

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

HAPPY READING IN 2026!

Asilomar 2026:

We hold these truths to be self-evident...

By Mark Scardina

This year back in its mid-spring time slot, the Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend returns to Asilomar on the beautiful Monterey Peninsula expanded to four full groups and already filling quickly. This year's selections promise lively, provocative discussions in an unforgettable setting.



Signing the Declaration, July 4, 1776

We begin Friday evening with an internationally renowned lineup of poets. Greece's acclaimed Constantine P. Cavafy sets the tone with *The God Abandons Antony*, followed by Pulitzer Prize-winner Lisel Mueller and her reflective *Why We Tell Stories*. Their perspectives pair intriguingly with Polish Nobel laureate Wisława Szymborska's *Dreams*. We close the evening with Walt Whitman's iconic elegy for Lincoln, *O Captain! My Captain!*, a timeless meditation on loss and leadership.

After Saturday's group breakfast, we turn to two works especially fitting for this commemorative year: the *Declaration of Independence*, written 250 years ago, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham*

Jail, which powerfully extends the Declaration's principles into the modern struggle for justice.

Saturday afternoon is free for exploration—Monterey, Pacific Grove, and the Asilomar shoreline await. In the early evening, our always-popular catered Meet & Greet returns, a warm welcome for all and especially for newcomers (we had 17 last year!). After dinner, we gather for Shirley Hazzard's breakthrough Novel *The Transit of Venus*, delving into enduring questions of love, fate, and power. Sunday arrives too soon, but we conclude the weekend with dramatic flair: *Inherit the Wind* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. Known to many through the Spencer Tracy–Fredric March film, the play offers rich ground for fresh insight through shared inquiry.

SF Mini-Retreat:

Suddenly everything changes

By Parki Hoeschler

Have you ever pondered buying a first class ticket for the Trans-Siberian Express? To travel across the vast Russian landscape by rail as you await what is, for many, the climax of the journey, the appearance of Lake Baikal? Or maybe to escape something in your life that is not right? But then, suddenly everything changes...

Have you ever wanted to join a geological excursion to the American Southwest? To contemplate life and death under the timelessness of the desert's night sky, surrounded by the immensity of the landscape? Or maybe to locate a situation you believe is not right? And then, suddenly everything changes...



Have you ever had to make an instantaneous decision that led you to a commitment that took you down a long, challenging, nerve-racking path, challenging every fiber of your being?

At 10:00 am on Saturday, February 28, 2026, via Zoom, the San Francisco Mini-Retreat will begin to enjoy the magic of a Shared Inquiry discussion of Percival Everett's 216-page *Telephone*. After a break for lunch, we'll return for a second Zoom discussion from 1:30 - 3:30 to discuss Maylis de Kerangal's 137-page *Eastbound*.

So grab your backpack, take a deep breath, and plunge into these tests of strength --- moral-ethical, intellectual, quick-witted, problem-solving decisions. Registration is now open for the not-to-be-missed SFMR. Join the adventure on February 28. Hoping to see you then!

Long Novel Weekend 2025: Growing up poor in rural Ireland

By Louise DiMattro

This year's Long Novel Weekend covered the three books of Edna O'Brien's The Country Girls Trilogy: *The Country Girls* (published 1960), *The Lonely Girl* (published 1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (published 1964). Each was allotted two hours of discussion, which focused on childhood friends, Kate and Baba, and their efforts to find a rewarding life at the end of the 1950's and early 1960's in Ireland and, ultimately, in England.

To really understand these novels, it is important to consider Catholic Ireland before the Second Vatican Council that was convoked by Pope John XXIII in October of 1962 and which lasted through December 1965. The purpose of the Council was to address the place of the Church in the modern world and to "open the windows and doors" to modern thought in the 20th Century. Prior to this major event in Rome, Ireland was dominated by Medieval thought that resembled another trilogy, Dante's epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. It was in that world that Kate and Baba came of age.

The three novels are known to be quite autobiographical with many of the events of Edna O'Brien's life closely mirrored in these three books. In fact, later in life Edna O'Brien did write her actual autobiography entitled *The Country Girl*. Once you have read all three books, you'll realize that O'Brien herself was a sort of composite of Kate and Baba.

These novels are known for their brutal honesty and frank discussion about sex, birth control, poverty, the patriarchal society of Ireland and the tragedy of alcoholism that overshadowed everything else. All of O'Brien's works were banned in Ireland, even to the degree that luggage and handbags were searched entering the country to make sure no one was using this means to smuggle in a copy.

