

THE SENIOR COLLEGE MESSENGER

Issue 46: August, 2025

This is an organ for members of Senior College to submit short articles that share news, letters to the editor, reactions to the program and anything that they feel will be of general interest. Its regular appearance will allow for an exchange of opinion on topics of interest to the members. In particular, it would be interesting to record reactions to the talks, colloquium topics, books discussed and items appearing in the Messenger.

We also welcome brief notices of important books of general interest that are worth reading and views on what should be included in a modern school curriculum from the perspective of your discipline.

Please submit contributions to the co-editors, Ed Barbeau at barbeau@math.utoronto.ca or Mary Finlay at booksaplenty1949@gmail.com.

BOOK CLUB REPORT OF JULY SESSION

The Senior College Book Club concluded its 2024-25 schedule in early July with a discussion of *The worlds I see: curiosity, exploration and discussion at the dawn of AI* by Fei-Fei Li. Twenty-eight Fellows enjoyed this heart-warming and engaging memoir while grappling with the many issues arising from the rapidly developing field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in which Professor Li is a pioneer. Unsurprisingly, participants were particularly interested in the impact of AI on teaching and learning at all levels, but especially at the university level. We were reminded that AI was the topic of the Senior College Symposium two years ago.

We humans have opted NOT to produce a summary of the book. Rather, in the spirit of the session, we asked ChatGPT, an AI large language model, to do the job for us. Here is the result.

The Worlds I See: Curiosity, Exploration, and Discovery at the Dawn of AI by Fei-Fei Li is a compelling memoir that blends personal narrative with the story of artificial intelligence's development over the past two decades. Fei-Fei Li, one of the most influential figures in the field of AI, shares her journey from an immigrant girl in China working in her parent's dry-cleaning business to a pioneering computer scientist and co-creator of *ImageNet* – the massive dataset that helped launch the deep learning revolution.

Summary: At its heart, *The Worlds I See* is about curiosity, resilience, and the human side of science. Fei-Fei Li recounts here struggles as a young immigrant adapting to a new country, navigating poverty, language barriers, and academic challenges. She details her path through higher education, eventually earning her PhD in electrical engineering and launching a groundbreaking career in AI.

One of the central narratives is the creation of *ImageNet*, the massive image database that became a cornerstone of modern AI research and helped spark advances in computer vision. Li explains the significance of the project and how it demonstrated that neural networks could outperform traditional machine learning algorithms in visual recognition tasks.

Beyond the technical milestones, Li reflects on the *moral and ethical questions* facing AI today. She advocates for "human-centered AI" systems that are inclusive, equitable, and guided by empathy and social responsibility. As a woman and a person of color in a predominantly male field, she also addresses the challenges of diversity and representation in STEM.

The memoir is as much about *science* as it is about *humanity*, exploring the emotional and philosophical implications of building machines that see, perceive, and interact with the world.

Submitted by **Susan Pfeiffer** and **Mary Jane Ashley**.

BOOK CLUB SESSION FOR SEPTEMBER

As you will see in the following schedule, the book club committee has lined up a varied list of books for your enjoyment and discussion. A month ahead of each selection, we will provide a description of the book chosen for discussion. For September 8, the book is *James* by Percival Everett; the discussion will be led by Meg Fox.

“With my pencil, I write myself into being,” write James. The escaped slave who accompanied Huck downriver on a raft in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Jim is brilliantly reconceived as a highly intelligent and literate man in this 2025 Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning novel. Even James uses the familiar slave-talk around whites, but in private the slaves speak standard English and James teaches a group of children “the correct incorrect grammar” to maintain the illusion of white superiority: “The better they feel, the safer we are.” He has read many books from Judge Thatcher’s library, and on his dangerous journey down the Mississippi to purchase the freedom of his wife and daughter, he converses with Voltaire on morality in a delirium after a rattlesnake bite and challenges John Locke on his hypocrisy. Everett thus explores language as performance and power, but shows that for the enslaved, words may not be enough: many adventures brought forth in James are grimmer than those on the same route in *Huck Finn*, as legal rape and murder of slaves were commonplace. Yet somehow irony and the deepening bond with Huck remain at the heart of James’ narrative until near the end of this great read. (Available in all formats: 303 pages)

WELCOME TO SENIOR COLLEGE

This month, we welcome **Barry Goldlist** as a Fellow of the College. He introduces himself in these words.

I was a guest at a celebration event for a colleague becoming a full professor, and sat beside Michael and Linda Hutcheon. When I told them I was retiring at the end of the 2024/25 academic year, they strongly advised me to join Senior College. I first met Michael when I was in training, and eventually became his colleague. One of the highlights of my career was winning the UHN/Sinai Michael Hutcheon Award for Mentorship, as he was a great mentor for my career.

