

# Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO  
Serving Northern California

## Rob Calvert Announces Asilomar 2012 books

### Early registration begins

James Joyce's best-loved short story "The Dead" from *The Dubliners* and Jean-Paul Sartre's famous play *No Exit* will be featured at the 54th annual Great Books Asilomar Spring Conference, April 20-22, 2012, announced chairman Rob Calvert. Eugen Herrigel's 1953 classic on Eastern philosophy, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, is the essay to be discussed. Poetry is by Robert Frost, Rainer Maria Rilke, Lucille Clifton, Yehuda Amichai, and Christopher Smart.



Early registration begins immediately. Persons signing up before January 1, 2011, will receive a discount of \$10. each. Those later than March 1 will be assessed an added \$10. Multiple-person rooms are \$334 per person for the two overnights of lodging plus six meals. Double rooms can be had for \$395 and single for \$551.

Further information and a detachable registration form can be found inside.

## Marge Johnson is Elected SF Great Books CEO

### Rob Calvert is next in line

By acclamation, Marge Johnson of Pleasanton, GBSF vice president, ascended to the position of president at our June 12, 2011 annual meeting/picnic in Berkeley's Tilden Park.

Rob Calvert of Berkeley was elected vice president placing him in line to assume the presidency in two years. Brian Mahoney continues as treasurer and Rick White as secretary. Jim Hall assumes the role of past president. The remaining members of the Executive Committee were confirmed in their positions.

## *From the President's Desk*

*In late August, as I was reflecting on my role as your new president and the contribution that I might make to our organization, my attention was drawn to the myriad articles about Steve Jobs who had announced his resignation from Apple Computer. What struck me in the outpouring of praise was Jobs's matchless contribution to the world of computing and telecommunications. It made me realize that, great or small, it is possible for people like us to make a difference in the lives of others.*

*This leads me to what you and I can do to help this organization that has so enriched us continue to thrive and grow. As a first step we can make sure that our acquaintances are aware of the programs offered by the Great Books Council of San Francisco. This Council, which has existed for more than 50 years, sponsors 43 groups as well as eight major annual events including retreats, discussion weekends, and local meetings. By inviting at least one new person to any of these events, you and I can make a difference not only in that person's life but in the life and vitality of the Great Books Council. I look forward to seeing you, your friends, and your neighbors at an up-coming Great Books event.*

**Marge Johnson**

### Three generations of GBSF

Rob Calvert introduced his son Duncan, 17, representing the third generation of Calverts to participate in GBSF. So far as we know this is a first. Grandfather Bob and grandmother Carol, leading participants for many years, are alive and well in North Berkeley. Long time GBSF member Roy Harvey, 85, could not attend the event because he was participating in the Dipsea, a rigorous race over Mt. Tamalpais. This is the 30th time Roy has run the Dipsea, and as the oldest participant he was awarded the coveted title of Dipsea Demon. Roy and his wife Jimmie met at an Asilomar Spring Conference and married about a decade ago.

### Events are well-attended

Outgoing president Jim Hall reported that events

*Marge Johnson Elected (Continued from page 1)*

this year were well-attended. The three mini-retreats – San Francisco, Wine Country, and Gold Country – were at or near capacity as was Poetry Weekend. New discussion groups were launched in San Francisco, El Cerrito, and Berkeley.

The Berkeley group, led by Carol Hochberg, is our first devoted exclusively to poetry.

#### **Vietnam book is discussed**

*The Things They Carried*, the novel by Tim O'Brien following the lives of a group of American soldiers in Vietnam, made for a lively discussion. A number of participants had served in Vietnam and shared their personal experiences.

## Asilomar Scheme Reviewed

### **Would cut costs, traffic time**

With prices going north and money south, GBSF's executive committee is considering a two-day weekend in 2013 with a single overnight on Saturday. It would save \$100 a person and avoid Friday traffic. Below is one way the schedule might work. You are invited to suggest other ways or other ideas you may have to reduce the costs of the weekend--or to say, "Leave it alone!"

