

Reading Matters

GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO
Serving Northern California

Asilomar 2018: **A quest for the truth?**

By Louise Morgan

"Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth." So declares Ursula K. Le Guin in the introduction to her landmark work of science fiction, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. What could she possibly mean by those seemingly contradictory statements? And do they have particular resonance in today's world?

Whether the artist/writer is a liar, a truth-teller, a prophet, a philosopher, a visionary, or an untrustworthy guide is an avenue we'll surely explore during the upcoming Barbara McConnell Great Books Weekend at Asilomar on April 13-15. If you haven't already registered, please do so soon! Details can be found at www.greatbooks-sf.com, which has a convenient registration form and a quick, easy way to pay the registration fee online if you choose.

The texts we've chosen for 2018 are timeless classics, still exciting and relevant today, works that have been on the selection committee's "must discuss" list for years.

The Iceman Cometh is the last of Eugene O'Neill's plays to be produced during his lifetime. The first American playwright to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, O'Neill completed his masterpiece in 1939 but delayed its theatrical production until after WWII. It received mixed reviews at first, but three years after O'Neill's death, a Broadway revival starring Jason Robards brought renewed critical attention. The work is now recognized as one of the greatest plays in American drama. *The Iceman Cometh* focuses on a group of alcoholics and misfits who endlessly discuss but never act upon their dreams, or "pipe dreams" as the traveling salesman Hickey derisively calls them. Lee Marvin, Brian Dennehy, Kevin Spacey, Nathan Lane, James Earl Jones, and Denzel Washington have all portrayed the nuanced character of Hickey.

Selections from *The Souls of Black Folk* will be discussed during our non-fiction session. In these essays, first published in 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois affirms that it is beneath the dignity of a human being to beg for rights that belong inherently to all mankind, thereby challenging the strategy of accommodation advocated by Booker T. Washington. This is a

powerfully influential work, essential reading for anyone interested in African-American history and the struggle for civil rights in America.

Back to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, our fiction selection. Yes, it's science fiction, a first for Asilomar but a genre that attendees have often requested. Published in 1969, the book swept that year's Hugo and Nebula awards, securing Le Guin's reputation as a writer of deeply probing, intellectual science fiction. Groundbreaking for its time but eerily relevant today, *The Left Hand of Darkness* tells the story of a lone human emissary's mission to Winter, a cold, forbidding world with inhabitants whose gender shifts at various times during the course of their lives. The emissary's goal is to facilitate Winter's admittance into a growing intergalactic civilization, but to do so he must bridge a gulf caused by his own prejudices and those of Winter's alien cultures.

Five poems have been selected to round out our weekend—works by Rekdal, Roethke, James, Dickinson, and Nemerov. By a curious yet familiar coincidence, it's no stretch to find connections between the poems and the themes and ideas that seem likely to surface in the other readings.

But at the end of the day, is it all an elaborate pack of lies, or is it The Truth? And why does Le Guin believe that "...no truly respectable society has ever trusted its artists"?

What great topics for discussion! You don't want to miss this chance to spend a weekend wrestling with such compelling ideas. [Register now](http://www.greatbooks-sf.com) for Asilomar 2018! We look forward to seeing you April 13-15.

Long Novel for 2018: **Steinbeck's *East of Eden***

By Caroline Van Howe & Paula Weinberger
event coordinators

We are delighted to announce the selection of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* for the 2018 Long Novel Weekend on July 14-15. Steinbeck himself said of the book, "It has everything in it I have been able to learn about my craft or profession in all these years. I think everything else I have written has been, in a sense, practice for this."

The weekend will include a showing of the iconic 1955 film directed by Elia Kazan and starring James Dean, Julie Harris and Raymond Massey. The Long Novel Weekend will be held at the Vallombrosa Center in Menlo Park. The

change of venue this year is due to a variety of factors including the availability of meeting space, participant feedback, and economic reasons.

We are pleased to report that we have been able to keep the registration fees the same as in 2016 and 2017. For more details, including registration fees and a registration form, please see the [Long Novel Weekend flyer](#).

Gold Country non-fiction Mini-Retreat!

The Glass Castle, by Jeanette Walls

Coming May 19, Auburn, CA: see [Gold Country flyer](#).

