

THE TRICORN

A NEWSLETTER PUBLISHED JOINTLY BY THE NEW ENGLAND ♦
LONG ISLAND ♦ PHILADELPHIA GREAT BOOKS COUNCILS

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LITERARY LIBERTY

A photograph of Rumanians eagerly buying books banned until recently in their Bucharest store is a forcible reminder of a freedom we are apt to take for granted. Can we imagine having books unborrowable, unbuyable and banned?

Let's dwell on the pleasures of libraries. Desiderius Erasmus was an appreciator, back in the 16th century. Desi stated: "When I get a little money, I buy books. If any is left, I buy food and clothes."

The term "food for thought" may have sprung from some biological concept of reading. Two 17th century writers in particular had voracious appetites for books. Jeremy Collier said, "A man may as well expect to grow stronger by always eating as wiser by always reading." And, according to Sir Richard Steele, "Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body."

In the 18th century, Charles Lamb, in an essay on books and reading, said, "I love to lose myself in others' minds." (Actually, he said "in other men's minds." That makes Elia a four-letter name in my book.)

The yearning for learning is expressed with sad sublimity in "The Slave Narrative," a compilation of oral histories. One man paraphrased:

"My master used to read prayers in public every Sabbath. I saw the book talk to him as he looked upon it and moved his lips. Later I followed him to the place where he put the book and, when nobody saw me, I opened it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hopes that it would say something to me. But I was very sorry, and greatly disappointed, when I found that the page would not speak."

To sum up with a quote from, probably, Anon., "We are each a part of all we read."

Claire Gerber



NEW ENGLAND NEWS

What's in a Name?

The first New England news is that Boston Great Books is no more. Put your hankies away! The name changed, nothing else has. But what a Kafkaesque, bureaucratic nightmare, when Boston Great Books attempted to revise its by-laws and change its name. After filing and refiling required documents for more than a year, the organization finally effected the change. (Warning: verify your organization's legal status before filing any changes.)

Fall One-Day Institute

This annual event will once again feature a classic and a contemporary reading. This year's theme is "Changing Places: King Lear Retold." We will read Shakespeare's *King Lear* together with Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, the novel for which she won a Pulitzer Prize. Through shifting viewpoints and striking imagery Smiley relates the decline of a wealthy farmer in Iowa who retires abruptly, offering equal portions of his land to his three daughters. Of course, the youngest is disinherited, the older two turn on each other, and the father's behavior deteriorates. The novel addresses contemporary social and environmental issues as well as questions about the nature of the family and the self.

The Fall Institute and annual meeting will be held on Saturday, October 28 at the Newton Public Library. Details will follow in our flyer. We are using the library and trying a bag lunch format to reduce expenses and allow more people to attend. We need your support and input at all our institutes and other events.

Local Longevity

Next January the Great Books Group in Andover will celebrate its 45th anniversary. What is even more remarkable, the group has been led all these years by its founder, Bob Rockwell. Bob encourages participants to lead a few sessions, lest the group become too dependent on him. He also welcomes suggestions from members for future readings, but he filters those requests through his own insight and experience to tailor the list to the goals of the Great Books program. The result is a group that appeals to generation after generation; the parents of a current participant discussed the Great Books with Bob years ago.

The Andover Memorial Library contributed substantially to the success of this group, publicizing its discussions, preparing fall and winter flyers, and maintaining the mail list. Support materials in the library's collection reflect the good relations between the library and the group over the years.

The group meets at the Andover Library 7:30-9:30 P.M. on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month. This Fall they will read world drama and 19th century American fiction.

Discussion Program Grants

The Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities offers small grants, up to \$500, to support library reading and discussion programs. Applications are accepted at any time to cover materials, publicity, speaker fees, and related expenses. Despite funding difficulties, the program administrator expects grants to be available at least through next year. Contact Faith White at their South Hadley office for information, (413) 536-1385. The Foundation also accepts applications monthly for mini grants, up to \$1,500. Requests for major grants, over \$1,500, are due May 1 or November 1. These awards help fund a range of cultural programs. The Foundation's Boston office can be reached at (617) 451-9021.

A VERY BASIC QUESTION

Attention Great Books leaders! Did one thing or another keep you from preparing for the upcoming discussion of your group? Or do you need one wonderful question for a spontaneous discussion? Herewith, a terrific basic question for all occasions, a query that has intrigued and confounded men for centuries: Why did the chicken cross the road? Yes, that's it, that's the all purpose question. It has been posed to a number of great thinkers and men and women of renown. Here are some of the more interesting answers:

Why did the chicken cross the road?

