

# 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:

- **Great Books Chicago**, April 26-29, 2012
- **HGBC Advanced Discussion Workshop**, May 12
- **HGBC Social Event**, May 19
- **July 4 Event: The Commerce Clause in the US Constitution**, July 4
- **Classical Pursuits, Toronto**, July 15-20
- **HGBC Discussion Symposium**, September 22

## INSIDE

- A report by guest contributor "Paul Lake" on the HGBC event, "What Is Art?" February 18. See story, p. 1.
- A how-to guide by Wendy Wilkinson on Creating Question Clusters. Wendy's guide was part of our successful Basic Leading Workshop on January 21. See p. 3.

## LOOK CLOSELY ...

"Close reading" will be the focus of an HGBC Advanced Workshop on May 12.

Every Great Books reading includes passages that invite extra attention for understanding and appreciation.

Close reading of fiction can help a group explore who is speaking, what is happening, and especially what does the work mean by focusing on key parts.

Close reading is a valuable tool in discussing non-fiction as well. The struc-

ture of an argument, the meanings of special terms, the author's perspective on



### **Advanced Workshop: Close Reading**

**When: Saturday, May 12, 2012, 10:00 am—1:00 pm**

**Where: Central Market**

**Cost: Free**

**Pre-Register NOW at:**

[http://bit.ly/  
GBCloseReading](http://bit.ly/GBCloseReading)

evidence and arguments — all these can become clearer through close reading.

Close reading is integral to the Great Books Shared Inquiry™ method.

The workshop on Saturday, May 12, will help participants and potential leaders understand and apply close reading to discussions of both fiction and nonfiction.

Seats are limited for this and all our workshops, so register early using the link in the highlight box.

## THAT IMPOSSIBLE QUESTION: "WHAT IS ART?"

Contributed by Paul Lake, West U Great Books

On a recent, rainy Saturday morning about forty representatives and guests of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the Houston Great Books Council convened at the museum to ask, and attempt to answer, that crazy, im-

possible question, "What is art?" Granted, most people have their own ideas about the types of things that fit that description, are satisfied with their subjective view, and agree that producing a variety of responses is part of the nature of art, per se. But today, in our public, multi-

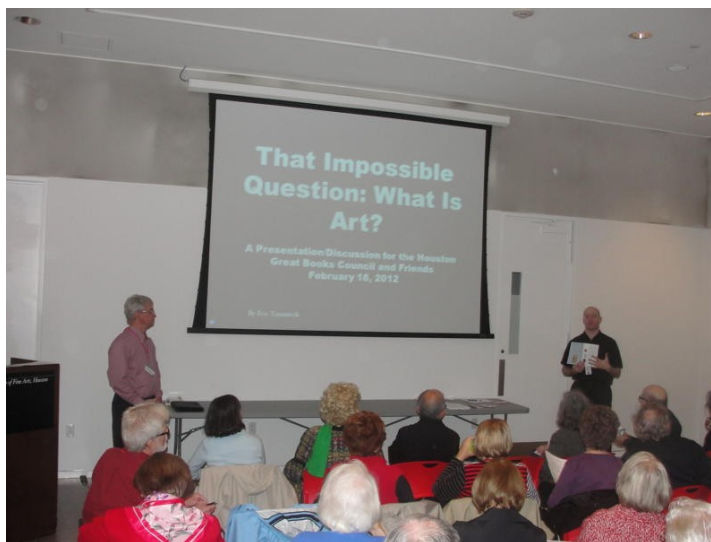
media art world often propelled by heavily endowed institutions and publically funded, federal agencies which make large grants to artists and art programs, the evaluation of artwork is not always just a private matter; some consensus seems to be in order. Yet,

*(Continued on page 2)*

the question, *quid sit*, seems to stubbornly await a definitive answer. A questionable NEA grant or the eye-popping prices paid for auctioned paintings, works that some of us wouldn't hang in a garage, can often ignite heated commentary—"I wouldn't pay ten cents for the c%&#" or "When did a toilet bowl become art?"

Possibly with this controversy in mind, our own Eric Timmreck, President of the Houston Great Books Council and volunteer docent at the MFAH, agreed to share his views on the subject. Drawing from many years of the study of literature and art, much of which was conducted through his affiliation with HGBC and the MFAH, Timmreck approached this topic 'perspectivally' and 'historically', i.e., from angles based on different aspects of a given work of art and the different ways that one, or a society in general, might regard it at a given time. In his analysis attendees were invited to view multiple examples of works (mainly paintings) which could be, or might have been 'regarded/ experienced as': Imitation, Aesthetic Experience, the Beautiful or Sublime, Form, Process, Meaning, Dialectic or Narrative while at the same time consulting passages from over a dozen philosophers, art experts, and artists themselves, including Kant, Nietzsche, Dewey, Kandinsky, and Danto. Their comments focused on what they found to be the important, if not required, qualities of art in general. In many cases the specific examples of art used in Mr. Timmreck's slide presentation were also addressed in the expert literature and were later viewed in person

Eric Timmreck of the Houston Great Books Council and Jay Heuman, Public Programs Coordinator, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston conclude opening remarks in a recent presentation at the Museum which addressed the question: "What is Art?"



through a tour of the museum led by four very helpful MFAH docents.

Armed with a host of suggestions on how one might better evaluate artwork, both representational and abstract, the group went on to look for universal components, the conceptual glue, the 'things' that all works of art share or, dare I say, should share in common. Thus, one might be closer to stating an attention-worthy opinion on not only what art is, but what it is not, to us, in the here and now, with no claims on what art might possibly look like in the future. Not surprisingly, progress was made.

