

# Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO  
*Serving Northern California*

## Mark Scardina saves Spring Weekend

***John Donne poem links novel and poetry sessions***

By Rick White

Mark Scardina of Ingleside Terraces, San Francisco, lives within what used to be the western turn of a race-track before its grandstand collapsed in the 1906 earthquake and the land was used as a refugee camp. Mark, a participant in Great Books since childhood, saddled up when he heard that the Barbara McConnell Spring Conference had no coordinator. He had not been around in 1906, but he had been around long enough to know this would be the first time in GBSF's 68-year history without this major event. It is, as they say, steeped in tradition. One way or another, Covid-19 notwithstanding, it had to be done. "I'll do it," he declared to a skeptical audience of his Great Books colleagues. How he did it Mark tells us below.

A pleasant surprise for attendees was Rob Calvert's getting the John Donne poem that played a recurring part in the Ishiguro novel added to the poetry selections for this event. The success of this has led to renewed consideration of the value of our conferences having a theme, seldom overtly the case, although sometimes suspected as having been decided by a secret committee. The history of theme suspicion can be followed through a search of the past 25 years in the website archives of this publication, a great resource for GBSF history. It has never been proved or disproved.

*You can look it up:  
The Great Books Council of San Francisco  
was founded on March 31, 1953.*

## Death be not Donne!

By Mark Scardina

*One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

John Donne's title "Death Be Not Proud" can be said to describe what has been developing for some years in the Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference. After decades of memorable weekends, rising costs, coupled with Rob Calvert's need to step back after years of successful management, appeared to mean that GBSF might need to leave behind the pleasures of the idyllic coastal retreat. Rob and I have a special affection for the Asilomar weekend. We began attending as teenagers with our parents. I could not let go of this. Even though I was not currently on the Executive Committee, I felt that I had to forward a plan to bring it back to viability.

Then Covid-19 struck. Could GBSF carry off a three-day event *online*? Books purchased for the original event were already in the hands of those who had signed up before Covid hit. Caroline Van Howe and Sheri Kindsvater joined me to awaken the event from its short sleep so it could emerge via Zoom.

If there is a theme committee operating in secret (I have never been convinced) an alleged "death agenda" was not disproved by the mix of works by Donne, Glück, Simic, Ritsos, Walcott, Machiavelli, Ishiguro and Edson. Keeping to the three-day schedule, participants from across the country engaged in four invigorating and enlightening sessions on Zoom.

The poetry selections set the tone for the weekend by offering deceptively simple first readings only to give

up their layers after examination through thoughtful questions served up by the leaders. From John Donne's assault on death to Louise Glück's ease with death and solitude, all shared a memorable Friday evening.

On Saturday morning we dusted off *The Prince* and faced its continuing relevance in trying times. It no doubt belongs in the Great Books canon. All the groups, each in its own way, intensely interpreted and evaluated Niccoló's seminal resumé.

Novels can be difficult to cover in a single two-hour session, especially when written by a master such as the British author Kazuo Ishiguro. *Never Let Me Go* held its audience, slowly revealing its outcome, in retrospect inevitable.

Sunday brought a new day and a fitting bookend to the weekend. "Wit" proved true to its title and brought together issues from the previous discussions.

Feedback from the Zoom weekend was overwhelmingly positive. However, the common refrain was to return to Asilomar in 2022 and that is the plan. The Executive Committee intends to introduce a more affordable structure to bring back past and present attendees and to entice new generations to this unique experience. Stay tuned!

