

# Reading Matters

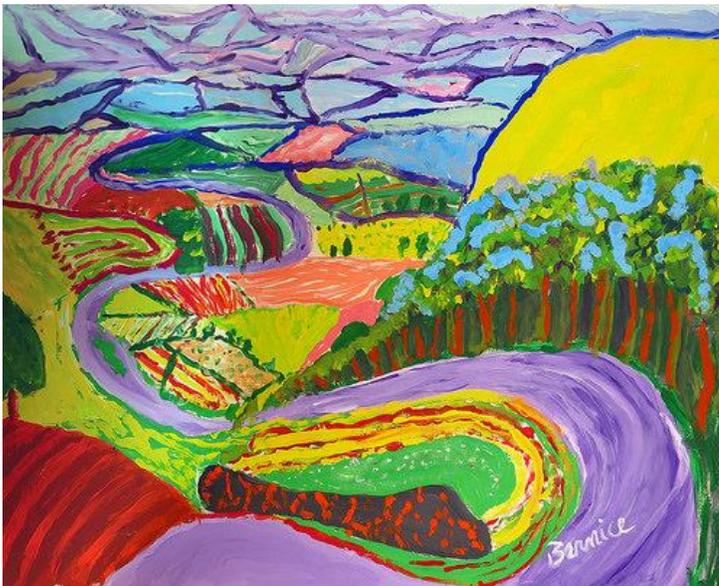
GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO  
Serving Northern California

## 2015 Annual Picnic:

- Barbecue
- President's report
- Election of officers
- *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

Laura Bushman is expected to be elected president of GBSF at the 2015 Annual Meeting in Berkeley's Tilden Park on Sunday, June 7. Laura is the nominee of the Executive Committee. She has served as vice president for the two years of Rob Calvert's presidency as well as picnic chair and publicity chair. Customarily, the vice president succeeds the president. Asilomar co-chair and readings chair Louise Morgan is the nominee for vice president.

Following the annual report of the president and elections of officers, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* will be discussed in small groups. The novel by Muriel Spark will be remembered as a movie starring Maggie Smith as a Scots school teacher with something more than an independent streak. Argument about whether the movie or the book was better will undoubtedly follow.



The picnic starts at noon and ends at about 3:30. Participants are encouraged to contribute a salad, entrée, or dessert. Brent Browning will have his customary barbecue going. A flyer with further information is available at

<http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/flyers/picnic2015.pdf>.

The site is Padre Picnic Area on South Park Drive. The weather is likely to be warm to hot or, less often, cold and foggy. Be prepared.

## Shockeroo:

### A cliché is discovered in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

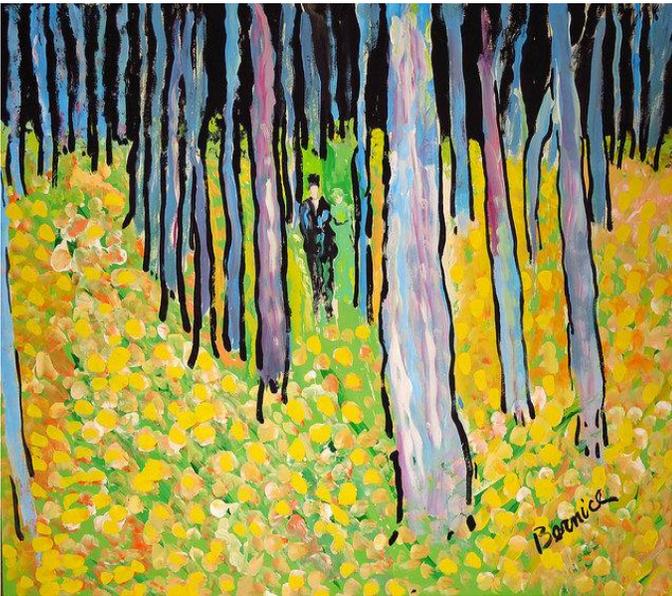
By Rick White

"Nowadays people know the price of everything, and the value of nothing." This overworked phrase appears in the ninth line on page 34 of our novel selection for the Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference of 2015. Barbara would have been unhappy, one thought, to come across such a clunker in this book by Oscar Wilde, an otherwise original and often uproariously funny writer.

Then it dawned on me. Perhaps Wilde originated the phrase. Unleashing a Google search, I found that [www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3565.Oscar\\_Wilde](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3565.Oscar_Wilde) provides 2904 quotations from the works of this British sage, and the preceding is one of them. First on the list is one of my favorites: "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken." The same source provides (only!) 443 quotes from Wm. Shakespeare and 972 from The Bible.

