

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

No rioting in Berkeley!

Safe space not demanded by Great Books participants at Long Novel Weekend

Cultural appropriation not protested

By Paula Weinberger and Rick White

In spite of this year's novel *The Corrections*, by Jonathan Franzen, being about a Midwestern family, no one raised in that part of the country complained of cultural appropriation by Westerners who stated opinions about characters in the book. There were no demands that a safe space be set up for protection against controversial ideas or that specified words or phrases be banned as microaggressions. Windows and doors were not broken. Fires were not set. Noses were not punched. There was, however, confusion among the thirty-plus participants in finding their assigned rooms and encountering unexpected stairways in the search.

Great literature is never safe.



From left: Caroline Van Howe and Paula Weinberger, event co-chairs; Janice White, Louise Morgan, Kay White, Jim Hall

For us, most important was a new location. From time to time, we like to try facilities in different locations. For 2017, the Long Novel Weekend was held at the Clark Kerr Campus—a satellite of UC Berkeley. Originally a facility for the blind and deaf, it has morphed into student housing as well as one of the University's conference centers with meeting spaces, a full dining facility, and participant housing surrounded by

lovely greenery and ample outdoor meeting, dining, and walking areas.

A new date: In past years, the LNW was held at the end of August. By choosing Clark Kerr, it was necessary to move the date to the end of July to accommodate their academic schedule.

Thank you to all who shared views about the weekend. Comments are essential in our planning for next year. In particular, we want to thank all who offered recommendations for next year's book.

A Saturday evening delight

The theme of our guest speaker, Troy Jollimore, was how "refusal" played a key role in the novel, how the refusal of each character to do what others might have expected or desired influenced all of their lives. A philosophy professor at Chico State with a Ph.D. from Princeton, Troy has written extensively on themes explored in *The Corrections*. This showed in his extraordinary grasp of the novel, his confidence and lively enjoyment while speaking to and with readers having decades more literary experience than either himself or his students. If our chair, Caroline Van Howe, had not called the Q&A session to a halt, Troy would not have gotten out of the room.

Highlights of Professor Jollimore's talk are provided in excerpts below.

These events do not work without discussion leaders. Thanks go to Brian Cunningham, Brian Mahoney, Louise Morgan, Paula Weinberger, Kay White and Rick White. Please think about joining this exclusive group. It is a fine and enriching experience.

A special thank you goes to Caroline Van Howe, a new addition to our Executive Committee. At her first meeting Caroline, an accomplished event coordinator, saw what we needed and volunteered to take charge of this conference. Paula Weinberger took the initiative to identify exactly the right speaker for the event and enlist him. Brian Mahoney handled the hard and exacting work of event registrar.

Next year's Long Novel will be *East of Eden*, by John Steinbeck.

A sampling of participant comments:

"I find it exhilarating to be in animated discussion about a piece of literature we've all read with care."
"Immense enjoyment of the intellectual stimulation provided at LNW."
"Excellent presentation by Troy Jollimore."
"Troy Jollimore was extremely impressive and a wonderful speaker choice."
"Friend asked me to come with her—glad I did!"
"The Long Novel Weekend was an engaging and exciting opportunity to discuss an important book with lively and interested people."
"Credit to the leaders and all participants for making this such an enjoyable and successful event."

Excerpts provided by the speaker

Underground

A novel as large and rich as Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* can hardly be encapsulated in a single talk ... It isn't just that the book contains a multitude of intertwining stories. It's also a matter of Franzen's ambition. Because he was writing both for a contemporary audience and for a prospective future one ... he wants to capture not only how it looks and feels on the surface—that acknowledged, visible, public life that we all share and display to each other—but also what is going on in private, in the deep heart, in the places we find it difficult to talk about, what is happening underneath the surface of our visible, public existence. Hence Franzen's quote: *And so in the house of the Lamberts, as in St. Jude, as in the country as a whole, life came to be lived underground.*

By inference, it is not just in the Lambert household, but in the United States of America, that things are being pushed underground, being denied, being repressed.

I want to connect this notion of life being lived underground to a few other ideas, to build a framework that will represent a way—one of many possible ways—of organizing our thoughts regarding this complex work of literature.

