

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2019: **A blast from the past: it's 1959 all over again!**

By Louise Morgan

What could Brigitte Bardot, John Glenn, and Pablo Neruda possibly have in common?! You'll find out next April 26-28 at Asilomar 2019. That's when we'll open a metaphorical time capsule and return to 1959, the first year that Great Books San Francisco held a weekend event at Asilomar. This gathering has since become an annual tradition and the highlight of our literary year.

1959? Good grief . . . that was 60 years ago! Are there any of us who can remember that weekend, either as a participant or perhaps as a child accompanying a parent? If you have memories of that inaugural weekend we'd love to hear from you. Information about the event in general and, specifically, the texts that were discussed would be a valuable addition to the GBSF archives. Sadly, our almost-comprehensive record of Asilomar readings extends back only to 1961. That lack of information didn't stop us from spinning ideas for a 60th anniversary celebration. After all, we now have the Internet! So, armed with relevant details from that great collective cyber memory, we shall proceed.

Elvis was going strong in 1959, as was squeaky-clean Pat Boone (regarded by some as the anti-Elvis!). Blue suede shoes vs. white bucks.

We were in the midst of the Cold War, and Richard Wilbur penned his "Advice to a Prophet" suggesting

how humanity might be persuaded to give up the weapons of 20th century warfare. We'll explore the ideas in that poem along with others selected for discussion at Asilomar—works by Auden, Levertov, Neruda, and Graves—all published in 1959. The space race was under way, the microchip was invented, and the first synthetic diamond was manufactured. Science seemed to have the potential for solving all the world's problems. But C. P. Snow recognized a "gulf of mutual

incomprehension" growing between scientists and literary intellectuals, and he wrote about it in *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. His lecture on it, delivered in 1959 at Cambridge, will be the focus of our weekend's non-fiction discussion. Given the current political climate, Snow's contention that a country needs "...politicians, administrators, an entire community, who know

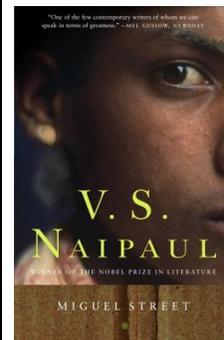


Asilomar Seashore

Harriet Burge, 2018. Kay White Collection

enough science to have a sense of what the scientists are talking about" seems especially relevant today.

The scientific and literary cultures may have been divided but, with the end of the world war, regional cultures in 1959 were becoming ever more tightly interconnected and new voices were being heard. A young writer from Trinidad working at the BBC in London found a publisher willing to take a chance on his unusual literary creation, *Miguel Street*: a set of humorous linked character portraits set in a Port of Spain slum. The book went on to win the Somerset Maugham prize, and its author, V. S. Naipaul, won the Nobel Prize for



Literature in 2001.

The theatre was thriving in 1959 with the publication of *The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson, *Sweet Bird of Youth* by Tennessee Williams, *The Tenth Man* by Paddy Chayefsky, and *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. Albert Camus, newly endowed with his own Nobel, adapted one of his favorite novels for the stage: Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (later renamed *Demons*). We'll discuss the resulting three-part play, also named *The Possessed*. As one reviewer put it, "It shows wonderfully well what Camus believes in: the importance of each separate individual, the limit which is not to be passed where the individual is concerned, the tragic inappropriateness of whatever does violate that limit, the practical impossibility of group judgment."

Journalist Fred Kaplan regarded 1959 as a landmark year, one imbued with a growing sense that things were changing and that the new was something worth embracing. We're looking to have a lot of fun with that idea during our Saturday evening party featuring activities, games, and prizes centered around life as we remember or imagine it six decades ago.

Don't miss this chance to be part of our milestone celebration. Register now for Asilomar 2019 either online or by filling out and mailing in the flyer on our web site, <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com>. And don't forget to bring photos, articles, and memories of Asilomar 1959!

