



Great Books Discussion Leaders E-Newsletter

January 24, 2021

Introduction to the Discussion Leaders e-Newsletter

The goal of this twice-a-year newsletter is to bring useful information to Great Books discussion leaders, especially local group discussion leaders. If there is anyone else in your group who you think



might be interested in what we cover, please pass this along to them. If you send us their email address by reply to this newsletter, we'll add them to our list and be sure they receive future newsletters.

What topics interest you? For what problems do you need answers? We've picked three topics to get us started. Let us know if we're on target:

“Anthology Review” – a review of an anthology published by the Great Books Foundation by a discussion leader who has used the anthology and has a definite opinion. We'll do a different anthology each issue. Have you used an anthology for which you have an opinion, good or bad? Let us know.

“Tips for Effective Leading” - suggestions for how to handle some of the problems discussion leaders actually encounter. We don't have all the answers but we're willing to start the conversation. We'll support what's taught in our annual Leader/Reader Workshop, the next one of which is scheduled for Saturday, March 13, 2021. Let us know the problems facing you.

“Local Discussion Group Profiles” – each issue we'll profile a different local discussion group. What are they reading and why? How are their meetings going? What ideas do they have for attracting participants? The profiles will be based on interviews with the leaders at the selected discussion group. What would you like to know about what others are doing?

So that's it. We hope this newsletter fills a need for you. We would appreciate your feedback, positive or negative. Send us your thoughts to greatbooksnca.newsletter@gmail.com.

Brian Cunningham

Assistant e-Newsletter Editor



Profile - Great Books Auburn, CA

Donna Reynolds was the youngest member when she began attending meetings 20 years ago. Now she is the oldest member of the Auburn Great Books group. She drives 15 miles from her home to the Placer County Library in downtown Auburn, the group's meeting place for its entire 40 years of continuous

meetings. Participants are drawn from California's "gold country" from as far away as 30 miles. Once the

Library threatened to impose a fee for using its room. But that threat was easily resolved since several of the group's members are also members of the Library Board.

This group of retirees, evenly divided between men and women, has dwindled in number in recent years to about five or six regular participants. They rely principally on word of mouth to attract new members even though the Library lists in its newsletter the group's second Tuesday of the month afternoon meetings. In addition, the annual Gold Country Mini-Retreat which the group hosts in a church in central Auburn also provides the group with visibility.

The Auburn bookies have been meeting via Zoom since the lockdown began. They report it has been going very well. If the pandemic remains a problem in May, they will conduct the Gold Country Mini-Retreat via Zoom. The book and the movie for this year's retreat, scheduled for May 15, 2021, is *Seven Years in Tibet*.

Currently, the Auburn group is reading Volume III of the *Introduction to Great Books*. They enjoy this Great Books Foundation anthology even though they are becoming "a little tired" of ancient philosophers. The increasingly difficulty of obtaining copies of this anthology caused Donna recently to go online to find a used copy for the newest member. One of the books they have particularly enjoyed in the past is the Foundation's *Great Conversations* anthology. Books are selected by the group as a whole. The group meets 12 months each year for one and one-half to two-hours. Each meeting begins at 1:00 PM starting with about 30 minutes discussing other books someone in the group has read or heard about recently. The group passes around responsibility for leading discussions to everyone in turn. Currently Jim Vasser is the discussion leader. These readers need no special techniques to involve everyone in the discussion.

Brian Cunningham
Assistant e-Newsletter Editor

Tips for Effective Leading - Zoom

Here are a few tips to keep in mind when leading a discussion on Zoom:

1. **Lighting** - make sure your face is well-lit from the front.

If the light source is above or behind you, your face will be obscured in shadows.

Natural light from a window is ideal, but at night you should sit so that you are facing a lamp or another source of good light.

2. **Motion** - make sure your device is stable and in a fixed position.

If you are holding an iPad or a laptop in your hands, your frame will lurch and jiggle with every move you make. This is distracting and can even cause mild motion sickness in sensitive viewers.

3. **Ambient Noise** - choose a dependably quiet location.

Leaf blowers, toilets flushing, dogs barking and other everyday sounds become annoying if they interrupt a productive discussion.

Remind everyone to use their "mute" buttons if background noise is unavoidable.

Louise Morgan
Training Coordinator



Anthology Review – Tube Talk

If you are in a long-standing Great Books group that relies on the Great Books published anthologies, you may be getting to the point where the group decides to read the newer collections. My local group did just that, we elected to read the newest entertainment anthologies. We started with *Tube Talk* and I have to say, I wasn't impressed.

