

# Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO  
Serving Northern California

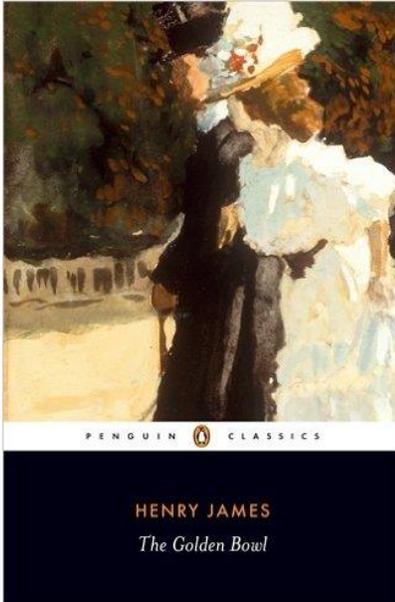
## Mother-son team rescues Long Novel Weekend

By Rick White

When they heard that the Long Novel Weekend for 2016 had been cancelled by GBSF ExCom for lack of volunteer leadership, 17-year old **Scott Shafer** and his mother **Kara** stepped forward to save it.

They will take on coordination of this much loved annual event now in its 26<sup>th</sup> year. As in recent years, it will be held from August 27-28 at the Vallombrosa Retreat Center in Menlo Park, the town where the Shafer family home is conveniently located. Registration information is available at <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/longNovel.htm>.

Because of the late start in planning this event, a team was assigned by our president **Laura Bushman** to meet quickly and decide on the book. **Brian Mahoney**, **Louise Morgan**, and **Rick White** first agreed upon criteria then culled lists of great novels. After deliberation the group readily agreed upon the Henry James novel, *The Golden Bowl*.



Set in England, *The Golden Bowl* is Henry James's highly charged exploration of adultery, jealousy, and possession that continues and challenges James's characteristic exploration of the battle between American innocence and European experience.

Selection criteria included the book's established literary merits, its length (in this case, 680 pages), whether it had a complex and provocative narrative, its availability in "readable" size type, and last but not least, whether it's an enjoyable read. While we have in recent years repeated magnificent books that were discussed years ago, the team did not wish to do so this time.

Maggie Verver, a young American heiress, and her widowed father, Adam, lead a life of wealth and refinement in London. They are both getting married: Maggie to Prince Amerigo, an impoverished Italian aristocrat, and Adam to the beautiful but penniless Charlotte Stant. But both father and daughter are unaware that their new conquests share a secret - one for which all concerned must pay the price.

This story completes what critics have called the major phase in James's career. *From the Penguin Books edition.*

Our runner up for this year was Stendahl's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, which met the above criteria but its various French translations needed further evaluation. We intend to consider it for next year.

Close behind the Stendahl (né Marie-Henri Beyle) was Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, a far from depressing novel despite its depressing name. Also under consideration were *Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lawry, *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, and *The Way of All Flesh* by Samuel Butler. The Franzen book has highly favorable reviews and is included on one of our lists of the top 100 books even though it was published only in 2001.

Participants will be asked at this year's Long Novel Weekend their opinion on which among these books to read for next year and possibly following years.

While examining lists of best-regarded novels, several were encountered that had great appeal but did not meet the length criterion. The team will suggest these to the Asilomar book selection committee for consideration at future Asilomar spring conferences. Among them are *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner, *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by Willa Cather.

## ***The day?—We seized the whole weekend!***

by Louise Morgan

If the caliber of a book can be measured by the amount of follow-up conversation it generates, then the texts we discussed at Asilomar in April scored all A's!

We began the weekend with Poetry on Friday evening. It was a good sign when, in the dining hall the next morning, breakfast tables were buzzing with strong opinions about Crazy Jane's conversation, the meaning of a young girl's blue dress, and whether Emily Dickinson's gun was real.

