

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

“If pigs could fly...”

By Louise DiMattio with Rick White

No one in the Soviet Union during Joseph Stalin’s regime could report truthfully about its horrors and survive. Author Mikhail Bulgakov needed to try anyway. To communicate the truth he struggled for years to write the craziest combination of unbelievable situations and happenings that he could imagine involving a cast of characters as impossible as Stalinism should have been.

The Master and Margarita, this year’s Long Novel, is a rollicking nightmare with interludes of beauty, love, and wonder. Here and there the literal truth peeks through—for instance—as a matter-of-fact report that so-and-so disappears and is not seen again. As well as he underplayed these events, no one would publish the book. Political repression may not have been the only reason. The narrative is beyond belief.

Throughout the book Bulgakov interweaves a novel being written by the Master which focuses on Pontius Pilate’s decision to crucify Jesus in order to save himself. Bulgakov posits that cowardice is the worst sin of all.

Asking why this was so, why the author would say this was not just a sin but the *worst* sin, was a pivotal question in our discussions. Other questions that arose to understand the author’s views include: Can there be

good without evil? Light without shadows? Does God exist? Who controls human life on earth? Is there an afterlife? Can love over-



come all difficulty? Are all people essentially good? He brings up Goethe’s *Faust* selling his soul to the devil. Then how can cowardice be the worst sin of all?

Louise tells how books are chosen

Often participants ask how our committee for the Long Novel Weekend, or for that matter for any event, decides what to read. Specifically, how did we come to choose this strange and complex work? The book has to be a challenge. It needs to provoke good interpretive questions, questions with more than one defensible answer. The best are questions to which the leader is not fully satisfied with his or her own grasp of the issue.

This time there was also a sentimental reason. One of our finest died not long ago, a great friend of all of us and a loyal member for many years of the Asilomar planning team, Chuck Scarcliff. For years Chuck had advocated that we program this novel for Long Novel Weekend. Because Chuck is one of the best readers we know, Louise says, she tucked that suggestion into the back of her mind for future reference. Then, about two years ago, when shopping online at the Great Books Foundation bookstore she noticed a free downloadable discussion guide for *The Master and Margarita*, a joint offering between Great Books and Penguin celebrating the 50th anniversary of the book’s publication. Seeing this made her sit up and take notice once again. The Great Books imprimatur was the stamp of approval for us. It was reportedly not only a very long book—not a liability for Long Novel Weekend—but a strange book. Maybe Chuck was right.

The decisive factor was reading the book in the spring with a small group totally dedicated to the Shared Inquiry process. She struggled. Nothing seemed to hang together. They *all* struggled except for one reader, Lillian Dabney, a Seattle librarian. Lillian said to hang on. “I’ve read this book many times. Trust me. It’s worth it.” Louise read and re-read and slowly but surely she was hooked. She brought it up with the committee. Member Brian Mahoney told of his special interest in literature from the Stalin period and gave the choice his resounding “yes.” That did it.

After leading both sessions of the discussion of this great novel, Louise reflected on the experience. No one can fully participate without having read this book (as is true for most of our selections) recently and at least twice. We should have been able to meet in person. The novel's humor, both nuanced and not so, and its profundity, sometimes concealed, deserved this. Our usual lunch, dinner, and a glass of wine would have added greatly to its enjoyment. We could have had an evening lecture by her musician husband, William Corbett-Jones. It would have focused on references in the book, including the great opera, *Faust*, by Charles Gounod and Peter Ilych Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. Such musical compositions are brought up throughout the novel. Our experience would have been richer had Covid-19 not interfered with our plans.



Here is Margarita as a witch riding a broom naked with her servant Natasha who is also naked astride a pig. They are on the way to a better life. Such lack of clothing is usual for many perfectly formed young women who appear in the story. The author's reason for this is not satisfactorily explained.

