

Conference Participants:
Presentation Abstracts & Biographies

Mennonite/s Writing X



words at work and play

June 12-15, 2025

**Canadian Mennonite University
Winnipeg Manitoba**

cmu.ca/mennonites-writing

Participant (alphabetical) Biographies & Presentation Descriptions (both academic & creative)

Kirsten Eve Beachy lives in Briery Branch, Virginia, where she writes about Mennonites, motherhood, disability, and changelings. Kirsten is an associate professor at Eastern Mennonite University, teaches creative writing and journalism, and serves as director of the Core Curriculum. Kirsten edited the anthology *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror* (Herald Press, 2010) and co-chaired Mennonites Writing VI: Solos and Harmonies (2012). Get connected at kirstenevebeachy.wordpress.com.

Simple: excerpt from new memoir, *Martyrs and Chickens: Confessions of a Granola Mennonite*

In this chapter from my memoir *Martyrs and Chickens* (DreamSeeker Books, 2025) I work and play with the word “simplicity”—in aesthetic, in thought, and in lifestyle expectations inherited from my frugal, environmentalist parents. I find it difficult to access simplicity in its many forms, immersed as I currently am in the demands of parenting twins (one conventionally “gifted,” one thriving with Down syndrome), professional life, creative work, and caregiving for an elderly relative. In the process of writing, I discover and share the internal Granola Mennonite Dream Scorecard that has guided my choices and sense of achievement—“keeping up with the Yoder-Schmatzfuses!” As I attempt to balance dueling, overwhelming senses of privilege and exhaustion, I turn to dance, like the Shakers: “I wake up Mennonite every morning. I need to dance for twenty minutes straight, just so that I can face the day.” There’s also quite a lot about *Bluey* in this chapter. I have kids; it’s inevitable.

James Bergman works as a speech-language pathologist specializing in early childhood language development. After years of struggling to find his own voice, James discovered his calling as an Intuitive Songwriter. He has written songs about food insecurity, human rights, farming, gun violence, early childhood education, and a host of other topics that impact all of our lives. He lives in Fargo, North Dakota, with his wife and two children.

Overcoming Previous Narratives: The Power of the Stories We Tell

As a culture and community of faith, aspects of our ancestry shape our identities. The traditions and views that we were raised with form a narrative in our minds about who we are and what is possible. The stories we have been told about overcoming hardship mould our understanding of ourselves and the world. When our personal experiences bring us beyond the boundaries of these schemas, the conflict that arises is often a struggle of identity. How do we maintain and honor our inherited identities while also answering the call to be more? How can we expand our understanding of ourselves for the sake of future

generations? Through personal stories, writings, and songs, James will share how these struggles have informed his faith and shaped his understanding of his Mennonite identity.

Daniel Born earned his PhD at CUNY Graduate Center where he studied with Irving Howe. He is author of *The Birth of Liberal Guilt in the English Novel* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995); co-author of *Unpardonable Sins* (Wipf and Stock, 2021), a hardboiled crime novel published under the pen name David Saul Bergman; and editor of *The Essential Dale Suderman Reader* (Wipf and Stock, 2024). His essays have appeared in *Novel*, the *New York Times*, and *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

Toward a Post-Mennonite Identity: The Writing of Dale Suderman

Dale Suderman's beginnings as a writer are traceable to his stark experience of homophobia and the hypocrisies of nonresistance that he encountered in his Kansas community during the early 1960s, and his exile from the Mennonite Brethren church proved to be the vital origin of his journey. Following graduation from Tabor College in 1965, he enlisted in the U.S. Army, deploying to Vietnam during the Tet offensive. He returned to the U.S. a peace activist and earned a master's in theology at AMBS. His move to Chicago in the late 1970s proved even more formative. There he cultivated a vast network of friends, and his writing encompassed gay history, men's studies, and deepening self-awareness via immersion in Jungian thought, Alcoholics Anonymous, and the Anglican communion. He would eventually develop a distinctively post-Mennonite identity, a mature outlook marked by pragmatism and joyful cynicism.

Di Brandt is one of Canada's most celebrated poets. Her poetry titles include the breakthrough collection *questions i asked my mother*, which was influential in the development of a place-based contemporary Canadian poetics, with multicultural and intercultural, feminine, maternal, spiritual and ecopoetic inflections. Her most recent collection is *The Sweetest Dance on Earth: New and Selected Poems*. Di Brandt is also a literary scholar of note, and popular professor of CanLit at several universities. Di Brandt served as Winnipeg's inaugural Poet Laureate in 2018-2019, and last year received the Manitoba Arts Council's Distinction in the Arts Award.

"Muh muh muh": Notes Toward a Contemporary Traditionalist Mennonite Darp Poetics, Part 2

The Mennonite Darpa, or farming villages, of southern Manitoba have often been mocked by other groups, both Mennonite and non, for stubbornly traditionalist views and practices, which seem completely unrelated to the church, or Christianity, or Anabaptism, or Menno Simons, or modern values of individuality, literacy and capitalist enterprise. What were these old traditionalist beliefs and practices, where did they come from, and how did they

manage to survive so powerfully from ancient times until nearly the present? The new Mennonite literary writing of Manitoba of the 1980s and 90s arose largely from the Darpa. Under-standing the imaginative connections between the old ways and the new writing might help us understand the harsh backlash that happened in the Manitoba Mennonite churches and colleges against the new literary writers and writing, and might help us develop creative and effective strategies of undoing its harms, not just to the writers, but to their home communities, and the Mennonite church-affiliated people who deserve to have happy access to the literature of their own inheritance.

Connie Braun teaches creative writing, mentors undergraduate writers and editors, and has published two books of non-fiction and two poetry chapbooks. Much of her writing is grounded in the war-refugee and immigrant experience of World War II, resonant today in her explorations of memory and witness, the silences and language of trauma, the sites of geographical and spiritual displacement and belonging, and the pervasive paradoxes inherent in being human. Her poetry has been set to music, she is a member of the League of Canadian Poets, and she lives in Vancouver. In 2025, her poetry collection *Moonroads* was published by CMU Press.

Jan Guenther Braun, born and raised on a farm in Saskatchewan in a predominantly Mennonite community, now makes her home on the 19th floor overlooking Lake Ontario in Toronto's core. With the reading copy of her debut novel, *Somewhere Else* well worn, she's working on a second novel. She's fascinated with the timeless narrative roads that struggle to lead her home, with the queering of her childhood geographies, and with the liminal space between embrace and rejection. Jan is a part poet, part farmer, part novelist, completely queer, irrefutably Mennonite, and a guest in the clouds of the Big Smoke.

(part of **Homecoming: Making Space for Queer Stories on the MennoLit Shelf**—see description on last page)

K.R. Byggdin (they/them) is the award-winning author of *Wonder World* (Enfield & Wizenty 2022), a novel that explores the possibilities of queer belonging in a small Mennonite town. They hold a Bachelor of Arts with honours in English and Creative Writing from Dalhousie University and are currently completing studies towards their MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Guelph. Their writing has received support from the Canada Council for the Arts and has appeared in anthologies and journals across Canada, the UK, and New Zealand. Born and raised on the Prairies, they now call the East Coast home.

(part of **Homecoming: Making Space for Queer Stories on the MennoLit Shelf**—see description on last page)

Cassidy Burr (she/her) is a PhD candidate and trauma scholar at McMaster University. She is interested in the ethics and responsibilities of witnessing silence and examining the ways silence can communicate the unspeakableness of traumatic experiences. Cassidy's research is grounded in Miriam Toews' and Katherena Vermette's writings and explores new methodologies for fostering empathy in relation to silence.