FROM BERKELEY (for example)

#### **Saturday**

- 8:00 a.m. Rise early and depart
- 9:45 a.m. Arrive Asilomar. Sign in and move into room.
- 10:30 a.m. Poetry discussion.
- 12:30 p.m. Luncheon
- 1:30 p.m. Discuss novel
- 3:30 p.m. Free time
- 6:00 p.m. Dinner
- 7:30 p.m. Party

#### **Sunday**

- 8:00 a.m. Breakfast
- 9:30 a.m. Discuss the play.
- 12:30 p.m. Luncheon (bag lunch optional)
- 2:00 p.m. Discuss the essay. (or take free time)
- 4:00 p.m. Adjourn

Individuals could make their own arrangements with Asilomar or nearby accommodations to stay Friday or Sunday night.

Please email your views to Rob Calvert at [rob@rob-calvert.com](mailto:rob@rob-calvert.com) or write a letter to this publication. The address is Rick White, 10 Oak Forest Rd, Novato, CA 94949.

## Two Dozen Leaders Trained

Kay White

New leaders want the chance to practice in small, friendly groups. Experienced leaders want more leaders so they too can enter book conversations. So, pass around the leading. Encourage new leaders. Leading a discussion builds commitment to the group.

On a Saturday morning in April, armed with coffee and bagels, 24 participants gathered in Walnut Creek to probe the Great Books *method of shared inquiry*. Some, like **Louise DiMattio** and **Jim Hall**, were veteran leaders. Others were new to the process and had come from Sacramento, Berkeley, Albany, El Cerrito, Tiburon, and San Francisco. Most had experience in Great Books discussions. Every-one was ready for action with their leader workbooks and other material furnished in advance.

As we went around the room, our resource leaders, **Barbara McConnell**, **Brent Browning**, **Karen Schneider**, and I, listened to what the participants were hoping to gain from their participation. Their responses included: read for questions; be at ease with silences; learn how to listen; avoid giving your own opinions; avoid fact questions; develop better follow-up questions; avoid having an agenda and go with the group's interests.

We dug into what makes a good interpretive question and how to avoid yes/no and fact questions. Brent gave tips on preparing and organizing questions. Barbara led us in a short demonstration discussion of *Robinson Crusoe*.

We finished the morning by reading Bill Baker's "Ten Commandments," which triggered experiences of times the rules were breached especially the First Commandment, "Thou shalt come to a discussion group to exchange ideas, not to find a convenient forum for expounding thine own pre-conceived opinion."

We traded ideas on how to generate productive discussions and what to do with difficult talkers. It helps to have several people in the same group attend leader training so they can reinforce the basic tenets for a good discussion in their local group.

After lunch *al fresco* by the bowling greens, we divided into three groups for practice leading and feedback. By 3:30 each had led a discussion and gotten feedback from everyone in their group. As a trainer,

*(Continued on page 3)*

*Leader training (Continued from page 2)*

each time I complete a Great Books training session I am more convinced of the benefits of the *method of shared inquiry*.

From their evaluations we learned that the participants most valued the small group practice. The workshop was rated 8.86 out of a possible 10 points. It was a full day, successful and enjoyable.

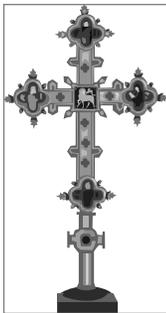
For our next training session, we will spend most of our time on the practice sessions and end earlier. Contact me if you are interested in leading or want to attend the next session, March 2012, at [kaycleveland@aol.com](mailto:kaycleveland@aol.com)

Best of all, we look forward to new leaders and readers from the 2011 workshop: **Jennifer Anderson, John Anderson, Cecilia Arthur, Nicolee Brorsen, Claudia Bubeck, Louise Dibble, Nina Gibson, Bobbi Herrington, Greta Pearson, Karen Reid, Jean Safir, Alice Shelton, Sheila Thall, Paula Weinberger, Joe Williamson, and Julie Simpson**, and to our “tuned-up” veterans, Louise DiMattio and Jim Hall.

