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Great Books Discussion Leaders E-Newsletter February 28, 2022

Calling All Discussion Leaders

Since no one has complained, the content of the first two Discussion Leader e-Newsletters must have been on target for you. If so, send Yes or if not send No to briancnngam@gmail.com. Of



course, you could say more if you wish. If you have used a Great Books published anthology you liked or disliked, tell us about that too so we can share it with other discussion leaders. Finally, if there is a subject relating to leading a Shared Inquiry discussion and about which you would like more information, let us know that too. We'll do our best to get useful information for you. Notwithstanding rumors to the contrary, silence is not golden.

Brian Cunningham
Assistant E-Newsletter Editor

Berkeley Poetry Group

In the time before Zoom the Berkeley Poetry Group met at Nina Gibson's home (and hopes to do so again). They have met each year since Carol Hochberg-Holker founded them in 2009. Thirteen poetry enthusiasts got together, the number being determined by the number of chairs to fit in Carol's living room where they began meeting. For the past two years they've been meeting via Zoom but are considering resuming in person. Kay White believes meeting in a home has been an important part of establishing and maintaining the fellowship of the group.



This group operates somewhat differently than other Great Books groups. Each participant chooses a

poem of one to two pages in length, circulates it to the group a week or so ahead of their meeting and then, if it is selected for discussion, leads the discussion of the poem. There are few rules about what poems may be selected. Poems can't be the participant's own poem. They avoid political but not religious discussion. During their two-hour meeting from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm on the first Thursday of each month they usually discuss 5 to 7 poems.

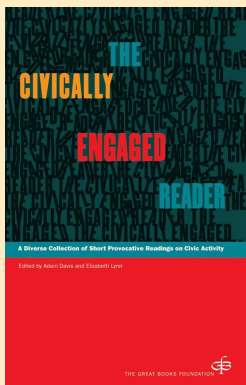
The 13 participants including four men, live in Berkeley, Oakland, San Francisco, and Marin. Seven are original participants. All are over 60 years of age and retired although a couple are active artists or poets. Membership is not formally closed but they believe 13 is the right number. When it becomes necessary to select new members, the entire group participates in the selection discussion.

Usually, each meeting has 10 to 12 participants, all of whom contribute to the discussion. Occasionally the discussion becomes "stuck" when a poem is particularly difficult to understand. This occurred recently with a John Donne poem. As a result, Donne's poetry has a cautionary future in this group.

Claudia O'Callaghan, who was one of those there in the beginning, recalls that founder Carol Hochberg-Holker wanted to use Shared Inquiry strictly, *i.e.*, refer only to the text of the poem without reference to outside sources. But Claudia doesn't think poetry lends itself easily to this format. The group has discussed many poems where they did not know what the poet had in mind; therefore, they used "projection": if this were my poem, this is what I would mean. They do honor the rules of Shared Inquiry by not discussing the poet or any other sources until AFTER the poem has been discussed. In founding the group, Carol advised newcomers to Shared Inquiry to select a poem for discussion and to think of questions to which they do not know the answer, open-ended interpretive questions. You may love a poem, but ask, "Is it discussable?" With each poem, participants are asked to include the year it was written and the poet's dates of birth and death.

The group has a tradition, when meeting in person, of enjoying a potluck dinner together each January for which Nina Gibson prepares a pot roast. The tradition grew from the group reading a poem entitled "Pot Roast" by Mark Strand. Nina said, "if we're going to discuss Pot Roast, let's have one." And so, they continue to celebrate Mark Strand and his subject.

