

# THE TRICORN

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

July 1984

---

## IF NO ONE WINS, WHO WANTS TO PLAY?

by Phyllis Rose

I taught the freshman Great Books course at Wesleyan University last semester. Its official title is "Touchstones of Western Values," and my students were eager to get as many values as possible. One complained that although the course covered **The Iliad**, Greek tragedy, Socratic dialogues and **The Bible**, it included no Roman values. I answered his consumerist complaint with a consumerist explanation: next year, when Robert Fitzgerald's translation appeared in paperback, we would "cover" **The Aeneid**.

Ten years ago, when I last taught this course, it was struggling to survive widespread skepticism about canonical lists of great books and the value of Western civilization. We taught Malraux's **Man's Fate** and Sartre's **The Flies** also, in order to give the ancient works what we did not blush to call "contemporary relevance." I am relieved not to have to defend daily the ground I walk on, as we had to do in the days when undergraduates laughed at the idea of a course on Great Books or Western Values.

My usual stamping ground is English literature, so my knowledge of the classical material is not profound. But the ability to read a text responsibly keeps me ahead of my students, who tend to treat all literature as a Rorschach test on which they bring to bear the few ideas that are already firmly in their minds. Fair enough. That's why courses like this one exist. That's why education exists: to free people from their preconceptions, to introduce them to something outside the self, to keep the objective world from being a giant Rorschach test.

★ ★ ★

**The Iliad** mystified my students. Most of them so distrust military actions that they could hardly see this one as an occasion for glory. Nor could they wrap their minds around the idea that a short life with glory might be more desirable than a long life without glory. Given that choice — a short life with glory or a long life without it — Achilles chose glory. I took a vote on the same question. All but three of my twenty-three students chose long life. They seemed to feel that if the ancient Greeks had lived with nuclear disaster around the corner, they would have had more respect for long life. "Glory" was decidedly a luxury item.

**The Iliad** was alien to them also because of the gods, who intrude, take sides, play tricks, and generally behave in an undignified fashion. My students have the exaggerated respect for other people's gods characteristic of those who have no gods themselves. They assumed that gods should behave seriously to be taken seriously, should behave admirably in order to inspire us to do the same. The Greek gods and goddesses disappointed them by joking around. Gradually they came to feel that the whole Trojan War was the fault of the gods. I argued in vain that the gods should be seen as literary expressions of passions and powers existing inside man. My students remained fatalistic. The gods — a bad lot — were to blame.

I shocked them by revealing my preference for Trojans over Greeks. The Trojans, I explained, are presented as people of culture and refined sensibilities. The Greeks are comparative barbarians. To my horrified students, this opinion flew in the face of history. After all, the Greeks won. They must be better.

This brings us to the heart of the matter, the irreducible difference between my students and the ancient Greeks. Deep down, my students, cockeyed optimists all, believe that good prevails and the bad die young. They believe in justice. If you asked them directly, they might deny it, but their belief in justice comes out in discussion.

It came out particularly when we discussed the tragic flaw. Good high schools across America apparently teach young people that a tragedy is tragic because a good man is led to destruction inevitably through some flaw in his character. If he didn't have a flaw, it wouldn't be tragic because it wouldn't "mean" anything. It would just be bad luck. To convince students that bad luck isn't tragic must take some fancy teaching; people without education tend to believe that bad luck is precisely what tragedy is about. But by the time they reach me, they're convinced.

Subscribing to the tragic-flaw theory has in fact become a hallmark of the educated person, the humanistic equivalent of belief in a just god. So my students, who have traded up from their one-dollar idea that tragedy concerns unhappy events to the ten-dollar idea that tragedy results from a flaw in the hero's character, offer me their belief in the tragic flaw and expect to be praised. I am outraged. I think the idea of the tragic flaw is one of the worst ever to come down the pike. It encourages self-satisfaction and the turning of one's back on other people's problems.

