our inability to physically meet together cause us to skip another year.

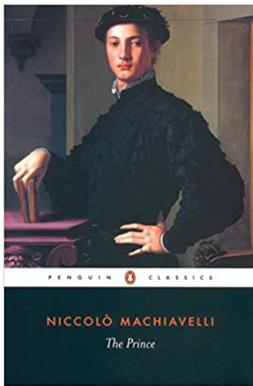
The 2021 McConnell Weekend is ON and ONLINE!

This virtual event will mimic our traditional Asilomar ones with slight adjustments to the schedule to accommodate interest from other parts of the country. This diversity should enrich the discussions. In addition, special low rates for seniors and newcomers as well free admission for registered students are going to be offered for the first time.

Mark your calendars for Friday, April 16th to Sunday, April 18th to attend the Barbara McConnell Asilomar Weekend as we have a great line-up of discussions and get-togethers planned using our Zoom platform. Zoom is an application for computers, tablets or smartphones allowing you to videoconference or teleconference into the discussion. For those of you who have never used Zoom or need assistance, we will have a special tech session on Friday evening from 5:30pm to 6:15pm.

I know many of you had signed up last year and were excited about the intriguing selection of readings put together by our Book and Poetry Selection Committees. I am pleased to report that you'll get to discuss them this year! Since the prices have been reduced further by not including the books, there will be no need to purchase them again. For those that didn't we have links to get the exact versions that we'll be using in your registration confirmation.

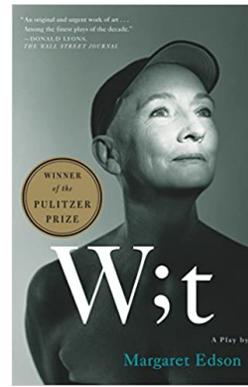
Kicking off the weekend at 6:30pm to accommodate our East Coast participants, will be a selection of poems from **John Donne, Louise Glück, Charles Simic, Yanis Ritsos, and Derek Walcott**. These poems will be provided as a PDF file in response to your registration.



Saturday will start at 9:30am with our non-fiction discussion. **Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*** will get the morning off to a rousing start as you explore this seminal work on statesmanship and political power that has proven relevant for over four centuries. This session will run until 11:40pm when we will have a break for lunch and our afternoon events.

Anticipating the success of our outreach efforts to attract new participants and students, we will be having a **Meet & Greet** general session from 1:30pm until 2:30pm. This will provide an opportunity to meet newcomers answering their questions, re-connect with fellow bookies, discuss shared inquiry in the Bay Area. Since Bay Area group coordinators are under special invitation, you'll get to know their local groups from different counties and what series they are discussing.

If you are a group coordinator, you should have received a special email invitation to a Zoom session meeting with the Executive Committee from 3:30pm to 5:00pm. We intend this to be an annual meeting where coordinators can express their concerns and needs plus share their successes along with learning about new Council initiatives and plans while providing feedback. To accommodate these two meetings, we've moved the fiction session start time to 6:30pm where you'll discuss a lesser-known but no less poignant novel from **Kazuo Ishiguro. *Never Let Me Go*** is a page-turning mystery while also providing a thought-provoking and disturbing view of the future. Winning the Booker Prize, Ishiguro has created "a gripping mystery, a beautiful love story, a scathing critique of human arrogance and a moral examination of how we treat the vulnerable and different in our society." The official end of this session is 8:40pm, but I am confident it will reverberate for hours after and perhaps call for your favorite adult beverage to help ease the mind.



The final, but no less intense, session will start on Sunday morning at 9:30am with the Pulitzer Prize-winning play ***W;t*** by **Margaret Edson**. Conceived from her hospital work experience are many familiar shared inquiry themes. This discussion will end at 11:40am where we will all join back up in a short general session to complete the weekend.