Pushing Past the Limits of Language: Ethics of Witnessing in *All My Puny Sorrows*

The characters and stories in Miriam Toews' *All My Puny Sorrows* are in constant motion; they oscillate between polarities of knowing/unknowing, trauma/care, and silence/speaking. My paper particularly takes up the binary of silence/speech. In this novel Toews demonstrates the on-goingness of being a witness to trauma, the story refusing tidy narrative arcs and endings. Silence is both an act of refusal that "speaks" for the subject, and an invitation to engage in non-traditional forms of communication, such as writing, playing music, and reading body language. Toews asks us to engage in the liminal spaces of language which offer a sense of possibility, wherein as witnesses we are continually asked to imagine beyond the scope of what is immediately present.

Abigail Carl-Klassen is a writer, researcher, poet, educator, translator, and nonprofit professional living in El Paso with her husband and two children. She earned an MFA in Bilingual Creative Writing from the University of Texas at El Paso and her work has been published widely in English and Spanish. She has published two poetry chapbooks, *A'int Country Like You* (Digging Press) and *Shelter Management* (dancing girl press) and her poetry collection, *Village Mechanics*, is forthcoming from FlowerSong Press.

Village Mechanics: Tricksters, Hustlers, and Good Timin' People, Playfulness as the Work of Rebellion and Reformation in the Campos Menonitas of Chihuahua, Mexico

My poetry collection *Village Mechanics* showcases the experiences of Old Colony origin Mennonites in Texas and northern Mexico, exploring the impacts of internal and external forces of change. These poems embody the complexities that occur at the intersection of oral history and folklore, and wrestle with excommunication, identity, and the challenges and opportunities surrounding transnational migration. This presentation begins with a short conversation about the play that occurs at the intersection of family, community history, and folklore and will feature a reading from *Village Mechanics* which highlights the playfulness which has been crucial in rebellion and reformation of Old Colony Mennonites in Chihuahua.

Christopher Dick is a professor at Tabor College, where he has taught in the English Department for the past 25 years. He earned a PhD from the University of Kansas in 2009.

His dissertation on German translations of Hemingway's fiction combined interests in American modernism, stylistics, and translation theory. Areas of research—in addition to Hemingway's early writing and linguistic topics—have included technology in the classroom and Mennonite literature.

An Allegory for Fighting the Good Fight: J.G. Ewert's *Der Gute Kampf*

This presentation will introduce attendees to Ewert's *Der Gute Kampf* (1900), perhaps the earliest work of fiction written by a Mennonite. The few scholars who have discussed Ewert either ignore this text or refer to it only in passing. I will discuss my recent translation of *Der Gute Kampf*, which tells the story of a knight named Fides (Good Faith) who sets out on a journey in service of his king. The presentation also seeks to contextualize *Der Gute Kampf* within Ewert's life and work. While his allegory quickly drifted into obscurity, its author did not. Despite a debilitating illness that eventually left him completely bedridden until his death in 1923, Ewert would go on to achieve renown as a newspaper editor, social justice advocate, and prolific writer.

Rita Dirks is Associate Professor of English at St. Mary's University in Calgary. She researches and publishes in the areas of women's and gender studies, focusing on contemporary Canadian literature and international writers of the 1890s-1925. Her most recent publication is *Silence and Rage: The Mennonite Novels of Miriam Toews* (Lexington 2024). Her current project is editing a forthcoming collection for Pandora Press, provisionally entitled *The Violence of Pacifism: Feminism, Theology, and Their Mennonite Reception in the Novels of Miriam Toews*.

Menno Culture as Simulacrum in Miriam Toews

In this paper I examine the imitation of reality, or the play between the real and unreal, in Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness* and *Irma Voth*; both novels represent Mennonite culture as located in two worlds, at least, between memory, revision, representation, and admitted and unadmitted transgressions. In both novels this Mennonite culture is put on display, in a heritage museum, in the first, and, in a film, in the second. These exhibit a self-enclosed ideal that does not exist nor has ever existed, a fabricated model which exists for the consumption of tourists in *A Complicated Kindness* and a worldwide film audience in *Irma Voth*; they have little to do with the preservation of the authentic. It is my argument that the simulacrum inside Mennonite culture has become the real; the real inside the fake inside the real, as in a matryoshka doll that is ultimately empty, in Toews's novels.

Paul Doerksen is Associate Professor of Theology and Anabaptist Studies and P.M. Friesen Co-Chair (with Andrew Dyck) in Biblical and Theological Studies at Canadian Mennonite University. His books include *Take and Read: Reflecting Theologically on Books* and *Beyond Suspicion: Post-Christendom Protestant Political Theology in Yoder and*

O'Donovan. He edited the posthumous publication of A. James Reimer's *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology* and co-edited (with Karl Koop) *The Church Made Strange for the Nations: Essays in Ecclesiology and Political Theology*. Doerksen serves on the board of L'Arche Winnipeg.

Amish as Villain and Victim: Reading Linda Castillo

The Burning, an Amish crime novel featuring Kate Burkholder, who has left the Amish life but now finds herself as the chief of police in a predominantly Amish community in Ohio, is the latest in a series that Amish culture and faith seriously. Castillo treats topics such as the authority of community, trust in God, separation of church and state, and pacifism with insight and respect. *The Burning* introduces significant historical dimensions of Amish theology, namely the theology of martyrdom as depicted in *Martyrs Mirror*, and the less well-known history of the *Schwertler*, or sword-bearers of early Anabaptism. This paper will engage a theological analysis of the depiction of these historical dimensions of Amish theology, and discuss the characterization of the Amish in this series.

Dora Dueck is an award-winning writer, former editor, avid reader, and lay historian. She is the author of four books of fiction and a book of non-fiction, *Return Stroke* (CMU Press, 2022). Her novel *This Hidden Thing* won Manitoba Book of the Year prize in 2011 and her short story collection *What You Get at Home* won the 2013 High Plains Award for short fiction. She grew up in Alberta, lived many years in Winnipeg, and now resides in Tsawwassen, B.C., grateful to spend these years on the beautiful traditional territories of the Tsawwassen and Musqueam and other Coast Salish Peoples.

Thinking About Oneself: Reflections on Desire and Discovery in the Personal

I am currently between books – the 2022 *Return Stroke: essays & memoir* and an upcoming collection of short stories, *Like a River Divides the Earth* (Freehand Books). I am passionate about both projects: the probing I do in essays or memoir of my own experience, which always feels a little too bold for someone who grew up under the Anabaptist expectation of humility but prides me forward into surprising personal discovery and thus, I suppose, satisfies the Anabaptist expectation of hard inner work. The characters and plots of my short stories have, in most cases, lived in and with me for many years and thus seem not only real but deeply serious, and somehow, my responsibility to tell and serve.

Nathan Dueck lost a staring contest with his hometown of Winkler, MB, after eighteen years. He now lives in Cranbrook, BC, where he teaches at the College of the Rockies. He is the author of *king's(mère)* (Turnstone Press), *he'll* (Pedlar Press), *A Very Special Episode* (Buckrider Books), and *Nathan Russel Dueck (1979-) : Mortifications* (Turnstone

Press). He's also the editor of the Lyrik series of selected and new poetry collections by eminent Mennonite poets for CMU Press.

Satirizing Myself for Fun and Profit

Author of easily the worst-selling book of Mennonite literature in English, Nathan Dueck has learned to laugh to keep from crying. He's got his fingers crossed about the reception of his newest book, a memoir entitled *Nathan Russel Dueck (1979-)*. It's subtitled *Mortifications* because it's a collection of his most embarrassing anecdotes. In those stories, he says some things about himself that are (maybe) better left unsaid. After all, they might make you think less of him. At the same time, they might make you chuckle while he pokes fun at himself. See, he's hoping that if he tells you all about his failures, foibles, and follies in a moderately exaggerated way, he'll be better able to cope. Which, as he thinks of it, is the point of satire. It's a literary genre, yes, but it's also a method for dealing with [gestures wildly]. That's something worth theorizing.