Although it was a timely choice this election year, many attendees were initially apprehensive that selections from *The Federalist Papers* would be dry and boring. Not a bit! Adam Rose was there to get us off on the right track. Adam teaches Great Books in the Basic Program at the University of Chicago; he is also president and education director of the online program [www.GreatDiscourses.com](http://www.GreatDiscourses.com). His short preliminary talk clarifying terminology and context was helpful in guiding the ensuing discussions of ten of the Federalist essays. We were able to see how keenly aware the founding fathers were of the problematic aspects of human nature and how thoughtfully the proposed constitution had been crafted. As Madison put it, “You must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

Control was also a major issue in August Wilson’s play, *The Piano Lesson*. We quickly took sides as two determined siblings argued passionately over what should happen to the family heirloom – an antique piano carved with images of their ancestors. While most felt that Berniece was justified in her desire to keep this reminder of their family’s legacy, several sympathized with the irresponsible Boy Willie and his dream of selling the piano in order to buy the same land their family had worked as slaves for generations, thereby finally “rising up from the bottom of life.”

After dinner, we looked forward to eating popcorn and viewing the film version of *The Piano Lesson* at the Saturday night party. Unfortunately, the gremlins from Microsoft had been at work to prevent us from increasing the audio on the DVD player to the desired volume. (It seems that the recent upgrade to Windows 10 included an additional control that no one knew about.) To overcome this setback, the audience responded by sitting *very* quietly and listening *very* intently to enjoy great actors portraying the characters we had so recently imagined and analyzed.

The main character in our final session—Tommy Wilhelm in Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*—elicited a wide range of opinions. Was he a victim of circumstance? A spoiled child? A loser? A gullible innocent? Helpless? Lazy? Two hours was hardly enough to try to determine just how and why Tommy had reached his day of reckoning, and whether he would emerge from his cathartic collapse able to seize the day or to fall back on his old ways.

Attendance at this year’s Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar was on a par with last year, and we were especially happy to welcome ten new first-time attendees. Occasional light showers failed to dampen spirits. Deer still peacefully grazed right next to our cabins, and the sound of the ocean still lulled us to sleep each night.

It takes the efforts of many to make an event like this happen. Special thanks go to **Rob Calvert** and **Sheri Kindsvater** for their months of planning and organizing.

**Kay White** gets kudos for her dedication to the recruitment and training of effective leaders. And the leaders themselves, all volunteers who devote much extra time and energy to the preparation that facilitating an effective discussion requires, deserve our recognition and gratitude. This year they were: **Laura Bushman, Adam Rose, Rob Calvert, Melanie Blake, Rick White, Julie Simpson, Mark Scardina, Elena Schmid, Filomena Pacheco, Louise Morgan, Kay White, Sheri Kindsvater, and Karen Schneider.**

### *A bit of Emily Dickinson trivia—for your information:*

It’s well known, among those inclined to know such things, that Emily Dickinson’s poetry can be sung to the melody of “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” Also mentioned as melodic contenders are “Amazing Grace” and the theme from “Gilligan’s Island.” I was not among those who knew this until the Friday evening poetry discussion at Asilomar. In the group I attended, **Ellen Ward**, an accomplished songstress, cut loose with the first stanza of our Dickinson poem of the evening, entitled “#764,” (a title whose descriptive qualities elude me).

*My life had stood—a loaded gun—  
In corners—till a Day  
The owner passed—identified—  
And carried Me away—*

And so forth.

I don’t know how this added piece of information will affect my enjoyment of Emily’s poetry in the future, but I will keep it in mind as I’m sure you will as well.

—Rick White

## **Ernest Hemingway vs. The Terrorists**

By Laura Bushman

On November 13, 2015, the civilized world was shocked by the senseless mass killings in Paris resulting in 137 deaths. Multitudes reached out to Parisians with sympathy and tears for their loss. Sites of the slaughter were decorated with flowers, candles and copies of a book reflecting the pain in their hearts, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*. Not Voltaire nor Balzac nor even Victor Hugo could express love of the city of lights better than Hemingway.

