

## Teachin' Books Episode 1.4 - Interview with Book Club Members / Alice Munro's *Dear Life*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

**00:10** Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald, and on today's episode, we are going to do something a little bit different from what we have done before. I'm talking today with a few members from my BOOK CLUB! Or from a book club I am part of, rather. Sarah Roger, Taylor Graham, Tracy Ware, Sandra Hoenle, and Bob Thacker.

So, I had never joined a book club before. I turned thirty last year, and I decided to put on my sort of "30 for 30" list of things that I wanted to do, to join a book club. The pandemic hit during that time and I was like, "Oh, I guess I'll probably not be able to join a book club this year. That's fine! There are way greater concerns than that."

But then, in the midst of all the social isolation and just sort of in the midst of that pandemic summer, the summer of 2020, Paul Barrett, who is a professor over at Guelph, tweeted something about, I don't know, starting a book club or reading a book together with others who are interested. And so I immediately was like, "Yes, that sounds perfect!" I was already wanting to join a book club this year and didn't think that I would get to."

So, Sarah Roger will talk a little bit, in the actual podcast chat, about how this Alice Munro *Dear Life* book club kind of came to be. But what I wanted to say here, before we get into that, is that of course book clubs are not a teaching and learning context in the strictest or most traditional sense, but they do have shared dimensions with something like learning in a classroom: the dialogue and discussion around a text, sharing perspectives with one another, relationship-building, sometimes there's an emphasis on self-growth or on self-education in book clubs, for better or for worse.

I suspect we'll have to talk about book clubs a few times over the course of this podcast, and I want to talk about book clubs more because they are sometimes figured as a teaching and learning context. This particular book club has been a really enriching experience for me, so I'm pretty excited to have you hear this chat.

In what follows, we will talk about Alice Munro's collection of short stories *Dear Life*, but really we talk a lot more about the experience of being in a book club, so if you've ever been in one, if you are in one, if you want to be in one... I think you'll like this chat.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

**JESS:** Okay, so before we get started talking about this, this book club that we've all been a part of for the last couple of months, I thought it would be good to have everybody just introduce yourself so that the listeners know who's speaking and we'll know your voice as well. So Tracy, maybe you can start.

**TRACY:** My name's Tracy Ware and I taught at Dalhousie, Bishop's, Western, and Queen's. And I would say the highlight of my teaching was teaching a grad course on Alice Munro for the last 13 years of my career. And so it's kind of some ways a similar response to her that I saw on this group.

**SANDRA:** I'm Sandra Hoenle and I recently retired from the German section at the University of Calgary. So, um, I guess the most relevant thing for the book club about that I would want to share about myself is that I've just been a lifelong very avid reader. I love books and literature.

**TAYLOR:** Hi, my name is Taylor Marie Graham. My pronouns are she/her. I live in Cambridge, Ontario, which is located on Treaty 4, also known as the Halimand Tract, the traditional territory of the Anishnawbe, Haudenosaunee and Neutral indigenous peoples. I'm a writer, theatre practitioner, and PhD student at the University of Guelph focused in rural Ontario theatre examined through postcolonial Irish diasporic and rural feminist lenses. And this research includes theatrical adaptations of Alice Munro's work presented at the Blyth Festival, in Huron county. And I guess for the purposes of this podcast, I also want to offer that I grew up in here in county, and Alice Munro's stories have shaped much of how I see myself in the world today.

**BOB:** My name is Bob Thacker, I taught for... I've retired from St. Lawrence University in upstate New York. I discovered Alice Munro in 1973. She changed my life, or directed my life. I've done a lot of.. taught her over and over and over again, I have written a good deal on her, about her. And I'm the author of a great big biography of Munro. And it was one of the lucky things in my life because I got to talk to her with some regularity as we were, as I was putting it together.

**05:21 SARAH:** Hi, I'm Sarah Roger, I'm in the English department at McMaster University. And my connection to Alice Munro is that I'm really interested in authors and books that are Prize winners. So I've come to her through that. And I teach her writing in courses on people who win prizes. Because of course, among other things, she has won the Nobel Prize, which is quite the distinctive feat for a Canadian writer and gives a lot of fruitful information and material for talking about her writing in class. I'm also one of the organizers of the book club, and I think we'll talk about that more in a second.

**JESS:** Yes, totally. Yeah, we'll get to that. I will just say, listeners, you will know my voice by now. But yes, I am Jessica. And I've been a member of this book club for the last couple months. And it's been lovely to talk with these folks and other folks that have joined it. I think we have like a group of... was it twenty five, Sarah?

**BOB:** Yeah, about twenty five, I think.

**JESS:** Yeah... it's like a pretty consistent group, given that what I hear of book clubs is that they eventually sort of fade out or disperse, I thought, anyway, is that the retention was really strong. Yeah, so maybe, maybe Sarah, we should just dive right into that: you are one of the original organizers of this of this book group, you're one of the organizers. So could you just say a little bit for listeners about how the book club came about, or what kind of form it ended up taking.

**SARAH:** So the origin of the book club is that I collaborate a lot on research projects with Paul Barrett, who's at the University of Guelph in the English department there. And he and I, we have an ongoing project on the public reception of Canadian literature. So how people talk about books, how people find books, how books move through the literary marketplace, we're really interested in tracking all those things. We do a lot of work engaging with the books on social media. And we were supposed to have a conference around this topic, and it was meant to be in May, but then COVID happened, and obviously we had to cancel. And Paul said, let's do something to bring the community together. That would be great. And I didn't really know what we could do. And he said, How about a book club? And we could do it on Zoom. And I thought this idea was ridiculous. Nobody's gonna show up. I don't know what you're talking about. People have other things to do. Everyone is sick of being online. He's like, "No, no, this is a great idea trust me." And so I trusted him, as I tend to, and he and I came up with a list of books, and we picked entirely based on what we thought we'd like to read.

