

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Seize the Day!

By Louise Morgan

GBSF Vice President and Asilomar Co-Chair

Mark your calendars for April 8-10, 2016 and then look forward to three days of fun and enlightening discussion at our next annual Barbara McConnell Asilomar Great Books Weekend.

The reading selection committee and the poetry committee are happy to announce that they have come up with classic, thought-provoking, and prize-winning texts for us to read, enjoy, digest, analyze, and share.

Taking into account your suggestions and requests, we kept the number of poems to five and put a page limit on the fiction and non-fiction choices. We also considered all the texts that have been discussed during previous weekends. The list is available for your perusal on our website www.greatbooks-sf.com under the "Asilomar" link.

Saul Bellow was among the authors you requested. His work has not been featured at Asilomar since we did *Dangling Man* in 1977, so for 2016 the committee chose *Seize the Day*, a short novel about which one reviewer wrote "Deftly interweaving humor and pathos, Saul Bellow evokes in the climactic events of one day the full drama of one man's search to affirm his own worth and humanity."

American political history always results in enthusiastic debate. Who would have guessed that two very short works, Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* and *Second Inaugural Address*, would easily fill two hours with animated discussion as they did in 2013.

Given that experience we decided that an exploration of *The Federalist Papers* would be in order. This is a collection of essays by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, written and published in 1787 and 1788 in several New York state newspapers to persuade New York voters to ratify the proposed U.S. constitution. Many of the issues and controversies laid out in these essays are still meaningful today. We won't have time to cover all 85 articles but will, instead, focus on ten that have been carefully selected for interest and for relevance.

We're especially enthused about our choice for the 2016 play. It is August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, the

fourth work in his Pittsburgh Cycle, where he explores the African-American experience in 20th century America. *The Piano Lesson*, set in 1936 during the Great Depression, centers on an argument between a brother and sister about whether to keep or sell a family heirloom, a piano carved with the faces of their great-grandfather's wife and son.

The poetry discussion on Friday evening features works by Sharon Olds, Emily Dickinson, Donald Justice, William Butler Yeats, and Naomi Shihab Nye. Will we discover a common theme this year? Who knows. But we do know that poems starting out as head-scratchers often reveal themselves through a series of aha! moments brought about by the magic of Shared Inquiry. These discussions are often among the most creative and enjoyable of the weekend.

Copies of these works are included in the cost of the weekend, and will be mailed to you upon receipt of your registration. A registration form is now available at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/asilomar.htm>. The weekend includes four Great Books discussions, a reception for first-timers, a party with entertainment on Saturday evening, six fine meals, and a chance to stroll the beach adjoining the lovely Asilomar Conference Center on the Monterey Coast. Do make plans to attend!

Middlemarch rides again at 2015 Long Novel Weekend

By Rick White

Forty-nine readers met at Vallombrosa Retreat Center in Menlo Park on August 29-30 to discuss George Eliot's great novel of rural 19th Century English life, *Middlemarch*. Leading the discussions were **Jim Hall, Kay White, Claudia O'Callaghan, Louise DiMattio, Louise Morgan, Rob Calvert, and Rick White**.

Afternoon entertainment consisted of a talk by Claudia Stevens, the librettist/producer of a recent opera, "*Middlemarch* in Spring," who discussed the complex process of transforming a multi-faceted story such as *Middlemarch* into an opera. Claudia's husband, Alan Shearer, who wrote the music, provided additional insight into the process. Their major decision was to focus on the leading

character, Dorothea, necessarily eliminating many of the side stories. Filmed segments of the opera were shown and can be seen on youtube.com.

The after-dinner entertainment was energetic English and Scottish country dancing, with calling and music provided by the group Humuhumunukunukuapua'a and Strathspey Society Band. They believe, and we do not doubt, that they are the world's best Hawaiian-themed Scottish music band. They are available for parties and weddings by contacting Patti Cobb, pkcobb@pacbell.net.



The band, from left: David Nevitt, concertina and caller, Heather McKay, fiddle; Katherine Carvajal Hall, flute; Patti Cobb, piano; and Bruce Herbold, percussion and caller.