In part, I want to connect it to the Freudian idea that what is most significant in a person's personality and psychology is often that which is not visible, that which has been buried and concealed precisely because it is so difficult to bear.

In the house of the Lamberts ... a good deal has been relegated underground; Alfred's very philosophy—and Alfred, we should recall, is a student of philosophy, and in particular of the great philosophical pessimist, Schopenhauer—is one of maintaining a peaceful and respectable surface underneath which what is difficult and unpleasant can be hidden, while remaining unacknowledged and never discussed.

Refusal and the Will

Alfred's refusal to discuss what is difficult, contentious, or unpleasant is one of many refusals committed by this novel's characters. And 'refusal' is, in fact, the central concept I want to use to frame this talk; because refusal—a refusal to go along, to cooperate, to meet other people's expectations, to make other people happy, and even to *be* happy; but also, of course, a refusal to face reality, which seems to be a specialty of the Lamberts, is one of if not the primary strategy employed by members of this family to deal with life.

Alfred sees himself as a person whose worth is expressed and proved precisely by his refusal to act on his unworthy desires—in particular, desires for sex and for financial advantage.... To satisfy these desires would sully and disgrace him, reveal him to be an animal at heart rather than a civilized human being.

This leaves open the question of whether Alfred's use of refusal and repression are really good strategies for dealing with the world.... It's no surprise that the refusal strategies of the Lambert children are equally unsuccessful.

Denise, for instance, refuses for some time to acknowledge the true nature of her sexual desires, or to consider the possibility that her father might be as much to blame as her mother, possibly even more so, for the problems in her parents' marriage.

Gary, meanwhile, lives in denial about his job, his marriage, and his mental health.

Chip, by engaging in a sexual affair with one of his students, refuses to face the reality that this is a bad idea not only in ethical terms, but professionally as well; the result, of course, is the end of his academic career.

Perhaps Enid, above the others, has raised denial practically to the level of an art, insisting on believing and promulgating highly biased, frequently rose-tinted versions of each family member's life, including Alfred's and her own.

Yet despite their resistance, Enid and the other members of the Lambert family eventually and inevitably learn, the world is not fundamentally relativistic, a place where there is no firm truth and anything goes Reality, rather, has a way of asserting itself; states of denial, while offering a certain temporary comfort, only make



Prof. Troy Jollimore

the inevitable confrontation with reality that much more painful and harsh

Unlike the other characters, saying no, in the end, is all Alfred has left; but in a way, refusal is all he has ever had. It represents, as it has always represented, his only means of meeting and navigating the world on his own terms, his only means of establishing his own real existence and of asserting the superiority of his will over the inadequate options offered by reality. As in his life, his last act before dying is to refuse food.

In conclusion

The Corrections, in the end, is a novel about happiness, and joy, and the mysterious absence of happiness and joy from contemporary American life. I'm not sure that it suggests a way out of this place where we currently find ourselves, or that its intention was to do so But this book does, I think, have a great deal to say, far more than I have been able to indicate here, though I hope I have made a start, about where we are now, and how we got here; and most of all, about who we are, at this particular moment in time.

Asilomar 2018 to feature American classics

By Louise Morgan

How are the texts for Asilomar discussions chosen?—good question! It's one that's often asked, sometimes with a subtext of "Why in the world...!"

Soon after receiving and scrutinizing the comments from this year's Asilomar weekend, a committee of six or seven Great Books seasoned veterans meets online. Someone tosses out an idea, perhaps for a theme (Let's do India!), and we're off and running. Inevitably someone else disagrees and proposes an alternative (How about Russian writers?...Russia has been in the news lately). A work that had previously been tossed around now resurfaces. (Are we ever going to do *The Prince*?) Numerous authors are mentioned. (How about Roth? Orwell? Tagore? Albee?) Length is a consideration, as is translation quality, when relevant, and availability is sometimes a factor. For example, Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Saviors of God* was seriously considered for 2018 until it was discovered that copies were unavailable in sufficient quantity.

The selection process goes on for weeks, sometimes bearing a resemblance to sausage-making. Eventually

certain titles bob to the surface frequently enough for arrival at a consensus.

And so, we are pleased to announce the selections for Asilomar 2018—three critically acclaimed works by American authors, all classics in their genres.