My students say "if only" a lot. If only Macbeth hadn't been ambitious, if only this or that had been avoided, everything would have been fine. "Everything is never fine," I tell them. None of us gets out of this alive. Tragedy is built into life. I adopt the metaphor of my material: "Zeus keeps two jars by his doorway — one filled with good, one with evil. He throws down both indiscriminately." There's no "if only" about it.

★ ★ ★

Oedipus was my ace in the hole, because I think there's no way he can be seen as deserving his fate. An oracle has prophesied that he will sleep with his mother and kill his father, so, horrified at the prospect of committing these crimes, he leaves the people he thinks are his parents. Of course, he runs smack into his real parents and commits the crimes he has been fleeing from. But how can he be seen as morally responsible? My students say he should never have left Corinth. He shouldn't have killed that guy at the crossroads. Under the circumstances, he shouldn't have gone to bed with any woman without checking very carefully whether or not she was his mother.

Our willingness to believe that people who have had bad luck somehow deserve it is a depressing fact of human nature. The tragic-flaw idea spills over from art to life. Throughout the semester I mentioned appalling news items. Three people are burned to death in a summer house on Fire Island. Was someone smoking in bed? asks a student. Did they have the electrical system checked recently? In a heavy rain Jessica Savitch and her companion drown when their car overturns in a canal. Had they been drinking? If illness, evil and death are not punishments, life is too frightening to consider. If there's no way of winning the game, who wants to play?

I ended the semester convinced of the "relevance" of the classical texts if their vision of the essential injustice of human life can be made to prevail. I field them against the moralistic consolations that protect my students' minds. But it's hard going, and sometimes, in my bad moments, I fear I am merely substituting a hundred-dollar disbelief for the ten-dollar ideas my students have come to me with.

(From **The New York Times**)

## BOSTON NEWS

### Fall Institute in Planning Stage

Once again, the Boston Council's One-Day Institute will be held amid the autumn scenery at Dana Hall College in Wellesly, Massachusetts on a Saturday in October. The exact date and book selections are still being decided. Flyers giving this information will be available at Colby in August. Anyone interested in attending can contact Bill Shea at 617/648-8322.

### Long-Range Strategy Planning

One of the most important and neglected tasks of any group responsible for overseeing a program is to step back occasionally and assess the "big picture" — to take note of significant trends and design long-range strategies accordingly. The Boston Council recently began such an effort, headed by Bill Rossi, a long-time Great Booker and wellspring of ideas. Other committee members are Rae Auburn, Louise Wye, and Jean Randlett.

Bill recently outlined a plan of attack for dealing with Boston's major problem: the steady decline in the number of Great Books groups (from approximately 60 in the late 1960's to about 20 today). According to Bill's outline, this attrition is fueled by two factors: the difficulty in sustaining interest among participants for longer than two or three years; and the lack of leaders around whom new groups could be started.

The problem of sustaining groups could be met in several ways. First, the Council could be more "paternal," inspiring a close-knit sense of community **among** groups through periodic outreach and publicity ventures in local areas. Second, the Council could develop good new lists of readings that groups could use for at least six years after exhausting the four years of classics now available in Chicago.

The problem of starting new groups requires a more ambitious solution, which also has two components. The first would be to target those towns without Great Books programs where demographic or geographic factors suggest a group might prosper. Next, effective publicity, a demonstration session, and the appointment of a person responsible for the mechanics of sustaining interest through the developmental stage of the group would get things going. Then the second and key component of the solution to the new-group problem would be the selection of an effective leader. The outline suggests that instead of offering leader training to everyone and allowing those graduates so motivated to go forth and lead new groups, we should select candidates for leader training from the ranks of participants, just as business firms select candidates for promotion from within. In practice, new groups could elect promising participants to rotate as co-leaders, and then recommend those with outstanding qualifications for formal training **after** they have had some hands-on experience discerning the pitfalls and pleasures of leading a group.

