

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Readings for Asilomar spring 2020 are revealed

By Louise Morgan

As soon as one Asilomar Weekend is over, everyone begins to wonder what the reading list will be for the following year. Our text selection committee springs into action, wrestling with the pros and cons of titles that have been suggested from a variety of sources—attendee recommendations, previously considered works, online lists, etc. This year’s winners rose to the top rather quickly, allowing the committee to reach a happy consensus with ease.

The fiction choice is Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, described variously as an examination of science and morality, and as “a gripping mystery, a beautiful love story, a scathing critique of human arrogance and a moral examination of how we treat the vulnerable and different in our society.” Those of you who recall discussing another Ishiguro work—*The Remains of the Day*—at our San Francisco Mini-Retreat two years ago know how beautifully this Nobel Prize-winning author crafts his prose.

We went back in time several hundred years for our non-fiction selection. It’s hard to believe but Niccolò Machiavelli’s classic work *The Prince* has never been discussed at Asilomar. It’s a slender volume described as being one of the first works of modern philosophy, especially modern political philosophy, in which the effective truth is treated as more important than any abstract ideal. Did you know that this controversial treatise has contributed to the modern negative connotations of the words *politics* and *politicians* in Western countries?

Margaret Edson’s one-act play *Wit* is a 1999 Pulitzer Prize-winner. It also won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Lucille Lortel Award, and the Oppenheimer Award. Understandably, it was a near-unanimous choice of our committee. Edson drew upon her work experience in a hospital as inspiration for this play about a scholar of the great metaphysical poet John Donne who learns that she has late-stage ovarian cancer. The play takes a poignant and humorous look at life, death, poetry, and compassion.

Because of its connection with the play we will include one of Donne’s poems, “Death, Be Not Proud,” as part of our Friday evening poetry discussion.

Veteran readers of these pages know there is always a theme for Asilomar readings, and that it is seldom announced. A secret Asilomar Theme Committee annoyingly leaves it up to attendees to figure it out. Readers have denied for decades that such a committee exists. However, it is impossible to prove a negative.

What is the theme this time? You tell us.

Regardless, it’s time to start planning to attend Asilomar 2020, April 17-19. Register now at:

<https://www.greatbooksncal.org/asilomar>

**GBSF launches striking new website.
See page 5 for story and pictures.**

Biggest Poetry Weekend is anticipated for this November

By Paula Weinberger

At this year’s Poetry Weekend, November 16-17 at Val-lombrosa Center in Menlo Park, we are doing something new. The weekend will feature poetry translation from one language to another. Attendees can expect the usual stimulating discussion of carefully selected, provocative poems throughout the weekend, but on Saturday evening we shall be assisted by this year’s Pulitzer Prize winner, **Forrest Gander**, and another noted translator, **Meryl Natchez**, who is chair of Marin Poetry Center events. We’ll prepare ourselves with an afternoon comparing varied translations of two poems.

Mr. Gander and Ms. Natchez will tell us about the art and the craft of translation. Much poetry is available only in translation, so we should understand the choices translators make and their reasons for doing so. The poems we’ll discuss in the afternoon are the *proem* to *Book I* of *The Odyssey* by Homer, and *Stalin Epigram* by Osip Mendelstam.

Prior to their talk, you’ll be able to chat with both speakers during a wine and cheese reception and dinner. Bios of Forrest Gander and Meryl Natchez can be found in the Poetry Weekend flyer at:

<https://www.greatbooksncal.org/poetry-weekend>

In Saturday and Sunday morning sessions, while not dealing expressly with translation, we’ll look at how poets use language as a vehicle for ideas and social commentary.

The list of poets will range from Jane Hirshfield, Philip Levine and Matthew Zapruder to William Butler Yeats and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle).

A complete list of poems can be found in the flyer, as can the registration form. If you have not already, sign up now as demand is expected to be high for this extraordinary event.