Jonathan Dyck is an illustrator and designer based in Winnipeg, MB—Treaty 1 Territory. He teaches comics at Canadian Mennonite University and has created work for *The Walrus*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *Broadview* magazine. His graphic novel, *Shelterbelts*, won the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award and the Doug Wright Award for Emerging Talent.

Making a Mennonite Graphic Novel

This paper begins with an account of my process creating *Shelterbelts* and my current work-in-progress, *Privilegium*, both of which revolve around characters whose lives have been shaped by Manitoba Mennonite communities. After a brief survey of some Mennonite precedents to the contemporary form of the graphic novel, I'll close by considering what the medium of comics can offer to the ever-expanding field of Mennonite literature.

Sarah Ens (co-creator of *here we are singing* in the MHC Gallery) is a writer and editor based in Treaty 1 territory (Winnipeg). She is the author of two books of poetry, *The World Is Mostly Sky* (2020) and *Flyway* (2022), which won the ReLit Poetry Award. Winner of *The New Quarterly's* Edna Staebler Personal Essay Contest and *Room Magazine's* Short Forms Contest, Sarah has published poetry and non-fiction in magazines including *Prairie Fire*, *Arc*, *CV2*, and *Poetry Is Dead*. Sarah holds creative writing degrees from UBC (BFA) and University of Saskatchewan (MFA). Sarah is regional representative for The Writers' Union of Canada and also works at University of Manitoba Press.

David Elias is the author of eight books, most recently *The Truth about the Barn: A Voyage of Discovery and Contemplation*, published by Great Plains. His historical novel, *Elizabeth of Bohemia*, published in 2019 by ECW Press, was a finalist for the Margaret Laurence

Award for Fiction at the Manitoba Book Awards. A new novel is forthcoming from Radiant Press in the fall of this year.

Voice in the Wilderness: Past Into Present

David Elias always assumed that when it came to his family history, he was the first of his kind. Then he discovered that the books he'd been writing for twenty years and more hadn't arisen out of a complete literary vacuum after all. Someone came before—an ancestor who wrote extensively in journals which were eventually published by the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society in a book titled *Voice in the Wilderness*. In this presentation David Elias examines the writings of Peter A. Elias, viewed through the lens of his own life and work. Questions worthy of consideration include: Did Peter have a vision for his body of work, or was he merely acting as a “reporter”? How much “spielraum” to indulge in “play” did he allow himself? Did he seek to construct (perhaps unconsciously) a literary mythology? What literary/Mennonite connections might be drawn between the two authors?

Fran Martens Friesen is emeritus professor of English at Fresno Pacific University where she has taught writing and literature for over twenty years. Her husband, Ken Friesen, also teaches at Fresno Pacific. They have three adult children, two of whom have visited China.

(part of **Cowriting a Memoir: Collaboration, Connection, and California Cabins**—see description on last page)

Patrick Friesen lives in Victoria, and has published poetry, essays, co-translations with Per Brask, and stage and radio plays. He has collaborated on two music/spoken word albums with Niko Friesen. Most recently he published *Reckoning with Anvil* and recorded an album of spoken word. Web site: patrickfriesen.com

Ralph Friesen was born in Steinbach, and now lives in Victoria with his wife, Hannah Hofer. A retired Family Therapist, he has published numerous articles and several books, mostly historical pieces about his hometown. One of these, *Between Earth & Sky: Steinbach, the First Fifty Years*, won the Margaret McWilliams award for the best Manitoba local history. His most recent book is *Prosperity Ever—Depression Never: Steinbach in the 1930s*.

Friesen and Friesen: From No to Yes

In the early 1960s, in Steinbach, teenagers Patrick Friesen and Ralph Friesen were neighbors and close friends. With poetry, fiction and conversation they sought to articulate their intellectual and emotional response to their religious and social environment; there was much interplay of intellect and humour. Using Ralph's book, *Prosperity Ever—Depression Never* and Patrick's two brief videos, *Maria* (a personal look at the Flu Pandemic of 1918) and *Margaret, Walking* (a video imagining a day in the life of a young woman walking

down Main St. in the 1940s), they will present a look at Steinbach in those decades. They will open discussion on the content of the book and videos, their own experiences growing up in the town, and on the process the two of them went through creatively. How did they arrive at this point with their differences of experience, memory and creative explorations?

Jeff Gundy has published fourteen books of poetry and prose, including the new *Reports from an Interior Province: New and Selected Poems*, *Wind Farm: Landscape with Stories and Towers*, and *Without a Plea: Poems*. A 2008 Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Salzburg, he is currently Writer in (Non)Residence at Bluffton University. His recent work on “Phantom Power(s) and How to Find Them” has led to essays published or forthcoming in *MQR*, *Conrad Grebel Review*, and *Mennonite Life*.

Truth, Poetry, and Power, or Said Samatar, the Sayyid, and Makhno

I have seen poetry as a force for peace, justice, reconciliation. But Somali historian (and Mennonite convert) Said Samatar’s *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Mahammad Abdille Hasan* jolted my ease. Samatar’s Sayyed, a warrior-leader of Somali tribes, was also a noted poet—who used poetry to further his ruthless drive for power. Samatar argues that poetry plays a “pre-eminent” but “sometimes sinister” role in Somali society, and the Sayyid is remembered both as a hero and a ruthless villain. In this he resembles Nestor Makhno, the anarchist leader who terrorized Mennonites in Ukraine but is sometimes remembered as a populist hero. What powers can poets wield, responsibly or recklessly? What is poetry’s relation to truth, as well as justice, peace, and mercy, in a world desperately in need of them? I propose to explore the uses and misuses of poetry (and language itself, in a broader sense), with reference to the figures mentioned here and others, Mennonite and not.

Andrew Harnish (he/him) is an Assistant Professor of Writing at the University of Alaska Anchorage. His research explores the intersections between writing studies and cultural rhetorics, including critical disability studies and queer theory. His critical writing has been published in *Religion & Education*, *Disability and Society*, and *Literacy in Composition Studies*. His creative writing has been published in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, *Atticus Review*, and *Miracle Monocle*. His long-gestating queer Mennonite bildungsroman is due to Pandora Press in 2025.

(chair of **Homecoming: Making Space for Queer Stories on the MennoLit Shelf**—see description on last page)

Ann Hostetler is the author of two volumes of poetry, *Safehold* and *Empty Room with Light* (Cascadia), and editor of the anthology *A Cappella: Mennonite Voice in Poetry* (University

of Iowa Press). Her poems and essays have appeared in journals such as *The American Scholar*, *PMLA*, *Poetlore*, and *Permafrost*. She is a professor of English and creative writing at Goshen College, in Goshen, Indiana, where she chairs the English department. Her scholarship concerns multi-ethnic literature in the United States, Canada, and Ireland. She edits the *Journal of Mennonite Writing* and is a 200-hour RYT yoga instructor.

Chris K. Huebner teaches philosophy and theology at Canadian Mennonite University. He recently completed a two-month fellowship at the Doopsgezinde Bibliotheek in Amsterdam where his research explored what 17th century Dutch Mennonites did with words.

Ay Rembrandt! A Painting, a Poem, and the Question of Voice

17th century Mennonites/Doopsgezinden were fascinated by the workings of language. As poets, preachers, translators, writers, theorists, and publishers, they were interested in understanding the way words work (or do not work) and the arts of using one's voice. This paper explores the question of voice and the use of words among 17th century Dutch Mennonites by weaving together two key sources: Rembrandt's portrait of the Mennonite minister Cornelis Claesz Anslo and a poem by the poet Joost van den Vondel that comments on Rembrandt's portrait.