I graduated from U of T Medicine in 1974 and did my postgraduate training at various Toronto Hospitals. I joined the Faculty of Medicine in 1979, and my initial base was at Toronto Western Hospital. My practice in medicine was focussed on Internal Medicine, particularly Geriatric Medicine. Geriatric Medicine was just starting in Canada in 1979, and I was immediately made part of the training committee in Geriatric Medicine at U of T, eventually becoming head of Geriatric Medicine for 14 years. I was one of the original members of the Canadian Geriatrics Society, eventually becoming President. My role in the department of medicine was as a teacher and then educator. I served as director of the training program in Geriatric Medicine at U of T, as well as chief examiner and then specialty committee head of Geriatric Medicine at the Royal College. My particular interests were in acute hospital geriatrics and falls prevention. I then became very interested in memory issues, and worked at the UHN Memory Clinic for over two decades. I made my home at Mount Sinai in 2009, and have truly enjoyed my stay there and was thrilled when the Sinai Foundation raised the money to create a chair in Geriatric Medicine in my

honour, that was just filled on July 1. I was also thrilled that the hospital recruited as my replacement my niece, who was practising Geriatric Medicine at a Harvard affiliated hospital.

My wife has won numerous awards for volunteer activity since her retirement, but I do not think I can match her. However, I have started in an established volunteer program that mentors foreign physicians and helps them understand English and Canadian medical culture. I am enjoying working with my first mentee. I have no great plans other than travelling and reading, but I have always enjoyed learning, and this is why Senior College seems such a great fit for me.

IN MEMORIAM

Hazel Lavina Agnes Lickley (August 11, 1936 – July 11, 2025)
Professor of Surgery

Ronald Wardhaugh (May 17, 1932 – June 8, 2025)
Professor of Linguistics

CALENDAR OF COMING EVENTS

Events marked with **F** are for fellows and external fellows. Advanced registration is necessary for each event. This can be done in response to a weekly email from Senior College to its members that describes the events or through the Senior College website.

Wednesday talks: Wednesdays, 10-12 am (Faculty Club; Zoom) provisional
 September 10: Lorraine York “Yes, I’m a witch”: Yoko Ono
 September 17: Susan McCahan *The impact of AI on university education*
 September 24: Liat Margolis *A land-based indigenous youth program*
 October 1: Larry Moran *What’s in your genome?*
 October 8: Bob Davidson *Smelling the humanities*
 October 15: Robert Sharpe *The Persons Case: Equality of women*
 October 22: Eric Jennings *A world history of vanilla*
 October 29: Zhang, Di *Exploring regional Yangqin music in China*
 November 5: Carl Knappett: *The coastal world of Minoan Palaikastro*
 November 12: Ian Radforth *Deadly swindle: an 1890 murder in backwoods Ontario*
 November 19: David Rayside *Biography of an early Upper Canadian house*
 November 26: Quinya Liu *Earthquakes, resource exploration and earth’s tectonic history*

To conclude the series on November 26, a special lecture/recital “The autumn of Brahms” will be delivered by James Campbell (clarinet) and Leo Erice (piano) at 2 pm at the Faculty Club.

Book Club: Mondays, 2-4 pm (F)

September 8: Percival Everett, *James* (2024) (Leader: Meg Fox)

October 6: John Vaillant, *A true story from a hotter world* (2023) (Leader: Susan Pfeiffer)

November 3: Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy Inc: the dictators who want to run the world* (2024) (Leader: David Milne)

December 1: Samantha Harvey, *Orbital* (2023) (Leader: Malcolm Woodland)

January 5: Terrence J. Sejnowski, *ChatGPT and the future of AI* (2024) (Discussion leader: Daphne Maurer)

February 2: Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: a history of settler colonialism and resistance, 1917-2017* (2020) (Leaders: David Milne and Jon Allen)

March 2: George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) (Leader: Lisa Steele)

April 6: Charles King, *Every valley: the desperate lives and troubled times that made Handel's "Messiah"* (2024) (Leaders: Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon)

May 4: Rachel Carson, *Silent spring* (1962) (Leader: Sara Shettleworth)

June 1: Ian Johnson, *Sparks: China's underground historians and the battle for the future* (Leader: Peter Alberti)

July 6: Susan Casey, *The Underworld: journey to the depths of the ocean* (2023) (Leader: William Logan)

Colloquia: Thursdays, 2-4 pm (F)
Senior College Centre, 256 McCaul Street

September 18: *What makes a city livable?* (Organizer: Giuliana Katz)

October 16: *Diversity and identity in Canada* (Organizer: Trevor Lloyd)

November 13: *Science and scientism* (Organizer: Phil Sullivan)

Aftermath

There is a long tradition in many cultures of posing mathematical riddles. One problem concerns a sheikh who left his herd of 17 camels to his three sons, so that 1/2 of the herd went to the eldest son, 1/3 to the middle and 1/6 to the youngest. When the sheikh died, they could not figure out how to proceed. They sought the advice of a traveller who was passing on his camel.

After some thought, the traveller added his own camel to the herd. From the now 18 beasts, he gave nine to the eldest son, six to the middle son and two to the youngest, at which point he reclaimed his camel and rode off.

A version of this problem appears in a 1993 book *The man who counted*, purported to be by an Arab scholar, Malba Tahan, who collected tales of a young man, Beremiz Samir, with a remarkable ability to settle mathematical disputes. The book is actually a confection by a Brazilian author.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_man_who_counted