Plato: For the greater good.

Karl Marx: It was a historical inevitability.

Oliver North: National security was at stake.

Jean-Paul Sartre: In order to act in good faith and be true to itself, the chicken found it necessary to cross the road.

Albert Einstein: Whether the chicken crossed the road or the road crossed the chicken depends on your frame of reference.

Aristotle: To actualize its potential.

Buddha: If you ask the question, you deny your own chicken-nature.

Darwin: It was the logical next step after coming down from the trees.

Emily Dickinson: Because it could not stop for death.

Epicurus: For fun.

Emerson: It didn't cross the road! It transcended it!

Ernest Hemingway: To die. In the rain.

Werner Heisenberg: We are not sure which side of the road the chicken was on, but it was moving very fast.

David Hume: Out of custom and habit.

Ronald Regan: I forget.

John Sununu: The Air Force was only too happy to provide the transportation, so quite unexpectedly the chicken availed himself of the opportunity.

The Sphinx: You tell me.

Mark Twain: The news of its crossing has been greatly exaggerated.

Betty Freidan: It was a hen!

Zeno of Elea: To prove it could never reach the other side.

Thomas de Torquemada: Give me ten minutes with the chicken and I'll find out.

William Faulkner: The chicken (or so its clucking, scratching presence seemed to make its identity clear, despite the faded red of its crown and the lack of one wing: a mysterious disappearance, as strange as that of the cat you live with for forty years until it goes on a last mousing trip, crossing into that undiscovered bourn from which no traveler returns) crossed the wide road safely. It endured.

DEFINING "GREAT BOOKS"

What constitutes a "great book?" The wittiest characterization I have heard is that of Mark Twain, who said that the great books are those which everyone wishes he had read, but no one wants to read. He does not tell us here why we should wish we had read them. For John Erskine, who initiated the General Honors Course at Columbia in the reading and discussion of his Classics of Western Civilization, the relevance of the great books was not limited to the century in which they were written; he found them always relevant to whatever century their readers inhabited. Twain seems to have agreed with Erskine when he said, "The ancients have stolen all our ideas from us."

In 1988 Geraldine Van Doren edited a compilation of some of Mortimer Adler's work under the title *Reforming Education: the Opening of the American Mind*. This followed by only a year the publication of Allan Bloom's best selling *The Closing of the American Mind*, of which Adler did not have as high an opinion as the public, who kept it on the best seller list. For the compilation on Reforming Education, Adler wrote a prologue and an epilogue. In the epilogue he wrote: "If we say a good book is a book worth reading once, and that a better book than that—a great book—is one that is worth reading a second or third time, then the greatest books are those that are worth reading over and over again, endlessly. The last 2500 years of western civilization have produced few books that can measure up to that standard. I can think of no more than 15 at the most."

I was surprised at his very modest estimate of 15 books worth reading endlessly, in view of another statement in which he had found the great books (presumably not only the greatest) still instructive on his 15th reading for discussion.

Adler's syntopicon, with its essays on the Great Ideas and its voluminous references to what Robert Hutchins called "the great conversation" conducted over the last 25 centuries by the authors of the great books, provides an exhaustive index to the ideas which, according to Mark Twain, the ancients have stolen from us. The manifold aspects of human relationships and human behavior which concern us today have been the concerns of all who engage in the great conversation, and the last word yet to be written on practically all of them.

Aaron Bechtel

PHILADELPHIA NEWS

Long Book Group

If the two week intervals between group meetings seems too long, the Philadelphia Long Book Group suggests a 956 page masterpiece to slip between your scheduled readings. Just as deep as it is long, *The Recognitions* by William Gaddis bursts with brilliance of every sort: magnificent language, mordant wit, encyclopedic erudition, immense imagination. The chief theme, forgery both actual and metaphorical, links dozens of characters in the worlds of art and literature and religion, set mostly in mid-fifties Manhattan, with occasional excursions to Spain, Italy, Central America, and New England. Gaddis captures the revealing small talk at many parties, as well as the deeper interplay among his main people. Almost any page can furnish examples of good Gaddis. Here is the isolate, Mr. Pivner, reading his newspaper:

"...he picked up his newspaper. The Sunday edition, still in the rack beside him, required fifty acres of timber for its magic transformation of nature into progress, benefits of modern strides in transportation, communication, and freedom of the press: public information. (True, as he got into the paper, the average page was made up of a half-column of news and four-and-one-half columns of advertising.) A train wreck in India, 27 killed, he read; a bus gone down a ravine in Chile, 1 American and 11 natives; avalanche in Switzerland, death toll mounts... Nothing escaped Mr. Pivner's eye, not penetrated to his mind: nothing evaded his attention, as nothing reached his heart."