Louise and Bill make up for the missing lecture

William Corbett-Jones is Professor of Music, *emeritus*, where he lectured at San Francisco State University, taught piano, piano performance, keyboard literature and chamber music for more than forty years. Many Great Bookies remember Bill for his lectures regarding music and history during several of the Long Novel Weekends in the past. Louise interviewed him at their home after the Long Novel Weekend.

LD – As you know, we completed our long novel event last month when we read *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov. A major theme in the novel is the difficulty Russian authors had when attempting to write and publish their work in the time of Stalin. They simply had to toe the party line and could not write about the truth as they perceived it. What was it like for composers in Russia in the same period? Who were they and did they have some of the same issues?

WCJ – Well, as a little bit of background, there was a great deal of freedom and “avant-gardism” in Russia in the 1920’s when artists, composers and writers were given free rein. Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) was a prominent composer, and an example of the freewheeling style of the time can be found in his First Symphony. However, Stalin tightened controls during the 1930’s and things became much more restricted. Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) were the most prominent composers living under the Communist regime and both felt the suppression of freedom of expression. Prokofiev left Russia after the revolution and arrived in the United States for a concert tour and was detained at Ellis Island for a short time. He also spent time in Paris as a touring pianist. In some cases, he was disgusted by what he encountered outside of Russia, most especially in Paris. He felt that French intellectuals were anything but intellectuals. Interestingly, Prokofiev chose to return to the USSR only to find his compositions criticized by the new government whose leaders encouraged composers to portray only important historical events in their music. It was a highly nationalistic time. Prokofiev did compose two pieces—*Ivan the Terrible* and *Alexander Nevsky*—in an attempt to ingratiate himself with the new regime. For the same reason he composed *Peter and the Wolf* in 1936. Eventually Prokofiev suffered greatly under the regime and received strong adverse criticism from Stalin. The last years of his life were unhappy. Paradoxically, Prokofiev and Stalin died on the same day—March 5—in 1953.

Shostakovich, on the other hand, was a child prodigy and competed in the Chopin International Piano Competition. He was younger than Prokofiev and thus considered to be a true product of the new Soviet system. Shostakovich was a prolific composer of many, many symphonies and chamber music pieces. He composed one opera, however, entitled *Lady MacBeth of Mtsensk*, which was severely criticized, most likely because of the dissonant quality of the music. He lived in Russia his entire life but did leave his country on one goodwill public relations tour and I actually shook hands with him at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel when I was a conservatory student. I believe the year was 1948.

Many works of Prokofiev and Shostakovich have made it into the standard musical repertory and are played around the world today. Shostakovich is regarded by many as the musical conscience of the 20th Century because his music exposed the ugliness of the world during his lifetime. He, too, lived in tremendous fear of being watched and of being arrested for reasons unknown to him as had happened to so many of his peers. I think that Shostakovich's music has a great deal of satire in it and is very reminiscent of many of the scenes in *The Master and Margarita*. Although I have never warmed to his piano music, I am aware of his greatness. I have coached his chamber music trio and piano quintet and have performed his Sonata for Viola with Paul Yarborough of the Alexander String Quartet. Believe me, that particular piece is long and very, very bleak and I am certain that Shostakovich intended it to be that way. I'd encourage anyone to read a memoir written by the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich's wife, Galina Vishnevskaya, who wrote so well about the abysmal conditions under which a Russian musician in the time of Stalin was forced to live.

LD – Bulgakov mentions many musical pieces in *The Master and Margarita*. Two operas come to mind immediately: Gounod's *Faust* and Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, both of which are mentioned several times in the book. What can you tell us about those operas?

WCJ - Interestingly, Gounod's *Faust* is the most frequently performed piece at the Paris opera house today. It is not surprising that the Russians, who had a long love affair with French language and culture, would listen to this opera frequently, too. The musical score of this work is lush and rich with gorgeous arias for bass, baritone and coloratura soprano voices. The main character, of course, is Marguerite, the same name as the

female protagonist in the Bulgakov masterpiece. In it, the female character makes a deal with the devil.