Violent struggle results in fine Poetry Weekend

By Paula Weinberger

As reported in our summer edition, a figuratively violent struggle took place earlier in the year to cull poems for this weekend from among 60 submitted by the 12 members of the poetry committee. Refereed by chair Carol Hochberg, the boisterous group narrowed them down to 15. Carol worked magic to find among them logical or fanciful groupings. The resulting three sessions were *All about Love*, *Other Souls*, and *Potpourri*.

From the luscious assortment of croissants, muffins, and homemade pumpkin bread provided by Oscar and Theda Firschein to a final lunch on Sunday afternoon, 43 ardent participants read, discussed, debated and imbibed this diverse selection of poems.

Saturday a.m. While love figures in all five poems discussed in the Saturday morning session, they transcend romantic love to embrace love of self, self-acceptance, and gratitude. In the Derek Walcott poem, *Love after Love*, the reader is invited to greet with pleasure the part of ourselves that we may have forgotten or abandoned.

Jack Gilbert, in *It is Difficult to Speak of the Night*, suggests that the final years of life are an opening for a new and wondrous time of being and reflection.

An empire yields unexpectedly: cities, summer forest,
satrapies, horses. A solitude: an enormity. Thank god.

In *To Know the Invisible*, Jack Gilbert reflects that acquired wisdom allows a mature lover to experience relationships more deeply.

Through the body and its weather, to the mind and heart,
to the spirit beyond. To the mystery.

W.S. Merwin, in *Once Later*, ponders the irony of postponing the pleasures of youth.

It is not until later that you have to be young
it is one of the things you meant to do later
but by then there is someone else living there

Finally, Mark Strand, in *VII*, strikes a more realistic note: while we can rise out of grief into glorious communion with nature, we must also accept that transformation is gradual.

Saturday p.m. After lunch, the dialogue continued with reflections on our relationship to nature. Dana Gioia's poem, *Becoming a Redwood*, invites the reader to imagine what it would be like to be such a monumental part of nature—a sentinel of silence.

Unimaginable the redwoods on the far hill,
rooted for centuries, the living wood grown tall
and thickened with a hundred thousand days of light.

Mary Oliver, in *Wild Geese*, also invites us to join with nature, to accept our role in the natural flow of life, but in a more active, experiential way.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Camille T. Dungy, in *Trophic Cascade*, explores how a single phenomenon, the introduction of “one hungry animal,” can transform a whole ecosystem. In this case it is Yellowstone National Park. She relates this complex series of changes in the park, one begetting the next, to the changes in the human landscape on becoming a mother. The poet leaves it to the reader to decide whether or not these changes are beneficial.

The Bear, by Susan Mitchell, takes us into the consciousness of the bear as it seeks the right log in which to hibernate.

When she does find it finally,
the log draws her in as easily as a forest,
and for a while she continues to see,
just ahead of her, the moon
trapped like a salmon in the ice.

Finally, Dana Gioia, in his provocative poem on the function of art, *The Angel with the Broken Wing*, recounts the frustration of a winged statue, trapped in a museum—a “perfect emblem of futility.” Once it had provided succor to the hopeless on the altar of a country church. Now it can no longer fulfill its true mission.

There are so many things I must tell God!
The howling of the damned can't reach so high.
But I stand like a dead thing nailed to a perch,
A crippled saint against a painted sky.

Wine, Cheese, and a Movie At a lovely pre-dinner wine and cheese reception, attendees had a chance to munch, imbibe, digest and further ruminate on the day's discussions.

After dinner we were treated to the Italian film “Il Postino.” Saturday evenings have traditionally been planned and hosted by Carol Hochberg, who selected this charming fictionalized account of an unlikely friendship between the poet Pablo Neruda and a simple village postman during the time of Neruda's exile in Italy. Due to illness, Carol was unable to be with us that evening although she was there in spirit. The film provided a wonderful segue to the Sunday

morning session because it raised questions about the nature of poetry and the different ways poetry finds us.

Sunday a.m. The Sunday morning poems tend to take a broader view and this group of poems was no exception. In *Fire Burns*, the physician/poet, William Carlos Williams, muses on the fire that both inflames both art and the reader but also leaves a certain set of people cold.

A wonderful gift! how *do*
you find the time for it in
your busy life? It must be a great
thing to have such a pastime.

But you were always a strange
boy. How's your mother?