This extraordinary novel was discussed in 1994, the fourth year of the Long Novel Weekend, now in its 25th year. The 2015 weekend received reviews close to a perfect five points by nearly all participants on all three variables: quality of the book, quality of the discussions, and quality of leading.

The book itself is one of the factors for such high ratings. A great book inspires excellent questions that, in turn, contribute to the quality of the discussions. Not to take away from the skill of our leaders, but a good book certainly helps.

At the planning session, a decision was made not to divide the book into thirds, the most common way, but to introduce the characters in the first session, explore key scenes in the novel in the second session, and to tie things together in the third session by discussing the novel in the context of its setting—time and place, both geographically and historically.

Middlemarch has many distinctive features. For one, it gives equal respect to male and female characters revealing their inner thoughts, strengths, weaknesses, and passions. It's also noted for the depth of exploration of each character's thought processes; how they weigh and bal-

ance factors governing their actions. George Eliot also helps us stand outside each character so we can view their actions in a larger context. We see how circumstances – native inclinations, family, social caste or class, economic conditions, prior life decisions and experiences – all affect how a character will respond to a given situation.

In the September 2015 issue of *The Weekly Standard*, Diana Schaub quotes from a lecture on George Eliot given by the late Amy Kass in 2010 at Bowdoin College. Ms. Kass, who died on August 19, taught the Great Books at the University of Chicago for 34 years. Here is what she said about the value of reading a long novel.

The virtue of a long book is precisely that it occupies us for a really long time: time not merely to visit but also to inhabit a different world; time not merely to meet but also to befriend and understand new kinds of people; time not merely to imagine novel decisions but also to live with their consequences. In a word, reading a long great book enables one to live feelingly outside of oneself.

Participants in the 2015 Long Novel Weekend certainly confirmed Amy Kass's perspective on the value of reading a long, great book.



Paintings in this issue are by Bernice Hunold. They can be seen in glorious color at the www.greatbooks-sf.com Reading Matters.

From the President

By Laura Bushman

Every June the Great Books Council of San Francisco hosts a picnic where we elect our new executive committee. This year we have had many changes, with some of our friends leaving the board and others joining. Our officers are: **Laura Bushman**, president; **Louise Morgan**, vice-president; **Brian Mahoney**, treasurer; and **Mary Wood**, secretary. Some other important positions are the event coordinators: **John Anderson**, poetry weekend; **Laura Bushman**, picnic; **Rob Calvert** and **Louise Morgan**, Asilomar co-chairs; **Sheri Kindsvater**, Wine Country

mini-retreat; and **Clifford Louie**, San Francisco Mini-retreat. Other members of the executive committee are: **Brent Browning**, area coordinator and bylaws chair; **Rob Calvert**, webmaster; **Oscar and Theda Firschein**, poetry registrars; **Carol Hochberg**, poetry selection committee chair; **Sheri Kindsvater**, Asilomar registrar; **Vince Scardina**, historian and calendar; **Tom Vargo**, bulk mail manager; **Jan Vargo**, database manager and area coordinator; **Rick White**, nominations chair, Asilomar readings, and publisher, Reading Matters; **Kay White**, leader training chair, publicity committee, and support for Gold Country mini-retreat organizer **Donna Reynolds**; and **Jim Hall**, E-newsletter publisher.

As you can see from this list, there are many different jobs to perform to make our organization work. It has been my pleasure to know and work with this board for over five years, and we actually enjoy our jobs. There's still more work to do, so please consider playing a more active role in our organization. **Help needed: Rob Calvert** would like advice to help improve the quality of our web site—anything from specific suggestions on content submission to taking over the webmaster role. Our treasurer, **Brian Mahoney**, wants an assistant to help with the work he does and be ready to take over.

Some additional requests: We would be delighted if someone were to take ownership of the GBSF Facebook account and maintain that site in a manner similar to our main web site, with frequent posts and updates to it. We also need someone to help distribute press releases about our events and post them to our web site.

Another potential project—we need someone willing to help us reach out to directors at senior centers to give them information about our events, perhaps even starting new monthly groups at centers.

