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Biography

Alice Munro was born Alice Ann Laidlaw, the eldest of three children of Robert Laidlaw and Anne Chamney, on July 10, 1931. The family lived in a nineteenth century brick farmhouse at the edge of Wingham, Ontario, the small town usually disguised in her fiction as Walley, Jubilee, or Hanratty. Munro’s father, a descendant of Scottish pioneers, raised silver foxes and, later, mink. For the first two grades, Munro attended the rough Lowertown School modeled in “Privilege” (1978), where she was the only child in her class to pass first grade. At her mother’s insistence, she was transferred to the Wingham public schools where, living in imagination and books, she felt even more isolated. She worked on an unfinished gothic novel during high school, influenced by Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights (1847).

After World War II the popular demand for furs lessened, and eventually the fox farm failed; times were so hard that the Laidlaws had to burn sawdust for heat. In 1947 Robert Laidlaw took a job as night watchman at the local iron foundry, raising turkeys as a sideline. Anne Laidlaw, an elementary teacher of Irish descent, had been forced to abandon her career because married women were not allowed to teach. In her mid-forties she developed a devastating form of Parkinson’s disease contracted from the encephalitis virus. Munro had to do all the housework from the time she was twelve and as a teenager worked as a maid for a Toronto family. Her feelings toward her mother were intensely ambivalent, and there were frequent clashes.

Winning a two-year scholarship enabled Munro to attend the University of Western Ontario, where in 1949 she entered the journalism program, switching to English in her second year. At her boardinghouse she received a full breakfast but had a meager food allowance of thirty-five cents for the rest of the day. She held two library jobs and sold her blood for extra income. In the spring of 1950, she published her first story, “The Dimensions of a Shadow,” in Folio, the campus literary magazine. By then she was engaged to James Munro, a fellow student. When her scholarship expired in 1951, she was forced to leave school, returning home to care for her temporarily bedridden mother. She and James were married at her parents’ home in Wingham just after Christmas.

Munro’s eldest daughter, Sheila, has noted that her parents’ marriage paralleled in many respects the mismatched backgrounds of Patrick and Rose in Munro’s story “The Beggar Maid” (1977). While Munro’s circumstances were modest, James’s father was a well-to-do accountant for the Toronto branch of Eaton’s department store. James took a managerial job at Eaton’s in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Munro struggled to find a time and place for her writing, torn between her own needs and society’s expectations of her as a wife and mother. In 1953 she sold her first commercial story, “A Basket of Strawberries,” to Mayfair, which unfortunately went out of business. That same year her daughter Sheila was born; Jenny and Andrea would follow in 1957 and 1966. Munro began to publish in other magazines, including Chatelaine and McCall’s, while her stories were featured on the Canadian radio series Anthology. She remained an omnivorous reader, especially of American writers Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor, and Eudora Welty. Working alone amid the clutter of daily life, she had little contact with other writers until much later. She battled not only the conformity of the 1950’s but also a general condescension toward women writers, visible in a 1961 newspaper article about her, headlined “Housewife Finds Time to Write Short Stories.”

Publishers warned Munro that they could not sell a short-story collection before she published a novel, considered a more prestigious literary form. Accordingly, she began a novel in 1959, the year her mother died, but her writing was soon blocked when she suffered an ulcer and panic attacks. Eventually she produced
several stories for the largely autobiographical *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), among them “A Trip to the Coast,” with its distinct overtones of Flannery O’Connor, and the remarkable “The Peace of Utrecht.” This first collection, dedicated to her father, would win Canada’s most prestigious prize, the Governor General’s Award.

In 1963 James Munro left Eaton’s to open a bookstore in Victoria, British Columbia. There Munro wrote in the mornings and worked at the bookstore. She submitted “Boys and Girls” to a University of Victoria creative writing class, where it was dismissed by the professor as something a typical housewife would write, a comment that effectively paralyzed her for a year. The move to a finer home in 1966 exacerbated difficulties in her marriage. As James became increasingly prosperous and conservative, she grew more rebellious.

*Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), Munro’s second book, was published as a novel, winning the Canadian Booksellers’ Award and firmly establishing her reputation as a Canadian writer of note. By 1972 her twenty-year marriage was disintegrating. The following summer, with her two younger daughters in tow, she taught a creative writing class at the University of Notre Dame in British Columbia and then returned to the University of Western Ontario to become writer-in-residence. With her next collection, *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You: Thirteen Stories* (1974), she broadened her subject matter, thereafter publishing a new book roughly every four years.

Munro married Gerald Fremlin, an urban geographer and former college friend, in 1976. That fall, after issuing twenty years of rejection slips, *The New Yorker* accepted several of her stories. The first, “Royal Beatings,” was published the following year and became the lead story for Munro’s fourth book, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978; published in the United States as *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*, 1979), which garnered another Governor General’s Award.

As the winner of the Canada-Australia Literary Prize (1978), Munro visited Australia and later traveled to China with a group of Canadian writers. *The Moons of Jupiter* appeared in 1982, followed by *The Progress of Love* (1986), for which she earned a third Governor’s General’s Award, and *Friend of My Youth* (1990), dedicated to her mother. *Open Secrets* (1994) received the W. H. Smith Award for the best book published in the United Kingdom in 1995. *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998) won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN/Malamud Award for short fiction as well as Canada’s esteemed Giller Prize of $25,000. *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) was followed by *Runaway* in 2004, which was awarded a second Giller Prize. Munro and her husband divide their time between Clinton, Ontario, and Comox, British Columbia.