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## Auburn is Scene of Good and Evil

Forty discussed *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, the book and the film, on May 14 at the Mercy Center in Auburn. This was the second Gold Country Mini-Retreat, an annual event that features non-fiction.



**Sheri Kindsvater** and **Rick White** led the group discussions. They focused on the characters, some of them quite colorful. The group decided the main character was the city of Savannah.

**Donna Reynolds** played the piano and sang Johnny Mercer songs after lunch. Mercer House was important in the book and Johnny Mercer, a native of Savannah, was mentioned often by the characters.

With unseasonably cold and rainy weather, few took advantage of the beautiful center grounds. The audio-visual setup was not suited for a large audience. The sponsors apologize: next year a member will bring his own equipment--a good sound system and a large screen monitor. The discussion of the film afterward was excellent nevertheless.

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## Potpourri

Rick White

I find the prolific use of the ejaculation, incredible, incredible. The word means “not to be believed.” Why should I believe what is described by it? “Incredible” is freely used by individuals who (properly) cringe at the overworked use of the word “awesome,” which might, in fact, accurately characterize its object. By my thinking, “incredible” is a worse choice than “awesome,” but why am I the only one who seems to think this is important?

Another pet peeve: in the news we hear, for example, “the capital of Tripoli,” making it sound as though Tripoli has a capital, or maybe a capitol. “A bomb went off in the capital (capitol?) of Tripoli.” Better would be, “A bomb went off in the capital, Tripoli.” (Too bad about the bomb.)

For many years we have heard on the Jim Lehrer News Hour, “And now for the analysis of Shields and Brooks.” I don’t want to hear Shields and Brooks analyzed. Maybe that *would* be fun, but I am sure it is not what Lehrer intended. A better way of saying it would be, “And now for analysis by Shields and Brooks.” Lehrer’s predecessor and, when last I looked, an eminence still associated with the program, Robert Mac Neil, wrote a book on the English language. I have not gone into the archives to see if he employed this ambiguous locution.

“Sesquipedalian” means the use of foot and a half long words. Je m’accuse. Pardon my French.

I’m setting myself up for a fall: you are welcome to draw attention to my own verbal transgressions.



Mercer House, Savannah

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## *Planning Poetry Weekend: A Personal Reflection*

Carol Hochberg

### **Finding the heart of a poem**

My involvement with the poetry committee began in 2004 when I attended a planning meeting at **Mary Wood's** condo. **Brent Browning** was leading the discussion about how to ask open-ended questions about the poems selected for the upcoming Westminster weekend and for Asilomar 2005.



That meeting changed my life. It introduced me to a totally new style of discussion called "shared inquiry." As a seasoned educator, I was of the belief that the teacher always had the answers. The idea that there are questions without right answers was both tantalizing and challenging. Now as chair of the poetry committee, I've taken Brent's teaching to heart and made discussability our main criterion in

choosing poems. We may love a poem for its lyricism and prosody, but you will not find it as one of the selections at Westminster or Asilomar unless it can engage a group of readers in meaningful open-ended discussion.

### **The poetry committee in action**

Prior to the June meeting, each member of the poetry committee selects up to six poems and mails (or emails) them to the other members. In that way, members come to the planning meeting prepared to read and lobby for their selections. We try to be civil and respectful of each other's choices. The session is an all-day, exhausting affair culminating in a vote for each poem. Poems are ranked by vote, and those with the most are selected. While we usually don't start with a theme in mind, more often than not poems fall into natural groupings.

### **Poetry lovers party down**

As an attendee at the upcoming Poetry Weekend at Westminster House in Alamo, in addition to reading and discussing a broad range of poems, you may participate in our Saturday evening extravaganza, conjured and choreographed by yours truly. In past years, attendees wept over the poems of Emily Dickinson or were (mildly) shocked by the goings on of Walt Whitman.