And so we picked Alice Munro because it seems to us like short stories were a good thing to read during a pandemic when people's attention was fractured. And it would be a really good thing to provide for a good format for talking about online because we could break it up week by week. And still, I thought, okay, this is great, but no one's gonna show up. This is ridiculous. And Paul said, Well, here's my next step. I'm going to contact people I know, I know people who are Alice Munro scholars. I know people who are authors, we can get them involved, too. And he contacted, among other people, Ryan Porter at Algonquin College, and Ryan works on Alice Munro and knew a lot of other people in the Alice Munro community. And Brian said, Great, I'll get on board too. And I will contact everyone I know who does Alice Munro. And I'm sure we can get people involved.

And between Paul and Ryan, they drummed up this group of people. And then Paul put out a call on Twitter and said, hey, we've got this cool group of people who wants to join us? At this point, I still thought that this was ridiculous and no one was going to join us. And the next thing you knew we had 25 people who all wanted to meet every week to talk to us about Alice Munro, over the internet. And here we are.

**JESS:** I love that story. And I also don't know if I really realized... because I was signed up to present at that conference that I of course, I know that you and Paul were organizing, but I don't think I really put it together that that this might have been attached to that or was somehow a replacement for that because of course the conference was canceled or postponed. And that was sad. And this really did take the place for me of that kind of like intellectual engagement and, and sort of community-building exercise.

**SARAH:** I suppose I should use this opportunity too to say on the record that I was wrong. I am sorry, Paul, for ever doubting you. And now we have it officially on on recording.

**JESS:** Yeah, and it was such a lively, it's been such a lively group. And like I said, the sort of the group hasn't sort of dispersed or fizzled out like a lot of book clubs, I hear have. To be honest, this is my first book club. So it's kind of an interesting experience as a first book club, because it is digital, on Zoom, with people I don't generally know, that sort of thing.

**10:07 SARAH:** I think that that is probably true for a lot of us. And judging by the community that's formed around this book club, my guess is that many of the people in this book club are the kinds of people that nobody else would want in their book clubs. And when I've had friends who have said, I'm going to organize a book club, do you want to be in it? I say, Do you really want me there? Is that actually what you're after? And I'm certain that if I showed up, they would be like, actually, that was a mistake. We don't want you here at all, we wouldn't want people with PhDs in literature. So I think we've sort of found our own people, the other people who want to talk about books the same way we want to talk about books.

**TRACY:** Like other people, I've got nothing to compare to never having been in one before. But actually, I'd be very interested if I ever am to see what the difference is if another writer is chosen.

**BOB:** Yeah, that's it. That really is that's true for me, too. I recently retired and moved to another part of the States. And I'm in Colorado now and I joined a newcomers group. And they have book clubs galore. And all these people said, Oh, you should get in a book club. And, and my reaction, and this was before this happened, my reaction was "No, I think I've been in a book club for a long time. I don't think I really want to do that." This hasn't been like that at all. And I think we'll get into that as we go along.

**JESS:** Um, yeah, Bob, maybe you can tell us a little bit about the author and the text for those who might not be familiar with, honestly, this text or even this author, despite her reputation.

**BOB:** Yes, as Sarah just said, I mean, having won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013 -- and I suppose you could make an argument that she did it for the book that we read, in part, because that was just published in 2012 -- Munro is a person whose career trajectory, I guess I would say is, is very interesting, and in various ways.

She was born in 1931, in Wingham, Ontario, which is Huron County, which Taylor has already mentioned. She grew up on a fox farm, well fur farm, that her parents ran in what's called Lower Wingham or Lower Town, very much a poor area, which she's variously characterized over the years as the the place where you find all the disreputable people in the local society and has gone into some

detail about that on occasion and has been criticized for it. She grew up there, she went to school, eventually going to the the school system in Wingham, was an exemplary student by the end of her... well, by the time she got into high school, the first few years were less so. She got a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario, a two-year scholarship, the money only was for two years because she was studying in the Humanities, and was there for two years. She did her first publishing there. So that's about 1950. Married at the age of 20, moved to Vancouver, had a couple of children, actually had had a total of four children, one of whom died in infancy, and just kept on publishing stories, right. She was well into the time she published her first book, which was in 1968, which was a breakthrough for her. Somebody who people who knew literature Canadian literature had known about, but she was not -- well, that had to do with how things were at the time -- but she, by the time her first book comes out, she she got a fair amount of attention.

This book that we've discussed, is her 14th collection. And so what she essentially did was was published a book, starting in 1968, with some regularity, every every few years. In 1977 1976, actually, she she hired an agent for the first time, and before very long, had sold a story to the New Yorker. She has been associated with that magazine for the really the balance of her career, having published, depending on how you want to count it, either 62 or 63 stories in that magazine, by the time of *Dear Life*, it is 62 at that point. In any case, that's kind of her background. The stories, as we know now, we'll say are not always but mostly set in Huron County or have some Huron County association. She's the writer of Southwest O, Southwestern Ontario, her writing is often discussed in, in those terms. *Dear Life*, as I said, was the 14th book. The stories that are contained in it were mostly published serially between 2010 and 2012. Two of the stories, which make up the four-story finale at the end of the book did not appear serially, but the other two did. And that finale is one that in lots of ways, certainly I understand it that way, but I think others do as well, that in some ways what this writer was doing, was going back to herself, as a as she had been in her early work and various things turn up and again. And so the argument, an argument for it is that the finale of *Dear Life* can be seen as the finale finale of Munro's entire career. This is probably her last book.