Early decision is made on 2020 book for Long Novel Weekend

By Caroline Van Howe

Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie is the book for Long Novel Weekend 2020. This early selection was made possible by interest expressed in participant evaluations from the 2019 LNW reported on below.

The novel won both the Booker and the James Tait Black Memorial Prizes in 1981, the year it was published. It won the Booker on two separate occasions, the 25th and 40th anniversaries of the prize. While it marks a particular historical period, we have found it to be of great relevance for our own time.

Tentative dates for the 2020 weekend are Saturday and Sunday, July 11-12.

Bros K. boffo at 2019 Long Novel Weekend

By Caroline Van Howe

Language cribbed from *The Hollywood Reporter* suitably describes the 2019 Long Novel Weekend July 27-28 at the beautiful and recently upgraded Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park. A surprising number of participants were first-timers at LNW. For some, it was their first ever Great Books event. The book, *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, was cited as their primary reason for coming.

Long Novel Weekend is a novel event (uh-huh). It is the only GBSF offering in which an entire weekend is devoted to a single work. Key are the three breakout sessions guided by group leaders who get together prior to the event to plan how to approach this complex work. As has been said of battle plans, this lasted only until the discussions took on their own momentum. This is as it should be; in Great Books the discussion belongs to the group.

Attendees nicely summed up the general feeling about the weekend. One declared "I never had read the Brothers K. and never thought I would! Not only did the weekend force my hand, but also the discussions and lecture made me want to read it AGAIN!" Another said "The range of understanding and ideas emerging from a single reading selection amazed me."

For those not familiar with the LNW, below is a timeline of the activities, a snapshot to entice more newcomers.

Saturday

- Registration with coffee/tea and breakfast snacks
- Welcome and Introductions
- Morning breakout group focused on the main characters and their relationship to each other
- Lunch
- Afternoon breakout group focused on some of the big, often conflicting, ideas raised by the novel
- Afternoon break—optional viewing of the 1957 Richard Brooks film, "*The Brothers Karamazov*"
- Early evening wine and cheese reception
- Dinner
- After dinner guest speaker, Stanford professor Dr. Nancy Rutenburg

Sunday

- Breakfast
- Morning breakout group focused on the trial for the murder of Fyodor Karamazov and pulling the pieces together.
- Lunch and Goodbyes



This year's guest speaker, Dr. Nancy Rutenburg, is the William Robertson Coe Professor of American Literature at Stanford and holds courtesy appointments in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures. Dr. Rutenburg is the author of *Dostoevsky's Democracy* (Princeton UP, 2008) and is working on a comparative piece entitled *Dostoevsky And*.

Dr. Rutenburg shared her research into Dostoevsky, the man, and political, social, philosophical and religious movements of the time. She pointed to a parallel between Dostoevsky's Russia and postbellum Civil War America. Both countries faced comparable challenges; in Russia it was the recent freeing of the Russian serfs. Dr. Rutenburg also noted parallels between the writings of Dostoevsky and mid-nineteenth century American novels including Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. A lively Q & A followed her talk.

SF Main Library GB group takes on "STEM" – physical science

By Brian Cunningham

I inherited the SF Main Library discussion group in 2018. Attendance had been dwindling. I was the only one to show up for the October session to discuss *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf in the anthology *Introduction to Great Books Third Series*. To try to learn what was go-

ing on I sent a short survey to all 25 on the mailing list. The six responses provided little insight.

