

THE TRICORN

NEWSLETTER published jointly by the BOSTON +
LONG ISLAND + PHILADELPHIA GREAT BOBS COUNCILS

August, 1987

Italo Calvino Tells Us: "Why Read the Classics?"

(Excerpted from *The New York Review of Books*)

Let us begin with a few suggested definitions.

1. The classics are the books of which we usually hear people say, "I am rereading . . ." and never "I am reading . . ."
2. We use the word "classics" for books that are treasured by those who have read and loved them; but they are treasured no less by those who have the luck to read them for the first time in the best conditions to enjoy them.
3. The classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious.
4. Every rereading of a classic is as much a voyage of discovery as the first reading.
5. Every reading of a classic is in fact a rereading.
6. A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.
7. The classics are the books that come down to us bearing the traces of readings previous to ours, and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture or cultures they have passed through (or, more simply, on language and customs).
8. A classic does not necessarily teach us anything we did not know before. In a classic we sometimes discover something we have always known (or thought we knew), but without knowing that this author said it first . . .
9. The classics are books which, upon reading, we find even fresher, more unexpected, and more marvelous than we had thought from hearing about them.
10. We use the word "classic" of a book that takes the form of an equivalent to the universe, on a level with the ancient talismans.
11. *Your* classic author is the one you cannot feel indifferent to, who helps you to define yourself in relation to him, even in dispute with him.
12. A classic is a book that comes before other classics; but anyone who has read the others first, and then reads this one, instantly recognizes its place in the family tree.

13. A classic is something that tends to relegate the concerns of the moment to the status of background noise, but at the same time this background noise is something we cannot do without.
14. A classic is something that persists as a background noise even when the most incompatible momentary concerns are in control of the situation.

. . . Now I ought to rewrite the whole article to make it perfectly clear that the classics help us to understand who we are and where we stand. . . . Then I ought to rewrite it yet again, lest anyone believe that the classics ought to be read because they "serve any purpose" whatever. The only reason one can possibly adduce is that to read the classics is better than not to read the classics.

And if anyone objects that it is not worth taking so much trouble, then I will quote Cioran (who is not yet a classic but will become one): "While they were preparing the hemlock, Socrates was learning a tune on the flute. 'What good will it do you,' they asked, 'to know this tune before you die?'"

BOSTON NEWS

Spring Weekend Report

Last April's Boston spring weekend was, as always, stimulating, engrossing, and fun. The books were William Golding's *Free Fall*, Elie Wiesel's *The Fifth Son*, and Dalene Matthee's *Fiela's Child*. The theme of the weekend, roughly, was memory, or the role of the past in determining the present. *Free Fall* addressed the question perhaps most directly: to what extent does one's history determine one's life, and where does moral responsibility lie? *The Fifth Son*, despite the seriousness of the moral issues it raises, has certain disadvantages for discussion, at least in this writer's opinion. On first reading, the book is a lot like a mystery. But once we know the secret of the protagonist's father, the survivor of the holocaust, few questions are left unanswered. Into the gap, then, come political opinion and personal memory: a difficult discussion for some groups, though the value of the book cannot be disputed. All of this was made up for by *Fiela's Child*, a deceptively simple book full of symbolism and beauty—the perfect end to a weekend of stimulating discussion.

Extracurricular time, too, was delightful. It was early spring; walks by the sea or around historic Plymouth were interesting. Plymouth Rock, incarcerated as it is in its ornate shelter, reminded some of us of a miniature Dome of the Rock—one antic soul imagined that he could discern in the rock the footprint of the first Pilgrim to ascend to Heaven.

Possibly the most unusual event of the weekend was the Friday night presentation of a play by the Bromfield Drama Club, Bromfield being the high school in Harvard, Massachusetts. I don't think I'm being biased in saying that it was a moving and wonderful piece of theatre; many others in the audience, with no connection to these kids I've known since they were little, thought the same. The impressive thing was that the kids had written the play themselves; called *Through Our Eyes*, it was a series of vignettes and monologues about the effects of divorce on children. A real treat, even for us Harvardites, because few of us had happened to see it at home.

What's Been Happening

There's been a little action on the organizational front in Boston this past year. Gus Soderberg offered a leaders training course in Lexington, attended by a dozen or so people, all of whom came from already established groups. The syllabus was the "Boston packet": selections from Genesis, *Meno*, *Oedipus*, and Tennyson's *Ulysses*.

