



## “Only Connect...”



The epigraph to E.M. Forster’s wonderful novel *Howards End* is: “Only connect...” Written in 1910 this novel is about our need to relate to other people and the difficulties that often arise when we don’t, and even when we do.

When Covid-19 abruptly changed our lives in March, one MCLL class decided to continue meeting on Zoom. Susan van Gelder’s very engaging class, “A History of Music Through Women Composers” was not quite finished. Susan proposed that we complete the course on Zoom. She then suggested that we might want to continue meeting informally each week, at the same time, to talk. Eight members of the original class agreed and what has evolved is a very dynamic and diverse discussion group.

Initially we relied on Susan to suggest subjects; however, she insisted that we all take responsibility for the Zoom meetings. Within a short time various members were offering topics, making presentations and guiding the conversations.

We graduated from women composers to women conductors. As the Black Lives Matter movement gained traction we embraced remarkable women of color such as Toni Morrison and artist Faith Ringgold. This led us to look at women artists such as Emily Carr and Georgia O’Keefe. We examined the careers of remarkable women writers such as Charlotte Gilman Perkins and Doris Lessing. Together we discovered Ada Lovelace (who created the first computer program), Alexandra David Néel (an intrepid traveler) and Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger (who pioneered birth control). We looked at the careers of Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Hillary Clinton who fought for gender equality. Most recently someone gave a

presentation on Chrystia Freedland and her awesome mother, Halyna.

The group is not only about continuing to learn; it serves as a support group. At the beginning of our weekly session we check in with each other and share good news, sad news and the tribulations of managing life during a pandemic. We recommend books, films on Netflix and food delivery services. We commiserate with and encourage each other.

Susan has taught us not to be afraid of technology and has shown us how to do slide presentations. Some of us have ventured there and others have not. Our group is very forgiving and there is absolutely no pressure when we give presentations.

On a beautiful day in August we all met for a picnic lunch in the Memorial Garden at Dawson College. It was thrilling to meet in person after months of meeting on Zoom. As the fall begins we have decided to continue our weekly get together. It has become something we are all committed to and we are curious to see where it takes us next. There is no shortage of fascinating women to discover and celebrate. There are so many women who have been overlooked or whose contributions have not been celebrated.

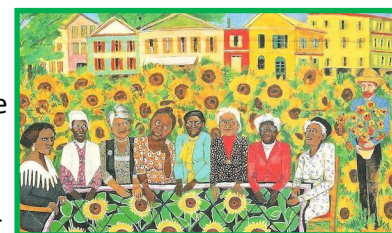
All this to say that there are many possibilities on Zoom and that MCLL members should embrace the opportunity to connect with others. Start your own group, find like-minded people to talk to each week. You will not be disappointed.



Toni Morrison



Emily Carr



Painting by  
Faith Ringgold

# Message from our new President



There is no doubt that the last six months have been like no other for all of us personally, and for MCLL too. I recall a meeting the week before the scheduled date of the AGM when we were finalizing the agenda—the date March 20, 2020 sounded auspicious. We were looking forward to the lunch to acknowledge and thank the moderators and lecturers for their amazing contribution to MCLL. We were excited to welcome Joe Schwarz as the guest speaker. But, by the end of that afternoon, we were all advised to stay home. The spring semester was cancelled. The university closed.

But the leadership at MCLL was undaunted. I am so proud to have succeeded Lorne Huston as president. Lorne worked closely with Ana Milic, our administrative coordinator, and many others to organize the early spring sessions after the planned program was cancelled. Lorne and Ana were instrumental in making a plan to keep things going. You all know the outcome: moderators were recruited, hosts were trained to support those moderators, and two sessions of 6 weeks duration were offered without charge. The response to an appeal for donations to MCLL was very gratifying. By the end of this spring session we were confident that we could resume our summer lecture program (Wonderful Wednesdays) and our full program of study groups and lectures online in September. And many of you are now enjoying this new way of learning and being together.

There are so many talented and gifted individuals among our members. We are all volunteers, all offering our time and talent to make MCLL a wonderful place to keep learning. Your role in study groups, whether as a presenter or member of a discussion group, are key to the success of MCLL's peer learning model. From the office volunteers, committee chairs and committee members, moderators and lecturers, you all contribute in a very special way. Thank you.

I look forward to meeting all of you whenever we can be together again. Or, in the meantime, online.

**Sandra Baines, President**

# Potter Research Report

Many MCLL members participated in a study earlier this year conducted by former dean of the McGill School of Continuing Studies, *University-Based Approaches for Older Adults: Adapting Universities for the 100-year Lifespan*. Part of this research consisted of questionnaires and focus groups.

Summarizing the results, MCLL members are seen to be highly engaged individuals. Two-thirds have an affiliation with McGill beyond their membership in MCLL and just under half are McGill graduates. About one-third have volunteered with MCLL/McGill and over 40% report having donated to the University. Education levels are high with four out of five holding a minimum of an undergraduate degree and about half with Masters or Doctoral degrees. Not surprisingly, members have had impressive careers with about 84% identifying as professionals, educators or managers. Income levels are also considerably higher than the general Montreal population. Not surprising, then, that they feel it important to be affiliated with a university-based learning program that provides intellectual stimulation and social interaction.

