

MINUTES  
of the Meeting of  
the Novel Club of Cleveland  
April 5, 2016

The evening of April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016 was auspicious. The members of the Novel Club, en masse, journeyed west, and where pre-requisite, presented their passports, then journeyed south west across the Cuyahoga River to Broadview Road, and more specifically to St. Columbkille Church and environs, where in one of the several structures located on the premises resides our member Pastor David Novak. Dave was joined at the entrance door by his co-host, member George Weimer. With a generous assemblage of adult beverages and fresh strudel made by the famous ex-Buckeye Road based Lucy's Bakery – who could resist the urge to abandon diets and useless resolutions by not indulging? Thanks were expressed, both formally and not, by everyone for the efforts of the co-hosts.

President Ann Ogan chaired the meeting, which it should be noted was well attended. Minutes of the March 1, meeting, prepared and transcribed (due to my winter holiday absence) by Louise Mooney, were approved. Warmly welcomed were new members: Peter Haas, and Joe and Ellen Kelly. The meeting's guests included Judith Ross (the Stupay's), David Welshhans (James Saunders), and John Gable (Louise Mooney). It was affirmed that our Club treasury was amply sufficient – and plans for a celebratory gala are to be discussed at our Club's Annual Meeting to be hosted (@4:00PM on Sunday April 23<sup>th</sup>, 2016) by Ham Emmons. Everyone was urged to note on a "sign-up" sheet what food or libations they plan to bring. Treasurer Emmons suggested members also bring \$20/ for their 2016/17 Club dues. Ms. Ogan reminded that in addition to selecting our reading list for our next year (the 121<sup>st</sup>) new officers are to be elected or re-elected, whichever the case. Our Club's paper Archivist made it abundantly clear to the assemblage that the repository for our papers, The Western Reserve Historical Society, is soon to be visited by Mr. Saunders - who implored members to deliver to him "final hard copies" of their biographical or critical papers. Of course everyone pledged, pursuant to a blood oath, to do just that. Summarily – it's important that you advise Ann Ogan as to what food, drinks you're bringing Ham's on April 24<sup>th</sup>. Chairwoman Leigh Fabens promises to meet the reading expectations of even our most discriminating members with her Committee's selection of possible to-be-read books. The Annual Meeting of the Novel Club is always a fun time.

The evening's presentations, dealing with the novel *Te Ghost Road* by Pat Barker, included: a biographical sketch of Pat Barker by Larry Siegler (read for Larry by Peter Haas) and the first critical paper delivered by new member Jim Schilling.

Born in 1943, in northern England, Pat Barker rose above a challenging upbringing to become a famous novelist. Barker's mother basically passed on her daughter's parenting responsibility to Pat Barker's grandparents. In fact, since both mother and daughter lived with Pat Barker's grandparents – her mother, inconceivably, passed Pat off as her “younger sister” in what has to be the ultimate in abnegation of responsibility. Notwithstanding this, at least to me, dysfunctionality, Pat Barker was an exceptional student – so at age seven she was able to obtain a scholarship to a private grammar school. Her education culminated when she was granted a degree from The London School of Economics. She returned to Durham, her natal home, to teach at the University of Durham and care for her ailing grandmother, until she passed in 1982. In 1974 Pat married a man twenty years older, David Barker, also a professor in Durham, by whom she had two children. As if being a mother and a professor wasn't sufficiently taxing, Pat Barker took to writing. Her first effort was entitled *Union Street*, which dealt with the travail of poor working-class women. The novel and a movie based on it were each successful in their respective milieus.

Tonight's novel was the final work in a trilogy entitled *The Regeneration Trilogy* – considered by critics to be her major work. Her focus was on World War I. A literary technique used by Barker is the incorporation of well-known actual persons in her books. In *Ghost Road* she incorporated Wilfred Owen, Dr. R.H.R. Rivers, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon into her narrative. Many of her literary creations deal with war, lower working classes, prostitutes, and the like. As an author, Barker repeatedly “rubs the reader's face” in explicit vulgarities, shocking narratives, and tasteless expressions – where a smaller dosage would do. She has; however, found a market for her abundant literary production – which in your Secretary's mind speaks volumes about our literary tastes.