In December, only **Carl Noe** and I attended. Since we had nothing to lose, he and I decided to try STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) readings. Fortunately, The Great Books Foundation publishes an anthology titled *What's the Matter – Readings in Physics*. The 2019 reading list using that anthology is very different:

January 3 - *The Uncertainty of Science* by Richard Feynman

February 7 - *The Science of Nature* and *Moving Things* by Aristotle

March 7 - *Falling Bodies and Projectiles* by Galileo

April 4 – *Forces; Laws of Motion; Time, Space and Motion*; and *Rules of Doing Philosophy* by Isaac Newton

May 2 - *Entropy: The Running Down of the Universe* by Arthur Eddington

June 6 - *Extending the Theories of Physics* by Max Planck

July 11 - *The Special Theory of Relativity* by Albert Einstein

August 1 - *The General Theory of Relativity* by Albert Einstein

September 5 - $E = mc^2$ by Albert Einstein

October 3 - *Quantum Uncertainty* by George Gamow

November 7 - *The Origin of the Universe* by Steven Weinberg

December 5 - *Black Holes and Predictable Worlds* by Stephen Hawking

We've struggled with several of these readings. And I've found it particularly challenging to formulate stimulating discussion questions. The editor of the anthology provides questions at the end of each reading but most don't help. I find I turn to the "Suggestions for Further Reading" in order to help me with questions.

Nevertheless, we've grown to eight attendees with several more who have indicated a desire, if not an intention, to attend. The Main Library posts fliers for us which have produced numerous inquiries and several new participants for at least one session. There are ample remaining essays in this anthology for next year – if that's what the group decides.

I conclude from this experience that San Francisco is an excellent market in which to find STEM readers.

SF Anza celebrates Shakespeare

By Clifford Louie

The Anza Library GB group has declared it will read one Shakespeare play every year. The first will be *King Lear* in April 2020, the month of the Bard's birth. The "no fear" Shakespeare edition is reported to be especially enjoyable because the left page has the text in Old English and the right Modern English.

For more on this, please contact clifford.louie@sbcglobal.net.

Brian Cunningham is certified as GBSF president, Elena Schmid VP

The slate of officers whose nominations were announced at the June annual meeting in the absence of a quota of the members was confirmed by the Executive Committee at its regular meeting on September 15. In addition to the new president and vice president, **Brian Mahoney** was reelected as treasurer and **Carol Edlund** as secretary. Outgoing president **Louise Morgan**, as is customary, will assume the role of past president, one of the five officers of the corporation. **Caroline Van Howe** will add the critical function of chair of the Publicity Committee to her portfolio.

Gratitude and appreciation is extended to **Brent and Erma Browning**, **Vince Scardina**, and **Mary Wood** for long and distinguished service on the Executive Committee and in many officer roles and action units. **Oscar and Theda Firschein** have retired from the Executive Committee but continue as registrars for Poetry Weekend. **Melanie Blake** has joined the Executive Committee.

"Grow Great Books" says new president

By Brian Cunningham

The perception is widely held that attendance has been declining at both monthly discussion groups and at weekend events hosted by this Great Books council. In addition, current participants are doing double and triple duty in various roles for the council, often without a backup person. The council's Publicity Committee has formed a project group to address these issues.

Core project team members are **Caroline Van Howe**, **Elena Schmid**, and **Brian Cunningham**. They will recruit additional members as needed. The team has named the project Grow Great Books.

In its first meeting the team decided to begin by gathering facts. Where, specifically, are declines occurring? What reasons and trends can be identified? How big is the change? What are the causes? Who is our target audience; that is, who is likely to be interested in participating in Great Books activities in Northern California? What is the competition for our target audience?

To address these questions, the project team is assembling a list of attendees at weekend events in the past few years, and will interview event coordinators and registrars. In addition, the group will contact discussion leaders to learn who and how many attend their monthly discussion groups and what changes have occurred there.

With data in hand the group will analyze challenges our program faces and try to identify appropriate strategies to address them.

The group envisions this effort as a part of a longer project to strengthen and invigorate the Great Books Council of San Francisco, which serves Northern California generally. The renewal and modernization of the new www.greatbooksncal.org website is a first step to appeal to new and younger readers. It is likely that many current participants will become involved in this project in one way or another. The project team welcomes ideas and suggestions. Please address them to any of the core project team.

The team will offer a more detailed description of its plans at the September 2019 meeting of the Council's Executive Committee.