John Kampen is Distinguished Research Professor at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio and Adjunct Professor of Bible at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. He is the author or editor of six books and numerous research articles with a speciality in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Among his many academic appointments was the position of VP and Academic Dean of Bluffton College from 1997-2004.

The Radical Power of Friendship

In the conclusion of Dale Suderman's penetrating essay, "Cynicism as Therapy: Seeing the Log in Our Own Eye," he lists four sources of hope, the third of which is friendship. Originally prepared for a conference of seasoned Christian activists wrestling with their own cynicism and disillusionment, Suderman had advanced friendship as a source of hope in the midst of their despair. This paper combines insights from his published materials with experiences and observations about how it functioned in his daily life and among the vast circles of friendship he assiduously cultivated. The theoretical perspectives informing his life as a gay man were drawn from both the Greek and Roman worlds as well as biblical sources. Dale's outsider "faggot" identity did not permit a simplistic adoption of any model but rather asserted the centrality of friendship to the good life.

Julia Spicher Kasdorf grew up in western Pennsylvania where her family belonged to Pittsburgh Mennonite Church and then Scottsdale Mennonite Church. She attended Goshen College in the early 1980s then moved to New York City where she lived at Menno House. She has published 12 books, as author or editor, many dealing with Mennonite literature. A Liberal Arts Professor of English at Penn State/University Park, she directs the Creative Writing Program and teaches poetry writing.

Social Politics and the Local

“I have never known the police of any country to show an interest in lyric poetry as such. But when poems stop talking about the moon and begin to mention poverty, trade unions, color lines, and colonies, somebody calls the police,” wrote Langston Hughes in a 1948 essay titled, “My Adventures as a Social Poet.” For more than a decade, Julia Spicher Kasdorf has been working in documentary poetry, which can be considered a sub-genre of social poetics. In this reading, she will share the pleasures and pitfalls of social poetics while reading new work from her current project, *Homeplace*, which attempts to capture the resiliency of agricultural workers within about 50 kilometers of her house.

Grace Kehler is an Associate Professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University. Her work on the Victorians’ vexed relations with the physical and the evolutionary provides a lively complement to her recent explorations of the affective and traumatic dimensions of Manitoba Mennonite writing. Recent publications include articles on Toews’ *All My Puny Sorrows*, *Swing Low*, *A Complicated Kindness*, and *Women Talking*.

Women Laughing: Miriam Toews and the Art of Subversion

In a public lecture in 2020, Miriam Toews described laughter as an artistic and subversive form of communication. That statement could be readily extended to most of her auto-fictional texts. Laughter, especially as shared among Toews’ represented women, attests to their embodied ways of knowing and interacting with one another—those interactions that allow for renewal in a complex society that often prefers simple narratives. In this paper, I will take up the art of women’s laughter as manifest in *Swing Low*, *All My Puny Sorrows*, and *Fight Night*. I will focus on the recurrent matriarchal character based on Elvira, Miriam’s own mother, who possesses the capacity to face naked suffering and devastating losses, while continuing to laugh. Laughter and joy prove as potent as trauma in disrupting and re-orienting life. In Toews’s novels, what seems like an ending often becomes a beginning. Laughter begins and begets.

Maxwell Kennel is the pastor of the Hamilton Mennonite Church, Director of Pandora Press, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Canadian Institute for Far-Right Studies. He is the author of *Postsecular History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) and *Ontologies of Violence* (De Gruyter Brill, 2023), and editor of Astrid von Schlachta’s *Anabaptists: From*

the Reformation to the 21st Century, translated by Victor Thiessen (Pandora Press, 2024), and Thomas Kaufmann's *The Anabaptists: From the Radical Reformers to the Baptists*, translated by Christina Moss (Pandora Press, 2024).

Publishing Anabaptist History: Pandora Press, Mennonite Publishing, and Critical Historiography

2024 saw the publication of Troy Osborne's *Radicals and Reformers: A Survey of Global Anabaptist History* (Herald Press), and translations of Astrid von Schlachta's *Anabaptists: From the Reformation to the 21st Century* and Thomas Kaufmann's *The Anabaptists: From the Radical Reformers to the Baptists* (Pandora Press), all three of which represent new approaches to the 500 year history of the Anabaptists and their reception by Mennonites. This presentation explores the publishing patterns of Anabaptist historians alongside the historiographical differences between the approaches of Osborne, von Schlachta, and Kaufmann, in the context of the ongoing and highly complex and contextual mediations between confessional and postconfessional approaches to the study of Anabaptism. With particular attention to the relationships between normativity and description in the writing of history, as they intersect with the materialities and virtualities of books and other media, this presentation concludes by showing paths forward between discourses of neutrality and polarization in the use and abuse of history.

Joelle Kidd (she/her), born in Morden and raised mostly in Winnipeg, now calls Tkaronto / Toronto home. Her short fiction and essays have been published in *The Walrus*, *PRISM International*, *Lit Hub*, and *The Rumpus*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Guelph and is a prose editor at *Plenitude Magazine*. Her first book, *Jesusland: Stories from the Upside Down World of Christian Pop Culture* is forthcoming August 2025 from ECW Press.

Wow, Not What I'd Call Music: The Uncanny World of Christian Pop

It was 1999: my family had just moved back to Manitoba from eastern Europe. I was enrolled in Christian school. Everyone was worried about Y2K. And "Cartoons," by Chris Rice was on the radio. In an essay blending memoir and pop cultural criticism, I explore Christian pop music as a vehicle for the sacred and profane, a strange collision of capitalism and religion, and a metaphor for the larger personal project of learning how to fit in, as a newcomer to the strange subculture of evangelical Christianity. This piece is excerpted from my forthcoming book *Jesusland*, which traces evangelicalism's reaction to the flashpoint of the early 2000s, a time when Christian music and movies crossed into mainstream culture, evangelical influence broke through to Washington, and pop stars wore purity rings. Returning to this music reveals the deep (and often quite troubling) roots and effects lurking beneath the frivolous, bubble-gum-pop surface.

Eileen R. Kinch is digital editor at *Anabaptist World*. She studied English at Chatham College and writing as ministry at Earlham School of Religion. She is the author of the poetry chapbook *Gathering the Silence* and her poetry has appeared in journals and anthologies. She is a co-editor of *Drawing Near* (Herald Press). She and her husband Joel Nofziger live near Tylersport, Pennsylvania and she is a member of Keystone Fellowship Friends Meeting in Lancaster County.

1. Mennonite Newspapers: Nurturing Community and Faithfulness

Discussions of Mennonite writing have tended to focus on fiction, poetry, and memoir. Yet Mennonite news publications are produced by Mennonites for Mennonite readers, so Mennonite news writing is also Mennonite writing. Mennonite news exists to inform, inspire faithfulness, and to nurture and maintain community bonds, as seen in four news publications. *The Budget* and *Die Mennonitische Post*, both conservative Anabaptist newspapers, create an imagined community through letters that share everyday news with readers and nurture community bonds locally and globally. *Anabaptist World* and *Canadian Mennonite*, more progressive publications, offer news of church gatherings and institutions, and inspire faithfulness through feature stories and personal reflection articles. Mennonite news publications, whether conservative or progressive, uphold nurture community and encourage faithfulness, even if Mennonites have different ideas about this means.

&

2. A reading from *Drawing Near: A Devotional Journey with Art, Poetry & Reflection*

Editor Eileen R. Kinch will introduce four poets, who will read their poems from *Drawing Near*, a devotional volume of ekphrastic poems that respond to linocut-style art images that appear in the Anabaptist Community Bible. *Drawing Near* is a project of Anabaptism at 500.