We welcome your participation. I have been a Great Books Council of San Francisco (GBSF) member since 1980 and know the value of serving on its Executive Committee (ExCom). This weekend was an example of the type of well-earned satisfaction ExCom members get from helping to organize one of our many exciting events. After months of planning, **Louise DiMattio**, chair of the Long Novel Weekend, was able to enjoy the well-earned fruits of her labors. The book was *Middlemarch* by George Eliot. The location was the country-like setting of the Vallombrosa Conference Center. Participants even got to sample English country dances led by a professional band and callers. Sunday morning came too soon.

So please consider playing a more active part of the Great Books Council of San Francisco, serving Northern California. We need your support and creative ideas.

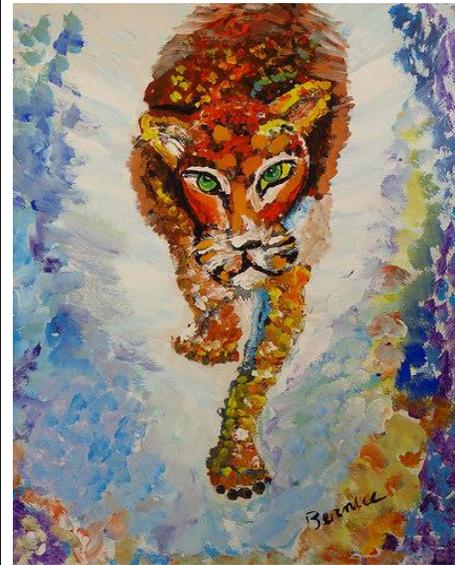
Is there something you would like to say about Great Books? Say it here in *Reading Matters*. Because it does.

Ready for Poetry Weekend 2015

By Carol Hochberg
Poetry Selection Committee Chair

Poetry Weekend 2015 is November 14-15 at Vallombrosa Retreat in Menlo Park. Details are provided in the registration form, which is available on our web site at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/poetry.htm>.

When the committee assembled in July for the eagerly awaited selection process...frankly, there was more anxiety,



Sorry, no Blake for you this time, Tyger.

for me, than usual. The poems were “all over the place,” from Yeats and Edwin Muir to Sharon Olds and Philip Schultz, a recent Pulitzer Prize-winner. I thought to myself: Oh boy, this is going to be a tough one, to make some meaningful grouping of the poems. The poems were, for the most part, dis-

discussible and interesting. The problem was where were the themes for good groupings into three two-hour sessions?

At the same meeting the committee selects poems for Asilomar. These must be accessible to persons who do not read poetry regularly.

For Poetry Weekend our new chair, John Anderson, was able to make three “piles,” as he described it, employing the general categories of “Love,” “Loss,” and “Other Worlds.” Thereby, we had our three discussion themes for Vallombrosa. Poems that did not fit into one of these categories, but which still received a high ranking from the committee, were set aside to consider for Asilomar.

Member **Mary Wood**, in her wisdom, offered T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as a one-poem discussion subject, as it is quite lengthy. Your selection chair had the idea this poem would make an interesting performance and discussion subject for our Saturday evening program. The committee responded with enthusiasm to this idea, and so we have our Saturday program. The poem, divided as it is into sections, is ideally suited for group performance, with the potential for an interesting direction of the voices because there is repetition and a kind of chanting. We will have fun with it, I’m sure!

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? *Practice!*



GBSF's **William Corbett-Jones** made it. He is seen here in Carnegie Hall preparing to play Mozart's Piano Concerto in A major (K414) and Ernest Bloch's Concerto Grosso, accompanied by San Francisco's Villa Sinfonia. Seventy-five musicians made the trip from The City to THE CITY this summer where Bill and they played for a sold-out house.

Celebrating Pi Day in Walnut Creek: Leader-Reader Workshop

By Kay White, Leader Trainer

Twelve of us gathered for coffee and muffins on Saturday morning, March 14, 2015, at the Hillside Club, Vista Room at Rossmoor, Walnut Creek. We opened at 9:30 with introductions and a welcome by **Laura Bushman**, vice president of the Great Books Council of San Francisco. We quickly moved into a discussion of the poem "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop. Several tried to distract the discussion, as they were requested to do, so the leader (yours truly) could demonstrate quick crowd control.