On a related subject, I feel that we should look at an even broader problem, that of selling participation in Great Books to a new generation of minds. Perhaps such an effort would mean modifying the program, above and beyond just undertaking public relations efforts. The world has changed a great deal since my parents joined Great Books 30 years ago. I, at 25, have been shaped by such changes as the increase in the average educational status of the population; the information revolution, with emphasis on keeping up with a barrage of stimuli; the emergence of computers and video technology supplanting the printed word; the possible downgrading of philosophy and abstract moral inquiry as an expected part of daily life; the rise of conflicting demands on free time.

It is possible that Great Books does not have to ride passively on these currents of change — maybe there are aspects of the program that, if emphasized, could themselves affect some of these factors. Perhaps our Councils could arrange in some coordinated way to discuss these issues. I would be glad to hear from anyone interested in furthering such an undertaking.

*Adam Finkel*

Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Qualitativa (H. Lamar Crosby, Jr.)

Maddest of all of Aristotle's frivolities  
Were his beliefs about opposite qualities.  
From only two pairs there derive, he insists,  
The natures of everything else that exists.  
These, of course, are the pairs which comprise the quartet  
Of the hot and the cold and the dry and the wet.  
For earth is the union of dry with the cold,  
And cold with the wet creates water, we're told.  
(Small wonder indeed that this great Polymath  
Recoiled at the notion of taking a bath!)  
Hot-wet begets air, whereas fire is dry-hot,  
And, as for the Elements, that is the lot.

But isn't it merely capricious to hold  
That the wet and the dry and the hot and the cold  
Are really more basic, as qualities go,  
Than others our senses have taught us to know?  
And isn't it even more strange that a **Greek**  
Should simply ignore what cries out with a shriek  
From many a krater and red-figured urn  
And was clearly a major Hellenic concern?  
For, among the designs that adorn a Greek pot,  
Some are quite decorous — some are quite not.  
And this is because they depict, **inter alia**,  
Opposite states of the male genitalia.  
The one's shown in Hector addressing his mother;  
Satyrs with Maenads exhibit the other.  
So hail to these potters who simply defy  
The hot and the cold and the wet and the dry!  
And let us pay equal or greater regard  
To the small and the soft and the huge and the hard.

H. Lamar Crosby, Jr. is a member of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Hollins College in Virginia.

### LOOKING FOR MEMBERS?

In a recent personal column in **The New York Review of Books**, sandwiched between "Beautiful Slim Struggling NYC Coed" and "Extraordinary Renaissance Man" was another ad, submitted not by a hopeful DWF or SWJM, but by a San Francisco Book Club, seeking "additional members expert and articulate in world literature."

### THE ENCLOSED QUESTIONNAIRES

The Chicago Great Books Foundation, in the process of developing new series of classics, asks members of groups around the country to respond to the questionnaire enclosed with this **Tricorn**. This is a real opportunity to influence important editorial decisions. Please fill out your questionnaire and return it (postage prepaid) to the Foundation.

The Area Councils

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

How does a Great Books leader brush up on his skills and correct the bad habits that creep into the process?

My tennis game benefits from a series of lessons every two or three years. A pro can spot the errors that develop and worsen as time goes on. Naturally I can't detect those mistakes as I play each week.

By analogy, I lead two Great Books discussion groups in Westchester County, NY. Although I love the work and many of my skills are improving, some are deteriorating. If a more experienced leader could sit in on two or three discussions he/she might have some constructive criticism to offer for my benefit and that of the discussions for years to come.

Is there any system for more experienced leaders helping less experienced ones improve on the job? Any response will be appreciated.

*Stanley Goldstein*

To the Editor:

It's interesting that the battle continues on the subject of how to lead a group. One undisputed principle is that the participants are a group of equals no one of whom knows more than anyone else. Or if that isn't so, the leader should pretend it's so.