I mentioned special rates at the top. The entire 3-day conference's standard price is \$40 which includes all discussions, meetings, poetry PDF but no books. We are offering a special rate for seniors (65+) newcomers, and group coordinators of \$20. Registered students will have free admission. I hope to continue this type of special rate out-reach program when we once again are able to meet at Asilomar. To support this, all proceeds from this conference will go to fund this program.

This 3-day online event is the most ambitious the SFGBC has ever undertaken. Using our experience with Zoom discussions from the one-day events as well as local group online discussions, we have decided to restrict group size from our normal Asilomar 14-16 down to 10-12 participants. In fact, we would prefer the lower limit if we can get enough leaders. This will allow the discussion to flow naturally without the need to raise hands, queue up speakers or employ other management techniques that interfere with the development of ideas and discussion flow. To those who either have experience leading or have taken leader training, please consider registering as a leader for one or more sessions. To reward your contribution, we are offering a special rate of \$20 for the conference.

As is traditional for this event, we will be scheduling pre-discussions for leaders in the weeks before. We know many of you may not have led an online discussion or feel proficient at it. Therefore, as part of each pre-discussion, we will have a Zoom meeting training segment to ensure everyone has a foundation to succeed.

New is that registration will only be handled online. Since you obviously need Internet access to participate, this should not be a problem. Please note that even though we process your registration for all of our events via PayPal, you do not actually need a PayPal account to register and all transactions are safe and secure.

Finally, registration is now open until March 26, 2021 or until we are full. As this weekend is opened up to national participation, I do expect keen interest especially from the Northeast. While the absolute maximum is 100 attendees, the cut-off will be lower due to the availability of leaders.

If you are a group coordinator or even a local group member, let them know that we will be holding our annual premier event online.

You do not want to miss this event! Register as soon as you can at <https://www.greatbooksncal.org/asilomar>

REGISTER TODAY!

The future still lies ahead

By Lydia Osborn

Recently, the Campolindo High School Book Club partnered with a small Great Books group on Zoom to hold a joint discussion on the short story “A City of Churches” by Donald Barthelme. The board of the Campo book club, including myself, had reached out to Great Books because we were interested in the shared inquiry method of discussion that Great Books practices and we were having difficulty holding a meaningful and long discussion about a piece of literature. Knowing about my grandmother’s involvement in Great Books and having heard her rave about the quality of the discussions, I organized a joint meeting so that our members could learn from the bookies and possibly integrate those discussion techniques into our weekly meetings. The experience was amazing and the book club truly enjoyed the higher level of discussion that the story and the bookies brought to the table. Thank you to the members of the Great Books Council who agreed to join us in this discussion! We really appreciate the help and guidance that you offered.

Those who attended the discussion were: Brian Cunningham, Louise Morgan, and Alison Amonette. Lydia and six of her classmates, along with Sarah Morgan (the Campolindo H.S. librarian) carried on a remarkably insightful and stimulating discussion of this post-modern short story for an hour and a half. Two of the girls used their phones to participate because they were on long car trips with their families.

The event was quite successful and the girls seem eager to have another joint discussion with us before school is out in the spring.

The eternal verity:

Discussion leaders make the difference

By Louise Morgan

Many things contribute to making Great Books discussions special, including camaraderie with fellow readers, thought-provoking texts, respectful exchanges of differing perspectives, and those wonderful “ah-ha!” moments when we’re struck by new insights.

However, one vital component often fails to get much recognition because when it functions really well you hardly notice it – a well-trained *leader*.

Skilled leaders make everyone in the group feel welcome. They animate the discussion by offering provocative opening questions. Although they arrive with lots of prepared questions they understand that the discussion belongs to the group, so they are comfortable with letting the discourse go off in unplanned directions. They see to it that everyone has a chance to contribute, and they intervene only when necessary – to guide a stalled discussion toward a new topic or to keep an enthusiastic participant from monopolizing it. Most of the



A great leader, Vince Scardina (1927-2019)

time leaders simply sit back and listen; indeed, a skilled leader is, in a sense, almost invisible.