**Biography**

One of the most impressive things about Munro’s fiction is that she is able to write about ordinary people and their problems with “an art that works to conceal itself.” Breaking nearly every rule of the traditional short story, she has transformed the genre. Her talent is widely respected, and her contemporaries praise her. Cynthia Ozick has compared her to a classic Russian author (“She is our Chekhov”), while Mona Simpson and Jonathan Franzen, among others, have suggested that Munro is worthy of a Nobel Prize. Munro has broken ground for subsequent generations of women writers by increasing an awareness of the whole of female experience, with clear vision, insight, and compassion.
married geographer Gerald Fremlin; they established homes in Clinton, Ontario, and Comox, British Columbia.

**Biography**

Alice Munro grew up in a small rural community in western Ontario. Her father spent most of his life raising fox for the commercial fur market, which resulted in a life of poverty or abundance, depending on the changing conditions of the foxes and the market. Her childhood was filled with struggling to belong to her peer group and always excelling at academics. Her intelligence won her scholarships to high school and college, and poverty made her drop out of college after her second year. Fear of poverty enticed her to marry Jim Munro when she was twenty.

Munro spent her entire childhood believing that she could and would write a great novel. She began writing poetry at age twelve and always kept her work hidden from her mother and family. After her marriage, she continued to write in secret, believing the cultural dictates of the times that women were either wives and mothers or artists, not both. Munro’s work often deals, not surprisingly therefore, with the mother-child roles. Her parental characters are often composites of her own parents, grandparents, and other family members. Her descriptions of the town and countryside almost exactly recall the community of her youth.

Munro was able to publish several works a year while her children were growing up, and she became steadily more prolific. She uses the language of women talking about their lives. Munro’s work is truly a matrilineal narrative in a literary world dominated by men’s voice and realities.

**Biography**

Born in Wingham, Ontario, on July 10, 1931, Alice Munro published her first story in 1950 while attending Western Ontario University, where she majored in English. Her first collection of short stories, however, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, was not published for another eighteen years. Munro comments that Wingham and its surroundings play an important part in her stories, both in their literal and emotional landscapes. She says in her Introduction to *Selected Stories* (1996) that “the ways lives were lived [in Wingham], their values, were very 19th century and things hadn’t changed for a long time. So there was a kind of stability...that a writer could grasp pretty easily.” Marrying in 1951 soon after she left the university, Munro and her husband left Ontario for Victoria where, in 1963, they started their own publishing company, Munro Books. When their marriage ended, she returned to Ontario and remarried in 1976. Munro says she writes every day “unless it’s impossible,” trying to get two to three hours of writing in “before real life hauls” her away. Although some critics have compared her psychological realism to that of Anton Chekhov’s, a comment she considers “a humbling experience,” Munro identifies Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor as some of the writers who have most influenced her. In addition to one novel, Munro has published seven collections of short stories, her most recent, *Runaway*, in 2007. She says that it was always her intention to be a novelist, but as a mother with three children, she never had enough time.

**Biography**

Alice Munro was born in 1931 in the small Canadian farming town of Wingham, in southwestern Ontario. She spent her entire childhood in Wingham, until she received a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario. While at the university, she met James Munro, and left school before graduating in order to marry him. The Munros raised three daughters and for several years ran a bookshop in Victoria; they eventually divorced. In 1972, Munro returned to Ontario and obtained jobs at universities to support herself while she was writing. During this time, she met Gerald Fremlin, a geographer. They decided to move back to the rural
area where they had both grown up and take care of their respective parents. They imagined staying in the area for a year or two; at present, the couple still resides in the rural community.

Munro never intended to be a short story writer. Rather, she began writing short stories because she never had time to write anything longer. She got used to the format and has never looked back. She has said that she doesn't understand where the excitement is supposed to come in a novel, and I do in a story. There's a kind of tension that if I'm getting a story right I can feel right away, and I don't feel that when I try to write a novel. I kind of want a moment that's explosive, and I want everything gathered into that.

She has different methods for accessing her imagination for story writing. One method is that she gets the beginning of a story from a memory, an anecdote. However, that anecdote gets lost and is usually unrecognizable in the final story. She gives an example: "Suppose you have—in memory—a young woman stepping off a train in an outfit so elegant her family is compelled to take her down a peg, and it somehow becomes a wife who's been recovering from a mental breakdown, met by her husband and his mother and the mother's nurse whom the husband doesn't yet know he's in love with. How did that happen? I don't know."

Munro follows a traditional method for composing her work. She does one or two drafts long hand before she approaches a computer. A story might be done in two months, beginning to end, and ready to go, but it is more often "six to eight months, many changes, some false directions, much fiddling and some despair" before a story is ready for publication. She writes everyday unless it's impossible, and she begins writing when she wakes up, writing for about two or three hours.

When Munro was young, her literary heroes were Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, and James Agee. As time has passed, she has come to greatly admire John Updike, John Cheever, Joyce Carol Oates, Peter Taylor, and, especially, William Maxwell. William Trevor, Edna O'Brien, and Richard Ford also rank high on her list of influences.

Before writing the Short Stories, the collection of stories in which "Walker Brothers Cowboy" first appeared, Munro published quite a few short story collections: Dance of the Happy Hours (1973), Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (1974), The Beggar Maid (1979), The Moons of Jupiter (1983), The Progress of Love (1986), Friend of My Youth (1990), and Open Secrets (1994). Munro is a three-time winner of the Governor General's Literary Award, Canada's highest award given in the literary arena; the Lannan Literary Award; and the W. H. Smith Award, given to Open Secrets as the best book published in the United Kingdom in 1995. Her stories have appeared in The New Yorker, the Atlantic Monthly, The Paris Review, and other publications. Her collections have been translated into thirteen languages.

Biography

Alice Munro was born in Ontario in 1931. She grew up on the outskirts of the town of Wingham, in a setting much like Tuppertown, as described by the narrator in "Walker Brothers Cowboy." As a teenager, Munro began secretly writing stories during her lunch hour because writing was considered a strange activity for a girl. Munro felt a sense of alienation when she began to write, and was self-conscious about her early stories—which she later described as intensely romantic.

