

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

2019 Pulitzer Prize winner Forrest Gander to speak at Poetry Weekend

By Paula Weinberger

Celebrated poet Forrest Gander will be joined by acclaimed poet-translator Meryl Natchez at GBSF Poetry Weekend this November 16-17 at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park. The two will discuss *The Art and Craft of Translation* at our Saturday evening event. The session that afternoon will feature poems that Gander and Natchez will be talking about.



Forrest Gander

Gander's Pulitzer was awarded for his collection, *Be With*. Excerpts of his interview by Natchez last September can be read in a page following. For bios of the speakers and to register, see the Poetry Weekend event flyer on our [web site](#).

Dostoevsky rides again at Long Novel Weekend

Stanford professor is evening speaker

By Caroline Van Howe and Rick White

After an immersion at this year's Asilomar conference in the play *The Possessed*, the stage version of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Demons*, we surface with the Russians in Menlo Park for a longer and even more dangerous ride through the countryside of *The Brothers Karamazov*, another tale of love, hate, and all the emotions between.



The West Parlor at Vallombrosa is ready for a book discussion

Our guest speaker is Professor Nancy



Nancy Ruttenburg

Ruttenburg. She holds an endowed chair at Stanford University and teaches in three departments—American, Slavic, and Comparative literature. She is the author of *Dostoevsky's Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2008), and working on a comparative piece called *Democracy And*. To learn what that curious title means, we recommended that you attend the event.

Dates: July 27-28, 2019

Long Novel Weekend will be held on July 27-28, 2019 at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park.

The Translation:

We will be using the 2002 translation by Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky. This translation was the Winner of Pen/Book- of-the-Month Club Translation Prize.

About the novel:

The Brothers Karamazov is the final novel by the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky. *The Brothers Karamazov* is a passionate philosophical novel, set in 19th-century Russia, which enters deeply into the ethical debates of God, free will, and morality. It is a spiritual drama of moral struggles concerning faith, doubt, judgment, and reason, set against a modernizing Russia, with a plot which revolves around the subject of patricide. Since its publication, it has been acclaimed as one of the supreme achievements in world literature.

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

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

Kurt Vonnegut, in *Slaughterhouse Five*, wrote that "...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 this July to discuss one of the greatest works of literature. New and veteran readers are warmly welcome. Please see the Long Novel event flyer and registration form on our [web site](#).

Asilomar 2019:

Bic Pens and Barbie Dolls

By Louise Morgan

Such items aren't usually on display at Great Books events, but they were relevant this year as we gathered to celebrate the 60th GBSF annual weekend at Asilomar.

Our focus was on 1959, the first year of what was then the "Annual Bay Area Great Books Weekend Institute," meeting on the Monterey Peninsula where "in one of the world's truly beautiful settings, stimulating Great Books discussions, pleasant companionship, good food and accommodations" blended for the perfect weekend. (I'm quoting from a booklet that celebrated the 25-year anniversary of GBSF at Asilomar.) It has since been renamed Barbara McConnell Great Books Spring Conference.

In celebration of the anniversary, all of this year's reading selections were published in 1959. Soon after our Friday arrival we joined our assigned groups for lively discussions of poetry by Denise Levertov, W.H. Auden, Pablo Neruda, Robert Graves, and Richard Wilbur, and marveled at how keenly their depictions of human nature still resonate today.

On Saturday we examined C.P. Snow's *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, again finding considerable relevance to contemporary issues. Later that day came an immersion in the flavors of life in WWII Trinidad in V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, which sketches characters who resemble those of his childhood in that island nation.

The traditional Saturday evening party began with a display of 1959 memorabilia, including Barbie dolls and Bic pens, both of which were introduced that year. The display featured short white gloves and large beads (courtesy of **Kay White**), a USSR t-shirt and Peter Max tie (thank you, **Rick White**), a gingham apron, saddle shoes, and Princess phone (compliments of **Sharon Lingane**), a vintage cigarette lighter (from **Mary McCosker**) and an ashtray (**Rob Calvert**). **Sheri Kindsvater** supplied the Barbie dolls from her extensive collection.