Does that mean that leaders at our events never have the pleasure of discussing the texts they have

Here’s an idea

When purchasing through Amazon, using the address www.smile.amazon.com will result in a small contribution to a non-profit organization on a listing they maintain. The Great Books Council of San Francisco is on their list.

studied so diligently while preparing to lead? Not at all. As part of the preparation process Great Books leaders get to enjoy a “prediscussion” session during which all the leaders of a text gather to discuss it among themselves, to bounce ideas off each other, to develop questions, and to plan how they will offer those questions to their respective groups so that all attendees will have similar experiences.

How does someone learn to do this? Well, GBSF has a long tradition of holding annual Leader Training Workshops that are open to anyone who wants to develop their leading skills. Those who attend these workshops depart feeling more confident that they, too, can lead an interesting and productive discussion. Not only that, but they will automatically become better *readers* by having learned and practiced the time-tested techniques and methods of Shared Inquiry.

Why don't *you* give it a try? Our **2021 Leader/Reader Workshop** will be held online via Zoom on Saturday, March 13, from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. It's fun, and open to anyone, newbie or veteran, who wants to become a better leader (or reader). Details and registration can be found on our website: <https://www.greatbooksncal.org/leader-reader-workshop>. We look forward to seeing you there!

Consider leading discussions. Get in on the challenge and the fun. Improve your listening.

Long Novel Weekend:

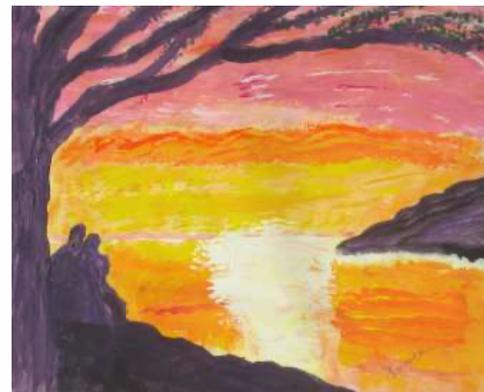
Midnight's Children

By Louise DiMattio

When the Covid-19 shelter-in-place mandate was announced by the Governor in March 2020, little did we know that all of the Northern California Great Books events were immediately in jeopardy. Not the least of these was the Long Novel Weekend scheduled for July at the lovely Vallombrosa Retreat Center in Menlo Park. By April, it was clear that we would not be meeting in person any time soon. What to do?

The novel that had been selected for 2020 was *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie. Several hearty souls had already registered for the event by the time we realized that cancellation was almost inevitable. However, by April, our local groups were moving successfully to Zoom and so ... drum roll ... why not try an event on Zoom? Many other institutions were already doing it. We could, too.

We decided to stay with *Midnight's Children* and host the “weekend” on three consecutive Saturdays in October. Conveniently for us, this novel was already divided into three books by the author. It fit our plan perfectly. Looking back, however, all of these decisions were easy in comparison to reading and leading this in-



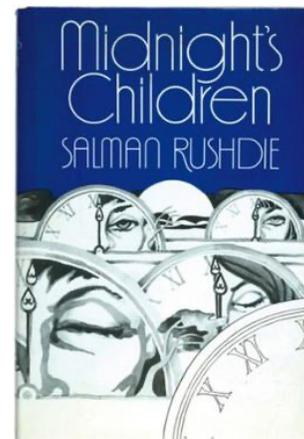
"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day..."

credibly long and complex book. There is a plethora of characters and themes. There is mystery, confusion, ghosts, switched identity, wars, religious strife, betrayal, murder and enough mayhem to satisfy the most dedicated dark mini-series watcher. At least three religions (Islam, Christianity and Hinduism) vied for the opportunity to explain all of this strife. Above all, independence from Britain and the partition of India into India and Pakistan on August 15, 1947 was the pivot point around which the entire novel swirled.

