Goodbye, Michael Parker. And thanks for all the books.

It’s his tenth book. He likes going out with a round number.

Author Michael Parker, whose novel “Prairie Fever” will be released May 21 by Algonquin Press, will retire from UNC Greensboro at the end of this semester. Tuesday, he led his final class.

“I actually published my first book the first year I was at UNCG, so my career coincides with my career here. So it’s really wonderful to be publishing my tenth book right before I leave, because I’ve written all ten of those books here,” he said, in an interview at Alumni House.

The first to hold the UNCG Nicholas and Nancy Vacc Distinguished Professorship, he has taught in the MFA Program in Creative Writing since 1992.

“I’ve always loved teaching the undergraduates here. They’re really an interesting bunch. It’s a very diverse population. They’re very open-minded. They’re fun to teach, because they don’t get offended. A lot of them have full-time jobs, and they have other lives, and when they’re writing fiction, they have stuff to write about.”

The nationally prominent MFA in Writing program attracts high-caliber graduate student writers, he notes. “Top-notch students who publish really tremendous work,” as he says. “The excellence of our alumni is the result of the legacy of program directors Jim Clark, and now Terry Kennedy, both of whom are geniuses when it comes to bringing us talented students,
and the teaching of former faculty Bob Watson, Fred Chappell, Lee Zacharias and Tom Kirby-Smith, as well as my current colleagues – Stuart Dischell, who has been here as long as I have, Craig Nova, Holly Goddard Jones and Emilia Phillips. We’ve had some wonderful visitors over the years as well who have helped shaped the program.”

He explains the program offers a unique approach teaching creative writing. “When I arrived they had a tutorial system in place, where you work with the students one-on-one, weekly or bi-weekly, in their last year of the program. You get to ask questions in tutorials that you can’t in a workshop: ‘What were you thinking? What are your models for this work? How can we make this more clear?’”

Students are drawn to plenty of one-on-one opportunities with the faculty, he says – and you get to know most everyone in the department. “There’s just a great deal of community here that doesn’t exist in other places.”

As he speaks, he turns to the distant Vacc Bell Tower, named for Nancy Vacc and the late Nicholas Vacc. “I’ve been lucky enough to be the recipient of their generosity for the past five years, because they established the Vacc Distinguished Professorship. It was tremendously helpful to me, not only in my research, but also in just what I was able to do to use the money to help out with the MFA program. ... I was able to use some of their money to fund the graduate students doing summer research trips.”

In 2009, he was awarded the UNCG Senior Research Excellence Award for his body of creative work. During his tenure at UNCG, he has received three career-achievement awards: the Mary Hobson Award in Arts and Letters, the North Carolina Award for Literature, and the R. Hunt Parker Award for significant contribution to the literature and culture of North Carolina.

In the coming months, he’ll move from his current Saxapahaw home to Texas. And he’ll give readings for his new book.

What can readers expect? “Like a lot of my books, it’s based on an anecdote, or actually an image, really, just an image.”

“It comes from my Grandmother, who I did not know. She died a few months before I was born. She grew up in Oklahoma, and the one thing I knew about her at an early age – I always knew the story and I have come to know a lot more about it, but this is one thing that was sort of the most salient thing I knew about it – was that in the winters in Oklahoma, in the really cold weather, she and her sister would get on a horse and their mother would pin blankets around them, all the way around them because it was so cold ...
“The horse knew the way to school and would take them to school. It was four or five miles because they lived out in the country. And then the teacher would be waiting to unpin them and then they would do the same thing on the way home. So I had this image of these two girls, a year apart, in school. What was it like under that blanket in the freezing cold? What did they say to each other? Were they fighting? Did they have a secret language, you know?

“Really all you need to write a novel is just one image. I mean, Faulkner said about ‘The Sound and the Fury’ that someone asked him where he got the idea and he said, ‘I saw a girl climbing a tree and she had muddy pants.’ And if you’ve read ‘The Sound and the Fury,’ you know that’s not what it’s about. It’s about a lot more than that, but you just need – at least I just need – one little, simple image or line of dialogue.”

