

Special mystery issue

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Mysteries challenge GBSF for annual picnic

By Laura Bushman and Rick White

Our leaders are baffled. Why does our only free event have the least attendance? It sometimes seems that events with the highest prices draw the largest audiences. The most expensive restaurants are the busiest. We should charge for admission. We should have luncheon catered. We should meet inside, out of the potential fog or excessive summer heat. Nah.

So why not read a murder mystery? Too popular for us? Might attract multitudes of non-serious readers? Some murder mysteries have been regarded as fine literature. So, let's try one of those. The consensus is Sheila Jackson's final novel, a 1960's gothic, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Considered also were *Sula*, by Toni Morrison, *The Ghost Writer*, by Philip Roth, and *Carrie*, by Stephen King. Jackson's novel is considered her finest and was adapted for the screen in 2018.

Laura Bushman invites book ideas for future picnics. laurabushman@yahoo.com.

Before the book discussion there is a brief Annual Meeting where GBSF officers and executive committee members are elected by the attendees, who by the rules represent the membership of the council.

The novel is written in the voice of eighteen-year-old Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood, who lives with her sister and uncle on a Vermont estate. Six years earlier, a tragedy isolated the three from their village. In the present, a cousin appears at the estate and a dark family secret leads to a deadly struggle reported in Merricat's young voice.

The June 14 event will be held as usual at Padre Picnic Area in Berkeley's Tilden Park from noon until 3:30 p.m. Bring food to share. See the [web site](#) for details.

Asilomar: another mystery?

By Louise Morgan

I'm frequently, and enjoyably, asked "What is Asilomar?" The questioner may know that it is a beautiful state park on the Monterey Peninsula, but wants to know what it is to Great Books.

My own experience comes to mind. I recall first hearing "Asilomar" mentioned during meetings of our monthly group, usually in phrases such as "That book was done at Asilomar two years ago," or "How many of you are going to Asilomar this year?" It took a year or two before I became fully aware of what "Asilomar" meant, and that the word was shorthand for The Barbara McConnell Annual Great Books Weekend at Asilomar. Sufficient interest finally aroused, I took the plunge in 2011 and registered for the first time. I haven't missed one since!

Asilomar (Spanish for "refuge by the sea") is in the town of Pacific Grove on the Monterey coast, adjacent to Pebble Beach. The accommodations are handsome and comfortable; in fact, a number of its buildings were designed by noted architect Julia Morgan. Many of the rooms have working fireplaces. It's easy to take a casual stroll along the beach boardwalk and, if one desires, it's possible to make a short trip to nearby Monterey and take in famed Monterey Bay Aquarium or stroll the Cannery Row neighborhood immortalized by John Steinbeck. We enjoyed the neighborhood and its denizens during a 2017 all-Steinbeck Asilomar weekend.



“Asilomar” is a three-day two-night weekend event during which we participate in four two-hour discussion sessions, mingle during a wine and cheese reception, and enjoy an evening program featuring a speaker or a film relevant to one of the texts being discussed. For instance, recently author-scientist Corey Ralston came and talked with us about the science-fiction literary genre we, as a group, were exploring for the first time. We had prepared ourselves by reading as that year’s Asilomar fiction choice Ursula K. LeGuin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

The pattern of text selection has been consistent for the sixty-plus years this annual gathering has convened at the Asilomar conference center. Our first discussion is on Friday evening, where after dinner we break into groups to interpret four or five poems submitted by the GBSF poetry committee. Saturday morning is devoted to a non-fiction work. It might be an essay, a memoir, or an important historical document. Saturday afternoon is fiction, typically a relatively short but acclaimed novel. Sunday morning is devoted to a play. They have ranged from Homer and the ancient Greeks to Shakespeare to Tom Stoppard. For example, in 2016 we discussed August Wilson’s drama *The Piano Lesson* and during the afternoon watched the film version starring Charles S. Dutton and Alfre Woodard.