Twenty-four intrepid but dedicated readers (coming from as far away as Colorado and Atlanta) tackled this book with the gusto that it requires. Questions were answered and confusion cleared up only to

be challenged all over again in the next session. Two leaders, Louise Morgan and I, undertook the monumental task of leading each session. Caroline Van Howe seamlessly performed feats of magical realism as our vigilant Zoom mistress. How appropriate for this novel!

When we had an opportunity to debrief about this new experience, several things became obvious. For example, not all wi-fi connections are created equal. Some people have poor connections which makes participation difficult and less rewarding than it might be. Each leader is challenged to try to help those folks but also not spend too much time trying to solve technical problems. My guess is that Zoom has now become a way of



life for most of us. Technical issues should not cause anyone to be left behind.

Stay tuned for the [Long Novel “weekend” in 2021](#). It is quite likely that the same format will be used and another challenging book will cause us to come together for the very rewarding experience of reading and discussing a great work of literature.

Inside Poetry: Mysterious whys and hows of structure are revealed

By Paula Weinberger

Fifty attendees, from as far away as Australia, France, the Netherlands, Canada and Mexico, had high praise for [Poetry Weekend](#) 2020 including kudos for the Zoom experience. Day 1 was devoted to the traditional poetry discussion groups with eight or nine participants per group. A new addition, an Open Mic, giving interested participants a chance to read a poem of their own or one of their favorites, was received enthusiastically.

The highlight, however, was the seminar on Day 2 by guest poet Rebecca Foust. Her topic **Poetry in Form: Freedom in Chains** was an eye opener for many. In the morning, Rebecca discussed popular “received” forms as well as newer created or “nonce” forms. Participants were provided with a handout that included the poems discussed as well as resources for further reading. In the afternoon, following an interview with poet and colleague, Cathy Shea, Rebecca talked about her interest in the sonnet, and read from her acclaimed book of sonnets, *Paradise Drive*. Below are some highlights from Rebecca’s presentations.

Think of **form** as a container for a poem and **mode** as the subject of the poem. Common modes are Narrative, Lyric and Dramatic. A form is always searching for the right subject, and that subject requires the appropriate form. When they come together, you have a poem. It is said that each poem has its ideal form.

Two key elements of form are: **rhyme** (end line or internal), and **meter** (the poem’s heartbeat or pulse). By combining forms, new forms are created.

Some forms have specific rhyme schemes and or meter while others are more fluid and open to interpretation. Forms that are widely recognized are called **Received** forms, while new forms, called **Nonce** forms, are continually being created.

Some of the most common **Received** forms are the rhyming couplet and the three- or four-line stanza with a repeated rhyme scheme. Rebecca reviewed forms such as the Ghazal, the Villanelle, and the Sestina that follow a fixed formula. (The sonnet, also a Received form, was discussed in the afternoon session.)

Contemporary Received forms include free verse, the prose poem, the columnar poem, and the mirror poem. In a mirror poem a series of lines is repeated starting with the last line. Columnar poems can be read up, down, across and even backwards.

Two newer Received forms are the **Golden Shovel** - every word of a well-known poem becomes the last word of each line of a new poem, and **Duplex** - a form that combines the rhyme scheme of a Ghazal, the line length and volta (turn) of the sonnet, and repetitive refrains typical of the Blues. (continued)

Why poets write in form

Form can enhance creativity by relieving the terror of the blank page. It gives the poet the next move – he or she knows where the poem is going. Form can also be a way to modulate extreme emotions. Different forms work well with different types of content. Finding the right combination is the poet’s task.

Interview and Reading

Rebecca was the first person in her family to attend college. Her mother, though of limited education, loved books and was the leader of their local Great Books group. Rebecca started writing poems at an early age but put poetry aside to pursue a career as a lawyer. The death of her mother, and the birth of a son on the autism spectrum, rekindled her passion for writing. The result was her first two books, *Mom’s Canoe* and *Dark Heart*. After taking a few poetry courses, Rebecca decided to get her MFA and devote herself to writing and teaching poetry.