A number of recommendations were made that can help to inform other universities and their practices regarding this demographic. These include understanding the ways in which learning impacts the well-being (e.g. intellectual, social, physical) of MCLL members, understanding what MCLL members perceive that they need from McGill University and how they believe they can contribute, and understanding what senior McGill leadership feel McGill can contribute to MCLL and how they believe McGill can benefit from having MCLL as part of it.

Any surprises? Dr. Potter remarked upon the intensity of MCLL members' desire to be more closely integrated with the University community. They believe that there is a deep and wide pool of experience and expertise resident within MCLL that could be more effectively recognized and utilized by the University.





## AGM

Looking back over the last few Covid-19 months, it seems years ago that we tuned in to Zoom and attended MCLL's 2020 Annual General Meeting. It

certainly had a special appeal and over 200 people tuned in, way more than the crowd of 70-80 at a usual AGM! Lorne Huston, as outgoing president, gave a very poignant report, the highlights of which are presented below.

Lorne began by congratulating the new executive: Sandra Baines as new president, Jeff Sidel as vice-president and Sally Cooper, a new Council member. He then spoke about three MCLL projects that had not been affected by the pandemic: the Fiona Clark Award, aimed at providing financial support for mature students enrolled in the McGill School of Continuing Studies; the Judith Potter Research project (see the summary below); and a policy on Community Outreach: Goals & Strategies which is designed to develop partnerships with other groups in the community who are under-represented at MCLL. Each of these projects, in its own way, will continue to have effects over the years to come.

But in addition to these very specific projects, Lorne went on, there has been a reorganization of MCLL and the way it is run. We have signed a new memorandum of understanding with the SCS which outlines who is responsible for what and how responsibilities must be shared. Instead of reporting to a manager at SCS, and having to convince them if we wanted to change or improve anything at MCLL, we are now an autonomous unit and Ana is our Liaison Officer. Our needs are at the heart of her job and she interacts directly with the various services of SCS like marketing, human resources, finances and operation, etc. In addition, we now have regular meetings with the Dean during the year to ensure mutual understanding.

It has not been plain sailing, he admits, as our two cultures have tried to merge but we have made tremendous progress. The link with SCS keeps us on our toes as it provides us with a safety net and these advantages have been well demonstrated during the pandemic crisis.

But this link is not the only thing that has helped us survive. We have had the aid of people like Ana, Martin Coles and the IT committee who have been preparing us for technological changes for years. Already, at our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary conference in 2014, Ana made a presentation on remote webcasting. She

was followed by Tony Frayne, Martin and, later, Irwin, as president, who put all his energy into supporting these changes.

So SCS and the technological groundwork have played an important part in helping us in this period of crisis, but this would have been of little avail if the heart and soul of MCLL were not strong and healthy. What is really amazing to see in the last three months, Lorne says, is the way we have collectively surmounted huge obstacles, with one person after another stepping up following an initial burst of solidarity on that very first weekend in mid-March. Members have rallied en masse to support the proposals put forth by people who always believed in Zoom - Martin Coles, Tim Skene, Rick Jones, Frank Nicholson:

- Ten moderators volunteered to give a SG in an entirely new environment!
- 150 members, new to Zoom, signed up.
- Our office volunteers, led by Astri, responded to emails, set up a phone chain to call up ALL our members, to see how they were doing, to keep in touch, to help with technological issues.
- Nina and the curriculum committee had a huge problem to overcome arranging moderators and groups.
- Not to mention the close collaborators with whom Ana and Lorne have worked tirelessly: Sandra Baines, Alice (our treasurer), Susan (volunteer coordinator) and Council, especially Julie Wait.

And all this has paid off. We had so many proposals for summer lectures that some had to shift to the fall semester! And the fall semester is offering 35 SGs and 27 lectures. Zoom hosts too have multiplied: from four to a dozen. We can be proud of what we have achieved despite the unprecedented worldwide lockdown. This is our collective accomplishment and I am so proud to have been a part of it.

Naturally, no-one imagines that this new situation is an improvement on our in-person Study Groups. We long to see each other physically. We need to hear our real voices but we have learned a lot about how we can use technology to help us get things done. And we will.



# On The Move

It appears I'm not the only one on the move. Maybe that's one of the consequences of this lockdown and its aftereffects – nothing else to do during this time, so might as well make a move! I started thinking seriously about giving up my home and garden of 36 years shortly into the new year. My garden has been a labour of love for many years but, alas, creaky bones and aching joints have turned taking care of it from a joy into a bit of a chore, and its beauty has suffered as a result. Even keeping up with the house has become more difficult, particularly any activity that involves bending. Once down, how does one get up again?! Thus the cane - a wonderful tool for balance as well as chasing away unwanted attention!