The Long Book Group first cut its teeth on Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* several years ago. A hiatus of several more years followed, as members recovered from their labors. Then last year the group, reconstituted under Aaron Heller's enthusiastic leadership, read Joyce's *Ulysses* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. This summer the group moved on to Fielding's *Tom Jones*. Books are divided into digestible chunks and discussed at three month intervals. A number of peak moments remain in the group's collective memory, but perhaps none created such lasting satisfaction as the moment at the end of the dinner celebrating the end of the Proust work, when group members simultaneously dipped their madeleines in their tea.

(Partial) Changing of the Guard

Eva Bix, finishing her two years of peaceful, pleasant leadership, handed the presidential gavel to Max Klayman. New vice president: Olga Wallace; New recording secretary: Nancy Washburne; Continuing as corresponding secretary: William McConeghey, and as treasurer: Sylvia Kasser. Joining the board of directors: John Dalton and Charles McCardell.

Guide For INSTANT DISCUSSION

After a friendly chit-chat with friends, what to talk about?

How about a word, a simple word dropped in the conversation--a word commonly used without thought.

Someone in attendance has bought a lottery ticket. "Good luck!" another says.

You ask, "What is luck? Does it really exist? What makes it good? What makes it bad?... and thinking starts.

"In the beginning was the word..." and we still don't know what it means.

On the other hand (the one without the drink), you might prefer a reading, something short that could be printed on your cocktail napkins. Here's one from *Proverbs XXVI*:

4- Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou be like unto him.

5- Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.

And the question is, "How does the *Old Testament* want us to answer a fool?" (I don't know the answer for Fools, but for Hosts I would suggest number 4, for Great Books Discussion Leaders number 5.)

Charles Ferrara

LONG ISLAND ONE-DAY INSTITUTE '95

The LI Council reports that it had its most successful Spring Institute ever--only two participants and one council member got lost. But the real bottom line was that the participants bought all the left-overs--fried chicken, potato salad and both books. How often does that happen?

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WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW



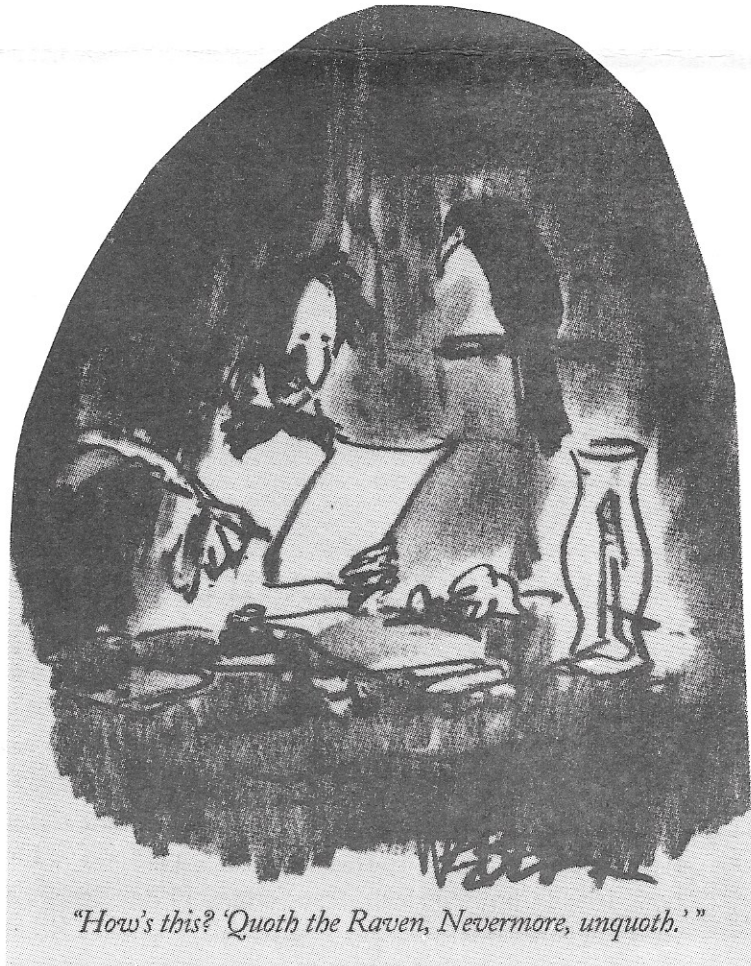
"And then I saw the shop teacher, Mr. Morgan, grab my homeroom teacher Ms. Truslow. In a flash, he was all over her."