I asked if he thinks readers will be surprised with this novel. “This whole thing is set in Oklahoma, Wyoming, and then a little bit in West Texas, which is high prairie. And so really it’s landscape and I feel like I accessed a different kind of language because I believe that language comes out of landscape. That these two things are really deeply connected. That people, the way they talk, the way they communicate, comes out of where they’re from and their relationship to land …

“I hope that they’re surprised by it. Because you want readers to be surprised. If they’re not, they’ll close the cover and you’ve failed.”

On Friday, May 3, at 7 p.m. in the UNCG Alumni House, Michael Parker will read from his latest novel, “Prairie Fever.” The event will be followed by a reception and champagne toast honoring Parker, who is retiring from UNCG after 27 years. The event is free and open to the public.

See the related story where Parker reveals two of his favorite books, which authors and bands he’s enjoying right now – and the most memorable writing tip he ever got.

Interviewed by Mike Harris.
Photograph by Martin W. Kane.

When one of the nation’s most noteworthy authors tells you in an interview “Actually, my nightstand collapsed the other night because there’s so many books on it,” you know what your next question has got to be:

**What are you reading these days?**

I have been reading Patrick Modiano, who is a Frenchman who won the Nobel Prize a few years ago. I’ve been sort of plowing through his novels. And then over the summer, Herta Müller, Romanian. She’s living in Germany. I read all of her novels. I tend to kind of get into one writer and then if I love them I’ll read their entire corpus. Peter Orner, who was just here, he’s a short story writer and novelist. He’s maybe one of the most talented contemporary writers around. Actually, my nightstand collapsed the other night because there’s so many books on it. It’s just crazy. ... Also, I’m reading Liza Wieland’s new book, which is about Elizabeth Bishop. It’s called “Paris 7 a.m.”

**What was your favorite book, as a young person?** “I wasn’t a very literary type when I was in high school. I was more into music. But I did read, and I read mostly Kerouac, Ginsberg, the Beats – and that was sort of the influence of my older brother who was reading that kind of stuff at the time. I also remember one summer I went to a summer program at St. Andrew’s College over in Laurinburg, and I had a guy who taught a Faulkner seminar, and I read Faulkner – I read “As I Lay Dying.” I think I already knew I wanted to be a writer, but I think reading “As I Lay Dying” at maybe age 15 or 16 and trying to figure out what the hell was going on, but also being really seduced by the rhythm of the prose and by the mastery of the structure of the novel, and understanding without being able to articulate that something really masterful and powerful was going on. Something very moving. And having a desire to want to do that, but also to be able to figure out what it was that he was doing. I mean, I was really, really, extremely taken by that, even though, I have to say, I don’t sit around and read Faulkner all the time now and I haven’t really read him in years. I still teach “As I Lay Dying” every chance I get.”

(The conversation went from Hemingway to Ann Beattie, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Tallent, Raymond Carver.) “I decided, for every contemporary book I read, I would read a book published before 1900 or, say, 1920 or something, from another culture or from another country. And that way I read all of Flaubert; the Russians, who I still love; Chekhov; Turgenev; and, you know, magical realism and the Latin American writers.”
What stands out in your mind as the most influential book that you read during all of that period?

“‘Madame Bovary,’ that’s the book for me. That’s the book that tells you what you need to do to be a fiction writer. Because Flaubert sort of invented all the stuff like free and direct discourse, and close third-person. All the stuff that we just take for granted now, he was the first one to do it. So if you read that book and you sort of forget that it’s about a woman who commits adultery, and you look at all the technical things that he’s doing, you can learn so much from a technical standpoint from reading that novel. Also it’s really funny."

It’s obvious from your fiction that you love music. What bands are you listening to right now?