Gold Country Mini-Retreat

The 2020 Gold Country Mini-Retreat takes place Saturday, May 16 in Auburn. The book *Seven Years in Tibet* by Heinrich Harrer will be discussed. Brad Pitt has the title role in the film to follow. For more details, please see the web page: <https://www.greatbooksncal.org/gold-country-mini-retreat>.

Warning! Asilomar can be addictive. A significant number of participants could be referred to as “repeat offenders;” incorrigible as they are, they rarely miss a year.

What’s on the agenda for 2020? For non-fiction we’re finally going to dig into Niccolò Machiavelli’s best-known work, *The Prince*. We discussed his *Discourses* in 2008 but have never got around to studying *The Prince*, his monumental analysis of statesmanship and political power, written four centuries ago but always timely.

The 2020 novel is by Kazuo Ishiguro, best known for *The Remains of the Day*. but we are reading a subsequent novel which sees this author veering off in a different direction. Described as a “glimpse into the future,” *Never Let Me Go* takes us into the world of an exclusive English boarding school where students are constantly reminded that they are special. The journal *Nature* calls this novel “the finest expression of moral disquietude over advances in biomedical science since Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.”

For our play we’ve chosen Margaret Edson’s 1999 Pulitzer Prize winner “Wit,” in which a college professor of literature learns that she has an advanced stage of cancer. As the story unfolds, the playwright draws parallels between the medical profession and the world of academia and makes us aware of how professionals can isolate those they are attempting to serve.

As for the poetry of the weekend, that will be revealed in the packet of books that registrants soon receive in the mail.

Will there be a theme this year? The editor of this newsletter claims there is a secret theme committee and there is always a theme, announced or not. He has provided no proof of this, maintaining that it is obvious. This is an unsolved mystery.

Registration is under way. The dates are April 17-19. A registration flyer can be found in this newsletter. Postage may be avoided by clicking on our Asilomar web page, <https://www.greatbooksncal.org/asilomar>.

With the “What is Asilomar?” mystery explained, we are still left with the unsettling and perhaps never to be settled mystery surrounding the theme. Come to Asilomar this spring and draw your own conclusion. Answer “Are you going to Asilomar this year?” in the positive. We look forward to seeing you.

Book, Dates for 2020 Long Novel are Announced

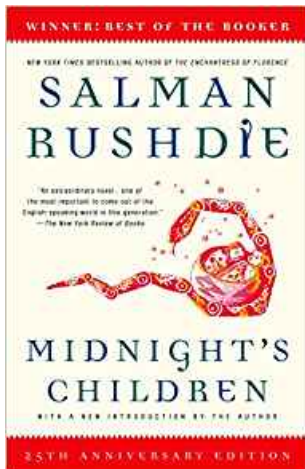
By Caroline Van Howe, coordinator

We are delighted that we can announce that the dates for Long Novel Weekend are firm, Saturday, July 11 – Sunday, July 12, 2020. The book is *Midnight’s Children*, by Salman Rushdie. In its time it won prizes and has continued to so--the Booker prize in 1981, “The Booker of Bookers” in 1993, and that recognition again in 2008. The event will be held once again at the Val-lombrosa center in Menlo Park nicely located on a ten-acre site and originally built during the Civil War era.

The center includes meeting rooms, a dining room, sleeping accommodations, and ample free parking. The weekend includes three two-hour discussions, four fine meals, a wine and cheese reception, and a Saturday evening guest speaker. The program opens at 9:15 a.m. on Saturday and concludes after lunch on Sunday.

Midnight's Children received critical acclaim when first published in 1981. V. S. Pritchett's verdict in the *New Yorker* was that with *Midnight's Children*, "India has produced a great novelist... a master of perpetual storytelling".

Author Rushdie wrote, "When *Midnight's Children* came out, people in the West tended to respond to the fantasy elements in the novel, to praise it in those terms. In India, people read it like a history book."



He also wrote "...if it can pass the test of another generation or two, it may endure."