Eugene Onegin is an opera with a libretto written by the poet, Pushkin. The opera features a young woman, Tatyana, who falls in love with Onegin, an older and very worldly man, "a bored Petersburg dandy" (Wikipedia). The young woman imprudently confesses her love for him even though Onegin considers her just a child at the time. Onegin then leaves and his best friend, Lensky, falls in love with Tatyana. A tragic duel takes place where Onegin inadvertently kills his good friend Lensky. Ultimately, Onegin does want to marry Tatyana but it is impossible. In the Pushkin story, the devil comes for Onegin when he both literally and figuratively kills innocence and sincerity in shooting his friend and rejecting the young Tatyana. Onegin lost his love, killed his only friend and found no satisfaction in life. He is a victim of his own pride and selfishness. He is doomed to loneliness and this is his tragedy. Perhaps he would be one of the guests at Satan's Midnight Ball. What do you think?

LD – A Wikipedia quote says that a Faustian bargain is a pact whereby a person trades something of supreme moral or spiritual importance such as personal values or the soul, for some worldly or material benefit such as knowledge, power or riches. A Faustian bargain is made with a power that the bargainer recognizes as evil or amoral.

What composers have woven this theme into their music and who are they?

WCJ – The Faust legend is an ancient one and was often featured in the traveling Punch and Judy shows in the Middle Ages. Of course, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a famous play, staged in 1604. Thomas Mann's last novel is *Dr. Faustus*, and the Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni wrote an opera called *Dr. Faustus* which he considered his most important work.

The most famous of all works on this theme, though, is of course Goethe's *Faust*, an extremely long epic poem divided into two parts. Part One features the familiar story where the bargain with the devil occurs almost on the very first page. A middle-aged man seeks to understand the answers to the eternal questions. Mephisto (the devil) appears and they make a pact. Part Two of Goethe's poem, written almost twenty years after the publication of Part One, deals with questions that are philosophical in nature. Many scholars have spent their entire lives studying this great poem.

Some composers who have used the theme of Faust are: Schubert's great song, "Gretchen am Spinnrade" (trans. Margaret at the Spinning Wheel), composed at the age of seventeen, Schumann's *Scenes from Goethe's Faust* and *Symphonie Fantastique* (Damnation of Faust) by Berlioz. It is interesting that Bulgakov used the names of composers for many of his characters. I am not sure that anyone knows exactly why he did that.

Attention gmail users: please check your Social and Promotions folders so you don't miss Great Books news and coming events.

2021 Poetry Weekend attendees to be exposed to ekphrasis

Wet appetites, visceral reactions expected

By Paula Weinberger

Poetry Weekend, November 13-14 via Zoom will explore this evolving poetic form with roots going back to Ancient Greece. Initially applied to poems inspired by the visual arts, ekphrastic poetry has come to embrace all art forms. Our guest speaker, Janée Baugher, an acclaimed practitioner in this tradition, will help attendees explore how the unique interaction between a poet and a work of art yields a deeper understanding and enhanced appreciation of both forms.

I was fortunate to attend a "webinar" hosted by Janée in which ekphrastic poets discussed the meaning and practice of this art form. They brought up questions that "wet" my appetite. No appetites should be left dry at the Weekend when questions such as these are introduced.

Is viewing the piece of art necessary to understand an ekphrastic poem?

To what degree should the poem evoke the art that inspired it?

What draws the poet to a particular piece of art?

How does the language of a poem connect with the visceral experience of viewing a work of art?

Do we view a piece of art differently after reading a poem inspired by it?

WEEKEND OVERVIEW

On **Saturday, November 13**, attendees will discuss poems selected by our Poetry Selection Committee including five ekphrastic poems. Here's the lineup for Saturday.

