

# Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO  
*Serving Northern California*

## Asilomar 2024: Celebrate the Power of Dialogue!

By Mark Scardina

Engaging conversation awaits on the idyllic Monterey coast. Join us this April 12th for your annual literary recharge. This year's Barbara McConnell Weekend at Asilomar's lineup is even better than last year's highly praised one. Poets--Wilfred Owen, Thomas Centolella, Louise Glück and lesser-known work by Virginia Woolf--will kick off the engaging discussion Friday night and set the theme for the weekend.

On the following crisp spring morning, take a deep dive into "Three Guineas" by Woolf where she explores women's roles in suppressing men's proclivity for war while laying the roots of feminism, this on the eve of WWII. The New Yorker declares, "*If you are a woman or anti-war or both, read it!*" Why not a man? This alone could cause a lively conversation at lunch, likely to be continued in the postprandial time allotted for an exploration of the area's special beauty.



Successful in getting newcomers last year, we hope to have more of them this Asilomar and welcome them at our Saturday afternoon Meet & Greet to share their excitement, with old-timers no less animated. Snacks,

hors d'oeuvres, and a selection of beverages are available to enhance the gathering.



### Meet & Greet

After dinner, we'll move back in time to the shores of the Mediterranean for a profound discussion of C.S. Lewis's brilliant retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche from her sister Orual's perspective. Lewis's last and widely considered most accomplished work, *Today We Have Faces*, brings "new meaning, new depths, and new terrors" to the timeless myth according to The Saturday Review. Lively differences of interpretation can be assumed.

Sunday may be the traditional day of rest, but at this Asilomar, fueled by the previous night's discussion, we'll leap into the fire in *A Doll's House*. Henrik Ibsen's depiction of a woman's struggle for her independence and individual identity led critic James Huneker to write of it "*That slammed door reverberated across the roof of the world.*" While capping the weekend's shared experience, it is sure to provoke the event's traditional debate about what was the unannounced theme of the weekend.

To help as many as possible share this experience, GBSF has maintained last year's reduced price for the conference itself and negotiated for only a small increase in Asilomar's price for the accommodations.

This includes keeping the charge for the conference itself free for students and first timers.



For those booking Asilomar rooms, the rate includes six full meals and free use of all facilities. To sign up or obtain more information, please see our website: [www.greatbooksncal.org/asilomar](http://www.greatbooksncal.org/asilomar).

We hope you can entice others to join you for this immersive weekend experience.

## Can Poetry Save the World?

By Paula Weinberger

Last year's Poetry Weekend, via Zoom, explored different ways poetry can raise our awareness of the challenges facing our world. We were delighted to have Elizabeth Herron, ecopoet and activist, share the strategies she and other poets have used to bear witness and open readers' minds and hearts. Below you will find a lovely writeup of the Weekend written by one of the participants, Alissa Simon, Tutor at Harrison Middleton University. This was posted to the HMU blog.

*Each fall, Great Books San Francisco hosts a poetry weekend. And if there's one thing that I'm grateful for in this world, it's poetry. I love to attend this event because of its hybrid nature. The first day is filled with reading and discussion. Groups of fifteen or so are separated into Zoom spaces where we read, analyze, and compare a handful of previously selected*

*poems. This is always enlightening. It gives dimension to the poems, to metaphor itself, as well as to the voices around us. As I have often said on this blog, listening is a vital skill, perhaps the most vital. In listening, not just to a poem, but to others' responses to a poem, I learn more than I ever would on my own.*

*The second half of each weekend is spent with a poet. Sometimes they offer a bit of a workshop, at others a lecture or a discussion, all enjoyable. This event allows the poet to speak as they are most comfortable. This year Elizabeth Herron, poet laureate of Sonoma County, read works of others, recommended books, talked about favorite lines, and generously listened to the audience. Poet presenters always amaze me with such generosity and she did not disappoint. Elizabeth Herron spent an entire Sunday with this random group of readers who just want to know more about what she finds important in the world. And the random group of readers generously gives their time in an effort to learn more, know more, hear more, explore more. It's a fabulous experience.*