This year's fare promises to be lighter: the attendees, aka the talented Westminster Poetry Players, will entertain.

### **Meet the poetry committee**

Special thanks go to our poetry committee whose passionate commitment is responsible for the marvelous range of poems and poets at these two events. Representing wildly and widely divergent literary tastes, they are all ardent lovers of poetry.

**Natalie Dunn** taught literature and creative writing for 35 years and knows the classics well; **Kathleen Conneely**, who unfortunately had to resign due to health reasons, came to the poetry committee from a career teaching literature in a junior college; **Steve Doherty** is a music teacher and freelance musician by profession, and a docent at the California Academy of Sciences by avocation; **Brent Browning** is a physician retired to a life of "contemplation and puttering" who finds sharing poetry to be a feast that is neither immoral nor fattening but definitely habit forming; **Mary Wood** joined the poetry committee in 1993 and until recently has served as committee historian maintaining a meticulous chronology of poets and poems for Westminster and Asilomar going back to 1972; **John Anderson**, a New Zealander and one of our newest members, has taken over Mary's role as historian; **Breda Courtney**, artistic director of Wilde Irish Productions, was born and raised in Ireland and brings her Celtic oral tradition to the committee; **Wallis Leslie** finds Westminster a magical two days filled with contemplation, celebration and communion with great poets and readers. The committee owes its quiet efficiency and thoroughness to **Theda** and **Oscar Firschein** who have served for years as Westminster registrars. Theda, a former children's librarian, is a poet and short story writer, while Oscar is the editor of *Tangents*, Stanford's master of liberal arts journal. Prior to retiring he conducted research in artificial intelligence at Stanford.

So, dear reader, now that you know something about our methods, I hope you will be pleased and stimulated at the upcoming Westminster Poetry Weekend. Bring good questions to the sessions and don't miss the Saturday evening entertainment. I promise you'll be entertained.

# Wolfe, Hemingway, and Stabenau Meet in a Bar

plagiarized by Rick White

**Stabenau:** Running into Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe in a La Jolla bar! Have you seen the movie "Midnight in Paris"? How did you guys get to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Is Fitzgerald here too? Picasso? Alice B. Tocklas?

**Hemingway:** Kurt Vonnegut said it in *Slaughterhouse Five*. I read it on the way. He says we came unstuck in time. We were in a speakeasy and we put a hundred on number five to win and a hundred to place and then had another whiskey and soda and ran into a couple of Italians we didn't know and the bartender set up drinks for all of us. Might've been the drinks. Could have been the shotgun.

**Wolfe:** A girl came in. She was ripe, a maenad of delight and loneliness, passionately bored, with an expression of tenderness and cruelty, with enormous accusing tranquility. Her large breasts spread tightly out; behind the shin greaves her splendid



Thomas Wolfe awkward calves were spined thickly with muscle; a thick bosky sedge of hair writhed under the edge of her bawdy frenzied hat. Her face lit with expectancy.

**Stabenau:** How did Hemingway take this?

**Wolfe:** Hemingway was lazy and alert, bored and amused as if he saw something of which he had never heard, but which he had known forever. His ptotic left eye pullulated rapidly as he bestirred himself out of fluescent inanition and asked her to join us at a circular round table while fleusing off an accumulation of crumbs.

**Hemingway:** I thought she was beautiful and I took her hand. She let me take it and I held it and put my arm under her arm and I leaned forward in the dark

to kiss her and there was a sharp stinging flash. She had slapped my face hard.

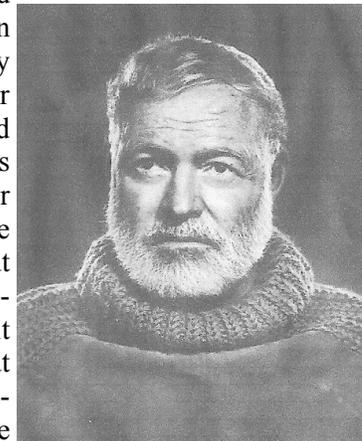
**Stabenau:** What did you expect? She didn't know you.