Nov 13 AM Discussion Groups 10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. PST	Nov 13 PM Discussion Groups 2:00 – 4:00 p.m. PST
Quest	Painter to Poet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tony Hoagland: <i>Voyage</i> • Louise Glück: <i>Parable</i> • C.P. Cavafy: <i>Ithaka</i> • Evie Shockley: <i>Ode to My Blackness</i> • Donald Justice: <i>Pantomim of the Great Depression</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frank O'Hara: <i>Why I am not a Painter</i> • Jorie Graham: <i>San Sepolcro</i> • Rebecca Foust: <i>After the Fall</i> • Denise Levertov: <i>The Secret</i> • B.H. Fairchild: <i>All the People in Hopper's Paintings</i>

On **Sunday, November 14**, from 10:00 to 12:00 PST, Janée Baugher will lead an interactive seminar introducing the range and conventions of contemporary ekphrastic poetry. This will include a PowerPoint presentation of the visual art and corresponding ekphrastic poetry curated for her guidebook: *The Ekphrastic Writer: Creating Art-Influenced Poetry, Fiction and Nonfiction*.

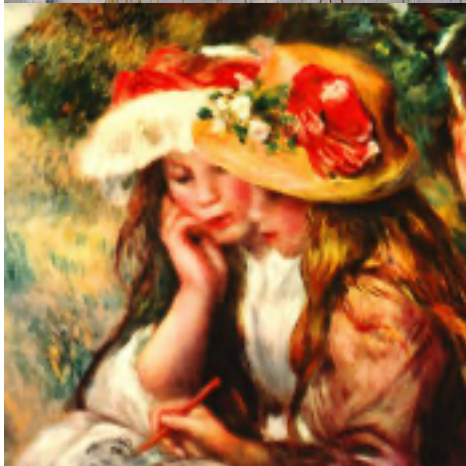
In the afternoon, from 2:00 to 4:00 PST, Janée will read a selection of ekphrastic poems and field questions about ekphrastic poets' creative processes.

TO REGISTER, Go to

WWW.GREATBOOKSNCAL.ORG

Under "EVENTS" acquire the Poetry Weekend registration form.

Here are four of the paintings influencing the poems to be discussed at Poetry Weekend. Around from top right “Adam and Eve,” by Albrecht Dürer; “Nighthawks,” by Edward Hopper; “Two Girls Reading,” by Auguste Renoir; “Sardines,” by Michael Goldberg.





Janée Baugher is the author of *The Ekphrastic Writer: Creating Art-Influenced Poetry, Fiction and Nonfiction* (McFarland, 2020) as well as two ekphrastic poetry collections, *Coördinates of Yes* (Ahadada Books, 2010) and *The Body's Physics* (Tebot Bach, 2010). As a poet, essayist, and cross-disciplinary artist, Baugher specializes in *ekphrasis*—creative writing influenced by the visual arts. Her writing has been featured in over 150 journals. She's been awarded artist residencies in Pennsylvania, Alaska, Vermont, Idaho, California, Washington, and Wisconsin. Baugher collaborates with choreographers and composers. She teaches creative writing in Seattle, is an assistant editor at the St. Louis journal *Boulevard*, the columnist at *The Ekphrastic Review*, and was named the 2021 Poet-in-Residence at Maryhill Museum of Art. <http://www.janeebaugher.com/>

GUERNICA, 1937 painting by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

By Janée J. Baugher

Though a metal bar holds us back fifteen feet, it seems possible to mount the newsprint-patterned horse with a sword in its back, possible to roll the decapitated open-eyed head from side to side, possible to hear wailing from the open-mouthed mother with limp babe in her arms.

Like an open-handed beggar open to his hunger, when war strikes everything opens to it. See the rider's sword, broken-open to its futility, and the window gripped to its sun. And of course, the brute, the bull, must be rapt. Notice his parted horns and piqued ears?



