

Calendar

Table Shape Is Important

Great Books Reading and Discussion

A year ago, the San Diego Great Books Reading and Discussion Program was featured in this space. The group meets Saturdays once or twice a month at the library downtown. Afterward, they adjourn to the nearby Gyroscope Greek Café for socializing and more informal talk. Their schedule mimics an academic one, running from September to May, with a modified summer session. Last week, three group members reflected on the previous months' "reads," as one member affectionately called them.

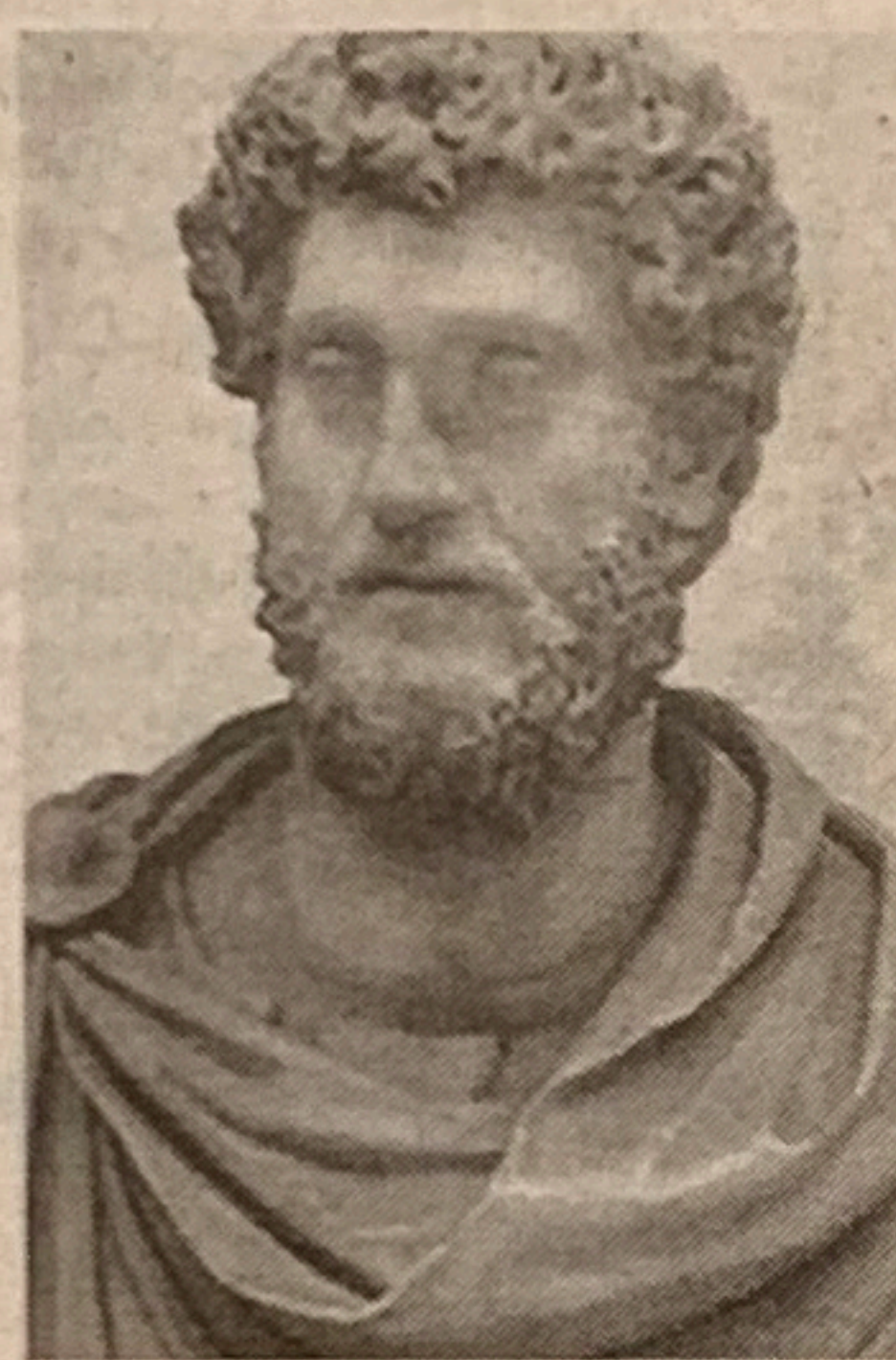
Frank Spalding said two choices proved topical. Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, scheduled months before release of the movie *Gladiator*, briefly swelled their numbers. The group can