Apparently, to be memorable it helps to be cynical. For example, from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." And, "The only difference between a caprice and a life-long passion is that the caprice lasts a little longer." About the theater, "I love acting. It is so much more real than life."

One is reminded of the story about a young man—it could have been a student in freshman English—who, after seeing *Hamlet* for the first time, commented, "I don't know why they say Shakespeare was our finest writer. That play was full of clichés."



Paintings in this issue are by Bernice Hunold. They are in glorious color in the electronic version at [www.greatbooks-sf.com](http://www.greatbooks-sf.com).

## ***Letter from the President: Evaluating Asilomar 2015***

By Rob Calvert

*Have you ever attended a Great Books event, filled out an evaluation at the end, and wondered what happens to that information? It turns out that those forms are a valuable tool for an annual event organizer, providing important clues for how to improve the event, staying vital and responsive to people's wishes.*

*In my role other than president, as co-coordinator of the annual weekend at Asilomar, I devour the information in the evaluations as soon as I get home. I tabulate the ratings of each discussion's leader, discussion, and reading, averaging them and comparing them to prior years. Our leader trainer uses the ratings, and particularly the written comments, as a basis for providing constructive suggestions to leaders, always eager to hone their skills.*

*It's been a source of pleasure for me to observe, year after year, that leaders at Asilomar have consistently rated in the mid-fours on a scale of 1-5. The San Francisco Council can take pride in the quality of our discussions. The Asilomar event and its Saturday party are also much beloved, and their ratings have been consistently high.*

*Evaluations also provide insight into other details about the weekend: the accommodations, food, staff, and so on. Comments aid in planning next year's event. This year I was pleased to see compliments about the Asilomar staff, not always the case. Things weren't perfect though.*

*For example, I learned only after this year's event, via the forms, that I'd had the good luck to avoid discussions in a meeting room with uncomfortable chairs. I apologize to those who suffered on behalf of literature. Rest assured that I'll be vigilant about the seating arrangements for next year.*



*People are likely to be most critical about the choice of readings. The novel (*Dorian Gray*) and the play (*Marat/Sade*) got high marks, but the poetry and the nonfiction choice (*Speak, Memory*) were less popular. Comments helped to clarify objections. Some felt that the poetry was dreary and lacked variety; some felt that discussing a biography, and particularly this one, presented unique challenges and was ultimately less rewarding. I'm forwarding these objections and participants' suggestions for future readings to the committees that do the selecting.*

*That the discussions at Asilomar usually are rated higher than the readings themselves confirms that Great Books discussions obey a powerful alchemy. Shared Inquiry in discussing a book or poem helps to blossom our understanding. We emerge richer for the experience. Long live Great Books!*

# Poet's Corner:

## Stray thoughts on poetry

By John Anderson  
Chair, Poetry Committee

Hello poets and lovers of poetry. Brent Browning has asked me to take over the chairmanship of the poetry committee, and I, perhaps rashly, agreed to step into his well-regarded boots. I thought that I'd introduce myself with a few words on a poetic topic. If this is of interest, I'll try to write something poetry-related for each issue of *Reading Matters*.

I've chosen a poem mentioned by Vladimir Nabokov in his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, familiar to those who attended this year's Asilomar weekend. If you have the book, turn to the bottom of p. 248. Go up four lines where you will find the name *Cynara*. Though Nabokov is frequently arcane in his references, this happens to be a poem I know quite well, and even remember its repeating last line, "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."

When I first encountered this poem, I assumed that the poet, Ernest Dowson, belonged to the school of metaphysical poets such as Donne, Marvell, or Lovelace. Well, here's the poem; see what you think.

### *Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae* \*

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine  
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! Thy breath was shed  
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;  
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,  
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:  
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,  
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;  
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;  
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,  
When I awoke and found the dawn was grey:  
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I have forgot much, Cynara! Gone with the wind,  
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,  
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind;  
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,  
Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:  
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,  
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,  
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! The night is thine;  
And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,  
Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:  
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

--Ernest Dowson

\*"I am not as I was under the reign of the kind  
Cynara." The quotation is a line from Horace.

John Donne, master of all poets metaphysical, lived from 1572 to 1631; Ernest Dowson, unexpectedly, from 1867 to 1900. Though 300 years apart, Dowson has a clear affinity with the metaphysicals. For one, "Cynara" is structured around a conceit – one of the hallmarks of that poetic style. He plays with the rhythms of the last three lines in each stanza rather like Donne, but with fewer imaginative turns because he repeats the same variant each time. Another similarity is a pervasive sense of melancholy. On reflection, however, in the metaphysicals, one can't help feeling that melancholy is an artful pose while in Dowson's poem it seems very real.