“I’ve been listening to Eric Bachmann’s solo work. He used to be in Archers of Loaf, and also Crooked Fingers. Particularly the last two solo albums. And I’ve actually had this album since 1972, but I just saw the Aretha Franklin documentary ‘Amazing Grace,’ where she was filmed two nights in a church in LA in the early 70s, and my (album) copy is so scratched because I’ve listened to it so many times. I never knew they filmed it – it’s tremendous. So I’ve been listening to that. I’ve also been listening to this Swedish band called The Amazing, and a lot of Swedish music in general. A lot of it is very sort of 70s. Very country rock-ish, which is interesting."

Final question: What’s the most memorable piece of writing advice you ever received?

“I was really lucky to study with the novelist Lee Smith, and she was really the first creative writing teacher I ever had. ... One time, I said, ‘I’m serious, I really want to do this! Is there any advice that you can offer.’ And she said, ‘Yeah, write every day for ten years.’

“I said, ‘Ten years? Every day for ten years?’ She said, ‘Yeah,’ and she said it like, “Oh, that’s just what one does.’ And so I did. I wrote every day for ten years. I wrote on the day that my daughter was born, I wrote on the morning that I got married. I wrote when I was deathly ill. I wrote when I had terrible hangovers. ..."

“Years later I ran into her and I said, ‘You know, I can’t thank you enough for giving me that advice. I feel like it made such a difference in my discipline.’ And she said, “Oh, you didn’t. I was just kidding. You didn’t believe me, did you?”
On Friday, May 3, at 7 p.m. in the UNCG Alumni House, Michael Parker will read from his latest novel, “Prairie Fever.” The event will be followed be a reception and champagne toast honoring Parker, who is retiring from UNCG after 27 years. The event is free and open to the public.

See related story about Michael Parker’s UNCG career and his perspective on UNCG’s students and the MFA Writing Program – and his new book, “Prairie Fever.”

Interviewed by Mike Harris.
Photograph by Martin W. Kane

UNC System Interim President Roper visits UNCG

Monday morning, Dr. William L. Roper paid a visit to our campus.

He met with Chancellor Gilliam and then with the chair and chair-elect of Faculty Senate and co-chairs and chairs-elect of Staff Senate. He also met with the leadership of the Student Government Association and the Graduate Student Association, in addition to Board of Trustees leaders. A reception was held in Alumni House with university leaders, including Board of Trustees members and leadership of the Alumni Association, Excellence Foundation and Board of Visitors.

Roper has served as interim president of the UNC System since Jan. 1.

He was most recently the dean of the School of Medicine and vice chancellor for medical affairs at UNC Chapel Hill and CEO of the UNC Health Care System. He also was professor of health policy and management in the School of Public Health and professor of pediatrics and of social medicine in the School of Medicine at UNC Chapel Hill.
Fun farewell to ‘The Sixties’ at UNCG

By Mike Harris
Photographs by Jiyoung Park

It’s been quite a tied-dye, revolutionary year. But UNCG’s “The ’60s: Exploring the Limits” series is coming to a close.

An encore performance by UNCG Spartans Play Dead, a cover band of faculty, alumni and staff, closed the year with festive cheer Saturday night downtown. (In visual at left, Dr. Rebecca Adams welcomes everyone before enjoying the band.)

That performance came on the heels of the daylong academic conference “UNCG Dead Scholars Unite!,” examining the Grateful Dead and Deadheads from various perspectives. It included a reunion of those who participated in UNCG classes that did field study on Deadheads in the summer of 1989.

The year’s “The Sixties” events on campus have included Weatherspoon art exhibitions, UNCG Dance concerts, jazz legend Herbie Hancock, a photography exhibit about the Freedom Riders and Freedom Schools, films and discussions dedicated to protest and music, and much more.

One more big “The Sixties” event remains:

UNCG Theatre and Triad Stage present the musical “Man of La Mancha” at Triad Stage. Tickets are still available, and can be purchased at the Triad Stage box office.
Photos from Saturday’s performance by Martin W. Kane. At top, symposium co-organizer Dr. Rebecca Adams speaks before the cover band plays their opening number, as alumnus David Bryan and vocalist Dr. Melissa Floyd-Pickard look on. Right, a song early in the performance Saturday night, with Dr. Jamie Anderson taking a harmonica solo, alumnus Bob Worrells on guitar, and drummer Jeremy Fountain, an alumnus.