## *Perspective of a lame duck president*

By Brian Cunningham

*Many would say I was a change agent. We have a new website, have seen the first issue of an e-newsletter focused on issues of concern to discussion leaders and are about to have new bylaws. We have had several subcommittees which considered how we've been doing at events, our relations with local discussion groups and issues of governance. Currently, two task forces are meeting, one to consider how 21<sup>st</sup> century technology impacts GBSF and the other to write a handbook to explain our traditions and the expectations they impose. And we've done most of this by email and video conference. Who knew?*

*Numerous bookies were involved in all these changes. I did little of it but catalyzed much of it. I think that's a good thing. GBSF is blessed with many talented individuals who willingly give their time and talent to GBSF. Most are passionate about Great Books events and the Method of Shared Inquiry. Beyond the most active volunteers are hundreds, yes*

*hundreds, of participants in our events and local reading groups.*

*Our traditions have survived for over fifty years even as the stewardship of them has passed from hand to hand. In some ways we are like a family, both the good ways and the other ways too. We have adapted those traditions to the video age of the past two years and will, I am confident, adapt them equally well to whatever challenges the future presents.*

*But here's the good news for all my successors. I didn't do it all. There's plenty still to do. I can't list them here because it is not for me to say. Each new leader will imprint their own vision on GBSF. And that's a good thing too.*

*Brian Cunningham, president, 2019 - 2021*



**Brian Cunningham**

## *Louise DiMattio likely next GBSF CEO*

Also of Ingleside Terraces, Louise DiMattio holds the uncontested lead to be elected GBSF president. A charming introduction to Louise is a letter she wrote recently to this publication.

*Rick,*

*For several years before the pandemic began, I had the overwhelming feeling that something was very wrong and something desperately needed to change. I am not talking about the obvious ... yes, the administration in Washington was a disaster and needed to change. What I am talking about was this creeping feeling I had of things being out of control.*

*Things were moving too fast. There were traffic jams everywhere. Uber drivers and Lyft drivers double and triple parked anywhere they pleased. Google buses went back and forth down 19th Avenue making stops to pick up any number of techies standing in line with headphones on already working on their laptops. The skies were polluted from countless planes taking off and landing at SFO and*

*Oakland. Rents were sky high and the homeless dumped trash everywhere.*

*San Francisco was just one of hundreds of cities that desperately needed to slow down except it didn't know it. When the pandemic came and everything did stop, I realized that the Universe was speaking and it had to happen. Everything was just wrong! It is truly sad that terrible suffering had to accompany this huge message.*

*Today I found this poem. I read it before the pandemic and I am reading it again now with a new insight into its meaning.*

## Above Us

*By Julia Hartwig (1921 – 2017)*

Boys kicking a ball on a vast square beneath an obelisk  
and the apocalyptic sky at sunset to the rear  
Why the sudden menace in this view  
as if someone wished to turn it all to red dust  
The sun already knows And the sky knows it too  
And the water in the river knows  
Music bursts from the loudspeakers like wild laughter  
Only a star high above us  
stands lost in thought with a finger to its lips

[Translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh.]

*Czeslaw Milosz said about this poem “Expectation of an imminent calamity. Many people have lived through such a moment, but they haven’t left poems about it. Yet these moments are an integral part of history, of many cities and countries.”*

*Louise DiMattio, June 2021*

## ANNUAL MEETING: *Time-travel fiction about race in America: a powerful read*

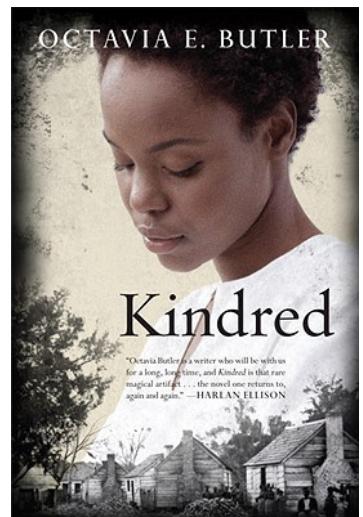
*By Rick White*

*Kindred* is a novel by American writer Octavia E. Butler (1947 - 2006) that incorporates time travel. It is more likely that our grandchildren have read it than we have. First published in 1979, it has been a common choice for high school and college courses.