Brian Cunningham
Assistant e-Newsletter Editor
Based on conversations and emails
With members of the group
February, 2022



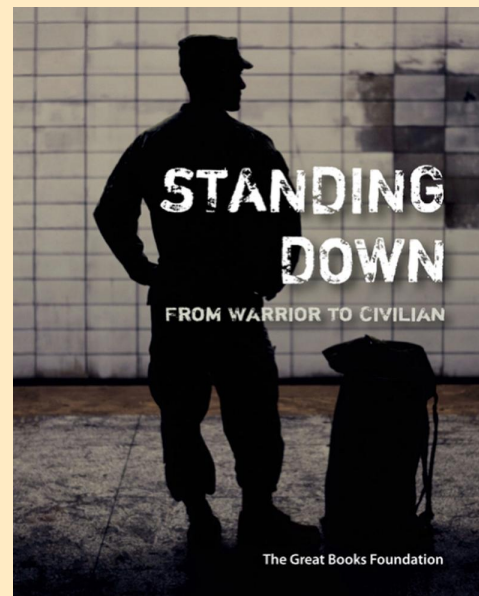
Civically Engaged Reader

Brian Mahoney says the Tri-Valley group's worst discussions have centered on the Great Books Foundation published anthology, *Civically Engaged Reader*. The

GBF *Anniversary Series* consisted of themes. It seems to Brian that some of the selections were forced to fit the theme. He thinks themes are all right if generated from the selective literature. The Asilomar event usually does not have themes, but Colby University's event always does have a theme. He would not offer any hard-fast rule either way but would not force a selection to fit a theme.

By the way, he says the best GBF volume for the Tri-Valley group has been *Standing Down*.

Based on correspondence with Brian Mahoney
Brian Cunningham



ATTENTION DISCUSSION LEADERS:

Do you have a favorite or most disliked GBF anthology? Or is there an anthology you are curious about? If so, send an email to briancnngnam@gmail.com, and we'll find someone to review it for us.

Reading for Questions

One technique that can be quite helpful as you prepare to lead a Great Books discussion is called "Reading for Questions." The idea is that leaders should avoid over-preparing for discussions by reading the text multiple times and trying to comprehend and interpret every nuance of the story before they face the group, which is something most of us tend to do.

Reading for Questions can be viewed as an exercise in delayed gratification — the leader refrains from deciding on an interpretation until he/she receives input from the group. In that way the leader can experience the occasional "Ah-ha!" moment when someone comes up with a novel or insightful analysis.

Advocates of this technique recommend focusing on the choices the author made, whether it's the actions of characters in a play, or the type of argument employed to persuade readers, or the specific word(s) used in the poem or story.

This technique isn't easy and doesn't come naturally. You are encouraged to read the text without lingering on how to answer the questions that inevitably arise. Simply note the questions and move on. Then, on a subsequent reading, you answer any fact-based questions (who, what, when, where) and try to create some follow-up queries for the open-ended questions (why, how). It is said that you are on the right track if you complete your initial reading with many questions and few answers.

Leading **Non-Fiction** selections is a special case. It is especially challenging because those texts usually lack ambiguity and, therefore, do not offer many opportunities for interpretation. However, there are some useful questions that could be put to the group so they can delve more deeply into what the author is saying and enhance their appreciation of his arguments. Here is a short outline that is distributed during the annual Leader/Reader Workshop:

