

Reading Matters

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL
Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2013: King Lear theme builds excitement

By Rob Calvert

As announced in our fall 2012 edition, for this year's Asilomar Spring Conference we're trying something new. As veteran participants know, the event has almost always featured a poetry discussion on Friday evening, nonfiction on Saturday morning, fiction on Saturday evening, and a play on Sunday. The organizers vigorously deny the existence of a theme intended to knit together the four two-hour discussions, although such a theme often appears to emerge. This publication has often featured attempts to deconstruct the engineering of the shadowy "theme committee."



Deluxe Room

With no malicious intent, Asilomar's book selection committee decided this year to preempt the theme committee's efforts by choosing two closely-related readings. The play is Wm. Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the novel is Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. Smiley, whose presence at our 2012 Long Novel Weekend inspired us to



Scripps and Lodge

explore her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, uses a 20th century American farm to explore questions that were posed by Shakespeare in the 17th century. These two works were selected in the hope that their combination in a weekend of discussion might prove extraordinarily provocative. The leadership is considering ideas for rearranging the discussion schedule so that we'll have ample opportunity to consider the connections between these two works.

If the theme committee found a link between these works and the weekend's nonfiction selection, that connection must await elucidation by our members. For our nonfiction discussion, we'll celebrate the 150th anniversary of a seminal work in the political history of the United States, Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*. It is timely for us to examine what is meant by a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. We might also care to debate (after the discussion, of course, in order to avoid making outside references) whether we agree with the review in the next day's issue of the Democratic-leaning *Chicago Times*, which described the speech as "silly, flat and dishwatery."

The *Gettysburg Address* takes only about two minutes to recite. Although it carries a great deal of weight for its brevity, we felt that our discussion might profit from a bit more Lincoln. For that reason, we've chosen to include a second of Lincoln's oratory gems, the *Second Inaugural Address*, in our discussion.



Exploring the issues that arise in this combination of readings should help each of us to think more deeply about our responsibilities to ourselves, our families, and our communities. It may prove interesting to see how the Friday evening poetry colors the subsequent discussions.

To register, download this flyer and form and send it in with your payment: <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/flyers/asilomar%202013%20flyer%20v3%20-%20electronic.pdf>.

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Why Read A Book?

By Kay White

The new year brings a fresh start. What titles are you browsing? Why do you read? We each have our reasons, but one is the sense of satisfaction, completion, as you

turn the final page. You have entered into someone else's view, opinions, experiences, and you filter, digest them with your own particular lens.

Better yet, you enter a Great Books discussion to compare your understanding with others' of the same book. As you explore various interpretations, new and subtle understandings can surface that had not occurred to you on your own.

When I finish discussing a book within a Great Books discussion, I often want more of the author. We are joined at the spine—of the book. We are cousins, or comrades in love or in danger. A sense of satisfaction with the thorough exploration of someone's vision, text, or poem surrounds me after I have read, prepared, and completed a Great Books discussion.

This sense of accomplishment comes most of all after leading a *shared inquiry* discussion in Great Books. *Shared inquiry* promotes the exploration of an author's work, with an open and level field for all readers in the conversation. There are only four guidelines to follow.

We are offering a once-a-year **Workshop for Leaders and Readers** on March 16, 2013 for you to learn more about *shared inquiry* and its power to understand and discuss your reading. Step out of your comfort zone a little bit, and dig into the new year's fresh start.

Sign up for the Workshop. Learn the four guidelines of *shared inquiry*, and bring more to your book group and to yourself. This accomplishment can bring deep satisfaction.

Download the **Leader Workshop** registration form from <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/flyers/2013LeaderWorkshop.doc> and send it in. Registration is only \$25 and includes a Leader Workbook, a lively day with motivated readers from around California, and practice sessions that are fun. Take it once, take it twice. Each time you'll find something new about yourself and build upon others' experiences. Our workshops are unique.

For more information contact Kay White at kaycleveland@aol.com.



Donald F. Casey

GBSF inherits \$40,000

Donald F. Casey, a member of the discussion group that met at the Falkirk Mansion in San Rafael, died in late 2011. We learned of this late in 2012 in a letter from his attorney. GBSF was one of 25 organizations named in Mr. Casey's will. On January 8, 2013, we received a check for our share in the amount of \$40,000.