**16:26 JESS:** Thank you so much for that that's going to be helpful for folks who aren't familiar with either the book or again, like the author.

One thing I guess I wanted to ask others, and just humor me here it's kind of a weird question. But if you had to think of like, one or two words to describe this collection, like words that came out of Bob's comments for me were a return, or memory, or I wouldn't want to say nostalgia, but something like coming back to your previous self, your previous writing, your previous work. Is there like a couple of words from anyone who wants to humor me here that would characterize this, this text for you?

**TRACY:** I'd always want to add the word candid, which which gets away from the nostalgia. And so when Munro remember things, it's it's very full and often self-critical.

**TAYLOR:** When you said that, my.. I thought of, you know, complicated remembering. So the complexities of how we remember our lives.

**JESS:** Absolutely. I think that memory aspect and the richness of memory and the complexity of memory is something that came up a lot in our book, book club discussions.

**BOB:** I guess, one thing I'd say I've always liked the comment that one of her editors at the New Yorker made to me once in an interview, where when she said this was Deborah Triesman when she first started editing Alice and of course, one of the things that if you're an editor at the New Yorker, you have to do is make stories shorter, and... just for space limitations. And, and one of the things she said was that when she first started editing Alice, she would notice things early in the story, that she'd say, "Oh, I can fix that," and, you know, on page two. And then when she gets to page, you know, toward the end of the story, she discovers that that thing that she thought she was going to fix was essential to what Alice was doing. So that I think Taylor is quite right. There's deep complexity in the memory here. But for the reader, you embark on an Alice Munro story, and you really don't know where you're going. Right? And often, when you think you're going somewhere, you don't get there, and you end up someplace else.

**JESS:** Yeah, I mean, for me this, I think I've mentioned this before, but this was my first time reading Alice Munro, front to back. And instead of just... I've taught her even her short stories, but I haven't read a collection front to back, which I think I said was embarrassing, and that I wasn't going to admit, but now I'm saying it here again. And so I guess it's just part of my story now. And I was I was led along unexpectedly, just in the way that you describe, every story. And the collection as the whole was sort of, to me an unexpected surprise, or there was surprises around narrative corners at every turn.

And actually, maybe this is a good segue into... I mean, was it the book that really drew you into participating in this book club? Or what? What was it that -- Sarah sort of spoke to this already about us finding our people or people to be in this book club together -- but for anyone who wants to answer this, what was it that really drew you to this experience of this book club? Of *Dear Life* book club?

**SANDRA:** Well, I came to the book club, because I saw the tweet by Paul on Twitter about this book club. And I'm not anyone who knows, or I wasn't anyone who knows a lot about Alice Munro, very little, in fact. And I had a number of reasons for joining the book club. First first one was that my regular face-to-face book club had been abandoned, or canceled, because of COVID. And it was I was had a really great experience with this this book club. I don't know, you may have heard something about it. It was it's been featured on CBC it's called "How can you say that?" So it was actually nonfiction. It wasn't wasn't a literary book club. But it was an excellent experience. I really missed it. And I thought, well, here's my chance. That sounds really interesting. I don't know very much at all about Alice Munro. And I'd love to learn more. And I'd love to read her work.

And I was I was really, I found it really appealing, too, that there were different kinds of people, there are experts. I mean, we have eminent, well-established eminent Alice Munro experts in the group, and

young scholars. And then of course, people like me, who really don't know much or anything about Alison Munro. And I found that mixture really, really great. It was similar to my other book club, my face-to-face book club, because we were people, we were people from all walks of life, there were academics, teachers, oil workers, I mean, there were people from everywhere, and the opinions were very diverse. And it was a really amazing, fulfilling, full of learning experience. Right?

So yeah, so I was really excited about having a book club to go to again. So it was more about the book club. I did have *Dear Life*, I'd read a couple of the stories in it. And I enjoyed them. And I thought, Okay, this is my chance to, to look at these a lot more thoroughly, and hopefully have some really good discussion around them.

**21:43 JESS:** I had a very similar experience to you where it wasn't so much about the text. I think I had already signed up to the book club before Paul Barrett had even announced a text. I replied to his tweet saying, yep, I'm in like, no matter what it is. And so and it was probably for me because of, you know, pandemic isolation, pandemic social distancing, or physical distancing, that made me want to reach out in ways that I might not have done before. And so yeah, similar to you. I think, for me, it was more so about the experience of reading collectively in this time of isolation versus the specific book itself.

**TRACY:** Anybody who knows me will know that it wasn't the tweets that grabbed my attention, because I never look at those. But it was the organizers, I know them and have been impressed with them. And it was also the author, more than this particular text, that arrested me, so anything of Munro's would get me.

**TAYLOR:** I became part of the book club leader into the process than anyone else, I think. I found out about the project through Paul Barrett, but not through his tweets. It was already underway. And in a lot of ways, I think I kind of weaseled my way into the ongoing conversation. So this meant that my experience of the group was colored by that fact and I didn't, I didn't experience the discussions which existed before me. And I didn't have access to what was already explored. And I don't know if this put me at a disadvantage. But it meant that to be part of the conversation, I sort of felt like I was barging in.

I just want to say thanks to the folks for graciously letting me in to do that There are, you know, folks in the group like Robert and Tracy, who really are Munro scholars, and, you know, there was a big breadth of people there in terms of their understanding of her writing. And I think that that was a really beautiful thing, because it created a surprisingly open sense that any comment or question or thought was welcome. And there was always room for future discovery. And that listening was important as giving in some ways.