My move was expedited by one of my daughters, who is more whirlwind than human being. We do not all have that luxury, I know, but my move has taught me a lot of things. Thanks to her, I've learned that it is a good idea to start paring down, selling, donating, or giving away absolutely everything one will not take a good six months in advance. Granted, for the last two months of living in my house, I felt as though I were camping, but for the week before the move, there was almost nothing left to do. There are any number of apps on-line for helping you plan and execute a move. The one I found suited me best was <https://movingwaldo.ca/> It provides check lists of all that needs to be done and when, including such things as informing Hydro-Quebec. Speaking of paring down, I know this is the hardest aspect of moving for most people. We just have to get it through our heads that the children don't want Great Aunt Bessie's pearls, or her sterling silver. They don't want the photos of all your trips, taken over the years and often not properly identified. And all that course work you put into learning Italian? You're not going to use it any more. Nor are you going to reuse or, let's face it, even reread the presentations you gave at MCLL over the years. And, as for the books. Ah, as for the books. You're allowed to take ten. The rest should be donated to places where they will be used and appreciated by others - some, perhaps, to Westmount Library, some to a hospital or hospice, some to old friends who don't realize they're being suckered in. I brought most of my paintings, sure in the knowledge that if my children don't want them, I'll never know about it!



The most difficult part of a move, at our age, is staying calm. Moving is very stressful and as much as we pride ourselves on our cool and calm demeanour, we will fall apart a little, no matter how organized we are. Most of the week prior to and following my move are a bit of a blur. I often felt quite helpless, and unable to make rational decisions during this time, and depended on my daughters to quite an extent to keep the boat from tipping over. If you're lucky enough to have a spouse, a child or a good friend who can provide that stability when it's needed, you're ahead of the game. If you are feeling very much alone during this time, have faith in your own abilities, try to think of only one thing at a time, and remember that you have got through many of life's hurdles that are far more serious than a move and you've done it with flying colours.

I found that although friends are ready and willing to help, that if you are downsizing to a small condo or two or three rooms, too many people can simply get in the way. I find I was better off with just Mika and me, rather than having well-intentioned friends asking me for directions – where does this belong? – when I don't yet know myself. Everything doesn't have to be accomplished in one day. Give yourself time and breathing room, and before you know it, you'll be settled.

And in that emergency box that you need to pack with the necessities? A bottle of single-malt Scotch is a necessity!

*Sandra Frisby*

# Reaching out... in the Covid Era

We all agree that we would much prefer to meet up downtown at our MCLL lounge or in the classrooms. I'm surprised actually, how much I miss not only the people but the place. I'd never found the rooms very attractive. I liked the Lounge, with the artwork on the walls, and the plants but the classrooms were pretty drab, the hallways were narrow and lit by cold glaring neon lamps. And yet, very often, I find myself thinking of the place. The crowded little kitchen where we are all jammed in together waiting for a coffee and jabbering away about this and that. How such a scene as that seems so impossible, today!

And so we have to put that behind us, at least for the time being. And we have found ways. So many of us have put aside our natural reticence towards things like Zoom and have discovered that there can be real pleasure in connecting with new people in new ways. I have two examples here which I would like to share with you.

## The Montreal – Prairies expatriates club.



Elizabeth Robinson, a member of MCLL who many of you may know, had the idea, even before the pandemic, of setting up a joint study group with the Calgary Association of Lifelong Learning. MCLL people got in touch with

the executive of the Calgary association and the enthusiasm was so great that two study groups were created, one on current events and one on comparative literature. I'm in the literature group and we had a first meeting recently. I was born in Alberta and I thought I would be something of an exception in the group, having a good knowledge of both cultures. To my surprise, most of the people in the group had lived in the other region for part of their lives. It was so interesting to discover these life stories of people who had



moved from Montreal out west and other people here in MCLL that had come to Montreal. I'm really looking forward to understanding how we "hybrids" will be reading the books from the two literary traditions.

## Free exercise sessions for people of our speed organized by the McGill University Research Centre for Studies on Ageing.

This is a great find. Carola Weil, our dean, mentioned it to me in passing in a recent email exchange. Many of you may remember that Barbara Rey MacLeod along with Irwin Kuzmarov and a few others tried to find a way to integrate wellness training including physical exercise into the program at MCLL. There were all kinds of physical and administrative obstacles to making it happen. But now the Education Committee of the MCSA (McGill Centre for Studies in Aging) has set up a series of lectures called the Brainy Boomers lecture series which includes regular exercise sessions on Zoom once a week with a professional fitness trainer. This is of great importance to me, especially during COVID. In spite of my good intentions, I was not getting out enough during the spring and I started to feel the physical consequences.

Over the past three weeks, I have participated in the fitness training offered once a week by the MCSA, which can be done in your living room. It is available through Zoom which means you can ask questions at the beginning or at the end. I'm always happy to turn off my camera so no-one can see how awkward I am when doing the exercises, but I can still watch the instructor as she goes through the various routines. I can then turn my camera back on again for the discussion period afterwards. Sessions are free but registration is required... and very simple. All you have to do is provide your email address. This program also includes a series of lectures by experts on health issues which are of particular interest to people of our age bracket.



To see the upcoming events : <http://CMEV.eventbrite.com>

If you have any questions please email: [sarah.mulcahy@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:sarah.mulcahy@mail.mcgill.ca) or [kaitlyn.butt@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:kaitlyn.butt@mail.mcgill.ca).

