

# Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO  
Serving Northern California

## Coming Soon! Asilomar

By Louise Morgan,  
Vice President

2016 is already upon us! That means it's time to register for the upcoming Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar.

Save the date—**April 8-10**. Go to our web site ([great-books-sf.com](http://great-books-sf.com)) to register online or by mailing in the form. The book selections will be sent to you as soon as your registration is received, so mail it soon. You will want enough time to become familiar with the readings before the weekend begins.

The annual weekend at Asilomar is our biggest event of the year. This springtime gathering has a history that goes back over five decades and is open to anyone who wishes to delve more deeply into great works of literature. The weekend includes four two-hour discussions covering fiction, non-fiction, drama, and poetry. In addition, there



will be a reception for first-timers, entertainment at the Saturday evening party, and several opportunities to stroll along the beach and explore the Pacific Grove area.

*Heritage* is a powerful theme that runs through all of the weekend readings.

Family heritage is a strong thread that runs through August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson," a Pulitzer Prize-winning play focusing on an African-American family in the 1930s. We tackle our political heritage as we read ten of the essays from *The Federalist Papers* written by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison. Published in 1787 and 1788 these were intended to persuade voters in New York to ratify the proposed U.S. Constitution. It's no surprise that we are still grappling with many of the same issues today.

Our fiction selection, *Seize the Day*, a short novella by Saul Bellow, explores our cultural heritage. Modeled on

### Registration forms available:

- [San Francisco Mini-Retreat, March 12, \*To Kill a Mockingbird\*](#)
- [Leader Training, March 19](#)
- [Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar, April 8-10](#)
- [Gold Country Mini-Retreat, May 21, \*I Am Malala\*](#)

James Joyce's *Ulysses*, it chronicles a climactic day in the life of a beleaguered man trying to affirm his worth and identity. You will laugh, wince, and even cry.

This year's poetry session takes a broad look at our literary heritage through the work of poets as diverse as Sharon Olds, Emily Dickinson, Donald Justice, William Butler Yeats, and Naomi Shihab Nye. Often the most creative and interesting of all our sessions, this year's selections provide much to ponder and discuss. Who could resist, for example, reading a poem titled "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop"? That guy Yeats certainly knew how to tease.

The cost of the weekend includes a comfortable room for two nights, six delicious meals, all of the reading selections, four stimulating discussions, a party with wine, cheese and entertainment, and a chance to experience the natural beauty of the conference grounds and the lovely Monterey coast. Old friends will be awaiting you. New friendships will be made. Don't miss out. Register soon!

# Poetry Weekend—2015

By John Anderson,  
Poetry Weekend Coordinator



Prediscussion of "Verities of Love." From left, Jean Circiello, Rob Calvert, Steve Doherty, John Anderson

thought it well worth the effort. Nine leaders guided forty-eight seekers through three two-hour sessions entitled: "The Verities of Love," "The Verities of Loss," and "Other Worlds."

Poets whose work we studied were: Jane Hirshfield, Anne Sexton, Louise Glück, Jack Gilbert, Marie Ponsot, Franz Wright, Rita Dove, Robert Hass, Sylvia Plath, Wallace Stevens, Robert Penn Warren, Edwin Muir, and Denise Levertov. The nine able leaders were **Jean Circiello, Rob Calvert, Theda Firschein, Carol Hochberg, Ginni Saunders, Louise DiMattio, Pam Loucks**, and this writer. On the sidelines but prepared to take over if needed were **Steve Doherty, Brent Browning, and Lindy Sinclair**.

As if these sessions were not a rich enough diet, on Saturday evening we gathered to perform (that is not a misprint) T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," written, or at least begun, at the ripe age of 22. This entertainment was organized by our indefatigable poetry selection chair **Carol Hochberg**.

Readers who were unable to attend can salve their anguish at Asilomar April 8-10. This annual event, honoring the late Barbara McConnell, offers a diverse selection of

When considering the array of provocative poems we would be discussing at this year's Poetry Weekend, I felt some apprehension in taking the bumpy road to enlightenment. Much to my delight, by our final lunch, what I felt, and what I was hearing from others, was that we had all faced the challenge victoriously and



Prediscussion, "Verities of Loss." From left, Bent Browning, Theda Firschein, Ginni Saunders, Louise DiMattio

poems by Sharon Olds, Emily Dickinson, Donald Justice, William Butler Yeats, and Naomi Shihab Nye. See you there!