Small teams spent a few minutes tackling a challenging 1959 trivia quiz; the Scardina and Neiman/Mitchell double husband-and-wife team emerged triumphant. **Mark Scardina** also was recognized for having been the first among us to have attended Asilomar, way back in the 1960's. A record for this year, this one for distance, was set by **Robert and Alfreda Martino**, who came all the way from Maryland to join us.

After the quiz we settled in our chairs to watch "Cold War Roadshow," a documentary about Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 visit to the U.S. This was the height of the Cold War, and the

country was apprehensive about entertaining the Soviet dictator. Khrushchev proved to be surprisingly amiable as well as deft at working the TV cameras. He and President Eisenhower got along despite Khrushchev's keen disappointment at being blocked from visiting Disneyland due to security concerns. A reciprocal visit to Moscow by Ike had been planned, but an American U2 spy plane was shot down over the USSR a week beforehand and relations turned icy. The trip was canceled.

After Sunday breakfast we gathered to discuss Albert Camus's play *The Possessed*, an adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel *Demons*. The story uses a backdrop of political unrest in Russia to explore, and to question, atheism and nihilism.

There's no question that it's the thoughtful preparation of all the participants, particularly the discussion leaders, which makes this annual event successful. The leaders, all volunteers, spent many preparatory hours reading, re-reading, collaborating, and generally striving to ensure that the sessions would be interesting, thorough, and fruitful. Many thanks to this year's discussion leaders: **Rob Calvert, Brian Cunningham, Sheri Kindsvater, Brian Mahoney, Louise Morgan, Mary-Anna Rae, Mark Scardina, Elena Schmid, Ellen Ward, Jan White, Kay White, and Rick White.**

Save the date! We return to Asilomar April 17-19, 2020. Hope to see you there!

Great Books brings good and evil to Chicago

By Rob Calvert

Each May, when spring temperatures melt the snow and the Buckingham Fountain's geysers shoot skyward once again, bookies gather for **Gary Schoepfel's** annual literary bash, Great Books Chicago.

The announcement of this year's theme, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, served notice that we'd tackle some of the biggest of big ideas: the nature of good and evil; moral codes imposed, embraced and rejected; and the elusive line between instinctive behavior and free will. Thought-provoking texts by Flannery O'Connor, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Margaret Atwood and Edward O. Wilson prepared the way for lively discussions.

GB Chicago, sponsored jointly by the Great Books Foundation and Harrison Middleton University, employs some of the country's most adept and experienced Shared Inquiry leaders, who guided the discussions with a presence that was well-prepared without dominating the conversation. My only quibble with the arrangements was that our groups remained fixed all weekend with the same leaders. That's a great way to become well-acquainted with members of your sub-group, but sadly, it leaves little time for meaningful conversation with the other conference attendees. My preference is for rotating groups, as practiced at our Northern California events.

As always, gaps in the conference schedule were filled with interesting “extracurricular” activities: author talks by Alex Kotlowitz and Nina Barrett, tickets to a Chicago Symphony concert, and meals at downtown-Chicago restaurants. The mid-Friday to mid-Sunday conference was so packed with activity that my family’s Wrigley Field pilgrimage had to wait until Sunday evening, when the Cubs obliged by drubbing the Cardinals.

Northern Californians made the Chicago trip in force, with participation from **Melanie Blake, Laura Bushman, Julie Simpson, Paul Ortega, Scott and David Shafer, and Christine Bonavolonta.** (Speaking of Melanie, she says that there’s still room in many of her Toronto Pursuits seminars this July 14-19 -- check it out at <https://www.classical-pursuits.com/toronto-pursuits>.)

While your calendar is out, consider jotting down that the next Great Books Chicago will take place on May 1-3, 2020, with a theme of (drum roll)... *Beauty* (or, as Gary put it, “You Call *That Art*?”). I can’t wait!