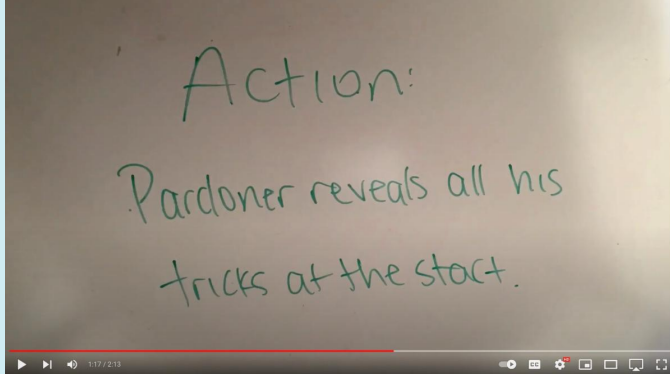
Non-Fiction is about issues and ideas

1. Reading them requires understanding the author's terms and following his arguments.
2. Authors often draw parallels, develop contrasts or variations, and make restatements or summaries.
3. Ask about:
 - steps in the author's argument that you don't follow;
 - what is the author's point of view;
 - what is the problem the author is presenting;
 - who is the author's audience;
 - is the author's premise accurate;
 - are there inconsistencies in the author's argument;
 - is the author trying to be persuasive; does he succeed;
 - are the author's analogies valid;
 - ask what assumptions the author is making;
 - if the text is very old then the meaning of some words may have changed; try replacing it with a modern word to see if it still works;
 - ask why we still read this text; why is it important;



**Do you have questions about
Asking Questions?**

One of the concerns that is often voiced



by discussion leaders is how to formulate the best questions to stimulate discussion. For some groups, the role of discussion leader is shared amongst the group, while with other groups one or two members may lead. It is usually the role of the discussion leader to kick off the discussion with an opening question and then to broaden the discussion with interpretative questions.

Louise Morgan, a member of the Great Books San Francisco Executive Committee who heads up the Great Books Leader/Reader Workshop team, has been working on creating resources to help with the tricky topic of “asking questions”. Louise, along with her granddaughter Lydia (also an Executive Committee member) have developed a series of short videos on this topic which are available for viewing on our new [YouTube Channel](#).

Please check out these informative videos for help in getting some of your questions answered.

Fact questions vs. interpretive questions **Opening questions**

If you have any feedback or would like to suggest other topics for other videos, please contact Louise at: louise-morgan@sbcglobal.net

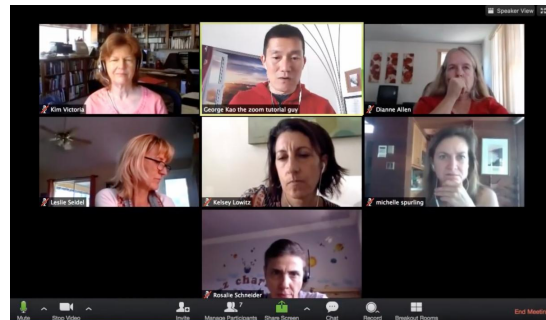
Caroline Van Howe

Publicity Chair

February 6, 2022

Discussion Leaders may reserve the Great Books Zoom Room – at no fee

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 and 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

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO EVENTS CALENDAR (Spring - Summer 2022)



Barbara McConnell Asilomar Weekend

April 22-24, 2022

Format: In-person

One of the major events of the year for

the Great Books Council of San Francisco is the spring weekend at the Asilomar Conference Center in Monterey, California, titled The Barbara McConnell Weekend at Asilomar in honor of a beloved Great

Books leader. During the weekend there are discussions of poetry, a work of nonfiction, a work of theatre and a work of fiction. The beauty of the area is conducive to stimulating discussions and convivial parties.

We will be returning to the beautiful Monterey Peninsula this Spring to immerse ourselves in a weekend of provocative readings, engaging discussions and in-person camaraderie!

Mark your calendars for the weekend of April 22-24, 2022. We are introducing some new features to our Barbara McConnell Weekend as well as reviving some from years past. We're dramatically rolling back prices by providing senior discounts and special pricing for students and 1st-time attendees. We will also be going back to the previous schedule where the 2nd Saturday discussion of the fictional work will be after dinner. This will allow us to have a meet-and-greet catered social before dinner and leave time for those post-discussion living room meet-ups. In addition, you'll now have time to explore Carmel and Monterey on Saturday after lunch.

For those who are our hard-working local group coordinators, be on the lookout for your special invite and event planned for Saturday afternoon.