A woman heavy of her spine and dragging her leg behind her like a burden tries to run off, but confusion sends her toward the bull. Her fingernails, tiny canvases where more stories can be sketched. In the center, the interrogator's light bulb, unclosed to its light, hangs as a noose hangs. Not even the poor receptive sky can shield the eyes of its gods. In this, Picasso prepares us for our imperviousness of men against men and of gods who turn on the open. Look now, beside the bull, the dove of peace: its tears pelting the gallery's shiny floor. [Previously published in Baugher's book, *The Body's Physics* (Tebot Bach, 2010)].

Notes from the President

By Louise DiMattio

I am most honored to have received the nomination for the position of President of the Northern California Great Books Council. Since I was duly elected at our Annual Meeting in July of this year, I have given much thought to our plans for the coming two years. After numerous conversations with members of our Executive Committee as well as frequent contact with other Great Books Councils throughout the United States, several important things are emerging.

Some of these things are obvious. Covid-19 has created an enormous challenge for groups like ours whose main purpose is the sharing of ideas, face-to-face, in order to expand our understanding of complex topics. We have continued most of our initiatives with the help of Zoom which, admittedly, has been a boon in many ways. In fact, many of our local groups have indicated that they will continue meeting on Zoom even when public health precautions have been lifted. The convenience of not having to leave home, not having to drive at night as well as allowing people to join the discussion from almost any place makes the use of Zoom very attractive. Participants in our recent Long Novel Event “zoomed” in from Toronto, Maine, Rhode Island, Missouri, Atlanta and many locales around California.

Clearly, Zoom is here to stay. However, some events lend themselves to the use of Zoom better than others. I am far from giving up on the idea that some of our events will naturally gravitate back to in-person meetings when we are finally able to plan them again. For the moment though, Zoom and our electronic outreach tool, Constant Contact, have allowed us to expand our reach and keep our costs down. Our events fill up very quickly, almost always within a few days.

This is all good news, really...a silver lining in the dark Covid cloud. So what, if anything, is holding us back? One thing is our need for a concerted effort to nurture new Great Books leaders. We have always had a robust leader/reader training program directed for many years by Kay White and most recently by Louise Morgan. The training program did not miss a beat during the pandemic. The March 2021 session met on Zoom so its work continues. The question, though, is what happens to those leaders after their training and I believe that it is the job of the Executive Committee to adopt a plan to support those newly trained leaders. For instance, the new leaders could be offered an

opportunity to “guest lead” a local discussion group. I know that many of the local group leaders would welcome this possibility. The use of Zoom brings this initiative well within reach. Immediate supportive and encouraging feedback can then be provided by the local leader after the discussion has concluded.

Another thought that has come to mind is the perennial question of how to encourage new and younger readers to join us in our addiction to Shared Inquiry (Yes! It is an addiction!) so that this wonderful endeavor will continue after we are gone. We are fortunate to have a Young Adult Liaison, Lydia Osborn, joining the Executive Committee this year. My thought is that, with Lydia’s help, we can program some different kinds of great books that might attract younger readers. Some possible selections come immediately to mind: Watership Down by Richard Adams, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia and The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros, to name a few. There may be many more titles that will attract the younger set (as my mother would say) and we know that bright young folks are no strangers to Zoom. The Great Books Foundation in Chicago may also have resources we haven’t even tapped yet.

The last thing I would like to mention is my gratitude for the support, love, mentoring and friendship I have received throughout my forty years of involvement in Great Books. I have been so fortunate to have known many, many great leaders and readers who have come together often to discuss great works and share their insights with me and many others. And may it be noted that none of those folks ever forgot to infuse these gatherings with a large dose of fun. They all knew that the magic of Great Books is, in the end, that mysterious thing that happens when something difficult becomes a joy, something challenging becomes thrilling, when a great endeavor changes your life.

Notes from a new generation

By Lydia Osborn

The [newly established] position of Student Liaison on the Great Books Council’s executive committee has presented me with several challenges, the most important being how to stimulate interest in Great Books among younger generations. I’ve often been asked “What are young people looking for?” or “How can we

appeal to an audience of your age?" While I by no means speak for an entire generation, I'm going to attempt to address some of those questions here.