We talked about how to approach poetry in shared inquiry: read the poem aloud, discuss it as a group, then read it again for closure; why it is helpful to review guidelines before starting; and how a seating chart helps the leader with participation. We talked about how to approach poetry in shared inquiry: to read the poem aloud, discuss it as a group, and then to reread the poem aloud again for closure.

By 11:00 we were in groups of four to review and discuss the homework everyone had so evidently well prepared. Each participant chose a story or poem to lead for practice sessions after lunch.

We enjoyed the sunshine and bowling greens outside the Hillside Club while we ate bag lunches and compared experiences. After lunch, we returned to small groups to practice leading discussions. Participants rated this practice as the most useful part of the workshop.

By around 3:30 in the afternoon, we came together to recap our practice sessions, and to toast our new leaders: **Brian** and **Maeve Hassett** from Auburn, **Penny Ittner**

and **Joann Spiegel** from Walnut Creek, and **Melanie Blake**, **Elena Schmid**, and **Nancy Waldeck** from San Francisco.

We look forward to their leading discussions. In fact, Elena Schmid joined **Maureen Bruce** at Asilomar in April to co-lead the poetry session.

Some of our most experienced leaders joined us for the workshop: **Laura Bushman**, **Louise DiMattio**, **Louise Morgan**, and **Karen Schneider**. Their encouragement and guidance helped all of us.

Watch for our next Leader-Reader Workshop. It will be in March 2016.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie

Review by Mary Wood

This book was discussed at the 2015 GBSF Annual Picnic in Berkeley's Tilden Park on June 7. Ms. Wood reviews the book here after participating in the discussion.

Miss Jean Brodie is an unmarried woman in her 30's who teaches at a girls school in Scotland. In the beginning, the author appears to be sympathetic to Miss Brodie as one of legions of unmarried women in the 1930's "who crowded their war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion."

A marvelous eccentric, Miss Brodie doesn't fit in with the other teachers, and is continually being harassed by the headmistress who is always looking for an excuse to fire her. She refers to her approach to education as "leading of what is already there in the pupil's soul," and considers the school's belief that education is a putting [in] something that is not there, an "intrusion."

I'm always fascinated by the choices characters make or don't make. My first question on reading *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was why Miss Brodie persists in teaching at a school where she sticks out like a sore thumb. My guess: that she likes being different.

Miss Brodie has cultivated a select group of ten-year-old girls known as her "set." She continues as their mentor and advisor well into their school years, even after they're no longer in her charge. Her set adores Miss Brodie and takes to heart all her words of wisdom, most of which center on herself. She frequently explains her unconventional ideas as the result of her being "in her prime," hinting at sexual experience, a great topic of speculation among her set.

Miss Brodie claims to recognize the individuality of each student, calling them "heroines in the making." She imagines a role for each that she expects they will fulfill. Beautiful Rose is to be the great lover, while Sandy, plain but with watchful eyes, the insightful one.

We experience the evolution of Miss Brodie through the eyes of Sandy, the girl who remains closest to her. In

the course of the novel, Sandy's feelings toward Miss Brodie, and our own, change. Sandy's conversion to Catholicism, her decision to become a cloistered nun, and the substance of a book she came to write on the nature of moral perception, may be interpreted as evidence of opposition to Miss Brodie.

The story centers on a love affair between Miss Brodie and Mr. Lloyd, art teacher at the school, an affair that remains unconsummated because Mr. Lloyd is married. To her horror, Sandy realizes that Miss Brodie has encouraged Rose, whom she has imagined to be "the great lover," to become Mr. Lloyd's lover. Things don't work out as planned: it is Sandy who sleeps with Mr. Lloyd. It is also Sandy, the girl Miss Brodie least suspects, who divulges information leading to her dismissal.

The account raises significant questions about morality. Miss Brodie, seeker of truth, claims to be moral, although moral outside of conventional beliefs. Sandy, the other seeker of truth, wonders what kind of morality this is. The reader asks: should Sandy have confronted Miss Brodie at the time about her manipulation of Rose? Was it right for Sandy in conversation with Miss Brodie, by then in embittered retirement, not to reveal that it was she who had betrayed her? Why does Sandy seem not to regret her own role in what happens?