Sherri Klassen enjoys life in Toronto. Her passions include history, good food and drinks, and humour. She combined these passions in her first book, *Menno-Nightcaps: Cocktails Inspired by That Odd Ethno-Religious Group You Keep Mistaking for the Amish, Quakers or Mormons* (Touchwood, 2021). She worked for over 15 years as a research administrator at University of Toronto before returning to writing stories and is writing a novel loosely based on stories from her second-generation immigrant Mennonite family.

The Cocktail Renaissance Comes for the Mennonites

Four years ago, I published *Menno-Nightcaps*, a book that combines cocktail recipes with historical vignettes and commentary about Mennonites. Trained as a historian, I sought to teach Anabaptist and Mennonite history to people who would never otherwise pick up a Mennonite history book. It may be too early to tell the impact of *Menno-Nightcaps* on Mennonite historiography. It may also be too early to tell the impact of *Menno-Nightcaps*

on Mennonite drinking habits. It is not, however, too early to discuss the difficulties in marketing a book a Mennonite cocktail book to people who think that Mennonites don't drink, to offer observations on the apparent Mennonite love of cocktails, and to sneak in a bit of history while producing a commemorative Anabaptism 500 cocktail recipe.

Isaac Kuhl-Schlegel (he/him) holds a Master of Theological Studies from the University of Toronto, where he focused on intersections of theology and popular culture. He currently teaches and advises students within the WIL program at Canadian Mennonite University. He is a Mennonite, writing.

The Pursuit of Peace in A.E. van Vogt's *Slan*

A.E. van Vogt may be the most influential Mennonite author that Mennonites don't talk about. Born near Altona, Manitoba, van Vogt is a major figure in early North American science fiction, but the scholarship on Mennonite/s writing has scarcely engaged with his work. This presentation addresses this gap through a critical reading of van Vogt's 1940 novel *Slan*, his first and most famous. I argue *Slan* uses the tools/toys of science fiction to dramatize a familiar Mennonite problem: how does a commitment to peace respond under the pressures of assimilation and the threat, present or remembered, of persecution? The novel deploys genre staples such as superhuman mutants and fantastical weaponry to tell the story of a young man discovering a pacifism inseparable from his genealogy. *Slan*'s neglect in the literature raises a question: does the Mennonite *spielraum* have room for a ray gun?

Becca J.R. Lachman lives in Appalachian Ohio, where she's the communications director of a public library system. After studying writing/literature at Ohio University and Bennington College, Becca edited *A Ritual to Read Together: Poems in Conversation with William Stafford* and published the poetry collections *The Apple Speaks*, *Other Acreage*, and *What I say to this house*. Her songs and lyrics have been performed on theatrical stages, by choirs of all ages, and in houses of worship around the world.

(part of **A Third Chair: Contemporary Fraktur for a Most Unusual Time**—see description on last page)

Michèle LaRue is a professional actress who tours nationally with her repertoire of *Tales Well Told*, which originated at The East Lynne Company. She was married to the late Warren Kliewer and was his mentee and colleague for 27 years until his death in 1998. They met in summer stock, when Warren directed Michèle in *Our Town*. **Warren Kliewer**'s post-academic career began in 1970, when he became resident director of the National Humanities Series, whose original productions reached isolated communities throughout the U.S. In 1980, he founded The East Lynne Company, to revive "earlier American" plays

and literature; it endured for 40 years. Five of Warren's scripts will appear in the multi-volume anthology *Acting Up*, coming soon from Gelassenheit Publications.

Joanne Lehman is the author of *Leah's Faith* (Masthof Press, 2025) and two forthcoming books in the Benville Community Series. She is a fellow of the Wick Poetry Center at Kent State University and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Ashland University. She is retired from adjunct teaching at Malone University and the University of Akron Wayne College. Joanne lives in Wooster, Ohio, and attends Summit Mennonite Church in Norton, Ohio.

Bonnet Girl Meets an Anabaptist: Why I Write Amish Fiction

Amish-themed romance has been around for a century, but today it is rarely authored by an Anabaptist. Until the mid-1990s, Mennonites *owned* the tiny Amish/Mennonite fiction genre. In 1997, Herald Press, the denominational press, stopped publishing fiction to focus exclusively on theologically driven nonfiction. That same year, Bethany House released *The Shunning*. This was the first of many Amish romances by Beverly Lewis and others. Back then, no one could have predicted the long-running popularity of the genre and its spin-offs. But have these books enlightened or misled readers about the Christian faith lived by the Amish? While writing Amish-themed fiction began as a playful detour into an entertaining genre, over time, this author's task became that of sharing the five-hundred-year-old values of Anabaptism, as she challenges readers to reflect on their personal faith heritage, family relationships, community-centeredness, and pursuit of simplicity in this complex world we Christians inhabit together.

Mary Ann Loewen is the editor of two collections of memoir writing: *Sons and Mothers* and *Finding Father*, both published by the University of Regina Press. She has taught Academic Writing at both the University of Winnipeg and the Canadian Mennonite University. She currently teaches Life Writing and Literature courses at the McNally Robinson Bookstore in Winnipeg. She loves to read, to cook and to cycle, and to hang out with her family. She has three grown children and three fiercely interesting grandchildren. She lives in Winnipeg.

Grandma and Kay: An Intergenerational Memoir

Exploring the relationship between a grandmother and granddaughter, this paper is a hybrid: part personal essay, part memoir, and part creative non-fiction. The timeline shifts from the granddaughter's premature birth resulting in lengthy hospitalization to her current five-year-old status as a precocious Kindergartner. Interjected amidst the reminiscences and story-telling are insights from writers whose words resonate, both in terms of how words work and how life works, intergenerationally and otherwise. Thus, rather than focus

on ‘experts’ in the field of grandparenting, I interact with writers who speak about everyday life, who speak to the notion of memory and story-telling, and who do so profoundly. These writers include novelists, essayists, memoir writers and critics from a variety of disciplines

Geoff Martin is a writer and editor based in Kitchener, Ontario where he recently finished a collection tentatively called *Homeground*. Essays from this manuscript have won *The New Quarterly*’s Edna Staebler Personal Essay Contest (for “The Isabel Letters”) and been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize (for “Baked Clay” and “Ten Crossings in the Midwestern Borderlands”). In 2023, he co-founded The Creek Collective, a group of artists making art in response to—and alongside—Schneider Creek.

History Maker

This presentation takes its name from a popular late-90s praise song by English band Delirious? And opens with a recounting of a Mennonite renewal movement in the 1930s that significantly shaped my grandparents’ rural Ontario lives. It then traces the premillennial dispensationalism that shaped the religious culture of my own evangelical upbringing and explores the fallout from my teenage pursuit of revival. Throughout, I explore the ways that (conflicting) ideas of history shaped my religious and cultural identity. The essay serves as the grounding piece in *Homeground*, offering an explanation for my personal interest in social and environmental histories. For that reason, I am soliciting feedback from a wide range of readers as I prepare the manuscript for submission. “History Maker,” along with my other land history essays, are lyric efforts that seek after James Baldwin’s exhortation to “know whence you came.”

Chantel Mierau is an artist whose interest in craft, labour, tradition, and the body has led her into complementary practices in textiles and video. She grew up in a primarily Mennonite community in rural Saskatchewan, then studied at two Mennonite education institutions. She later studied at the University of Manitoba, graduating with a BFA in 2011. Her work can be found at chantelmierau.com.