Her Writing Process

Rebecca is a collector. Even during her non-writing period, she still collected articles, lines of poetry, and ideas that could be developed into poems. These have continued to be a resource for her writing. Every so often, a poem will come in its entirety. Even if driving, Rebecca will pull over to transcribe such a poem word for word. These poems rarely need editing unlike the extensive editing on her “idea” poems.

What Feeds Rebecca’s Writing

Rebecca stays involved with poetry writing activities such as retreats, workshops and conferences. She

recommends that anyone interested in writing poetry join a group where poems are shared and critiqued.

A Short Intro to the Sonnet

One of the most popular poetic forms is the sonnet. Poets continue to modify the traditional sonnet forms (Shakespearean and Petrarchan) to the degree that there is now no definitive definition of a sonnet. If it has enough of the characteristics of a sonnet, and feels like a sonnet, it's a sonnet. Some characteristics of the sonnet are:

- They have fourteen lines.
- Traditional sonnets have a set rhyme scheme; modern sonnets often don't rhyme.
- Sonnets have some type of meter (number of beats per line) but some modern sonnets have no set meter.
- Most sonnets have a turn called a volta such as a change of tense, place, pitch and may include words like "but," "yet," or "even so."
- Sonnets often pose a rhetorical or logical question to be answered.
- Sonnets tend to be lyrical rather than narrative.

Reading from *Paradise Drive*

The sonnets in *Paradise Drive* depict the journey of a character named Pilgrim as she moves from her home in rural Pennsylvania to wealthy Marin County in California. The sonnets are sharp, satirical and often humorous.

About Rebecca Foust

Rebecca Foust is the author of six books including *Paradise Drive* and *The Unexploded Ordnance Bin*, and *ONLY*, a new book forthcoming from Four Way Books in 2022. Recognitions include the Pablo Neruda, CP Cavafy and James Hearst poetry prizes, Marin Poet Laureateship, and fellowships from Hedgebrook, MacDowell, and Sewanee. Foust works as the Poetry Editor for *Women's Voices for Change*, and you can read her weekly poetry column here, <https://womensvoicesforchange.org/category/arts-culture/poetry>

To learn more about Rebecca Foust, check out her interview in the *Marin Poets Live* series, sponsored by the *Free Library of Marin*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ju-LBZr7nBs>.

What Becky Foust said to me

By Rick White

Words resonate both in sound and meaning to an attentive ear. Each word in a poem is like a chord in a musical composition. Its sound plays a role in the sound of a passage. The notes in a chord are like the letters in a word, each a part of what is voiced. Each word, like each chord, both contributes to and derives meaning from those which precede and follow it. Rules govern the way words are used as they do the way chords are. Both are governed by their context. Letters are notes and words are chords. Musical passages without lyrics are figurative sentences. They have figurative meanings that will range widely among listeners. Lyrics provide one of many possible literal interpretations.

***Save the Date: Poetry Weekend 2021
November 13 -14 via Zoom!***

The poet attends to both the tenor of verbal expression and its complex of overt meanings. He attends to the overtones of both sound and meaning as they affect one another, in their sum creating new or heightened meaning. Pace, intensity, and rhythm are components of both verbal and musical composition and they too contribute to the sum of meaning. The totality may relate to natural human rhythm as iambic pentameter is known to correspond to the comfortable length of a human breath and other meters are known to create greater or lesser discomfort.

Most who listen to music hear and sense the melody, harmony, and rhythm without thinking about it. Listeners may recognize what instruments are playing and enjoy the challenge of figuring out the combinations. The lovely sounds of a clarinet-bassoon duet are a favorite of Beethoven's and my own, maybe because I play the clarinet.