In 1949, Munro left home to attend the University of Western Ontario on scholarship. In 1950, her first published story, "The Dimensions of Shadow," appeared in the university’s student publication. Upon her marriage in 1952, Munro ended her formal education. She and her husband moved to Vancouver and, two years later, to Victoria to open a bookstore. It was around this time that Munro began to write from her own
experience, exploring characters and situations found in her native region of southern Ontario.

While raising her children, Munro continued to write and sold a few of her stories to be aired by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Over the next twelve years, she wrote the stories that appeared in her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. This volume, published in 1968, won the Governor General’s Award—Canada’s highest literary award—the following year. The stories in this collection are autobiographical in origin. Like Ben Jordan, Munro’s father—to whom the collection was dedicated—had a fox farm in the 1930s, and Munro grew up very poor.

In the early 1970s, Munro and her husband separated, and she moved to London, Ontario, with her daughters. By then a respected author, she was given a position as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario. Over the next few years, she published several more short story collections.

In 1976, Munro remarried and moved to Clinton, Ontario, just a few miles from the town where she grew up. She continued to publish award-winning fiction that drew critical praise, both in Canada and abroad, and traveled extensively to lecture on fiction and the writing process.

**Biography**

Alice Munro was born Alice Laidlaw in 1931, in Wingham, Ontario, Canada. She grew up near the Great Lakes that border the United States and Canada, in rural environs such as are featured in much of her early fiction. She attended public schools and was considered such a good student that she advanced a grade early on. She began writing fiction while in high school, and even wrote a novel during this time which she has said was derivative of Emily Bronte’s famous *Wuthering Heights*. She won a scholarship to attend the University of Western Ontario and spent two years there as an English major. It was there that she first published short stories, in a university publication. She left the university upon her marriage to James Munro, when the couple moved to British Columbia.

During the 1950s, Munro continued to write while raising her first two daughters. She sold some of her stories to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for dramatization and radio shows. Munro had a third daughter in 1966, and then in 1968 her first collection of short stories, *The Dance of the Happy Shades*, was published. “Boys and Girls” is from this first collection of stories. Munro’s only novel was published in 1971. In 1974 a second collection of stories was published. With this third publication Munro established herself as a contemporary writer of note.

Munro has seven published books to her credit, six of which are collections of short stories, making her a specialist in the short story genre. Most national literatures have writers who specialize in this way, another notable author being Anton Chekhov an early twentieth-century Russian writer famous for his short stories. It has often been said, therefore, that Munro is Canada’s Chekhov.

Munro’s fiction is consistently favorably received by critics and the reading public alike, and she has won numerous awards for her writing. She has been invited to be Writer-in-Residence at various universities, including her alma mater, the University of Western Ontario (which conferred her an Honorary D.Litt. in 1976).

**Biography**

Munro was born on July 10, 1931, in the small town of Wingham, Ontario, in Canada. Her father owned a silver-fox farm on the outskirts of the town. The author began writing stories as a teenager during her lunch hours at school because it was too far to walk home, as other students did. Since writing was not looked upon
favorably in the small town, Munro never showed her writing to anybody, but she has described these early works as passionate stories, full of horror, romance, and adventure. Munro did well in school, and in 1949 she earned a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario.

In 1951, Munro married James Munro, and the couple moved to the city of Vancouver, British Columbia, on Canada’s west coast, where the author concentrated on raising a family, including Sheila (born in 1953) and Jenny (born in 1957). Munro also secretly began to write stories again, drawing on her experience in rural Ontario for many of them. In 1963, the couple moved to Victoria, British Columbia, where they opened a bookstore together and, in 1966, had another daughter, Andrea. Two years later, in 1968, Munro published her first story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which won her immediate critical and popular attention—as well as the Governor General’s Award for fiction in 1969. In 1971, Munro published *Lives of Girls and Women*, an interconnected collection of stories. Munro’s relationship with her husband deteriorated, and, when they separated in 1972, she moved back to London, Ontario, with her two younger daughters. During the 1974–1975 academic year, Munro served as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario. In 1974, Munro also published *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*, her third collection of short stories. In 1976, Munro’s divorce from James Munro became official. The same year, she married Gerald Fremlin, a geographer, and the couple moved to Clinton, Ontario, about twenty miles from the author’s childhood home of Wingham.

Munro has been consistent in her writing career, publishing a story collection every three or four years. In 1978, she published *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which was also published as *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* (1979). From 1979 to 1982, Munro traveled throughout Australia, China, and Scandinavia, but this did not interrupt her publishing pattern. In 1982, she published the collection *The Moons of Jupiter*, which was followed by *The Progress of Love* (1986). The same year, Munro was awarded the first Marian Engel Award, which is given to a woman writer for an outstanding body of work. In 1990, Munro published her seventh book, *Friend of My Youth*, which included the story “Meneteung.”

Unlike many authors who write both novels and short stories, Munro continues to focus solely on short fiction. Munro has also published the following collections: *Open Secrets: Stories* (1994), *The Love of a Good Woman: Stories* (1998), and *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage: Stories* (2001).
Munro is one of very few modern writers who have built a reputation solely through the writing of stories, a form that has generally been regarded as of lesser consequence than the novel. Even though the publishers of her second book, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), called it a novel, Munro rejected a chronological approach and clustered its chapters around themes, as in a book of linked stories. When her American publisher pressured her to rewrite her fourth book, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), as a novel to improve sales, she turned it into a story sequence, unified by the character of Rose. By the 1980’s, what author Joyce Carol Oates calls Munro’s “stories that have the density . . . of other writers’ novels” cannot accurately be referred to as “short” stories; their length suggests a greater complexity.

