

Date: December 1, 2015 (Meeting Date)

Memo to: Members of the Novel Club prepared by Thomas Slavin – Novel Club Secretary

Subject: Minutes of the noted meeting date

Given the fact that the Conomy's have a house under construction - a house that's perched over a hillside no less- member Catherine LcCroix lent her lovely Shaker Heights abode to tonight's hosts, the Conomy's. The dining room table literally groaned under the weight of all the goodies, munchies, wines, and coffee's that Jack and Jill Conomy provided. It was a struggle, but eventually President Ann Ogan managed to herd all of the Novel Club members away from the dining room table to the living room so as to allow our meeting to commence.

Tonight The Novel Club was honored by the presence of five guests: 1) Caroline Morgan's son John, a guest on other occasions, visited us again; 2) Professor Peter Haas – a member of the Department of Religion faculty at CWRU and guest of Bob Targett was present; 3) Visiting with us again is David Welshhans – the frequent guest of James Saunders; and finally, 4&5) Joe and Ellen Kelly attended once again – remember Joe is chair of the Department of Religion at John Carroll and Ellen recently retired from an administrative position within the Shaker Heights school system. The Kelly's were guests of your Club's secretary – Tom Slavin. We regret that Carol Fox and Siobhan Lubowsky found it necessary to submit resignation letters. Only two members are past due in their payment of dues. President Ogan stated with regret that we are well into the 2015/16 year but the "hard copy" of our Novel Club Calendar is still not available for distribution.

Leigh Fabens requested that recommendations for both topics and book titles for the 2016/17 our Club's 120th season) be emailed her. She reminded everyone that the Club's policy is that we don't read the same book more than once every ten years. Jack Conomy quipped we should read more "Irish Literature."

For reminders – our January, 2016 meeting will be at the Cleveland Heights residence of Ms. Joyce Kessler. The January book will be John Updike's novel – "Rabbit Run."

Dianne Stupay launched the evening with her biography of author Sebastian Faulks. At the tender age of 62 Mr. Faulks has written eleven novels and three books of non-fiction. A new novel is promised during January. '16. As a young man, Faulks was raised in a traditional home, with both loving parents and an older brother as a constant companion. His parents each had linkage to the setting of tonight's novel (Faulk's fourth) the British front lines during a period of war. Peter Faulks, Sebastian's father was a lawyer by trade, who enlisted (in 1939) to fight in the Duke of Wellington infantry regiment. His mother's father served with the Artist Rifles in World War 1 – losing his life near the Rhine during WW II.

Faulks was educated both at Wellington College, an independent boarding and day school, followed by his winning an "open exhibition" that allowed him to read English at Cambridge. He graduated from Emmanuel College/Cambridge in 1974. While there he became fluent in French, after living three

months in Paris. He tried writing, teaching, and operating a small book club called “The New Fiction Society” – none of the aforesaid with much success. Finally he joined the Daily Telegraph as a junior reporter – and spent the next fourteen years as a newspaper journalist. During all these years he spent his evenings and weekends writing fiction – his work product, by his own admission, wasn’t very good. His first published novel was a book called “A Trick of Light” that came out in 1983 when he was 29 years of age. He found time to marry (in 1989) Veronica Youtlen, a fellow journalist that previously had worked for him. With their children in tow they moved to France for a year – where he observed something that may be of interest: “What really appealed to me about France was not France itself, but the fact that the past was so much more easily available in that country than in my own. He observed that 15 minutes off the main highway and you are back in the 1920’s and 30’s.” His first “blockbuster novel “The Girl at the Lion D’Or(1989,)” followed by tonight’s novel, and concluding with the novel “Charlotte Gray (1998)” - all were set in France and are characterized as his “French Trilogy”. In an 2005 interview Faulk’s stated that he had visited France as a child, studied French in school, lived in Paris, and spent his free time driving around small towns and villages – particularly in Brittany. He posited that these small out of the way places were rather “closed-up,” formal, and somewhat unfriendly, but once he was able to penetrate their forbidding exterior he found there was drama, there were secrets, passions, and there was intrigue for him to absorb.