Google contains many interpretive reports on this book, a substantial proportion carrying offers to help students write a successful essay about it. I was turned off by the editorializing in most of these, but Wikipedia offers—while it is still provocative—a comprehensive

and apparently straightforward account of the book. This drew me in and I look forward to its 264 pages. In the Wiki introduction to this extensive article, it reports that the book is

the first-person account of a young African-American writer, Dana, who finds herself being shunted in time between her Los Angeles, California home in 1976 and a pre-Civil War Maryland plantation. There she meets her ancestors: a proud black freewoman and a white planter who has forced her into slavery and concubinage. As Dana's stays in the past become longer, the young woman becomes intimately entangled with the plantation community. She makes hard choices to survive slavery and to ensure her return to her own time. *Kindred* explores the dynamics and dilemmas of antebellum slavery from the sensibility of a late 20th-century black woman, who is aware of its legacy in contemporary American society. Through the two interracial couples who form the emotional core of the story, the novel also explores the intersection of power, gender, and race issues, and speculates on the prospects of future egalitarianism.



See the third page following for  
**Details of the Annual Meeting and nominations for GBSF officers and members of the Executive Committee.**

## This poem is about many things

*By Rick White*

This poem, which we discussed at our 2021 McConnell weekend, is about many things, as many poems are. In these times of closed minds it is moving to read about someone who listens respectfully, on a difficult subject, open to the notion that her friend may be right. “Not a stupid person, yet with all she knows, she literally talks to god.” In Great Books discussions, non-believers who listen know that it is not uncommon for deeply intellectual individuals to believe in God, even

to worship and follow a religious path. There is evidence, not conclusive, but evidence of a creator. Look around. Tell me that all this just happened. There is evidence also that either God is different from ourselves in ways we cannot reach by thinking or else God is not good. Who would permit such suffering?

Poetry affords a way to face such issues.

### Celestial Music

By Louise Glück

I have a friend who still believes in heaven.  
Not a stupid person, yet with all she knows,  
she literally talks to god,  
she thinks someone listens in heaven,  
On earth, she's unusually competent.  
Brave, too, able to face unpleasantness.  
  
We found a caterpillar dying in the dirt,  
greedy ants crawling over it.  
I'm always moved by weakness, disaster,  
always eager to oppose vitality.  
But timid, also, quick to shut my eyes.  
Whereas my friend was able to watch,  
to let events play out  
according to nature. For my sake, she  
intervened;  
brushing a few ants off the torn thing,  
and set it down across the road.  
  
My friend says I shut my eyes to god,  
that nothing else explains  
my aversion to reality. She says I'm like the child  
who buries her head in the  
pillow  
so as not to see, the child who tells herself  
that light causes sadness—  
My friend is like the mother. Patient, urging me  
to wake up as an adult like herself,  
a courageous person—  
  
In my dreams, my friend reproaches me.  
We're walking  
on the same road, except it's winter now;  
she's telling me that when you love the world you  
hear celestial music:  
look up, she says. When I look up, nothing.  
Only clouds, snow, a white business in the trees  
like brides leaping to a great height—  
Then I'm afraid for her; I see her  
caught in a net deliberately cast over the earth—

In reality, we sit by the side of the road, watching  
the sun set;  
from time to time, the silence pierced by a birdcall.  
It's the moment we're both trying to explain the fact  
that we're at ease with death, with solitude.  
My friend draws a circle in the dirt; inside  
the caterpillar doesn't move.  
She's always trying to make something whole,  
something beautiful, an  
Image  
capable of life apart from her.  
We're very quiet. It's peaceful sitting here,  
not speaking, the composition  
fixed, the road turning suddenly dark, the air  
going cool, here and there the rocks shining and  
glittering—  
It's this stillness that we both love.  
The love of form is a love of endings.

### Consulting the classics

By Brian Mahoney

I've been asked what Greek or Roman play or dialogue I would find most helpful in understanding the situation that we are in today and why? What can pull us together? What is the contribution of the Great Books *Shared Inquiry* method?

The *Shared Inquiry* method and the discussions that we participate in are the most important functions that will preserve our democratic society; and might be even more important than what our elective and non-elective officials are doing in the legislative and executive branches of government.

