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Alice Munro: An Appreciation

Michael Boyd

When a student in one of my English classes exclaimed how neat it was that we just happened to be reading some stories by Alice Munro on the day it was announced that she had won the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature, I didn't mention that I had predicted that this would happen every year for at least a decade. Why spoil the student's enjoyment of coincidence? Or, even better, the illusion that I might have insider knowledge? Her winning was not inevitable, after all. The fact that she was a woman from a small town in Ontario who wrote only short stories, not novels, did not necessarily make her an obvious front-runner. Only her work would do that—the 14 books published over the past 45 years. Alice Munro should be seen as both continuing the realist/Chekhovian tradition and introducing innovations in technique that have been admired by readers and

writers all over the world. Her central setting, the small towns and farms of southwestern Ontario, has become as richly populated with vivid fictional characters as Hardy's Wessex, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, or Garcia Marquez's Macondo.

When teaching the stories of Alice Munro, I like to begin with the opening of one entitled "Differently" from her collection *Friend of My Youth* (1990):

Georgia once took a creative-writing course, and what the instructor told her was: Too many things. Too many things going on at the

same time; also too many people. Think, he told her. What is the important thing? What do you want us to pay attention to? Think.

Eventually she wrote a story that was about her grandfather killing chickens, and the instructor seemed pleased with it. Georgia herself thought it was a fake. She made a long list of things that had been left out and handed it in as an appendix to the story. The instructor said that she expected too much, of herself and of the process, and that she was wearing him out (*Selected Stories*, 498).



It is difficult to see a significant connection between this beginning and the story that follows, but we may treat it as a piece of self-analysis. Munro seems to be announcing something important about her own practice as a storyteller. She characteristically puts in "too many things going on at the same time," things that we will be forced to accommodate by making our own connections. These complications are probably the primary reason her readers frequently claim that her short stories seem more like novels.

This claim is obviously presented as praise—and perhaps explains why she finally received the Prize, long overdue, making her one of the oldest recipients at the age of 82 and the only one who writes only short stories, not novels. (Yes, I know that *The Lives of Girls and Women* [1971], is always called a novel, but *The Beggar Maid*, published seven years later, is always referred to as a short-story cycle, in spite of the fact that it follows the same pattern of interrelated stories as the earlier work. In any case, her work has done much to elevate the status of short fiction in the minds of critics and common readers.)

She writes primarily but not exclusively of the lives of girls and women in this expanded or dilated manner, giving us the illusion of seeing a whole life, not just the singular epiphany of the moment of self-discovery that has been the defining characteristic of the short story, at least since James Joyce. How is this accomplished? Not by adding more words—although many of her best stories are longer than average, some rightfully considered novellas. More significantly, she employs a variety of devices to create the sense of a life extended through time.

Surely the most frequently employed of these devices is her rejection of linear chronology in favor of time-shifts, often jumping backwards to fill in the past or leaping forward, shocking us

with the changes wrought by time. These shifts are clearly marked by Munro's segmentation of her text, triple-spacing between sections running from one to six or seven pages in length. Reading one of her stories for the first time, I am constantly aware of how impossible it is to predict where in the central character's life she is taking us next. Only when we reach the end of the story does the ordering of the different parts seem essential to the effects created by the narrative as a whole.

Another way in which Munro disrupts and expands conventional storytelling practice is by splitting the story into different points of view, something more frequently found in novels than in short fiction. "Labor Day Dinner" presents the events of a single afternoon through the eyes of three characters, none of whom have any idea of what will almost happen to them at the end of the story. "White Dump" combines shifts in time with shifts in point of view to tell the story of the breakup of a marriage through the eyes of three generations—daughter, mother, and grandmother. Sometimes the breaks seem more radical, as in "The Albanian Virgin" and "The Love of a Good Woman," when one story collides with another

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without them having any apparent connection. Readers may be left to make their own thematic linkages. A character might reflect on her personal loss of past relationships. Her risky decision to burn her bridges and seek a new life is suddenly thrown into doubt: "Sometimes our connection is frayed, it is in danger, it seems almost lost. Views and streets deny knowledge of us, the air grows thin. Wouldn't we rather have a destiny to submit to, then, something that claims us, anything, instead of such flimsy choices, arbitrary days?" ("Albanian Virgin," *Selected Stories* 602). An interpretive leap is in order here. The existential crisis of the character can also be read as a dilemma in the reader-writer relationship. Might

not this doubt, this fear also refer to the reader's uncertainty about how things connect in this narrative?