Three Chores—Obraumche, Busy Napping, and Microfibre

First shown in 2019 at Winnipeg’s Platform Gallery, *Three Chores* is my series of short experimental videos. Each of the three videos imagines an improbable or impractical chore. Using the visual vocabulary of housework and craft (especially craft involving yarn), I turn naps into make-work projects, use a crochet hook to create a plumbing problem, and latch on to a dust bunny in an unexpected way. Wool, silk, beeswax and hair are mishandled and over-handled in ways that magnify the failures of the artist’s body, and which rule out the possibility of any practical outcome. In the lecture, I discuss the videos in relationship to domestic work. “These chores are in fact not chores, but fanciful

concentrations. I lose myself in these tasks, these materials in a way I never lose myself while doing the dishes.”

Melanie Springer Mock (she/her) is professor of English at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon, where she primarily teaches first-year writing, memoir, and journalism courses. She is author or coauthor of six books, including *Finding Our Way Forward: When the Children We Love Become Adults* (Herald Press, 2022).

What Happens When Conspiracy Theories Hit Home

(part of **Words that Divide and Unify: Mennonites and the Language of Grassroots Political Engagement**—see description on last page)

Elsie K. Neufeld is a poet, essayist, and soon-retired personal historian. She is currently working on a book of essays. Its title, “Gooseberries & Permission Slips,” was inspired by an early-morning Facebook post by Magdalene Redekop.

Work & Play: On Being a Personal Historian

“When stories find you, take good care of them,” said writer Barry Lopez. This presentation is about the work and play involved in midwifing nearly four dozen books and eulogies into being. It began in 1996 with my parents’ Russian Mennonite story, and will end with Italian immigrants, Mario and Bruna Dalla Zanna. Details fade, but names remain: Teddy, a chain-smoking, trailer court resident. George, a retired merchant seaman who fled home at 14, then sailed around the world eleven times. Herta and Edith, German-writing penpals (1932-1994). Ruth, a professional pianist with crippling rheumatoid arthritis, who defiantly survived a near-fatal car accident. Bruce, a retired electrician, once general manager at Mott Electric, whose stories scaffolded the company’s book. Georg, a concentration camp survivor turned theology professor, whose life’s passion was befriending men with addictions. George and Margaret Braun, whose story included my mother’s story. Every teller has been my teacher.

Hope Nisly (she/her) is a retired academic librarian and archivist, currently in her “Third Act” as a political organizer and activist in the Central Valley of California. She has had her personal essays published and recorded by a variety of literary journals, some of which can be accessed via her website at hopenisly.com. She is at work on her first book, a memoir in fragments.

GOTV and Resistance in Perilous Times (part of **Words that Divide and Unify: Mennonites and the Language of Grassroots Political Engagement**—see description on last page)

Cale Plett (they/them) is the Winnipeg-based author of two forthcoming YA books, the contemporary queer romance *Wavelength* (Groundwood: House of Anansi 2025) and *The Saw Mouth* (Delacorte: Penguin Random House 2026), a queer horror novel. They hold a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Winnipeg, where they graduated as valedictorian and winner of the Chancellor’s Gold Medal for Highest Standing in the Arts. Cale is an alum of Lambda and Banff Centre emerging writer programs, and has had poetry and fiction published in journals across Canada. They are represented by Amy Tompkins at Transatlantic.

part of **Homecoming: Making Space for Queer Stories on the MennoLit Shelf** (see description on last page)

Casey Plett is the author of *On Community, A Dream of a Woman, Little Fish, A Safe Girl to Love*, and is the co-editor of *Meanwhile, Elsewhere: Science Fiction and Fantasy From Transgender Writers*. She is the Publisher at LittlePuss Press and teaches at Ohio University.

(part of **Homecoming: Making Space for Queer Stories on the MennoLit Shelf**—see description on last page)

Jami Reimer (she/her) (co-creator of *here we are singing* in the MHC Gallery) is an interdisciplinary artist and educator originally from Winnipeg. In 2023, Jami was awarded the Robert Fleming Prize for composition from the Canada Council of the Arts for her arts-based research about bioacoustics and amphibian chorusing. Her ongoing project *Soft tongues: a bioacoustic opera* is currently in workshop for a production with reNaissance Opera. Jami holds degrees in music from CMU, education from University of Manitoba, and an MFA from Simon Fraser University. Jami resides on unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, known as Vancouver.

Julia Reimer has taught in the areas of theatre, performance, rhetoric and communication at Fresno Pacific University, LCC International University, and Kean University. Reflecting on these themes, her chapter “Negotiating the Blade: A Dramatic Reverie on Faith, Institutions, and Theater” appeared in the *Anabaptist Remix* (2022) volume. When not busy pondering the work of educational institutions, she is a director, actor, and the founder/collaboration coordinator of Near Far Theatre, an independent project-based venture based in Fresno, California.

Reminiscence Theatre as Imaginative Excerpting

“Reminiscence theatre” (Schweitzer, 2007) is the practice of collecting oral histories from older adults looking back on their lives and scripting the material to perform it back to them. It can be understood as a type of documentary theatre: plays based on interviews or other documentary texts that are compiled, reworked, and reimagined. A reminiscence script is necessarily a co-constructed and collaborative process, involving a complex layering of participants and audiences, texts and contexts. With the historical practice of excerpting as a lens, the paper explores the playful acts of intertextuality that occur when actors draw text and inspiration from oral storytelling. How does the meaning of the material shift as actors excerpt and compile, engaging in acts of de-contextualization and re-contextualization? (Where) are the protagonists in the scripting, characterizations, and performance event? What are the ethical tensions of gathering and then returning the stories—transformed by the aesthetic imagination—to the original tellers? These themes are explored in relation to a multi-linguistic reminiscence theater project conducted in the fall of 2022 at an international university in northern Europe.

Ruth Rempel is an Associate Professor of History and International Development Studies at Canadian Mennonite University. The history of development in the African continent is her area of specialty. She is a life-long fan of science fiction and fantasy and has reviewed science fiction novels for the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*.

On Reading *The Practice*, *The Horizon*, and *the Chain*

Sofia Samatar’s latest work contains multitudes. It is a science fiction novella about a fleet of generation ships. It is a remembrance of the horrors of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It is a mystical reflection on the unity of being. It is a satire of life in a progressive university department. It is a parable about social change. This essay traces my journey with Samatar’s fleet. To what ports does *The Practice* takes a Mennonite speculative fiction nerd, a white academic who writes modern African history, and a slowed-down activist still curious about social change? It takes me to generation ship stories by Black authors. It takes me to histories of social change involving abolition. It takes me to speculative fiction writers who have used the parable format. It draws me through the work of reimagined universities, children’s play, prophetic words, and power within toward a horizon of hope.

Julia D. Rempel’s previous work within Indigenous communities as a medical researcher influenced her understanding on forgiveness. Those interactions were pivotal in the reorientation of her vocation, in which she has continued to explore the topic of intergenerational trauma and forgiveness more broadly. Julia currently works as a spiritual health practitioner in a long-term care home, presents as an occasional preacher and is writing a novel on the strength and limits of forgiveness.

A Holy Rebellion: Forgiving the Sins of the Fathers

This paper considers the work of forgiveness in the healing of intergenerational trauma. Our lives began in a time we can never know and in a place we may never see. From those times and places, the interweaving of generations eventually led to us; the offspring of parents and of history. This history may have left our families, and us, wounded in heart, soul and mind. Healing from this can be arduous. The naming is only a beginning and might be impossible to unravel. But persisting in this work is needful, for from this history we have become co-creators in our own, and our children's, presents and futures. The movement towards forgiveness is often fragmented and difficult. It is a holy rebellion against all that seems right and fair. Nonetheless, this ongoing labour holds the sacred mystery that can reveal the wholeness, and reconciliation to ourselves, that we seek.