A step further, usually with a level of performance experience or musical training, one may sense the "time signature." Common are measures in 4/4, DAH duh duh duh ("quadruple time, or "common time"); 3/4, DAH duh duh ("triple time" and "waltz time"); 2/4, DAH duh ("duple time"); and 6/8, (commonly "march time") DAH duh duh DAH duh duh, and (less commonly) 9/8, DAH duh duh DAH duh duh DAH duh duh, heard often in Rossini overtures. Dave Brubeck, in "Time Out," popularized 5/4 time. Measures sound as DAH duh duh DAH duh, trickier.

Few listeners will sense the key in which a piece is written: C Major, F minor, etc. I can detect major and minor, and when the music shifts from one to the other, but not the key. I wonder if it is common for professionals to recognize the key.

In poetry, iambic pentameter, a characteristic rhythm in Shakespeare's plays, takes the form of five pairs of syllables, commonly accented as duh DAH duh DAH duh DAH duh DAH duh DAH. A poet may apply regular rhythms, but, for most, they are not so noticeable as in music.

From Becky Foust's presentation, now I perceive that an accomplished listener, unlike myself, can hear poetry and be moved and enlightened by passages the way music can do this for me and others at my level. Unless the meaning of a poem is obvious, I struggle with the help of fellow readers to figure it out. I have not learned to hear and understand it the way I do music, or for that matter, painting, architectural design, and other fine arts. Poetry requires more sophistication.

It's not as bad as it looks!

By Melanie Blake

To be honest, when Northern California went into lockdown in early March of this year, I did not stop to think whether online book discussions would work. I simply plunged into it because there was no other option. By April, it was clear the small literary travel company I run would not be able to host any of our trips or hold our annual weeklong event in Toronto. Almost overnight, all the things we had done for nearly twenty years were no longer possible.

Like millions of others, we got a Zoom account. We started running discussions, beginning with *Pale Horse*, *Pale Rider*, Katherine Anne Porter's strange and beautiful account of a journalist caught up in the flu pandemic of 1918–19. There were glitches, to be sure. Book shipment times were very long in the initial days of the pandemic, and we put everything together so quickly that I had time only to get an ebook. Leading a discussion with the book on my phone, which served as a second screen, was frustrating at best. Getting discussions started felt especially awkward. Those few minutes before a discussion starts, when small talk usually flows naturally, were punctuated by silences just a few seconds too long. It was alarmingly easy to not realize a latecomer had been in the virtual waiting room for ten minutes or (gulp) longer.

But it got easier, discussions got better, and it became apparent that Zoom did not stop participants at Classical Pursuits from bringing the same level of energy and sharpness to online discussion that they had in real life. I was very happy when many groups in the San Francisco Great Books Council took their discussions online. These groups have been carefully nurtured over many years, often decades, and it seems to me people value them more than ever for their ability to keep us connected.

Zoom has not been a replacement for in-person discussion; there is just no way to replicate the feeling of being all together in the same place. I can't wait to see all my friends from Great Books again—to sit around a fire at Asilomar or to arrive at the summer picnic sweaty but energized after the bike ride up to Tilden park, ready to sit under a tree with a good book and a cold soda. And as Zoom and software like it remain the only way to hold events at the moment, it can sometimes be hard to muster up enthusiasm for another Zoom call.

But to my mind Zoom has been a very good alternative to in-person discussion. Discussions are lively and focused, participants still ready to take on big questions. Zoom also offers some obvious advantages over in-person meetings—Great Bookies who have moved away can rejoin their friends in Northern California. Those who could not travel or drive can now be part of a group. The read-as-you-go format used at this year's Long Novel Weekend can make the commitment seem less daunting to people still working full time. And at Classical Pursuits, we've found Zoom discussions allow for more experimentation with start times, discussion lengths, works discussed, and more. Now that we have the basics down, we're starting to look at other possibilities, such as multimedia sessions or making Zoom more accessible to those with hearing difficulties.

Many event planners believe that virtual events are here to stay, even after we start to get together again in person. The challenge for the Great Books Council and other organizations will be to find the right balance in creating different types of events that respond to changing needs. I'm confident our collective love of reading and talking about great books will help us all meet this challenge and grow stronger than ever.