**Hemingway:** The girls all fall for me. Why should she be any different? I looked into her eyes and put my arm around her as I had before and kissed her again. I kissed her hard and held her tight and tried to open her lips; they were closed tight. Suddenly she shivered. I held her close against me and could feel her heart beating and her lips opened and her head went back against my hand and then she was crying on my shoulder.



**Wolfe:** Think what Ford, Edison, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Julius Caesar would think. They would have seen Hemingway's behavior as inspired madness, making this poor girl an object of conversation, abuse, boast, and anathema.

**Hemingway:** The Italians circled around us and glared and spittle formed on their lips and they bunched their fists and hitched up their sleeves and the bartender reached under the bar and pulled out a sawed-off shotgun and pointed it at all of them at once. An explosion blew the joint to smithereens. Next we're



Ernest Hemingway  
 this vony uea  
 tgsort with the ten-dollar tequila and the limes and the salt and the nachos and the hot sand beneath our feet and the sleek women and great colored metal cars and clean streets and quiet, everywhere no horns honking.

**Stabenau:** Bartender, give these men whatever they want.



Great Books Council of San Francisco  
Serving Northern California  
[www.greatbooks-sf.com](http://www.greatbooks-sf.com)

The Great Books Council of San Francisco presents  
**The Asilomar Great Books  
Weekend**  
**April 20-22, 2012**

To learn more about the Asilomar Weekend and other Great Books events, visit [www.greatbooks-sf.com](http://www.greatbooks-sf.com). While at that site, sign up for the Northern California Great Books [Electronic Newsletter](#).

The Asilomar Great Books Weekend has been held annually for more than 50 years on the Pacific Coast between Monterey and Carmel. The weekend includes four Great Books discussions, a reception for first-time attendees and a party on Saturday. It is a weekend not to be missed and long to be remembered.

### READING SELECTIONS

**Selected poems:** This year's poetry selections are by Robert Frost, Rainer Maria Rilke, Lucille Clifton, Yehuda Amichai and Christopher Smart.

**Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*.** The classic 1953 essay on Eastern philosophy illustrates when it really isn't appropriate to keep your "I" on the target.

**James Joyce, "The Dead."** The last in Joyce's *Dubliners* story collection, this is arguably the most widely-read and best-loved of his works. Like the other tales in *Dubliners*, "The Dead" examines lower-middle-class society in Dublin in a story suffused with music and poetry.

**Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*.** The great existentialist philosopher's best-known play provides us with a unique and unexpected view of hell.

**Arrival and Departure:** Registration at the conference is between 3:00 and 5:30 on Friday, April 20 in the main lodge. Your departure will be after lunch on Sunday, April 22.

**Cost:** The costs shown include lodging, six meals and books, which will be mailed soon after you register. Costs vary according to lodging preferences and assignments. All rooms have private baths. Availability of rooms in historic buildings (designed by Julia Morgan) is limited, so if that is your preference, please register as early as possible.

**Refunds:** Cancellation notices postmarked before February 1 will receive refunds less \$50 for book and postage/handling costs. Cancellations after that date will receive no refunds.

**Added Attractions:** There will be an orientation for newcomers late Friday afternoon. A party will be held on Saturday with entertainment, refreshments and a good time for all.

**Box Lunches:** Box lunches are available instead of lunch at the Dining Hall on Saturday and Sunday, but must be ordered when you register.

**Free Time:** There will be some free time on Saturday afternoon for visits to nearby attractions, or to spend as you please.

**Asilomar is for Families!** Please contact Sheri Kindsvater at [kindsvater@aol.com](mailto:kindsvater@aol.com) or 916-852-0615 for more information and for special discounted family rates.