Tonight's critical paper, delivered by Jim Schilling, was both well-written and insightful. *Ghost Road* won the Booker prize in 1995. “Barker's focus is the extreme manifestation of man's inhumanity to man.” Jim states, “Any pretense of glory in war and romance in love is stripped away,” so that moving, sensitive, and uplifting writing is juxtaposed next to graphic, gruesome, and unromantic narratives that left this reader unsatisfied because of the novel's unevenness.

“Shell Shock” was WW I jargon for what we currently call PTSD, the acronym for “post-traumatic stress disorder,” a psychological condition that affects combat soldiers in different but always stressful ways. One of the novel’s key characters is Dr. Rivers who experimented with neurological techniques for treating impacted soldiers at the Craiglockhart Psychiatric Hospital in northern England. One of his many patients is a fictional working class Lieutenant named Billy Prior – certainly an odious literary character if there was ever one. Prior, a bi-sexual junior-officer, was characterized by Jim as a chameleon – which I think is an apt description. He had no sense of duty, no love beyond rutting, and certainly no sense of duty. He was, because of his ability to survive, well-regarded by the troops in his command. Jim asserts that in the novel women garnered purpose, because they had employment in the war industries...a condition that allowed women to pub hop. Granted women earned more money and had a greater variety of employment options than did their Victorian imbued mothers; however, that was necessity calling...there were no men to work in the factories, they were out fighting in France. What Barker did well, was to make the reader aware of the horrors of war...which were graphic and consequential.

It was not difficult for Mr. Schilling to engage NC attendees in a lively discussion of the book. Schillings questions were “spot on” and resulted in the Secretary taking page after page of notes from the ensuing dialogue. Virtually everyone, including guests, participated in the fray. Many words were expended discussing whether the lengthy digressions about River’s Eddystone Island adventures amongst the Melanesian headhunters were important to the fabric of the novel. After considerable to and fro on the subject – the weight of the membership opined that amongst the headhunters war was an intrinsic component of life style so that the consequences of war were not psychologically impactful. Whereas in Europe during the Great War the horror infused manifestations of death and injury “stressed out” the combatants in ways far different than in Melanesia. Louise went so far as to say the Melanesian component of the book was not a digression and novelistic weakness, but rather, a shrewd and meaningful juxtaposition. Joe Kelly said the Melanesian people were doing just what they do – head-hunting.

Whitney focused on Dr. Rivers trying to find psychiatric cures for his patients so the “shell shocked” can be promptly dispatched back into the trenches. “We don’t rush our PTSD soldiers back into battle today.” Ellen confided that her twin brother, a Viet Nam vet, was psychologically wounded and simply can’t heal.

Louise stated she thought Pat Barker identified with Billy Prior. Bob Targett related the story of Rudyard Kipling (and someone chimed in that Teddy Roosevelt did the same), who was so nationalistic that he implored his son Jack to enlist – and he was of course killed in battle. This led into a discussion – precipitated by Viet Nam vet George Weimer on the stigma of cowardice...a poignant testimonial to be sure.

Judith Ross, a guest of the Stupay's, contributed significantly to the evening's discussion – wherein she discussed Billy Prior's encounter with the prostitute.

Our lengthy discussion concluded with: "Who was the hero of *The Ghost Road*?" In my view there were no heroes – only victims. This delightful evening concluded around 10:20PM to protestations from members who still wanted to express opinions. Jim Schilling did a great job in preparing the critical paper and posing highly discussable questions. We at the Novel Club haven't had so spirited a discussion in a long time.

Respectfully submitted,

Thomas Slavin