Registration is now open! Please click this link for a flyer with all the details: [2022 event flyer](#)

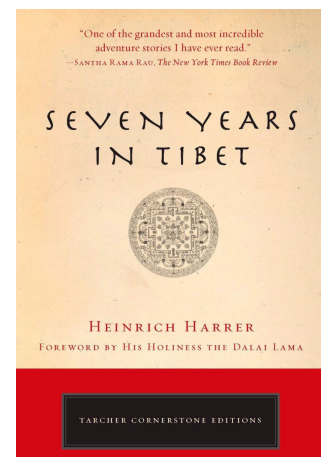
To register for the 2022 Asilomar Weekend, please click here: [registration page](#)

Gold Country Mini-Retreat

May 21, 2022

Format: In-person or via Zoom – To be determined

Since 2010 we've held annual Gold Country mini-retreats in beautiful Auburn, CA, nestled in the Sierra foothills. Like our mini-retreats in San Francisco and Calistoga, this is a one-day event that combines discussion of a book (usually nonfiction) with a screening of a related film. There is a small charge, and lunch is provided.



Please join us in Spring 2022 for the next Gold Country Mini-Retreat on 5/21/22. We will be discussing *Seven Years in Tibet* by Heinrich Harrer

Questions? Please send email to greatbooksncal.webmaster@gmail.com.



Leader/Reader Workshop

June 2022

Format: To be determined

Join our Great Books workshop to meet with enthusiastic readers from around northern California, brush up on your leading style, discover new ideas,

and practice discussion leading in a supportive setting. Bring friends from your discussion group.

Lead by Example

The Leader-Reader Workshop helps develop confidence in Great Books discussions. We'll spend the day demonstrating, discussing, and practicing techniques for effectively leading and participating in discussions. We'll trade tips on having good discussions and what gets in their way, and we'll practice our technique in mini discussions, reviewing what worked.

Experience the power of the *shared inquiry method*! This workshop is offered annually by the Great Books Council of San Francisco and is for all levels of leaders and readers. There is a small charge to cover expenses, a break-even fee.

The next workshop will be in June 2022. Further information about the event, including how to register, will be posted on our website as soon as it's available.

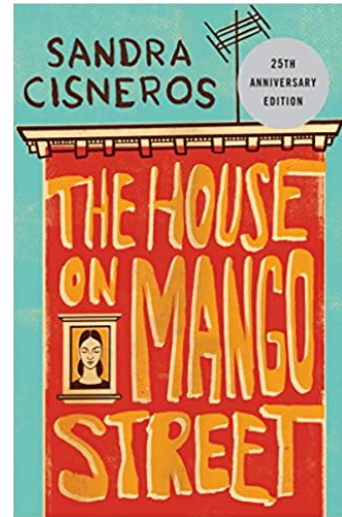
Annual Meeting and Book Discussion

July 16, 2022

Each summer, the Council holds a brief annual meeting, board elections, and then the *pièce de résistance*: a book discussion!

Format: Online via Zoom

We'll start with a quick set of formalities: delivery of the Council's Annual Report, followed by annual elections of officers and the Executive Committee.



Then we'll do what we like to do most: have a book discussion! This year's book is *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. "Acclaimed by critics, beloved by readers of all ages, taught everywhere from grade schools to universities across the country, and translated all over the world, this short novel is the remarkable story of Esperanza Cordero, a young Latina girl growing up in Chicago, inventing for herself who and what she will become. Few other books in our time have touched so many readers."

We'll be reading the paperback version of this book, ISBN-10: 9780679734772. It is the Vintage Contemporary Classic 25th Anniversary Edition. It is available at your local bookstore for \$11.95.

The Annual Meeting is free and open to anyone who has attended a Northern California Great Books event or discussion group during the past year. Please join us in July 2022!

Questions? Please send email to greatbooksncal.president@gmail.com.