Robert Crum, in the *Guardian* Top 100 Books list of 2015, called it "Among the many turning points in the constant remaking of the English novel – the dazzle of Sterne; the quieter, witty genius of Austen; the polyvalent brio of Dickens; the vernacular brilliance of Twain, and so on – the appearance of

Midnight's Children in 1981 now stands out as a particularly significant milestone."

Join us for a weekend of discussions of this "Book of Bookers." Registration is open. Visit the GBSF web site at: www.greatbooksncal.org/long-novel-weekend.

The backbone of Great Books is revealed

By Louise Morgan

So many things contribute to making a Great Books discussion a special experience--camaraderie with fellow readers, thought-provoking texts, respectful settings, differing perspectives, and those wonderful "aha!" moments when we're struck by new insights.

However, there's one vital component that often fails to get much credit because when it functions well you hardly notice it. That linchpin is a well-trained leader.

Skilled leaders make everyone in the group feel welcome. They animate the discussion by offering

provocative opening questions. Although they come prepared with lots of questions, they understand that the discussion belongs to the group, so they are comfortable with letting the discourse proceed in unplanned directions. They see to it that everyone has a chance to contribute, and they intervene only when necessary--to guide a stalled discussion toward a new topic or to keep an enthusiastic participant from monopolizing the conversation. Most of the time leaders simply sit back and listen. Indeed, a skilled leader is in a sense almost invisible.

Does this mean that leaders never have the pleasure of talking about the texts they have studied so diligently while preparing to lead? Not at all. As part of their preparation leaders have the special enjoyment of a "pre-discussion" during which all the leaders of a particular book gather to discuss the text among themselves, to bounce ideas off each other, to develop questions, and to plan how they will offer those questions to their respective groups so that all attendees will have a productive experience.

How do people learn to do this? GBSF has a tradition of annual Leader Training workshops open to anyone who wants to develop leading skills. Those who attend these workshops become more confident that they, too, can lead a discussion that's interesting and productive. Not only that, but they will automatically become better *readers* by having learned and practiced the time-tested techniques and methods of Shared Inquiry.

The next Leader/Reader Workshop will be held on Sunday, Feb. 23, from 10 am until 4 pm in Lafayette. It's fun, and open to anyone – newbie or veteran – who wants to become a better leader (or reader). Details and registration information can be found on our website: <https://www.greatbooksncal.org/leader-reader-workshop>.

As Harry S Truman once said, "Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers."

This just in!

Speaker is named for Poetry Weekend 2020

Rebecca Foust, the award-winning Marin poet and author of *Paradise Drive*, has accepted our invitation to speak at 2020 Poetry Weekend, November 21-22. See her bio later in this issue.

Poetry Weekend 2019:

“*The case of the missing roof*”

By Paula Weinberger, Wallis Leslie,
and Rick White

What people are saying about 2019 Poetry Weekend

- Best ever!
- Loved the selection
- Stimulating, educational, enlightening
- Wow! Powerful!
- Excellent give and take and sharing
- Speakers should be lavishly praised
- My first but not my last

Poetry in Translation

Where better to catch a hint of the language of trees than at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park. It features trees from around the world. Here inquiring minds, also from around the world, gather to share their explorations of the wisdom and beauty of poems, poets, and the translating of poems.

When participants were asked what they hoped to get out of the Weekend, most said they were intrigued by the event’s focus on translation. This began on Saturday afternoon with a session led by **Jim Hall**. Participants were invited to discuss the differences among translations by looking at multiple versions of two poems, one ancient and one modern. It was demonstrated that a poem is inevitably turned into a different poem depending on the translator. No translation is quite the same poem as that of the original author.

One set of examples was nine translations of Osip Mandelstam’s “Stalin” epigram. The poem contains eight couplets. The author read it aloud once at the home of Boris Pasternak during Joseph Stalin’s reign. Below are nine translations of the final couplet.