Munro’s subject is the intricate detail of human experience, viewed almost always from a female perspective and with special attention to the mother-daughter relationship. She traces the lives of women whom the 2004 Giller Prize jury called “locally Canadian, remarkably ordinary, and at the same time startlingly universal.” The lives she observes may be stunted or blossoming; her central character may become an actress or waitress. While the earlier work explores the coming of age of a young, lower-middle-class girl who learns hard lessons on her way to maturity, in time these initiation stories begin to address social and political issues like patriarchy or abortion rights. Munro never passes judgment on her characters; they have made their choices, too frequently the wrong ones.

Her style is realistic and without sentimentality, often evoking a strong sense of her native region and its history. (Her settings have expanded over time to include British Columbia, Scotland, Ireland, central Europe, and even Australia.) A prime example is her well-known story “Meneseteung” (1988), titled with the Native American name for the river commonly known as the Maitland (or Peregrine), which flowed near the border of her parents’ farm. This story offers a detailed, unembellished view of life on the Ontario frontier, providing an ironic contrast to the delicate verse written by a nineteenth century Canadian poetess.

Munro has remarked that all her writing is essentially autobiographical. Several of the early stories appear to be reminiscences, yet there is always artifice at work. Like Rose’s father in the powerful “Royal Beatings” (1977), Munro’s father occasionally beat her, and his death after heart surgery inspired another story, “The Moons of Jupiter” (1978); yet the details in these stories go far beyond her personal experience. Her striking ambivalence toward her mother—embarrassment, shame, and later, guilt—surfaces whenever a teenage daughter struggles with a mother who is disfigured, ill, or dying from a degenerative disease. Anne Laidlaw’s death in 1959 triggered “The Peace of Utrecht” (1960), and her uncontrollable trembling appears in “The Ottawa Valley” (1974), where Munro writes: “The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get . . . to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid, of her . . . for she looms too close, just as she always did.”

Munro’s early penchant for gothic novels sometimes allows her to edge toward the bizarre. In one of her most gothic stories, she manages to create a sense of vulnerability and menace from an experience she shared with Gerald Fremlin. In a rural area stood a wall she remembered, set with colored glass mosaics. There the couple, urged to enter the nearby farmhouse, encountered four drunken men, one naked, playing cards in a windowless room. She included this event, partially transformed, in “Save the Reaper” (1998).

Typically, Munro withholds information from a story, believing that the less one reveals, the better, and many of her characters follow this custom of silence or omission. She prefers that her reader fill in the gaps and often inserts a key word or phrase that will take on new significance with a second reading. Particularly
noteworthy is the way she handles the fluidity of time, employing time shifts—skipping, reversing, doubling around to take a second look. She explains, “I don’t take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere . . . I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while.”

Ambiguity, the shifting perception of truth, is another favorite device. In most cases, there are multiple and conflicting truths, which Munro may reveal through a characteristic double vision of past and present, perhaps by means of someone returning home who sees old haunts, old loves, through different eyes. She may offer the conflicting perceptions of two characters, as she does with Rose and Flo in *Who Do You Think You Are?* Such treatment frequently results in an ironic discrepancy between appearance and reality.

“How I Met My Husband”


Type of work: Short story

A hired girl has her first encounter with romance and determines what kind of woman she will be.

A typical early story, “How I Met My Husband” introduces a young girl’s initiation into adulthood, as narrated by her mature self, and exemplifies the double vision frequently found in Munro’s work.

When Edie, a naïve farm girl and high-school dropout, is hired as a maid by the new veterinarian, Dr. Peebles, she is awed by his home’s modern conveniences: pink bathroom fixtures, an automatic washer, ice cubes. Edie is keenly aware of society’s lofty attitude toward hired help and country people, yet she unconsciously exhibits the same prejudice toward shiftless Loretta Bird, an unwelcome neighbor.

The Peebles family lives across the road from the old fairgrounds where one day a small plane lands, sparking all sorts of conjecture. That afternoon the barnstorming pilot Chris Watters, who offers plane rides for a dollar, seeks permission to use the Peebles’s pump and instead finds Edie trying on Mrs. Peebles’s long dress and jewelry while the family is gone. Edie is immediately smitten.

When Alice, the pilot’s fiancé and a former army nurse, arrives unexpectedly, Dr. Peebles follows local custom by inviting her to stay with them. Tension escalates as Alice tries to convince Chris to marry her, but he is clearly reluctant and soon disappears. Viciously turning on Edie, Alice flounces after him. As Edie waits for Chris’s promised letter at the mailbox, she meets a young mail carrier who will soon become her husband. Unlike Alice, Edie decides, “If there were women all through life waiting, and women busy and not waiting, I knew which I had to be.”

“Royal Beatings”


Type of work: Short story

A conflict intensifies the already ambivalent relationships between Rose, her stepmother Flo, and her father.

“Royal Beatings,” one of Munro’s best-known stories, reveals the bonds of love and hate, brutalities great and small, within a family. Nothing is simple in this story, which features a surprisingly intricate plot as well as convoluted time and tense shifts. It begins late in the Depression years in the poorest section of Hanratty, where Rose lives with her father and stepmother, Flo, behind their grocery and furniture repair store. One day
Flo relates an account of a previous thrashing, when three young men attacked the father of the grotesque dwarf Becky Tyde, who sometimes visits the store. The child Rose cannot fit Flo’s story together with her present life, for they seem unrelated.

Flo’s tale foreshadows a second beating, this time suffered by the preteen Rose—a brutal ritual which builds, erupts, and then collapses. When Rose talks back to her stepmother once too often, Flo goads Rose’s father into punishing her. The narrative shifts into present tense to render a horrific account of the first “royal beating” that cheeky Rose endures, then switches to future tense to describe the ritual that will follow: a repentant Flo coming to her room to bring a salve for her back, a tray of food, chocolate milk. Years later, the adult Rose sees a television interview with an elderly man from Hanratty, someone from Flo’s story, and is finally able to connect the strands of the past to the present.