We are left to reflect on Sandy's motivation and on Miss Brodie's character. Why does Sandy become a nun? Why does she, who claims to have admired Miss Brodie, contribute to her downfall? Is her book on morality, which receives much acclaim, a tribute to, or is it a condemnation of, Miss Jean Brodie?



Monet's poppy field was on our wall for several years. I love the way Bernice makes the poppies jump out of the field. Impressions of an impressionist. – Ed.

***Middlemarch* Weekend: Some Observations**

By Jim Baird

It helps to think of *Middlemarch* as a series of conversations with the reader as observer and the author as guide. Like a good hostess, George Eliot introduces us immediately to the main characters, particularly to Dorothea and Celia Brooke, orphan sisters, and to their uncle and guardian, Arthur Brooke. Dorothea ("Dodo" to her younger sister), age 19, is beautiful and is unorthodox in her thinking; Celia ("Kitty") is cheerful and conventional, ballast to her sister's idealism.

Dorothea initially rejects the idea of marriage, perceiving it as a constraint until she meets Edward Casaubon, a wealthy clergyman and scholar many years her senior. She sees Casaubon as the fulfillment of her ardent wish to be the partner of a great man grappling with ideas that will benefit mankind. She wishes to devote herself to a life of service that will enlarge her knowledge, understanding, and usefulness.

The courtship of Dorothea and Casaubon dismays everyone who cares about her. They see, which she cannot, a dry old pedant who has chosen a life dedicated to a high-flown research project—to produce "the key to all mythologies." Dorothea is not to be dissuaded and sees this marriage as a way of freeing herself from the mundane concerns of the ordinary.

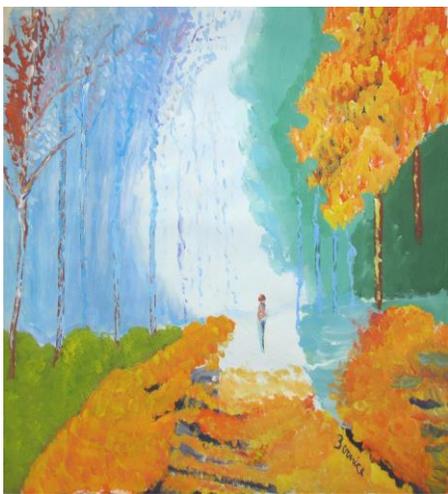
The marriage takes place. The newlyweds travel to Rome for their honeymoon. Instead of the romantic seclusion of two lovers getting to know each other, Dorothea gets an unwelcome dose of reality. Casaubon all but ignores his bride, preferring to read manuscripts in the Vatican Library. Instead of the welcome helper, a partner in his life's endeavors, Dorothea begins to realize that her husband sees her more as a burden. She is also beginning to suspect that the man she hoped to worship may have entangled himself in an incomprehensible web of useless information. Casaubon, for his part, had hoped for a compliant secretary, not a fellow scholar and possible critic. His suspicion that Dorothea has begun to doubt his work begins to gnaw at his soul.

Enter Will Ladislaw, a young and handsome cousin of Casaubon's, currently living in Rome. Though they don't like one another, Will is indebted to Casaubon for supporting him and his mother (now deceased) after his father's death. Will's grandmother, Casaubon's aunt, had married a Polish actor and has been disowned by the family.

Will and Casaubon are opposites. Will is a lively, free spirit, charming and perceptive, a lover of the arts struggling to find his way in the world. Dorothea is attracted to him. She is comfortable expressing herself to him. She does not perceive the developing rift between Will and Casaubon and encourages their frequent meetings while in Rome.

Their honeymoon is over, and the Casaubons return to Middlemarch, disappointed and unhappy with one another. Dazzled by Dorothea and in doubt of his earlier intention to immerse himself in art, Will also returns to Middlemarch. To win favor with Dorothea, he cuts off his income from Casaubon and against Casaubon's explicit disapproval he accepts an offer from Dorothea's uncle, Mr. Brooke, to be his secretary and political mentor. Casaubon, while not suspecting Dorothea of impropriety, envies the attraction between her and Will. He knows that Will does not value his project and fears that he will turn Dorothea against him.