In *Never Enough Time*, Andrea Hollander has advice for those of us in the fast lane. She encourages us to allow life to unfold. We will never know what may develop out of a simple invitation. It's something we rarely take seriously, but the poet helps us imagine if we did.

William Stafford in his poem, *As Me*, reflects on the impossibility of summing up a life. Like a river in winter covered with a coating of ice, things may look static on the surface, but underneath a current of events and feelings is constantly flowing.

Stephen Dunn's poem, *On the Death of a Colleague*, elicited quite a bit of discussion on the appropriateness of a student's blunt remarks at a memorial service. The professor, a member of the theater faculty, quite talented, had succumbed to alcoholism—something the senior faculty skirted around.

3It was a student's turn to speak, a sophomore,
one of her actors.
She was a drunk, he said, often came to class
reeking.
Sometimes he couldn't look at her, the blotches,
the awful puffiness.
And yet she was a great teacher,
he loved her...

Despite the fact that this student's remarks seemed to free people attending the service to more fully embrace the life of this teacher—a question remained whether this type of remark does more harm than good.

The final poem, *The Garden*, by the Jamaican poet Ishion Hutchinson, was perhaps the most challenging. It recounts a revolutionary attack on a small island village. The outcome of the attack appears uncertain. The wave of destruction passes, but the village, its trees, its homeless, its poverty, remain.

the prisoners prayed in their bunkers,
the baby drank milk while its mother slept,
and by the window its father
could not part the curtains.

We are left to reflect on whether progress is possible or life simply goes on.

A cornucopia of thanks There are many to thank for helping make this weekend run smoothly.

Our session leaders Rob Calvert, Jean Circiello, Steve Doherty, Carol Edlund, Jim Hall, Louise Morgan, Ginni Saunders, Paula Weinberger, Carolyn Yale and alternates, Parki Hoeschler and Ellen Ward.

Behind the scenes Registrars Theda and Oscar Firschein, whose job description includes tracking attendees, assigning groups and leaders, coordinating housing, and much more. They also graciously host the pre-discussion brunch. Scott Shafer and his mom, Kara, who once again manned the registration table. Rob Calvert and Jim Hall who ably promoted the weekend via email, print, and the web. Paula Weinberger and Ginni Saunders who stepped in for John Anderson to recruit the session leaders and host the wine and cheese reception.

Without you The warmest thanks go to our attendees for their serious commitment to poetry. We hope to see everyone next year at Vallombrosa.

Mark November 3-4 on your calendar.

Wine Country Mini-Retreat:

Native Son — WOW!

By Sheri Kindsvater

We met on a lovely day in Calistoga to discuss Richard Wright's classic novel about the African-American experience in the inner city of the early 20th century. Bigger Thomas was in trouble from the beginning and his luck didn't get any better throughout the novel.

Seventeen attended, and we formed a circle to delve into serious topics about race relations in those days. Our leader Mark Scardina posed a few thought-provoking questions and the examination took on a life of its own. Gentle guidance kept us out of arguments over current social policy so that we could focus on the author's complex and intertwined ideas. Opinions varied from dislike of the protagonist Bigger to sympathy for him. The book was so heavy with discussable ideas that we didn't get to the eloquent ending speech of his lawyer, a speech credited with making Wright in his day a spokesman for racial reform.

Discussion didn't stop at its scheduled time, and then carried on over lunch at the variety of lovely places in Calistoga. Afterward we gathered back to watch what was stated by critics to be one of the worst movies of a book ever made. We saw the most recent of several productions, all out of print, this one featuring Oprah Winfrey and a very young Matt Dillon. Made in 1986, its production quality was poor, but we wisely uncorked the wine early and sat back for a view. We concluded that the movie wasn't so bad as expected. (*In vino veritas?*) A lengthy discussion ensued and I was told that a good time was had by all.

We packed up, as it turned out, in the nick of time. The catastrophic Santa Rosa fire started that night on Tubbs Lane in Calistoga, the “Tubbs Fire,” consuming forests and villages through which we had only a few hours earlier made our way home. When I awoke the next morning I couldn’t believe what had happened, having been there just hours before. We are thankful that the Inn and its surroundings escaped the fire and will be ready for our return in 2018. It makes me wonder about Wright’s legacy: does the changing landscape of this region reflect the changing landscape of racial relations in our country as well? From death and destruction can we rise and create a better place for all of us?