**JESS:** Absolutely. And like, so much of what you just said, I... resonates with me, the mix of participants. I know, that's something Sarah has mentioned to be a benefit of this group as well. And I'm not sure if... I think that there's a wider mix than we're even seeing represented in those of us who are talking here today. There's a lot of folks, including folks who wanted to come on today, but just couldn't because of

scheduling reasons who aren't professional readers, meaning they're not, they don't do literary study as a as a profession. And a lot of folks who are... who identified as science-y. I know a couple of people said that.

And that very mix of participants is something that, for me, was valuable because of the sheer variety of methods that ended up being talked about each week. So different methods of reading. I think I in the last day, I wrote a little concept map of different... what I thought were different methods or approaches to the text that people had taken over the course of a couple of months. And there was methods such as biographical, historical or history-based methods, focusing on intertextuality, both between Munro texts and to other allusions, images and patterns, there was people that focused a lot on tone, like humor, on publication history, on editorial decisions, on theory, like psychoanalytics, that was one that came up a little bit, on paratext, on characterization, and the building of character on our own emotional responses to the characters -- that that came up a lot, right? I have a bunch of other methods sort of written down here. But that sheer variety is something that I think it's hard to get in groups where you don't have that mix of participants.

**25:44 SARAH:** I think it's interesting that you mentioned the emotional responses that people have to the texts. Because, like you mentioned, I'm one of those people, as a professional reader, as so many of us are. But when I was reading these texts, and I think it was the conjunction of Alice Munro plus the pandemic, it really made me feel like the book club and the stories were pushing me out of that professional lens into a personal one. And I think that I'm probably not the only person in the group for whom this was the case.

But I felt very much like a Munro character at times, because I had gone from being a woman with a sort of rich world around me, you know, like very full life that I was leading with a lot of intellectual stimulation to being trapped at home with small children. And they were moments like when we were talking about "To Reach Japan," where I thought, that character at the beginning is me! Like, somebody who had this big world, and now, there they are, in this tiny one. And I think in many ways, we could all relate to that, that these stories are about people who are dealing with the tension between the big world and the small world. And so no matter what we came from, we had all been thrown into these little worlds, alone, but together, and so we were having personal emotional responses in ways that we might not have in other contexts.

**JESS:** I think I wrote something along those lines, when I was filling out the survey that the organizers of the book club had had asked folks to serve, sorry, fill out, which is that I said, I liked that this book club validated emotional responses to texts and characters when in some of the academic contexts that I've been in, been in, that has been, you know, tsk tskd, or it's been sort of like it's a "no no," right? And sometimes it's not, especially when you have instructors who validate affective responses to texts or validate reader response theory, that sort of thing. But in a lot of the academic context I've been in, it's not okay, just to say, "I didn't like that and for no damn reason. I don't have to justify it. I just didn't like it." But I appreciated, especially in the midst of a pandemic, where you have a lot of feelings, that this was a book club where you could indeed, indeed share your feelings like in that way that a lot of literary



professors might cringe at. But in a way that's extremely validating. It's a way of like validating a different method of reading.

**BOB:** I want to go back to the earlier discussion, I think, and the mix of people. I mean, in my own case... I mean, I'm still working on Munro. And so I'm thinking about her pretty much every day. And, and as a person, as I say, I taught but I taught at an undergraduate school, so I didn't have graduate students, right. And one of the things that attracted me to this is that I could see from the mix, actually it was Ryan who told me about it initially, that that I would get a chance to, to hear from -- and I'm a long way from graduate school, right, and I know it's changed -- and so I thought, well, this would be a good opportunity for, for me to hear others talk about Munro, and in ways I don't think about her myself. And just as you've said, Jessica, you know, that happened every week. And it happened every week, and in what I thought were salutary ways, at least for my own thinking.

**SANDRA:** To add to that, yeah, what you were saying about in an academic setting, that often certain things aren't, aren't validated or accepted or desired or what, whatever. I, because I do have an academic background, I in German literature and cultural studies, but this, this was quite different. I did want to say that in an academic setting, often I find that there are people get so wrapped up sometimes in the minutiae, and that, that I feel that there's not that they're really drilling down into one tiny little, little point. And that's not of general interest in a group that's not all specialized in that particular author in that particular method or something like that.

And I also found the... so I found this refreshing that it was, it was very open, and it was very, very varied. And you mentioned all some of the different approaches and the emotional responses and which I found really great too. And, and also the difference between German literary studies, and English Canadian Studies, I found that very fascinating as well. And I really appreciated being able to take part in that.

**JESS:** Your comment about drilling down into like a single focus or a minutiae, like a detail, reminds me that I was thinking throughout the book club about how the ephemeral nature of our discussions, probably partly because of Zoom, partly because of the brevity, like we only have an hour or so, I think that ephemeral nature sometimes, even if an idea sort of went away before it got deeply engaged with, it was sometimes to our benefit. because like you said, not only is it maybe not only is that ephemerality maybe more appealing to folks from a wider array of interests, specialties, backgrounds, that sort of thing.

But also, there's something like lively and energetic about that ephemerality where we're not drilling down into one single thing and talking about one detail in the final line for a whole hour, as academics are wont to do, but instead, we are keeping things a little bit more unfocused.