The play, Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, was written in 1939 but remained unpublished until seven years later at the height of O'Neill's fame; he'd feared that American audiences would reject it. Regarded as one of the great modern tragedies, it explores the human need for self-deception—"pipe-dreams" as Hickey, the central character, calls them—as a means of getting on with life, because to abandon them is to risk death. Hickey has been portrayed on stage and screen by such luminaries as Jason Robards, Lee Marvin, Kevin Spacey, and Nathan Lane.

For our non-fiction discussion, we've selected essays from *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois. The first African-American to receive a Harvard Ph.D., Du Bois was a sociologist, historian, novelist, and activist whose career spanned the nation's history from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement. These essays, published in 1903, were the first to articulate many of Black America's thoughts and feelings, including the dilemma posed by the black psyche's "double consciousness" which Du Bois described as "this twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings."

And now for something completely different! Despite recurring requests to embrace the science fiction genre, the Asilomar Weekend has never ventured into this territory—until 2018, when we'll explore Ursula K. Le Guin's classic *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This groundbreaking work, published in 1969 and winner of the Hugo and Nebula awards, has been described by L. Blunt Jackson as "science fiction for the thinking reader, and should be read attentively in order to properly savor the depth of insight and the subtleties of plot and character. It is one of those pleasures that requires a little investment at the beginning, but pays back tenfold with the joy of raw imagination." Le Guin is 87 at this writing and lives in Berkeley.

The Asilomar poems are chosen by a separate panel of poetry pros, whose deliberative process bears similarities to the one described above. 2018 will feature poems by Paisley Rekdal, Theodore Roethke, Clive James, Emily Dickinson, and Howard Nemerov.

We're excited about these choices of American Classics, and we hope that you too will find them interesting, stimulating, and insightful. We look forward to discussing them with you on April 13-15 at the 2018 Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference. For more information and to register for the event, please visit <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/asilomar.htm>.

Violent struggle said to precede Poetry Weekend

By Carol Hochberg

I had a difficult time with the selections for this, the 32nd annual Poetry Weekend of the Great Books Council of San Francisco. I had, literally, to wrestle them. (Actually "figuratively" would be correct, but "literally" sounds more like "literature," and that is what we are discussing.) Who wins, "Turkeys" or wild geese"? The turkeys were eliminated: the wild geese had taken them to the mat.

Seriously, all of the poems were eminently discussable. Rankings by the poetry committee were uniformly high. Few submissions by the members didn't make the cut. The average ranking by these hard graders was 3.5 or higher (out of a possible 5).

Then there was the classic "theme problem." Why don't we just call them sessions I, II, and III? Nope, even dressed in Roman numerals, that's boring. We had to invent three titles under each of which to place five poems. In this we were saved by "Potpourri," the name we call the final discussion, the yearly grab bag of poems that don't fit the other two categories.

The first theme, "All about Love," seemed fairly straightforward. After all, love, or Love, is a universal concern. Derek Walcott's "Love after Love" led off the group, with its message of "You will love again the stranger who was your self." Then W.S. Merwin's "Once Later," a meditation on the aging person who looks back, "but by then there is/someone else living there/with the shades rolled down...."

Then there is Mark Strand's "VII," which proclaims "Oh, you can make fun of the splendors of moonlight,/But what would the human heart be if it wanted/only the dark, wanted nothing on earth/but the sea's ink or the rock's black shade?" What, indeed? This group of thought-provoking poems is rounded out by two contributions from Jack Gilbert, whose poetry is discussed at Poetry Weekend with good reason.

The next theme, "Other Souls," concerns itself with the non-human, but definitely metaphorical, use of the experience of "The Bear" looking for a log to hibernate in, the role of the gray wolf in restoring the interwoven relationships in Yellowstone in "Trophic Cascade," the "Wild Geese," who call to you "harsh and exciting—/over and over announcing your place/in the family of things.

The "Potpourri" has, for this writer, the most oddly discussable poems: "The Garden," by Ishion Hutchinson, carries an authoritarian terror with lines "the Minister of All could not sleep," and "the night had the scent of cut grass/sprayed with poison, the night smelled of bullets..." In "On the Death of a Colleague" by Stephen Dunn, a student has the audacity to tell the truth that the deceased "was a drunk...often came to class/reeking.../And yet she was a great teacher,/he loved her,/but thought someone should say/what everyone knew/because she didn't die by accident."