## ALL Conference – A Journey's First Step

By Rob Calvert, Past President

In early November I traveled to Chicago to attend the first conference of ALL, the Alliance for Liberal Learning ([www.allianceforliberallearning.org](http://www.allianceforliberallearning.org)). What is ALL, you ask? Here is its mission statement:

*The mission of the Alliance for Liberal Learning (ALL) is to promote and support conversations about great works and ideas.*

*ALL seeks to open the public imagination to the enduring value of lifelong liberal learning, which prepares us to live freely and well.*

*ALL believes that the foundation of liberal education lies in active engagement with the ideas, insights and discoveries embodied in the world's great books and works of art and science.*

*ALL will bring together members of the general public, scholars, academic programs and institutions, businesses and other organizations promoting liberal arts education to share its work via seminars and discussions, conferences, online networks and sponsorship of events.*

Since I'm very interested in conversations about great works and ideas, I came to Chicago hoping to forge ties with others of like mind, while perhaps finding some inspiration too. I was not disappointed.

**Mark Cwik** organized the ALL conference. His résumé includes a stint with the Great Books Foundation, vice president of the Chicago regional GB council, instructor/leader with [Great Discourses](#) and with [Classical Pursuits](#), founder of [Great Books Great Discussions](#), and now co-founder of ALL. Thanks to the dedication of Mark and others, the conference appeared to run smoothly and remain focused on the serious business at hand.

The 60 or so attendees, like the member organizations in the ALL network, were predominantly but not exclusively educators. [The University of Chicago](#) and [St. John's College](#) were well represented, as were [Harrison Middleton University](#), [Shimer College](#), and numerous other North American colleges. The [Great Books Foundation](#) president, **Joseph Coulson**, was there, along with others from the Foundation. The sessions provided a chance to hear the viewpoints of many participants from liberal-learning oriented enterprises such as Classical Pursuits and Great Discourses. Among the Northern Californian contingent were **Melanie Blake** ([Classical Pursuits](#)), **Dave Clemens** ([Monterey Peninsula College](#)), and **Mary Finn** ([Polis](#)).

I thought that Todd Breyfogle of [The Aspen Institute](#) set the tone brilliantly in his keynote address. He reminded us that we are all “inward bound” on a journey of discovery, as we seek to find ways to “live humanely in the machine age.” He likened ALL’s member groups to medieval monasteries, which were set a day’s journey apart so that pilgrims could reach a new haven as they journeyed together. Organizations like ours that facilitate shared learning are also capable of offering intellectual and spiritual shelter and sustenance to our fellow pilgrims as we search for value and meaning.

There were two other keynotes, given by Christopher Nelson, president of St. John’s College (Annapolis) and Eva Brann, a beloved St. John’s tutor. All three of the keynote addresses were quite different, and each one was interesting in its own way. All three addresses are available to be heard and viewed online at <https://allianceforliberal-learning.org/news/watch-the-keynote-speakers-from-the-first-conference-of-the-alliance-for-liberal-learning/>.

Many of the conference sessions were panel discussions, examining a variety of topics. I attended sessions on the following:

- Whether/how liberal learning can be quantitatively assessed
- Getting the word out: shaping public perceptions of liberal learning
- What does it take to be a great seminar leader?

I also had the good fortune to attend a talk by Adam Rose at the Chicago Cultural Center titled “The University of Chicago at 125 Years.” Although it wasn’t actually part of the ALL conference, its timing was fortunate. Adam traced the history of the Great Books movement, quoting extensively from Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read a Book*. His views on this topic would have been familiar to those SFGBC members who participated in Mark Cwik’s 2014 Great Discourses course about Great Books history, in which Adam also participated.

I’ve had some time now to reflect on what I learned from the conference. In summary:

*Finding value.* Todd Breyfogle quoted a David Brooks distinction between “résumé virtues” and “eulogy virtues.” In the long run, our self-worth is derived primarily from the latter, not from the positions we held but from the stories people want to tell about us after we’re gone. I’m reminded of Robert Pirsig’s pursuit of Quality in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, in which he admits that it isn’t an easy thing to define, but it’s worth spending one’s life trying to find it and live it. I believe that reading, discussing, and learning from the Great Books is one of the better ways to search.

*How we learn and what we learn.* In one session, I listened to a panel mulling over whether the value of liberal

learning can be assessed quantitatively (and whether that’s even a meaningful question). I was struck by how the remarks clustered around two different kinds of learning. The first are the “skills” of liberal learning – the so-called intel-



lectual techniques of discussion/expression, comprehension, listening, critical thinking, and connecting disparate ideas. These can be acquired, per-

fected and even assessed quantitatively, at least to a point. The second are the ideas we read about and discuss—the 102 “great ideas” in Mortimer Adler’s *Syntopicon*. Unlike intellectual techniques, our understanding of them is idiosyncratic, and can’t be assessed objectively. That distinction is important to me because I believe that both have value. An example of how this distinction plays out is the long-standing debate about finding balance in a Great Books discussion. At one extreme of the debate, Great Books focuses on employing the Shared Inquiry method, even if a discussion is about a People Magazine article. At the other extreme, Great Books focuses on discussing a particular “canon” of books, regardless of how they’re discussed. Thus, *how* we learn and *what* we learn.