By Mike Harris

Provide names of your school’s staff awards, for big ceremony

UNCG’s staff award winners will be recognized at the Staff Appreciation Day hosted by the Chancellor’s Office on May 20, 2019.

If your department, school, program or college has staff awards that you would like to be recognized at this event, please send the award name, name of the recipient, and a brief description of the award to s_alston@uncg.edu by May 6, 2019. If information is not received by this date, the award will not be recognized at the event.

We don’t want any staff awards winners to be “left out.”

Here are some samples: We’ve already received award information from the School of Health and Human Services about a national academic advising award recipient in their school. Award recognitions submitted by the UNCG Police Department include an officer who saved a life. Several departments have notified us about awards that staff members have received from entities other than UNCG – from state or national organizations or from publications such as the Business Journal.

Have any questions? Email s_alston@uncg.edu.
Starfish updates: Summer 2019

With the spring semester coming to a close, the Students First Office would like to wish students, staff, and faculty a productive and restorative summer. As the University transitions out of the spring term, we would like to remind the campus community of important information about the Starfish features available over the summer.

Starfish Features and Availability: Summer 2019

May 9: Last day to issue feedback items (flags, kudos, referrals) for Spring 2019 classes

May 10: Commencement; all Spring 2019 flags, kudos, and referrals will be cleared (Note: Cleared tracking items will remain available for historical viewing until the start of fall term)

May 15-June 19: Summer Session I; Starfish flags, kudos, & referrals available for issue to undergraduate students enrolled in summer courses

June 20-July 25: Summer Session II; Starfish flags, kudos, & referrals available for issue to undergraduate students enrolled in summer courses

Appointment Scheduling: Online appointment scheduling will remain available over the summer to all instructors and staff who post availability in Starfish. Instructors and staff who will be away from campus during this time should remove all calendar availability prior to leaving. Note: Incoming students (new freshman, transfers, and readmitted students) admitted for Fall 2019 will not be able to use Starfish for appointment scheduling until the Fall 2019 term starts.

Starfish Support & Training

For Starfish assistance, and for individual/group/departmental training sessions, please email starfish@uncg.edu.

Students, staff, and instructors are encouraged to explore UNCG’s Starfish website for additional information about Starfish and available training guides.

Newsmakers: Haines, Buehler/Zhou, Dread & Delight, Blackledge, Kalcounis-Rueppel, and Grant

Whether researchers with timely insights or students with outstanding stories, members of the UNCG community appear in print, web and broadcast media every day. Here is a
sampling of UNCG-related stories in the news and media over the week:

- A Wall Street Journal article featured research by former HDFS graduate student Dr. Nan Zhou and HDFS faculty member Dr. Cheryl Buehler. The article.
- Professor Steve Haines spoke to the News & Record about music, his career, helming the Miles Davis Jazz Studies Program, and his upcoming album. The interview.
- The Weatherspoon Art Museum’s “Dread & Delight” exhibition, hosted last fall, was reviewed in the Journal of Folklore Research, one of the most prominent journals in its field.
- Yes! Weekly featured graduate student Erin Blackledge’s work to make museums accessible by hosting a speakeasy night at the Greensboro History Museum. The article.
- The research of Dr. Matina Kalcounis-Rueppel and her graduate students on bat calls was highlighted with a UNC TV documentary. The video.
- UNCG Nursing alumnus Ernest Grant was featured on the WUNC Radio’s “The State of Things.” He was also recently the recipient of the International Fire Service Training Association’s 2019 Dr. Anne W. Phillips Award for Leadership in Fire Safety Education.

