

THE ORMOND BEACH LIBRARY GREAT BOOKS PROGRAM

The Ormond Beach Library Program was established in 1991 by the permission of the Volusia County library system for Charles Cassel to be responsible for the conduct of meetings conforming to the rules of the library system. Permission is solicited for each year of continuation of the program. Library programs are open to the public, encouraging citizens to attend at any time, according to their interests. They belong to the people of the area, and have no other organizational control.

From its beginning the program was an offshoot of the Chicago Hutchins-Adler Great Books Foundation program which flourished from the 1940s to 1960s and is continuing today. The Foundation program used the “New Criticism” critical theory and aimed to bring discussants to a common understanding of the “true” meaning of texts, focused on a “canon” of Western literature as presented in Morimer Adler’s book, “How to Read a Book” and Harold Bloom’s book, “How to Read a Book and Why”. The Foundation program aimed to emphasize the classic Platonic-Aristotelian wisdoms and related later texts, and a return to moral foundations being eroded by modernism. See “A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise and Fall and Curious After Life of the Great Books”, by Alex Beam, 2000.

The Chicago foundation program selected texts, and provided with them instructions on planning and conducting meetings. Meetings were to have two discussion leaders, who would meet between meetings to select questions for guiding participants to the true meaning of the text.

Participants were not allowed to cite commentaries on the text, or biographical works on authors. Comments on the meaning of the texts required participants to cite the paragraphs and lines in the text supporting their interpretations. The Foundation maintained district representatives for attending local meetings and demonstrating the prescribed way for conducting discussions.

From its beginning, our local program departed from the Chicago Foundation program, opting for a philosophy of literary criticism called “Reader Interest”. See “Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide” by Lois Tyson, 1999. Rather than try to bring everyone to the same perception of the meaning of a text, the aim is to focus on what the text can provide to the participant within the context of his/her existing world view. It is assumed that reading and discussing modern, provocative books that have impacted recent intellectual, cultural, political and moral outlooks, best serves the interests of the participants. Reading texts that may or may not support existing opinions, and discussing them with others who may have conflicting outlooks is assumed to be the most stimulating and productive way of doing reader interest criticism.

--Chuck Cassel, November , 2011