My generation is facing a world where success is measured in material possessions, and where simply surviving is a daunting task. The cost of housing has skyrocketed, college admissions have become something of a lottery, and finding a satisfying and supportive job feels extremely difficult. Consequently, we've become dispassionate, possibly to a fault, in how we look at our lives and make our decisions. At this stage of our lives, we take a very practical perspective and focus on activities with measurable benefit.

I'm taking Economics this year, so I'll try to put this in terms that we've learned so far; resources such as time are scarce, so people choose how to use their limited time based on the projected utility of each activity. Utility is how much benefit a person gets out of choosing a certain activity—in other words, the activity with the least opportunity cost has the highest utility. The best way to ensure financial and personal security is to maximize utility and minimize opportunity cost.

For this example, utility can be split into two categories: carrots and sticks. The fact that participating in Great Books has neither a carrot nor a stick means that the younger generation may see little utility in joining. They may want to participate in Great Books for intellectual or personal benefits, but they may feel that other priorities come first in ensuring their survival, so may decide to wait until they have more security.

There are always going to be some people who deeply love reading and discussion, and they might be more likely to prioritize those interests if there were a few key changes to the current GB structure.

From my perspective, one important change Great Books could make is to always offer some events in virtual format. Zoom is the ideal platform to reach people who are in school or beginning their professional lives because it saves them time and money, thus minimizing the opportunity costs. It would also be beneficial to offer shorter and more contemporary readings that would take less time to understand well enough to discuss and yet still provide a worthwhile discussion of one or two hours.

In my experience, reading the more formal English that is common in the traditional classics is becoming less common in high school and university, so selections in modern English would have more appeal to a younger audience.

In conclusion, while it may not be realistic to hope for a deluge of new young members, making a few changes to the events and selections could attract dedicated readers in younger age cohorts who would enjoy participating in virtual events and who could support the long-term future of the organization.

Leading in the Zoom Era

By Louise Morgan

The Covid pandemic has been playing havoc with our lives for nearly two years, and there are few signs that it will be over anytime soon. In fact, Contra Costa County just announced that it is considering a Five Year Plan for dealing with the virus, and it was announced today that the annual Giant Pumpkin Contest at Half Moon Bay will be closed to the public for the second year in a row. This tells me that most, if not all, of our Great Books discussions will be held virtually for some time to come.

Is that necessarily a bad thing? I don't think so. In fact, meeting over Zoom has yielded some benefits that we may be reluctant to give up when life returns to normal.

For one thing, we've widened our circle of participants. My local group has been enriched by the virtual presence of a wonderful young woman in New York who learned about us through our website. Our annual events have benefited from the contributions of several people who live too far away to have attended in person. On a personal note, being housebound as I recovered from a bad fall would have kept me from attending several events, but Zoom has allowed me to keep up with the action.

The problems we experienced early in the lockdown — "You're on Mute!" — have diminished as we've become more familiar with the technology. And you can't beat virtual meetings for convenience! But, of course, there's a downside.

We miss the social aspect of Great Books discussions, the before and after chats with old friends, and the chance to continue discussions of the text over lunch with people from a different group. We would like to be able to stroll along the beach, or take in the sights offered by an interesting new venue. But laptops, iPads, and phones will be our portals for the foreseeable future.

I've been surprised at how easy it is to lead a group on Zoom. Being able to see each participant equally and face to face is helpful, as is seeing them in their "natural

habitat”. For some reason people don’t seem as bothered by long pauses while pondering a provocative question; perhaps they feel more comfortable since they’re basically at home. There are far fewer complaints about being unable to hear, or about the lighting level of the room.

It would be foolish to predict how Great Books discussions will look two or three years from now, but I think it’s safe to assume that virtual gatherings will be part of the picture indefinitely.

