

Vol. 9 No. 2  
Winter 2004-2005

# *Reading Matters*

publication of the SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL

*Serving Northern California*

## ***Letter from the President***

Dear readers, this will be my last article for Reading Matters as president of the San Francisco Great Books Council. My second term ends at the Annual Meeting in June 2005. It has been first and foremost a privilege and secondly a responsibility serving the Council as its president. I honor the members of the Council for their hard work, enthusiasm and dedication that they have demonstrated in carrying out the tasks that needed to be done.

We were saddened by the low attendance at our 2004 Asilomar meeting, but that did not distract from the quality of the program that we provided. We nearly cut our yearly expenses by half in response to the low attendance. However, the Long Novel Weekend, *Anna Karenina* was a smashing success with an attendance that matched the time when we did Homer's *Odyssey*. The Poetry Weekend and the Mini Retreat held in San Francisco were both excellent events. Our Annual Meeting at Tilden Park under Kathleen Conneely's leadership has always been one of my favorite SFGBC events.

The selections of books that we choose for our events are always open to criticism. In the last two months I have received negative criticism from three different individuals for our choice of essay at Asilomar this year. Brent Browning and I have corresponded to one questioner by mail; the other faithful participants have stated that they will not attend Asilomar this year simply because they are not interested in the reading. The book in question is Edward Wilson's *Consilience*.

I would like to respond to this negative criticism, I hope in a positive way. We cannot always choose a first-rate winner like *Anna Karenina*; but I think that there is something to be said for choosing a second-rate piece of literature. So often, the works of lesser quality delineates the flaws of human society in the writing itself. I am thinking of Kafka's *The Trial* that we did last year at Asilomar. I think that there might be days that we might feel like Joseph K; but I was not convinced that Kafka's character symbolizes the total twentieth century man.

I remember a number of years ago, that we did a poem, that I have since forgotten the title, (and I do not want to be reminded) that talked about bodily parts and fluids in ways that I really didn't want to know. I did not respond by imposing self-exiled status from the conference. I simply let it be known that I was not amused; and participated in the discussion with the other poems.

I'm not going to be a leader for Edward Wilson's *Consilience*; but I am certainly going be a participant!

--Brian W. Mahoney

## ***Asilomar 2005 Sign-Ups Slow, May Lose Spaces***

### **Urgent Phone Calls, Special Insert**

Anyone not signed up who intends to participate in this year□s Spring Conference is urged to call Jimmie Harvey, registrar at (415)383-1319 *post haste*. Asilomar□s deadline for us to return unused spaces is at hand. Executive Committee members have called most who attended last year and have not signed up and urged them to do so now. An application is enclosed in this newsletter.

The novella is *The Shawl*, by Cynthia Ozick; the essay, *Consilience*, by Edw. O. Wilson; the play *Fences*, by August Wilson; and there is a selection of poetry.

### ***Picnic Reading Decided***

*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, by Azar Nafisi, has been announced as the annual picnic reading by chair Kathleen Conneely. She calls this book □an extraordinary memoir,□ and urges us to buy it and set aside Sunday, June 12 for an exciting experience.

### ***Letters to the Editor***

Readers are encouraged to send letters to the editor responding to articles in this newsletter or about anything else concerning Great Books. We reserve the right to edit for space and clarity. Here is the first.

Dear Editor:

I am writing in response to Rick White□s column, □The Argument Rages On,□ in the latest issue of your newsletter. Mr. White mentions a famous quote from Shakespeare, □Methinks though [sic] dost protest too much.□ Not only does he mangle the quote, he attributes it to the wrong play. The correct quote is, □The lady doth protest too much, methinks,□ Hamlet, III, ii. Queen Gertrude speaks the words to Hamlet as they watch the play within the play.

Perhaps we should insist on a Shakespeare theme. There are so many immortal lines in this work that a long-term study might help us remember which line goes where!

-- Jan Quesenberry, Great Books of the Sacramento Delta

Dear Ms. Quesenberry:

Congratulations on being the first to write a letter to the editor in our nine years of publication. Mr. White admits that he misremembered the quote.

Would you like to write for us?