I was further surprised to learn that the poem was written as a love poem to a young girl of eleven, Missie Foltinowicz, the daughter of a Polish restaurant keeper. Given the poem's intention, I was not surprised that Dowson, along with his friend, Oscar Wilde, was a member of the Decadents—a label he wore proudly.

In the case of Dowson, knowing too much about a poem doesn't always enhance it. Instead of the charming, sly confessional of a man about town, we can't help but reflect on Dowson's darker side. His tendencies toward pedophilia, apparently, did not color his personality, as he was well liked by those who knew him. To wit, when he returned from France, having lost his battle with consumption, Dowson was first taken in and looked after by Mr. Foltinowicz, the father of "Cynara." Oscar Wilde wrote: "Poor wounded wonderful fellow that he was, a tragic reproduction of tragic poetry, like a symbol, or a scene. I hope that bay leaves will be laid on his tomb and rue and myrtle too for he knew what love was."

May I suggest that in your reading, whenever you light upon some tantalizing or teasing reference, stop! Look it up! Who knows what new treasure may be in store for you?



## Sixth Nonfiction Mini-Retreat Is held in Gold Country

### Nelson Mandela's heroism

By Kay White

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul .....

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

From *Invictus*, by William Ernest Benley, 1849-1903.

Twenty-two gathered at Mercy Center in Auburn on Saturday, May 9, to discuss John Carlin's *Invictus*, the story of Nelson Mandela's leadership in South Africa from 1985-1995.

Auburn Great Books hosted the day. A third of the attendees said they knew this poem from memory. How Nelson Mandela grew through violence and oppression in South Africa to become the country's recognized black African leader and first democratically elected president was our topic and the inspiration for discussion.

Jim Hall and Kay White co-led a single discussion group. It worked well with a large circle of 22 chairs and well-prepared participants. Because of the book's focus on

only ten years of Mandela's life, background information was limited. The author gave scant notice to Mandela's childhood except to say that he was from the royal family of the Xhosa tribe.

Our discussion centered on what prepared Mandela for his leadership in South Africa. What were his unique gifts and talents? His early years as military commander for the African National Congress, his 27 years in prison, and his political acumen helped to form his long view for South Africa. Mandela was perceived as the clear leader among black South Africans.

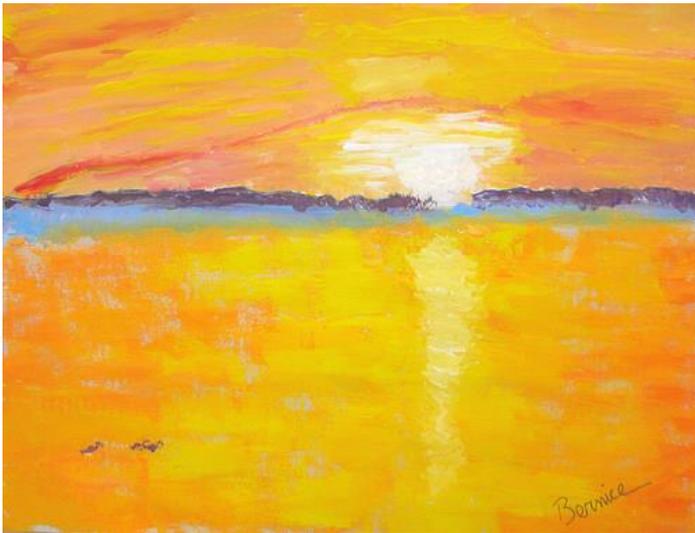
In 1988, President Botha realized, with Mandela still in prison, that a political settlement was needed to stabilize black/white problems in South Africa. Was a peaceful settlement possible with the ANC to avoid the kind of political and economic chaos that went on in Northern Ireland for thirty years? After three and a half years of negotiations, a compromise was reached for a power-sharing coalition to last five years: Democratic elections would be held. The president would belong to the majority party but the configuration of the cabinet would reflect the proportion of the vote each party won. These arrangements guaranteed that white civil servants, including the military, would not lose their jobs and that white farmers would not lose their land. Neither would there be Nuremberg-style trials.

Elections were held in 1994. Mandela was the first democratically elected president in multiracial South Africa. The final chapters of the book showed how Mandela was able through faith, generosity, and artifice, to convert the hostile national rugby team of Afrikaners into a force unifying the country as South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup. Blacks and whites cheered together as "One Team, One Country."

By 12:15 we were ready for lunch in the Mercy Center dining room and free time to roam the gardens.