GBSF renews itself

By Elena Schmid

The Great Books Council of San Francisco (GBSF), which serves Northern California, gets its work done through committees. Its Executive Committee, the equivalent of a board of directors, oversees the process. It has three standing committees, Finance, Nominating, and Publicity. Each event, the Barbara McConnell Weekend, Poetry Weekend, Long Novel Weekend, the several mini-retreats, and Leader Training, has its own coordinator and working committee. The standing and event committees are ongoing.

Ad hoc committees were set up in 2020 to review aspects of our administration, to smooth out and in some instances formalize practices that had evolved over time. Brian Cunningham, GBSF president 2019-2021, had concluded that the corporation, a 501c3 not-for-profit educational institution, considering how elaborate our activities had become over the years did not have clear or complete underpinnings. A recent veteran of the corporate sector, he perceived that we were overly dependent on the institutional memory of long-time participants. We had lost sight of the desirability of clearly articulated operational structures and processes that, for instance, enabled relatively new leaders such as himself to use their talent and energy to its potential.

Brian inaugurated the establishment of specialized committees to review our practices, our roles, our information flow, our bylaws, the efficiency of our working committees, and so forth. As his vice president, I regularly participated in sessions of the committees, finding the members to be an amazing group of individuals committed to the mission of Great Books and to enhancing the effectiveness and reach of GBSF.

The newly formed ad hoc committees were:

1. The **Events Committee**, to see what we can do to enhance our events, maybe add some new ones and use emerging technology to reach more potential participants. Members were Louise Di-Mattio, Ginni Saunders, Louise Morgan, Brian Mahoney, Sheri Kindsvater, Mark Scardina, and Elena Schmid.
2. The **Leader/Reader Taskforce**, to build on the accomplishments of Leader/Reader Training which we have been doing for decades. Recent activity has examined how best to train new leaders and how we can enlist more of them. The number of discussion groups at our events has been limited by the number of leaders. Members were Louise Morgan, Caroline Van Howe, Kay White, Mark Scardina, Jim Hall, and Elena Schmid.
3. The **Local Group Committee**, to see how to help local groups attract more and younger participation and achieve greater geographic and ethnic diversity. Members were Melanie Blake, Brian Cunningham, Rick White, Jim Hall, and Elena Schmid.
4. The **Governance Committee**, to review and update the GBSF bylaws, word by word. The committee developed a draft that was approved at the June 2021 Executive Committee meeting. It was adopted at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the membership, the first such meeting to be held on Zoom. Members were Rob Calvert, Caroline Van Howe, Kay White, Brian Cunningham, and Elena Schmid.
5. The **Guidebook Task Force** emerged from the realization by the other committees of a need to set forth clearly and simply for those involved how all this is supposed to work. It should be a coherent expression of GBSF rules, traditions, roles, and expectations, formal and informal. It will need to be a living document, to be reviewed and kept current as practices and circumstances change. Task force members are Rob Calvert, Caroline Van Howe, Kay White, Brian Cunningham, and Elena Schmid.

In the Covid Age, Zoom made this planning possible and safe. We could see one another and talk through issues big and little. Caroline Van Howe coordinated the process so that our meetings did not conflict with one another as we learned to be comfortable with the technology.

Banning books rides *again*?

By Rick White

GBSF's Wine Country Mini-Retreat will be held on Zoom this year instead of in Calistoga. Its future location is to be determined. Henceforth, its name will be "Banned Books Mini-Retreat," following a theme that has emerged with time.

The annual program has featured literature, i.e. fiction, controversial at the time, but has not dealt with non-fiction. The fiction had been banned in some places until years later. This year's "banned book," *Fahrenheit 451*, was not so much banned as it was about banning, in fact burning, books found to be offensive. Fahrenheit 451 is the ignition temperature of paper.