# ASILOMAR GREAT BOOKS WEEKEND — REGISTRATION FORM

Names (please print or type): \_\_\_\_\_

Mail readings to: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of people registering with this form:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

email \_\_\_\_\_

**Register Early!** Mail your registration form before Jan 1, 2012 and deduct \$10 per person.

**Late Registration:** If you are registering after March 1, 2012, please call 916-852-0615 to verify that space is available. A late charge of \$10 per person will be assessed after March 1.

**Families:** Call 916-852-0615 for information on discounted family rates.

I do NOT wish to receive Great Books news

- Single Room (1 person)      \$551
- Double Room (2 persons)      \$395
- Multiple Room (3 or 4 persons)      \$334
- Registration before January 1      less \$10

Cost	Persons	Price
\$551	<input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	\$
\$395	<input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	\$
\$334	<input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	\$
less \$10	<input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	\$

**Total:** \_\_\_\_\_

Mail your completed registration form and check to:

**Sheri Kindsvater, Registrar**  
**10820 Glenhaven Way**  
**Rancho Cordova, CA 95670**

Questions? Please contact [kindsvater@aol.com](mailto:kindsvater@aol.com) or call 916-852-0615.

Make check payable to:

**The Great Books Council of San Francisco**



**Please check applicable boxes:**

	I wish only to share a room with (roommate name(s)): _____
	This is my first time at the Asilomar Great Books Weekend.
	I am willing to share a room with someone of your choice.
	I wish to be in the same discussion group as my roommate(s).
	I do NOT wish to be in the same discussion group as my roommate(s).
	I wish to receive vegetarian meals.
	I am disabled and will require a first-floor room. (We will try to accommodate your needs. Transportation by jitney service is available on the Asilomar grounds.)
	I request a less-expensive historic room, based on availability. The difference in cost will be refunded to me once historic rooms have been allocated.
	Contact me about sharing a ride to/from Asilomar.
	I request the following number of box lunches for Saturday. (number): _____
	I request the following number of box lunches for Sunday. (number): _____



## Neglected Book is Discussed at Long Novel Weekend

A hardy band of 31 readers convened at the Walker Creek Ranch in the west of Marin County on August 20 – 21 to discuss the Thomas Wolfe novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. This is the first volume in a series roughly following the life of the author in the person of his protagonist Eugene Gant. A famous book during its time and for a while afterward, now it is largely gone from reading lists. The following scholarly treatment of this circumstance is provided by a participant at the event. As he notes, the book generated lots of enthusiasm among about half of those attending. Several others agreed with Wolfe’s critics.



Rob Calvert & Karen Schneider at the party



Four grandmothers at the Grandmother Oak



John and Jennifer Anderson, Kay White, Sandra Green & Paula Weinberger in the enchanted forest



A critic?

## Poetry Weekend is Only Weeks Away

Poems for the event to be held at Westminster House, Alamo, on November 4-5 are:

**Saturday Morning: *Varieties of Love***—“A Walk in Late Summer” by Theodore Roethke, “David, King of Israel” and “My Parents’ Lodging Place” by Yehuda Amichai, “Late Poem” by Cynthis Zarin, “A Validection of Weeping” by John Donne and *A Winter Light* by John Haines.

**Saturday Afternoon: *Celtic Interlude***—“When the Pie was Opened” by Paul Muldoon,

“Under Ben Bulben” by William Butler Yeats, “The Ebony Adonis” by Nuala Ni Dhomnaill, “To a Mouse” by Robert Burns, “What Language Did” by Eavan Boland, and “The Other Side” by Seamus Heaney.



Westminster House

**Sunday Morning: *A Potpourri***—“The Descent” by William Carlos Williams, “The Longing to be Saved” by Maxine Kumin, “Waiting and Finding” by Jack Gilbert, “Poem in the Matukituki Valley” by James K. Baxter, “Hawk Roosting” by Ted Hughes, “Autobiographia Illiteraria” by Theodore Weiss.

