

Novel Club minutes for meeting taking place October 2, 2018

The Novel Club opened its 2018-2019 season at the lovely home of our new members Robert and Victoria Ware, in Auburn Township. The evening began with a nice mix of appetizers, wine, and conversation.

The meeting portion of the evening began promptly at a few minutes past 8:00. Louise Mooney opened the discussion by noting the passing of two longtime members, Ham Emmons, and Ted Sande. Tom Slavin offered remarks about Ted, and Catherine LaCroix did the same for Ham. Both will be missed. As Ham was slated to be president this year, and Louise VP, Louise assumed presidency, leaving a vacancy for VP. Louise announced the decision that Jennie Kaffen would move into the role of VP, all effective immediately. Calendars were passed out, and our treasurer, Andy Fabens, announced that the calendar had been paid for and that most, but not all, members had paid dues. Those still owing dues are asked to bring their 20\$ to the next meeting. Program committee requests suggestions for books for next year, and noted that there are no defined categories as had been the practice in the past.

Our book of the evening was *Saturday* by Ian McEwan, with Toby and Jay Siegal providing the biographical and critical papers, respectively. Toby covered all aspects of McEwan's life in her bio. As far as his early childhood goes, he was born in 1948 in Allershot, England where one salient feature of his childhood memories was his parents' descriptions of their experiences during the war; another is that his parents had been accused of neglect. The picture of his home life was not that of a tranquil, peaceful one but he grew into an educated successful man, so something clearly worked. Perhaps his childhood is why his early writing, pre 1980's, can be described as macabre, and included quite a bit of violence. Later, beginning in the 1980's, his work changed, likely because he had children of his own. He has been met with great success as a writer. His book *Atonement* (2001) received worldwide acclaim and in this book we see a clear example of his recurring themes of forgiveness and misunderstanding. Our present book, *Saturday* received mixed reviews when it was first published in 2005. Some said it showed his soft side, and demonstrated great intellect, while others described it as banal, with cardboard cutouts for characters. McEwan is a prolific writer; He has published 16 novels, 4 short stories, 2 works of children fiction, plays, screenplays, and even a libretto. He has also written 12 film adaptations. Toby provided printed lists of these works, and had plenty of praise for his achievements in writing.

Jay began his critical paper by asking if author and Henry, the protagonist, are the same person. Indeed they share many similarities; their homes are similar, as are his wife and children. Both are worried about their declining bodies and are educated men of science. With that in mind, on to the plot: the story takes place over a period of 24 hours, bringing to mind Joyce' *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. It is placed within street protests and there is also reference to a distant image of a burning plane. In trying to navigate the protest, Henry is involved in a minor car accident, and the man with whom he has this accident later arrives at his house seeking some sort of retribution. Jay found that a problem with the plot was its artificial symmetry, and somewhat preposterous ending. The idea of the daughter reading poetry which to "soothe the

savage beast” was ridiculous. Next he discussed the main character; Henry should by any measure be contented, as he is successful and has a nice family. An anxiety and fear, though, lies just beneath his surface. Jay noted that McEwan moves the reader smoothly through Henry’s day with no circular time shots, giving the book a nice flow. The themes of empathy/guilt/forgiveness/redemption were well developed throughout the story. Jay declared the book well wrought, but somewhat brought down by overly lengthy descriptions of unnecessary details such as the bathroom, and Huntington’s disease.

Jay led with the question: Do the big details enhance the narrative? One member felt that yes they did. He described McEwan as a screenwriter that paints a vivid picture. Several others concurred. Another commented that the details provided a bridge for the readers to get into the focal characters’ heads. Others found the details annoying and distracting. As is custom, discussion soon changed direction and became a discussion of the plot, which several people found to be contrived and unrealistically constructed. The next question concerned the role of literature in the book. This elicited a myriad of responses. It was noted that literature connects Henry to his children, and represents how Baxter wants to feel accepted. Literature seemed to humanize the characters. The third question was about religiosity. Was Henry religious? This question also drew multiple opinions. Many members of the Novel Club saw him as religious, as there was something spiritual about him, and he thought about moral questions. Others saw the point of the book being that we don’t need religion to be moral, as there is an emphasis placed on scientific causes for what happens to people. The final question brought in the Herzog quote at the end of the book, and anti-war protests as well as the sad state of current affairs were discussed. Conversation surrounding the book was engaging, and almost everybody in attendance contributed.

The discussion wrapped up at 10:00, and we adjourned for a final treat before heading home in the dark night. Next up, *East of Eden*.