Long Novel Weekend 2019: *The Brothers Karamazov*

By Caroline Van Howe

Following a very successful Long Novel Weekend in July 2018, we are delighted to announce the dates and book selection for next year. The Long Novel Weekend will be held on July 27-28, 2019 at the Vallobrosa Center in Menlo Park. The book is *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Thanks to all who shared feedback about the weekend and offered suggestions for next year's novel. After extensive discussion the committee selected this great 19th century Russian novel, only the fourth book chosen a second time for discussion since the founding of Long Novel Weekend in 1991. The others were *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann in 1991, *Middlemarch* by George Eliot in 1993, and *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville in 1995.

The translation

After the decision about the novel is taken each year, a critical decision is made about novels not written in English—namely, the translation. After online research and consulting experienced readers, the committee chose the 2002 printing of the 1990 translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. This version won the Pen/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize in 1991. Reviews included:



Fyodor , 1876

Heartily recommended to any reader who wishes to come as close to Dostoevsky's Russian as possible. —Joseph Frank, Princeton University

Far and away the best translation of Dostoevsky into English that I

have seen . . . faithful . . . extremely readable . . . gripping.

—Sidney Monas, University of Texas

About the novel

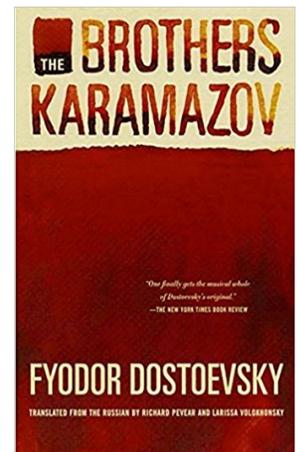
The Brothers Karamazov is Dostoevsky's final novel. He devoted nearly two years to writing it. It was first published as a serial in *The Russian Messenger* from January 1879 to November 1880. The author died less than four months afterward.

This is a passionate philosophical novel set in his own lifetime that explores debates of the time about God, free will, and morality. It is a spiritual drama of moral struggles concerning faith, doubt, judgment, and reason, set against a modernizing Russia. The plot revolves around the subject of patricide. Since its publication, it has been acclaimed as one of the supreme achievements in world literature.

Praise for the novel from other writers and thinkers sets it apart and in a world of its own:

Sigmund Freud called *The Brothers Karamazov* "the most magnificent novel ever written."

Einstein considered *The Brothers Karamazov* to be "the supreme summit of all literature."



Kurt Vonnegut, in *Slaughterhouse Five*, wrote "...there is one other book...that can teach you everything you need to know about life. It's *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky."

Join us for an exciting weekend in July to meet and discuss this extraordinary book. New readers and veterans are warmly welcome. Please see the flyer and register form on our web site, www.greatbooks-sf.com.

Chicago gets *Something Wicked*

By Rob Calvert

How about a spring vacation with a literary twist? On May 3-5, 2019, the Great Books Foundation will host its annual Great Books Chicago weekend of literature discussions. The theme this year is *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. The three two-hour Shared Inquiry discussions will encompass "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor; "The Grand Inquisitor" from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky; *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood; and *The Meaning of Human Existence* by Edward O. Wilson.

This will be the fourth Great Books Chicago weekend since it was revived by its inimitable impresario, Gary Schoepfel. Discussions in other years have included: (2016) Orwell's *1984* and selections from the Foundation's *Imperfect Ideal* anthology; (2017) Willa Cather's *My Antonia* and selections from the Foundation's *Her Own Accord* anthology; and (2018) selections from the Foundation's "Big Ideas" anthologies on the worlds of film, TV, and music.

For the weekend itself, Gary puts together a fun and exciting time, with side events and excursions complementing the adroitly-led discussions. This time we'll spend an evening at Chicago's Symphony Hall, with maestro Riccardo Muti and the appropriately celebrated Chicago Symphony Orchestra performing Bizet and Respighi, along with mezzo Joyce DiDonato giving a rare performance of Berlioz's aria "The Death of Cleopatra."

Great Books Chicago has become a can't-miss staple for me every spring. I try to allow a couple of extra days before or after the literary weekend so that I can enjoy the city's delights. No Chicago visit would be complete without stopping by to hang out with the impressionist masterpieces at the Art Institute!