Edna O'Brien (1930-2024) falls in the line of succession of the great Irish authors. She admitted that she owed

much to James Joyce and, if you know Joyce, you will recognize echoes of his prose in O'Brien's writing. Now, in the 21st Century, the newer Irish writers like Claire Keegan and Anne Enright acknowledge their lineage as they stand on the shoulders of those who have come before them. Fortunately, the tradition continues, more robust than ever, to this day.

Pastoral Poetry: It's out there

By Paula Weinberger

Professor Nicholas Jones, our Poetry Weekend guest speaker in 2024, was invited back this year to talk about Pastoral Poetry. It is not a genre, he explained, but a mode of expression used by poets as diverse as John Milton and Walt Whitman. A poet writing in the modernist style such as Dylan Thomas can employ pastoral imagery as does the metaphysical poet, Andrew Marvell, and the romantic poet, John Keats. While tone and style differ, here are some common themes of the pastoral that were discussed.

Shepherds when they appear in pastoral verse are often depicted lyre in hand. Their song is a coded way of talking about the delights of the poetic process. For example, Christopher Marlowe's poem *The Passionate Shepherd to his Love* (c. 1580) is an invitation to participate in the pleasures of poetry.

*The Shepherds' Swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.*

An opposite strand of the pastoral is that nature as an ideal is rarely perfect. In *The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd* (1600), Sir Walter Raleigh's rebuttal to Marlowe's passionate plea warns the reader that winter with its cold and hardships is sure to come.

*If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every Shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move,
To live with thee, and be thy love.*

*Time drives the flocks from field to fold,
Where rivers rage and Rocks grow cold,
And Philomel becometh dumb,
The rest complains of cares to come.*

The pastoral setting is often referred to as an idyllic state, a yearning for Arcadia or the biblical Eden. Dylan Thomas's poem *Fern Hill* (2009) describes the pleasure and inevitability of the fall from grace.

*Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of
his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.*

Pastoral verse often has a melancholic tone with portents of death. Beauty is fleeting, time unravels all things. A.E. Housman's poem from *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) has become emblematic of that sentiment.

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodlands I will go
Wearing white for Eastertide.*

*Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.*

*And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.*

John Milton chose to use pastoral language in his long elegy, *Lycidas* (1638) - a powerful meditation on the death of his dear friend.

Walt Whitman used a pastoral metaphor in his poem *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* (1865) to mourn the death of Abraham Lincoln, although Lincoln's name and death are never mentioned.

*When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the
western sky in the night,
I mourned, and yet shall mourn with
ever-returning spring.*

Poets frequently have used the pastoral as a coded way to comment on political or social concerns that could not be openly expressed. In Virgil's *Eclogue I* (likely in 41 BCE), amidst the bucolic sentiment we learn of a shepherd's exile from his land during a period when farmers were being dispossessed.

*Meliboeus: Most fortunate old man, no matter if
Your fields are stony or, by the brook's edge,
Marshy
And weedy, still they're yours and enough for you...
But we have to leave our homes and go far away...
Oh, will it ever come to pass that I'll
Come back, after many years, to look upon
The turf roof of what had been my cottage
And the little field of grain that once was mine,
My own little kingdom.*

At its core, the focus of the pastoral is often a form of reflection and remembrance as in Thomas Gray's well-known poem, *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* (1750).

*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

Gold Country Mini-Retreat: Operation Mincemeat

By Kay White

Circle your calendar for a trip to Auburn on Saturday, May 16 to meet our Northern California Great Bookies. The Auburn Great Books group hosts non-fiction discussions each year, and *Operation Mincemeat* is the selection for 2026. We'll discuss the book Saturday morning, have lunch together on site, and watch the 2021 film in the afternoon with a short discussion comparing the movie to the book.



Pan for gold here?

Ben MacIntyre's book describes a hard-to-believe World War II British military operation that helped Allied forces to achieve victory in southern Europe. The *Times Literary Supplement* said: "*Operation Mincemeat* is more an eccentric detective mystery than a gory war story, concerned with the anxieties of thinking rather than the traumas of killing...."

The movie, subtitled *The True Spy Story that Changed the Course of World War II*, premiered in 2021. Colin Firth starred as Ewen Montagu, along with Matthew Macfadyen as Charles Cholmondeley. John Madden directed the film.

The book is available in paperback with several printings. So that we're close to the same page in our discussion, look for ISBN-10 0307-453286 or ISBN-13 978-0307-453280. A registration announcement is coming in January.