To register, call Oscar or Theda Firschein at (650)834-6340 or write oscar1@earthlink.net.

# Thomas Wolfe and his Critics

*John Anderson*

At the recent Long Novel weekend we discussed Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, and marveled. We marveled at the soaring prose, but most of all we marveled at the Gant family: did ever such a dysfunctional family really exist? Apparently it did. The family of the novel was closely modeled on Thomas Wolfe's own. That the novel is dark, nihilistic, and despairing is no surprise. What may be surprising is the number of people who over the years have been affected deeply by the work including a number of well known novelists.

Pat Conroy's response is typical:

I have needed to write the American novelist Thomas Wolfe a love letter since I first encountered him in Eugene Norris's high school English class at the end of 1961. The book's impact on me was so viscerally powerful that I consider the reading of it as one of the pivotal events of my life. [1]

Wolfe devotees form a rather special group. Though from different backgrounds and generations, they have all fallen under the spell of his mesmerizing, lyrical storytelling. We can attest to the fact that this special attraction is still alive and well. After 13 hours of intense discussion at the Long Novel Weekend, a satellite group, under the leadership of Rick White, has formed to read and discuss the second volume of the Gant family saga: *Of Time and the River*.

## Wolfe then and now

When Wolfe died in 1938 at the age of 38, he was not only famous and popular but highly regarded by other writers.

After Wolfe's death, his chief contemporary William Faulkner said that Wolfe may have had the best talent of their generation. [2]

Since then, literary tastes have changed and his reputation has declined. In fact, Wolfe's work is largely unknown to current generations of readers. While many of those attending the Long Novel Weekend, being of a certain age, had read Wolfe in high school, few were still familiar with his work. However, it's fair to say that most everyone was grateful for the opportunity to get to know this talented, original and powerful writer.

## The heart of the long novel

In each of the three sessions discussants were drawn to the lyrical outbursts that soared up off the page transforming mere description into ecstatic poetry. For some, the poetic language made the dark narrative bearable.

Novelist Robert Morgan captures some of these feelings in his introductory remarks to the novel:

I became intoxicated with the elevated, poetic prose. ... The intensity, the Byronic sadness, the sense of thrilling grief, and of fallenness from a higher world and a higher language, were the most special elements of the experience. [3]

While some group members were inspired to follow Eugene Gant off to Harvard and into the world in the next volume, others were satiated after this first encounter. Robert Morgan poses a way of looking at

the division between those who have fallen in love with Wolfe and those who have not:

For years I have argued that the American poetic imagination is divided against itself between Emersonian exuberance and openness and the Gothic, symbolist interiors of Poe. [4]

Though readers tend to resonate between one

aspect of Wolfe and the other, it's possible to argue that despite its polar tendencies Wolfe's work is an amalgam of the two perspectives. The portrait he paints may be gloomy and dark. Though his characters quest for that which they can never find, there is also a solidity, a reality, a humanity that shines through them. We know them. That is what draws us in, and for many keeps us reading.

## References

1. Pat Conroy, p. 2 of a three-page epigraph in *Look Homeward, Angel*. The others who share this space are Charles Frazier, Elizabeth Kostova, and William Gay.
2. Wikipedia: Thomas Wolfe. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Wolfe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Wolfe)
3. Robert Morgan, *Look Homeward, Angel*, pp. xi-xii.
4. Morgan op cit, pp. xii-xiii.



Thomas Wolfe's House, Asheville, NC

## How to Start and Maintain a Great Books Group

Clifford Louie

If you are interested in starting a Great Books discussion group, here are some of the things that worked for **Jim Hall** and me when we started a group in San Francisco's Richmond District a couple of years ago.

**Getting a place:** Your library is a great place to start. Many have meeting rooms and are happy to host book groups.

**Getting participants:** Helpful ways to get the word out include:

- Talking to your friends
- Posting an announcement in GBSF newsletters
- Posting flyers at your local library and in nearby businesses
- Inviting members from other Great Books discussion groups to attend.