The registration fee, which does not include lodging, is \$450. Register at the Chicago website:

<https://www.greatbooks.org/giving/great-books-chicago/>

Poetry fills the air at Vallombrosa

By Paula Weinberger

Forty-seven poetry enthusiasts gathered at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park on November 3-4 for the annual Great Books Poetry Weekend. There was much to say, share, puzzle over, and enjoy. A solid 88 percent gave the weekend a top rating. Most were pleased with the selection of poems and very pleased with the quality of the discussions. Once again, when we read and talked about poems, they came alive.

The Vallombrosa Center got high marks and positive comments about both the accommodations and the food.

Saturday evening's guest poet

A Saturday evening tradition has been to invite a guest poet to read. This time we were delighted to have prize-winning poet, teacher, and artist **Prartho Sere-no**, whose warm and outgoing personality brought a personal touch to her reading.

Prartho read selections from all of her books including her latest, *Indian Rope Trick*. By request, she read a poem of hers that had been a favorite at a previous weekend, "Magdalene Faces the Tribunal of Quantifiable Evidence and Measureable Outcomes."

Prior to the reading, we took time to remember **Jan and Larry Fussell** and **Carol Hochberg** who had died since our last meeting. The Fussells and Carol were key in developing Poetry Weekend in the 1970s and leaders in the program continuously since then. Jan and Larry's three daughters, **Lisa Beersten**, **Karen Maxwell**, and **Dawn Sauceman**, gave tributes to their parents. **Jean Circiello**, a longtime member of the Great Books poetry group in Berkeley, founded and hosted by Carol, shared remembrances.

Selecting poems for discussion

Each year members of the Poetry Committee meet to evaluate fifteen candidate poems for Poetry Weekend based on their merit and discussability. They find a way to sort them into broad categories for three two-hour discussions. Sometimes this is easy, sometimes challenging. This year, the chosen poems fell nicely into the following groupings: "Precarious Relationships," "Reflections," and "Eternal Questions."

Saturday morning's discussion

In our first morning we took on "Precarious Relationships." In all five of the poems personal relationships were resolved differently. They ranged from an ambiguous outcome in an estranged relationship in Philip Larkin's "No Road" to whether the woman in "Meditations by the Stove" by Linda Pastan was simply resigned to her domestic confinement or had found contentment there.

Saturday afternoon

Saturday afternoon's focus was "Reflections," and it had us ponder the transformation of despair to blessing in "The Still Time" by Galway Kinnell, how to face a reality in which nothing is certain in "The Empty Glass" by Louise Glück, and the cyclical patterns in life as reflected by Elizabeth Bishop in "Sestina," the intricate rhyming structure for which she named the poem.

Prartho Sereno attended several sessions during the weekend. She was active in the afternoon discussion of her poem "My Chinese Doctors Says." In Chinese medicine, each organ of the body holds a different feeling. The spleen is the witness, "aloof as it gathers the days into its bag." The poem is an imagining of memories that might have been captured in the "steamy bowl" of her grandmother's spleen when it was "lifted out at 93." Our conjectures intrigued Prartho and she told us her own perspectives on the events set forth in the poem.

"The Still Time" by Galway Kinnell describes a transformation in which all things that drove him to despair returned as blessings. We pondered the nature of a transformation that could turn the hollowness of the poet's heart into an opening for hope.

Louise Glück in "The Empty Glass" had us reflect on the vagaries of fortune. "I asked for much, I received much. I asked for much, I received little, I received next to nothing." The poet questions how to face this reality and concludes "to believe that some good will come of simply trying." The examples she cites are ambiguous and generated a lively discussion.

Sunday morning

Our last session, "Eternal Questions," began with "We Must Die Because We Have Known Them" by Rainer Maria Rilke. The title is a quotation from the epigram of one of the oldest known manuscripts, the *Papyrus Prisse*. The poem begins with a young man singing the praises of an unobtainable love. It ends, in

contrast, with a grown man and an elderly sailor silent with terrors that play inside "as though in quivering cages."