“Prue”


Type of work: Short story

This character study of a stunted life examines a middle-aged woman who reacts to a failed relationship.

Only five pages long, “Prue” is a brief history of a pleasant, good-humored woman, once a dining room hostess in British Columbia and presently a Toronto clerk. Divorced and with grown children when she met Gordon, a wealthy neurologist, she lived with him off and on before he and his wife finally divorced. One evening Gordon admits he has acquired a jealous young lover with whom he is infatuated, but he wants to return to Prue in a few years and marry her. Prue treats this development as a good joke with which to regale her friends.

What she does not tell them is that the next morning she steals one of Gordon’s gold and amber cufflinks, which she stores secretly with other mementos in a tobacco tin which her children once gave her. Such souvenirs, which are neither expensive nor worthless, she simply takes, perhaps as something tangible to hold for herself. Prue reveals herself as a woman familiar with disillusion and empty relationships, which she deflects by anecdotes and humor even as she appears to move on. The unspoken truth of her emotions is withheld, concealed like the objects she keeps in the tin.

“Circle of Prayer”


Type of work: Short story

A single mother struggles with her teenage daughter and the memory of the husband, of which she is still learning to let go.

In “Circle of Prayer,” Munro has raised time shifts to the next level, with a story so completely out of chronological order that it demands a close reading. Trudy, a single mother, works from four to midnight at the Home for Mentally Handicapped Adults. When she hears that her fifteen-year-old daughter’s classmate, Tracy Lee, has been killed in an automobile crash, Trudy fears for her daughter Robin, who feigns indifference to the death.

Trudy drinks her morning coffee and thinks of her husband Dan—their first meeting, their courtship and life together. She remembers their arguments when he left her to live with a younger woman, Genevieve.
summer Robin returned after a month with her father, upset because he seemed happier with Genevieve than at their home.

Rebellious Robin comes home at noon to change clothes so that she can join her classmates for an afternoon visitation at the funeral home. When the girls drop their jewelry into Tracy Lee’s open coffin as a symbolic gesture, Robin adds her dead grandmother’s jet beads. Trudy confronts her for taking the beads without permission and insists on an explanation, but the real issue for both is Dan, not the necklace: their grief, not their anger. Janet. Trudy ’s fellow worker, advises her to pray for the return of the jet beads. Janet belongs to a secret Circle of Prayer and believes that, when everyone in the circle prays together, prayer will be answered. Trudy responds sarcastically that perhaps God will return Dan, the beads, even Tracy Lee.

Trudy recalls her honeymoon, when she watched Dan’s mother playing the piano and perceived the older woman’s sadness through her own joy. When Dan left her, she was aware of her love for him as well as her own unhappiness, a confused jumble of emotions. Suddenly Robin telephones, implying a reconciliation, and unlike most of Munro’s stories, the mother-daughter relationship begins to heal.

“Wigtime”

First published: 1989 (collected in *Friend of My Youth*, 1990)

Type of work: Short story

Two high-school friends reunite as mature women, regretting little.

The longer, looser structure of “Wigtime” suggests the mounting complexity of Munro’s work. When Anita, now divorced, comes home to Walley to care for her dying mother, she reconnects with her friend Margot, whom she has not seen in thirty years. Both were once farm girls near Lake Huron, coming of age in the late 1940’s, and they recall high school life, wedding fantasies, and the cups of steaming coffee as they waited at Teresa Gault’s grocery for her husband Reuel, the school bus driver. Teresa, a French war bride, spoke to them bluntly, sometimes alarming Anita, who was uncomfortable yet fascinated by details of sex and miscarriage.

The two friends have not confessed the painful truths of their lives before. Margot used to make her life with an abusive father sound like a slapstick comedy, but while Anita was hospitalized with appendicitis, Margot began a relationship with Reuel and eventually married him, abandoning her dream of becoming a nurse. When she was warned that Reuel was unfaithful to her, as he had once been to Teresa, she disguised herself as a hippie to spy on him with their young baby-sitter. From her discovery of this affair, she has negotiated a new house and the comfortable life she presently enjoys. Both Anita and Margot have survived, as has Teresa in her own way, housed in the county home’s psychiatric wing. All have settled for their present lives, and Munro points out with characteristic restraint, “They are fairly happy.”

“A Real Life”


Type of work: Short story

Three friends with differing attitudes toward marriage find that they must modify their expectations.

Munro creates sly pockets of humor in “A Real Life” as she introduces Dorrie Beck, the descendant of a pioneer Ontario family who is currently in reduced circumstances. In spite of a brief social education at
Whitby Ladies College, where she developed beautiful handwriting, Dorrie has evolved into a strong, competent countrywoman. She does a man’s work, can trap and shoot with the best, and is oblivious to the social graces.

Her friend Millicent has settled into a prosaic marriage with a man nearly twenty years older than she, who owns three farms, including the Beck family farm, where Dorrie still lives alone. When Millicent gives an evening supper for the Anglican minister and his visitor Mr. Speirs, she invites Dorrie and Muriel Snow, a single, thirtish music teacher who is desperately seeking a husband. Even though Muriel instantly sets her cap for Mr. Speirs, he is more impressed by Dorrie, who arrives late because she has to shoot a feral cat that may be rabid. Speirs corresponds with Dorrie from his home in Australia, and they decide to marry, after which she will live there with him.

The two friends sew Dorrie’s wedding dress while she stands about miserably in her woolen underwear. While Dorrie has second thoughts about the wedding, Millicent convinces her that she cannot bow out because only marriage can give her “a real life.”

Self-reliant Dorrie reluctantly submits to the prison of marriage because it is expected of her, but fortunately it offers her even more freedom. She continues an active outdoor life in Australia, growing fat and rich. Ironically, the flirtatious Muriel willingly marries a widowed minister and loses all of her former independence, while Millicent ends her days alone.