Walking Into a Tavern with Three Karamazovs

By Kay White

You feel keyed-up as the discussion starts. How will the discussion go? Will people weave ideas into understanding or stake out disagreements? It is all potential. We depend on the shared inquiry structure for respectful, courteous discussion.

It's funny that four guidelines are so productive. To be in the discussion, participants must read the whole selection. Comments are based within the selected reading. Interpretations are supported with evidence from the text so others can examine their own understandings. Leaders ask interpretive questions and do not provide answers.

This method has stood the test of time since the 1940's when Mortimer J. Adler and Robert M. Hutchins formed the Great Books Foundation in Chicago, which ultimately led to grassroots reading groups for Great Books.

We expect different understandings in Great Books. Leaders are like trail guides. They keep the conversation open for all ideas, offer another topic question when interest wanes, make sure quiet voices are heard, and keep comments on the trail, within the chosen book.

Who will expand ideas dormant in the reading? You never know. It's a blind date. It's a surprise party. As discussion leader, you open the door with an interpretive question. The participants bring the provisions, the ideas that connect in the discussion.

So how did it go for our July Long Novel leaders with Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*? Louise Morgan, **Ellen Ward, Wallis Leslie, Jim Hall, Paula Weinberger, Willie Wool, Rick White**, and I agreed to read and lead a discussion of a book close to 800 pages. Why?

It is a challenge, a thrill, a discovery to read and lead a discussion. Dostoevsky is an author worth all you care to invest.

After first reading for the scope and range of the story, I started again. This time I found clues, subtle character traits woven into early passages I had missed on my first fast read. The author's craft and genius became clearer.

Here is what our *Brothers K* leaders say about being a discussion leader:

- "I learn a lot. Everyone participated, enthusiastic, disciplined, with no outside references."
- "I listen—for a change! The group had no monopolizers, good insights, not too cerebral!"
- "I have an opportunity to challenge my attention and equanimity. I have the cheer of being among thoughtful, articulate folk (especially the camaraderie of the leaders' pre-discussion)."
- "I read the book more thoroughly than I would have. My participants were great, especially well-prepared."
- "I hope that I helped. The participants seemed especially well-prepared."
- "I have a greatly enhanced appreciation of the text."
- "I'm motivated to prepare more thoroughly."
- "I have a stronger commitment to read closely."

What's it like to be a Great Books discussion leader? We feel the art of discovery in literature, and the value of other readers. We experience the joy of collaboration. We find surprises. And most of all, we connect with eternal questions that Dostoevsky presents us, face-to-face, unmistakable elements of our humanity.

Do you like a challenge? Do you want the thrill of leading a discussion? You should contact kaycleveland@aol.com or louise-morgan@sbcglobal.net.

Signatures: *Kay White*

By Louise Morgan

Smart, dynamic, and always positive, Kay White has been the main reason that GBSF discussions are so satisfying. In her role as Leader Trainer Kay makes sure that discussion leaders are selected with care and are thoroughly prepared prior to our annual events.

A distinguishing feature of Great Books is the use of the Shared Inquiry method, but this method is not intuitive. Most people tapped to lead a discussion without any training in Shared Inquiry would tend to ask questions that could be answered factually or by a simple Yes or No, but such questions don't lead to a productive exchange of ideas. Neither does an all too natural tendency to *teach* the text while the group sits back and listens.

Consequently, Shared Inquiry—a Socratic method in which the leader prepares a series of questions that stimulate an interactive exchange of ideas—must be learned.

That's why Kay plans, organizes, and conducts a Leader-Reader Workshop, every year.

In addition to the workshop, Kay also hosts pre-discussion gatherings for leaders a few weeks prior to an annual event. Over snacks and beverages, the leaders work together exploring possible interpretations of the text, tossing around ideas, and organizing their questions in such a way that all groups will have similar positive experiences.