This memoir of his life in Paris was published in 1964 a few short weeks before his suicide. The events take place

in a Paris much different from the one we see today. Hemingway was a 22 year old, following his muse during the 1920s. He seemed to know everyone important in the literary life of Paris during his six years in the city. Names drop in a cascade: Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Ford Madox Ford, and more. The memory of food also colors every chapter – breakfasts, lunches and dinners enjoyed at simple cafes, wonderful restaurants, and picnics.

On June 5, 2016, the Great Books Council of San Francisco holds its own picnic—pot-luck—from 12:00-3:00 p.m. It includes a brief Annual Meeting, then a discussion of *A Moveable Feast* to remember Paris as it was during Hemingway's time. We hope that you will join in. For more picnic information, see <http://www.greatbooks-sf.com/events/picnic.htm>.

“If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.”

—Ernest Hemingway



## Endangered mockingbird survives book discussion

By Rick White

Thirty-three gathered at El Patio Restaurant on Alemany Boulevard on March 12 for the San Francisco mini-retreat. The discussion centered on Harper Lee's coming-of-age novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Free and plentiful parking was an appreciated feature of this location as was the delicious catered lunch. That the book discussion was excellent goes without saying.

Sometimes the most difficult challenge for any discussion leader is to come up with a good opening question. It is an arcane art as the best questions are often obscure and unexpected. My group leader, **Sheri Kindsvater**, came up with a good one: “In the opening, why does the narrator blame the series of events that ensues on Andrew Jackson?” **Clifford Louie**, the event coordinator and a second group leader, came up with an equally provocative if less quirky leading question. His was “Why does Scout settle differences with her fists?”

If either of these questions intrigues you, read or re-read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. You could do far worse with a few spare hours—and see what you come up with.

Half of the attendees had read the book years ago and nearly all had seen the movie starring Gregory Peck as the narrator's father, Atticus Finch. The events in the novel took place in 1935 while the book was written and published close to the outset of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Famously, the story includes the trial of a black man falsely accused of sexual assault on a 19 year old white girl. Atticus is attorney for the defense. He presents a persuasive case that the man, Tom Robinson, is innocent and that the girl's father, whose accusation of Tom had led to the trial, is himself the likely offender. Although the evidence against Tom is weak and flawed, the jury delivers a verdict of guilty. I've often wondered what went through the jurors' minds. Had they secretly believed Tom innocent, but convicted him anyway? Again, you might want to refer to the book to come to your own conclusions.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is extraordinarily well written. The characters are richly developed and thoroughly believable. Its theme of racial injustice was particularly timely in 1962. The story, however, is as much about growing up in an isolated Alabama town, in a time of crisis, with a remarkable father.

After lunch, we viewed and discussed the 1962 movie that all agreed was an accurate and admirable rendition of the book. Most of the narration came straight from the book.

As is customary at the end of the San Francisco mini-retreat, a drawing was held. Tickets were distributed by 13-year old Gina Schneider, the youngest participant. The prizes were two copies of Harper Lee's recently published sequel, *Go Set a Watchman*.

The consensus was that the book was a great one to discuss, the leading was exemplary, and the day a resounding success.

### Colby Summer Institute, July 17-23, 2016:

Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* (two days); Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard*; Margaret Edison, *Wit, A play*; J.L. Carr, *In the Country*; Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*. For information, <http://greatbooks-atcolby.org>.

# RIP Bernice Hunold, Artist

By Rick White

Since our previous issue, Bernice Hunold, whose work has frequently been featured in our pages, has died. She was 97 years old and lived in the San Francisco Jewish Home. In her younger years she actively participated in Great Books.

When I remarked to one of her close friends, **Mary Wood**, that Bernice was very sweet, Mary answered that she was also quite feisty – a side I had not seen.



Her paintings, as the one above, communicated exuberance. As of this writing, many of them can be seen at [www.flickr.com/photos/bernicehunold](http://www.flickr.com/photos/bernicehunold). Bernice was delighted that we published her artwork, and we, in turn, are appreciative to have had her painting beautify our pages.