Most who attended liked the idea that the term 'art' is a designation given to artifacts made with certain intentions that exhibit certain qualities and if so, are regarded appropriately. More specifically, they agreed that an artifact (painting and sculpture) should be held out as 'art' if it exhibits a large portion of the following list of features: is about some-

thing and embodies its meaning; informs; communicates truthfully; speaks to us at least as effectively as the written word; preserves some important idea; captures some moment in time worth preserving (if for no other reason than we learn to avoid those moments); had been intended to be regarded as art; is somehow associated in some way with other works that have been historically regarded as art; is memorable; induces some kind of meaningful aesthetic experience (described as: that time in which our sensing, emotional selves and our rational minds, faith and reason if you will, somehow come together to produce a novel, feeling-based understanding of a different, yet productive kind); is pleasurable, but not necessarily so (works that reproduced fearful or chaotic moments were not rejected as art for those reasons alone, yet other objects discussed, but not observed here, that seemed born to distort the truth, defile, or offend the innocent ... were rejected) and fi-

nally, that it leads us towards unification, i.e., to feel as if we are a part of a larger whole, all share some things in common.

Of course, right when everyone thought they we were about to hit pay dirt, find a consensus, come to the grandest of all agreements by producing a detailed list, a taxonomy

of all the necessary or sufficient conditions for an artifact to be labeled 'art', that annoying little aspect of the human condition, 'subjectivity', entered yet again into the conversation and all called it a day. Nevertheless, if engendering greater public knowledge and deeper insight, maybe even more tolerant positions (what open discussion is really

about) on this complex subject was part of the goal here, along with creating a memorable social gathering, then this presentation about art could easily be called a work of art itself—or could it?

## CREATING QUESTION CLUSTERS

by Wendy Wilkinson

Being a discussion leader is a difficult, selfless act. And one of the hardest tasks of a leader is creating questions. After years of leading discussion groups, I now create question clusters instead of single questions, and I offer you my system in hopes that you may better enjoy the role of leader.

Our best questions start with our own questions we have as we read. But simply writing down our initial questions in one long, giant list can be problematic. Our tendency as beginning leaders is to try to get through every question on the list, and we often move on to the next question as soon as we hear only one answer. This will create a question-and-answer session that randomly hops around the text. Instead, we want to come up with ways to ask questions that will promote discussion.

Question clusters are multiple questions about one topic. The directions are simple: take an initial question and ask it in a different way. Keep doing this until you can think of no other approaches. This builds a question cluster that serves several

tasks. One, you as leader now have a firm grip on the complexity of the idea. Two, this can provide structure and help you better organize the overall approach. Three, you will develop stronger questions that are more likely to create a dialogue. Four, you now have multiple questions at your disposal to help a stalled or sidetracked conversation.

The following three examples are based on the story "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver. The initial question is the question I had while reading the story. The subsequent build questions are questions built from the initial question that I developed later while thinking on the story.

### Example 1

Initial: Why did his wife try to kill herself when she was younger?

Build: Do you think she's a different person now than she was then? In what ways is she the same and/or different?

Build: How does this knowledge affect the narrator and their marriage?

Build: Why does it matter that we know this information?

### Example 2

Initial: What is the narrator like before Robert shows up? Do you like him?

Build: Point to specific passages that tell us something about the narrator.

Build: How does the narrator's wife feel about him? Is there anything we know about the narrator that the wife doesn't know?

Build: In what ways is the narrator figuratively blind?

### Example 3

Initial: Is it an important detail that they drink/smoke/eat the whole evening?

Build: What changes take place in the characters as they imbibe?

Build: Is the drinking/smoking/eating necessary to the narrator's epiphany at the end?

Build: How is the scene where they eat related to the drinking? Why is this scene in the story?

Build: What roles (good and bad) does alcohol and other types of consumption play in this story? How does the story feel about consumption?

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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 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>.

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

**WHAT HOUSTON GREAT BOOKS ARE READING, MARCH - MAY 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 Mansfield, Hemingway, and Pritchett from the Great Books Short Story Omnibus (March 25, April 26, May 27)

Central Market: *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Wolff (April 9)

Cypress Creek: Readings by Homer, Montesquieu, and Chaucer from the Great Books 3<sup>rd</sup> Series (March 19, April 16, May 21)

Explorers: *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun* by JRR Tolkien (May 2)

Heights: *The Heart of the Matter* by Graham Greene (April 14)

Houston Nonfiction Book Club: *Nonzero* by Robert Wright (March 21, April 18, May 16)

Life & Times: *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce, and *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* by Joseph Campbell (March 21, April 18, May 16)

Looscan: *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (April 19)

Memorial: *Being-in-the-World* by Hubert Dreyfus (March 25, April 26, May 27)

Meyerland: Stories from *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* by Chitra Divakaruni (March 13, April 10, May 8)

Montrose: *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (April 5)

Monumental Great Books: *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon (April 28)

Philosophy Cafe: *Hegel through Hegel's Own Introductions* (March 18, April 15, May 20)

Political Philosophy: *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* by Jeremy Bentham (April 12)

Sugar Land (First Colony): *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni (May 15)

West University: *Meno* by Plato from the Great Books Great Conversations 4 anthology (April 10)

Woodlands: Selections by Calvino, Lurie, Husley, and Houston from Great Books *Even Deadlier* (March 1, April 5)

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