*Sharing the journey.* Meeting so many bright, committed and thoughtful people at the conference was a great reminder that the intellectual ride is a lot more fun when it’s shared. The conference reinforced that what’s true on a personal level is also true of groups. For me, Great Books discussions, and the joy in understanding that I derive from them, are a great personal reminder of that fact.

The dozens of organizations at the conference are, in one way or another, trying to share the joy of learning. We’re grateful to ALL for providing a vehicle for finding new ways to share techniques and aspirations, and for helping us to find that light in a monastery window as we press ahead on our journey.

## Commentary:

### *Reflections on Poetry Weekend*

By Jim Baird

I don’t know how many folk are like me, but if it were not for Poetry Weekend, I doubt that I would read much poetry. It isn’t that I don’t like poems, but on my own, a poem can take as much effort to understand as a whole novel. If I’m going to work that hard, I appreciate having help, the kind I get from a dozen or more like-minded souls



at each poetry discussion where everyone's unique insights contribute to a fuller and more satisfying understanding.

"Shared Inquiry," the method of discussion employed by Great Books, was on full display at Vallombrosa this November where we took on 15 poems in two days. Here are two of my favorites: "Knowing Nothing," by Jane Hirshfield, and "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife," by Anne Sexton. I recommend reading the Jane Hirshfield poem aloud.

### *Knowing Nothing*

Love is not the reason,  
Love is the lure,  
the thin goat staked out in the clearing.

The lion has stalked  
the village for a long time.  
It does not want the goat,  
who stands thin and bleating,  
tied to its bit of wood.

The goat is not the reason.  
The reason is the lion,  
whose one desire is to enter—  
not the goat, which is  
only the lure, only excuse  
but the one burning life  
it has hunted for a long time  
disguised as hunger. Disguised as love.  
Which is not the reason.

Or would you think  
that the bones of a lion reason?  
Would you think that the tongue?

The lion does not want the goat,  
It only wants to live. Alone if it must.  
In pain if it must. Knowing nothing.  
Like the goat, it only wants to  
live.

Like love. Or would you think that the heart?

If this is a love poem, it's certainly not something you'd sing under a lover's window. Hirshfield uses short words, short lines, and short stanzas—two of which end abruptly with open questions. The poem is philosophical and abstract like a Socratic dialogue—posing questions to be answered with other questions.

A hungry lion is circling the village. A goat has been "staked out," to be devoured by the lion so that the villagers may live. But the lion does not want the goat. Its hunger is for something greater. The goat is but a necessary lure, implying that in our quest for life we must destroy. In the end, the poet asks us to compare this animal struggle to that of

the human heart. We are left to wonder if we, like the goat and the lion, must destroy in our quest for love and life.

The ambiguous word "reason" is one of the pivots upon which the poem turns: We have *reasons*, but we also have *reason*, that part of the mind that verifies that what we know is true. But when it comes to love, as the poem's title suggests, we know nothing.

Anne Sexton's "For My Lover, Returning to His Wife" strikes a very different note. A doomed romance is over and, as you'd expect, the poem is worldly and bracing, like a cold shower. Too long to reproduce here, it's easy to find on Google. While you're looking, be sure to listen to Anne Sexton reading the poem on YouTube. Her voice tells it all.

On our first reading, my group saw the poem as resigned and sad—the summing up of an affair that has ended. But when we listened by smartphone to Anne Sexton's recording, her slow, furious voice—at once worldly-wise and bitter—changed our minds. The torch she carried for the other woman's husband wasn't burning any more, but the sour smoke remained. Musicians talk about tone as a richness of sound that carries the emotion in a song. Like a saxophone's reedy solo, Sexton's reading was a tonal revelation.

The time passed quickly. Once again, despite my initial hesitation, I'm pleased with the realization that poetry is not just for the experts. If you enjoyed pondering these two samples, there will be 15 more next November. I hope to see you then.

### *Who is Prufrock?*

A poem named for a British gentleman  
continues to baffle readers

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," T. S. Eliot's masterpiece of modernist poetry, was the focus of a group reading on Saturday evening at the Poetry Weekend. The poem provoked a great deal of discussion, some of which follows.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is printed here so that readers have their own context for the remarks that follow.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

By T. S. Eliot

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'ïodo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...  
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,  
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;  
There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—  
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —  
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")  
Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—  
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)  
Is it perfume from a dress  
That makes me so digress?

Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
And should I then presume?  
And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers,  
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,  
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?  
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in  
upon a platter,

I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,  
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—  
If one, settling a pillow by her head  
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;  
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while,  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along  
the floor—  
And this, and so much more?—  
It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a  
screen:

Would it have been worth while  
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:  
"That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all."