[Note: In our material for the weekend, it is explained that a “raspberry” is Georgian slang, not widely known, for a large gathering of criminals.]

Whenever he’s got a victim, he glows like a broadchested
Georgian munching a raspberry.
(Burton Raffel, 1973)

At each execution, he belches his best
This Caucasian hero with his broad tribesman’s chest.
(Bernard Meares, 1957)

He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries.
He wishes he could hug them like big friends from home.
(Clarence Brown and W.S. Merwin, 1974)

Whoever is being executed—there is raspberry compote
And the gigantic torso of the Georgian.
(James Greene, 1989)

After each death, he is like a Georgian tribesman,
Putting a raspberry in his mouth.
(Robert Lowell, 1958)

Whatever the punishment he gives—raspberries.
And the broad chest of an Ossete.
(David McDuff, 1975)

Wherever an execution’s happening though—
There’s raspberry, and the Ossetian’s giant torso.
(Scott Horton)

Each execution--sweet as a berry,
To this broad-chested thug from Gori.
(Meryl Natchez, 2003)

And like a pig farmer who’s plucked a blackberry from a vine,
Savors the sweet spurt, before he turns back to his swine.
(Christian Wiman, 2011)

Someone in the room got the poem to Stalin. This led to Mandelstam’s arrest, exile, and death in 1938 on his way to the Gulag. The leaker may be unknown, but there is no mystery as to the murderer.

Another method of translation, surprising but not illogical, is that of Stephen Mitchell in his *Tao Te Ching*. This classic by Lao-tzu dates from hundreds of years B.C.E. and previously had been translated countless times. Mitchell drew from fourteen years of Zen training and the perusal of dozens of versions in German, French, and English, to prepare a highly regarded text entirely from secondary sources. “If I haven’t always translated Lao-tze’s words,” he explained in his introduction, “my intention has always been to translate his mind.”

At the Saturday evening program, guest poet-translators Meryl Natchez and Adam Morris, a Stanford professor of literature and languages, discussed decisions that arise in translating poetry. Some of these were:

How literal should the translation be?

Would a Latinate or Germanic word serve best here?

How colloquial should our version be?

In the case of a word ambiguous in the poet’s language, what English substitute would serve best to preserve the ambiguity?

Should we strive for the tone of the time and place or employ modern English?

Should we take care not to clarify the meanings of obscure passages?

They demonstrated not only their dedication to the craft of translation but how it was affected by love of the poetry. In particular, the work of Osip Mandelstam and the Brazilian Hilda Hilst inspired their effort to produce “the best words in the best order.”

In a breakout session whose theme was “Words and Ideas,” Patrick Daly’s poem “Words” was used to stimulate an interest in learning new languages. Daly suggests in his poem that we “open our minds to darkness” and listen while words arrive “like marsh waders in silvery after-dawn light as the tide comes in/meandering to shore, picking their way towards us.”

Throughout the weekend’s reading and re-reading of each poem, with the extraordinary attention given to each word by the poet and then the reader, the power of the poem’s language enchanted us and propelled us in and out of the unknown.

Poetry Weekend is a team effort

The Great Books Council of San Francisco is able to provide experiences such as Poetry Weekend because it is a totally volunteer effort. The staff budget is zero. This warrants recognition of the many who made the event happen.

The discussion leaders, the “backbone” mentioned above, were **Jean Circiello, Steve Dougherty, Jim Hall, Wallis Leslie, Brian Mahoney, Louise Morgan, Ginni Saunders, Elena Schmid, Caroline Van Howe, and Carolyn Yale**. The alternates were **Nina Gibson and Parki Hoeschler**.

Many hours of work were put in by registrars, **Oscar and Theda Firschein**, who also hosted the Saturday breakfast and the sumptuous pre-discussion brunch.

Jan and Tom Vargo prepared the mailer and name-tags. The Vargos long have maintained the council’s database—its repository of participant information.