Bernice shall not be forgotten.

## Notes from Asilomar

By Rick White

What follows may be of interest to those who attended this year's Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference. I tried to write down a few things from each discussion in which I took part. The first was Poetry on Friday evening. I know that many of you enjoy **Jim Baird**'s "Diary" in these pages. Unfortunately, Jim missed Asilomar this year, so I'll do my best to fill in for him.

### Poetry

The first poem was "The Blue Dress" by Sharon Olds. Group leader **Mark Scardina** opened with the question, "Why was the gift a dress?" Allegedly presented to the poet by her absent father, the dress held special significance. Some in the group believed the mother had bought the dress and signed the father's name to it. As with any good poem, there are no answers, just conjectures. On a more personal note, what I found interesting was a description of what

Hinks Department Store looked like from its balcony in the late 1940s. As a child, I had been there and, in my memory, it was exactly the same.

In Emily Dickinson's enigmatic poem "764," our group pondered the identity of the narrator. I thought it was the gun referred to in the poem's first line (*My life had stood – a loaded gun* –) reflecting back to its owner. Others thought the poem was about conversion to Christianity. It was at this point that **Ellen Ward** (referred to in *A Bit of Emily Dickinson Trivia*) decided to sing a stanza of the poem to the melody of "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

Mark tried to illuminate the meaning of Donald Justice's poem, "The Evening of the Mind" by asking about the "you" the poem referred to. Despite the animated discussion, I was still feeling a bit murky. I gathered it had something to do with staying and leaving, then ending with

And you must wake again to your own blood  
And empty spaces in the throat.

In "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" by William Butler Yeats, some thought the debate was about life and love from the standpoint of old age. Certainly the poem's reference to breasts being "flat and fallen now" suggests that. The ending lines, however, still puzzle me.

But love has pitched his mansion in  
The place of excrement;  
For nothing can be sole or whole  
That has not been rent.

Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "The Story, Around the Corner" spoke quite powerfully to me – especially the lines:

is not turning the way you thought  
it would turn, gently, in a little spiral loop,  
the way a child draws the tail of a pig.

This poem helped me realize that one doesn't always have to fully understand a poem in order to be moved by it. In this case, it was the poem's vivid language, and its sense of life's sudden ending, that resonated with me.

A scrap or cell of talk you barely remember  
is growing into a weird body with many demands.  
One day soon it will stumble up the walk and knock,  
knock hard, and you will have to answer the door.

Death, I suppose.

Ashland, Oregon:

### Great Books Shakespeare Festival,

July 22-25, 2016. See Hamlet, Richard II, and Winter's Tale, and join group discussions of each.

For information, visit <http://siskiyoucenter.com>.



### **The Federalist Papers (No. 1, 2, 3, 10, 23, 41, 42, 44, 51, and 76)**

The morning session on Saturday was a discussion of ten of *The Federalist Papers*. Departing from custom, we asked our special guest, **Adam Rose**, to take twenty minutes to set the stage. Adam teaches the Great Books at the University of Chicago. His introduction included the definitions of key words in the context at the time they were written. For instance, “country” meant an area of geography; “nation” a people; “state” a sovereign government; “empire” a collection of such “states” that are in some manner or degree subordinated to it.

I led one of the three discussion groups. Below are some of my questions, with page numbers, to give you a sense of the scope and depth of the topics covered.

p.27 What did Publius believe should be the position of the new United States in the world?

p.73 How does Publius view private property—in particular its uneven distribution?

pp.149-150 Did they see any danger in their having given the national government unlimited authority to protect the public safety from attack?

p.319 What was Publius’s view of human nature?

p.319 “In republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates.” How does this relate to checks and balances?

p.453 Does the nomination of a candidate by the president for high office require the Senate to provide advice and consent?

**Kay White** had a different set of questions for the group she led. Here are a couple of them:

p.76 What does Publius think of a theoretical government that reduces mankind to a perfect equality in political rights....?

p.252 Why does Publius frame the arrangement of government powers to succeed “by working toward the greater, not the perfect, good?”