Sophocles's *Rex Oedipus* was performed at the same time as the plague of Athens around 430 BC. (Scholars attributed this plague to typhoid fever.) It wiped out about 25% of the population. It might be worth rereading this play because according to the chronicle Thucydides documented the grim symptoms as the social and psychological fallout looking for a scapegoat to blame for the situation.

We might be able to learn a truth from Epictetus who wrote *we suffer not from events in our lives but from our judgment about them*. We need to focus on how we approach things. We might gain some insight on reading Epicurus's thoughts on happiness. The Greek word is *eudaimonia*. Perhaps a better word to use is flourish.

How does one live a life that flourishes or a flourished life?

The preamble to our Constitution has the phrase the *pursuit of happiness*; perhaps we might say the *pursuit of wellbeing*. Epicurus wrote that the pursuit of wellbeing (happiness) has three components: we need to have friends, we need to be free from tyranny (government, religion, and family) and we need to have time for reflection. These three items constitute wellbeing (happiness).

During this shelter-in-place period, I find myself re-reading Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. Trying to embrace his six epithets: to be upright, to be modest, to be straightforward, to be sane, to be cooperative, and to be disinterested. I have discovered a new interest in poetry that I find to be prescriptive. I will close with a poem written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by a Persian poet with the pen name Hafiz. If we can make the last line of this poem a reality perhaps we will be able to solve the problems of today.

By Hafiz (1320-1389)

It happens all the time in heaven,  
And some day

It will begin to happen  
Again on earth -

That men and women who are married,  
And men and men who are  
Lovers,

And women and women  
Who give each other  
Light,

Often get down on their knees

And while so tenderly  
Holding their lovers hand,

With tears in their eyes  
Will sincerely speak, saying,

My dear,  
How can I be more loving to you;  
How can I be more kind?

## **GBSF Poetry Weekend continues to evolve**

By Paula Weinberger

In 2019, we added a focus to the Saturday evening event by inviting poet/translators, Meryl Natchez and Adam Morris, to share what drew them to translation, its challenges, and their own methodology. In 2020, we expanded that format with well-known poet Rebecca Foust, who gave an incredible seminar on poetry in form in addition to her reading from her acclaimed book of sonnets, *Paradise Drive*. Participants not only came away with new insights into the relationship of form to the message of the poem, but also gained a personal sense of Foust's writing process and her fascination with the sonnet. As the first Poetry Weekend via Zoom, we were pleased that the Zoom format did not interfere with the sense of connection and community that has characterized onsite Poetry Weekends. In fact, the experience was enhanced by the diversity of participants including six international attendees. Based on rave reviews, we are continuing with the seminar/reading format in 2021.

The theme for Poetry Weekend 2021 is **ekphrastic poetry** and the many ways poets have taken their inspiration from the visual arts. On Saturday, small groups will discuss poems in a variety of genres. In the afternoon, poems, though quite varied, use paintings as a jumping off point for the poet's own reflections.

On Sunday, we are delighted to have highly regarded ekphrastic poet, collaborator, and teacher, Janée Baugher, as our guest presenter. In the morning, she will give an interactive talk introducing the range and conventions of contemporary ekphrastic poetry, including a PowerPoint presentation of both the visual art and ekphrastic work she curated for her guidebook on ekphrasis, *The Ekphrastic Writer: Creating Art-Influenced Poetry, Fiction and Nonfiction* (McFarland, 2020). In the afternoon, she will read ekphrastic poems and field questions about ekphrastic poets' creative processes.

Following the Saturday afternoon session, there will be an Open Mic offering participants the opportunity to read a poem of their own creation or share a favorite.

For further information about Poetry Weekend 2021, please visit the GBSF website at:

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

# Details

## Annual Meeting: July 10, 2021

The Annual Meeting starts with delivery of the Council's Annual Report, followed by elections of the Council's officers and Executive Committee for the following year.

Then we'll do what we like to do most: have a book discussion! This year we'll discuss ***Kindred*** by Octavia Butler.

The 2021 event will take place online. Registration will open on June 15, 2021. Zoom access information will be provided to those who register.