A couple of new groups got under way this year, too—one in the town of Groton, started by Bob Lotz, and one in Concord under the direction of Pat Kabele. A modest attempt to stem the tide of dissolution.

Coming Up

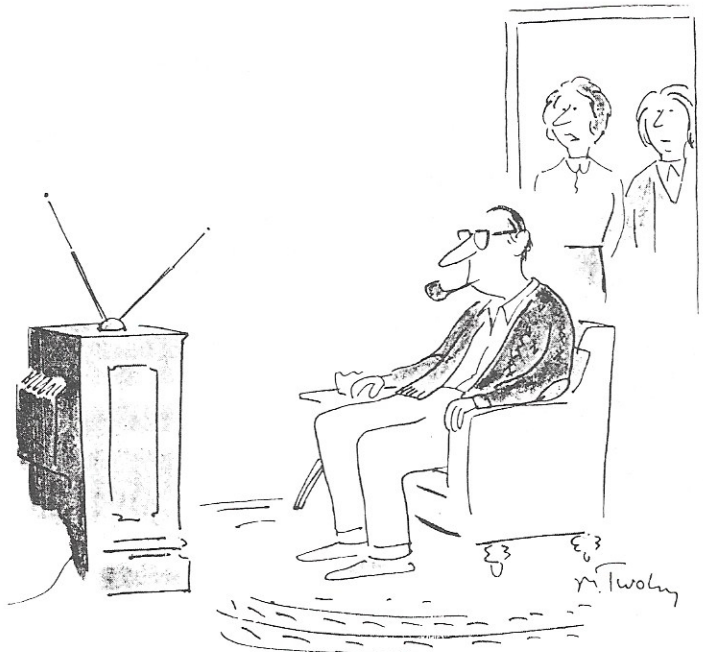
The Fall One-Day Institute this year will be held on September 26 at Tufts University. The books will be Gore Vidal's *Burr* and the Archibald MacLeish poem "America Was Promises." Anyone who would like to register should write to Bill Shea, 9 Lincoln Street, Arlington, MA 02174.

Frank Vallier

This spring brought the death of long-time Great Booker Frank Vallier of Quincy, one of the world's sweetest, most sensitive, and funniest people. A retired policeman, Frank combined toughness and sensitivity in a way that is all too rare—an extraordinary man, and he will be missed.

Looking Ahead

As I write, it is a hot, humid day in early June. The iris are blooming; the lilacs are just gone; the peonies are in bud. By the time you read this, many of us will be at Colby, deep in *Howards End* ("only connect"), relating what we're reading to our lives and families. I can't wait.



"Harold has managed to retain his bookish appearance without ever actually reading."

Ann Levison

WILMINGTON NEWS

Diane Smith is the new president of The Great Books Council of Delaware. She will preside over four groups, one more than existed last season.

Summer readings in Wilmington included works by Elie Wiesel, Martin Buber, and Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai.

Editor:
NORMA OSER
7933 Heather Rd.
Elkins Park, PA 19117

**Long Island
Correspondent:**
JUNE FERRARA
14 Bay Second St.
Islip, NY 11751

**Boston
Correspondent:**
ANN LEVISON
175 East Bare Hill Rd.
Harvard, MA 01451

LONG ISLAND NEWS

Confidential Report

To: Long Island Great Books Council

From: Greenblatt Whittier

Subject: *Intimate Strangers*—6/7/87 Institute

Readings: Pages kept falling out of *Wayfarer*—interesting book or bad binding.

Best Questions by a Leader: Is it possible to be intimate with someone who is beneath you?

Best Participant Response: (on seeing espalier in garden) “Oh, look, a menorah tree!”

Most Popular Food Served: 1. Stella D’Oro Breakfast Treats
2. Black olives

Longest Runback of Opening Question for “Intimate Partners”: 103 yard return (yours truly); nullified for bringing in outside source.

Best Institute Cartoon:



“When I said I wanted to be intimate I meant that I wanted to tell you who I really am.”

Best Poem on Theme:

“Triangling In” by Rose Eder

1. Triangulation
Manipulation
Confrontation
Retaliation
Strangulation
No relation
2. Revelation
Arbitration
Association
Communication
Liberation
Emancipation

PHILADELPHIA NEWS

A Lovely Look Backward

We are glancing backward in 1987, as we celebrate the creation of our constitution. Somehow we find time to reflect on what was, on earlier and gentler eras before the race to keep pace with our expanding mechanization.