count on a dozen regulars. That Saturday, 20 people showed up, 8 of them newcomers. Machiavelli's *The Prince* was another inadvertently relevant choice, coinciding with the aftermath of the U.S. presidential election.

Machiavelli's opinion of common man wasn't high, said Spalding. "He thought only leaders had essential worth and that they should do whatever it takes to lead, including being deceptive. Now some people would say many contemporary politicians have a similar philosophy. And we said, 'Oh, my God! How did we luck out on this? It's just so perfect.'" Before the discussion, the group restated its rules: "Discuss the text" and "Listen to other people." "We knew it could become volatile. Well, it didn't take ten minutes before someone said, 'I don't care about the rules. I'm talking real life.'" Temporarily the rules were suspended.

On Veteran's Day, the choice was Thomas Huxley's *On the Relation of Man to the Lower Animals*. "Huxley promoted Darwin's theories, because Darwin didn't have a forceful personality and hated to promote himself," Spalding said. "Huxley became known as Darwin's bulldog. You can imagine the controversy as he told people the line dividing man and other animals was not as sharp as they'd always believed." The group anticipated a lively debate; then a problem arose. The library was closed for the holiday. So they met instead at the restaurant to which they usually adjourn. For that occasion a new rule was instituted: "No beers shall be uncorked for the first two hours."