*The Great Books San Francisco poetry committee spends a lot of time compiling the list of poems to be read. They plan ahead and discuss the poems before the event as a way of generating questions. They do so much legwork that the event runs without a hitch. Thanks to all those who participated in the event, but also those who planned it!*

*I always walk away astounded with gratitude, which is a fitting theme for today's blog. (As a side note, if it were up to me, I would add gratitude to the list of great ideas, along with forgiveness, because both contain great complexity and importance in defining what it means to be human.) So, in gratitude for this wonderful event, I took a line from each of the 10 poems that we discussed and shaped the following "found poem" with attribution. I hope it serves the moment and the day. May you find a quiet moment to create space for yourself and your loved ones!*

## *A Found Poem with Ten Diverse Voices*

By Alissa Simon

without fire in words without love  
in its emptiness, the world  
– O give me a room to keep a secret –  
fractal branching of mistakes  
the nothingness of winter becomes a little less  
the gift of shadows  
in the staggering universe  
got up. They danced away  
I can breathe now through any fire

(“The Light, Changed by Yves Bonnefoy)  
 (“Aubade” by Louise Glück)  
 (“Acorn” by Phillis Levin)  
 (“Daedal” by A.E. Stallings)  
 (“The Course of a Particular” Wallace Stevens)  
 (“The Lamplighter” by Eavan Boland)  
 (“Another Story” by Ellen Bass)  
 (“Jacaranda” by Aracelis Girmay)  
 (“How Music Stays in the Body” by Lee Herrick)

Stay tuned for information about Poetry Weekend 2024, scheduled for mid-November on Zoom. The Poetry Selection Committee is already putting their heads together to plan another exciting program.

[Ed.] Below appear reflections by Louise DiMattio. Following them are two poems selected by Elizabeth Herron to illustrate the theme of Poetry Weekend. We suggest they be read with Louise’s account in mind.

### *Poetry and Epiphany*

By Louise DiMattio

Def: epiphany: 1.) the manifestation of a supernatural or divine reality; 2.) any moment of great or sudden revelation.

Amazing moments can happen during a Great Books discussion, epiphanies. It has happened to me many times and it can take different forms. Here’s an example: I have been leading *Great Expectations* at Rossmoor for the last several months. At one point, a participant stopped the whole discussion and asked if we could take a few moments to focus on the beauty of Dickens’s text. She read several passages out loud that were stunning in their beauty and full of meaning and nuance. The entire group looked up in silent amazement. A rare thing had happened – an epiphany. How wonderful it is when a participant, and not the

leader, can and does make that happen. Of course, Dickens started it all.

I am fortunate to be a member of the monthly Great Books poetry group. I guess you expect poetry to lead you to “Aha” moments and it does. So often I have said to the group, “I can’t find the words to explain but I know exactly what the poet is saying.”

There is a physical response, a tingling feeling, and, for just a few seconds, you are in a liminal space separate from the normal humdrum of everyday thought. Poet Denise Levertov calls it *the secret*. You know the secret for just a few seconds, then it’s gone. I know I can’t live in that space forever, but I want to; I am always searching for it.

During the pandemic and up to the present, I have been sharing the leading of a short story group with Great Books leader trainer Louise Morgan. The group is called Flash Fiction Friday and is sponsored by Classical Pursuits ([www.classicalpursuits.com](http://www.classicalpursuits.com)). We meet on Zoom for only an hour on Friday afternoons so people from all over can join us. Folks come and go but the beauty of the stories remains. Who knew how many gorgeous stories there are in the world? Epiphanies can happen anywhere in imaginative literature.