Wishing you all courage, creativity and caring for this strange season of fall 2020.

**Maybe you would like to think about a study group for the winter semester that could take advantage of some of the unique possibilities that Zoom allows us to explore.**

# Remembering

## **Mebbie (Meribah) Aikens**

I first met Mebbie about the year 2000. I had been coaxed into volunteering in the office and was often sharing the desk with Mebbie. She was interesting, sharing the stories of her life. She was always taking care of people from far and away, having them stay over at her home, and she cooked food for everyone who seemed to need it.

Mebbie led an interesting study group for several years, "Writing the Story of Your Life". Some people wrote their story from the very beginning up to the present day: and some even had their story published. Mebbie had copies of those on her bookshelves at home. Others in the group would write incidents from their lives that seemed interesting and needed telling. Mebbie was helpful and non-threatening in her leadership of this group.

Always sensitive to the needs of others, for example if someone seemed to have difficulty paying their fees, Mebbie would suggest that they apply for a 'scholarship'.

She spared very little time for herself, ever putting the service of others before her own needs. We office staff were always aware of her presence and assured of her help whenever it was needed. She was very special was our Mebbie.

## *Margaret Linklater Appelman*

## **Ann Pearson**

Ann was a quiet force, a work of art in her own life. A long-time moderator of many art-related study groups, she contributed greatly to the functioning of the MCLL community. An avid and accomplished photographer, she played an active role in the Montreal Camera Club. She enjoyed being part of her book club and was involved in many artistic activities in Montreal, including freelancing at the National Film Board.

In addition to her love of art she showed a lifetime interest in women's issues and in world religions and this, combined with her love of travel, made her an exceptionally accomplished woman and a fascinating friend. She had an eye for the unusual and an extraordinary understanding of the world – art, yes, but not just that! It was always to Ann that MCLL turned for her opinion on our art exhibits. Just so that you understand this extraordinary woman, she gave a presentation on Zoom from her bedroom about one of her favourite unsung composers, Jennifer Higdon, just two weeks before she died! MCLL lost a precious member, indeed. In a final letter to a friend she expressed her peace with leaving "this troubled world."



## **Sandra Frisby**

# Legacy Workshop

In mid-September MCLL and the School of Continuing Studies collaborated in presenting a workshop online on the subject of Legacy Giving. The purpose of the workshop was to introduce the idea to potential donors who might want to include MCLL in their giving in their will. As Dr. Bernard Shapiro, MCLL member and former Principal and Vice-Chancellor of McGill said, universities and churches are the only institutions to have survived from medieval times - thanks to the generosity of the Pope, princes, and partnerships with philanthropists. These partnerships are still needed, especially in these difficult Covid times. Other speakers included the son of a legacy donor and an expert on legacy giving. Dr. Carola Weil, Dean of SCS, acted as moderator and Sandra Baines, MCLL President, chaired the event. The workshop was recorded and is available on You Tube.

We have all received so much from McGill over the years that it feels fair to give back at some point. And what easier way than noting in our will that such and such amount be given at the time of death to an institution where we had so much joy in learning. As most of us are living on a fixed income, the amount can be specified at a later date. All that has to be done now is to notify McGill that a legacy has been made. For more information contact McGill School of Continuing Studies.

# New Moderators and Lecturers

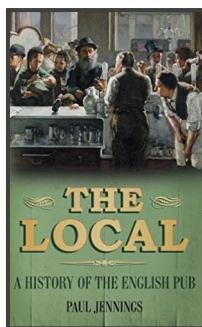


## Belinda Beaton

Belinda has developed a course on the English stately house. While pursuing her D Phil in British History at the University of Oxford,

she spent several summers taking mature students on tours of some of England's most notable historic properties and lecturing on their evolution. She has been interviewed on BBC television and BBC Radio 4. On the Queen Mother's death, in 2002, CBC television broadcast an interview with Belinda as part of its official coverage of the royal funeral.

While at Oxford, Belinda participated in developing public programming for the four university museums and sat as a curator of the Bodleian Library. Her articles and reviews have appeared in diverse publications including the *National Post*, the *Ottawa Citizen*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *Saturday Night* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. After almost two decades living in the UK, she has returned to Canada and is delighted to make Montreal her new home.



## Paul Jennings

Paul Jennings describes himself as a social historian who has researched and published on the history of drink and drinking places in England, particularly *The Local: A History of the English Pub* and *A History of Drink and the English 1500-2000*. He formerly lectured in History at the University of Bradford. He is now retired, lives in the beautiful spa city of Harrogate, and

recently completed *The Working Class in Edwardian Harrogate*, which is in the press.

It is thanks to Catherine Moore that Paul, who is not an MCLL member and does not even live in Canada, that we were lucky to have him as one of our Wonderful Wednesday lecturers. Paul met Catherine in Cambridge back in the mid 1970s and she knew that he worked in university adult education prior to his retirement and was aware of his work on the history of drink and drinking places. It was a very informative lecture with excellent illustrations of old pubs in the West Riding of Yorkshire. All who attended probably dashed to the kitchen for a beer as soon as Paul had finished! Cheers everybody.