Kay's background in management has surely been helpful. Originally from Los Angeles where she met her husband Rick, they enrolled in UC Berkeley for undergraduate studies in academics and student politics. Then it was on to Washington DC and a job at the Smithsonian for Kay. She moved along with Rick when he was drafted into the US Army, and she worked at Northwestern University. Ultimately, after several moves, she returned to UC Berkeley to attend the Goldman School of Public Policy. Armed with a Masters degree, Kay was hired by Alameda County's Office of Evaluation where she soon moved into senior management positions.

She was introduced to Great Books around 1994 at an Asilomar weekend. She says she found the readings and the discussions "invigorating." Two years later she and Rick hosted Gary Schoepfel from Chicago's Great Books Foundation as he gave leader training sessions in their Berkeley living room.

Soon afterward GBSF under President Erma Browning co-hosted "A Gathering of Equals" with the Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland and the Lafayette Presbyterian Church. The text discussed was Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail". From that point on, Kay declares, she was part of the Great Books action!

Kay served as vice-president of the council from 2005-2007 and became Leader Trainer around 2005 when the late **Barbara McConnell** offered her the job or, as Kay puts it, "told me to do it." Kay greatly admired Barbara as a model discussion leader. Kay herself not only regularly leads discussions but is also prepared to serve as a backup if a regular leader is unable to lead.

From 2007-2009 Kay was president of the council, and she continues to serve on the executive committee as co-coordinator for the annual Gold Country mini-retreats.

Rick and Kay have two grown children. Their daughter **Karen Schneider** often participates in our events. She assisted Kay with Leader Training before her real estate career took off. Grandson **Cleve** helped us interpret *The Brothers Karamazov* at Long Novel Weekend this year.

Son **David White** used to host a Mill Valley Great Books group, combining discussion and dinner. Now he reads to his 9-yr-old sons and runs competitively in national track and field events when he is off duty from his fish passage engineer job with NOAA.

We're looking forward to many more three-generation book discussions with the Whites and with others for whom Great Books has become a family affair.

GBSF overhauls its online presence for a new era

By Caroline Van Howe

The Great Books Council of San Francisco has a spanking new website with a more explanatory URL, i.e. address. **Rob Calvert**, our webmaster and lots of other things, and his son, **Duncan**, put it together over several months with a small team of others from the Executive Committee.

We are delighted to have this going and wanted to share it in *Reading Matters* right away because this is *the* go-to place for complete information about reading groups and special events, plus news, features and, of course, the archives of *Reading Matters*. We are keeping the best content from the old website while removing redundant links and obsolete content.

The new web address is <https://www.greatbooksncal.org> changed from www.greatbooks-sf.com better to reflect that we are non-profit and that our groups, events and outreach activities extend throughout much of Northern California. We are transitioning to the new website during the month of September. Anyone accessing the old one will be redirected to the new website henceforth for several months.

The new website was designed with these goals in mind:

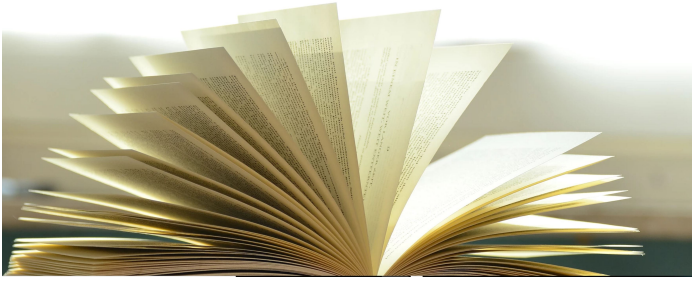
- To reach a wider audience.
- To attract new members for reading groups and events.
- To integrate its content with email and social media postings.

In addition to these goals, we sought:

- A more attractive look and feel, especially more graphics.
- More compatibility with devices such as smart phones and tablets.
- Easier navigation to find things. For instance, there is a "Find a Group" option.
- Easier maintenance for the site's developers.
- Better optimization for search engines so that more people will find us.