For me, Munro's most exciting experiments in form or structure occur in the middle period of her writing, from 1980 to a little after the turn of the century, a period that includes seven collections—half of her production to date. In an interview with the CBC radio host Peter Gzowski in 1994, she offered a hint of what she was trying to do in some of her most ambitious works: "I want to move away from what happened, to the possibility of this happening, or that happening, and a kind of idea that life is not just made up of facts, things that happened ... but

Michael Boyd's Favorite Alice Munro Stories

Where to begin? Start with *Open Secrets* (1995) or maybe her excellent choice of 28 stories from the first seven collections, *Selected Stories* (1997). My favorites (1998–2012) spread over six volumes are:

[The Love of a Good Woman](#) (1998)

Love of a Good Woman
Cortes Island
Save the Reaper
The Children Stay
My Mother's Dream

[Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage](#) (2001)

Hateship, etc.
Family Furnishings
Comfort
Nettles
The Bear Came Over
the Mountain

[Runaway](#) (2004)

Runaway
Passion
Chance
Soon
Silence

[The View from Castle Rock](#) (2006)

The View from Castle Rock
The Hired Girl

[Too Much Happiness](#) (2009)

Dimensions
Fiction
Some Women
Child's Play
Wood

[Dear Life](#) (2012)

Leaving Maverley
Gravel
Corrie

all the things that happen in fantasy, the things that might have happened, the kind of alternate life that can almost seem to be accompanying what we call our real lives. I wanted to get all of that, sort of, working together.” Can we imagine what Georgia’s writing instructor would say about that? Suddenly *nothing* can be safely omitted! Alternate lives lived alongside of our “real life”? We might recall Jorge Luis

shameful. Laying your finger on the wire to get the safe shock, feeling a bit of what it’s like, then pulling back” (392). But there is nothing especially unusual about such use of the imagination to consider various possible lives, what *might* have happened. We do it in our lives, as a part of our real lives, and we do it when, in the act of reading, we vicariously enter the lives of fictional characters.

half the class and further complicate an already complex structure scheduled for discussion on that day. But sometimes it can lead to a perception of her body of work as an single, multifarious entity enriched by that repetition with the same sort of variation so essential to musical structure and the cohesiveness of novels. Resemblances between characters, relationships, plot situations, and themes abound. For example, Munro likes to return to the theme of marital infidelity—real and imagined—and its aftermath. Probably no writer, certainly no woman writer, has rung so many changes on this triangular relationship, considered so thoroughly its causes and effects in so many different permutations. The cumulative effect of this matches the male masterworks of the novel of adultery, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, and yet how different they are in almost every way.

Okay, here is your assignment: go, read all of her stories, some at least twice because you won’t really know where she is going until you both get there. Some will work for you better than others, but almost all will provoke some shock or tremor of recognition, some sense that they resemble nothing so much as novels in concentrated form. Or maybe just one impossibly long novel, some approximation of what D. H. Lawrence referred to as the great, bright book of life.

“I want to move away from what happened, to the possibility of this happening, or that happening, and a kind of idea that life is not just made up of facts, things that happened . . . but all the things that happen in fantasy, the things that might have happened, the kind of alternate life that can almost seem to be accompanying what we call our real lives.”

Borges’ plenary fiction “The Garden of the Forking Paths,” that never-ending story in which one path of life taken points toward and activates those not taken, and gets all those alternate lives “working together.”

In “Miles City, Montana,” a child drowns, and 20 years later the narrator’s daughter almost does, but the mother is “compelled to picture the opposite,” in all its copious and tragic detail: “There’s something trashy about this kind of imagining, isn’t there? Something

There is perhaps another way in which Munro thickens our reception of a particular story—after we have read a few—and that is by what her biographer Robert Thacker calls her practice of “revisiting” earlier stories (*Alice Munro*, 2011). When I have taught courses on Munro or spent three or four weeks on her *Selected Stories* in a survey course, I have asked the class to begin our discussion of a new story by calling attention to echoes or rhymes from earlier ones. This can go on for maybe



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