**31:22 SARAH:** Two things in response to the conversation that's just been going on. First, going back to what Bob said about graduate seminars. One of the catchphrases that Paul and I had as we were

developing this, and that we would repeat to each other as we were discussing it, and often send back and forth to each other in the chat, as we were taking turns moderating it, was "this is not a graduate seminar." So if it was veering too much to theory, and I was moderating or vice versa, there would be a message that would just pop up on my screen saying "this is not a graduate seminar," of as a reminder that that was not what we were here for. And while it was good to go down some of those rabbit holes, that that wasn't the express purpose of the gathering, and that we should make sure to keep the conversation flowing in a way that was going to be inclusive to lots of different perspectives.

And about the nature of the ephemeral nature of the conversation. I felt like Zoom really helped us in that regard. Because it forced us to take a very structured one person would speak, and then somebody else would speak, and it wasn't if we'd all been in a room, we probably would have all been talking over each other, people would have been butting in saying "Oh, one more thing," and there would have been side conversations that would have broken off, all of which would have been wonderful too. But because people had to wait their turns, that often meant that when a point was made, it took three or four people to circle back around, because the next person to speak would invariably be responding to the previous, the person but one. So it had this sort of leapfrogging nature of conversation that made for a much more complex interpretation of the stories and allowed different ideas to fit together in a way that I don't think they ever could have if we'd been in person.

**JESS:** That's so true. There was like a unique juxtaposition of ideas because of that very Zoom function.

**TRACY:** I've mentioned before that one thing I wonder about, I wouldn't say I worry about it, but sometimes I do, is the lack of conflict in Munro studies. And that hits me because insofar as I stood for anything, generally I did, teaching Canadian literature, you had to take on conflict of all kind, nationalism, feminism, class issues, all of that. And the basic thing about teaching Munro is it's not that they're never there -- I mean, she richly engages the issues that matter most -- but never in an angry, conflictual way. Not that conflict has to be angry. And I think the good outweighs the bad mostly in that, and that was true here as well.

**BOB:** Yeah, I mean, that's really true. I agree with Tracy on that.

The other point I was gonna make when we talk about, you know, ephemerality and discussion or, you know, the breadth of it or, or how we perceive, it seemed to me, really, from the very beginning, and Sarah's allusion to "To Reach Japan" a couple of minutes ago gets right at it, the fact that we were focused on one story, except for one night, and we were focused on one story a week, you know, really, I think, kept the group focused. Okay. And I think that was one of the ways that worked well on Zoom, because I think it worked well on Zoom, from the beginning, and, and throughout.

**JESS:** And actually, that pace, that one story a week until the very end, is something I know I wrote about in the survey, my survey answers and I feel strongly is part of the reason why this might have been so successful, because a lot of friends who are in book clubs talk about how the pace is just

unsustainable if you're especially if you're in a monthly book club that reads a whole large text every month, or sometimes you're in a bi weekly book club. And also, I appreciated that pace during the pandemic. We're all having to juggle and manage a lot of things and a lot of pressures. And then we're also feeling the need to slow down in a lot of ways too. So that slower pace really helped here.

**TAYLOR:** Yeah, I just, you know, it's kind of funny, Sarah, that you mentioned that there's sort of a cyclical nature to the book club, because I'm kind of doing that now. And sort of responding to the thoughts that I was having when you were talking about this idea of grad school and what that means, you know, and if this was that, or something different.

My experience with education is varied, I guess, because I've trained both as a playwright and an academic, you know, I went through playwriting. So I have that experience of creative development, reading, the vulnerability that comes along with that, the experimentation. So that feels part of academia for me. But I'm also in the middle of a traditional, you know, academic PhD right now full of those seminar discussions and lots of essay writing. So I think there was room for both, as part of this book club, it did sometimes feel like that grad-level English class, but then someone would throw something a little more experimental into the mix, push those boundaries and do a discussion of maybe the creative journey of the writer some questions there, maybe. And I think my Munro gives us a sense of that in her reflections on writing in the piece. So maybe that's why we felt like we could go there. Yeah, it really opened up the book club, I think.

**JESS:** I know you want to jump in Tracy, I just wanted to add that I'd actually be interested in hearing more about and maybe even we can have like a side conversation, Sara, and maybe Paul as well, about the what you think the different genres of book club versus grad seminar look like? I'm not sure if we have like enough time to fully flesh that out right now. But that's such an interesting discussion, because I think I even said in my survey, or answers, something like, "this was like having all the best parts of the grad seminar, except basically, none of the bad parts," including that it's also you know, a mix of participants that was that made it a little bit different, or I want to say almost even richer than that kind of academic context might be.

**37:07 TRACY:** I just wanted to say that I find so compelling the things that have been said about short fiction working from this book club, that I don't understand why the bias against short fiction remains, but it does. But you know, I taught *The Stone Angel* for 30 years and every time I didn't know how to break the lectures down and on page 88, when there's no point to just because the clock went, and then I have to run in the last lecture to get to the end, because I hadn't planned it sufficiently. So it's... the stories just naturally ease to do that. It's something that you can handle in the equivalent of a lecture with a fullness that novels never allowed me. I mean, I'm biased against novels and for short stories, but I wonder why I'm not more common that way.

**JESS:** Yeah, I really think the short story format worked really well for a book club. So I will keep that in mind in my in my future dealings with book clubs.