**Leerkes will receive Jefferson-Pilot Excellence Professorship**

The new recipient of the Jefferson-Pilot Excellence Professorship will be Dr. Esther Leerkes, professor of Human Development and Family Studies.

Leerkes has been a faculty member at UNCG since 2002. She was promoted to Professor in 2013 and appointed Associate Dean for Research in the School of Health and Human Sciences (HHS) in 2017. In the latter role, she has worked diligently, strategically, and collaboratively to nurture and strengthen research activities throughout HHS and across campus.

She is a nationally and internationally recognized authority on parent-child relationships during infancy and early childhood. She has published more than one hundred peer reviewed journal articles and book chapters and she has been instrumental in securing a dozen external grants. As investigator or principal investigator, she has received more than $12 million in NIH funding alone. She currently serves on four editorial boards, has served as a member of an NIH study section since 2014, and presented more than 125 papers or posters at national and international conferences.

Leerkes is also an award-winning teacher and mentor. Recognition of her teaching excellence
includes the Mary Frances Stone Outstanding Teacher Award (in the former School of HES) and the Outstanding Graduate Mentor Award in HHS. She has directed a dozen masters theses and doctoral dissertations and served as a member on numerous other student committees.

Interim Dean Dave Demo said, “I am thrilled that we are able to recognize Dr. Leerkes with a distinguished professorship that she so richly deserves. She has had a prolific scholarly record, along with sustained success in securing external funding, teaching and mentoring. Dr. Leerkes is also an energetic and enthusiastic ambassador for research in HHS and across campus.”

The Jefferson-Pilot Excellence Professorship was established in 1983 when Excellence Fund contributions from the Pilot Life Insurance Company and Jefferson Standard Life Insurance Company were combined to form one endowment fund.

At Kennedy Center, Professor of Theatre Jim Fisher lauded

This month, Professor of Theatre Jim Fisher was formally inducted into the College of Fellows of the American Theatre.

The ceremony was held at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.

Induction is one of the highest honors bestowed on educators and professionals in American theater. It has only been awarded to just over 200 recipients since the conception. Fellows include Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights; Tony Award-winning actors, directors, artistic directors, and designers; administrators and artists from major regional theatres; academic administrators of distinguished theatre programs; and distinguished scholars of theatre. The Fellows represent the highest standards of service and accomplishment in creativity, education, and research in theater.

“At this point in my career, being a year away from retiring, the honor certainly feels like a kind of culmination of the various aspects of my career in academic theatre and the professional theatre,” said Fisher. “I am in awe of so many of the Fellows, past and present, who have been the leading lights of the American theatre since the early 20th century. At the events, and in the rolls of the Fellows membership, are the ‘heavy hitters’ of the field – so many of them have been mentors and models for me in my own work.”
As part of the honor, Fisher participated in an interview, which was filmed and will be archived at the Harry Ransom Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin.

Fisher has served as a chair of two university theater departments for a total of 22 years. At UNCG, he helped build a relationship with Triad Stage, directed full productions, and continued teaching a substantial range of courses. He was the 2017 recipient of the Mary Settle Sharpe Award for Teaching Excellence. Over his career, the UNCG alumnus has produced nineteen published books and edited six volumes of “Puppetry Yearbook.” Four of his books are on playwright Tony Kushner, for whose work Fisher was an early champion. Read more about his work on Kushner here.

“There is a profound social and communal dimension to all of Jim’s work,” said nominating Fellow Cheryl Black. “His compassion, his generosity, his concern for social justice, and his love for humanity permeate all he does.”

*By Susan Kirby-Smith*

*Visual: Jim Fisher with Dana Fisher, his “partner in everything.” They’ve been married 42 years.*

**Join the Faculty and Staff Alumni Network for coffee and treats**

Join the UNCG Faculty and Staff Alumni Network for coffee and treats before the exam season begins.

Celebrate our Spring 2019 graduates and see your alumni coworkers before summer break.

The Open House format event will be May 2, 2019, 8 – 10 a.m., with remarks at 8:45 a.m., in Alumni House.