-- The Publisher

## ***Anna Karenina Draws Largest Attendance***

Long Novel Weekend on August 28th and 29<sup>th</sup> this year drew its largest attendance ever, more than 70, to discuss a new translation of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Popularity of the book and ample space at the site led to this record. The Great Books Foundation seal appeared on the cover and Oprah Winfrey had chosen it for her book group. While *Anna Karenina* does not have the vast scale of the author's more celebrated *War and Peace*, in some ways it is a superior novel. It is better organized and more coherent.

Some thought the title misleading, as it suggests a romantic novel, a woman's book. However, of the seven main characters, four are male. The principal male character is not Anna's lover, Vronsky, or her husband, Karenin, but Levin, often thought to be the one character in all of Tolstoy's fiction most autobiographical. We tossed around alternative titles for the book. One was *Love and Marriage*. Another was *Fidelity and Infidelity*. There were more.

### **Saturday Night Live**

Saturday night Kathleen Conneely showed the 1935 Greta Garbo film version of the book. She arranged two large screens so that everyone would be able to see. Lana Dilger, of Russian Extraction, spread tables with homemade Russian comestibles -- piroshki, rye and salmon finger sandwiches, rye and ancient gouda, cheesecake, teacakes, apricot tarts, cranberry coconut cookies, poppyseed roll. She set out six vodkas -- Stoli, Zolganaya, Lemon Grass, Coffee, Cranberry, and Citroen -- champagne punch, and an alcohol free cranberry punch.

### **Bitter Irony**

While many felt Tolstoy's perception into his characters and their complexities to be unsurpassed, it was observed that he gave short shrift to careers in the military and government, to anyone not working the land. Karenin, a government official deals with political conflicts concerning non-Russian ethnics in the south and the Caucasus. Tolstoy glosses over this challenge, seems to write it off as bureaucratic. But as we celebrated our Russian weekend, 330 school children were massacred at Beslan in an ongoing battle for Chechnyan independence from Russia.

## ***Asilomar 2004 Poetry Report***

by Theda Firschein

At Asilomar '04, I led an evening poetry session. Here is some of the flavor.

□ **The Subway Platform,** □ by Laurie Sheck, describes the poet's subterranean world as a □shore stripped of promised softness or repose.□ The initial isolation of the poet masks the humanity of the others waiting for the train.

All around me were briefcases, cell phones, baseball caps,  
forlorn and still glistening

folded umbrellas

with rain. Who owned them? Each face possessed a hiddenness

DO NOT STEP ACROSS THE YELLOW LINE,

while the □wrappings and unwrappings□ of □the city□s sequential grids□ above alternated with gold and ashen robes □sewn with birds that flew into seasons of light.□

The rails become the final harbingers of light, □treacherous, almost maniacal, yet somehow full of promise.□ Again the birds appear as wings of sorrow and grief, but the gray bird of the poem gives way to the epiphany of the coming of the train, a □forward illumination of the tunnel□s dark insides.□ The hems of women□s dresses billow and sway and leap □as if a seamstress had loosed them like laughter from her hands--□

In □**The Continuous Life**,□ by **Mark Strand**, the poet ponders how to instruct the next generation about existence between the □two great darks□ of life and death. In this didactic exercise, the children must □come inside□ and partake of the □family album,□ where the mundane lessons of household chores give way to the deeper issues of being.

□ each of you tries

To keep busy, learning to lean down close and hear

The careless breathing of earth and feel its available

Languor come over you, □sending

Small tremors of love □ into your days and beyond.

□**At Barstow**,□ by **Charles Tomlinson**, paints an unflattering picture of an American town, as perhaps only an Englishman (sorry for the outside reference!) can. It is perhaps his outlander□s view that inspires the poet to invoke Belsens and Gotterdammerungs in his stereotypical description of an American □placeless place,□ where the slight flavor of Mexico in the tacos is reminiscent of gasoline.

Thus does this Brit invoke the Roy Rogers of Hollywood westerns, who once tarried in Barstow, but did not ride there. At the joining of gasoline and desert air, only Rogers□s □dustless undishonoured stetson rode beside the bed,□ suggestively glowing □in the pulsating, never-final twilight.□ □He was spent. He was content.□ That□s as good as it gets in Barstow.

□**On the Move**,□ by **Thom Gunn**, evokes the frenzied movement of motorcyclists, who □almost hear a meaning in their noise.□ □They strap in doubt -- by hiding it□ in costumed impersonality. The poet compares the riders with the birds who, along with saints, complete their purpose by reaching no absolute. But □One is always nearer by not keeping still.□

**Gerard Manley Hopkins** in □**The Caged Skylark**□ also compares man to birds. While man□s spirit is caged in his skeletal bones, the skylark abides in his □wild nest, no prison.□ But Man□s spirit, though fleshbound, is free, for at the end his bones are risen.