Kay asked participants what object or animal the U.S. Constitution reminded them of. A particularly memorable response was “a perfectly laid dining table before the food fight starts.”

### ***The play: “The Piano Lesson” by August Wilson***

**Melanie Blake**, of Classical Pursuits, led the group I attended. Her opening question was, “Why did the house lack warmth and vigor?” I’m not sure if we answered the question, but it got the discussion flowing. In the play, the house is described as “sparsely furnished,” but in the movie version we watched that evening, the house is depicted as amply furnished. I suppose that’s the director’s license although his choice puzzled me particularly in light of Melanie’s question.

The piano, in the title, is a thing of great beauty and sentimental value because it has carvings representing several generations of the family’s history. Berniece and her brother, Boy Willie, share ownership of the piano but have different ideas about its fate. Berniece wants to keep it as an heirloom while her brother wants to sell it to buy the land their family farmed as slaves. While the tone of the play is essentially serious, there are many comical moments. One is Boy Willie’s efforts to steal the heavy piano; another is his plan to drive north with a truckload of watermelons to sell to rich white people.

This wonderful, heartfelt play generated a lively discussion. The group concluded that, in the end, the most important things are love for each other and respect for the generations who had struggled to keep family together.

### ***The novel: Seize the Day by Saul Bellow***

As a fan of Yiddish expressions, I saw this to be the story of a shlemiel, a gonif, a J.A.P., and a shmuck. Our leader, **Louise Morgan**, asked why the shlemiel—my word, not hers—Tommy Wilhelm, né Wilhelm Adler (he had made an unsuccessful try as a movie actor), although nearly broke, chose to live in the same residential hotel as his father, Dr. Adler, where all of the tenants but himself were elderly. A “Dr.” Tamkin, a gonif with whom Tommy regularly and unsuccessfully played poker, and who his father had warned him against, took this shlemiel for his last few hundred dollars in a commodities future buying scheme. Tommy’s J.A.P. (Jewish American Princess) wife—we were unsure whether he had left her, or she him—forever kvetching, nagged him for money. Dr. Adler

was a rich self-satisfied shmuck who, the group agreed, assumed none of the responsibility for how his forty-four year old son had developed and did little to help him. The only one who seized the day, we concluded, was the gonif.

My friend **Oscar Firschein** may take issue with my Yiddish. At the discussion, **Nicolee Brorson** preferred the stronger word shlemazl to shlemiel for Tommy. We could go back and forth on this distinction. I think *pilpul* is Hebrew for that sort of thing.

## Experienced leaders and neophytes learn techniques, share ideas at Great Books Leader-Reader Workshop

By Kay White

What does it take to lead a Great Books discussion? First, read the selection closely, more than once. Think about “zipper questions.” Watch for quiet thinkers. Know the discussion belongs to the group.

These tenets and more were in full motion as nineteen Great Books fans gathered for the workshop on Saturday, March 19<sup>th</sup>. We started at 9:30 in the morning with coffee and tea at the Drake’s Landing community room in Greenbrae. The sun was as bright as the tulips and spring greens highlighting our room. We could see Drake’s Estuary with its occasional rowers, but everyone kept focus on how to lead a Great Books discussion.

We practiced zipper questions—interpretive questions that open the reading to wider and deeper discussion.

We had a demonstration discussion of Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “One Art.” A seating chart helped the leader track participation and notice who had not yet spoken. The leader wants to keep discussion open for all, even the quiet ones, without putting them on the spot.

What is hard for the leader?

- Keeping out of the discussion
- Avoiding leading questions
- Turning yes/no questions into “How?” or “Why?”

What is easy?