Caroline Van Howe handled online communications and technical matters, **Rob Calvert** editorial and web support.

Ginni Saunders, as co-coordinator of the event, among other duties managed the poetry selection process and assisted with the wine and cheese reception.

Ed. Note: Coordinator **Paula Weinberger** shaped and guided the weekend and recruited our outstanding guests.

A fond farewell to Brent Browning

We were saddened to learn of the death of **Brent Browning**, a longtime friend of Great Books. Brent wore many hats including years of service as president of the SF Great Books Council and as Poetry Weekend coordinator. Participants had a chance to share memories of Brent, recalling his wry sense of humor, dedication, and loving-kindness. He will be sorely missed.

The case is solved!

Poetry Weekend 2019 blew off the roof.

Mark your calendars

Poetry Weekend 2020 will be **November 21 and 22**, again at Vallombrosa.

GBSF Reading Groups Surveyed

By Jan Vargo

At the end of every year, as database manager for the Great Books Council of San Francisco, I conduct a census of all known Great Books reading groups and programs in Northern California. According to our recent survey, in 2020 there will be thirty-seven Great Books reading groups and programs active in Northern California, down five from our 2019 count.

Each group or program may choose to be included on the list that appears later in this edition of *Reading Matters*, on the GBSF website, and on a nationwide list maintained by the Great Books Foundation, headquartered in Chicago. Some are not accepting new members and ask not to be listed. Listing your group on these three sites is a good way to attract new members.

Two college programs are on the 2020 list: the Great Books Certificate Program at Monterey Peninsula College and the reading group at College of the Sequoias in Visalia. Two others operate through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). Others mostly meet in the homes of participants, in bookstores, or in public libraries. The San Francisco Public Library system is a particularly helpful partner.

The total number of groups has fluctuated between thirty-two and fifty-six since 1998 when the first census was published. This year some groups report that they are doing very well and others state that they have only a few aging members. As always, we hope to see new groups form in 2020.

Most welcome new members, although some have a waiting list. If you are interested in joining a group,

contact it for information, including their reading list. If you start a new group or hear of one, please let us know.

Vincent Scardina, 1927-2019

By Mark Scardina

On the morning of September 27th the SF Bay Area Great Books community lost one of its first members and leaders as Vincent Scardina passed peacefully in his sleep. For most of his ninety-two years he was passionate about the arts and he had a special relationship with Great Books that lasted over half a century. For much of that time he was not only a participant and leader but an SFGB Council board member who served in many positions, including president and historian. These years saw the Great Books Foundation's row of slim paperback anthologies for reader discussions grow to dozens of books. Throughout, Vince's love of the Shared Inquiry method used in Great Books never waned.

Vince was always a passionate advocate for outreach. Those of you who have been introduced to Great Books discussions through a mini-retreat have him to thank for starting that program and shepherding it during its early years. If you were lucky enough to be in a regular group with him, you were schooled in his everyone-bring-a-question approach to leading that was controversial at the time but has since contributed not only to better participation, but more leaders.

I benefited from this passion when in the Sixties he bravely introduced me, a precocious thirteen-year old, to Asilomar. On me this had a lasting impact. I was welcomed to share the Great Books experience with him until his health prevented him from continuing. Even then he would treasure my calling him monthly with a post-discussion recap.

While spending fifty-plus years of one's life volunteering for Great Books is remarkable and noteworthy, literary art was not his sole passion. Those who have been to our family home for one of many GB meetings or Asilomar pre-discussions that he hosted have seen first-hand his passion for Asian arts. Once retired from a career in interior design, he was trained and became an Asian Art Museum docent. For fifteen years, he guided visitors to understand and appreciate the splendor and simplicity of its collections. He continued his outreach to the community by serving on the Asian Art Society board till 2007.