Finally, we decoded □**Sonnet**□ by **Percy Bysshe Shelley** which begins,

Lift not the painted veil which those who live

Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,

And it but mimic all we would believe□

This poem was best accessed through the questions it provokes:

1. Why are Hope and Fear, which are seeming opposites, *twin* destinies behind the veil?
2. Who is the speaker and who the seeker in the sonnet?
3. Why does the seeker unsuccessfully seek first □things to love,□ and then later (in life?) make Truth the object of his futile search?

Birds appeared in □The Subway Platform,□ □On the Move,□ and □The Caged Skylark.□ □At Barstow□ and □On the Move,□ deal with lowlife themes. Yet always implicit is a transcendent message.

## ***Remembering Asilomars Past***

by Chuck Scarcliff

I came to Asilomar first in 1969 or 70. Several discussions stand out in my memory. One took on Nikos Kazantzakis□ *Saviors of God*. I was new to Great Books and to Asilomar, and called myself the □exchange student from Sacramento.□ I probably didn□t know what I was talking about, but I did talk. I□ve never let not having a clue about a book hold me back. But people listened. Maybe they were just being polite, but they acted as if I was saying something worthwhile. That gave me confidence. With *Cat□s Cradle*, Asilomar introduced me to the writings of Kurt Vonnegut. I□ve read many of his writings since and annoy strangers and alienate friends by quoting from what I call □The Gospel of Kurt Vonnegut.□

For me, the most beautiful book ever selected for Asilomar is *Zen and the Art of Archery*. I still re-read it.

We□ve read many poems and two especially come to mind. The first is from □The Tibetan Book of the Dead.□ One participant looked upon it as holy, and asked that we not discuss it. Reading it aloud was enough for him. We could have said a few words without spoiling the poem. The second is different □ Kim Addonizio□s red dress poem, □What do Women Want?□ It made enough of an impression that I wrote a parody about what men want. Several women wore red dresses to the Saturday night party.

I remember a discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* because of the leader, Marjorie Scott. Her example taught me much about how to lead. I remember Kant□s essay on morals. I made a smart-ass remark about the categorical imperative, □It□s nothing more than the Golden Rule.□ □So what□s wrong with the Golden Rule?□ asked Alex Appell, with an engaging smile and a giggle. I thought I was smart, but she was smarter. Another time we talked about the people we meet in Great Books. □We really don□t know anything about each other,□ she said, □Except our deepest and inner-most thoughts.□

I remember other discussion leaders but none with more admiration than Bill Baker. He was the best Great Books leader ever. And, a party animal. On one Sunday morning-after, he slunk late

into the discussion room, not leading that day. The topic was Shakespeare's five stages of life, in *As You Like It*. He scanned the assemblage with bright red eyes and announced, □There will be no talk of puking and mewling.□

I miss Bill and great leaders of the past, but there were some turkeys too -- discussions that were two hours of agony. Once, I bailed out after an hour. It was bad manners, and I hoped everyone thought I had gone to the restroom and couldn't find my way back. The quality of leaders is generally better now than then. Leader training and pre-discussions have pay off. We once held Asilomar discussions in smoke-filled rooms. I don't think many miss that.

I□ve led at Asilomar Once when I arrived Marion Shepardson reported that Joan Dennison was ill in hospital and had selected me to take her place leading. I felt greatly honored. I was never to see Joan again, and of all the people now gone from Asilomar, there is none I miss more.

Some things are better at Asilomar now. Restoring the dunes and building a boardwalk among them is the best. Fixing up older buildings, some by Julia Morgan, also ranks high. And the staff is nicer now than sometimes in the past.

## ***Pi and Ice Cream Enjoyed at Annual Picnic***

by Kathleen Conneely

With soft breezes wafting across the blue gazebos and red checkered tablecloths, it was a perfect 70 degrees for our annual picnic/book discussion on Sunday, June 13th at Tilden Park.