Great Bookers' lives are as busy as everyone else's. We goggle at choked calendars, wondering how to stretch an hour, how to lengthen a day. Fall Event chairpersons Ruth Allen and Sue Peck offer us a lovely, leisurely look backward on Sunday, October 18. From 1:00 to 4:30 p.m. we will explore the beautiful estate of Glen Foerd on the Delaware River, an Eden of peace and beauty lying within Philadelphia limits. We will, for that time, inhabit the 19th-century world of Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and Thoreau. Trees 300 years old grace gardens covering 18 acres. A 25-room mansion rich in history, filled with rare antiques and artwork, will be shown to us with the help of historian and Great Booker Grace Baker. Ruth Allen warns that mysterious visitors from the past may seem to appear among us, so be prepared for the unexpected, if such readiness is possible. And, of course, delicious refreshments. Come for this delightful afternoon and see the Great Books friends you've missed over the summer.

Here's how to find Glen Foerd:

1. From center city take I-95 north to Academy Rd. exit; go east on Linden Ave. to State Rd., then north on State to 1 block south of Grant Ave.; turn right on Fitler and follow signs to entrance.
2. From PA Turnpike take Roosevelt Blvd. (U.S. 1) south to Grant Ave.; turn right onto State Rd., then left onto Fitler; follow signs to entrance.
3. From center city on Roosevelt Blvd. (U.S. 1) north, follow signs to Northeast Phila. Airport (Grant Ave.); turn right onto State Rd., then left onto Fitler; follow signs to entrance.

For further information, call Ruth Allen (673-3718) or Sue Peck (436-6374).

A Cull to the Cullers

Since mailing costs continue to rise, we must pare our list to cull those no longer interested in our program. If, in the last 3 years, you have neither belonged to a Great Books discussion group nor taken part in any Council activity, you will be dropped unless you send a written request for continuing mailings to Sibyl Cohen, 1812 Penn Center House, Philadelphia, PA 19103.

Leader Training Course

Please call leader trainer Sibyl Cohen (568-9827) or coordinator Barbara Duno (527-1632) if you are interested in taking leader training. The next class will be organized in response to your interest.

Shakespeare on Sale

Philadelphia's Spring Institute has 28 copies of Richard III for sale at only 40¢ each. If your group wants Shakespeare-on-the-cheap, call Ruth Allen, 673-3718.

Summer Sessions in Philly

Two sessions in center city drew a number of participants, hoping for airconditioned Great Books fun at the beautifully restored Bourse. Despite a breakdown of the cooling system, spirits, as well as temperature, remained high at the initial meeting, as discussants grappled with parables by Kafka and Borges. The July session, a month later, was planned around poems by Auden, Shapiro, and Kunitz. The planning committee worked even more loosely than last summer, when it conferred only by phone. This summer, committee members tried ESP, which seemed to work just about as well. Non-chairperson Eva Bix did the donkey's share of the work, for which she merits the lion's share of the credit. Henrietta Rogers made all arrangements with the Bourse.

New Philadelphia Coordinator

Philadelphians continue finding exceptional people to take over the essential job of coordinator whenever they must part with one. This time young, bright, and energetic Haverford Library leader Barbara Duno has taken over with a strong and steady hand. She showed her mettle immediately by taking on a job no former coordinator had dared: an archeological dig into the hopelessly disorganized, ever-burgeoning files. Since then she has whipped out an updated group list, corresponded with all groups, and planned the start-up of new groups, as well as a number of fall events.

Great Books is not the first challenge to be met and mastered by Barbara. She studied international relations back in California, where she grew up (NOT as a Valley Girl), and then worked as a Spanish-speaking social worker for Los Angeles County. Then, in Mexico with husband Carlos, Barbara became a professional photographer, serving as vice president of the Mexico City Photography Club. When the Dunos moved to Philadelphia in 1983, Carlos travelled frequently, and their three children were becoming more independent, so Barbara began her participation in The Great Books Program. "Great Books keeps my mind working," says Barbara.

Moving into administration has made the new coordinator appreciative of the depth of commitment of so many long-term volunteers. She is "sincerely impressed with the willingness of everyone to pitch in and work." Barbara Duno's new colleagues are equally impressed with her. Barbara urges groups with problems to call her at 527-1632 for TLC and ideas.

An Anonymous Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

I joined Great Books hoping to augment my education relatively painlessly. My hopes were fully realized, not only because of exposure to the classics, but the Great Books process proved an educational and intellectual experience that has been a source of satisfaction to me.

