

## MINUTES OF THE NOVEL CLUB

DATED: November 3, 2015

PREPARED BY: Thomas Slavin

Toby and Jay – we already miss visiting your lovely house on River Mountain Drive in Moreland Hills. The spacious, contemporary, and tasteful décor have made Siegel hosted meetings a favorite for all Novel Club members. Toby informed everyone that our meeting of November 3<sup>rd</sup> was likely to be the last held at their lovely home. We were advised that their residence has been sold, and sometime after the first of the year, “new owners” will be perching in our Novel Club nest. Good luck in your new abode Toby and Jay – we’ve loved your River Mountain Drive hospitality.

President Ann Ogan called our meeting to order – after everyone had their fill of the Siegel’s supply of wine, cheese and assorted pastries. Ann introduced three guests: Peter Haas a professor of religion at CWRU and Joe and Ellen Kelly. Joe, a much published author, is on the faculty of John Carroll and Ellen recently retired from her task of trying to teach English literature to Shaker High students. All three were welcomed. Carol Fox and Siobhan Lukowsky, for various personal reasons, turned in their respective Novel Club membership cards. They will be missed.

Leigh Fabens reported that her Program Committee is actively searching for both a theme and new novels for us to read and critique. Her Committee plans to get started on 2016-2017 in December.

It comes with age...no one seemed to remember who was supposed to be taking minutes during the course of our last meeting (October;) therefore, given our collective amnesia, Ann Ogan dispensed with the exercise, and no October minutes were read. As this year’s Club Secretary, I take some solace in the fact that I was out of the City on a business trip on October 6<sup>th</sup> and can plead ignorance by way of Georgia – my trip’s destination.

For those who are everlastingly forgetful – members were reminded that dues remain priced at \$20.00 per year. Our Club treasury boasts a balance of \$2,328.66, funds which are resting comfortably in our checking account. This robust balance does not include the Club paying for the cost of our Novel Club Calendar for 2015-2016, in that we have not yet received said club calendar back from the printer. Our 120<sup>th</sup> season should not be different from the 119 that preceded it – suggesting that it is not uncommon for the Novel Club to delay and procrastinate.

A final housekeeping note: “Birdsong” by Sebastian Fox is going to be co-hosted by Jill and Jack Conomy. The situs for the December meeting is the LaCroix house located on Stanford Road in Shaker Heights.

Tonight’s presenters are Caroline Morgan – Biography and George Weimer – preparer of the critical paper. Surprise – George took ill the very evening he was supposed to deliver his paper. Into the breach, never having read George’s work product, galloped Louise Mooney – who did a fine job in George’s stead.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Fyodor Dostoevsky like his “The Brothers Karamazov” character “Mitya” and/or “Dmitry,” (the names used were interchangeable in the novel,) shared common traits with his literary creation: gambling, compulsive money borrowing, womanizing, psychological instability, passionate writing, and all-around aura that can only be described as Class A “rascal.” The son of a poorly paid doctor, Fyodor was born in Moscow in 1821 – and matured subsequent to the point in time when Russia’s serfs had received their freedom. While Fyodor’s father was poorly paid, and the family’s life was not easy, he was professionally honored and granted by the Tsar the status of a minor nobility. Given this “status” improvement he was able to acquire, with borrowed money, a small estate, which in Dostoevsky’s youth was maintained by approximately 100 male serfs.

Dostoevsky’s mother, the daughter of a Moscow merchant, was very loving, warm, and engaging – this by way of contrast to the stern and unforgiving demeanor of the father. The parents both contributed to the education of their five children – teaching them Latin, German, French, and the tenants of the Russian Orthodox faith. Both at home and in “engineering school” Fyodor loved to read – primarily French and Russian authors – his favorite being Gogol. Following his graduation from the engineering school, Fyodor entered the military service as a commissioned officer; however, within a year he resigned so as to pursue his passion for writing. By this point in time his life commenced to unwind, given the early age death of his mother to tuberculosis, and his father’s death at the hands of an alienated serf.

In 1846, while only 25 years old, his first novel entitled “Poor Folk” was published. It received critical acclaim and brought Dostoevsky financial success. Unfortunately his next book was not well received, precipitating serious mood swings and the onset of epilepsy – a problem which plagued him for the balance of his life. Exacerbating the aforesaid, he became involved with the Petrashevsky Circle – a group of left-wing intellectuals that advocated atheism, communism, and Western social theorists. Apparently Dostoevsky’s involvement was such that it led to his arrest and eventual relocation to Siberia for four years, tasked with hard labor. His only solace was the fact he was given the “Bible’s New Testament,” a book he all but memorized. The deep and profound religious belief that he found while in Siberia was inculcated in all his subsequent writings. While in Siberia he married a persistently ill young widow (who was encumbered with a son.) In 1859 he was allowed to travel to St. Petersburg where he edited a magazine. A short time later both his wife and his brother died – and because Dostoevsky had been philandering – he felt great remorse for how he unfaithfully treated his dead wife. Given that his brother Mikhail was instrumental in securing Fyodor’s release and relocation from Siberia, by paying his brother’s gambling debts, and by being everlastingly supportive - Fyodor was doubly impacted by his brother’s death.