Brian Cunningham, Elena Schmid are nominated for top GBSF posts

“Everything is best in this best of all possible worlds,” is finding of historic survey

By Rick White

The executive committee of the Great Books Council of San Francisco has met and decided upon its candidates for election to lead GBSF in the coming period. Assuming the absence of a floor fight, they will take office immediately following a vote of the membership of the Council at its annual meeting at Padre Picnic Area in Berkeley’s Tilden Park. Their terms of office are for a year, with the expectation they will be reelected for one more. **Brian Mahoney** will continue as treasurer and **Carol Edlund** as secretary. The balance of the executive committee usually receives a vote of confidence renewing their service. Members, about 20 in number, have defined responsibilities in this all-volunteer organization. Some chair our half-dozen or so recurring book discussion events, others such tasks as publicity, website and database management, leader training, and publication of two newsletters—the one you are reading now, still available by snail mail as well as electronically, and a more frequent e-letter published by Jim Hall.

Reports to the meeting included the annual financial report of Treasurer Brian Mahoney, available for inspection. The fiscal condition of GBSF continues strong, maintained by a modest charge added to events and the fact there are no salary expenses.

A book discussion is always held following the brief business meeting and this time the book will be *Candide* by Voltaire, source of the optimistic finding cited above.

“I entered into unknowing”

A conversation with Forrest Gander

By Meryl Natchez

“Be With,” Forrest Gander’s first new book of original poetry in five years, is an extraordinary journey through a difficult period, one during which he has been working to re-assemble his life after the sudden loss of his wife, the poet C. D. Wright. It is also a time during which he is dealing with the increasing confusion of his aging mother. These themes echo through the book in lush and surprising language. I interviewed Gander in Petaluma, California, shortly before he departed for India to take part in the first Indian Ceramics Triennale, where he presented a collaborative installation of ceramics and poetry with Ashwini Bhat.

I know you are about to set off for India tomorrow, and in this book, as in past work, travel and landscape are integral to your work. What motivates your travel?

I spoke about this a bit in Core Samples. Here’s the quote: “I was looking for bonds. I wanted to break a mirror. I wanted to render myself accessible, available. I wanted to borrow eyes from another language. I was looking for the words to come.” This is still a good description of why I travel.

What struck me about this book, *Be With*—obviously there is a lot of pain in it, but there is a complete absence of sentimentality. You are feeling your way through time in a state of grief, and I am right there with you, because we all have some level of grief in our lives.

It’s good to hear you say that. I don’t know how to read from this book. In some ways it seems obscene to read from it, because it’s deeply personal. In some ways they don’t feel like poems—more like extractions, and I really don’t want to theatricalize my grief. The only way I might think about it, is that it’s not so much about my private grief, but a vehicle for connecting with other people. I don’t know if that’s successful.

Can you say anything about experimental poetry that might help people relate to less accessible work?

Experimental isn’t a very satisfying word to me. As someone said, No one has an experimental baby. Different kinds of poetry drive the art forward. I try to keep myself open to modes that aren’t comfortable to me. The ceramic artist Tracy Ware used to have a big sign in her kitchen:



“Comfort Kills.” Some so-called experimental contemporary work challenges me, too. But I feel that that’s good for me. That I don’t get stuck in my ruts, am made to feel uncomfortable. When I hear work that can hop off in directions that seem quirky, I can feel as though I’m watching a mind at work that’s moving faster than my mind. So I just kind of hold on, and I can find that the effect overall is powerful and that I come away feeling that I am seeing something I haven’t seen before.

I want to move now to a more difficult question, about how hard it was for you to work on this book. I could really relate to that phrase, “Everyone sees her... in his eyes,” because I think that when people know and love you, your loss is re-experienced each time you see each other.

That is just how I felt. For a long time, I was just in hiding. And I hate talking about this because it’s all “I, I, I,” about me, while the person it’s really about isn’t here to speak. That’s the place where the real loss is.

I hate the way that everything around death has been codified, there are so many stages of grief, and it’s all prescribed. As though they’re going to take away the very particularity of your own pain and say that it’s just going to follow this scheme. All of that made me sick, so I couldn’t write, and didn’t care about writing for about a year and a half.