Come join the wrestling match! For more information and to register for the event, please visit <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/poetry.htm>.

A Message from the President

Ten years ago a newcomer to the Bay Area timidly visited the Alice Street Great Books local group in order to audit their discussion and to determine whether this organization would be a good fit for her interests. That evening's selection – Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose" – was challenging for someone with a weak literary background, but there was something compelling about the notion of a diverse group of people coming together regularly to sharpen their understanding of classic texts. The atmosphere was congenial, and the use of Shared Inquiry made her feel that her comments were not only valid but a welcome part of the discussion.

I still drive into Oakland to attend those meetings, and there is great satisfaction in knowing that I have now read and thoroughly dissected well over one hundred important texts that I might never have explored on my own. In addition, it has been a pleasure to become acquainted with the remarkable people that comprise our group. Inevitably, however, there has been turnover in our membership; some folks regrettably "retired" because they decided that declining vision and/or hearing prevented them from full participation, and some because of a diminished ability to recall details. At least three longtime members have passed

away. A solid core remains active, but we continually look for new people to fill the empty seats.

This summer at our annual meeting and picnic I was elected to serve a two-year term as president of the Great Books Council of San Francisco. It is a real honor to represent an organization that has been active throughout northern California since 1953, providing services such as coordinating regional events, training effective leaders, maintaining fiscal discipline, and strengthening our linkage to the Great Books Foundation.

But we must do more to ensure that the Great Books program not only remains strong but also grows. To accomplish this I believe we must focus on communication, marketing, and recruitment.

One goal we need to achieve is an improved Web presence. Fortunately, we have a very capable and



savvy webmaster, Rob Calvert, who is in the process of redesigning our site to make it more attractive, informative, and user-friendly. As we transition into being a more tech-capable

group moving from phone calls and snail mail to email and texting, our website should be the portal of first choice for all things relating to Great Books.

Louise Morgan

Building greater public awareness of the Great Books program and its Shared Inquiry method is vital. Social media comes into play here. More and more people are getting their information about what's going on in their spheres from the friends they touch base with daily (often hourly!) on Facebook, Instagram, etc. We must use this resource to get the word out about our programs and special events, and to communicate the pleasure that results from in-depth discussions of classic literature.

Relying solely on electronic media to fill empty seats and to grow our membership won't solve the problem; it's a great way to get the word out but most people still need the human touch, someone who can talk up the virtues of the organization and invite them

to attend meetings. Therefore, we need to focus on active, personal, and targeted recruitment.

We all know someone who would enjoy being a part of this wonderful organization, so spread the word! Regularly invite likely prospects to your local group meetings, or even to one of our annual regional events such as Long Novel Weekend or the Wine Country mini-retreat. Don't miss an opportunity to talk about how much more you enjoyed a book or play or poem because of having explored it with others in a Shared Inquiry discussion. Distribute our colorful brochure to venues like libraries and bookshops where serious readers gather.

It is my great hope that when my term ends two years from now we will have seen a steady increase in the number and size of the many discussion groups in our council. I'll be out there working to make it happen, and I'm counting on your help.

*Yours in the spirit of inquiry,
Louise Morgan*

All are welcome at Great Books workshop

Want to meet lively readers? Try the Great Books Leader-Reader Workshop. Our attendees come from San Francisco, San Diego, San Rafael, Novato, Oakland, Auburn, Lafayette, Walnut Creek, El Cerrito, Danville, Palo Alto, and places way beyond. Some are new to Great Books. Some are new to the area, looking for a discussion group that fits them. Some are readers wanting to improve their reading but not interested in leading. Some are veterans of Great Books who want to refine and share their skills. We add our experiences and ideas together on one Saturday, and familiarity with each other. Our conversations reveal our backgrounds, assumptions, likes, and dislikes.