In order to extricate himself from debt, Dostoevsky continued to write – using the services of a young stenographer named Anna to expedite his writing down his work product. Anna and Fyodor, given their proximity to one another, fell in love and married. Together they finished two books: “The Gambler” and “Crime and Punishment.” Notwithstanding the popularity of the books – creditors still pressed for the repayment their loans – compelling the newly minted couple to flee to Europe...where Dostoevsky, true

to his fashion, lost what little the couple had remaining at the gambling tables. He then promised Anna never to gamble again...a promise he kept. With the publication of "The Idiot" and "The Possessed" they finally emerged from the mountain of debt they had incurred. At approximately this point in time the serialized version of "Brothers Karamazov" was released to great popular acclaim. Dostoevsky became the champion of Holy Russia and one of the country's most revered authors. Like both his mother and his first wife, he shortly thereafter died, at young age 60 of chronic lung problems.

#### THE CRITICAL PAPER

The words were expressed in different ways, but the message was the same" "Brothers" was a great read in every respect, but damn – it was long.

George stated that he (actually Louise) had 20 minutes to deliver a paper that was the equivalent to climbing Mount Everest in an hour. He was on the mark! We from the start have to keep in mind that the book was written and published in parts...so that there was an element of "pot boiler" to the narrative. As George succinctly stated, "Old Man Karamazov, a rascal to the core, sired three legitimate sons from two wives – and possibly a bastard son from yet another woman. Then the Old Man is murdered, the Bastard son confesses and commits suicide. In keeping with the novel's twists and turns the oldest son – Dimitri is convicted of murder by a jury and sentenced to Siberia. George made it sound simple, but the copy of the book I read took almost 1,100 pages to fully tell the story.

If "Brothers" was just a dime novel – it certainly wouldn't have enjoyed its long-lasting universal acclaim as one of the world's great novels. So here Novel Club members is where, according to George Weimer, where the author's genius is evidenced.

Karamazov means "black stained, the original sin" in Old Slavonic...and for that matter the author's selection of names thru-out the novel reflects much about the character of those that people the book. Dostoevsky, as noted earlier, post Siberia, was a fervent believer. This novel was laced with issues like: "Does god exist? Does He, if he does, care for us? How can there be a caring God with so much human suffering throughout the ages? Is the "burden" Christ left humanity with, namely freedom of choice and total charity towards others, too much for all but a few to bear? And so on. Certainly the dialogue between the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Cardinal of Seville and Dimitri's brother Ivan constitute some of the most thoughtful writing ever put down on paper.

George pointed out that Freud was a great admirer of this book. Dostoevsky's inclusion of obvious Oedipal Complexities in describing several of the book's characters rings so true that Freud, who self-analyzed, felt that this novel was equivalent to self-analysis. Many critics, past and present, see "Brothers" as Dostoevsky's personal psychoanalysis.

George, in his critical paper, pointed out there were components of the book that he'll never forget: For example: 1)the funeral of Captain Snegiryov's son Illusha; 2) the courtroom drama featuring the arguments of both the prosecutor and the defense counsel, and 3) Ivan's "poem" – dealing with God and his enemy – atheism.

George concluded by opining that if there is an overriding theme in this book, it is that life is an internal personal war. This war is the one we all wage all the time, even if we are not always aware of the battles, the one announced in so many ways in the book commencing with its first paragraph: Here is the monster, the evil one, the source of our need for our need for vengeance. Or do we leave vengeance up to God? "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord"

The conclusion of George's critical paper, a challenge to prepare, was greeted by sustained applause by Novel Club attendees. Well deserved applause, I might add.

#### QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

George had prepared five questions and/or topics for discussion amongst members...again read by Louise. Once open dialogue commenced, opinions, comments, and short speeches then rained down on your inexperienced Secretary. From "the author's women didn't have any serious thoughts;" to June Salm's sagacious retort, "The essence of the book stays with you as a living force." Hooray for that pithy comment. Joe Kelly stated that, "There must be a God if we are to have morality and it is impossible for a convict to live without a belief in a God." Someone said, "The process of man being saved brought the book to life." The questions were provocative and the comments they generated were pithy.

In keeping with the long tradition of The Novel Club, including the admonition that "suffering is good for you" we concluded our discussion in re this magnificent book at 10:00PM and made haste for the wine glasses, which had been replenished for our nourishment.

Again, "Thank you hosts Toby and Jay." Thank you for affording us, once again, the opportunity to enjoy your hospitality. We'll miss your elegant home as a Novel Club venue. " The meeting adjourned at 10:00PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Tom Slavin, Secretary