In my own Great Books experiences, this principle of equality has been continually disregarded. In each of the three area groups with which I've been associated, outside sources were quoted. In two of the groups, members brought in other books and lectured the group. In one group, a member came with Cliff Notes to prove that my position during the last discussion had been wrong. A candidate for a Ph.D. in English lectured for an hour and a half on the book up for discussion. A professional scholar can kill the discussion and kill the fun.

I would be very interested in finding a group that adheres to the Great Books principle.

*Name Withheld*

To the Editor:

I was really impressed by John Greenblatt Whittier's article in the last **Tricorn** about the Philadelphia Leaders Club Meeting I conducted in November (or was it October?) He captured the tenor of the session in prose that quick-stepped across the page with order and precision, and he couldn't have been wittier. (Or could he?)

I don't recall meeting him that evening. Too bad he didn't have more to say during the discussion.

*Charles L. Ferrara*

Editor's note:

Though Professor Ferrara was apparently pleased by John Greenblatt Whittier's remarks in the February **Tricorn**, some of the lecturer's admirers found those same remarks insulting. Though it can only add to the confusion, we feel it is time to reveal that the mysterious Whittier is, in fact, none other than Charles Ferrara himself. We hope that this disclosure will dam the stream of misguided mutterings directed at this journal.

TRICORN    Norma Oser  
7933 Heather Rd.  
EDITOR:    Elkins Park, PA 19117

REGIONAL  
CORRESPONDENTS:

Long Island: June Ferrara  
14 Bay Second St.  
Islip, NY 11751  
Boston: Adam Finkel  
5 Cutler Ave.  
Cambridge, MA 02138

---

## PHILADELPHIA NEWS

### A New Philadelphia Area Coordinator

Liz Eidelson, our new Coordinator, has been energetically learning on the job since taking over in May from outgoing Coordinator Ruth Abel, whose resignation was reluctantly accepted. Liz first became acquainted with Great Books when she cooperated enthusiastically in the establishment of a new discussion group at the Penn Wynne Library, where she was Head Librarian. She then rose in the Lower Merion Library system to become Head Librarian of Ludington Library and Assistant Director of Libraries in the township. Family illness made her resignation necessary, though she still does public relations for Ludington.

A person of many parts, Liz is a poet, a gardener, and a fierce tennis competitor. We are delighted to welcome her to her new position.

Liz is working with the following officers, all elected to a second term last April: President Aaron Heller, Vice President Sibyl Cohen, Treasurer Harold Moll, Financial Secretary Sylvia Kasser, Recording Secretary Doris Auspos, and Corresponding Secretary William McConeghey. New board members are Etta Nussbaum and Charles Barnes.

### A Call to Arms

If you are a veteran Great Books leader — honorably discharged, retired, on leave, or in the reserve forces — your Council needs you. Several long-time groups lack leaders, and a number of new groups could be started if leaders could be assigned to them. Why sit by the fire dreaming about the great battles you led in the past? Don't remain hors de combat when you could be in the thick of it.

Plunge into new intellectual action. Call Coordinator Liz Eidelson (667-2284) for information about a possible new assignment.

### Great Great Books Publicity

Under the gratifying headline, "Great Books Still Going Great Guns," the **Sunday Inquirer** last April 22 spread the local Great Books story across the top of first page of the Family Section. To prepare his article, staff writer John Corr visited Aaron Heller's Welsh Road Group for a discussion of Plato's **Symposium**, and also interviewed Is Wachs, Debbie Kline, and Helen Schlesinger. The Plato discussion impressed him with the enthusiasm of the participants and the quality of the exchanges. Aaron reported that Corr accompanied the group to a near-by diner for refreshments, where he continued to ask probing questions. **The Inquirer** not only pictured Great Books most positively, resulting in a number of new-participant inquiries, but also picked up the tab for Welsh Road's coffee and bagels.