Then I accepted a teaching opportunity at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers with a lot of trepidation, because you have to produce new work every day. But having to produce, I found there was this gush that came up in those ten days that formed the core of this book. I don’t know—I’m glad to have articulated it because I think that not saying it, not being able to speak of it and avoiding people, I was waiting for it to become ambiguous. Because I didn’t think that I could look at it, that it was just too fierce and raw. But I’m glad that I did look and discovered a way of responding. I don’t know that it was healing. It’s hard for me to think that there is any healing from something like that.

You have a relationship that lasts most of your life, and includes all the important parts of your life. Every memory you have is connected to someone else, and every book that defines you is something that you talked about and shared with someone else, so when that person is gone, it’s like the world just retreats from you. I still feel very suspended—just sort of lightly here, and afraid really.

That makes perfect sense to me, because you’ve lost a huge part of yourself, and what’s left is all tangled up in what you’ve lost. But I really find that the way that you acknowledge your brokenness in this book, how you simply explore loss without reaching for answers, was very comforting to me. Because it’s very visceral and authentic, and there’s not much of that around. But I have one last question... what’s next?

I don’t know. I really don’t. I think of St. John of the Cross: “Entréme donde no supe/y quedéme me no sabiendo...” I entered into unknowing... and that’s what I’m

doing. I’m waiting to see what my economic situation is like, and what I might do in the future. I may have an opportunity to teach now and then, I might do other things—I always have. Another possibility—I have an agent now in Barcelona, Pontas—they are interested in my novels, and I’m just working on finishing one. And an interesting director has picked up the film rights to The Trace, so that might be a movie. We’ll see.

(Excerpted from Poetry Northwest, September 14, 2018)

Why you should start binge-reading right now

By Ben Dolnick, New York Times

One night a couple of summers ago, the power went out and, unable to watch Netflix or engage in my customary internet fugue, I lit a candle and picked up a thriller by Ruth Rendell. For the first time in as long as I could remember, my sole source of entertainment for an evening was going to be a book.

And yes, yes, just as you’d expect, it was wonderful, it was cozy, the internet is terrible. But what struck me more than the night’s general delightfulness, was how much my experience of reading the book was influenced by the speed with which I was suddenly moving through it. To that point, I’d been reading the book the way I usually read books, which is to say in five- or 10-minute snatches before bed. And I’d been more or less enjoying it—watching Rendell’s criminal protagonist get out of prison, following along as he searched for his victim—but I’d been enjoying it the way a person enjoys hors *with a plate of them*. Now, by reading for an hour or two straight, I’d found my way into the caterer’s tent. I could savor the particular tart flavor of the author’s voice. I could admire the elegance of the trap she was setting for her doomed criminal.

Before my storm-induced Rendell marathon, I’d been reading the wrong way. John Gardner, the literary critic, wrote that the job of the novelist is to create a “vivid and continuous dream” for the reader, but I’d somehow developed a case of readerly sleep apnea. I’d gotten into the habit of consuming novels so fitfully that I was all but sealed off from their pleasures. It was as if I’d been watching movies in a special buffering-only mode, or listening to music through the world’s balkiest Bluetooth headphones.

This style of reading had, I realized, shunted me into a vicious circle. I was reading less because I was enjoying it less, which made reading even less enjoyable, which inclined me to read even less. In this way, a bookmark lodged at page 128 of “Wolf Hall” began to seem as immovable as a Stonehenge tablet.

I had accidentally discovered one of the great disadvantages of books (a medium that is not exactly short on disadvantages at the moment). There is no team of brilliant and vaguely sinister engineers, cooking up ways to get you binge

reading. There is no auto-play technology frictionlessly delivering you from one chapter of the novel you're reading to the next. There is only you, alone in the silence of your room with a chapter break before you and your phone cooing at you from the dresser. No one could blame you for putting "The Count of Monte Cristo" back on the bedside table where it spends its days. Maybe, like a long-forgotten glass of water, it will evaporate on its own.