The first thing you will see is gorgeous graphics. This feature takes us a big step further in making the new site more appealing. Below find snapshots of the new site, including some of the site on a mobile phone, that show some of its improved look and feel.

"Every reader is familiar with the nervous excitement of turning a page and cascading into a new chapter filled with boundless possibilities and potential wonders to unearth. With this new chapter of the Great Books digital landscape, we sought to create an enjoyable and informative platform for current members as well as increase our digital presence to help the next generation of bookies discover the simple fun of sitting down with friends to discuss the age-old questions of literature and life." **Duncan Calvert**, designer of <https://www.greatbooksncal.org/>.



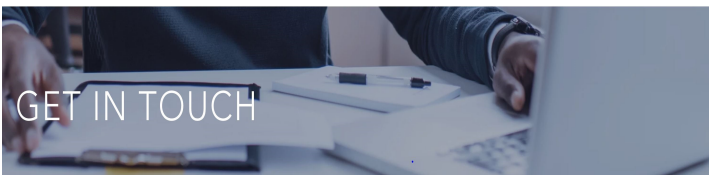
This image is from the new Home Page. Buttons across the top of the screen make it easy to navigate the website: **Home, About, Events, News & Updates and Contact Us.** There is a Search Site area, seen here rather faintly to the right, where a phrase or word can be entered for direct navigation to any section of the website.

FIND A GROUP START YOUR JOURNEY

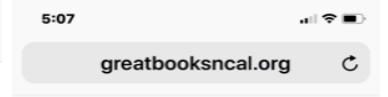
Discover the book discussion group that fits your geographic and intellectual needs with the group list and Google MyMaps application



Many come to the Great Books site to find out about groups in their locality. The **Find a Group** section is on the **Home Page** and has its own dedicated set of listings in the **About** section. Viewers can find a group by using the Google Maps feature (see icon above) or by viewing the listing of groups and contacts. There are more than 40 Great Book groups in Northern California, and this is one of the most frequently viewed areas of the website.



Under the **Events** section, there is a listing for each of the events hosted by Great Books San Francisco throughout the year. Here are snapshots of the next two events: Wine Country Mini-Retreat (October 12) and the Poetry Weekend (November 16-17).



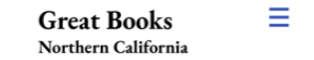
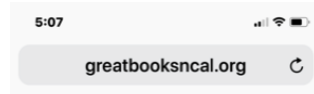
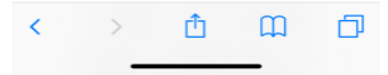
Wine Country Mini-Retreat

October 12, 2019

Location: Calistoga Spa Hot Springs, CA

Poetry Weekend

November 16-17th, 2019



READING MATTERS NEWSLETTER



The new web site is “mobile friendly” so you can access it from your smart phone or tablet. All of the Great Books San Francisco info is right at your fingertips.

Every issue of *Reading Matters* since the first, in 1996, is available on the site, as are listings of the novels, essays, plays, and poetry from many years earlier.

2019-20 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	FEBRUARY 2020
<p>10/12: Wine Country Mini-Retreat: Ray Bradbury, <i>Fahrenheit 451</i> plus the movie. Calistoga</p>	<p>11/16-17: Poetry Weekend: <i>The Art and Craft of Translation</i> Menlo Park</p>	<p>2/?: SF Mini-Retreat</p>
MARCH - APRIL	MAY – JUNE	JULY
<p>4/17-19: Asilomar Spring Conference: Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>Never Let Me Go</i> Machiavelli, <i>The Prince</i> Margaret Edson, <i>Wit</i> Pacific Grove TBD: Leader Training</p>	<p>TBD: Gold Country Mini-Retreat TBD: Picnic/Annual Meeting</p>	<p>7/11-12 (tent.): Long Novel Weekend: Salman Rushdie, <i>Midnight's Children</i></p>

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California:

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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.