- Enjoying surprising ideas from the group
- Realizing a fuller understanding of the poem
- Getting to know how others think

We had a good range of experience in our group; some were brand new to shared inquiry while others had years of leading discussions. Assisting me with the small group practice were **Jim Hall**, **Julie Simpson**, and **Karen Schneider**, all experienced leaders. We were pleased to have long-standing leaders joining us, **Carol Hochberg** from Berkeley, **Norman Nayfach** from San Rafael, and **Carol Edlund** from Walnut Creek. Well-experienced in Great Books discussions were **Jim Baird** from Novato, **Julio Burroughs** from Corte Madera, **Parki Hoeschler**

from San Rafael, and **Scott Shafer** from Menlo Park. We welcomed newcomers to Great Books, **Brian and Martha Cunningham** from San Francisco, **George Curry** from Fairfield, **Marylou Grossberg** from Corte Madera, **Sylvia Landman** from Novato, **Susanne Lewald** from Berkeley, **George Stanis** from Lafayette, and **Ann Wagner** from Phoenix, on her way to start a group in Incline Village at Lake Tahoe.

Each had a chance to practice leading a group discussion with four or five people. Participants said this was the most useful part of the workshop. Leaders were able to try out their questions and watch the group respond. Friendly feedback was given after each practice. As the leader trainer, I was impressed with their preparation, care, and delivery of Shared Inquiry. Participants were ready, focused and primed for their turns at leading.

I had heard the same readings discussed five or six times before, yet there were new ideas brought out. I wish I could bottle the essence of the discussions generated on this day.

Workshop members let us know what they thought of the workshop through evaluations. Some comments were: “I’ve gotten a greater awareness of discussion questions.” The mailed advance materials were “Excellent;” “Loved the materials;” “Very good introduction;” “Very helpful;” “A very rewarding experience.” “The focus is different for leading. There is a tradeoff from not being in the discussion when you’re leading.” And one holdout, “Warning, poetry was not expected.”

Our day was exciting, fun, and valuable for Great Books leaders and readers. We have volunteers ready to lead. Please invite them to lead in your groups and upcoming events: George Stanis at [2gstanis@gmail.com](mailto:2gstanis@gmail.com) in Lafayette, Jim Baird at [baird152@gmail.com](mailto:baird152@gmail.com) in Novato, Brian Cunningham at [pepper@TOL.com](mailto:pepper@TOL.com) in San Francisco, and Carol Edlund at [caroledlund@att.net](mailto:caroledlund@att.net) in Walnut Creek. Experience is the best teacher.

Finally, several asked for a special session on how to lead different materials, especially nonfiction. If you’re interested, please let me know by e-mail at [kaycleveland@aol.com](mailto:kaycleveland@aol.com).

### *Rules of Shared Inquiry*

1. *To participate one must have read the entire book recently.*
2. *The leader asks questions of interpretation and does not offer answers or opinions.*
3. *Comments are based on the selection everyone has read.*
4. *Manners are expected. Listen, let speakers complete their thoughts, stay on the subject.*

## 2016 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

MAY-JULY	AUGUST-OCTOBER	NOVEMBER - DECEMBER
<b>5/21: Gold Country Mini-Retreat</b> <i>(I Am Malala)</i>  <b>6/5: Annual Meeting/Picnic</b> <i>(A Moveable Feast)</i>	<b>8/27- 8/28: Long Novel Weekend</b> <i>(The Golden Bowl)</i>  <b>TBD: Wine Country Mini-Retreat</b>	<b>11/19-20: Poetry Weekend</b>
<b>GBSF Endorsed</b>		
<b>7/17 – 7/23:</b> <b>Colby Summer Institute</b> <b>7/22 - 7/28: Great Books</b> <b>Shakespeare Festival</b>		

SAN FRANCISCO GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL, Serving Northern California: Laura Bushman, President; Louise Morgan, Vice President; Mary Wood, Secretary; Brian Mahoney, Treasurer; Rob Calvert, Past President.

*Reading Matters:* Editor and Publisher, Rick White; Line Editor, Paula Weinberger; Proofreader and Fact Checker, Carol Hochberg; Database, Jan Vargo. Paintings by Bernice Hunold.

Fruit and vegetable photos by Kay and Rick White.

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

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