



## Monthly news & updates



***Season's Greetings  
and best wishes for a safe and  
healthy holiday  
from RAQ President, Council,  
and staff***

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December 2020 pension update: -1.6% return rate for October 2020

### ***Getting through the pandemic: The Alice Munro Virtual Book Club by Tracy Ware***

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If you have ever considered joining a book club, you might be interested in my recent experience. In the spring, I was approached by Ryan Porter, a Queen's Ph.D. (2010) now teaching at Algonquin College. He and Paul Barrett, another Queen's Ph.D. (2011) now teaching at Guelph, were thinking of organizing a virtual reading group as a response to the cancellation of conferences and the other restrictions on life in the pandemic. When Ryan said that they planned to focus on Alice Munro's final collection, *Dear Life*, I was hooked, even though I had little experience of Zoom and none at all of book clubs. To our collective surprise, our weekly meetings were such a success that in October we moved to Munro's second-to-last collection, *Too Much Happiness*, and in January we will continue backwards in Munro's career, story by story, volume by



volume. No one is in a hurry to finish. Our group has a wide range of experience and interests: we have both Munro specialists and general readers, along with creative writers of many kinds; we come from B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, Colorado, North Carolina, and New York; we have Professors of various subjects, Postdoctoral and graduate students, administrators, editors, an Emeritus Research Scientist at the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and a Senior Instructor Emerita in German at Calgary, and doctors and therapists with experience beyond the usual English classroom. In the fall we added Mary Jean Wright (B.A. in English, Queen's, 1970; M.A. in Anthropology, McGill, 1980), now retired from the federal public service; her daughter, Catriona Wright, was already in the group. Some of us were already devoted admirers of Munro; others are reading her for the first time. We were all willing to try an uncertain format, and most of us have attended regularly since the first session in June.

Any book club depends on the efforts of its members who are free to say almost anything as long as they respect the views of others. Our group immediately demonstrated that we could argue without rancour; an attitude of informed appreciation has remained dominant, but we often disagree on particular stories, and we try to say why. Most important, perhaps, was the decision to focus on short fiction; that way, our reading is limited to one story a week, and so even those busy with work, families, or bookshelves could do the weekly reading. Having worked on Munro since graduate school, I can't imagine another writer eliciting such hearty agreement on aesthetic merit, but I may be biased. For all readers and book clubs, a collection of short fiction avoids the demands of novels or books of nonfiction, which must have been the ruin of many a reading group. I speak for others when I say that Munro's works undermine the dubious if lingering idea that novels are more important than short stories.

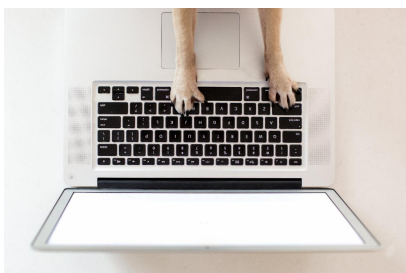
The most surprising thing has been the group's ability to explore each story fully while pursuing any tangent that arises; despite the loose ends and stray details, we somehow always manage to consider the endings, and that is essential with Munro. From Munro's biographer, Robert Thacker (Emeritus, St. Lawrence University), we have learned something about Munro's revisions, and it is often the endings that are most extensively revised. Our discussions seem to find their own rhythms, but I suspect that the organizers (Sarah Roger, Taylor Brown, and Kiera Obbard, as well as the two Queen's graduates named above) are partly responsible for the appearance of order. They make sure that anyone who wants to speak gets to do so.

As a retiree English professor, I find it heartening to return to literary debates and discussions. Acting as a lifeline in a difficult time, our Wednesday meetings now punctuate my week. If I cannot fully agree, I can understand why Tim Struthers (Guelph) said that he could listen to our discussions all night.

You can hear more on **Jessica McDonald's podcast** on "Teachin' Books," Nov. 10, 2020.

**Share your favourite pandemic pastimes with RAQ!**  
**Send suggestions to [raq@queensu.ca](mailto:raq@queensu.ca).**

**Highlights from  
RAQ survey**



## From Alistair MacLean, chair of RAQ's strategic planning exercise

At its December 2020 meeting, RAQ Council enthusiastically received the report of the planning group (found [here](#)) and supported recommendations to continue advocacy on pension and benefits, and pursue opportunities for lifelong learning both with RAQ and in concert with other groups. Council also supported continued discussions with other campus unions and with Advancement.

Both former faculty and staff members were strongly represented among respondents with an even split between genders. New perspectives for RAQ's future were provided by the over 40% of respondents who are new members this year and from the realization that a significant number of members are geographically remote from Kingston or are otherwise unable to attend Kingston-based events. The planning group is continuing to explore the implications of the feedback provided by respondents.

## Learning to teach during a pandemic: A faculty member on pivoting to online learning

Please check out RAQ President Diane Kelly's latest interview in a series of conversations with faculty, staff, and students about the learning and teaching struggles and successes during this COVID-19 year at Queen's. **Here**, she speaks to Dr. Mary Ann McColl, a well known, highly regarded professor in the School of Rehabilitation Therapy and the Department of Public Health Sciences at Queen's University, about the challenge of online teaching and the impact of the pandemic on research and scholarly activities.



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