Through our Workshop, our San Francisco Council discovers new and energetic *Great Bookies*. Our newly elected Council Vice President, Elena Schmid, began leading poetry discussions at Asilomar soon after her 2015 workshop. Brian Cunningham, fresh from our 2017 workshop, guided a masterly discussion of Steinbeck's *Log from the Sea of Cortez* at this year's Asilomar. Caroline Van Howe, 2017 workshop graduate, just wrapped up a successful Long Novel Weekend as Co-Coordinator with Paula Weinberger. Carol Edlund, workshop graduate of 2016, is our newly elected Secretary of the Executive Committee.

We get to meet you and discover your interests and talents. You meet us and decide if Great Books are for you. The strongest endorsement we hear, over and over, is that our method of discussion stays with the book. Our leaders keep the focus on the author's work.

Our next workshop will be held in February 2018. Look for the flyer and registration on our website www.greatbooks-sf.com and in our December 2017 issue of *Reading Matters*. I'm looking forward to meeting you.

Kay C. White, Leader Coordinator
keycleveland@aol.com

Reach more and younger readers through Facebook!

By Sheri Kindsvater

When I was little, one of my favorite episodes of "Little House on the Prairie" was when Mrs. Olson was listening in on the phone party line and got into a whole lot of trouble. Curious, I asked my grandma (who still had a phone in her kitchen) why Mrs. Olson could hear what everyone was saying, and grandma told me all about the party line telephone. She explained that when you picked it up you could hear all sorts of conversations. These phone lines were havens for gossip and news and the big talk at church on Sundays. The party line continued well after its inception in 1878 and was celebrated by Doris Day in her first film with Rock Hudson, "Pillow Talk," phoning Hudson. Today I still find that movie hilarious. Could the story be any less relevant today? A man seeks a date so he pretends to be something he's not in order to get the girl. In the end the truth comes out.

Who knew that many years later an unknown Harvard student named Mark Zuckerberg would launch what has become the largest social media platform, Facebook. Much like the party line, Facebook allows people to peek in, to interact, to gossip and laugh and gripe and everything else in glorifying color, sound, and graphics. Technology!

I am a fan of Facebook. I have more than five hundred "friends" from around the world and subscribe to numerous pages. Being an artist, horse lover, book lover, movie lover, and so on, I can't go one day without seeing some new and interesting thing on my feed. I get caught up on family goings-on, those little things you would never learn if you relied on a phone call. I see when the new horror movies are coming out. My social

feeds tell me when there is a new gallery show opening or a new museum exhibit to check out. I see what my friends are working on, reading, and doing with their lives. I get to share whatever information I want with them. And sometimes, I get to just sit and "listen" to everything going on.

Now, I know you are thinking. "Well that's great, Sheri, but what does this have to do with reading or Great Books?" I say, "Did you know that Great Books has a Facebook page? It belongs to the Great Books Council of San Francisco." Here's the link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/669300279765567/?ref=bookmarks>.

It's still a small page. Out of the hundreds of members in our area, we have only 31 of you on the page. I say this is too low. We ought to have all of you on it! We'd love to see what ideas you have, what you are reading, what plays or events you went to, what you thought about the last Great Books event. The page would love to hear the gossip over the latest read or the funny stories at the last event. We'd love to know what you are doing with the readings in your lives. I'm also pretty sure you'd love to hear what everyone else is gossiping about as well.

Kay White told me that many times, after she has a particularly interesting book discussion, emails start flying back and forth continuing the discussion and hashing out ideas. My thought is how sad that all of us don't share in this. If participants did it on Facebook, not only could the same thoughts be hashed out but other people would get to see the discussion. It could entice new people. You could tag others to let them in on the discussion in order to see their thoughts. It could open whole new readings to someone who hadn't thought to read them before. Right there, on the world wide web, on the Great Books Council of San Francisco Facebook page.

Our council is considered one of the best in the country. Our events are esteemed by other councils and we are looked to as leaders in the Great Books realm. It's my hope that we, together, can build our budding Facebook page to stimulate the development of other councils. So visit, join, jump in. Let's get two hundred plus members on the page and create a community of book lovers to show the Facebook community that people do read the classics and love them. You can even do it at night when your head is on the pillow and you are reading Facebook on your mobile device. That's what I do; I guess I'm living my own "Pillow Talk."