## Debbie Mercier

Debbie Mercier retired from McGill University in 2019 after a 40-year career in professional roles in human resources and fundraising at several McGill units, including the Faculty of Medicine and Advancement. She also spent seven years working

directly with the Dean of Continuing Studies, fundraising for the School. During this period, she worked closely with several presidents and Councils of the (then) McGill Institute for Learning in Retirement. Having greatly appreciated and internalized the value of our MCLL for many years, Debbie is now fully enjoying it from a different perspective – as a member.

The first MCLL study group that Debbie registered for as a newly minted retiree, was naturally "Creative Writing" with Roz Paris. "Naturally", she explains is because she has had a lifelong interest and passion for writing that she is finally having an opportunity to fulfill. She is currently the Editor of the *McGill University Retirees Newsletter* (MURA), and, in the past, has written articles for the McGill News, the McGill Reporter, and other publications. Let's hope she can become a regular contributor to The Newsletter!



## Wolfgang Schneider

Wolfgang was born in Germany, where he grew up in a small town in a wine-growing region in the Southwest, roughly between Stuttgart and Heidelberg. He comes from a family of professional housepainters, but rather than joining the family business he

wanted to go to University. He took up chemistry and biology and finished with a PhD in biochemistry from the University of Heidelberg. He spent two years doing research in Boston before settling in Montreal, where he spent several years at the Lady Davis Institute, the research institute of the Jewish General Hospital, and started a family. After additional training at the University of Toronto he returned to Montreal in the early 1990s and started a new career as a clinical chemist in the biochemistry labs of the Montreal General and Sacré-Coeur Hospitals. Since his retirement a few years ago he has joined MCLL where he has become reacquainted with his old interest in history.

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# A Virtual Bloomsday Celebration



Back in 2011 my husband David Schurman offered a study group at MCLL on James Joyce's *Ulysses*. During that term our group of 16 explored the many faceted book but also the Bloomsday phenomenon begun in Dublin in 1954 and now celebrated in 60 cities worldwide.

It's called Bloomsday, the day on which the action of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* takes place, June 16, 1904, the day they say Joyce had his first date with Nora Barnacle, his partner (later wife) and the mother of his two children Giorgio and Lucia both born in Trieste, Italy where Joyce was teaching English. The day, however, is not named for any of the family but rather after Leopold Bloom, the protagonist in *Ulysses* whose life and thoughts form the core of the novel as he interacts with his wife Molly Bloom, the young Stephen Dedalus, and many other characters we recognize from Joyce's works, history, and epic poetry. The whole novel takes place from eight in the morning on June 16th through to the early hours of the following day. Leopold Bloom is said to be based on Ettore Schmitz, known as Italo Svevo, an Italian writer who was one of Joyce's students in Trieste. Schmitz was the son of a Jewish German. During our study group we decided to form a committee to host a Bloomsday Festival in Montréal in June of 2012. With this initiative of members and the financial support of MCLL, Bloomsday was launched as an event including pubs and food, lectures, walking tours, and all the arts. The Irish community, especially the School of Irish Studies at Concordia, supported the venture so that now our Bloomsday is the second largest outside of Dublin itself. When COVID-19 hit, Bloomsday 2020 had already been percolating. David had resigned as President, but the VP Kevin Wright took over. Kathleen Fee became VP. After the initial shock of having to cancel live activities, Kathleen, ever the actress, determined that the show must go on and started organizing Bloomsday online over five days, June 12 to 16.

One of the highlights for me was the talk on the first day by Michael Kenneally, Principal of Concordia's School of Irish Studies. He reminded us that Joyce was writing *Ulysses* when the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918-19 was at its

height. Joyce, Kenneally pointed out, had an obsession with germs, and the novel reflects this preoccupation – as long as you have an expert to show you where to look. What is terrific is that this talk is still available on the Bloomsday website, so you can enjoy it at your convenience. [www.bloomsdaymontreal.com](http://www.bloomsdaymontreal.com)



All the other events are also available. Have a look at what the fabulous committee was able to pull together over the airwaves. An exhibition of caricatures by Craig Morriss was scheduled for the Atwater Library. Thanks to the generosity of the artist, it too can still be viewed on line.

Why does *Ulysses* continue to be read? Few novelists have the ability to play the English language like a great virtuoso. Joyce did. If reading is daunting, enjoy it in a recorded version. It's such fun when good actors bring the text to life, and we have little work to do.



*Judith Schurman*



# Beware the Mirage of Empathy and the Fallacy of Pity

There has been much talk recently in the media and other public discourse on “empathy”. “He’s got empathy”, pundits lauded ponderously the great leadership of one politician as contrasted with another whom they fault for “lacking in empathy”. Admirers of both adversaries, though bitterly at loggerheads, agree on the rightness of empathy as a defining quality in great leadership, let’s say, in a time of a raging, bewildering pandemic. The squabbles between the two groups are more like jousting for the crown of empathetic laurels. No one pauses to consider that the whole premise of empathy as indicator of a well-functioning society, good character and effective leadership is rather dubious.