One fact most don't know is that throughout his decades in Great Books, Vince never developed an affinity for poetry. The exception was a passion for the ancient Japanese poetic art form Haiku. The clarity and simplicity of this three-line, seventeen syllable expression of nature, emotion and beauty resonated with his love of art and gardening. At his memorial service, I offered my own humble effort at Haiku:

Old rain running deep
Tender maples unfurling
A life remembered

About Rebecca Foust:

Ms. Foust will be a featured speaker at Poetry Weekend 2020. She is a graduate of Smith College and Stanford Law School. After years of private practice followed by years of advocacy for kids with autism, she left law to pursue her passion for writing poetry, earning an MFA in poetry from Warren Wilson.

Becky's first full length book, *All That Gorgeous Pitiless Song*, won the Many Mountains Moving book prize in 2010, the same year that her *God, Seed: Poetry & Art About the Natural World* won the Foreword Review book of the year award for poetry. *Paradise Drive*, written entirely in sonnet form, won the 2015 Press 53 prize for poetry and was widely reviewed.

From 2017-2018 Becky served as Marin County poet laureate. She is the poetry editor and a weekly contributor at *Women's Voices for Change*.

Lingering Karamazov

From Wallis Leslie

Some other disciplines solve problems. We return to the problems that can never be solved but must be addressed again by each intellectual generation in its own ways.

These words were spoken by Roland Greene, newly appointed director of the Stanford Humanities Center. By the time the Brothers K extravaganza rolled into town, everything I read, heard, saw, and did reminded me of something in the book, and darned if the effect isn't lingering. The quote above offers another angle on why some questions remain eternal, or at least that is how the quote affected me, a sufferer from the all things Brothers K syndrome.



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Great Books San Francisco has a new logo!

You may have already noticed that Great Books San Francisco has a new logo. After many years of faithful service with a black-and-white logo of an open book, the Executive Committee wanted to have a more up-to-date logo to complement our new web site and capture the heart and soul of the organization.

The logo design process was kicked off with a survey to gather information on the organization's goals and messages and each participant's personal preferences on color, font, and logo designs. The survey results were synthesized into a design brief that was put out to online bid. Interestingly, the synthesized brief highlighted the feedback consensus to feature representations of people, discussions, ideas and groups rather than the representation of a book or books, as in the old logo. After careful review of the best six designs, the Executive Committee voted unanimously to select the logo design that everyone felt best represented Great Books San Francisco.

The logo depicts a group of readers in a circle to represent the discussion of books and ideas using the Shared Inquiry method that is at the core of Great Books meetings and events. The logo comes in a variety of color treatments and formats for use in different placements. Check out the new web site to see it in action: www.greatbooksncal.org.

For comments and feedback on the logo, web site or other publicity-related matters, please contact Caroline Van Howe, Publicity Coordinator at: greatbooksncal.publicity@gmail.com.



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2020 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

FEBRUARY 2020	MARCH - APRIL	MAY
2/8 San Francisco Mini-Retreat Ann Patchett, <i>The Dutch House</i> + film "Summer Hours" with Juliette Binoche	4/17-19 Asilomar Spring Conference Niccolò Machiavelli, <i>The Prince</i> ; Margaret Edson, "Wit"; Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>Never Let Me Go</i>	5/16 Gold Country Mini-Retreat Heinrich Harrer, <i>Seven Years in Tibet</i> + film with Brad Pitt
JUNE	JULY - SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER - NOVEMBER
6/14 Picnic/Annual Meeting Shirley Jackson, <i>We Have Always Lived in the Castle</i>	7/11-12 Long Novel Weekend Salman Rushdie, <i>Midnight's Children</i>	TBA Wine Country Mini-Retreat 11/21-22 Poetry Weekend Speaker is Rebecca Foust

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California:

President, Brian Cunningham; Vice President, Elena Schmid; Secretary, Carol Edlund; Treasurer, Brian Mahoney; Past President, Louise Morgan.

Reading Matters: Editor and Publisher, Rick White; Database, Jan Vargo.

Website: <https://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 from Brian Mahoney, Treasurer, at gbbrianmahoney@gmail.com.