But in book after book, if you do push on through one chapter break, and then on through the chapter break after that, something amazing happens. Subplots that would once have been murky to the point of incomprehensibility (what was the deal with that Dead Sea captain again?) step into the light. Little jokes and echoes, separated by dozens or even hundreds of pages, come rustling out of the text forest. A writer's voice—Grace Paley at her slangy best, Nicholson Baker at his hypomaniac craziest—starts to seep into and color the voice of your innermost thoughts.

You will, in other words, find yourself propelled through a book that would once have been a multiseason dead weight in your tote bag. And this will not be the creepy propulsion of the countdown that draws you guiltily into a "White Col- lar" marathon, but the intimate, happy propulsion that keeps you talking well into the night with a visiting friend.

Now this may all seem a bit rich, coming from a fiction writer. *You aren't enjoying reading? Then read longer! Read faster! The problem is you!* But the corollary to this way of reading—of taking books down in gulps rather than sips—is that you will discover much more quickly when a book isn't for you, and you can then set it aside without the nagging suspicion that you might have sabotaged it by your method of ingestion.

Fine, you say. If I were Thoreau, with nothing more on my agenda than a pond walk at noon and an apple at 3, it might be nice to read like this. But who has the time?

And pleasure is, after all—once I scrape away the layers of self-image and pretentiousness—the reason that I read. When I've found the right book, and I'm reading it the right way, reading is *fun*—head-tingling, goosebump-raising fun. It's a vivid and continuous dream that is somehow both directed from without and cast from within, and I get to be awake for it. Netflix can wait.

[Reprinted with permission.]

"The discussion belongs to the group."

Say What?

By Kay White, Leader Trainer

Mary-Anna Rae, Julio Burroughs, Brady Williams, Jim Beebe, and I spent Saturday, March 9th, practicing and testing shared inquiry in our Leader Workshop.

We started with a poem, "The Reader" by Michael Bazzett.

The Reader

Opens the book and begins disappearing,

Hands first. The invisible

Tips of her fingers turn pages,

Mistaken for a slow wind.

The ticking clock stops and the spreading ...

Twelve more lines follow and we soaked into them like wine on bread. Each of us had read and thought about the poem before.

What happened was invigorating. Words seemed newer, more suggestive. Line breaks and spacing caused pause. Curiosity rose before the next thought. There was no correct understanding of *The Reader*, but our ideas fused with each others' comments. We listened and built on each others' interpretations.

The discussion belongs to the group. It was a powerful experience with Bazzett's poem. Earlier I had wondered if the poem would sustain thirty minutes of discussion. We held onto it for more than that to explore words, spaces, and punctuation. We felt ourselves sinking into *The Reader* as explorers, and as bona fide readers.

The discussion belongs to the group is the maxim I proposed in my first leader workshop in 2004 for the Great Books Council of San Francisco. A leader in Great Books is a lightly directive guide rather than a wagon train master. He or she asks open-ended questions to move discussion along and to explore more deeply. The participants choose the route and the leader follows their interest.

The leader is there to make sure everyone can get into the discussion and that comments stay based within the reading. The point is to promote productive discussion, not to steer its direction, or to provide answers. The group owns the discussion.

We had a great day together at our March workshop. Jim and Brady come from the Los Gatos group started by **Brent and Erma Browning**. **Julio** co-leads a group with **Norman Nayfach** at the College of Marin. **Mary-Anna** is with the San Francisco Main Library group led by **Brian Cunningham**. Mary-Anna recently led a fine poetry discussion at our April Asilomar weekend.

2019 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

MAY - JUNE	JULY - AUGUST	SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER
6/2: Picnic/Annual Meeting <i>Candide</i>	7/27-28: Long Novel Weekend <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>	TBD: Wine Country Mini-Retreat
NOVEMBER - DECEMBER	JANUARY – MARCH 2020	APRIL – JUNE 2020
11/16-17: Poetry Weekend Guest poets: Forrest Gander, Meryl Natchez	TBD: SF Mini-Retreat Leader Training	4/17-19 Asilomar Spring Conf. TBD: Gold Country Mini-Retreat Annual Meeting/Picnic

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