Paul Bloom, author of a book entitled “*Against Empathy*”, relishes the usual response his theory receives: “*Taking a position against empathy is like announcing that you hate kittens—a statement so outlandish it can only be a joke*” and rushes to clarify he is not promoting a stance “*against morality, compassion, kindness, love, being a good neighbor, doing the right thing, and making the world a better place.*” On the contrary: the claim being made is that in the matter of being/doing good, empathy is a poor standard to live or judge by.

Come to think of it, this notion is as old as language. “*The road to hell is paved by good intentions*” is a piece of wisdom that has been attributed to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153). And we usually understand its meaning without impugning Bernard’s moral heart.



**Hannah Arendt**

Empathy breeds good intentions and pity. Pity is counted as a virtue, related to other human passions we perceive as good: compassion, sympathy, mercy, kindness, etc. The difficulty arises from a perception of “pity” as a positive emotion, while in fact it is concomitant with corrosive postures like condescension, moral selection, sentimentality, bias, lopsidedness, revanchism, all of which are in conflict with what constitutes valid and reliable justice. Pity is not an intelligent or thoughtful emotion; it is passive, sterile, narcissistic, and when deployed politically may often lead to violence.

Pity is an emotion produced, as per Spinoza, in passive ignorance, stimulated by sensory titillation of our easily excitable imagination, and is at odds with the kind of rational, constructive, effective, thinking of an active mind.

Good thinking is predicated on knowledge, well-informed emotions and lucid ideas. With pity and empathy, we are overwhelmed by raw emotions that hamper our ability to think well and judge accurately.

Hannah Arendt, an unsentimental philosopher, regarded pity as “*the perversion of compassion*” that “*proved to possess a greater capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself*”. Pity induces a kind of irresistible, beyond-moral indignation, a rage that displaces accountability and responsibility. Politically-deployed pity gnaws at the bulwarks of civil society and becomes, as Arendt says, “*boundless*” as well as, I would add, bottomless. It was authentic pity that led to the blood bath of the French Revolution and the 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutions with which we ought to be most familiar. The language of pity, according to Arendt in “*On Revolution*”, venerates cruelty as a necessary implement in the service of humanity. She turns to Robespierre’s legacy as an exemplification of her insight:

“*Par pitié, par amour pour l’humanité, soyez inhumains !*” is a sentence “*taken almost at random from petition of one of the sections of the Parisian Commune to the National Convention*”, and the remarkable thing about it is that it is “*neither accidental nor extreme*”. “*The evil of Robespierre’s virtue was that it did not accept any limitation*”.

For Arendt, the catastrophe of Robespierre’s “pity-inspired” chaotic rule of terror was its upending of the foundations of impartial justice, which she articulated in this way: “*the application of the same rules to those who sleep in palaces and those who sleep under the bridges of Paris*”.

Let’s keep that in mind next time some cynical politician, or sanctimonious pundit or table-pounding prophet speaks about “empathy” as a virtue.

**Noga Emanuel**

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### Rick Staphenhurst

Born in South Africa and raised in the United Kingdom, Rick immigrated to Canada in 1972. He completed a Doctorate in Business and Commerce (from Australian National University, 2011) and Master's degrees in Business Administration (York University) and Development Studies (Carleton

University). He is currently an Assistant Professor and Director of Parliamentary Programs at the School of Continuing Studies, McGill University and is a professeur associé in political science at Laval University.

Previously, he worked at the World Bank in Washington, DC, the Canadian International Development Agency in Ottawa, and both Bank of Montreal and TD Bank in Toronto. This work involved extensive travel throughout Africa and Asia, where he worked with legislators, government officials, civil society representatives and journalists in more than 60 countries.

He has written extensively on issues related to anti-corruption and parliamentary strengthening. He has also authored numerous articles and working papers that have been published in both the business and in peer-reviewed academic journals. And he has a wide range of interests in addition to his more serious side. For example, he was all set to present a lecture entitled "Elvis Presley's *King Creole: Film Noir?*" last spring (the event was cancelled due to Covid, unfortunately for us) and he has a lecture on Africa ready to present this fall, via Zoom.

Rick is married with two adult children and two granddaughters. His hobbies include reading, stamp collecting, and playing with his granddaughters. At the time of writing, he is in the process of moving from Montreal to Ottawa but he has promised to keep in touch.

## A Positive Side to Covid-19

Amazing as it may seem, the pandemic has brought out unexpected sides to people who never suspected they would find themselves in such a context. As members of MCLL, we are used to getting up, getting dressed and hopping on a bus or a metro to attend a class at 688 Sherbrooke, going for lunch with a friend afterwards then going to see a movie at the Forum. Oops! Suddenly we were cloistered, often totally alone. But frustrations and phone calls to friends brought forth some good ideas. We found this out when we started calling MCLL members to see how they were coping. This was an initiative put together by a team headed by Lorne Husten, Astri Thorvik, and Lisa Knyszynska. The response to a call put out to the membership resulted in approximately 80 volunteers who were each given 10 names of members to call, covering the whole of

MCLL! Many of these volunteers maintained contact with the people they called, making new acquaintances along the way and helping them out in various ways.

