

# GREAT READING

H O U S T O N   G R E A T



B O O K S   C O U N C I L

## BOOKMARKS :

- **Book Central Market Community Room** for 2013, if your group uses it, June
- **July 4 Event: The Commerce Clause in the US Constitution**, July 4
- **Classical Pursuits, Toronto**, July 15-20
- **HGBC Discussion Workshop**, September 22 (See p. 3.)
- **HGBC Annual Meeting and Elections**, October 7

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- Discussing Nonfiction Workshop for September! See p. 3 for more.
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## CELEBRATE COMMERCE JULY 4?

On July 4 the Houston Great Books Council will sponsor its annual discussion of the Constitution and related documents. This year we will discuss the Commerce Clause, from Article 1, Section 8, item 3. Don't worry, it isn't very long, only 16 words.

We will meet from 1:00 to 3:00 pm at the Barnes and Noble on Westheimer and Voss.

Thanks to recommendations from Rocky Rhodes and Janet Beck we will have a terrific guest leader, Peter Linzer, a constitutional law professor at Universi-

ty of Houston. Water and snacks will be provided.

It should be a fascinating discussion, especially because the Supreme Court is likely to issue their ruling about the Affordable Care Act in June, so we'll be able to discuss the Commerce Clause in that context.

## DISCUSSING FINNEGANS WAKE ON 52ND STREET

by Bill Hord

This year I was lucky enough to spend Spring Break in New York City. And I was doubly lucky to take part in a discussion of pages 130-133 of *Finnegans Wake* while I was there.

The *Finnegans Wake* Society of New York maintains a website that lists discussions of Joyce's masterpiece around the world. I discovered several groups meeting monthly in Manhattan, and that two groups were planning to meet the week of my visit. I contacted both, and made my

plans!

My wife and daughter had discussed what to do in New York, and my daughter had joked that for me it would be a book discussion. She knows me too well!

On Wednesday I travelled to a residence on 52nd Street just off 9th Avenue. A group of 7, counting me, with a bottle of "Jhon Jhamieson and Song" for courage, met in the host's living room. It was lined with bookshelves filled with books by and about Joyce. We had a lively discussion

of (part of) the first riddle addressed to Shaun.

Answer: Finn MacCool!

On Thursday evening I tried to locate the other group, meeting in the back room of a Greenwich Village restaurant, but by the time I got there, I had missed them.

My experience was nonetheless unforgettable.

There are Great Books and other groups meeting everywhere, and there are ways to find them. I recommend it to everyone.

## THINGS FALL APART GREAT BOOKS CHICAGO 2012

by Connie Lewis

Among the 70-plus attending, there was a strong Texas contingent at Great Books Chicago this year. Attending from Sugarland was Alice Mondshine and from Houston were Eric Timmreck, and Connie Lewis; and from Georgetown, Texas, were Carin & William Glass.

Alice, Eric and Connie arrived Thursday afternoon, wanting to get a good night's sleep for the packed-full weekend. We registered Friday morning at the Hilton Garden Inn on Grand Ave. which was the event hotel this year. We headed for the Art Institute of Chicago, after walking around Millennium Park and the outdoor art "Cloud Scape" or aka "the bean" we had a quick lunch. We

met up with the rest of the attendees and broke into small groups to view and discuss several paintings and a sculpture...always with the week end theme in mind. We returned to the hotel for discussion of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. After dinner we headed for the Navy Pier to Chicago Shakespeare Theater to see the play *Timon of Athens*.

Saturday morning we joined our assigned groups for discuss of the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Saturday's lunch was family style and served to the entire group at Maggiano's Italian Restaurant. This was followed by a welcome talk, announcements and a presentation of monologues by a group called BoyGirlBoyGirl.

Saturday evening was "free" so Alice, Eric and Connie decided to continue the Things Fall Apart theme by attending *The Iceman Cometh* at the Goodman Theater...five hours, four acts and three intermissions later we were about to fall apart.

Sunday morning, again in our assigned groups we discussed five poems; including Yeats Second Coming in which one of the lines is ...things fall apart. After this discussion there was ½ hour break to pack/checkout. The final witty talk on was by Alex Pollock. We each received one of his books, *Boom and Bust-Financial Cycles and Human Prosperity*, in which you will find the Paul Volcker quote "about every ten years, we have the biggest crisis in 50 years."

## CAN GROUPS GROW WITH MEETUP?

by Bill Hord

Familiarity doesn't always breed contempt. More often in Great Books, reading substantial literature with a solid and steady group over years leads to deep discussions and real friendships.

At the same time, every group needs new participants, for both the liveliness of its discussions and inevitably for its survival.

A few of the Houston Great Books groups are now using a social media website called Meetup to promote their discussions and attract new members. The HGBC Board has decided to support this approach on an experimental basis with an expand-

ed number of groups.

Alice Aman has used Meetup to promote her groups for a while, with good success.

Recently, I created meetups for three groups, and so far 11 new people have joined the Philosophy Café Meetup; 9 have also joined the Monumental Group; and one has signed up for Finnegans Wake.

I was warned that many people sign up on Meetup and never attend meetings. This may be the case — it is too early to tell how many new members will become active participants — but the first Philosophy Café meeting after we starting using Meetup included 2 of the new mem-

bers. It is also worth noting that these participants respected the Great Books approach (I posted a set of guidelines on the Meetup site beforehand) and gave our discussion a breath of fresh air.

Meetup offers a lot of flexibility for posting pdfs for members only, for discussions between meetings, and for managing communication with members. One big advantage of using Meetup is reaching younger readers who might have an interest in our approach and our groups.

If you think you might like to use Meetup to promote your group, contact Board member Kent Guida at kentguida@gmail.com .

## WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT NONFICTION

Workshop? Symposium? Conference? Seminar?

Whatever you call it, mark a new kind of event on your calendar for September 22: a chance to talk about how to organize, lead, and take part in discussions of nonfiction.

Many of our groups focus on stories and novels. Most of us are very experienced discussing fiction.

Nonfiction, on the other hand,

seems harder to discuss, for a variety of reasons. (But is it really?)

Also, it seems that, in selecting books by vote or by consensus, fiction is chosen more often than nonfiction.

There are a variety of issues (and a variety of kinds of nonfiction).

On September 22 we'll explore the problems you've had, as well as the solutions you've discovered. The event is intended to be a chance to

inquire and learn together, in true Great Books fashion.

**WATCH FOR MORE DETAILS AND REGISTRATION IN THE SEPTEMBER 1 NEWSLETTER!**

For the Workshop we're reading:

***The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* by Alison Gopnik**  
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009, 250 pp.)

## CLOSE READING WORKSHOP

Group leaders, experienced participants, and novices from around the Houston Great Books area filled the Close Reading workshop on May 12. We were there to explore and apply the idea that "the quality of a discussion is based on the participants' sound understanding of what a text actually says" (*Shared Inquiry Handbook*).

The *Handbook* describes close reading in this way: "In close reading, the group examines a single passage of a work line by line—and sometimes word by word—raising questions about its meaning."

Close reading is essential to the Great Books Shared Inquiry™ method. The *Handbook* suggests the following procedure for applying close reading in a discussion:

1. "The leader asks someone to read the passage in question aloud."
2. "The group reviews the context of the passage. In a work of fiction, identify who is "speaking" in the passage—the author, a fictitious narra-

tor, or a character—and recall what events have occurred in the plot up to that point. In nonfiction, note the position of the passage in the argument as a whole. For example, if the passage is placed at the beginning of the selection, consider its purpose there. Does it provide background information for the argument? Does it introduce assumptions and definitions? Does it take issue with another author? Does the passage state a theory the author hopes to prove?"

3. "The group goes over the passage line by line, with the leader asking questions about each word, phrase, and sentence that is not clear to participants."

Workshop leaders Wendy Wilkinson and Bill Hord emphasized different uses of close reading with different kinds of texts at different stages in the process.

Wendy led the group using a worksheet for fiction that focused on discovering common elements such plot, setting, character, theme, and unresolved sections. She empha-

sized using this approach before the group actually meets.

Bill shared some tips for close reading nonfiction, such as marking key and/or unusual words; identifying the author's words for key concepts; and marking the structure of sentences, paragraphs, and arguments.

For difficult texts, it can be helpful to everyone to get a set of discussion questions ahead of the meeting. Some models for questions for shared reading with the group include:

- What is the sense of a key or difficult word?
- What is the author saying?
- What are the implications of this text?
- What is the relationship between two sentences?
- Do you agree with what it says?

Participants also shared their insights into the texts we were reading and their experience with close reading in discussion.

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HOUSTONGREATBOOKS.NET



On the web at [houstongreatbooks.net](http://houstongreatbooks.net)

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**Don't Stay Home and Read Alone! Join a discussion group and get more out of your book. Find a group at [houstongreatbooks.net](http://houstongreatbooks.net)!**

**Great Reading is published quarterly by Houston Great Books Council; Bill Hord and Wendy Wilkinson, editors.**

Great Books discussion groups are forums for thoughtful readers. Discussions are lively, friendly, sometimes contentious — and a good deal of fun. The object of a Great Books discussion is not to go home with the “right answer.” Participants challenge their own and others’ beliefs and opinions in the light of a rich, thought-provoking text.

Great Books discussions employ a method called Shared Inquiry™. Shared Inquiry is a Socratic, collaborative, and question-driven discussion method. The leader’s role is to advance conversation through careful questioning, letting participants reflect, speak and explore together.

For more information about Houston Great Books and what’s happening in any of our more than 20 discussion groups, visit our website at <http://houstongreatbooks.net>.

WHAT HOUSTON GREAT BOOKS ARE  
READING, JUNE - AUGUST 2012

If you haven't visited the Houston Great Books website recently to check out what our groups are reading, you're missing some great opportunities. Here's a **sample** of what you'll find.

Always on Sunday: Stories by Singer, Sartre, and Cheever from the Great Books *Short Story Omnibus* (June 24, July 22, August 26)

Central Market: *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess (July 9)

Cypress Creek: Readings by Aeschylus, James, and Machiavelli from the *Great Books 3rd Series* (June 18, July 16, August 20)

Explorers: *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin (July 11)

Heights: *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne (August 11)

Houston Nonfiction Book Club: *The Education of Henry Adams* by Henry Adams (June 20, July 18, August 15)

Life & Times: *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, and *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* by Joseph Campbell (June 20, July 18, August 15)

Looscan: *Summer Break* (June, July, August)

Memorial: *Being-in-the-World* by Hubert Dreyfus (June 24, July 22, August 26)

Montrose: *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes (July 5)

Monumental Great Books: *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo (July 28)

Philosophy Cafe: *Hegel through Hegel's Own Introductions* (June 17, July 15, August 19)

Political Philosophy: *The Utilitarian Debate* (June 14, July 12, August 9)

Short Story Group (formerly Meyerland): *Stories* by Balzac, Poe, and James from the *Great Books Short Story Omnibus* (June 12, July 10, August 14)

Sugar Land (First Colony): *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni (June 19)

West University: “To Perpetual Peace” by Immanuel Kant from the *Great Books Great Conversations 4* anthology (June 12)

Young Thinkers: *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey (June 25)

**Look for the next *Great Reading* in your mailbox again around September 1!**