In "Stanzas" by Emily Bronte, the poet rejects the "busy chase of wealth and learning...the clouded forms of long past history," to seek succor and wisdom from the "ferny glens and lonely mountains." We are asked to reflect on this path and its power to awaken the heart to the "worlds of Heaven and Hell."

In "Blind Leading the Blind" by Lisel Mueller, the poet guides us through a mysterious cave. She has experienced its contours and dangers before, but the journey is still unpredictable as we "learn toads from diamonds, the fist from palm, love from the sweat of love, falling from flying." The poem begins with "Take my hand" and ends with "There are two of us here. Touch me."

"Hymn to Beauty" by Charles Baudelaire questions whether Beauty comes "from the stars" or rises from "the black pit." Beauty dazzles but it also destroys like a moth flying into a flame. The poet pleads indifference to the contrast: "From God or Satan, who cares?" He will take Beauty on its own terms, for Beauty alone makes "the world less hideous, the minutes less leaden." The poem challenges us to define "Beauty" and to assess the poet's summation.

The session concluded with "Brief Pause in the Organ Recital" by Tomas Tranströmer. Here the poet contrasts the chaotic nature of life with the formalism of an organ recital. It is the silence, the pause in the music that awakens his thoughts to the nature of this "faltering world." The discussion centered on the formal verses chaotic nature of life and the role of silence.

Discussion Leaders: Carol Edlund, Ginni Saunders, Ellen Ward, Steve Doherty, Mary Wood, Caroline Yale, Rob Calvert, Jean Circiello, Louise Morgan.

Alternates: Parki Hoeschler, Nina Gibson, Paula Weinberger.

Mark your calendars

The 2019 Great Books Poetry Weekend will take place on November 16-17 at Vallombrosa. Details will be posted at www.greatbooks-sf.com.

ALERT: If you go to smile.amazon.com when placing your order GBSF will earn a small contribution from the amount of the purchase. It adds up!

Signatures: *Rob Calvert*

By Louise Morgan

“I’ve pitched in.” That’s how Rob Calvert, with characteristic understatement, sums up the time and effort that he has put into Great Books starting in the 90’s when he first attended an Asilomar weekend. He



Rob Calvert

mentions being part of “the large corps of committed volunteers who keep the Great Books fires burning.” Indeed, GB is heavily dependent on volunteers who variously plan, organize, administer, train, lead, perform, analyze, solve, assist, record, promote, and come to the rescue. Rob has done all that and more.

Deep roots are part of the story; his parents, **Bob** and **Carol Calvert**, had a 50-year relationship with Great Books that started in Southern California in the 1950’s. His sister **Kathy Calvert**, a veterinarian practicing near Santa Cruz, attends Asilomar and belongs to **Brent Browning’s** monthly group. **Matt** and **Duncan** are Rob and **Katie’s** two sons; Duncan recently “caught the bug” and has attended some GBSF events and participated in monthly discussions.

Rob himself joined a monthly discussion group in Berkeley and began attending Asilomar regularly about twenty years ago. His involvement steadily grew as he became the GBSF webmaster, started service on the executive committee, became the primary coordinator for Asilomar, and rose through the ranks to become vice-president, president, and past president. In addition he is part of several text selection committees and is frequently tapped to lead discussions.

Among the most tech-savvy of our members, Rob is rarely seen without his laptop. He edits minutes, flyers, and articles with what Rick White calls his “gimlet eye,” and is the de facto recorder of data and details pertaining to GBSF. He is a critical player in maintaining our institutional memory and our effective liaison with the Great Books Foundation and other GB organizations.

Rob says “the greatest strength of Great Books is the learning and enjoyment we get from its Shared Inquiry discussions. I’m interested in how Great Books can leverage the internet, particularly video conferenc-

ing, so that Shared Inquiry can overcome physical and geographic boundaries.”

He adds: “Great Books discussions help me with a goal that’s been central throughout my life: striking a balance among different ways of perceiving and interacting with the world. As a lifelong performing musician with a liberal arts education, a science degree and a tech career, I value switching easily between rational/practical and aesthetic/feeling mindsets. (I’m excited about our upcoming discussion of C. P. Snow’s look at this division, *The Two Cultures*, during Asilomar 2019.)