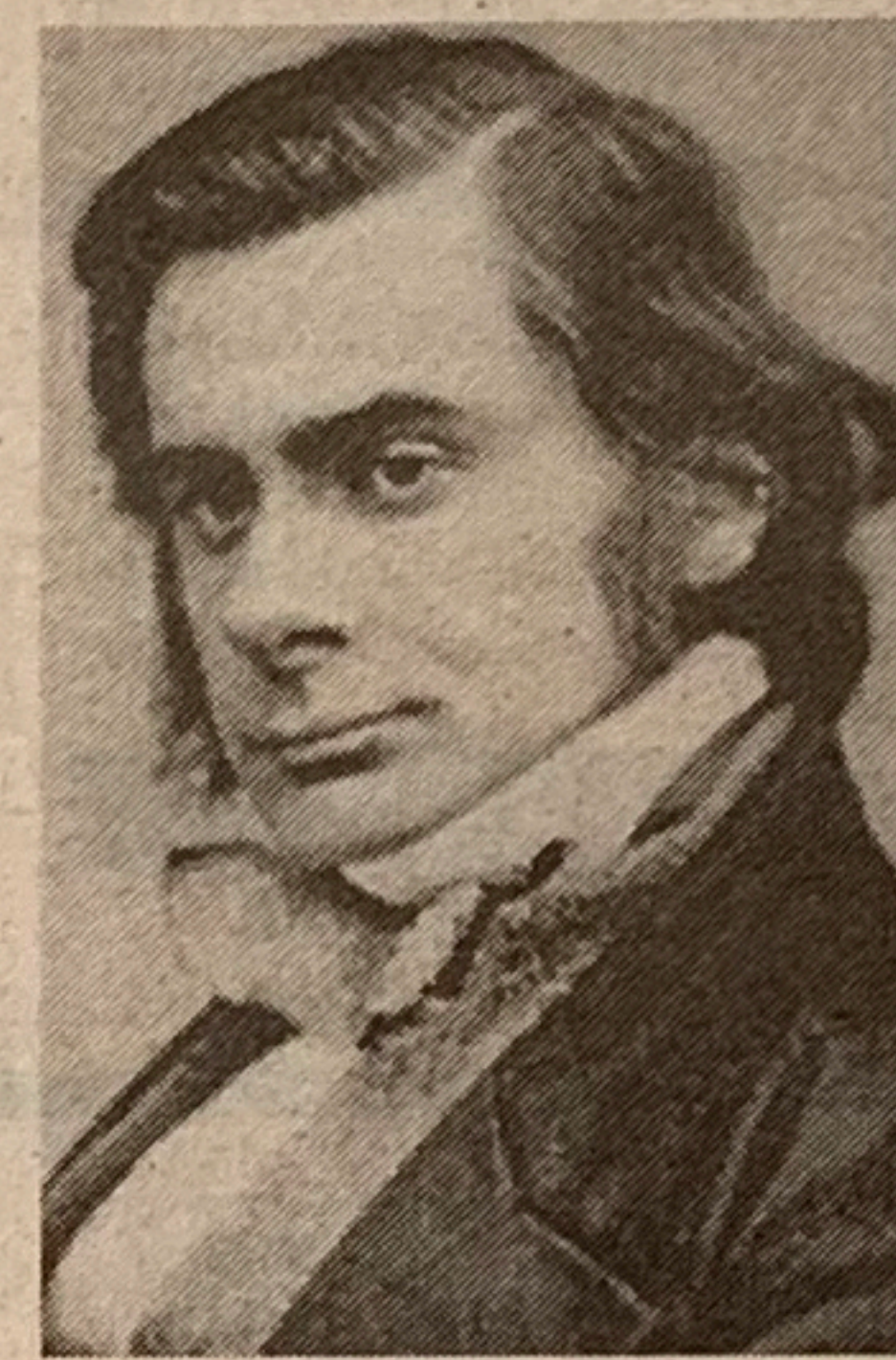
Things went only okay. "The



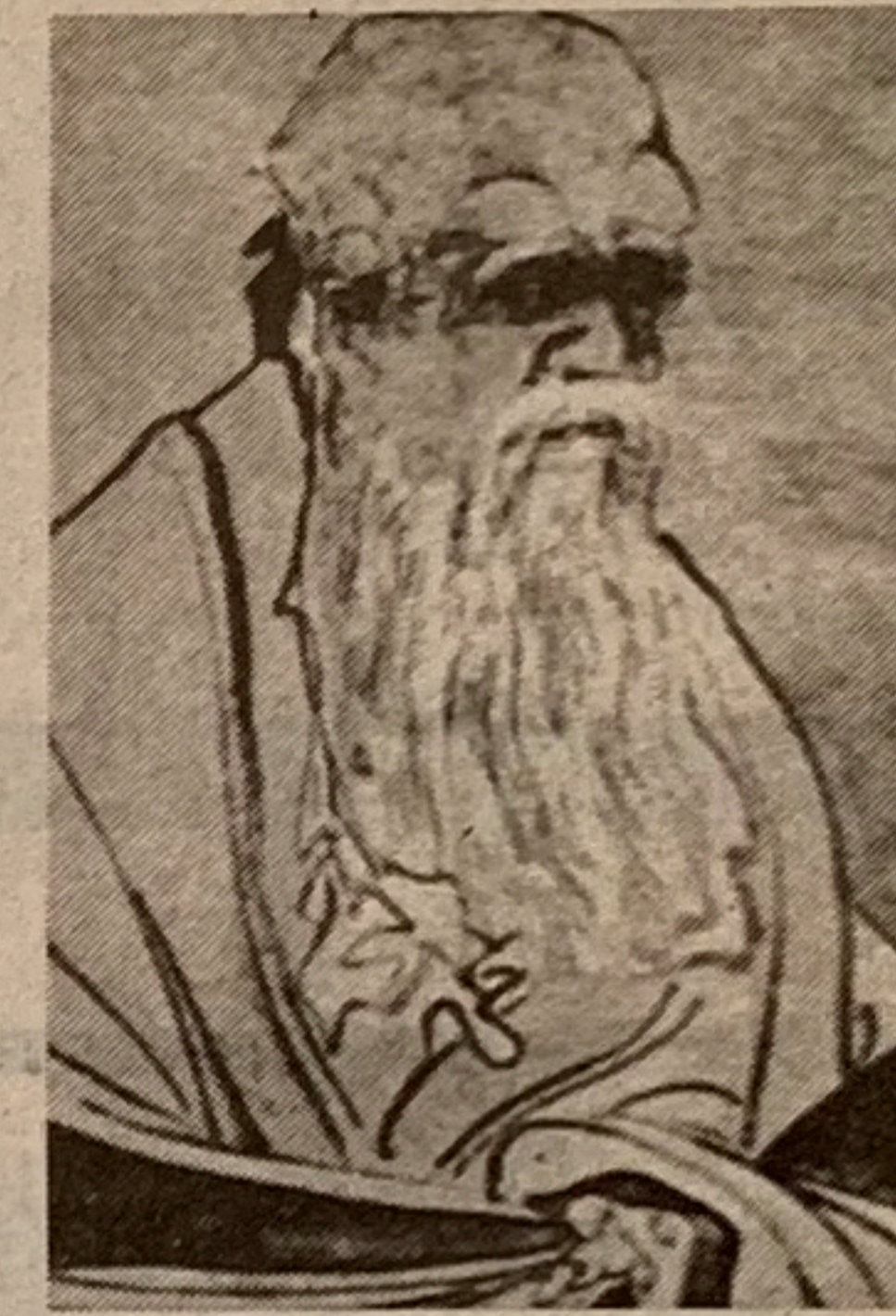
Marcus Aurelius



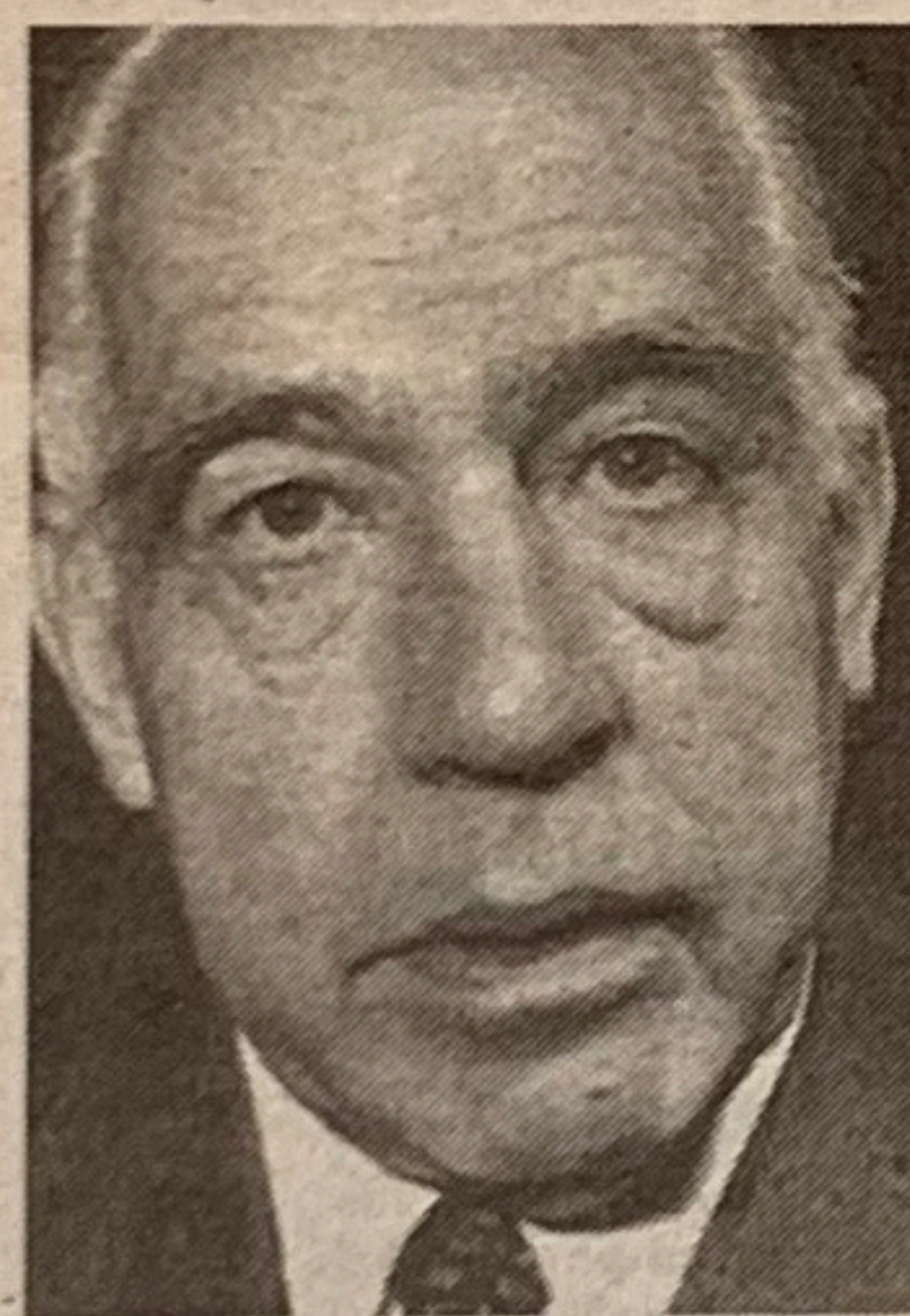
Niccolo Machiavelli



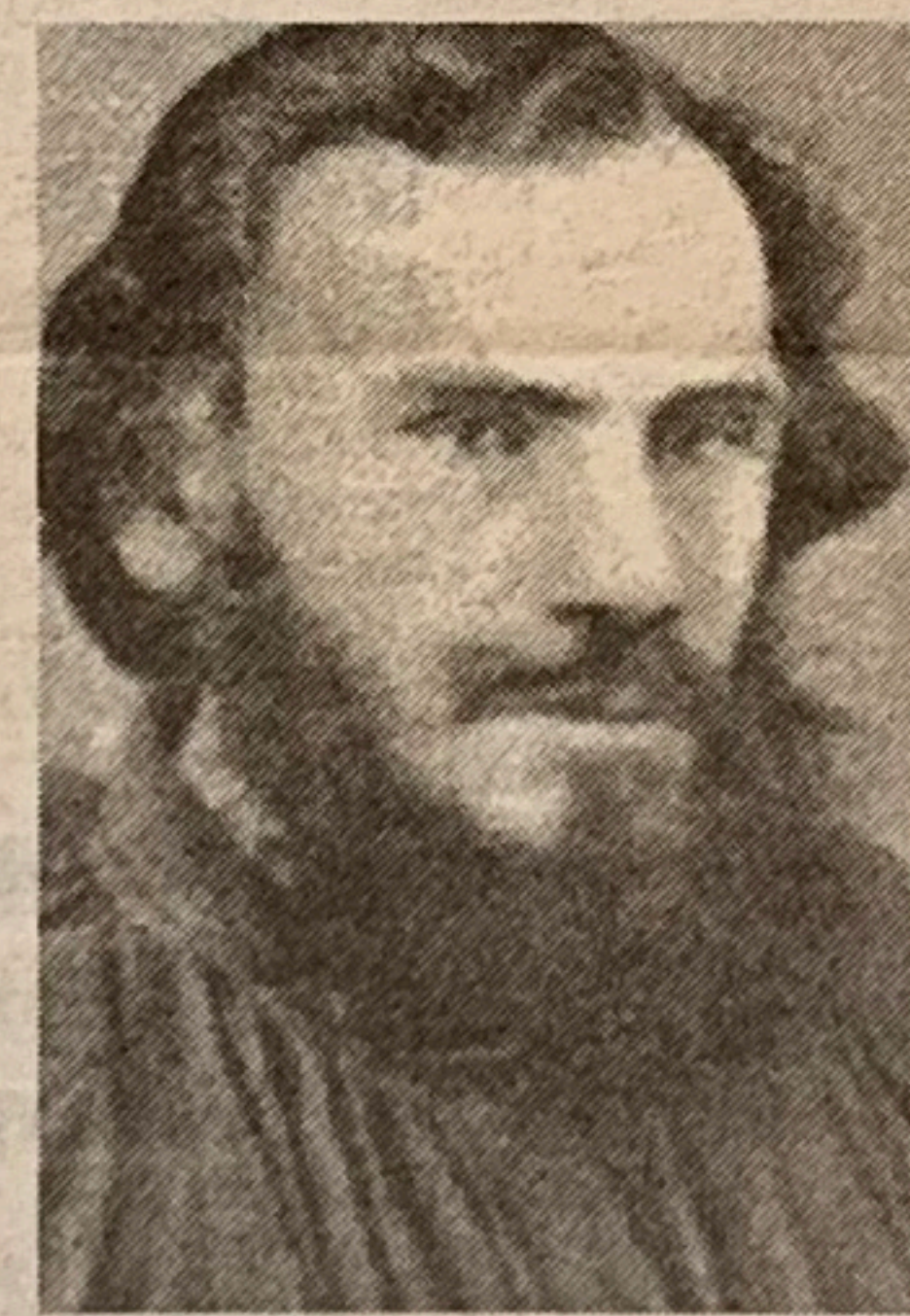
Thomas Huxley



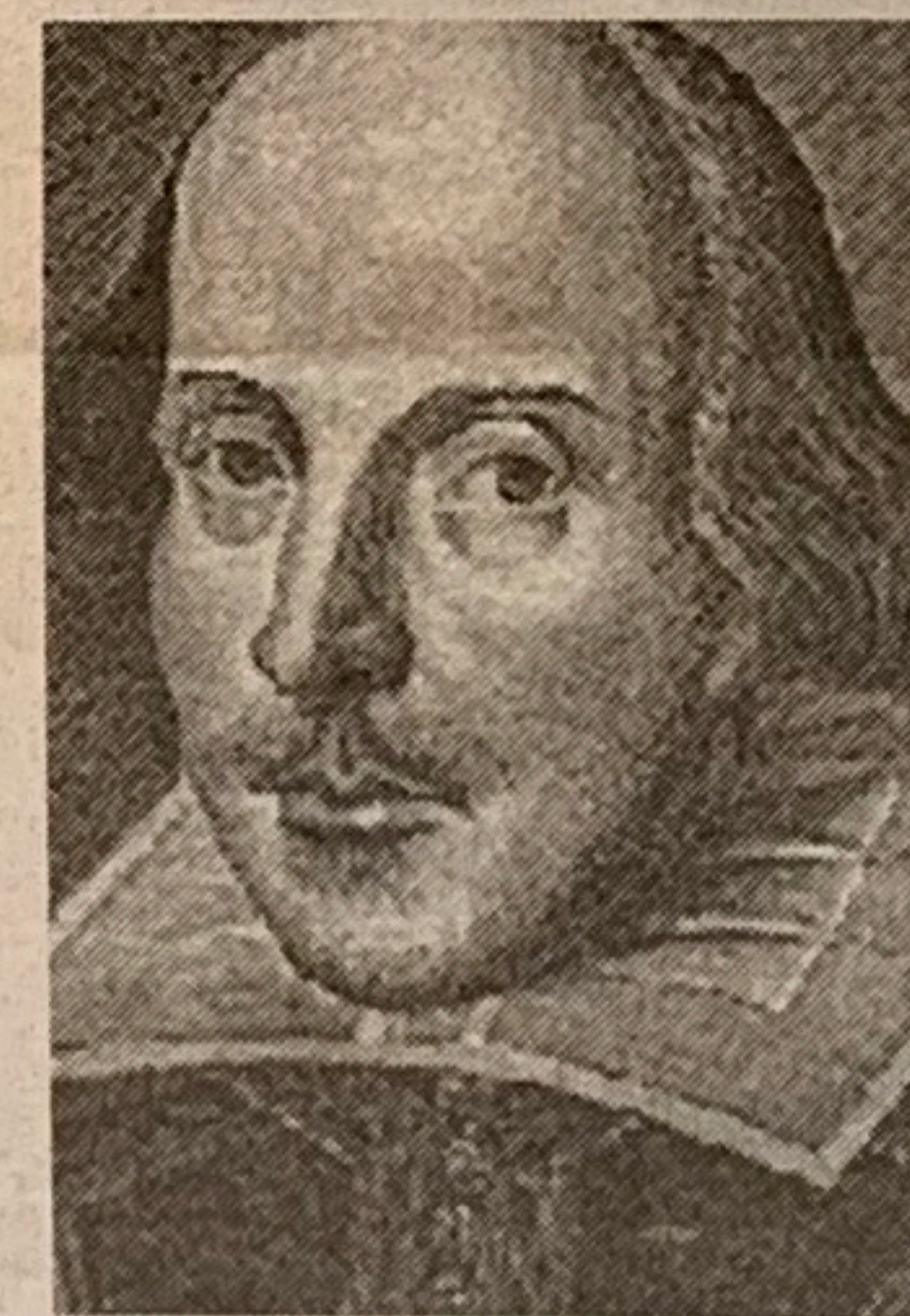
Lao Tzu



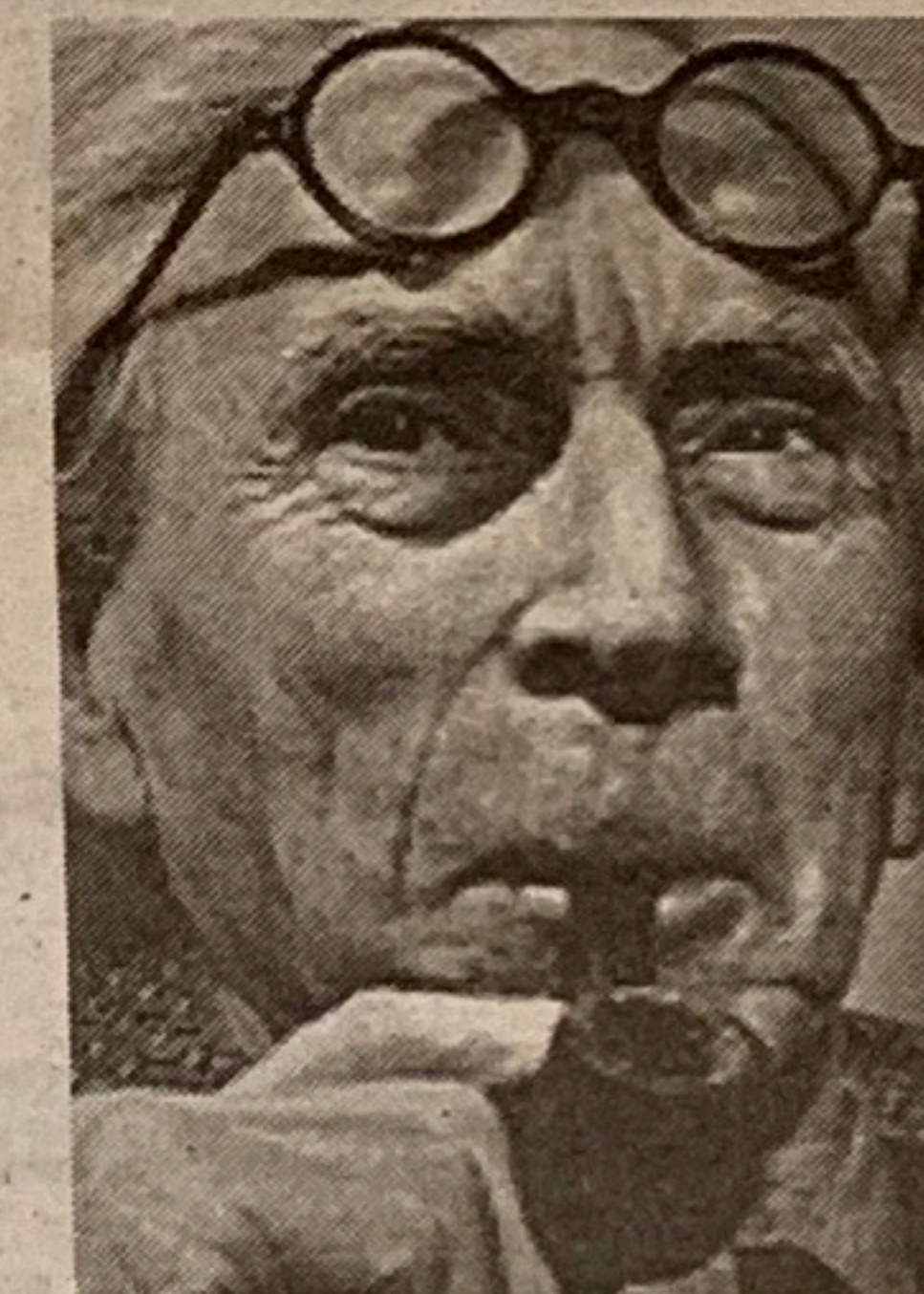
Neils Bohr



Leo Tolstoy



William Shakespeare



Bertrand Russell

Gyroscope put four tables together, but it wasn't the same. The library table is oval. This was a rectangle, and people had trouble seeing faces." Though it may not qualify as one of the loftier human truths, they learned a lesson that day: "Table shape is important."