I was preparing to lead a particularly moving and poetic 1941 short story, *A Worn Path* by Eudora Welty. I usually read the story at least three times prior



to asking my opening question. On my third reading, I entered that special place that is so difficult to explain. Animal and nature become alive: "A big black dog with a lolling tongue came up out of the weeds by the ditch. She was meditating and not ready, and when he came at her she only hit him a little with her cane. Over she went in the ditch, like a little puff of milkweed. Down there, her senses drifted away. A dream visited her and she reached her hand up, but nothing reached down and gave her a pull. So she lay there and presently went to talking. 'Old woman,' she said to herself, 'that black dog come up out of the weeds to stall you off, and now there he sitting on his fine tail, smiling at you'."

I entered the dreamlike state. I was on the worn path and talking with myself and with God. I was the old woman. I could see the vegetation and feel the humid air. I was no longer at my desk in San Francisco. Something happened.

People who love literature and poetry know what I mean. It's prayer, it's meditation, it's a joining with another person, the author or poet, who will never know the journey you took. It's a rest. It's a rest in beauty and in grace.

[Ed.] Louise told us "I hope they will read the Eudora Welty story in its entirety....It's worth it." For the full text see <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1941/02/a-worn-path/376236/>.

*And now poems selected by Elizabeth Herron during Poetry Weekend:*

### A BRIEF FOR THE DEFENSE

By Jack Gilbert

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are not starving someplace, they are starving somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils. But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants. Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women at the fountain are laughing together between

the suffering they have known and the awfulness in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody in the village is very sick. There is laughter every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta, and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay. If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction, we lessen the importance of their deprivation. We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil. If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude. We must admit there will be music despite everything. We stand at the prow again of a small ship anchored late at night in the tiny port looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning. To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a row-boat comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth all the years of sorrow that are to come.

*From Collected Poems by Jack Gilbert. Copyright © 2012 by Jack Gilbert. Reprinted with the permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.*

*And then:*

### THE UNBORN

*for David Brower*

By John Daniel

Whatever they could be  
we hold in seed –  
their faces  
containing our faces  
in the darkness deeper  
than anyone can remember,  
their voices  
that given speech



will speak for us  
when we have passed beyond speech –  
whatever it is  
the world wants to become  
only they can tell,  
only in them  
can the womb say its name  
and only in us  
can they speak at all,  
they speak  
if we speak for them.

## Census of Reading Groups is Postponed until April

By Jan Vargo

In the past, the local Great Books Council conducted an annual census of the Great Books reading groups that we sponsor in Northern California. As manager of our database, I usually began the survey after Thanksgiving for publication in the January issue of *Reading Matters*. Unfortunately, it was often difficult to reach group contacts during the holidays so we postponed the census until April so that we can announce the results at our annual meeting in May.

In 2022, I was able to contact 31 groups, some of which were still on hold due to COVID. Many groups had switched to meeting on Zoom and do not intend to meet in person again. All groups may choose to be listed on the Great Books Foundation website. My own group, which now meets on Zoom, has a faithful attendee who now lives in Texas, and I just received a request to join the group from a man in Mexico City. He saw the group listed on the Great Books national website. If you are the contact for one of our reading groups, I look forward to finding out in a few months how the group is doing. And if you would like to start a new group, be sure and let us know. We can list it on our website (<http://www.greatbooksncal.org/>). This is a great way to attract new members.

## SF Mini-Retreat date is set —not yet the readings

By Parki Hoeschler

This year Santa's Christmas elves are keeping the San Francisco Mini-Retreat announcement under wraps until after the 12th Day of Christmas.

The date is **Saturday, February 24, 2024**. It will be held over Zoom. Two selections will be discussed, one at a two-hour session starting at 10:00 and the other at 1:30. Time will be provided to compare and contrast the two selections.

Last year's story was set in South Africa and the year before in the lands of the Trojan Wars, from Sparta to Troy. How about the boroughs of New York City this year?

The novel last time was in the form of a letter from a dying Mother to her daughter. Will it be postcards instead this year? Lines of poetry that enrich and lead us into chapters? Will a superior court judge be encountered rather than a homeless man?



**Elves: Pres. Louise DiMattio, V.P. Elena Schmid, new Co-Treasurers Eileen Coleman, Paul Smith**

Most important, will a dog play a notable role again this year? Will sons from privileged circumstances appear? How would their fathers compare to King Priam?