Parallel to Dorothea is Tertius Lydgate, a young doctor who comes to Middlemarch after studying in London and Paris. He is filled with ideas about how the body works and how to manage various diseases. He dreams, like Dorothea, of making a contribution that will better the lives of people and pave the way for further discoveries. Though well born, Lydgate has only a small personal fortune, which he significantly depletes to purchase the practice of a retiring Middlemarch doctor. Lydgate believes that a small village like Middlemarch would be ideal for conducting his research, far from the petty rivalries of London. Unfortunately, the folk of Middlemarch, as well as the remaining physicians, are skeptical of Lydgate's methods. Even his successes are often used against him. Though Lydgate might have earned a comfortable living there, his unwillingness to set aside his modern ideas about medicine leave him few patients. His fate gets tangled with Nicholas Bulstrode, the town banker, a puritanical, dogmatic Methodist, because he needs Bulstrode's financial support for the development of a fever hospital. This association further alienates Lydgate because Bul-



strode was universally disliked. Despite Lydgate's high ideals and his determination not to marry until he established himself, he falls in love with Rosamond Vincy, the beautiful daughter of the town mayor, who was a local manufacturer. Rosamond sees Lydgate as her way upward in class through joining Lydgate's aristocratic family. Like Dorothea and Casaubon, Lydgate and Rosamond had mistaken beliefs about one another. Rosamond, spoiled and indulged, refuses to moderate her style of living, and Lydgate's pride and un-

willingness to upset Rosamond lead him to spend beyond his means. In time this bubble bursts. He is saved from the shame of bankruptcy by Bulstrode, who after first refusing to help gives Lydgate the money he needs. Bulstrode, revealed to have long ago obtained his fortune through fraud and suspected of a recent murder, is run out of town. Lydgate, unfairly thought to have been his accomplice, is ruined.

A dozen characters whose stories entwine with the main characters in unexpected ways are introduced throughout the book. The reader is party to their interior reflections as well as exterior conversation. We are drawn into the fiber of Middlemarch, a community in transition, where some support change and others fiercely resist. If you live there you likely know your place. If you yearn, like Dorothea and Lydgate, to rise above the environment, you might like them be driven to leave.

George Eliot begins the novel by reflecting that great souls are not always born into circumstances allowing them to fulfill their destiny. Potential Saint Teresas, she observes, walk the earth unrecognized. Dorotheas or Lydgates don't always reach their potential, but their ardor and their passion enrich us all. Eliot concludes the book with this passage: "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

Examples of Great Discussion Questions

In "The Greatest of Teachers" (*The Weekly Standard*, September 7, 2015), Caitrin Keiper recalls questions that Amy Kass asked in Great Books classes at the University of Chicago.

Opening questions included these: In the Declaration of Independence—"When, in the course of human events"—what does it mean for human events to have a course? Do they? In Shakespeare's Sonnet 116—"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments"—is it minds that marry? How? In the 1934 romantic comedy *It Happened One Night*, what is the "it"?

Some questions about Shakespeare's *King Lear* were: Why does Gloucester begin with such a crude and blustery introduction of his bastard son, and why does it matter? What does Kent's response say of his character? Does Lear's plan to divide his kingdom make any sense? What is he trying to accomplish or avoid? Why does he force the "love test"? How can Cordelia fail to answer? Why does Lear not see what is so plain to everybody else, and find a way to backtrack before disappointment gives way to disaster? (And that, she reports, was just the first half of the first scene!)

2015-2016 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

OCTOBER 2015	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
10/3 & 10/4: Wine Country Mini-Retreats (<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>)	11/14-11/15: Poetry Weekend	
JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2016	MARCH	APRIL - MAY
TBD: SF Mini-Retreats (<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>)	TBD: Leader Training	4/8-4/10 Barbara McConnell Asilomar Great Books Weekend (<i>Seize the Day, Federalist Papers, The Piano Lesson, poetry</i>) 5/15: Gold Country Mini-Retreat
JUNE - JULY	AUGUST - OCTOBER	NOVEMBER - DECEMBER
6/5: Annual Meeting/Picnic	8/27-8/28: Long Novel Weekend TBD: Wine Country Mini-Retreat	TBD: Poetry Weekend

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