After a pot-luck barbecue, home-made peach ice cream waited for us at the dessert table, brought in an icy wooden bucket by an anonymous newcomer (whoever you are, grateful thanks from us all!). Officers were elected for 2004-2005 -- Brian Mahoney, president; Brent Browning, vice president; Grace Apple Dennison, treasurer; Gary Geltemeyer, secretary. We arranged ourselves into groups to discuss *Life of Pi*.

Winner of Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Man Booker prize, Canadian author Yann Martel begins with an alleged "author's note" where an elderly man in Pondicherry, India, tells the author, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." Right away, we are hooked into a story within a story, questions about the truthfulness of storytelling and an ending that teaches a lesson about belief.

Narrator-protagonist Piscine Molitor Patel ("Pi" for short) first tells us, in flashback, about his childhood in India as a God-loving boy in a loving family, the son of a zoo-keeper and owner. Reacting to Indira Gandhi's repressive regime, his family emigrates to Canada. Taking along a few zoo animals, they set out on a sea voyage. After a few days their rickety Japanese vessel encounters a storm. The ship capsizes, its only human survivor the sixteen-year old Pi. He finds himself joined on his lifeboat by a hyena, an orangutan, a wounded zebra and □ to his horror -- a 450-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. The tiger soon dispatches all but Pi. He invents ways to survive not only hunger, the elements, and shark-infested waters, and Richard Parker□s increasingly desperate appetite.

Most of the book is about the death-defying 227 days Pi spends adrift on the Pacific in a 26 foot lifeboat with a tiger. At first the situation is difficult to believe, but as the story unfolds with

credible detail it disarms us. Martel describes Pi's courage and his use of zoo knowledge and thoughtful improvisation to overcome remarkable odds.

Then, at the pivotal moment when he is insane with hunger and losing strength, he uses knowledge of animal psychology and behavior learned at his father's zoo to gain dominion over Richard Parker. Like a circus trainer, with the use of a whistle he changes the human/animal relationship to become the alpha male over the tiger.

The existence of this animal, and the relationship between the boy and the animal, saves Pi. The catastrophe of isolation could have been fatal.

### **What role did Pi's religion play in his survival?**

In a moving passage, Pi expresses his spiritual beliefs:

The universe makes sense to me through Hindu eyes. There is Brahman, the world soul ... Brahman expressed not only in gods, but in humans, animals, trees, in a handful of earth, for everything has a trace of the divine in it. Brahman is the spiritual force within what you might call the soul...That which sustains the universe beyond thought and language... is the same thing. The finite within the infinite, the infinite within the finite, (ch. 16, pp 48-49)

Pi had learned his science from an atheist high school teacher. "I don't believe in religion," he reflected early in the story. "Religion is darkness." (p.27) His trial at sea taught him that science can take one only so far, then faith in the infinite must take over.

In what author Martel considers the core of the book, he recollects Pi's words, "...a realization that the founding principle of existence is what we call love." And to the author's question to himself, "What of God's silence?" he pauses, then answers, "...an intellect confounded yet a trusting sense of presence and of ultimate purpose." (p. 63)

The small lifeboat in a vast sea symbolizes the human condition -- the finite surrounded by the infinite. Pi, who chose an infinite number for his first name, sees his place in the universe and it sustains him on his journey.

### **The Story Ends □ or Does It?**

At the end, Pi reaches land and tells his story. He is not believed, so he tells a different story. On the lifeboat were his mother, a French cook, a Taiwanese sailor with a broken leg, and Pi. The cook killed the sailor then killed Pi's mother and then Pi killed the cook. "Solitude began. I turned to God. I survived," says Pi to his listeners. He asks, "Which story do you prefer?" Martel leaves us: with a choice of what we want to believe.

## **2004 Mini-Retreat: Death in Venice**

by Claudia O□Callaghan

On February 24, 2004, at the Mechanics Institute in downtown San Francisco, forty-three enthusiastic participants gathered to discuss Thomas Mann□s intensely autobiographical novella, *Death in Venice*. Von Aschenbach, its central figure, like most of Mann□s main characters, was

torn between the puritanical discipline of work and the desire to indulge himself in sensual pleasures. There was no shortage of themes: aging, sickness, death, homoeroticism, beauty, and obsession, to name a few.

After lunch, we viewed the film by Lucchino Visconti. Although reactions to this film were mixed, primarily because Visconti inserted elements not in the book, no one could fault the portrayal of von Aschenbach by Dirk Bogard and the atmosphere achieved through incorporating music from Gustav Mahler.