“Save the Reaper”


Type of work: Short story

A grandmother comes face to face with evil near her childhood retreat and is forced to reexamine her life.

“Save the Reaper” is one of the most disturbing stories Munro has written. Eve, an actress, is driving in a rural area with her two young grandchildren. In the car, her grandson Philip imagines alien space invaders in other cars, which they then follow. The game is Eve’s; she used to play it with her daughter Sophie. Eve has generally fond memories of her daughter and blames their past estrangement on Sophie’s husband and mother-in-law. However, her idyllic vacation with Sophie and the grandchildren on the shores of Lake Huron is cut short when her daughter secretly phones her husband, asking him to rescue her. Forced to recognize her real relationship with her child, Eve must constantly reassess what she believes to be true.

As Eve tries to recall places of interest to charm her grandson, her faulty memory of a wall decorated with glass mosaics finds her turning off the road onto private property to ask directions from the driver of a pickup truck which is blocking her way. He leads her into a dilapidated farmhouse where four sinister people sit in a littered, windowless room, drinking and playing poker. One man is naked. Eve suddenly realizes that the situation is out of control; she has put the children in real danger, as well as herself, in what is apparently a drug house. Still, she agrees to give a young woman hitchhiker a ride to town, has even given the girl directions to her cabin, where after this night Eve will be alone. She is terrified, with an impending sense of disaster.

Critical Essays: Alice Munro Short Fiction Analysis

Alice Munro has been compared to Ernest Hemingway in the realism, economy, and lucidity of her style, to John Updike in her insights into the intricacies of social and sexual relationships, to Flannery O’Connor and
Eudora Welty in her ability to create characters of eccentric individualism, and to Marcel Proust in the completeness and verisimilitude with which she evokes the past. She is an intuitive writer, who is less likely to be concerned with problems of form than with clarity and veracity. Some critics have faulted her for a tendency toward disorganization or diffusion—too many shifts in time and place within a single story, for example. On her strengths as a writer, however, critics generally agree: She has an unfailing particularity and naturalness of style, an ability to write vividly about ordinary life and its boredom without boring her readers, an ability to write about the past without being sentimental, a profound grasp of human emotion and psychology. Chief among her virtues is her great honesty: her refusal to oversimplify or falsify human beings, emotions, or experience. One of her characters states, “How to keep oneself from lying I see as the main problem everywhere.” Her awareness of this problem is everywhere evident in her writing, certainly in the distinctive voices of her narrator-protagonists, who are scrupulously concerned with truth. Finally, her themes—memory, love, transience, death—are significant. To explore such themes within the limitations of the short-story form with subtlety and depth is Munro’s achievement.

“Dance of the Happy Shades”

One of Alice Munro’s recurring themes is “the pain of human contact the fascinating pain; the humiliating necessity.” The phrase occurs in “The Stone in the Field” and refers to the narrator’s maiden aunts, who cringe from all human contact, but the emotional pain that human contact inevitably brings is a subject in all of her stories. It is evident in the title story of her first collection, “Dance of the Happy Shades,” in which an elderly, impoverished piano teacher, Miss Marsalles, has a “party” (her word for recital) for a dwindling number of her students and their mothers, an entertainment she can ill afford. The elaborate but nearly inedible refreshments, the ludicrous gifts, and the tedium of the recital pieces emphasize the incongruity between Miss Marsalles’s serene pleasure in the festivities and the grim suffering of her unwilling but outwardly polite guests. Their anxieties are intensified by the mid-party arrival of Miss Marsalles’s newest pupils, a group of mentally disabled children from a nearby institution. The other pupils and their mothers struggle to maintain well-bred composure, but inwardly they are repelled, particularly when one of the mentally disabled girls gives the only accomplished performance of a sprightly piece called “The Dance of the Happy Shades.” The snobbish mothers believe that the idea of a mentally disabled girl learning to play the piano is not in good taste; it is “useless, out-of-place,” in fact very much like Miss Marsalles herself. Clearly, this dismal affair will be Miss Marsalles’s last party, yet the narrator is unable at the end to pity her, to say, “Poor Miss Marsalles.” “It is the Dance of the Happy Shades that prevents us, it is the one communiqué from the other country where she lives.” The unfortunate Miss Marsalles is happy; she has escaped the pain she would feel if she could know how others regard her, or care. She is living in another country, out of touch with reality; she has escaped into “the freedom of a great unemotional happiness.”

“The Peace of Utrecht”

Few of Munro’s characters are so fortunate. In “The Peace of Utrecht,” for example, the inescapable emotional pain of human contact is the central problem. Helen, the narrator, makes a trip with her two children to Jubilee, the small town where she grew up, ostensibly to visit her sister Maddy, now living alone in their childhood home. The recent death of their mother is on their minds, but they cannot speak of it. Maddy, who stayed at home to look after their “Gothic Mother,” has forbidden all such talk: “No exorcising here,” she says. Yet exorcism is what Helen desperately needs as she struggles with the torment that she feels about her sister’s “sacrifice,” her mother’s life, and her own previous self, which this return home so vividly and strangely evokes. Mother was a town “character,” a misfit or oddity, even before the onset of her debilitating and disfiguring illness (she seems to have died of Parkinson’s disease). For Helen, she was a constant source of anxiety and shame, a threat to Helen’s own precarious adolescent identity. (Readers who know Munro’s novel Lives of Girls and Women will find a strong resemblance of Helen’s mother to Del Jordan’s bizarre mother. She also appears as recognizably the same character in the stories “The Ottawa Valley,” “Connection,” “The Stone in the Field,” and perhaps “The Progress of Love.”) Recalling the love and
pity denied this ill but incorrigible woman, Helen experiences raging guilt, shame, and anger that she and her sister were forced into “parodies of love.” Egocentric, petulant, this mother demanded our love in every way she knew, without shame or sense, as a child will. And how could we have loved her, I say desperately to myself, the resources of love we had were not enough, the demand on us was too great.