Ann Keenan led the discussion for Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* and Rishis's *Upanishads*. This book group is affiliated with the Chicago-based Great Books Foundation whose traditional focus is Western ideas. But, according to Spalding, "Ann said, 'You know, there's another half of the world, and we should discuss it, too.'"

Keenan is a physicist and computer scientist, as well as a long-time practitioner of yoga, meditation, and Tai Chi. Another group member, a UCSD mathematician, is a Zen Buddhist. "So the group has two Western-trained scientists steeped in Eastern philosophies who see the convergence of the two," Keenan said.

Those selections resulted in the year's largest turnouts — "way over 20, standing room only, for Lao Tzu," said Keenan, "and almost that many for the *Upanishads*." More Eastern readings are planned in the future.

Keenan also guided the Neils Bohr

afternoon. "The title was daunting: *Conversation with Einstein on the Epistemological Problems in Atomic Physics*. But it complemented so well a previous selection, Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*. Those reads tied together so beautifully. They were both asking 'What is reality?' 'Is there such a thing?' And: 'How far can humans go in comprehending it?'"

Other patterns emerged in this year's reads, Keenan noted, but only regular attendees would appreciate them. She regretted that many people came for one topic only. "For Tolstoy, we had a woman whose degree is in literature, but she wasn't there for Bohr. Two physicists came for him, and participated and enjoyed it. But I wonder if they'll ever come again."

Particularly for something like this weekend's discussion of *Hamlet* she said she feared they wouldn't show up.

Ralph Purves will monitor the conversation about Shakespeare's troubled prince on Saturday. "We have two Shakespearians in the group," Purves said, "and they'll naturally want to discuss the great performances they've seen. And it's true that the play is meant to be seen, not read. But what we all have in common is the text, and

that's what our focus will be."

Purves led the Russell discussion earlier in the season. He was happy to report its success, especially since he considers philosophy to be "our biggest wild card." "We never know whether a selection is going to work out or not."

Although many in the group are scientists, he added, "we have a philosophical bent." Purves himself is an engineer-turned-executive for San Diego Gas & Electric. "Russell makes the point that when things are well enough understood, they're science. But when they're not well understood, that's philosophy. The implication is that there is a boundary line and that science is the 'easy' part, if you will, while philosophy is more speculative, maybe totally speculative. That's one insight that really stuck with us."

— Jeanne Schinto

San Diego Great Books Reading and Discussion Program
Saturday, May 19,
2:00 to 4:00 p.m.
San Diego Public Library
820 E Street, downtown
Second-floor meeting room
Free
Info: 619-440-5625

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