**SARAH:** I think it would be interesting to know how many people among our group were short story aficionados or people who read short stories otherwise, because I'm also biased towards the short story. I, my PhD was on Borges and Kafka. So it was all for mostly short stories. And whenever I was teaching, because I was in a Spanish department for the longest time, it was always Gabriel Garcia Marquez that we were expected to teach. And those are mammoth novels. And I didn't really see why we couldn't stick to the shorter pieces. It might be that this was that was the thread that connected all of us. It never occurred to me to ask.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

**JESS:** So I think just because of time here, I will I will move on to this what is kind of the main question, at least from the perspective of the podcast, which is this is a podcast, FYI, it's launching in October. It's a podcast all about folks who work in a variety of formal and informal educational contexts. Book clubs have been figured as a kind of educational context, both kind of simply but also troublingly, to some extent. So I am curious if there's ways that -- and we've already, we've already addressed some of these -- but I'm curious if there's ways that the *Dear Life* book club functioned like so particular ways that it functioned as an educational context for you, like, did we were we in this to learn? Did we learn? What do you think?

**SARAH:** I learned a ton, I think in two directions. One was, I learned a lot from the people who were Munro experts that there we had a group of people who had an astounding wealth of knowledge, and it was a true delight every week to hear them talk about things. It was certainly a highlight for me every time Bob, you said, "Oh, and here are three alternative endings to the story. I just happened to have the New Yorker plus a handwritten draft right here. And let me tell you what the other options were. And here's what the editor said and why." And so for me, that was great as somebody who's a bit of a magpie for that kind of information.

But I also learned a lot about the ways that other people approach and interpret literature. I think that for the people in the group who either teach or the people who are students, whenever you're in one of these contexts, you're in it in a sort of performing context, that you're up at the front of the room like this all-singing, all-dancing person who's trying to bring everyone together and tie in all the threads and make sure the themes get picked up, or you're sitting in the class and you're trying to come up with that single point that's going to make you sound brilliant to the professor and endear you to your peers. And it's hard to be either of those. And in the book club, you didn't need to be either of those you could just be. And so I learned not just about Munro, but also about how people approach literature, and how people express themselves around literature in a way that I don't think I ever saw in the classroom.

**TRACY:** I would say without planning it, I went a couple of weeks, I know one early on, without saying anything in the hours, and that wasn't a problem. I mean, people had plenty to say here and when I found it hard to get in, who needed to? And I found -- it took me a while to figure the thing out -- but once I figured out the chat boxes, they were a way of getting something in on a small point.

**41:24 JESS:** Yeah, that's very relatable to me, I think I I've talked to a few people in my life about how I felt like I was a listener in this in this group a lot of the time, and I and I did a lot of listening. But for me it was really validating to realize how much listening is engagement and listening is learning and from an instructor's perspective, that's really important to remember always because there can be a tendency sometimes to sort of privilege or see as the best student, the one who's most active or gives the best verbal contributions. But of course, that's, that's in no way a measure of engagement. Listening is learning, listening is engagement. And so in my role as a listener a lot of the time in the way that you were accidentally a couple of times, Tracy, and in that role, I felt like I was validating for myself that listening can also be a really good way of learning.

**BOB:** And, you know, flipping over what Sarah said, without being that autobiographical, I mean, I know perfectly well that I've been doing this for so long and so deeply, and, in fact, I tell people that I really only have two writers, I care anything about, Munro and Willa Cather, and that has been the case really, for at least the last decade, probably longer. I really came away every week with fresh insights. Because it was good for me to listen to people who didn't know anything about Munro, or I didn't know much about Munro coming into this, but read the text with care, brought something to it, and, and responded in ways that that got me thinking about that particular story. Right. And these stories and I, you know, people heard me say this a lot. I mean, that's my point about the finale. I mean, I you know, I'm absolutely convinced that she you know, she knew this was going to be the last book and she was going back to herself in all kinds of different ways and and which lends these stories I think, you know, like it's almost like a geological and see she's been thinking geologically a lot in the last couple of decades, right. I think it's almost like laying down sentiment in some ways that that she was she was thinking about the stories and you can see that in the, you know, the shaping of the endings and things she did or didn't do.

**SANDRA:** Um, yeah, well, first I'd like to echo with what Sarah said about the, the wonderful wealth of knowledge we have in this group with all the experts. And I've learned a tremendous amount from from all of them. And I'm very thankful for that. And I was also very happy not to have to do that performative piece that Sarah also referred to the one standing in front of the class, and it's like, oh, my God, you know, we got to do this. And, and, and they'll have have all that going on, and pulling it all together, that it's very relaxing, to just sit and be able to think and listen a lot of the time.

And the other thing, this also goes back to talking about short stories and the benefit of short stories, as opposed to novels, perhaps, that it was a lot easier to do really careful reading and rereading, which with a novel wouldn't wouldn't have happened. And I really appreciated that in the book club, I learned so much more about about the writing about, you know, about interpretations about different

approaches, and instead of just reading it through, like I would have done just reading it on my own, and thinking, Oh, well, isn't that interesting? I actually stopped and thought like, why is that interesting? You know, so I had to inquire of myself. What, why am I thinking this, right? And that made it a much richer reading experience for me, too.

**TRACY:** I was amazed at the way the group always managed to get to the ending and deal with it pretty fully. Sometimes we'd get to the ending almost right away. And I would think, oh I could never do that in a lecture, what am I going to do with the other 40 minutes? But people did it. And because I think myself and I know, Bob has written this, that the endings for Munro stories are almost always crucial. And he testified again, and again to the way that's what she revised when she was reconsidering the story, not the opening matters. But the ending.

**JESS:** Yeah, that that fullness of discussion, even though it was only usually an hour a week, and then also responding to what Sandra said about the, you're not having to do the sort of performative as an instructor be in the front or even doing the performative student angle, which Sarah was talking about, as well, where you're trying to say the best thing. The book club, for me anyways, was an exercise in sharing the labor of learning and sharing the labor of even with the Munro enthusiasts that were, you know, generously sharing their expertise in maybe a heavier way than, than some of us, there is still a real sharing of the labor of learning that I noticed in all of the conversations and the rich dialogues.