Long Novel Series

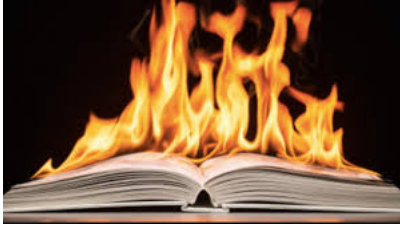
August 2022

Format: To be determined

In an ordinary summer, the San Francisco Council devotes a weekend to discussing a single long work of fiction. Please join us in August 2022 for an examination of a long novel that spans multiple discussions. Please check back on [this site](#) in early 2022 for information about the 2022 Long Novel, including how to register for the event.

Questions? Please send email to greatbooksncal.president@gmail.com

Banned Books Mini-Retreat



The Banned Books Mini-Retreat is an annual examination of literature that organizations have tried to suppress. The next Banned Books Mini-Retreat is scheduled for October 2022.

Please check back on [this site](#) in 2022 for information about the exact date, readings, and how to register.

In recent years during the Banned Books Mini-Retreat, we've enjoyed discussions of book, and sometimes film, versions of *Fahrenheit 451*, *Animal Farm*, *Native Son*, *Lord of the Flies*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *Othello*.

Questions? Please send email to kindsvater@aol.com.

Caroline Van Horne

Publicity Chair

February 6, 2022

To read the current *Reading Matters* click on the logo to the right.

Reading Matters

Introduction

Reading Matters is the principal house organ of the Great Books Council of San Francisco. At this writing, it is in its 27th year of publication. It is an important public face of the Council. For most of the years from its founding until the present it has been edited and published by Rick White, assisted by individuals in editing and production under the fiscal eye of the treasurer and oversight by the executive committee. While Rick has continuously been publisher, for a few years apiece Mary Wood and Chuck Scarcliff served as its editor with delegated responsibility for its appearance and content. Guiding both its publishing and editing are its role as a significant public face of the Council, its policies and programs, within the mission of the Great Books Foundation. Articles are written often by the leaders of activities and programs of the Council and at other times mostly by the editor.

Publisher

The publisher is responsible for proposing to the executive committee of the Council any changes in its approach and its budget as these arise from time to time. The approach has been to function faithfully to report on and reflect the policies, practices, and activities of the Council as they may be of interest to its members and to stimulate interest and participation from the broader public. The budget has been based on the number of issues in the coming year and their estimated cost of printing and mailing. These are in turn determined by the number of pages, always in multiples of four based on two pages on each side of and 11" by 17" sheet of newsprint. The maximum has been 16 pages,

including articles, art, flyers, credits, and postal information. Publisher, editors, and writers are unpaid. Printing has been purchased from local vendors and delivery by the US Post Office. Increasingly, mailed copies have been replaced by electronic. GBSF has no personnel costs; all else is done by volunteers. Where the publisher is not also the editor, the publisher is responsible for recruiting and overseeing the editor.

Editor-in-Chief

The editor, or the publisher in a dual role as editor, recruits and selects contributors, articles and artwork for each issue, largely determined by the GBSF annually recurring events and activities. The editor shapes the issue, writes its headlines, sets its tone, works to bring out the personality of the contributors, and to enliven things with touches of humor and novelty, sometimes literary, sometimes even silly, that add charm of a sort to what might otherwise seem old where the same blend of activities is reported year after year. A theme, serious, facetious, or both, may emerge in assembling the issue, perhaps highlighted within the nameplate.

Production Volunteers

Issues of Reading Matters are timed for maximum impact on participation in the Council's major events, three annually at this writing—McConnell Spring Conference, Long Novel Weekend, and Poetry Weekend. Thus, *Reading Matters* is published thrice yearly. Attention is also given within this framework to support the mini-retreats, leader training events, and other events that may arise. *Reading Matters*, its printing and mailing, is one of three major overhead expenses of the Council, the others being insurance and electronic communication. The volunteer production activities in *Reading Matters* are generally in this order. Most of the named individual volunteers have carried out these tasks year after year.

Useful 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 2022 edition just [CLICK HERE](#).