When we reconvened, Donna Reynolds played the piano and sang the national anthem of South Africa in Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho, Afrikaans, and English. Her finale, "Born Free," set the mood for our viewing the film *Invictus* with Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela and Matt Damon as Springbok captain François Pienaar. The film followed closely the book but simplified the political complications of both black and white interests. Much rugby action was featured, the scrum being new to many of us. The grunting and the pushing of that strange maneuver were more prominent in the film than the singing and dancing described in the book.

The weather was sunny, the discussion was lively. Donna Reynolds and Auburn Great Books hosted an excellent day.



## Theme is *The Fall* at Colby 59<sup>th</sup> annual Great Books summer conference

**Atlantic Music Festival  
provides free concerts**

**Junior and children's book  
programs are included**

On a beautiful Maine campus, from July 26 to August 1, this week-long conference is \$580 for room, board, book discussions, parties, and picnics. It offers an inexpensive, intellectually stimulating vacation for readers who love to think and talk about the world's great literary works. For two hours each day, readers discuss their understanding of thought-provoking classics through the Great Books Foundation's *Shared Inquiry Method*. The Colby Committee does not conceal the fact that its event follows a theme. The focus this year is on *The Fall*. "Man's transition from a state of innocence to experience represents an archetypal journey that is repeatedly explored in literature."

Unlike our Northern California offerings, junior and children's Great Books activities are provided.

### **Adult Readings: theme *The Fall***

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (two days)

David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom*

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

### **Youth Readings:**

Grade 8 and up: Lois Lowry, *The Giver*; Suzanne Fisher Staples, *Shabanu, Daughter of the Wind*; Gail Tsukiyama, *Women of the Silk: A Novel*; plus *An Hour with Poetry*, William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, e e cummings, Richard Blanco, et al.

Grades 6 & 7: Clare Vanderpool, *Moon Over Manifest*; Jacqueline Kelly, *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate*; E.L. Konigsburg, *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth*; and Gary D. Schmidt, *The Wednesday Wars*.

Grades 1-5: Pearl S. Buck, *The Big Wave*; Alice Dalgliesh, *The Courage of Sarah Noble*; Patricia Reilly Giff, *Lily's Crossing*; Kate DiCamillo, *The Tale of Despereaux*.

A children's program is offered for ages three and above. Cost for commuters is \$290. They reside off-campus but are included in lunch and all activities, including a Friday evening lobster bake.

Scholarships are available based on need. A one-time \$50 discount is available to Colby alumni.

The registration deadline is July 1. For further information, please contact [agreatbook@aol.com](mailto:agreatbook@aol.com).

## Great Books Foundation publishes a profusion of extraordinary anthologies for discussion groups

By Rick White

*Imperfect Ideal: Utopian and Dystopian Visions*; *Immigrant Voices*; and *Standing Down: From Warrior to Civilian* are three new anthologies that continue the Great Books Foundation's commitment to keeping the Great Conversation alive and strong. For a full listing and description of the foundation's publications, please take a look at their website, [www.greatbooks.org](http://www.greatbooks.org).

The texts are accompanied by notes about the authors and questions for discussion. Selections are based on more than sixty years of experience with Shared Inquiry. I was stunned by the collection and wished I had them all.

Along with their traditional series of classics, special volumes are devoted to short stories, science fiction, modern American poetry, human rights, civics, economics, work life, money, sex, crime, and readings in American democracy.

## 2015-2016 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

<b>JUNE – JULY 2015</b>	<b>AUGUST</b>	<b>SEPTEMBER</b>
<b>6/7 <a href="#">Picnic/Annual Meeting</a></b> <i>(The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie)</i>	<b>8/29-8/30 <a href="#">Long Novel Weekend</a></b> <i>(Middlemarch)</i>	
<b>OCTOBER</b>	<b>NOVEMBER</b>	<b>DECEMBER</b>
<b><a href="#">Wine Country Mini-Retreat</a></b>	<b>11/14-11/15 <a href="#">Poetry Weekend</a></b>	
<b>JANUARY 2016</b>	<b>FEBRUARY - MARCH</b>	<b>APRIL-MAY</b>
<b><a href="#">San Francisco Mini-Retreats</a></b>	<b><a href="#">Leader Training</a></b>	<b><a href="#">Asilomar Spring Conference</a></b> <b><a href="#">Gold Country Mini-Retreat</a></b>
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Website: [www.greatbooks-sf.com](http://www.greatbooks-sf.com)

Great Books Foundation: [www.greatbooks.org](http://www.greatbooks.org)