March 9th is set for 2019 leader-reader training event

This year’s leader-reader training event is set to take place on March 9th. The session, to be led by Kay White, is designed to help readers at all levels—including discussion leaders—prepare more effectively for a rewarding book discussion. The site will be announced when the approximate number of participants is determined. Please register now. See flyer on a page later in this issue.

“During the last two decades I’ve come away from many discussions saying ‘Wow!’ Sometimes they were new ways of looking at old favorites like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The most satisfying experiences were introductions to books that I might not otherwise have read, such as an Asilomar discussion of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and a series of Great Discourses (online) discussions of the Qu’ran. They expanded my world.”

Great Books is busted! Gathering is caught watching a cartoon

By Sheri Kindsvater

Maybe it was a first for GBSF: we gathered to spend an afternoon watching a cartoon. This exception to our alleged literary sobriety was made to honor George Orwell’s great political satire, *Animal Farm*. Hoping not to lose completely our reputation for seriousness, we took two hours in the morning to discuss the original text.

In keeping with our ongoing Wine Country theme of banned books, *Animal Farm*, as a film, was banned around the world by countries where it was seen as an indictment of their regimes.

In the story a majority of animals in a revolt against farm life adopt and post on the barn wall seven commandments. One at a time in dark of night words are added to the end of each commandment to contradict its meaning. "All animals are created equal" says the original writing, but words have been added to say that "some animals are more equal than others."

This language gives two treacherous pigs, Napoleon and Snowball, what they need to take over the farm and rule it as dictators.

We considered the lack of education that enabled these pigs to take over and betray the rest of the animals. Taking advantage, angry farmers took many of the animals to slaughter. We are not given options for a better way to run things but the novel clearly rejects tyranny. In particular it shows the role of corrupted language in bringing it about. Such use of language has come since to be known as "Orwellian."

Humanlike characteristics the author gave his animals made them and the events believable. This is a book to be read, studied, and enjoyed for many years to come.

The film we watched in the afternoon was the first animated version of *Animal Farm*. Reportedly it was financed by the CIA with communism in mind. It was done in the style of the time, the post WW2 period, complete with a cartoon soundtrack.

After the movie, our participants partook in wine on the patio and discussed both the movie and the book—how its implied cautions might relate to society today.

Here's to next year for more lessons from a banned book!

Letter from a reader

By Debra Roby

I would argue that a book becomes great when readers who were children on its publishing date start reading it. That surely is a sign that the book has legs beyond initial hype.

The last almost three years I have deliberately worked to read books NOT written by white men, or white Americans. I'd argue that *Americanah* is a great book; Olivia Butler is a great author worth consideration (ok, much of her writing would be difficult to some to read. But *Kindred* is approachable); Amy Tan is a great author.

Is *Fried Green Tomatoes at the WhistleStop Café*? Maybe. Maybe not. Lots to chew on. Great movie. Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Yes.

If it's not obvious, I lean toward science fiction. Speculative. Afro-futurism. Wide open different view points. Lives like I'd never be able to read. I've seen the anthologies from Great Books and they don't seem to limit to books from 70 years ago. I personally think a book can be great at 20-25 years.

I think N K Jemisin's *Stone Gate* trilogy is great based solely on its having won The Hugo Award for each book. (Yes, three years in a row!)

Please keep this discussion alive. We encourage letters to *Reading Matters* because reading matters.

2019 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

FEBRUARY 2019	MARCH - APRIL	MAY - JUNE
2/6: San Francisco Mini-Retreat <i>The English Patient</i>	3/9: Leader-Reader Training 4/26-28: Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference <i>The Two Cultures, Miguel Street,</i> <i>The Possessed, selected poetry</i>	5/18: Gold Country Mini-Retreat <i>Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations</i> 6/2: Picnic/Annual Meeting <i>Candide</i>
JULY - AUGUST	SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER	NOVEMBER
7/27-28: Long Novel Weekend <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>	TBD: Wine Country Mini-Retreat	11/16-17: Poetry Weekend

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Great Books Foundation: www.greatbooks.org.

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 gbrianmahoney@gmail.com.