**46:14 BOB:** I mean, there's, there's been a thing I've been interested in I, I'm not sure how much I can say about it that makes a lot of sense, but I'm always interested in discussions of Munro's realism or verisimilitude. And talking about teaching, I'm gonna wax briefly, anecdotally: the first lecture I ever gave on Alice Munro was in a Canadian literature class at the University of Waterloo in my second year, I think, or maybe was my first year as at work. And I was teaching "Thanks for the Ride," where I taught in that lecture. And I'd used that story centrally. And I was really worried about this, because I didn't know if I was a teacher or not. And anyway, I, I still remember this because I did it and it came off reasonably well. And my supervising professor said nice things about it. But the thing I really remembered was a student who came up to me right after and she says, "I want to tell you something." I said, "What's that?" And this kind of goes back to something Taylor said in her introduction. She said, "I took my book home last weekend, I went home to visit my family." And she said, "and what I had to do was take a bus to a small town and then sit in a restaurant," in until her father came in from the farm to pick her up. Right and she said, "and I started reading 'Thanks for the Ride.'" And this is a it's I think it's it's one of her first really important stories 1957, but it opens up with the description of a cafe in a small town, okay? Very much like Wingham or any of these others in southwestern Ontario. Right. And she said to me, "And I looked up, and I was in Pop's cafe." That is, Munro had just described it so accurately even the point where Munro talks about bugs smashed between the window and advertisements for pieces of pie. Okay, and, and she said, "And I was just there, that's never happened to me in a story before!" she said. Right.

So you know, there you go. And you know, this is early on. And that's where that's where Munro was going. One, one final thing about this business, the short story versus novel. Alice Munro, probably more than anybody else in English, has changed attitudes towards that and Doug Gibson, you know, one of the ways he enticed her to Macmillan of Canada in the 70s, was by promising her he would never use the word novel to her, because she had spent so many years trying to write novels, which she then abandoned. And I guess that's teaching, Jessica.

**JESS:** That was great, thank you. Actually, that just reminded me about how anecdotes, such as the one you just told, were also a part of some of our meetings together. I liked that, of course, the anecdote became a form of teaching and learning and just sharing with each other over the course of the book club. So yeah, I just want to make sure we actually say, what we think about this book, what is it about *Dear Life* that makes it so compelling? Or that makes it relevant to teach and learn with right now?

**TRACY:** There's one thing that came up a couple times, and we never finalized it, or even pursued it fully, but that I'm very interested in: the idea of a late style. That what difference does it make that Munro might have deliberately written her last volume when she writes these stories here? And some of the things that are said here I think we agree on and others we'll continue to wrestle with. What does a writer do at that point? Well, there's going to be more retrospection, longer retrospection, and there is in these stories, but there's got to be more now.

**JESS:** So is that to say that, like, part of this book's value or worth in a sort of teaching and learning context is looking at it in relation to her history of writing? That's one of its sort of main something that you're pulling out as a main piece of its value?

**TRACY:** Got to be, but she was doing it almost from the beginning. And certainly everything since the boy in *The Love of a Good Woman* has been intensely retrospective, going back to the earliest stories and revising them.

**50:40 TAYLOR:** Yeah, I mean, this is, again, getting into that personal, personal side of things that the book club, let us do, you know, being from Huron County and enjoying work that complicates rural lives... You know, that's, that's really an essential part of what I think makes these stories so beautiful. I think, sometimes today in depictions in different types of media, you know, rural folks and folks from a lot of different communities, but you know, just focusing on them aren't 're given that full dimension. And, you know, she really complicates these people. She makes them go through a lot. They have, you know, this this life that has lots of mistakes, false endings, deception, they're afraid of things, you know, you walk in the middle of the night on a dark farm, contemplating death. But you know, there's also moments of recognition, realizing things about yourself, those sort of warm memories you have from your childhood mentors, those people that sit beside you that, you know, might not know all your thoughts, because we get to know the thoughts, right, because Alice gives us those, but they're there.

And so we get this really rich complexity of, of the people in these stories. And, to me, that's, you know, what makes them so beautiful.

**JESS:** And that itself was so beautiful. I think that that really speaks to the relevance of, let's say if somebody were to include include this text in their classroom, in the public, there are harmful and reductive damaging narratives about rural Canadians. And you see so much in this book, in Munro's work, in this book as well, how she shows people for the complex beings that you are, if I can just sort of say exactly what you said, Taylor.

And actually, just on my own note, the one thing I had written down in answer to my own question here about what makes this text especially relevant is moral complexity, because that's something I noticed in *Dear Life* is, is a Munro really refuses to reduce people to bad or good. And there are people who might do quote-unquote "bad things," meaning something selfish or traditionally thought of as immoral or something careless, but she refuses to just characterize them as bad people. I think Sarah earlier mentioned the main character from "To Reach Japan," who drinks during the day, and sort of doesn't attend to her kids, she ends up having at least one affair -- is it more than one affair? I think two? Okay, two affairs -- and then she's also presented very richly with this really rich sort of interior and, from the outside, complexity that doesn't allow her to be reduced to simply a bad person. So moral complexity along with what you were saying, Taylor, is something that really draws me to this text in this time and cultural climate where good versus bad can be the sort of dominating paradigm from which we understand different things in the world.

