

Nursing Home Narratives: Canadian Writers on Long-Term Care

Full lecture description:

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic focused national attention on appalling conditions in the country's long-term care homes for older adults, these spaces have long functioned as repositories of deeply ingrained anxieties about aging itself. This lecture considers the role that narrative plays in shaping our perceptions of dependency and care in older age by examining three stories by Canadian writers: "Torching the Dusties" (2014) by Margaret Atwood, "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" (1982) by Alice Munro, and "Nella at 86" (2020), an "audio diary" by André Alexis.

All of these narratives take place within imagined care home environments and offer us the opportunity to consider how ideas about older age are reflected in and produced by the spaces built to house older adults. Looking closely at the details of these fictional institutions—their names, their architecture, their décor, their daily routines—the lecture will explore questions such as: how do these spatial details correspond to and comment on the place of older adults in Canadian society? What insights can we gain from these stories about the way in which care homes define their residents as different from other people and how does this difference intersect with other variables like class and gender? In what ways do these stories attempt to imagine the care home as a livable space in which residents can exert control over their own lives? At a time of growing panic about population aging, these "nursing home narratives" invite us to recognize the complex and layered meanings of institutional spaces, and to acknowledge the humanity of those who are all too easily reduced to the status of a burden on society.

Recommended reading: You may want to read the three stories in advance of the lecture, but this is not a requirement.

Margaret Atwood, "Torching the Dusties" in *Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales* pp. 241-86.

Alice Munro, "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" in *The Moons of Jupiter*.

André Alexis, "Nella at 86" (You can access the audio diary and a print transcription of it here: <https://www.volcano.ca/metamorphosis-trilogy>. Scroll down to Episode 3.)

Lecturer biography:

Sara Jamieson is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Carleton University where she teaches Canadian and Indigenous literatures. Her recent research is focused on representations of older age in contemporary Canadian writing and includes published articles on the work of authors such as Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Joan Barfoot, Paul Quarrington, Carol Shields, and comics creator Joe Ollmann. She is currently at work on a project on midlife in Canadian literature and culture.