It should be of particular concern to those who read books that book banning has returned. History is repeating itself, as it is wont to do, but now it is about non-fiction. As someone said, history does not exactly repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes. Now it is becoming common for non-fiction books found to be disagreeable by somebody somewhere, often anonymous, to be cancelled not because it is faulty in some way but because it runs afoul of current dogma. This is, we recall from Junior High School, why Galileo's unfashionable view that the universe does not revolve around the Earth was suppressed.

The Wall Street Journal, Saturday, September 18, 2021, ran an opinion editorial by Thomas Spence, president of Regnery Publishing, headlined "Banned Books Week" Isn't Actually Interested in Banned Books. The book, *Irreversible Damage*, by Abigail Shrier, he wrote,

praised by a number of feminists, might pique the interest of the more open-minded members. We were wrong. When a bookstore employee in Brooklyn pulled a copy...from the box, the shock of encountering a book that contradicted her passionately held opinions drove her to Twitter to rebuke the [distributor, the American Booksellers Association] for hurting her feelings. 'I'm seething,' she wrote. Within hours, the ABA had apologized to its member stores for a 'serious, violent incident' and declared that sharing this title with booksellers was 'inexcusable.' ...[L]ater the ABA added the outrageous defamation that the book constitutes 'hate speech.' So welcome to Banned Books Week 2021...whose theme is 'Books Unite Us; Censorship Divides Us.'

"Dozens of Amazon employees tried to make sure this book was expunged from its online store," Spence, its

publisher, reports. "If Amazon doesn't carry a book, it is practically invisible. Amazon, fortunately, decided not to ban Ms. Shrier's book." Spence concludes with a question: "When will Banned Books Week pay attention to banned books?"

ZOOM! An invitation from the New England Great Books Council:

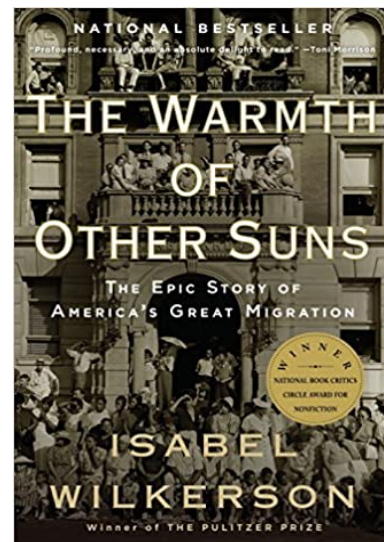
Saturday, December 4, 2021

1:30-4:30 P.M. EST (10:30 A.M. PST)

The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration

By Isabel Wilkerson

In this bestselling, beautifully written masterwork, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson chronicles one of the great untold stories of American history: the decades-long migration of black citizens who fled the South for northern and western cities, in search of a better life. From 1915 to 1970, this exodus of almost six million people changed the face of America. Wilkerson compares this epic migration to the migrations of other peoples in history. She interviewed more than a thousand people, and gained access to new data and official records, to write this definitive and vividly dramatic account of how these American journeys unfolded, altering our cities, our country, and ourselves.



The program is free of charge. You buy your own book. ISBN 978-0-679-76388-8

PRE-REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED: Simply send email TO: newenglandgreatbooks@gmail.com, SUBJECT "The Warmth of Other Suns" with your name and email address.

2021 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

Events where noted will be held on Zoom.

OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER - MARCH
10/23: Banned Books Mini-Retreat: <i>Fahrenheit 451</i> . Zoom.	11/13-14: Poetry Weekend: Ekphrastic poetry. Zoom.	2/?: San Francisco Mini-Retreat: Book and Movie TBD. Zoom? 3/?: Leader-Reader Training. Zoom.

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California:

President, Louise DiMattio

Vice President, Elena Schmid

Secretary, Dorothy McHale

Treasurer, Brian Mahoney

Past President, Brian Cunningham

Reading Matters: Editor and Publisher, Rick White

E-letter Editor and Publisher, Jim Hall

Database, Jan Vargo.

Website: www.greatbooksncal.org

Great Books Foundation: 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)