Shared Inquiry ...and All That Jazz

By Paul Smith

Mark Scardina, who's been with Great Books his entire life, once told me that book groups resemble jazz ensembles. Coincidentally, I was learning about jazz at the same time.

My wife and I spent two months in New York and, serendipitously, stayed around the corner from a

basement club aptly named Smalls. For the first time, I was close enough to see jazz being created, not just performed. I was infatuated. I spent two out of every three late nights down in that basement, listening.

I love singing and wanted to get involved. I studied the musicians carefully, especially during jam sessions, in which players who had never played together formed new groups on the spot. They signaled their skill levels, directly and indirectly, negotiated a song they all knew well enough to try, settled on a key, and planned how to kick it off.

That's when Mark's analogy landed.

To a casual onlooker, jazz seems smooth and relaxed—a coordinated performance with spontaneous improvisations lighting up the room. In reality, jazz is highly structured and demands a daunting level of discipline. Musicians practice relentlessly. They rely on a strong structure to create a carefully bounded space for spontaneity.

I occasionally hear newcomers say, "Just play a song, and I'll improvise," but that doesn't work.

As a singer, here's the bargain. You learn several songs and memorize the lyrics. You determine which key you can actually sing in. You learn how to communicate the tempo. You practice leading other musicians at the start and end of the song, the trickiest parts. Singers carry a lighter load than the other musicians, who must learn scores of songs before taking their first step toward the stage.

This bargain brings everyone onto the same page and enables coordinated play. The session looks casual and effortless only because everyone knows their parts and has practiced ("chopped wood") for thousands of hours. Each musician makes dozens of discrete decisions that help the group along.



A jazz-discussion combo (a.k.a. GBSF officers)

The same dynamic applies to a book discussion. From the outside, the leader's role can look easy or minimal. Perhaps the leader asks only a handful of questions. That restraint often signals real skill—and a bit of luck at

working with participants who are eager to engage. The leader makes dozens of quiet decisions to nudge the conversation forward, then steps aside. As with jazz, the more relaxed and spontaneous it appears, the more skill usually sits underneath.

Many tenets of the Shared Inquiry method, as outlined on the GBSF website (greatbooksnkal.org/shared-inquiry), also apply to music:

- "Temper the urge to speak with the discipline to listen" becomes: "Temper the urge to solo with the discipline to listen."

Other tenets need no adjustment:

- Substitute the impulse to teach with a passion to learn.
- Hear what is said and listen for what is meant.
- Merge your certainties with others' possibilities.
- Reserve judgment until you can claim understanding.

So here's to the group leaders who do exactly what's needed to induce fascinating discussions!

My opinion: An Eleventh Commandment?

By Louise DiMattio

I treasure my position as a Great Books leader. I lead essays, novels, short stories and poetry throughout the calendar year. As my husband will tell you, I spend hours getting ready to lead. I read the selection multiple times, take copious notes and try to formulate good "why" questions. Despite all of this, I still feel butterflies each time the meeting draws near. But, once the meeting begins and the all-important opening question has been asked, things settle down and usually go pretty well.

Some members of my groups, in preparing for our discussions, have asked their AI what the important interpretive questions are in the reading selection. Then they come to the meeting with answers to those questions rather than thinking the reading through and developing their own. Sometimes they use this material at the meeting without acknowledging its source, trying to look good without having done the real work. Other times they try to show off their AI skills by reporting the results, perhaps passing out copies in advance of the meeting, even including me, perhaps expecting praise.

If they do send me a copy, know that at my computer or into my iPhone I am shuddering, repressing an impulse TO REPLY IN CAPITAL LETTERS,

that is, yell electronically, LET'S THINK FOR OURSELVES. In a lesser world, I could say "Hey, let's google this stuff, read Siri or Gemini, then let's break for coffee."

About forty years ago a local Great Bookie named Bill Baker set forth "Ten Commandments" to be followed in reading and discussing literature. Now may be the time to hand down another, "Thou shall refrain from gorging on AI until after thou hast thoroughly prepared to participate in Shared Inquiry," a spirited effort together to reach into the depths of a worthy work. Go for it! Or else you may miss what the book can mean to you, what the author might say especially to you among its readers. AI can be wrong in general or wrong about you. AI can miss something or it can give you bad advice. Read and think. Then, if you are curious about the robot's opinion, see if it makes sense.

And furthermore:

Call me crazy (I know that) but, along with leading Great Books groups, I also belong to "Pretty Good Books" groups online and in my San Francisco neighborhood. Notable differences exist between Great Books and Pretty Good Books. In Great Books the leader says, "You must read the entire selection to participate in the discussion. In Pretty Good Books, ample food and wine will likely precede getting to the book.