Kudos to registrar, Kay Blaney; leaders Kathleen Conneely, Sonia De Hazes and Marjorie Scott, and consultants Vince Scardina and Barbara McConnell.

**Mini-Retreat 2005** will feature *The End of the Affair*, by Graham Greene. Saturday, February 19, Mechanics Institute, 57 Post Street, San Francisco. Contact Claudia O'Callaghan, (415)584-7504 or [callcoc@aol.com](mailto:callcoc@aol.com).

## **Great Books London Theatre Tour**

Most of our Great Books events began when a few people interested in a specific subject decided to organize a weekend of reading and discussion related to a subject dear to their hearts. Over time the events become an annual tradition. Thus we in the Bay Area have a few enterprising individuals to thank for our annual Poetry Weekend and our Long Novel Weekends.

Currently we are witnessing the birth of a new event, the annual London Theatre Tour. [U.S. def. theatre, a building; theater, dramatic performance. □ed.] The London Theatre Tour is organized by Ted Kraus, a retired theater critic who now resides at Rossmoor. Ted has attended and reviewed more than six thousand plays. For the London Theatre Tour, Ted chooses a set of plays to fill a week of theatergoing in London. Participants attend the plays then join in shared inquiry discussions. The tour is advertised as for the theater lover, but the occasional theatergoer will have a wonderful experience.

### **England's Theater Tradition**

English theater goes back to the Elizabethans and is today the finest in the world. While the United States has only a few regional theater groups that actually employ their own actors, England has over eighty professional regional theater groups. In England it is possible for actors to make a living by acting in plays, so the level of acting is astonishingly high. Regional groups compete to put on the finest new plays and revivals and the best make it to London each fall. At matinees you see a large contingent of teenagers attending as a group. Theatergoing is subsidized by the British government to support their great artistic heritage. Theater is to London what art is to Paris. It is what each does best and it is the place to go to experience the very best.

### **This Year's Plays**

Among those was a new play entitled *Old Masters* with a well known actor, Edward Fox, in the main role. We also saw a new production of a Greek classic, Euripides' *Hecuba*. Then there was a new production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with the American actor Christian Slater in the main role. The fabulous thing about this was a Nurse Ratchet not tough and hard, but sensual and alluring. The supporting cast were professional comedians, terrific as character actors.

Don Juan is an archetypal character in Western literature comparable in that respect to Faust. He first appears in Spanish drama. The play we saw, by Moliere, had the two main characters, Don Juan and his servant, almost straight out of the commedia dell' arte. Later versions on this theme include *Don Giovanni*, one of the greatest of all operas, by Mozart, a long poem, *Don Juan*, by Byron, and another play, *Man and Superman*, by Shaw. Wouldn't it be interesting to put several of these together for a weekend of discussions with a video version of the opera?

*Buried Child*, a Pulitzer winning play by Sam Shepard, sustained a long discussion. We went round and round with it, trying to cover every detail. It was a tough one to figure out. It takes place in the rural Midwest. It seemed to be part Ma and Pa Kettle Down on the Farm, part Agatha Christie, and part John Waters. Perhaps the wrong parts, as they say.

One day we took the train up to Nottingham to see a wonderful adaptation of E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*. The main theme is the tragic meeting and misunderstanding of two cultures, the British and the Indian. Our version featured the main Indian character as a sincere, handsome, almost dashing fellow with a natural capacity for friendship. Thus the bond between two central male characters, one English, one Indian, becomes more intimate, more ambiguous.

The highlight of our trip was the revival of *Journey's End*, by R. C. Sherriff. The play takes place on the front lines of World War I. Relationships are complex, but all the men are doomed, and only the newly arrived do not realize it. The play was first staged in 1929 with a young unknown, Laurence Olivier, as Captain Stanhope, the main character. We are certain that we have discovered a future star in Brendan Patricks, another unknown who is here making his professional acting debut in the same role. That day we crept out of the theatre. We had forgotten what an intense experience theater can be.