Read Dirty to Me

Here's good news to pass on to any illiterate, smut-loving friends: Erotic classics (abridged) are available on tape, published by a British company, Prelude Audio Books. Among the titles: Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*, the Marquis de Sade's *Justine*, Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*, and Anais Nin's *Henry and June*, all read by well-known actors and actresses. A search is on for a suitable erotic masterpiece to be read in the thrilling, whispery voice of John Malkovich.

Poe's Poser

Poe knew his scansion was not right;
He fretted all the day and night,
Living like an eremite.
Ceaselessly he would recite
The lumpy line that caused the blight,
Until at last he saw the light;
He lopped "unquoth," E. Allan Poe,
becoming the great bard we know.



"How's this? 'Quoth the Raven, Nevermore, unquoth.'"

CELEBRATE WITH US!

PHILADELPHIA'S 25TH ANNUAL GREAT BOOKS



FALL INSTITUTE WEEKEND

NOVEMBER 10, 11, 12, 1995

POCONO MANOR INN

LOVE LINES



Love in the Time of Cholera . . . Gabriel Marcia Marquez
Poems . . . e. e. cummings
The Heart is a Lonely Hunter . . . Carson McCullers

Love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.

John Donne

COST: \$205 per person, double occupancy. \$265 for single occupancy. Price includes meals, lodging, books, entertainment and tips.

TO REGISTER: Please send a deposit of \$105 per person for double occupancy and \$135 for single occupancy with your registration form to:

CANCELLATION: Your deposit, less a charge for books and mailing, will be refunded if notice is postmarked no later than October 6.

Sylvia Perelman
8214 Marion Rd.
Elkins Park, PA, 19027



REGISTRATION FORM

Enclosed is a deposit of _____ \$105 per person double occupancy or \$135 per person single occupancy - (if available) made payable to Fall Institute Committee.

Table with 4 columns: Names (please give the first and last name of each person), Non-smoking group, Smoking group, No Preference group. Two rows of registration information.

Address (street) _____
(city) _____ (state) _____ (zip) _____ (phone) _____

Special requests should accompany this form. They will be honored if possible.

(Optional) I would like to room with _____



A GATHERING OF EQUALS

"I am proposing a national conversation open to all Americans, a conversation in which all voices are heard and in which we grapple seriously with the meaning of American pluralism," declared Sheldon Hackney, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Since shared inquiry and thoughtful conversation are the heart and soul of the Great Books Program, the Philadelphia Council (as well as those of Chicago and San Francisco) applied through the Great Books Foundation for an NEH grant to join Hackney's "great conversation" on American pluralism and identity.

Board member Marney Hague sparked the July 8 event, writing proposals, contacting local ethnic, religious and racial organizations, inviting panelists, arranging space in the Convention Center. Program Chairman Sibly Cohen dealt with the mountain of minutiae, and a large group of volunteers too numerous to name worked to create a smooth, successful day.

In the afternoon session, two 90-minute discussions led by local leaders focused on the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. After a dinner break, a two-hour panel discussion moderated by Denise Alquist considered Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, ending with a period of interaction between panel and audience. Panel members were Rebecca T. Alpert, Co-Director of Women's Studies Program, Temple University; Elijah Anderson, Professor of Social Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania; Thomas Paine Cronin, President of AFSCME, District Council 47; Robert Fishman, History Professor, Rutgers University; Christine James-Brown, President, United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania; Steve Lopez, Philadelphia Inquirer columnist; Hayatun Nessa, graduate student from Bangladesh; William Tucker, Professor of Psychology, Rutgers University; and Cornel West, Professor of Religion and Afro-American Studies, Harvard University.

The response of the participants was overwhelmingly favorable, but our "Great Conversation" is not over. Six follow-up sessions are planned, starting Thursday, September 14 at Friends Select School, 17th and Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia, from 7 to 9 pm. The last five meetings will be monthly from October through February, all at Friends Select School. On September 14, Steve Lopez's *Third and Indiana* will be discussed. For information: Norma Oser, (215) 635-3504.

Great Books
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