Annual Survey: Forty-plus Great Books reading groups are active in Northern California

By Jan Vargo

In December the Great Books Council of San Francisco conducts a survey of Great Books reading groups in Northern California. This year’s census identified 41 groups. One formed in 2017. Four groups listed last year no longer meet. San Francisco has ten active groups, the largest number of any city in our area. Other cities with multiple groups are Walnut Creek and Sacramento. Many groups meet in public libraries, in private homes, or at organizations such as senior centers and churches. Some of the sponsoring organizations, such as the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI), require membership. Not all groups accept new members, but such groups often keep a waiting list.

Each year, the Council publishes the current list of the groups in *Reading Matters* and on the GBSF web site (see [Group Contact Info](#)). The Great Books Foundation also lists group contact information on its web site, www.great-books.org. The group listings help to attract new members. We encourage group managers to review their group contact information and send corrections and updates to Jan Vargo at vargopack@cs.com. One group recently added its listing to the Council web site and attracted new members within days.

Two academic institutions in Northern California have special Great Books programs: College of the Sequoias in Visalia and Monterey Peninsula College. We are excited that these programs reach out to young people. We hope their students will stay active in Great Books after graduation by joining a group or attending any of our many events.

Although most groups read anthologies published by the Foundation, some groups supplement those books with other selections. One group reads exclusively poetry.

We encourage readers to form Great Books reading groups and join our community. Contact us with the group information and let us help you find new members.

Signatures

(printed sheets folded and stitched together to form a book; therefore, an integral part)

Within minutes of meeting Oscar and Theda for the first time it becomes apparent that this delightful couple has led a long, rich and fascinating life. You might even find yourself wishing that you had been able to become friends with them many years ago. Together they have contributed greatly toward making our Great Books discussions so very rewarding.

A good friend, Christine Miller, recently offered some insights into Theda’s early life. “Theda is the baby of a very large family and was raised by her older sisters. The sister who named her Theda was a silent movie fan. The sister who taught her English through poetry was the reason that Theda needed speech therapy in school to get rid of her iambic pentameter.”

And about Oscar Christine observed, “Oscar loves to be underestimated. To the casual observer he is an oldie. The truth is that he has the knowledge, spirit, mind and curiosity of a 25-year-old techie who reads Homer in his spare time. Prepare yourself before engaging him!”

In lieu of a standard bio for this profile Theda wrote the following essay which beautifully captures their relationship and their powerful connection to good literature.

—Louise Morgan



OSCAR AND THEDA: BOUND BY BOOKS

By Theda Firschein

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments.*

— Wm. Shakespeare, *Sonnet 116*

Oscar’s mother, an immigrant from the Carpathian Mountains of Austria, fell in love with the Brooklyn Public Library and would trek there with her young brood nearly once a week. Since her English was limited she would choose books for her children based on the colorful covers, unaware of levels of suitability for a child. So poor Oscar, still in pre-adolescence, had to struggle to make sense of a shiny new edition of *Plato’s Republic*.

Theda, living in another part of immigrant Brooklyn, suffered from a different dilemma. She had never visited the non-fiction section of her own neighborhood library, hidden by a side door, up a narrow flight of stairs. So for young Theda, everything there was to know in the world was to be found in stories and poetry. How did these two hapless

young people manage to find each other as grownups later on?

It was on an organized bicycle trip through Cape Cod that they met. Theda was twenty-one and Oscar was twenty-six. They might have been considered an unlikely pair. Oscar was a construction engineer, working in Pittsburgh on the building of a hospital, and Theda, an English Major from Brooklyn College, appeared to him to be overly poetic. He even thought he detected a slight iambic pentameter rhythm in her voice. Theda believed that Oscar, working in construction, might not be very interested in books. But still he was very attentive to Theda, as they lagged behind on their bicycles together instead of keeping up with the others.

The truth was that Theda was not originally supposed to be in Oscar's cycling group. But at a pre-trip meeting the week before, it was announced that the trip from New York to the Cape was over-subscribed. Would someone volunteer to go with a sparsely-attended group from Pittsburgh instead? Theda might have been thinking of a familiar Robert Frost poem, when she made her fateful choice.