Finally, Helen and her sister withdrew even the pretense of love, withdrew all emotion: We took away from her our anger and impatience and disgust, took all emotion away from our dealings with her, as you might take away meat from a prisoner to weaken him, till he died.

Still, the stubborn old woman survived and might have lived longer except that Maddy, left alone with her mother and wanting her own life, put her in the hospital. After she tried to run away, restraint became necessary; she did not survive long after that.

Some critics believe that Munro’s strongest works are those which draw on her own small-town origins in western Ontario, stories of Jubilee, Tuppertown, Hanratty, Dalgleish. Munro has confessed in an interview that “The Peace of Utrecht” is her most autobiographical story and thus was difficult to write. Perhaps its emotional power derives in part from its closeness to her own experience, but it exhibits those qualities for which her writing has been praised: the effortless clarity of style, the psychological penetration of character, the evocation of time and place, the unfailing eye and ear which convey an impression of absolute authenticity—these are the hallmarks of Munro’s finest fiction, and they are evident even in her earliest stories. For example, in “The Peace of Utrecht,” Helen’s visit to two memorable residents of Jubilee, her mother’s sisters, Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou, demonstrates a deftness of characterization and a sureness of touch which are remarkable but typical of this writer at her best. Helen finds them spending the afternoon making rugs out of dyed rags. They are very old now. They sit in a hot little porch that is shaded by bamboo blinds; the rags and the half-finished rugs make an encouraging, domestic sort of disorder around them. They do not go out any more, but they get up early in the morning, wash and powder themselves, and put on their shapeless print dresses trimmed with rickrack and white braid.

Later, after tea, Aunt Annie tries to press on Helen a box of her mother’s clothing (painstakingly cleaned and mended), seemingly oblivious to Helen’s alarm and pain at the sight of these all-too-tangible reminders of her mother. To Aunt Annie, things are to be used up; clothes are to be worn. Yet she is not insensitive, nor is she a fool. Revealing to Helen (who did not know) the shameful facts about her mother’s hospitalization against her will, her pitiful, frantic attempt to escape one snowy January night, the board that was subsequently nailed across the bed to immobilize her, and Maddy’s indifference to it all, Aunt Annie begins “crying distractedly as old people do, with miserable scanty tears.” Despite the tears, however, Aunt Annie is (as Helen is not), emotionally tough, “an old hand at grief and self-control.” Just how tough she is is conveyed by Aunt Annie’s final, quietly understated words: “‘We thought it was hard,’ she said finally. ‘Lou and I thought it was hard.’”

Helen and Maddy, with less emotional resilience, try to come to terms with their own complex anguish through evasion, rationalization, and finally, admonishment—“don’t be guilty”—but Munro is too honest to imply that they can be successful. In the final lines of the story, Helen urges her sister to forget the past, to take hold of her own life at last. Maddy’s affirmation, “Yes I will,” soon slips into an agonized question: “But why can’t I, Helen? Why can’t I?” In the “dim world of continuing disaster, of home,” there is no peace of Utrecht, not for Munro’s characters, perhaps not for Munro.

The preoccupation in Munro’s fiction with family, usually as a “continuing disaster,” is striking. Assorted eccentric aunts, uncles, and cousins appear and reappear; a somewhat miscreant brother appears in “Forgiveness in Families” and “Boys and Girls.” Sometimes the family portraits are warmly sympathetic, as in the case of the grandmother in “Winter Wind” or especially the gentle father who calmly prepared for his death in “The Moons of Jupiter.” Even the neurotic mother and father in “The Progress of Love” are treated sympathetically. There, the mother’s fanatical hatred of her own father leads her to burn the desperately
needed money she inherits from him at his death. Clearly, for Munro, family origins matter, sometimes as the source of humor and delightful revelation but more dependably as the source of endless mystery and pain. This is particularly true of “the problem, the only problem,” as stated in “The Ottawa Valley”: mother. At the story’s conclusion, the narrator confesses that she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid, of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same.

Some relationships, some kinds of “fascinating pain,” can be recorded or analyzed but not exorcized. Clearly, these may become the inspiration for significant literature. In Munro’s fiction, the view of the emotional entanglements called “family” is unflinchingly honest, unsentimental, but always humane, at times even humorous.

“Bardon Bus”

Another important dimension of Munro’s short stories is sexual relationships, particularly in the “feelings that women have about men,” as she stated in an interview. In “Bardon Bus,” the narrator, a woman writer spending time in Australia, meets an anthropologist (known as “X”) and begins a deliberately limited affair, asking only that it last out their short time in Australia. Later, when both have returned to Canada, she is miserable, tortured by memory and need: “I can’t continue to move my body along the streets unless I exist in his mind and in his eyes.” Finally, she realizes her obsession is a threat to her sanity and that she has a choice of whether to be crazy or not. She decides she does not have the stamina or the will for “prolonged craziness,” and further that there is a limit to the amount of misery and disarray you will put up with, for love, just as there is a limit to the amount of mess you can stand around a house. You can’t know the limit beforehand, but you will know when you’ve reached it. I believe this.

She begins to let go of the relationship and finds “a queer kind of pleasure” in doing this, not a “self-wounding or malicious pleasure,” but pleasure in taking into account, all over again, everything that is contradictory and persistent and unaccommodating about life. I think there’s something in us wanting to be reassured about all that, right alongside—and at war with—whatever there is that wants permanent vistas and a lot of fine talk.

This seeming resolution, however, this salvation by knowing and understanding all, is subtly undercut by the conclusion of the story. The narrator’s much younger friend, Kay, happens to mention her involvement with a fascinating new “friend,” who turns out to be X. The story ends there but the pain (presumably) does not.