Please check our website <https://www.greatbooksnkal.org> soon for information about how to register.

The Annual Meeting is open to anyone who has attended a Northern California Great Books event or discussion group during the past year. There is **no charge**.

Questions? Please send email to [greatbooksnkal.president@gmail.com](mailto:greatbooksnkal.president@gmail.com).

## GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

### NOMINATING COMMITTEE REPORT

#### Nominations for Executive Committee For Consideration at the Council's Annual Meeting of July 10, 2021

Melanie Blake	Continuing
Rob Calvert	Continuing
Brian Cunningham	Continuing
Louise DiMattio	Continuing ( <i>Footnote 1</i> )
Jim Hall	Continuing
Sheri Kindsvater	Continuing
Brian Mahoney	Continuing ( <i>Footnote 2</i> )
Dorothy McHale	( <i>Footnote 3</i> )
Louise Morgan	Continuing
Lydia Osborn	( <i>Footnote 4</i> )
Elena Schmid	Continuing ( <i>Footnote 5</i> )
Caroline Van Howe	Continuing
Jan Vargo	Continuing
Paula Weinberger	Continuing
Kay White	Continuing
Rick White	Continuing

Footnote 1: Nominee to be President.

Footnote 2: Current and Nominee to be Treasurer.

Footnote 3: Dorothy McHale was appointed to the Executive Committee by the President pursuant to the Bylaws and confirmed by the Executive Committee at its May 8, 2021 meeting. She is a nominee to be Secretary

Footnote 4: Lydia Osborn is a Senior at Campolindo High School. She has organized and led two GBSF reading discussion events involving both experienced GBSF bookies and Student Members of the Campolindo High School Book Club. She has agreed to serve as a youth liaison to GBSF.

Footnote 5: Current and Nominee to be Vice President.

\* \* \*

*The following two poems came to us from Sy Packman. He says they speak to him in this strange time.*

### **Today, When I Could Do Nothing**

*By Jane Hirshfield*

Today, when I could do nothing,  
I saved an ant.

It must have come in with the morning paper,  
still being delivered  
to those who shelter in place.

A morning paper is still an essential service.

I am not an essential service.

I have coffee and books,  
time,  
a garden,  
silence enough to fill cisterns.

It must have first walked  
the morning paper, as if loosened ink  
taking the shape of an ant.

Then across the laptop computer—warm—  
then onto the back of a cushion.

Small black ant, alone,  
crossing a navy cushion,  
moving steadily because that is what it could do.

Set outside in the sun,  
it could not have found again its nest.  
What then did I save?

It did not move as if it was frightened,  
even while walking my hand,  
which moved it through swiftness and air.

Ant, alone, without companions,  
whose ant-heart I could not fathom—  
how is your life, I wanted to ask.

I lifted it, took it outside.

This first day when I could do nothing,  
contribute nothing  
beyond staying distant from my own kind,  
I did this.

**London, 1802**

### **WILLIAM WORDSWORTH**

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:  
England hath need of thee: she is a fen  
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
Have forfeited their ancient English dower  
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;  
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;  
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.  
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:  
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:  
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,  
So didst thou travel on life's common way,  
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart  
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

### **The Social Distance**

*By Kim Roberts*

*This poem, from Washington City Paper, June 25, 2020, was given us by the GBSF poetry committee. The poet's newest book, an anthology By Broad Potomac's Shore: Great Poems from the Early Days of our Nation's Capital, will be released this October by the University of Virginia Press. She has five books of her own poems, the latest being The Scientific Method.*

The fashionable looks this season  
are bandit or surgeon. One senator  
cloaks his face in a Confederate flag  
then feigns surprise when some are offended.

On the fourth yahrzeit of my mother's death,  
I think of her, unable to read lips  
Through all those masks: the muzzled world.  
On the sidewalk, we try a new geometry.

but some repeatedly fail their math.  
Paper products become the new currency:  
my love brings me two boxes of tissues.  
I try to imagine an innocent time

when we could stand under strobe lights,  
heat rising from a herd of bodies, bass notes  
like glorious thunder the only thing  
transmitted through the air.