Two roads diverged in the woods, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

But to this day she isn't totally sure why she, a shy young person, suddenly raised her hand. What she does know is that this unlikely gesture changed her life forever.

"You are the strangest engineer I know," Theda said to Oscar, as they rode together side-by-side and talked about books. Oscar confessed to a boyhood infatuation with Tolstoy's Natasha, and was touched by Theda's compassion for the tragic Anna Karenina. Books were becoming for them the coded messages of their growing attachment to each other. By the end of the week-long trip, Oscar decided that he would quit his job in Pittsburgh and return to his family's over-crowded apartment in Brooklyn to be nearer to Theda. He would meanwhile apply to jobs in California, and ask her to come with him.

So when Oscar suddenly arrived in Brooklyn, their old-country parents took special notice. Theda, her mother sighed, was already twenty-one years old and not yet married. And Oscar, his mother felt, at twenty-six was well on his way to becoming a bachelor. The two mothers took matters into their own hands and a summit meeting was held on a bench of the train-station platform, midway between their two Brooklyn neighborhoods. Oscar's younger sister was engaged to be married, and the frugality of a double wedding could not easily be overlooked. Oscar's father, a printer, would be conscripted to make up the invitations. So Theda, along with Oscar, once again succumbed to the vagaries of fate. And what might seem to others to be a craven compliance with the dictates of immigrant parents could be thought of instead as part of life's larger plan. It was not

long before, on a back page of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, an obscure notice appeared:

Double Wedding in Brooklyn.

In an old battered car, overflowing with books, a newly-married couple made their way cross-country to a life in California, Oscar finding work in the emerging field of computers, and Theda applying to the University of Southern California for a Masters in Library Science.

Sixty-three years have passed since Theda, now a retired librarian and storyteller, inexplicably raised her hand one day and changed both their lives forever. They have two grown sons, two daughters-in-law, and two granddaughters. No, they did not choose brides for their sons. Both boys managed this very well by themselves without parental interference. However, Theda and Oscar did make a half-hearted effort to match their female Dalmatian with a male dog of impeccable pedigree, but she spurned all of their efforts.

Oscar, after his retirement from the world of artificial intelligence, went on to receive a Masters of Liberal Arts (MLA) degree from Stanford. He now serves as editor of *Tangents*, the MLA magazine.

(Theda and Oscar Firschein are long-time members of Great Books and are registrars for Poetry Weekend.)

Editor's favorites: Misused words

Fortuitous means accidental, but not lucky. *Serendipitous* means accidental and lucky.

An *enormity* is a horror. *Enormous* means huge.

Homogenous is a biological term that means similar because arising from the same origin. *Homogeneous* means alike more broadly.

Top clichés of 2017

"At the end of the day..." means "finally." At the end of the day we are stuck with the way "homogenous" has overtaken the word "homogeneous." The end of the day has arrived sooner than expected. You can Google it.

"Going forward..." means "from now on." Going forward, "homogenous" means the same thing as "homogeneous."

Word of the year contest

Nominations are still open for 2017 Word of the Year. This must be a term whose use by the speaker carries the implication of erudition. Some earlier year winners were "interface," "paradigm," "oxymoron." "Paroxysm" may be on the horizon.

SF Mini-Retreat is Feb 24!

The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro

[Register here](#)

2018 CALENDAR • GREAT BOOKS COUNCIL OF SAN FRANCISCO

FEBRUARY- MARCH 2018	APRIL	MAY
<p>2/24: SF Mini-Retreat Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>The Remains of the Day</i></p> <p>3/4: Leader Training</p>	<p>4/13-15: Barbara McConnell Asilomar Spring Conference W.E.B. Du Bois, <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> Ursula LeGuin, <i>The Left Hand of Darkness</i> Eugene O'Neill, <i>The Iceman Cometh</i></p>	<p>5/19: Gold Country Mini-Retreat Jeanette Walls, <i>The Glass Castle</i></p>
JUNE	JULY	NOVEMBER
<p>6/10: Picnic & Annual Meeting Margaret Atwood, <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i></p>	<p>7/14-15: Long Novel Weekend John Steinbeck, <i>East of Eden</i></p>	<p>11/3-4: Poetry Weekend</p>

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The full report can be obtained from Brian Mahoney, Treasurer, at gbbrianmahoney@gmail.com.