The Mini-Retreat official registration announcement will be revealed, as usual, by elves after the Holidays. Plan on attending the SF Mini Retreat to find out and to enjoy the Method of Shared Inquiry.

In the meantime, Happy New Year!

[Ed. The readings were set after this was written. See calendar at end of newsletter.]

## “Why is that?” A key to leading effective discussions

By Louise Morgan

“Why” is a powerful word, perhaps the most productive in the basic list of interrogatives other than why aspiring journalists learn: *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and sometimes *how*. Most questions beginning with interrogatives elicit specific and brief answers.

Who murdered the old colonel?

The butler.

What did the sisters discover in the attic?

A forgotten photograph.

When did James make his fateful decision?

At dawn.

Where was Gatsby when he was shot?

In his swimming pool.

You get the idea. And it quickly becomes clear this is not the best way to encourage an extensive and fruitful discussion.

But *why* stands apart because answering it requires at the very least an explanation. And, more often than not, a *why* encourages the group to speculate, leading to exploration of ideas about motive, incentive, ideas, or something else that might have caused the action or behavior to have occurred as it did. Hearing such speculations can often cause us to review an initial interpretation of events or refine our viewpoint.

Shared Inquiry stresses that we avoid asking fact-based questions unless they are used in a strategic way to focus the discussion or to make sure everyone has the same understanding about key points. Otherwise, you are encouraged to employ *why* early and often when crafting your discussion questions. It’s a powerful tool!



Asilomar dining hall



President Louise DiMattio with Treasurer Emeritus Brian Mahoney: Thanks!

**2024 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO**

January - February	March - April	May - June
<p><b>1/27 Banned Books Pop-Up #2:</b> August Wilson, <i>Fences</i></p> <p><b>2/24 San Francisco Mini-Retreat via Zoom.</b> <i>Thirteen Ways of Looking</i>, by Colum McCann, and “Merge” by Deborah Eisenberg from the collection <i>Your Duck is My Duck</i>.</p>	<p><b>3/ TBD Banned Books Pop-Up #3</b></p> <p><b>4/12– 4/14</b> <b>Barbara McConnell Spring Conference at Asilomar.</b> Virginia Woolf, <i>Three Guineas</i>; C.S. Lewis, <i>Till We Have Faces</i>; Henrik Ibsen, <i>A Doll’s House</i>; selected poetry.</p>	<p><b>5/18 Gold Country Mini-Retreat in Auburn.</b> David Grann, <i>Killers of the Flower Moon</i> followed by its movie directed by Martin Scorsese.</p> <p><b>6/ TBD Banned Books Pop-Up #4</b></p>
July - August	September - October	November - December
<p><b>7/ TBD Leader-Reader Workshop via Zoom.</b></p> <p><b>7/6 Annual Meeting: via Zoom.</b> Election of Officers. Discuss TBD</p> <p><b>8/ TBD Banned Books Mini-Retreat</b></p>	<p><b>10/12-13 Long Novel Weekend via Zoom.</b> Gabriel Garcia Marquez, <i>One Hundred Years of Solitude</i></p>	<p><b>11/16-17 Poetry Weekend,</b> poetry selections and location TBD</p> <p><b>12/ TBD Banned Books Pop-Up #5</b></p>

**SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL Serving Northern California:** President, Louise DiMattio, Vice President, Elena Schmid; Secretary, Caroline Van Howe; Treasurer, Eileen Coleman & Paul Smith; Past President, Brian Cunningham.

*Reading Matters:* Editor and Publisher, Rick White; E-letter Editor and Publisher, Jim Hall; Database, Jan Vargo.

**Website:** [www.greatbooksncal.org](http://www.greatbooksncal.org)

**Great Books Foundation:** <https://www.greatbooks.org/>

The GBSF annual financial report one-page summary can be seen on our website. The full report can be obtained by contacting our treasurer at [ecolemansmith@gmail.com](mailto:ecolemansmith@gmail.com).