**SARAH:** I think to further your point and Taylor's, one of the strengths for the stories of the stories for me as well, that makes them so relevant, and so teachable is the ways in which Munro portrays women -- that these are fully-realized, complex women. And I brought it up multiple times, I think, over the course of our many discussions, because I felt that the characters were so relatable, which again harkens back to what we said before about being able to bring our own lives into the interpretations in a way that we couldn't otherwise. But I feel like Munro has been creating these characters that are truly complexly feminist way before her time that this is something that really speaks to our current moment. But it turns out that Munro's been doing it for decades and decades, for which I truly applaud her and made the story stories really sing for me.

**BOB:** My comment would be, well two things. One, about this book, is that that, you know, it's recursive recursive nature is is very evident to me. And, and I know to others who spend a lot of time on her. But I'm, I guess I'm less sure that that's as important as the, the way in which she's structuring the book, to not only look back on what she'd written before, but look back at who she is. For a long time, I've said that, Munro writes stories that create the feeling of being, that's what it feels like to be a human being. And there are lots of moments in her stories where you just kind of go, "Ha! That's right." Okay. And it seems to me that in *Dear Life*, I mean, I could point to various ones, but the ones I certainly would point to were in the finale, and the, you know, "Night" with the Father, and then most especially, "Dear Life" with the mother, right? Because, as we said, when we were discussing it, this is something that comes



up again and again and again. And it just happens that I've been rereading things connected to this in the last few days. And it's just so... the relation with the mother is so there, it's just there. So that the you know, but she's she's still looking at herself, right? The person she was when she was young. And the person she was, you know, like in "Dolly," when she's 70.

**56:32 JESS:** Definitely the complexities of relationships, including parent and child relationships, come through. I mean, complexity is a word I think I've used 20 times already and Taylor has used and all of us have used, but it's part of probably I think, the relevance, the richness and the value of this text.

**SANDRA:** I'd have to echo a lot of what's already been said again, complexity. I mean, when you when you first asked us about what you know, think of a word, complexity -- that came up came up immediately. But also the this the masterful way that she portrays this complexity. It's... She's the master of brevity, but also complexity, which I find amazing. Yeah, just that just to be able to read something that's so well written and so complex, I think that has huge value educationally and for just for being a human being, to see this, this complexity of people and the richness that she provides us with.

And then on a personal level, being a woman of a certain age, I found the stories very compelling to this, this thinking back this questioning, you know, who am I, where have I been, where am I now, where am I going, what are those last years going to look like? That sort of thing. I mean, that was very present for me reading these stories as well.

**TRACY:** I really liked that brevity and complexity for this last volume, more than for the earlier ones, which are not brief at all, sometimes they're sprawling and multi layered. But these stories are achieved that complexity in a very brief span, sometimes.

**JESS:** And actually, I think that's something that came up in the book club quite a few times. We haven't really talked about it much today, but just to flag it, which is that formally, there's a lot to talk about with her with her work. So if you're thinking about sort of an undergraduate English class and how to incorporate this this text I mean, it's obviously very easy to. Munro is so teachable because of the formal innovations for formal particularities, interesting details that are happening in the at the level of craft and writing. That's something that, for me, makes this compelling to read as somebody like as an English major.

**SARAH:** I, I just would like to use this opportunity in the hopes that everyone who has been in the book club listens to thank everybody for their participation, because it really was a group effort. And one of those things where the total was so much more than the sum of its parts. And so it was so wonderful to have all the different people and to be able to have this experience for which I think a thank you is owed all around.

**TAYLOR:** I just wanted to echo that to say thank you so much to everyone. And thanks so much, everybody here too. I really enjoyed myself. Thanks.

**JESS:** Yeah, thank you all for coming on the podcast! We are continuing on with the book club and with the text *Too Much Happiness*. That's correct. Right. Okay. And so I'm curious to see what we've talked about today how we'll feel in the next iteration of the book club and what we think might change. Thank you so much for coming on, each of you, and for chatting with me.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Thank you so much to Sarah Roger, Taylor Graham, Tracy Ware, Sandra Hoenle, and Bob Thacker for chatting with me about the Munro book club. A huge thank you, as well, to the other book club organizers and all of my fellow book club members, for making it such a great experience and also a very happy addition to my weekly schedule.

**1:00:16** This episode was recorded on Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of the Métis, in Saskatoon, where the Saskatoon Public Library has been putting on an online series called Indigenous Spotlights. These spotlights are not like a book club in the traditional or technical sense, but the videos have been released regularly on Facebook and, I think, also YouTube and perhaps other platforms, so they kind of remind me of book clubs because they present that same ability for dialogue and exchange around a text – like a musical performance, or poetry, in the case of these videos.

I want to tell you in particular about the library's recent video, from November 7<sup>th</sup>, from this series, of a fireside poetry reading by Cooper Skjeie. Cooper reads a few different poems in this video. I will say that there's sort of a wind sound – there's wind – which makes it a little bit hard to hear, just a head's up. But the poems are really worth listening to. There's a couple of poems in particular that, to paraphrase him from the video, are about negotiating land, and space, and territory, and belonging, and urban Métis identity, and in particular here in Saskatoon on Treaty 6. So I recommend checking out that video. And I also want to tell you about an upcoming video by Curtis Peeteetuce. That one is a performance piece, I believe, called *Immemorial*, and it will be aired... or streamed... or whatever the correct word is here on November 14<sup>th</sup>. So, check out that.

You can find these videos and more [@stoonlibrary or Saskatoon Public Library on Facebook](#), which I'll link to in the show notes. You can also find more information about their programming on the [SPL website](#). Again, I'll link to that in the show notes.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

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