## FEWER YOUTHS READ BOOKS, STUDY FINDS

Last April the findings of the nationwide readership survey commissioned by the book industry were released. Here are some of the more significant facts as reported in **The New York Times**:

Book reading among Americans under the age of 21 has dropped sharply since 1978, from 75% to 63%. This is of grave concern to book publishers, as well as to all others who have an interest in adult book readership. There has also been a marked drop in book reading in the 65-and-over group. However, the percentage of adult book readers has remained constant since 1978.

The average American now spends 11.7 hours each week on all forms of reading, compared with 16.3 hours watching television and 16.4 hours listening to the radio. Book readers average 25.7 hours a week reading, 11.6 of those hours reading books.

The study made clear that parents' attitude toward reading has a profound effect on the amount of reading their children do. The study reported, "Book reading is highest among children whose parents value reading for both the pleasure it affords and as a key to achievement. Children who read a great deal were regularly read to by their parents."

Contrary to popular belief, book readers are neither solitary nor introverted. They are more likely than non-readers to be taking part in cultural activities, social groups, and sports.

### Philadelphia's 14th Annual Great Books Fall Weekend

The Fall Institute Committee has arranged our Pocono Weekend quartering once again at the Pocono Hershey Hotel, a popular choice last year. Early registration is suggested to guarantee a place.

Date: Friday, Saturday, Sunday — October 26-28, 1984  
Place: Pocono Hershey, White Haven, PA  
Theme: Justice/Morality  
Readings: **The Moral Decision** by Edmond Cahn  
**Oresteia** by Aeschylus  
**Light in August** by William Faulkner  
Cost: \$150 per person, double occupancy, includes meals, lodging, books, entertainment, and tips.

Please send registration form with \$50 deposit to: Sylvia Perelman, 8214 Marion Road, Elkins Park, PA 19117.

---

### REGISTRATION FORM

Enclosed is deposit of  
\$ \_\_\_\_\_ (\$50 per person)  
made payable to  
Fall Institute Committee

Names (please give the first name of **each** person)

(first) \_\_\_\_\_ (last) \_\_\_\_\_

(first) \_\_\_\_\_ (last) \_\_\_\_\_

Non-smoking  
Group

Smoking  
Group

No  
Preference

Address (street) \_\_\_\_\_

(city) \_\_\_\_\_ (state) \_\_\_\_\_ (zip) \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Any special requests should accompany this application. They will be honored if possible.

## Girt Books Trufax

They says how bout commin to Girt Books I says what girt big thing is that? They says it wer wen menne bloaks all talk about 1 book. Wel lwl try eny thing lce tho it soundit crazy to me.

So we startit roadin to Sale Um the witch town from Old Time. Aunty wer all over the road on her girt red eyed rat she wer chasen sum bloaks and bein chast by others. After we ben roadin all day I says this Sale Um is pas the sarvering gallack seas innit.

Then suddney we wuz ther. Inside the ho tel the woal Girt Books pack was tellin and rappin roun each other it lookit lyk a Eusa folk some poasym. I says 'Trubba not' but they wuz too busy to say 'no trubba.' Soon they put on a Punch show but they couden touch Walker an Orfing. The babby dint even get et diddee.

Nex day they put hanfuls of folks in seppert rooms an some bloaks from the Ram come in to make quirys. Them heavies dint let up for a minim with their questions then later on they woar us out with further quirys. My oan gang cum up with plenny connexions we knowd it wer help the quirys or sharna pax and get the poal.

For meating they giv us roast boar. 1 nexter me at table hissert mus be menne boars roun Sale Um. I says you wan to see boars cum to my group ter morrer. That nite we sleapt on a kine of girt hard slab I says Riddley you have foun the hart of the stoan.

Nex day after a nice bit of swossage we lef Sale Um with redder eyes then Aunty's rat. 1 bloak axt howd you lyk Girt Books Riddley? Well its bettern bein dog et innit.

Editor's note: If this article seems utter nonsense, for enlightenment read Russell Hoban's splendid novel, **Riddley Walker.**

14 Bay Second St.  
Islip, NY 11751