I segue now into the critical paper written and delivered by Art Stupay. One of Art’s first observations was his view that there were many similarities between last month’s WW I Hemingway novel “A Farewell to Arms” and tonight’s “Birdsong” – similarities of portrayal, structure, and origin and their endings. In fact, Art posited that Faulks may have written “Birdsong” in homage to “Farewell to Arms.”

Art began his talk with a history lesson in re the origins of WW I. He paraphrased NY Times writer Roger Cohen’s commentary on how long ago the world was for many years organized in a rigid structured manner. Following the assassination of the Crown Prince of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and his wife, the rigid structure came apart – piece by piece. Within a few years over 16 million people died in the process. All this carnage came about because at the onset two people were killed by an assassin’s bullets.

Art’s critical paper was unusual in that he plotted step by step comparisons between Frederick Henry in “A Farewell to Arms” with Stephen in “Birdsong” starting from their challenging childhoods to as both books conclude an almost heroic status – in that they maintained leadership and gave evidence of basic human decency when faced with a reality in which there was little to be found. Focusing on “Birdsong” our hero Stephen (effectively an adoptee by a non-related guardian”) proves himself and rises thru education and plain old cleverness to distinguish him-self. During 1910, while in France in behalf of his employer, he falls madly in love with the wife of his host. The wayward wife, the mother of two young children, is bitter that her “much older husband” abuses and belittles her. Their romance, as depicted by Faulks, is graphic. Stephen and his paramour Isabel flee her home, her husband, her children and live remote from Rouen, but far more humbly than before. The consequences for Stephen are simple – he loses his employment which he subsequently replaces with a far more simple trade. This balances out, so in great part because he’s psychologically satisfied with his new life with Isabel. Isabel’s conscience, having fled her husband, her family, her children, and her home is far more impacted – although it is not

revealed in the novel. Although in love with Stephen, she elects to leave him, without notice, and she returns, humbly with hat in hand, to the position she abandoned. Stephen is of course both dumbfounded and devastated over her departure.

About this point in time the WW I commences and Stephen enlists. What follows, at least in my opinion, is some of the best writing on the grim horrors of trench warfare ever written. The brutal battles on the Somme, with the astronomical levels of casualty suffered by the Brits, boggles the reader's mind. Stephen although brave, remains a closed fist, with his emotions under constant control, and always in search of a way to reunite with his beloved Isabel. As was evidenced in the lengthy discussion that followed Art's presentation, many of the members of the Novel Club were very familiar with the impact of war on the social fabric of France. Marvelled that in spite of the mountains of tragedy small manifestations of humanity repeatedly were evidenced.

Tying up some loose ends - Stephen after the war marries Isabel's older sister Jeannette. Their grandchild Elizabeth, fascinated by family history, is able to break the code that Stephen used in writing his personal journals therein revealing the story line of "Birdsong."

Isabel falls in love with another house guest – this time a German officer who billets in her Rouen home. The German is gravely wounded in the war – but after getting Isabel to move to Germany, is well enough to marry Isabel. Art opined that this was a weak part of the story, nonetheless, both Isabel and her German major husband die.

Stephen, a heroic survivor of the war suffers post-traumatic stress disorder, rarely speaks, and dies of natural causes a few years after the war concludes.

Like a German opera essentially everyone dies.

Seven questions were prepared for discussion – and what a discussion we had! Members of the Club were somewhat divided on the overarching aspect of the book – did it tell an important story well? Member Art Saunders dismissed the book by characterizing the writing as: subject, verb, and object. Moreover, he felt there was little interesting said about the book's characters. Jack Conomy said that the book was all about sex and death – and that it was not a serious book on WW I. Whitney Lloyd said it was the best description of WW I that he could recall. Moreover, he felt that the fully described Stephen was "heroic." Joyce Kessler opined that WW I shocked everyone about the very concept of being human. In all, Novel Club members expressed varying shades of opinion – as is the typical case. After so much dialogue, which Art Stupay ingeniously linked to "Farewell to Arms," we collectively adjourned back to Catherine's dining room for one last sip of 2015's God's nectar.

Respectfully submitted,

Tom Slavin – December 25, 2015