### **The National Theatre and the Globe**

Depending on the schedule, you may see two plays a day. But you will also have an occasional free day before an evening performance. In keeping with the theatre theme, there are two places you will not want to miss. One is the National Theatre, a striking and distinguished building on the south bank of the Thames. The National is a cantilevered building which incorporates three different theatres. The building also contains several bars and buffets, as well as workshops and meeting rooms with names like Gielgud and Richardson, and what is probably the finest drama bookstore anywhere. The building and the site give you some idea of the importance of theater to London. Almost certainly one of the plays you see on the tour will be at the National. You may want to go early to get a bite to eat and look around. You will also want to browse the bookstore and perhaps pick up a book on theater in London. Just a short walk from the National is the newly reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe, which includes an educational center. It is an American inspired project. It is also well worth a tour.

### **For more information**

The third annual London Theatre Tour is scheduled tentatively for the week of October 17, 2005. For information or to get on his mailing list call Ted Kraus at (925)939-3658 or e-mail him at [tmktheatretours@hotmail.com](mailto:tmktheatretours@hotmail.com).

## ***Colby 2004 Report***

by Rick White

*No Ordinary Time* was the theme of the 2004 Great Books week at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, and it was no ordinary time. In place of the usual list of readings that challenge interpretation, several apparently were selected to shed light on challenges facing the United States in its war on terrorism.

Roosevelt's *Great Speeches* traced through his own words FDR's response to depression and then to war. It was evident that he lied grandly and repeatedly while preparing the nation to take on the Axis powers. For example, in his Fireside Chat of December 17, 1940, while readying the US for war, he proclaimed "You can nail, nail, nail any talk about sending armies to Europe as deliberate untruth," and stated on September 11, 1941, knowing otherwise, that the identity of an American destroyer torpedoed by the Germans in the North Atlantic was "unmistakable." Colby participants critical of GWB for "misleading statements" to support his taking the US into Iraq thought FDR's outright lying was justified.

*Grapes of Wrath*, by California writer John Steinbeck, portrayed truthfully the shocking treatment of migrant "Okies" in California agriculture during the great depression, repeatedly blaming it on America's economic system rather than on particular organizations or individuals. Narrative chapters were accompanied by essays so that the reader would not miss the point. As propaganda the book was extremely effective and as storytelling, unlike some radical narratives of the time, it was superb.

*Anarchism and Other Essays* by Emma Goldman was a trying read for this correspondent, but it made for a surprisingly good discussion, as the group struggled to figure out what she meant by "anarchism," and what was her idea of a properly constituted political order. We concluded that her ideal society would not lack political structure but would be governed horizontally by what we have come to call "civil society" — voluntary associations of individuals making arrangements among themselves without an overseeing authority. While she did not advocate violence in overthrowing the existing oppressive regime, she absolved its perpetrators by holding government responsible for bringing it on.

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt (1948) at 800-plus pages (we covered 176) deserved a week of its own and should be must reading for anyone who cherishes freedom. A realized totalitarian society is the opposite of a realized anarchist society, as totalitarianism depends on the complete elimination of civil society and its replacement by a dictator and a continuously changing secret police. Consideration was given to how intellectuals are particularly gullible during the rise of such a system. Islamic fundamentalism may be a contemporary case of the genre, however it is difficult to see how secular intellectuals could be led to support a system *overtly* religious, unlike Communism, "the God that failed."

*Night*, by holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, provided a first-hand look at one of the two existing instances of totalitarianism. Nazi atrocities were literally incredible. The rare escapee who returned to his town to describe such conduct as throwing babies in the air for target practice was thought to have gone nuts. According to Arendt, carrying out actions so horrible as not to be believed was a conscious strategy of both Stalinism and Nazism.

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by James Agee, a book purportedly about southern white sharecroppers — struggles in the same period as *Grapes of Wrath*, was published as co-authored by Walker Evans, as Evans had traveled with Agee and produced photographs as famous as the book. These, included without captions, made up the first 50 pages.

I used the word □purportedly□ above because my judgment, and that of others, was that the book was more about the author than the sharecroppers. To me, at 68, the book seemed, while written extraordinarily well, to be adolescent, narcissistic, and self-absorbed; the author, freshly graduated from Harvard, appeared to be more interested in his own reactions and in celebrating his guilt feelings about putting himself into their lives than he was about the sharecroppers. However, I confess to my group that when I had read the book in my own adolescence it moved me profoundly and contributed to my choosing a career in the government, first in the Labor Department, then in the War on Poverty. It did the job intended.

Appropriate movies were shown during off hours: Charlie Chaplin□s *Modern Times*, the Henry Fonda film version of *Grapes*, and a film about Emma Goldman□s life.