Each of these four ways contributed 25% to the Richmond group's membership.

### Six principles:

**(1) Maintain communication:** Effective communication is essential for keeping members involved and informed and less likely to drop out. Start by emailing group members a week before the meeting a reminder to give them enough time to read the selection if they have not done so. Then, send a second email the day after to highlight provocative issues discussed and to announce the date and selection for the next meeting.

**(2) Encourage members to attend the GBSF leader training workshop:** It's healthy for a group to have a variety of leaders each with their own perspective. Even for those not interested in leading, the leader training workshop will help them become more careful readers and stronger participants. Seasoned leaders should offer a helping hand to new ones by reviewing discussion questions or jumping in if they get stuck.

**(3) Use Bill Baker's "Ten Command-**

**ments":** Mr. Baker's Ten Commandments are witty and concise and provide an excellent way to introduce members to the method of *shared inquiry*.

**(4) Run the group democratically:** Respond to the needs and interests of group members. Make sure meetings are held at a time when most can attend and take a vote on the readings.

**(5) Be flexible and innovative:** Readings do not have to be confined to those in Great Books Foundation anthologies. Encourage members to continue the discussion after the meeting. Hold your own mini-retreat at a member's house if there's an appropriate book with a film based on it.

**(6) Get expert support:** GBSF has leaders happy to serve as mentors to new groups. Take advantage of this resource. Jim Hall's more than 30 years of experience was critical in helping the Richmond group to a healthy start.

## Classical Pursuits: An Invitation

Since 1999, Classical Pursuits has taken the Great Books experience on the road. We travel through both space and time to explore the particular visions of great writers in the place in which their works are set. We go beyond the headlines and crowded tourist attractions to places like Dante's Florence, Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo, Flannery O'Connor's Savannah and Salman Rushdie's India. Our reading and our travel experience are both enriched by this coupling literature and location. In 2012, we have six wonderful trips and Toronto Pursuits, our annual summer camp for inquiring adults. Contact is Ann Kirkland, [ann.kirkland@classicalpursuits.com](mailto:ann.kirkland@classicalpursuits.com).

### Great Books Council of San Francisco

*Serving Northern California*

**Officers:** Marge Johnson, president. Rob Calvert, vice president. Rick White, secretary. Brian Mahoney, treasurer. Jim Hall, past president. **Reading Matters:** Rick White, publisher. Carol Hochberg and Paula Weinberger, editors. Jan Vargo, database. **E-Newsletter:** Jim Hall. **Webmaster:** Rob Calvert.

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<b>JANUARY</b>	<b>FEBRUARY</b>	<b>MARCH</b>
Jan 7 – Executive Committee (ExCom) meeting and <i>Reading Matters (RM)</i> mailing party	<b>Feb 4 – SF Mini-Retreat: <i>Kiss of the Spider Woman</i>, by Manuel Puig</b>  Feb 5 – Super Bowl Sunday	<b>Mar 10 – Leader Training (tent.)</b>
<b>APRIL</b>	<b>MAY</b>	<b>JUNE - JULY</b>
Apr 9 – Deadline for May 5 <i>Reading Matters</i>  <b>Apr 20-22 – Asilomar Spring Conference</b>	May 5 – ExCom/ <i>RM</i> Mailing Party  <b>May 12 – Gold Country Mini-Retreat</b>	<b>Jun 10 – Picnic/Annual Meeting</b>
<b>AUGUST</b>	<b>SEPTEMBER</b>	<b>OCTOBER-DECEMBER</b>
<b>Aug 18-19 – Long Novel Weekend (tent.)</b>	Sep 3 – Deadline for Sep 29 <i>RM</i> .  Sep 29 – ExCom/ <i>RM</i> Mailing Party	<b>Oct 6 – Wine Country Mini-Retreat (tent.)</b>  <b>Nov 5/6 – Poetry Weekend</b>