Long Novel Weekend 2018

July 2018 – dates to be determined

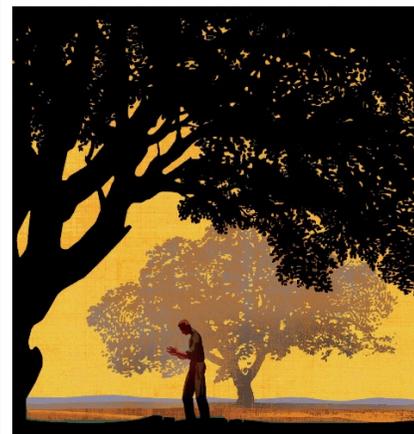
Clark Kerr Campus, UC Berkeley



Clark Kerr Campus
2601 Warring St, Berkeley,
CA 94720

We will discuss

East of Eden by John Steinbeck



PENGUIN CLASSICS

JOHN STEINBECK

East of Eden

The Location: The Clark Kerr Campus is a lovely Spanish mission complex six blocks south of the main UC Berkeley campus. The site includes meeting rooms, a cafeteria, lodging, and ample parking. Participants are housed in two- or three-bedroom suites with a shared bathroom and common area. A selection of meals is available from the dining hall, including vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free selections.

About the Book:

A masterpiece of Biblical scope, and the magnum opus of one of America's most enduring authors.

In his journal, Nobel Prize winner John Steinbeck called *East of Eden* "the first book," and indeed it has the primordial power and simplicity of myth. Set in the rich farmland of California's Salinas Valley, this sprawling and often brutal novel follows the intertwined destinies of two families—the Trasks and the Hamiltons—whose generations helplessly reenact the fall of Adam and Eve and the poisonous rivalry of Cain and Abel.

The masterpiece of Steinbeck's later years, *East of Eden* is a work in which Steinbeck created his most mesmerizing characters and explored his most enduring themes: the mystery of identity, the inexplicability of love, and the murderous consequences of love's absence. Adapted for the 1955 film directed by Elia Kazan introducing James Dean and read by thousands as the book that brought Oprah's Book Club back, *East of Eden* has remained vitally present in American culture for over half a century.

We will use the Penguin Twentieth Century Classics paperback edition with an Introduction by David Wyatt, published October 1, 1992.

ISBN-10: 0140186395
ISBN-13: 978-0140186390

Please purchase only this edition from your bookseller.

(The book is available in new and used versions on Amazon.com.)

About the Author:



John Ernst Steinbeck, Jr. (1902–1968) is an American who won the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humor and keen social perception." He has been called "a giant of American letters," and many of his works are considered classics of Western literature. Most of Steinbeck's work is set in Central California, particularly in the Salinas Valley and the coastal ranges. His works explore the themes of fate and injustice, especially as applied to downtrodden or everyman protagonists.

Steinbeck himself said of the book,
"It has everything in it I have been able to learn about my craft or profession in all these years. I think everything else I have written has been, in a sense, practice for this."

For further information: Contact event coordinator Caroline Van Howe at carolinevanhowe@comcast.net or 415-453-1014. *Dates and Registration information will be announced by October 1, 2017.*

2017-2018 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

OCTOBER 2017	NOVEMBER 2017	FEBRUARY 2018
10/7: Wine Country Mini-Retreat Richard Wright: <i>Native Son</i>	11/11-12: Poetry Weekend	2/17: Leader Training Date TBD: San Francisco Mini-Retreat
APRIL 2018	MAY 2018	JUNE-JULY 2018
4/13-15: Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference Du Bois, <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> LeGuin, <i>The Left Hand of Darkness</i> O'Neill: <i>The Iceman Cometh</i>	5/19: Gold Country Mini-Retreat	6/10: Picnic & Annual Meeting Date TBD: Long Novel Weekend John Steinbeck, <i>East of Eden</i>

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California: President, Louise Morgan; Vice President, Elena Schmid; Secretary, Carol Edlund; Treasurer, Brian Mahoney; Past President, Laura Bushman.

Reading Matters: Editor and Publisher, Rick White; Proofreader and Fact Checker, Carol Hochberg; Database, Jan Vargo.

Website: www.greatbooks-sf.com

Great Books Foundation: www.greatbooks.org

Photo, page 1, by Laura Bushman.

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.