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politically cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black.  
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

### Mary Wood laments:

I regret to have missed the discussion of Prufrock at Poetry Weekend. The poem has many perplexing images and metaphors that make it a particularly rich piece for discussion. One reference that has continued to elude me is the mermaid metaphor toward the end of the poem.



Poetry Weekend prediscussion for "Other Worlds." From left, Pam Loucks, Louise Morgan, Carol Hochberg

I am assuming that like sirens, that lured men to their deaths, hanging out with mermaids can also get you drowned. Perhaps that is why the poet ends the poem with, "human voices wake us, and we drown." But if that is true, why does the poet want mermaids to sing to him as well as his belief they will not sing for him?

### Rob Calvert writes:

I think one of the wonderful things about Prufrock is that it's open to so many different interpretations. But for me, having the mermaids sing to you is to be the receiver of semi-divine, other-worldly inspiration. In the end, Prufrock sadly isn't entitled to receive that inspiration—he is not Prince Hamlet, and is indeed almost ridiculous. As for the drowning in the last line, for me this form of drowning is the death of the soul, and not of the body—we drown in daily trivia, and lose our connection with the peaceful nirvana that can be found in "the chambers of the sea."

What I've always wondered about the mermaids is whether they knew the answer to Prufrock's "overwhelming question," or whether they were even interested in asking it.

### Wallis Leslie responds:

I thought the mermaids were symbolic of the rich, gorgeous world of imagination and creativity which the speaker is capable of perceiving (unlike the inhabitants of the crass yellow fog world he currently lives in).

### Some final thoughts on poems, poetry and Poetry Weekend by Carolyn Yale:

In our final session, the leader asked which poem we'd read thus far was our favorite. Everyone had a clear preference and rationale—and almost everyone favored a different poem. All agreed that the highlight of the weekend was the collective reading of T.S. Eliot's Prufrock. Carol Hochberg led us through this wonderful poem.

When I was in school, before Cliff Notes were omnipresent, we read things in their entirety and discussed their content taking into account historical and cultural context. I love words—*duende*, *schrecklich*, and *ta-arof* for example—that have deeply resonant meanings in their native culture but no English counterpart.

I noticed situations this year where outside references became an issue. Most poems made no obscure allusions to battles, dates, "talents," etc. Perhaps the most foreign reference was that dark plain somewhere on Interstate 80.

Does the poet's biography matter? Jane Hirshfield's "Knowing Nothing" seemed to crystallize with an appreciation of Zen Buddhism (or having read *The Cloud of Unknowing*). By contrast, Gilbert's "After Love" resonated with music lovers without needing interpretation.

Whether a course on dream interpretation would have helped us to decipher Louise Glück's poetry is unclear: We never did figure out who departed on the dream bus—wife or poet, or (since it was a dream) both.

I regret not exploring less familiar perspectives and would encourage including great poems from other traditions. To make these poems a richer, accessible experience for American readers some background might be needed. Perhaps this exercise could come in the evening with one significant poem, first discussing its context, then reading it aloud, then discussing it.

Denise Levertov's "Where is the Angel for me to Wrestle" separated us into two camps grounded in differences in men's and women's experience. The men read the poem without feeling the depth of the writer's complaint. She might have simply wanted relief from washing dishes. The women, responding existentially, empathized beyond words.

The selection committee gave us a fine array of challenging poetry. There was complex syntax (Warren); conceptual trickiness (Schultz's lines about loneliness and laws); and a flood of affinities so unlikely but right to stun the reader ("Nick and the Candlestick," by Sylvia Plath).

### Maxine Ellman posts a final note:

I found myself expressing thoughts I didn't know I had—with energy! Poetry Weekend is about self-revelation, deepened understanding, and personal transformation. I was surrounded by fellow spirits who had something to say and who could say it beautifully.

## 2016 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

JANUARY- FEBRUARY 2016	MARCH	APRIL
	<b>3/12: SF Mini-Retreat</b> <i>(To Kill a Mockingbird)</i>  <b>3/19: Leader Training</b>	<b>4/8-4/10 Barbara McConnell Asilomar Great Books Weekend</b> <i>(Seize the Day, Federalist Papers, The Piano Lesson, poetry)</i>
MAY-JULY	AUGUST-OCTOBER	NOVEMBER - DECEMBER
<b>5/21: Gold Country Mini-Retreat</b> <i>(I Am Malala)</i>  <b>6/5: Annual Meeting/Picnic</b> <i>(A Moveable Feast)</i>	<b>8/27-8/28: Long Novel Weekend</b>  <b>TBD: Wine Country Mini-Retreat</b>	<b>TBD: Poetry Weekend</b>

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