Always a highlight for me, but only for a dozen or so of the 170 GB attendees, is the opportunity to observe master classes held each summer at Colby by the Portland String Quartet. Thirty-two accomplished pre-collegiate musicians are assembled into eight string quartets for a few weeks and each is assigned a piece to learn. Each year, one of the best of these plays a movement to kick off our talent show. This year it was Dmitri Shostakovich□s eighth quartet, first movement, and it blew our socks off. The next day I heard the group in class play a later movement. Imagine, sitting 20 feet directly in front of four teen-aged musicians concentrating their adolescent vitality and their life□s ambition on playing an extraordinarily difficult work and doing it virtually flawlessly. It took me several hours to recover. That has not happened to me before in a musical lifetime. Now I□m afraid to hear anyone else play it.

Colby is an extraordinary experience. I haven□t mentioned the hours of socializing at our own open bar each evening, trips to the lake, optional poetry readings, excellent, varied, and plentiful food. And, incidentally, anyone who cared to had the opportunity to chat in groups or privately with John Conway, the Johnny von Neumann professor of mathematics at Princeton, inventor, among other things, of □The Life Game.□ John was on campus to teach at a math lab and chose to hang out with us.

This year, 2005, the Colby theme is □The Fool.□ Details below.

### **Wachs Great Books Summer Institute, Colby College, August 7-13, 2005**

*The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus

*Don Quixote*, Cervantes (new translation by Grossman)

*Cato□s Letters*, selection by Trenchard & Gordon

*Catch-22*, Joseph Heller

*The Conversion of the Jews*, Philip Roth

*Gimpel the Fool*, Isaac Singer

Registration of \$480 covers books, accommodations in a dormitory room (single or double), meals, discussions, and access to campus facilities, as well as a film, group social activities, and a real Maine lobster bake. Participants who choose to stay off-campus can pay \$180, which includes lunches and the lobster bake. Registration deadline is June 1. Add \$25 after that date.

A deposit of \$180 is required with application, the balance to be paid by check or cash at Colby. Books will be sent upon receipt of deposit. To register, complete the following information and send to **Great Books Summer Institute, 824 Thomas Road, Lafayette Hill, PA 19444-1107**. Direct questions to Tom or Carol Beam at 215-836-2380, fax 215-836-7158, or email [agreatbook@aol.com](mailto:agreatbook@aol.com).

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Rooming With \_\_\_\_\_

Rooming Near (if possible) \_\_\_\_\_

- Need handicap access
- Need bedboard
- Prefer Leaderless Group
- Have previous Great Books Experience
- Am taking Boothbay Bus Trip

Enclose check payable to Great Books Summer Institute

## ***A Call for Discussion Leaders, Saturday, March 5, 2005***

Mark the date, March 5, Saturday, to practice leading Great Books discussions. Hone your skills, share your techniques, and help new leaders. We will meet from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 10 Oak Forest Road, Novato, CA 94949. Bring your lunch. Call Kay White at (415)382-1927 or e-mail at [kaycleveland@aol.com](mailto:kaycleveland@aol.com), or mail to the above address. Sign up, free of charge, by February 26. We need you. We want you.

## ***SFGB CALENDAR OF EVENTS***

Feb. 19 (Sat.) Mini-Retreat, Mechanics Inst., SF, Claudia O'Callaghan (415) 584-7504 -- *End of the Affair*

June 12 (Sat.) Picnic, Election of Officers, Tilden Park, Berkeley, Kathleen Conneely (510) 530-2344 -- *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

Sept. 10-11 (Sat. & Sun.) Long Novel □ Walker Creek Ranch, Marin County, Gary Geltmeyer, Chair (510) 654-0235, Mary Stuart, Registrar (707) 575-1984 -- *Book to be announced*

Nov. 12-13 (Sat. & Sun.) Poetry Weekend, Westminster Retreat, Alamo, CA

**SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL**

*Serving Northern California*

**Brian Mahoney, President**

**Brent Browning, Vice-President**

**Gary Geltemeyer, Secretary**

**Grace Apple Dennison, Treasurer**

**Barbara McConnell & Louise DiMattio, Past Presidents**

***Reading Matters***

**Publisher, Rick White**

**Editors, Paul Ortega and Lucy Whybrow-Ortega**

**SF Website: [www.greatbooks-sf.com](http://www.greatbooks-sf.com)**

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