There has been, however, a benefit I never anticipated. That is the opportunity to meet intelligent, responsible people of character who have become an important part of my life and whom I might never have met otherwise.

In addition, as a participant and sometime leader, I have observed the activities of Council. The quality and quantity of work performed by its members is, to my mind, awesome and commands my profound respect. Most of them have other obligations—work, family, civic responsibilities—yet their commitment to Great Books makes the Philadelphia program the success it is. Philadelphia Council, I salute you!

NEW OFFICERS IN PHILADELPHIA

In Great Books, "the changing of the guard" always leaves one thinking, "Plus ça change . . ." because the same long-term, devoted volunteers exchange chairs. Of course a few new faces appear, but the installation of new officers can be followed by most present without a program. Incoming president Bob Blumenthal and vice-president Fran Jacobs have joined ongoing officers Harold Moll, treasurer; Sylvia Kasser, financial secretary; Eva Bix, recording secretary; and Bill McConeghey, corresponding secretary. Outgoing president Sibyl Cohen was congratulated heartily for her two years of outstanding leadership. Coordinator Liz Eidelson resigned her position, but will continue to work for the local program as a board member. Those serving with Liz, as well as the toilers in the field, acknowledge her splendid coordinating. Newly-elected board members include Florence Shankman, Max Klayman, Susan Peck, Henrietta Rogers, Ruth Shapiro, Diane Smith, and John Taylor.

Fall Institute Weekend

Pocono Manor

November 13-15

"WHY FAITH?" The Pocono Mountains will provide Fall Institute Weekend participants with an elevated starting place for a searching look at the phenomenon of faith. The three chosen authors explore this theme in vastly different works. Par Lagerkvist's *Barabbas*, a condemned thief, is spared crucifixion when the Roman governor determines that Christ is to be crucified instead. Barabbas then spends the rest of his life hungry for the certitude that faith gives to the Christians he meets. Soren Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, uses the story of Abraham and Isaac as a point of reference for an examination of faith, starting with Abraham as a "Hero of Faith." John Steinbeck, in *To A God Unknown*, pits an atheist against a monotheist in a struggle over a western farm, in what the author intends, perhaps, as a reflection of a larger conflict.

Registration:

Please send a deposit of \$70 per person (double occupancy) or \$100 per person (single occupancy, if available) with your registration to:

Sylvia Perelman
8214 Marion Road
Elkins Park, PA 19117

Cost:

\$170 per person, double occupancy, or \$232 per person, single occupancy. The price includes meals, lodging, books, entertainment, and tips.

If you must cancel, the deposit less a charge for books will be refunded if your cancellation is postmarked no later than October 7, 1987.

REGISTRATION REPRESENTS A COMMITMENT TO READ ALL THE BOOKS
AND ATTEND ALL DISCUSSIONS

REGISTRATION FORM

Enclosed is a deposit of \$ _____, made payable to Fall Institute Committee.

Names (please give first and last name of each person)	non-smoking group	smoking group	no pref.
(first) _____ (last) _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(first) _____ (last) _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Address _____			
(city) _____ (state) _____ (zip) _____	(phone) () _____		

Please tell us any special requests, and we'll try to accommodate you.

GB Speaks Up For Library Funding

“Full funding for the Philadelphia Free Library is the lifeblood of our city’s future,” Mack Blank told reporters for the *Inquirer*, WIP Radio, and others at our own press conference during recent City Council budget hearings. Protesting the city’s proposed money allocation that threatened a 13 percent cutback of the library’s book purchases, Mack went on to explain how “Great Books discussion groups meeting in library branches all over town help parents and youngsters discover the library’s classics, steering them toward richer lives.”

Amid busloads of placard-waving Friends of the Free Library packing the City Hall proceedings, press conference attendance by Bill Allen, Emil Bix, Liz Eidelson, Milton King, Lucille and Bill McConeghey, and Is Wachs made a strong showing for Great Books support.

Group Growth

Is your librarian proud of hosting your discussion group? Ask her to proclaim her pride in ways that help your joint enterprise grow and prosper.

Example: Fishtown Community Library lists each month’s Great Books schedule in the *Friends of the Free Library Newsletter*. Free of charge, too.

Example: Elkins Park Free Library displays not only “Next Reading” counter cards furnished by our area coordinator and bulletin board schedules: the group even rates a turn on the library’s outdoor marquee.

These librarians weren’t asked—they volunteer their help. Encourage yours to do likewise.

Emil Bix

Great Books
14 Bay Second St.
Islip, NY 11751