It started with an article by Emily Nussbaum called *The Great Divide*, an examination of the legacy of the *All in the*



Family and its impact on television. We had a really good discussion about it but sadly, not a true Great Books discussion.

It's always been my understanding that Great Books discussions come from and refer back to the text. But the newer anthologies seem to harken to the first part of the idea – coming from the text. They do very little to the second – referring back to the text. Many of these articles don't dig in deep to the ideas they are professing. For instance, Nussbaum writes "Archie was TV royalty because fans saw him as one of his own." A powerful statement. She then moves on to an examination of what "bad fans" are but it is dropped soon after the idea is started. We all love classics because writers from Plato to

Hemingway and everyone in between flesh their ideas out. They give us their notions of universal concepts, in this case racism, sexism, entertainment value and its ethical responsibility, and others that Archie Bunker challenged every week to "60 percent of the viewing public" every Saturday night. But there was no deeper reflection on these ideas, only the kind of gloss that we see on TV every day.

The book includes an article by George Carlin himself, *Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television*. Now I remember this controversy when I was a kid, when there were entire albums by Richard Pryor or George Carlin with words that could curl toes. But this article offers no examination, and really no thesis of a big idea. Our discussion waned because today, all those words are said on television and without some guidance from the author there was nothing to discuss.

The non-fiction piece *Brad Carrigan, American* failed to keep our interest and the promise of an examination of the Netflix empire did little to spur conversation, especially since most of the group had the shows that are deemed right but none of what seemed wrong, which in my opinion is much more rich conversation. At one point Karen Hill-Scott says "When people say kids today are smarter, I disagree. They're just more exposed." Pivotal but it's left there hanging with no further reflection.

The book examines great points of TV history like Kristi Yamaguchi's rise or the pivotal *Mad Men* series that started the "binging" craze. Alas, though, there were no great ideas coming from the readings. They move to TV news but again, no big ideas (though there was an article of interest about the OJ Simpson trial). Much nostalgia arose with the article about the Moon Landing, but again, no big ideas. You'd even think that questions about justice, legalities, political pundits and their roles, truth telling and fact checking would have arisen from the politics section but sadly not.

Much of the book, sadly, is lacking in spurring conversations about "Big Ideas", a long-standing promise of a Great Books conversation. My group did a great job of conversing and reminiscing but the discussions left me lacking. I'd close my computer (we meet on Zoom now) with no thoughts rumbling in my head. Other than, "Hey, I haven't watched *Mad Men* in a while. Maybe it's time for a binge during this stay-at-home order." We've moved on to *Double Features* which examines film. It's shaping up to be similar to *Tube Talk* but with my love of all things movies I bring a new enthusiasm to the book. Our third discussion should show where my tastes lie. But so far, the book is a great reminiscence but not a great idea. Happy Reading all!!!

Sheri Kindsvater
Fair Oaks Group

Let's Zoom and Discuss Great Books

Are you interested in hosting a Great Books discussion by Zoom but not sure where to start? We can help! Great Books has a Zoom room that can host meetings for up to 100 participants. Discussion Leaders may reserve the Zoom room at no fee. GB Publicity Coordinator, Caroline Van Howe, manages the Great Books Zoom and can help with setting up meetings, invites, and basic support. Discussion leaders are able to manage the Zoom room themselves. You can request one meeting or a recurring series, say every Tuesday at 7 pm.



Interested? Contact Caroline at: cvanhowe@gmail.com

Useful Quick Links

GBSF Events

[San Francisco Mini-Retreat](#)
[February 20, 2021](#)

[Leader-Reader Workshop](#)
[March 13, 2021](#)

[Barbara McConnell Asilomar](#)
[Great Books Weekend](#)
[April 16-18, 2021](#)

[Gold Country Mini-Retreat](#)
[May 15, 2021](#)

[Annual Meeting and Book Discussion](#)
[July 10, 2021](#)

[Long Novel Weekend](#)
[August 7, 14, and 21, 2021](#)

[Banned Books in Wine Country](#)
[Mini-Retreat](#)
[October 2021](#)

[Poetry Weekend](#)
[November 13, 14, 2021](#)

Other Quick Links

Our Website
<https://www.greatbooksncal.org>

Reading Matters, published and edited by Rick White, is our premier publication. To read the Winter-Spring 2021 edition just [CLICK HERE](#).