Bradley Schmidt is a translator, writer and lecturer based in Leipzig, Germany. He originally hails from a Mennonite community in central Kansas, where he also went to college. In addition to translating contemporary German prose and poetry, he has translated poetry by Julia Kasdorf into German; his translation of *Nachtbeeren* by Elina Penner is forthcoming with CMU Press. He has been preparing a novel called *The Home Place* (working title).

Doing the Work, Playing with Words, and the Preparation of the Novel

There will be explorations work that include service and professional sacrifice, gendered aspects of care work, my work as a translator, which is often invisible, as well as the (limited?) usefulness of "doing the work." Interweaving these themes with an examination playing with words. How and when do I play with words through sampling, referencing, and repurposing? How can this lead to creative writing? The final thematic thread to be integrated is the tension between my own heightened appreciation for translation provoked the memoir *This Little Art* by Kate Briggs (2017) and sporadic attempts to work on my own material since then, especially vis-à-vis Roland Barthes' *The Preparation of the Novel* (1983), which plays a central role in Briggs' memoir. Finally, there will be some reflection on the creative process to date, describing the current state of play.

Adam Schrag is a Senior Lecturer in Strategic Communication and Security Technologies at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Schrag's work focuses on military visuality, the history of media, and technological disasters. His work has been presented and published internationally, including essays on the history of war photography, early cinema, and PowerPoint. Before his current position, Dr. Schrag was an Associate Professor of Film & Media Studies at Fresno Pacific University. He grew up in Freeman, South Dakota, and graduated from Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. His work is influenced and inspired by many long conversations with the late Dale Suderman.

Things Hidden: The Influence of René Girard in the Works of Dale Suderman

This paper examines the influence of René Girard (1923-2015) on the work of Anabaptist cultural theorist Dale Suderman (1944-2020). Drawing on Suderman's unpublished lectures, correspondence, and the *Essential Dale Suderman Reader*, I argue that Girard's theories—though rarely addressed directly in Suderman's writing—provide subtextual scaffolding for Suderman's intellectual style, shaping his explorations of masculinity, friendship, and faith. Suderman, who navigated insider-outsider identities across Mennonite, intellectual, and gay communities, was drawn to Girard's mimetic theory, particularly its reading of the Christian narrative, which Suderman applied to both interpersonal and institutional forms of violence and desire. Girardian concepts permeate Suderman's playful irreverence toward academic and political orthodoxies and his ironic juxtapositions of sacred and profane. Examining Suderman's Girard not only helps us read Suderman in a new light but also pulls Girard out of the shadow of recent tech-right co-option of his theory.

Shirley Hershey Showalter (she/her) was professor of English and president of Goshen College after which she joined the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, MI. She is author of *Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets the Glittering World* (Herald Press, 2013) and co-author of *The Mindful Grandparent* (Broadleaf Books, 2022).

From College President to Crusading Grandma

(part of **Words that Divide and Unify: Mennonites and the Language of Grassroots Political Engagement**—see description on last page)

Jessica Smucker is a poet, essayist, and songwriter based in Lancaster, PA. Her writings have appeared in publications such as *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Potomac Review*, *CMW Journal*, *The Mennonite*, *MennoNot*, *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, and *Drawing Near: A Devotional Journey With Art, Poetry & Reflection*. As a songwriter, she has recorded several volumes of original music and performed in hundreds of venues. She plans to release more music this year and is currently working on two separate memoir projects.

What I Didn't Learn in Africa

This is a coming-of-age memoir-in-progress that explores the topic of neurodiversity in girls. A family trip to Southern Africa, set squarely in time at the gateway to puberty, introduces our narrator to a variety of complex foreign ecosystems right before abruptly dropping her into the most bewildering wilderness of all: high school. Where she was brave and adventurous only weeks earlier (tracking fresh lion tracks on a walking safari!), she is suddenly paralyzed and scared (afraid to ask her teacher for a bathroom pass). Of course, it's not just the contrast in scenery that's knocked her off balance; it's hormone changes, a new school, a new medication, new versions of herself competing to replace the one she's

always known and understood. The story travels back and forth between wide open savannahs and stuffy classrooms, as the narrator tries to process how easy it is for a person to get lost, even while following the (supposedly) right path.

Lynn Sommer is a visual artist in Lancaster County, PA. In 2017, she created frakturs for the meditative, adult coloring book *Amish Prayers* from Herald Press and was a featured artist at the 2023 Mennonite Arts Weekend. Her formal education includes Goshen College, Conrad Grebel University College, and West Chester University. She has a master's in counseling and worked most recently as a therapist following years as a special educator and public school counselor.

(part of **A Third Chair: Contemporary Fraktur for a Most Unusual Time**—see description on last page)

Margaret Steffler is professor emerita of English Literature at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. Her research focuses on Canadian women's fiction, girlhood narratives, and life writing with a recent emphasis on Mennonite/s Writing and the work of Miriam Toews. She is a co-editor of *Children and Childhoods in L.M. Montgomery: Continuing Conversations* (McGill-Queen's UP, 2022) and is the editor of *P.K. Page's Mexican Journal* (Porcupine's Quill, 2015) and *Metamorphosis: Selected Children's Literature* (PQ, 2020).

Miriam Toews's *Fight Night*: Playful Allusions, Transgenerational Resistance, Joyful Mourning

Through its quotations, allusions and intertexts, Miriam Toews's *Fight Night* (2021) invites readers to engage in a playful game of recognizing words and sources. What begins in play quickly leads to serious and sobering work in which words, once identified, are thoughtfully considered and expanded in order to resonate beyond themselves, evoking sensuous, intellectual, emotional and spiritual resistance. This paper discusses the ways in which *Fight Night* invites the playful participation and engagement of the reader in order to open the delightful recognition of words into a reading of transgenerational resistance and joyful mourning. The playful and the profound work together in partnership rather than in opposition or sequence. The blending of the serious and the fun emphasizes the ecstasy of joy, the strength of resistance and the pain of sorrow in a family and world that have become familiar to readers of Miriam Toews's work.

Linda Umble of Ronks, PA, is an Interventionist in the Ephrata Area School District, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. She is a graduate of Tabor College (BA in Social Science - US History) and EMU (MEd) and a lifelong reader, writer and learner.

Looking for Space – A Mennonite Reader on Mennonite Writings

This presentation explores the complex, evolving identity of Mennonite literature through a deeply personal lens rooted in family history, community, and faith. Drawing on the legacy of John Denver's Mennonite Brethren heritage, it examines how Mennonite writers and readers navigate the tensions between tradition and change, belonging and difference. Through reflections on formative texts—from early classics like *Light from Heaven* and *Peace Shall Destroy Many* to contemporary voices such as Casey Plett and Sofia Samatar—the talk highlights how Mennonite literature reveals fractured identities shaped by migration, silence, and resilience. This presentation invites participants to consider how Mennonite storytelling holds space for contradictions, endurance, and growth. It calls for a broadening of the literary map to include underrepresented voices and challenges us to nurture a Mennonite writing tradition that honors both roots and reaching—offering a home for faith that is felt, wrestled with, and carried forward in all its complexity.

Andrew Unger is a novelist and satirist from Steinbach, Manitoba. The creator of the satire site *The Unger Review* (formerly *The Daily Bonnet*), his books are the novel *Once Removed* (2020, Turnstone Press) and the collection *The Best of the Bonnet* (2021, Turnstone Press). Two works are forthcoming, a nonfiction book about satire and another novel.

Towards an Understanding of Mennonite Humour

I will be sharing from my new book of creative non-fiction on the nature of satire. Drawing upon examples from a wide range of sources, including my own writing, my presentation deals with satire in general, but also touches on Mennonite responses to satire and humour. Of interest to conference guests may be my chapter on Miriam Toews, in which I argue that her work, particularly *A Complicated Kindness*, should not be classified as satire, despite containing a protagonist with a sarcastic voice. I also discuss the passive aggressive nature of satire and how it aligns with the Mennonite non-violent tradition.