# The Mysterious Urbano Sundial

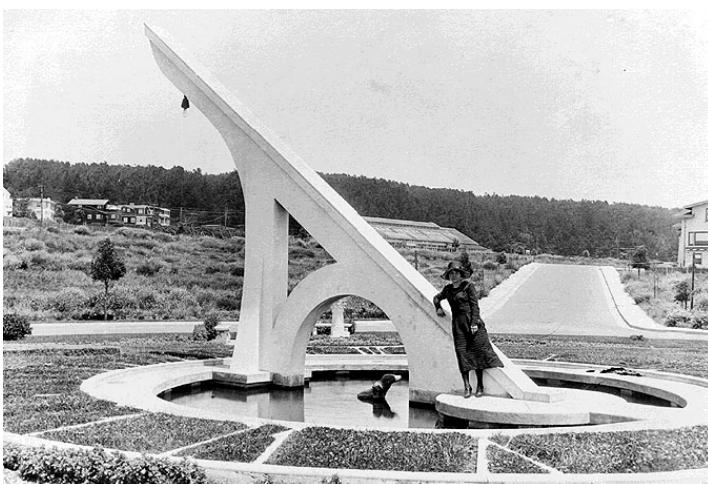
## Unfinished History



**The Urbano Sundial at the end of Entrada Street, 2008.**

*Photo: Chris Carlsson*

What is a gigantic sundial doing in the middle of this prosaic neighborhood? Local occultists claim that the Urbano Sundial, like Stonehenge, the Mayan and Egyptian pyramids, and other ancient monuments, is a cosmic calendar built on a power spot.



**Urban sundial, 1922.**

*Photo: Private Collection, San Francisco, CA*

Whether or not you believe such theories, you'll have to admit that the Urbano Sundial is a bizarre, incongruous sight. When it was built, around the turn of the century, what is now the Urbano Street circle [oval] was the Ingleside race track, located in the wasteland of endless sand dunes that covered most of western San Francisco; the sundial, say historians, was erected as a race-track ornament. Later, as the city sprawled outward across the barren sands, the track was paved over, the bleachers were torn down, and the racetrack became a middle-class neighborhood. All that remains of the former racetrack is the mysterious sundial.

--Dr. Weirde



**Sundial as car advertising set, early 1920s.**

*Photo: Private Collection, San Francisco, CA*

Ed. Note:

Urbano Street is paved on top of the original oval dirt track. According to a longtime resident, the Sundial was not built as a track ornament but as the symbol for development of the neighborhood as it began around 1910. The oval and the way the properties are laid out around it and within it gives this neighborhood a special beauty.

**2021 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO**  
Events where noted will be held on Zoom.

JULY - AUGUST	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER
<b>7/10:</b> Annual Meeting: Elections. Reading: novel <i>Kindred</i> , by Octavia E. Butler. Zoom. <b>8/14,21:</b> Long Novel Event: in two sessions. <i>The Master and Margarita</i> , by Mikhail Bulgakov. Zoom.	<b>10/XX:</b> Wine Country Mini-Retreat: A once-banned book, yet to be selected, plus a related film. Venue to be determined.	<b>11/13-14:</b> Poetry Weekend: Readings to be determined. Zoom.

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California:

President, Brian Cunningham; Vice President, Elena Schmid; Secretary, Dorothy McHale; Treasurer, Brian Mahoney; Past President, Louise Morgan.

*Reading Matters*: Editor and Publisher, Rick White; E-letter Editor and Publisher, Jim Hall; Database, Jan Vargo.

**Website:** [www.greatbooksnkal.org](http://www.greatbooksnkal.org)

**Great Books Foundation:** [www.greatbooks.org](http://www.greatbooks.org)

The GBSF annual financial report one-page summary can be seen on our website. The full report can be obtained from Brian Mahoney, Treasurer, at [gbbrianmahoney@gmail.com](mailto:gbbrianmahoney@gmail.com).