The ideas people have had to relieve their frustration and provide an alternative to Netflix are fascinating. One person had formed a group with a few other women to make meals two or three times a week for street people down in Cabot Square. They drove downtown to the groups huddled in the square where they were highly appreciated, especially in the first few weeks when the downtown core was empty.

Another member began trying all kinds of new recipes and sharing the results (apart from the thrice failed Portuguese tartlets) with her 95-year-old neighbor and a friend recovering from chemotherapy. Another has lent space in her house to a mental health organization whose office was placed out of bounds when the church closed its doors.

If you or other MCLL members you know was similarly engaged in positive action involving others please let us know so we can mention them in future issues.



Lesley Régnier

## Coffee Anyone

In pursuit of its intergenerational interest/goals, McGill's School for Continuing Studies (SCS) has recently signed a partnership with Ten Thousand Coffees, thanks to sponsorship from the RBC Future Launch Program. Ten Thousand Coffees is a platform designed to facilitate all aspects of networking and mentoring. SCS's customized version allows for meaningful conversations between generations on various topics, and includes opportunities for language exchange, professional advice, and knowledge sharing

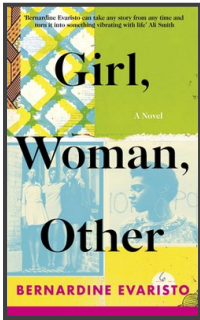
If MCLL members want to have meaningful connections with SCS students, this is an interesting opportunity. Based on your preferences, you would be matched with students who have questions related to your professional background, degree, interests, and skill set. Your time commitment is minimal, determined by your availability, and you can either chat on the telephone or meet virtually.

Information sessions will be set up to present the capabilities of this program and to answer questions. Watch your email for more details.



# Pamela's Bookshelf

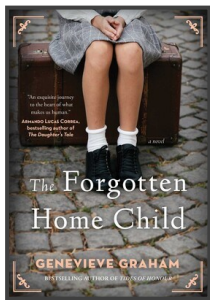
## Fiction



***Girl, Woman, Other*** by Evaristo Bernardine (2019) paperback

Bernardine Evaristo is the first Black woman writer to win the Booker Prize. Born in England of a Nigerian father and a White mother and known for her experimental writing style, Evaristo is a celebrated author of eight books. In this fierce, angry, and laugh-aloud funny book, which took her six years to finish, Evaristo's mission is to write about the

African diaspora. To do so she focuses on the lives of twelve British characters, all of whom are women or girls, except one, who is non-binary. She chooses to write about older women, mostly Black older women, defying a culture that is focused on youth. Her characters include Amma, a feminist playwright; Dominique, her lifelong friend and collaborator, who has absconded to America, but returns for the opening of Amma's play at the National Theatre in London; and my favourite, Yazz, Amma's wonderful daughter, child of sperm donor, Roland. All the characters, whom we've come to love, intersect with each other and, with one exception (Penelope), are brought together at the end of the book. Yet the book finishes with an epilogue centred on Penelope. Its moving last words – "this is not about feeling something or about speaking words this is about being together."



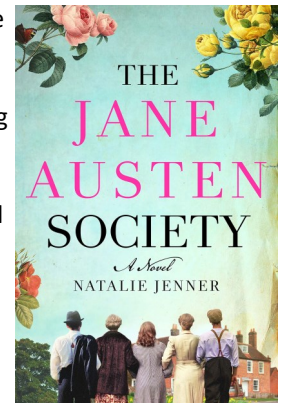
***The Forgotten Home Child*** by Genevieve Graham (2020) paperback  
Canadian historical fiction writer, Genevieve Graham, "stumbled" upon the heartbreaking story of the British Home Children on the internet a few years ago. She became "intrigued" and started asking questions. On finding out about the vast numbers of destitute children brought into

Canada by Dr. Barnardo she asked why she hadn't learned about this in school and decided - how could I **not** write their story? There are two timelines in the book (2018 and 1936) and two perspectives: the first person point of view of steadfast ninety-seven year old Winnie who finally decides it's time to break the silence and tell her story and the third person perspective of embittered Jack who loves Winnie and feels responsible for keeping their "ragtag" family group from Liverpool together. The cover, specially designed for this edition, shows

the suitcase Winnie had made herself to house her few possessions. After reading this novel the Forgotten Home Child will no longer be forgotten.

***The Jane Austen Society*** by Natalie Jenner (2020) paperback

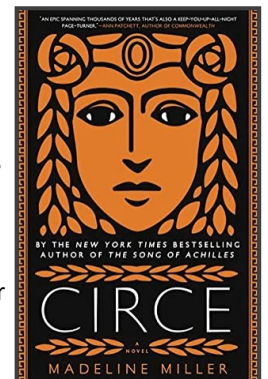
A resoundingly successful debut novel. Natalie Jenner, a passionate and lifelong Austen devotee, is a Canadian writer educated in both literature and law, as evidenced by this book. A disparate and distraught group of characters, all of them damaged by war, are brought together by their love of Jane Austen to form a society to preserve her home and legacy. The setting is Chawton, where Austen wrote her six famous novels, recognizable in the beautiful cover featuring five of the main characters. The book's special charm - the lively, enlightening and learned discussions between the characters about Austen's novels. If you own these texts, you will want to read them again. If not, you may want to rush out and buy them.