Nataliya Venger is a Ukrainian historian specializing in Mennonite studies and nationalism, with teaching and research experience in Ukraine and Canada. She holds a Doctor of Science and PhD from Dnipro National University and is currently a research associate at the University of Winnipeg. A co-editor of *Modern Studies in German History*, she has published widely on diasporas and Mennonite history. Her work is supported by major grants, including Fulbright, ERAZMUS, and the D.F. Plett Foundation.

Visual Texts of Henry Pauls: Between Myth, Nostalgia, and Historical Reality

Henry Pauls is a Mennonite artist born in Rosental, a Mennonite settlement in Chortitza (Ukraine). He later emigrated to Canada and belongs to the generation known as the Russländers. His paintings function as visual texts, where each element – theme,

composition, symbols, and colors – as “words” and a meaningful carrier of historical memory. The aim of this presentation is to offer a historical analysis of Henry Pauls’ work by situating his artistic legacy within its broader cultural and historical context. His art is presented as both a historical and human testimony, serving as a visual narrative that bears witness to the Mennonite past in the Russian Empire, its values, traditions, and mental maps. At the same time, it expresses a distinctive form of nostalgia—a deep emotional longing not only for a vanished world but also for the joy and safety of a remembered childhood.

Joseph Wiebe is Associate Professor of Religion and Ecology and Director of the Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life at the University of Alberta. His book, *The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Community, Affection, and Identity*, offers a critical reading of Berry’s fiction, emphasizing the role of imagination in community and environmental ethics. His research examines the intersections of religious identity, environmental ethics, and imagination, with a particular focus on Mennonite traditions and the influence of settler colonialism on eco-theology.

Genealogies of Grace: Mennonite Kinship and the Politics of Relational Responsibility in *Women Talking*

This paper examines the politics of Mennonite storytelling in *Women Talking*, focusing on how August’s narration shapes both the novel’s structure and its political theology. Toews’ fictional retelling of the Manitoba Colony atrocities is both a critique of patriarchal fundamentalism and a reimagining of Mennonite kinship through relational responsibility. August’s transformation, born of listening and his love for Ona, challenges liberal logics of individual freedom and sentimental tropes of healing. His writing embodies a desire that destabilizes possessive love and reconfigures communal life amidst inherited violence. In this way, Toews’ novel joins the tradition of Mennonite literature as a site of serious play—where memory becomes revision, and devotion manifests as disruption. Contrasted with Sarah Polley’s film adaptation, which leaves the impression that liberation is only possible through escape, the novel dramatizes a genealogy of salvation: one found in becoming a good relative whose responsibility to others offers not resolution but the possibility of justice, joy, and repair.

Robert Zacharias teaches at Toronto’s York University. He is the author of *Reading Mennonite Writing: A Study in Minor Transnationalism* (2022) and *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian Literature* (2013); he is the editor of *In Search of a Mennonite Imagination: Key Texts in Mennonite Literary Criticism* (2025) and *After Identity: Mennonite Writing in North America* (2015).

“Satan, infidelity, higher criticism, etc.”: On Documenting the Long Emergence of Mennonite Literary Criticism in English

This presentation reflects on my efforts to deepen and expand the history of Mennonite literary studies in North America, with reference to the *Distant Reading, Mennonite Writing* digital database and the anthology *In Search of a Mennonite Imagination* (CMU Press, 2025). The database includes some 40,000 searchable datapoints for over 4,000 writers and works, while the current anthology project includes 54 essays from 44 different authors, first published in 27 different venues over a time period of more than 150 years. What, if anything, can be learned about Mennonite literary studies when we broaden our understanding of the field? The presentation will grapple with the notion of literary history itself, the role of methodology in Mennonite literary studies, and, most substantially, the conceit of a distinctly Mennonite literary critical tradition.

Mary Ann Zehr is the writing program director for Eastern Mennonite University. She was a journalist for *Education Week* newspaper for fourteen years and a public high school teacher for eight years. She writes a monthly book column for her local newspaper in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

(part of **Cowriting a Memoir: Collaboration, Connection, and California Cabins**—see description on final page)



Collaborative Panels or Sessions: Joint Abstracts

Words that Divide and Unify: Mennonites and the Language of Grassroots Political Engagement (Friday, 9:15 am)

(Melanie Springer Mock, Hope Nisly, Shirley Hershey Showalter)

This is a disturbing moment in the U.S. politics, when leaders and influencers validate fears, galvanize hatred, and run roughshod over the common good. When our country alienates friends and allies, demolishes democratic procedures, and obliterates rights of entire groups of citizens, how do we respond? How can Mennonites play a role in politics, using words and stories that unify and heal, at a time when MAGA politics and White Christian Nationalism define local and national politics? Through a series of questions, the panelists will discuss their engagement in political action, explore the stories of their communities, and frame a broader conversation about how this is an expression of love for God and neighbors. The audience will be invited into the conversation on political engagement and personal stories.

Homecoming: Making Space for Queer Stories on the MennoLit Shelf (Friday, 1:30 pm)

(K.R. Byggdin, Jan Guenther Braun, Cale Plett, Casey Plett, chaired by Andrew Harnish)

As noted by Daniel Shank Cruz and other scholars of Mennonite/s Writing, Queer Mennonite Literature is a growing subgenre worthy of exploration and examination. In “Homecoming: Making Space for Queer Stories on the MennoLit Shelf,” join moderator Andrew Harnish in conversation with panelists Cale Plett, Casey Plett, Jan Guenther Braun, and K.R. Byggdin as they discuss the ways queerness and Mennonite identity are reflected in their own writing practices. Topics of discussion will include literary influences (both Mennonite and/or queer), the necessity of uplifting 2SLGBTQIA+ voices within Mennonite Literature, adventures in queer Mennonite genre fiction, and the importance of making space for both grief and joy—as well as faith and doubt—in our stories. Ten years after the debut of the LGBT Fiction Panel at Mennonite/s Writing VII, we gather to ask: how has Queer Mennonite Literature evolved in the past decade and where might it go from here?

A Third Chair: Contemporary Fraktur for a Most Unusual Time (Friday, 3:15 pm)

(Becca J.R. Lachman and Lynn Sommer)

How do we keep telling (and playing with) important stories during seasons of grief and chaos? In this session, poet Becca J.R. Lachman and visual artist Lynn Sommer will interview each other about their process of creating and publishing a collaborative chapbook project. After discovering a *fraktur* with untranslated text at the Kidron (Ohio) Historical Society made by her Great(x3)-grandfather, Becca teamed up with

Lynn on a series of illuminated poems based on the original's structure but using 21st century life experiences. Including a visual slideshow, creative readings, and a nod to American Grammy-winner Chappell Roan, Lynn and Becca will also share how collaboration allowed them not only to dive into regular creative delight during fiercely uncertain times, but also led to solving family mysteries.

Cowriting a Memoir: Collaboration, Connection, and California Cabins

(Saturday, 9:15 am)

(Fran Martens Friesen and Mary Ann Zehr)

We two Mennonite women published a memoir on our experiences teaching English in China in the 1980s. The 2024 memoir is entitled *Doors Cracked Open: Teaching in a Chinese Closed City*. This revisiting of memories was an intensive collaborative effort that reconnected us to our past, to our former Chinese students, to our current and past Mennonite communities, to our younger selves, and to each other as long-standing friends. We incorporated different writing styles and reconciled conflicting memories. We built in play in our writing project. We felt it was important to keep sanity—and our friendship! Twice we rented cabins in or near Yosemite National Park and held our own writing retreats to renew our spirits. We believe that sharing about our collaborative writing will encourage others to consider their own collaborative projects.