Harry Truman said, "**Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers.**"



Melanie Blake is executive director of [Classical Pursuits](http://www.classicalpursuits.com), headquartered in Toronto, Canada, and she is a member of the GBSF executive committee here. May 23-29 she will be a co-leader on "Paris' Thinking Spaces: Drinking Places," a literary tour by Worldwide Quest, with which Classical Pursuits is now a partner. Email: info@classicalpursuits.com for information about that and other Classical Pursuits and Worldwide Quest worldwide literary travels.

Zoom works for local groups

By Jan Vargo

How are our Great Books reading groups faring during the pandemic? For the annual census of our groups in Northern California (see <https://www.greatbooksncal.org/find-a-group>), I recently attempted to contact all 37 groups. Although three groups did not respond to my requests for information, I was able to get some information on those three groups from the websites of their sponsoring organizations.

Only one of the 37 groups that met last year has quit meeting permanently due to dwindling attendance and difficulty of reaching the meeting site. Most of that group's remaining members are now participating in other Great Books groups and events by Zoom. Long-time Great Books aficionado Louise DiMattio founded a new group in San Francisco, so that keeps our total at 37 groups in Northern California. Her group is called the Older Women's League (OWL) and meets on Zoom.

At least 28 groups are meeting on Zoom and almost all report that the meetings are going very well. A few indicated that they may not go back to meeting in person after the pandemic. Another six groups are temporarily on hold until safer times. One group has so many members that it requested that we not list it this year. I was unable to determine whether the two remaining groups were on hold or meeting on Zoom.

Anita Johnson, the director of the Great Books Program at Monterey Peninsula College, was pleased to

report that the enrollment in their Great Books courses is increasing. These courses are meeting now on Zoom and their book club will resume meeting in February, also on Zoom. It is encouraging that new people, especially young people, are learning about Great Books in their program. We hope that they will form new groups after graduation. The number of groups in Northern California has fluctuated between a high of 56 in 1998 when the annual census began and a low of 32.

Most groups on this year's list are accepting new members, but some require membership in their organization; some have waiting lists, so if you are interested, contact the group for more information. Please let us know if you decide to start a new group. Listing your group on our website is an excellent way to attract new members. I want to thank all the group contacts who responded to my requests for updates on groups in our Great Books community. Happy reading in 2021!

Don't miss this year's

***Barbara McConnell Asilomar
Weekend***

Friday Evening, April 16th

to

Sunday Afternoon, April 18th

***All discussions and get-togethers will
be Online hosted on Zoom.***

***Make sure you check our special
rates for seniors, students,
newcomers and leaders***

Space is limited so Register Today!

<http://www.greatbooksncal.org/asilomar>

2021 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

Events where noted will be held on Zoom.

FEBRUARY	MARCH	MAY
2/20: SF Mini-Retreat: <i>Familiar</i> , a play by Danai Gurira. "Interpreter of Maladies," a short story by Jhumpa Lahiri. Zoom.	3/13: Leader-Reader Workshop: Demonstration, practice leading, discussion. Zoom.	5/15: Gold Country Mini-Retreat: The book is <i>Seven Years in Tibet</i> , by Heinrich Harrer. Then a film adaptation starring Brad Pitt, David Thewlis, and B.D. Wong. Zoom?
JULY - AUGUST	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER
7/10: Annual Meeting: Reading to be determined. Zoom. 8/7,14,21: Long Novel Event: in three sessions, <i>The Betrothed</i> , by Alessandro Manzoni, Robert Penman Translation. Zoom.	10/??: Wine Country Mini-Retreat: A once-banned book, yet to be selected, plus a related film. Venue to be determined.	11/13-14: Poetry Weekend: Readings to be determined. Zoom.

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California

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The GBSF annual financial report one-page summary can be seen on our website.

The full report can be obtained from Brian Mahoney, Treasurer, at gbbrianmahoney@gmail.com.