Mr. Casey's obituary can be read by googling his name. He attended Dartmouth College and Tufts University, receiving degrees in Economics and Law. He served as a junior officer in the U.S. Navy before undertaking a distinguished career in public service, mostly in the federal Office of Personnel Management (formerly the U.S. Civil Service Commission) then in Marin County. His support of high culture—museums, opera, classical music, and literature—was notable, and many such institutions were remembered in his will.

With the funds from Mr. Casey's bequest, GBSF will be in extraordinarily good financial shape. The organization will not be in a position to hire staff (which would wreck the group, whose secret to more than half a century of success has rested on its volunteers), or to undertake pie-in-the-sky projects. But it will have the money to continue, as it has, to make the required cash advances to reserve space for its events. In addition, it will be able to avoid the small but aggravating bank charges on its checking accounts, and to consider small projects aimed at enhancing the objectives in its strategic plan.

Great Books Week at Colby College will focus on "The Coming of Age"

Couple from GBSF to attend

Kay and Rick White will fly to New England for the 57th Annual Great Books at Colby College summer institute in Waterville, Maine, July 28-August 3, 2013. These two, along with other family members, and



The Pond at Colby College

friends have participated in the program several times in the past. The couple looks forward to the program and to seeing old friends.

Five books will be discussed in two hour discussions, one each day for five days. Ample time and facilities are provided for exercise, live music, literary and social events, and field trips, including a private beach owned by the college.

The readings are Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*; Willa Cather, *The Professor's House*, Anton Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*; Vita Sackville-West, *All Passion Spent*; and Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*. The event is sponsored by a committee of members from

Great Books councils in the Northeast. As with our own events, prices are kept low because there is no paid staff. For more information, please go to their website, www.greatbooks-atcolby.org.

Poetry Weekend 2012:

The sonnet is explained
The sonnet is discussed
The sonnet is parodied
Ceci n'est pas un sonnet.

By Mark Andrews

It was to be the last poetry weekend at the Westminster Retreat in Alamo. This delightful mansion and its gardens will meet the bulldozer as soon as it can be sold. Without knowing this, a capacity attendance of forty gathered there on Saturday, November 3, when most others were watching college football, which not a few at the meeting might otherwise have been doing, to discuss poetry and poems. The day was launched by **Wallis Leslie** explaining the sonnet form.

After defining the word "sonnet" as from the Italian for "little Song," "sonnetto," she explained the two classical forms. Both have fourteen lines. The Italian (Petrarchan) sets up the situation in eight lines and resolves it in six, she says. The English (Shakespearean, Elizabethan) divides into three groups of four lines (rhyming, for example, ABBA, CDDC, EFFE, or ABAB, CDCD, EFEF), followed by a rhyming couplet GG that concludes it. (The Petrarchan does not use a final couplet.) Both Italian and English are in iambic pentameter, which means five pairs of syllables with the second syllable of each accented, to wit: *duh dah duh dah duh dah duh dah*. Modern poets are not likely to be so fastidious. Wallis provides this example from former poet laureate **Billy Collins**.



The Manor at Westminster

A Sonnet

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,
and after this just one dozen
to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,
then only ten more rows of beans.
How easily it goes unless you get to Elizabethan
and insist the iambic bongos must be played
and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines,
one for every station of the cross.
But hang on here while we make the turn

into the final six when all will be resolved,
where longing and heartache will find an end,
where Laura will tell Plutarch to put down his pen,
take off those crazy tights,
blow out the lights and come to bed.

Sonnets by Michael Drayton, Kim Addonizio, Petrarch, Shakespeare's LXV, below, Philip Sidney, William Wordsworth, and John Keats were discussed.

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Questions by discussion leaders included these:

- Line 3: Why call this rage?
- Line 10: What is "Time's best jewel"?
- Line 11: Whose strong hand?
- Line 13: What is the "miracle force"?
- Line 14: What is the black ink?



Kay White, Wallis Leslie, and Jean Circiello

led the three discussion groups.

The Generations was the theme of Saturday afternoon. Poems were by Robert Duncan, Sharon Olds, Eavan Boland, Dorianne Laux, Sylvia Plath, and Charles W. Pratt. Leaders were **Steve Doherty, Ginni Saunders, and Karen Schneider**.

