

MPC series addresses 'Great Books and Democracy'

U.S. POET LAUREATE ROBERT PINSKY LEADS OFF COLLOQUIUM

By LILY DAYTON
Herald Correspondent

Te conversation between author and reader is one of the most intimate forms of communication.

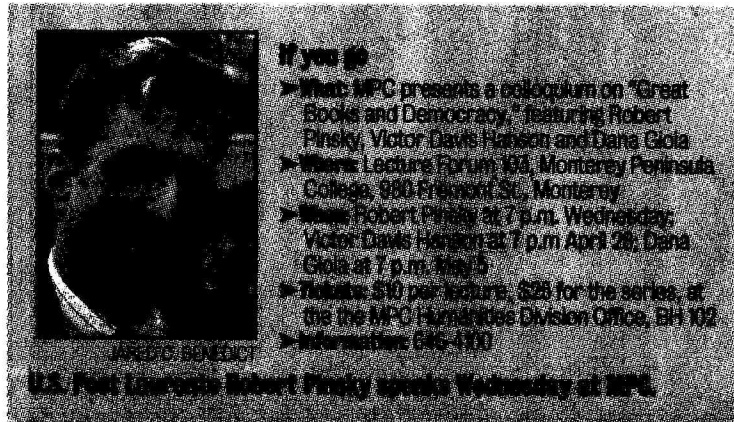
Though quiet, these intimate murmurings are far from powerless — they are the very words our civilization was built upon.

Over the next three weeks, Monterey Peninsula College's Great Books Program has invited three authors to speak with the community about the power of the written word in a literary colloquium on "Great Books and Democracy."

Former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky will lead off the colloquium Wednesday night. The series continues the following Wednesday, April 28, with classicist and military historian Victor Davis Hanson. The colloquium concludes May 5, with Dana Gioia, poet and immediate past-chair of the National Endowment for the Arts. Each speaker will give an address, followed by a question-and-answer period, with a book signing after the presentation.

David Clemens, coordinator of MPC's Great Books Program, organized the "Great Books and Democracy" colloquium with the idea of a forum between literary scholars and the community to discuss the democratizing effects of literature.

The Great Books Program serves as a multidisciplinary



umbrella offering a number of literature, philosophy and history courses. It was open for enrollment on-campus at MPC as well as online last fall. Clemens modeled the program after the ideas of Robert M. Hutchins, put forth in "The Great Conversation" (1952), which characterizes Western literature as a conversation about great ideas leading to great questions.

Clemens designed the program in response to fears that this conversation may come to an end as students become less familiar with the literary classics and more inundated with blogs, Twitter, text messages and reality TV.

"There is a group of people who are hungry for this," said Clemens. "They are being fed pop-culture 24-7 and they have the feeling there's something from which they've been deprived. They are having an existential crisis.

"We've been carrying on this discussion for over 2,500

years, with questions such as "What is a meaningful life?" "What is justice?" and "What is a human being?" Students get the feeling they've been left out of the conversation. They are standing outside the door and can hear the conversation, but they are feeling left out. When they (take part in the conversation), they are feeling that this is the real deal. That this is what (they) came to college for. It electrifies them."

The cultural disconnect described by Clemens is perhaps one more symptom of a larger societal issue: the decline of literary reading in America, which was documented in Gioia's National Endowment for the Arts studies, "Reading at Risk" and "To Read or Not to Read." The studies found that fewer than half of American adults read literature today — and the rate of literary decline is increasing.

A striking finding to come out of this research was the

strong correlation between reading and other activities in peoples' lives. For example, compared to nonreaders, readers were two to four times more likely to volunteer for charities, visit a museum or attend a sporting event. They were also 1.5 times more likely to vote regularly.

"The surprising thing, when you look at the data, is that

reading well or not reading well has effects in all areas of peoples' lives," said Gioia. "This is based on nearly 50 studies done by different federal agencies and universities. Reading is extraordinarily important. As America loses this capacity, we are losing an intelligence and economic capability that is very important to our success."

"We've become impatient, not contemplative," said Hanson. "It's a me-first presentism generation that believes that everything that happens in the next second is the most important thing. They're losing that connection with literature of the past. The only way to have that connection is to read."

Hanson stressed that this connection is essential to citizens in a democratic society.

"Our government depends on a literate public to vote and read ballots," he said. "If a public can't read, it can't be

informed."

On a deeper, more personal level than civic duty, perhaps it is the potential of literature as a vehicle that resonates individual voices throughout our culture — as well as each individual's interpretation of and experience of these voices — that makes literature and literacy a vitalizing force for democracy.

"I believe passionately in great literature in relation to American democracy," wrote Pinsky in an e-mail. During his term as U.S. Poet Laureate (1997-2000), Pinsky demonstrated the importance of poetry to Americans in the "Favorite Poem Project" www.favoritepoem.org.

In this unprecedented undertaking, Pinsky invited Americans from all regions and all walks of life to name their favorite poems. Many of these individuals were recorded reading their chosen poems, and then reflecting on their personal impressions of the work, for a permanent audio archive at the Library of Congress.

"I believe that the medium for a poem is any one reader's actual voice: each reader's breath," wrote Pinsky. "So, the art is inherently and by the nature of its medium on an individual, human scale. That would be important in a democracy, I think: the dignity of the individual. There are great works in mass media — great movies and TV shows — but inherently, and by the nature of their media, those works are on a mass scale. The particular importance of

poetry has to do with intimacy and human scale."

Gioia said that the intimacy of reading a poem, play, short story or novel can have political importance because it helps breed compassion and understanding:

"Literature helps us understand the reality of other peoples' lives from the inside and outside. That act fundamentally changes one's relationship with society. Reading literature has been one of the major civilizing forces in the world over the last few hundred years. A novel especially shows us the internal reality of another person's existence in (his or her) daily life."

As far as what makes a great book or great poem, answers will vary — as they should in a democratic society. But all colloquium speakers agreed that a great work is one that deals with the great questions and themes of humanity — such as life, death and morality — or the illumination of a great truth.

Though literary curricula has importance in exposing people to the great conversation of literature that exists before them, Pinsky maintained that any list of "great books" will be different for each individual, and that it should be discovered individually.

"The quest of each person for significant, beloved works of art is noble and essential," wrote Pinsky.

And so the conversation continues.