Once the discussion convenes, at least thirty minutes will elapse while people say why they couldn't read the book. Yet, this is the book they voted on and agreed to read. The discussion limps along for a short time and then a half hour is spent deciding what to read next month. I usually have a splitting headache by 9:00 pm and it's not from the wine (I don't drink). I arrive home swearing I will never attend again. Never! But then I do.

Rules prevail even in a Pretty Good Books club. Readers are annoyed by a provocative title covering for a festival of self-promotion. Don't pick a "bestseller" still only in hardback. The library's waitlist will be too long. Most of all, do not schedule a Pretty Good Books group to meet in October or November of an even-numbered year. That is an election year and should you in your scheduling forget it, you need to make certain to have a sufficiency of wine on hand.

Try summer at a literary oasis: Great Books at Colby College

By John Dalton

The 70th Anniversary of Great Books at Colby will be held the week of July 19 to 25, 2026. Our theme will be *Renaissance Realities*. It will include: Niccolò

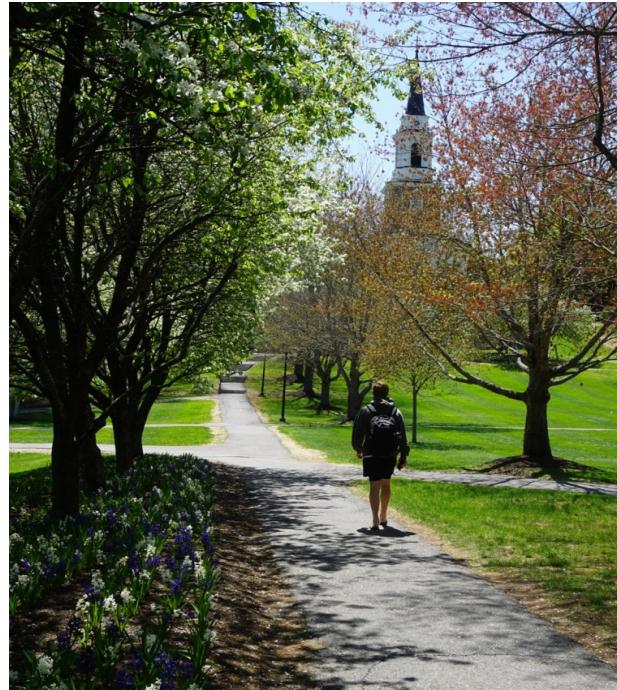
Machiavelli, *The Prince*; Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*; William Shakespeare, *King Lear*; René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*; Pär Lagerkvist, *The Dwarf*; and John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*. Books are now available. You can pre-register with a deposit of \$400. Cancellations prior to June 30, 2026 incur a cost of \$100.

We are pleased to announce the return of the Junior Great Books Program for young people ages four to sixteen engaged with supervised activities in the morning, while their parents, grandparents or other adults have their discussions.

The children will have an hour of their own book discussions after lunch. Book titles will be chosen to reflect the ages of those registering to attend.

Morning activities may include visits to the athletic center to swim, hikes on the campus trails, special visits to the library, art museum and campus farm, arts and crafts as well as outside play.

Program Coordinator Donna Crane has been affiliated with Colby for over 20 years. She holds a master's degree in library science with a specialization in school libraries and serves as president of her local community center. Her children participated in the Junior Great Books program from 2009 to 2018.



A stroll on Colby's campus

If you are interested in attending with youngsters, assisting in leading activities, or joining in book discussions, please contact me, John Dalton, for more details (jd5258875@aol.com). Be sure to leave your phone number.

2026 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

January-February	March-April	May-June
2/28 San Francisco Mini-Retreat Zoom Readings: Maylis de Kerangal, <i>Eastbound</i> ; Percival Everett, <i>Telephone</i>	4/17-19 Barbara McConnell Weekend at Asilomar Pacific Grove, CA Readings: <i>The Declaration of Independence</i> ; Dr. Martin Luther King, <i>Letter from Birmingham Jail</i> ; Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, <i>Inherit the Wind</i> ; selected poetry	5/16 Gold Country Mini-Retreat Auburn, CA Reading: Ben MacIntyre, <i>Operation Mincemeat</i> (TBD) Leader-Reader Workshop Zoom
July-August 2025	September-October	November-December
(TBD) Annual Meeting Zoom	(TBD) Long Novel Weekend Zoom	(TBD) Poetry Weekend Zoom

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The full report can be obtained by contacting greatbooksncal.treasurer@gmail.com