***Circe*** by Madeline Miller (2018)

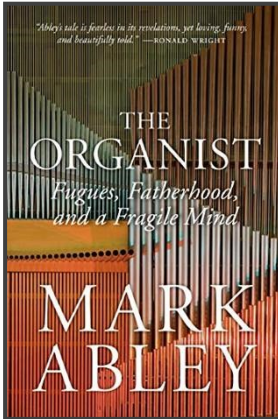
paperback

Brilliantly subversive and feminist. The potential reader is enticed by the award-winning copper foil cover showing Circe's face. A captivating story with enduring and interesting topics: the pleasures and perils of living alone; the difficulties and delights of single motherhood; the power of sexual autonomy; the futility of war and, most importantly, the difference between humans and gods. Madeline Miller, whose debut novel, published in 2011, retells the story of the Iliad, here turns her attention to the Odyssey. Circe, a despised lesser goddess, born with a thin human voice, is allowed to tell her own story. The first person narrative voice establishes an intimate connection with the reader as we journey with her over thousands of years to a choice we never get to make - to be mortal or not.



# Pamela's Bookshelf

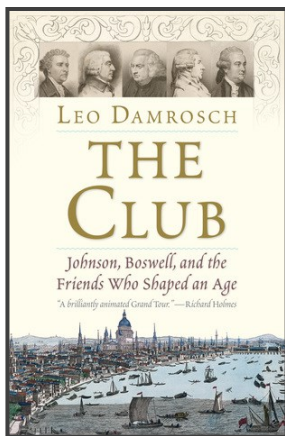
## Non-Fiction



***The Organist*** by Mark Abley (2019) paperback

Heart-wrenching yet humorous memoir. Some years after his death, the author's father, Harry Abley, appears in a dream and admonishes his son sternly with the question "Did you know that I was more than you made of me?" This book is a tribute to his father and their long and complicated relationship. The opening anecdote sets the tone – a depressive, irascible father with a plane to catch hiding in a toilet, only emerging when his 15

year-old son cries "I'm so glad you're an artist." Mark Abley, Rhodes Scholar, Guggenheim Fellow, prolific and award-winning Quebec writer, has written his best book yet. Fascinating details about the organ and what it means to be a musician. Most of all it shows that in coming to terms with a difficult and demanding parent we can come to terms with ourselves.



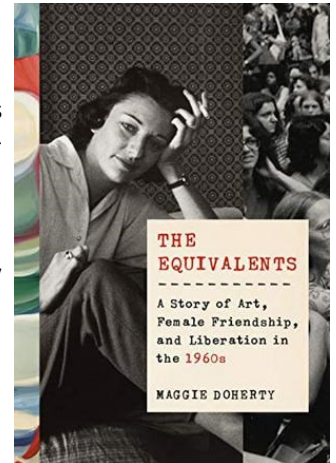
***The Club*** by Leo Damrosch (2019) paperback

A non-fiction bestseller. Leo Damrosch is a noted award-winning Professor of Literature Emeritus at Harvard. The Club was founded by Joshua Reynolds in 1764 in order to help lift Samuel Johnson out of the regular fits of depression to which he was prone by getting together for food, drink and intelligent talk. While Johnson and Boswell, literature's celebrated odd couple, are at the centre of this story, it remains a

group portrait of the extraordinary individuals who made up its membership. Important insights into Johnson's close relationship with women, especially with his "mistress" Heather Thrale. Generously and informatively illustrated in colour and black and white. Not to be missed.

***The Equivalents*** by Maggie Doherty (2020) hardcover

Maggie Doherty is a writer and teacher at Harvard whose work has appeared in many prestigious liberal reviews. She graduated from Harvard's doctoral program in English in May 2015. *The Equivalents* is her first book, received with mostly glowing acclaim. A hugely ambitious project, it is the first book to record the lives of the women who were admitted into Radcliffe's "messy experiment" offering fellowships to women with a PhD or equivalent whose artistic lives had been made difficult by marriage or children. The "backbone" of the book is the intense, supportive, yet ultimately tragic relationship between volatile Anne Sexton and the more stable Maxine Kumin, a relationship that Doherty places in the larger context of confessional poetry. Doherty's voice is lively and personal – Margaret Atwood's review praises the book for reading like a novel. It's not a short book, but you won't want to put it down.



***You're Not Listening*** by Kate Murphy (2019) paperback

Kate Murphy is a New York Times journalist whose eclectic contributions have explored an amazing range of subjects. Her book is well researched, entertaining and easy to read. It has been called essential reading for our times when our cell phones and devices cut us off from each other, leading to what has been defined by experts as a plague of loneliness. Listening to each other would help alleviate this and may well change your conversations forever. It is much easier to have an intimate conversation when you don't have to worry about what to say next. When people tell you that they don't have time to talk, they're actually saying they don't have time to listen. Murphy's book engagingly explains what they're missing.