After dinner, **Carol Hochberg** led a crowded living room in a sonnet exercise for which she gamely laid out a set of rules. We were each to take a sonnet which she distributed and modify the couplet at the end. My group decided to end each stanza throughout with "San Francisco Giants" in recognition of their recent World Series triumph, the heck with confining ourselves to the last couplet. The evening kind of went like that.

Sunday morning the theme was Our Higher Nature. Poems were by Bob Hicok, Jane Hirschfield, Molly Peacock, Paul Hoover, Marie Howe, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. **John Anderson**, the team of **Theda and Oscar Firschein**, and **Brent Browning** led.

In 2013 this annual event will be held at the Vallombrosa Retreat Center in Menlo Park. It holds



Vallombrosa

twice as many participants; poetry weekend has been sold out for years at Westminster's forty overnight participant limit. Vallombrosa was very popular when we tried it in the summer of 2012 for the Long Novel Weekend.

A river runs through it

Huckleberry Finn is discussed in the Wine Country

Not far from the headwaters of the Napa River, where floods downstream have been known to invade the lower stories of houses, thirteen intrepid readers met at the



Calistoga Inn and Spa with leader Jim Hall on Saturday, October 6, and a second nine met with him the next day

to discuss the most famous of Mississippi River adventure novels, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

The tale takes place a few years before the Civil War. The boy Huck Finn and a mature slave, referred to throughout the book as "Nigger Jim," flee Huck's confining home life and Jim's condition of servitude and take to the nearby Mississippi on a raft.

This is the story of their growing friendship and deepening loyalty as they face tribulations along the way. Dilemmas arise that bring out the moral character of Huck and help him to come of age.

Assumed by many to be a children's book, *Huckleberry Finn* is anything but that. Thievery, betrayal, murder, and mayhem occur with regularity.

"How does Huck's belief system change?" "Where is home for Huck?" "What is Huck's responsibility to Jim?" "What does the Mississippi mean to Huck and to the story?" "Why did Tom Sawyer (who appears late in the story) fail to tell Jim he had been freed in his owner's will?" Those were some of the questions Jim Hall asked in leading the discussion.

After splitting up for lunch in town, the group returned to its meeting room at the Calistoga Inn and Spa to view and discuss the 1938 film *Huckleberry Finn* starring Mickey Rooney. The movie generally follows Twain's themes but varies in many particulars. Response by the group was largely positive in spite of the changes. A few

did not like it because it did not reach the emotional depth of the book.

This event is held each year in Napa Valley during the grape harvest.

To suit the time and place Jim Hall ends the proceedings with a flight of fine wines from his personal collection and a layout of breads and cheeses. The favorite wines were a vintage 2000 zinfandel from Seghesio Vineyards and a 2007 De Lorimer reserve chardonnay.

Limited publicity led to low turnout for this delightful and luxurious event, a remarkable bargain at \$30.

POTPOURRI

By Rick White

"Lie" seems to be disappearing from the English language. Nowadays when a politician wants to say that his opponent is not telling the truth, he says the statement is "inaccurate." Inaccurate? Off by one one/hundredth from the truth? What? Mostly true, but a little bit not true? But that is not all of it. Freddy the Pig, a childhood favorite of mine in the eponymous series by Walter R. Brooks, told us that when a politician said "frankly," the likelihood is that the next statement would not be true.

"Lie" has another problem: when it refers to assuming a recumbent position it is now almost universally replaced with "lay." This is so widespread that it will soon become officially recognized as correct usage. The complaining we curmudgeons do in our effort to save this beautiful language is likely in a lost cause. The language has always evolved and it will go on doing so. In not too long the guys who massacre the language will have game, set, and match. If there is no gratification in the act of complaining then we may as well hang it up. The only time we are likely to hear "lie" is when a cockney says he want to go out and get "lied."

"Whom" is disappearing. The word "whom" is going away fast and may remain only in the salutation "To whom it may concern," due to the exploding number of legal disputes.

The words "disinterested," "fortuitous," "enormity," and "decimated" may already be in the process of having their dictionary definition changed. They are increasingly left uncorrected by editors when used to mean "uninterested," "fortunate," "hugeness," or "destroyed." Not long ago, they did not mean any such thing. You can look it up.

What is all this? If anyone thinks it is not a losing battle, please let us know. Is it worth fighting anyway, or does it just make some of us feel superior?