“Tell Me Yes or No”

The female protagonist of “Tell Me Yes or No” is also sifting through the emotional rubble of an adulterous affair, which has ended, perhaps because of the death of her lover, or perhaps it has merely ended. In this story, it is difficult to distinguish reality from fantasy, and that may be the point. The other lives and other loves of her lover may be real, or they may be a fantasy (as defense mechanism) of the protagonist, but the central insight is the realization of how women build their castles on foundations hardly strong enough to support a night’s shelter; how women deceive themselves and uselessly suffer, being exploitable because of the emptiness of their lives and some deep—but indefinable, and not final!—flaw in themselves.

For this woman, none of the remedies of her contemporaries works, not deep breathing, not macramé, and certainly not the esoteric advice of another desperate case: to live “every moment by itself,” a concept she finds impossible to comprehend, let alone practice. The irony of her difficulty is evident, considering Munro’s passionate concern throughout her fiction for “Connection” (the title of one of her stories). Here, it seems that
there is some connection between past choice and present desolation: Love is not in the least unavoidable, there is a choice made. It is just that it is hard to know when the choice was made, or when, in spite of seeming frivolous, it became irreversible. There is no clear warning about that.

“Labor Day Dinner”

Munro’s clear-eyed, self-aware narrators are never easy on themselves. They are constantly requiring themselves to face reality, to be aware of and responsible for the consequences of their own choices. In “Labor Day Dinner,” the narrator, forty-three-year-old Roberta, has for the past year been living on a run-down farm with George, a younger man and former art teacher. His ambitious plan is to restore the farm and create a studio in which to do his sculpture. Roberta’s daughters Angela, seventeen, and Eva, twelve, are spending the summer with her. The atmosphere is emotionally charged, prickly, and tense. George does not approve of the way Roberta indulges her daughters, allowing them to practice ballet instead of doing any work. George does not approve of Roberta, who seems to be indulging herself with tears and moody idleness. On the other hand, Roberta (weeping silently behind her sunglasses) does not approve of George’s cooling ardor, his ungallant awareness of her age as evidenced by his request that she not wear a halter top to his cousin’s Labor Day dinner because she has flabby armpits. So far, this sounds like the unpromising stuff of the afternoon soaps. (In fact, some of Munro’s short stories first were published in popular magazines.) The difference is in what Munro is able to do with her material, the way in which she prevents her characters from deteriorating into stereotypes or her theme into cliché.

Roberta (who has reduced her waist only to discover that her face now looks haggard) reflects mournfully: How can you exercise the armpits? What is to be done? Now the payment is due, and what for? For vanity. Just for having those pleasing surfaces once, and letting them speak for you; just for allowing an arrangement of hair and shoulders and breasts to have its effect. You don’t stop in time, don’t know what to do instead; you lay yourself open to humiliation. So thinks Roberta, with self-pity—what she knows to be self-pity—rising and sloshing around in her like bitter bile. She must get away, live alone, wear sleeves.

The self-awareness, the complex mingling of humor and pathos, the comic inadequacy of the solution, to wear sleeves (rivaling Prufrock’s momentous decision to wear his trousers rolled), these lend to the character and to the story a dimension which is generally missing in popular fiction.

Roberta’s daughters are close observers of as well as participants in this somewhat lugubrious drama. Angela, watching the change in her mother from self-reliant woman to near wreck and viewing George as a despot who hopes to enslave them all, records in her journal, “If this is love I want no part of it.” On the other hand, sensitive Eva, watching her older sister develop the unpleasant traits of a typical adolescent, wants no part of that—“I don’t want it to happen to me.”

They all nearly get what they want, a way out of the emotional trauma in which they find themselves. On the way home from the Labor Day dinner, the pickup truck in which they are riding (the girls asleep in the back) comes within inches of being hit broadside by a car that came out of nowhere traveling between eighty and ninety miles an hour, no lights, its driver drunk. George did not touch the brake, nor did Roberta scream; they continue in stunned silence, pull into their yard and sit, unable to move. What they feel is not terror or thanksgiving—not yet. What they feel is strangeness. They feel as strange, as flattened out and borne aloft, as unconnected with previous and future events as the ghost car was.

The story ends with Eva, waking and calling to them, “Are you guys dead?” and “Aren’t we home?”

The ending shocks everything in the story into a new perspective, making what went before seem irrelevant, especially Roberta’s and George’s halfhearted playing at love. For Munro, it seems that the thought of the nearness, the omnipresence, and the inevitability of death is the only thing which can put lives and
relationships into true perspective, but this (as Munro states at the conclusion of “The Spanish Lady”) is a message which cannot be delivered, however true it may be.

The Love of a Good Woman

Munro continues at the top of her form in The Love of a Good Woman, where the pain of human contact, in its various guises, remains her central theme. In the title novella, Enid, a middle-aged, practical nurse finds herself attending the dying Mrs. Quinn. Lonely, kind Enid strives to do good, resisting her dislike of the sick woman. As an intruder in a household that cannot function without her, she is unaware of her attraction to the husband, a former classmate, until his wife implicates him in the death of a local optometrist. If the dying woman’s story is true, Enid must decide whether to confront the husband or to believe in his innocence as she begins to lose hers. This complex, loosely structured work ends ambiguously, as do most of the stories, with Enid hesitating between motion and stillness.

“Cortes Island” is the most troubling story of this group, perhaps because of its ambiguity, perhaps because human lives have gone terribly wrong. A newlywed couple rents a basement apartment from the elderly Gorries. When the young woman needs a job, Mrs. Gorrie asks her to sit with her wheelchair-bound husband. A stroke has rendered Mr. Gorrie virtually speechless, but by grunts he can make himself understood. He wants her to read scrapbook articles from Cortes Island, where long ago a house burned to the ground, a child escaped, and a man died. What happened on Cortes Island, where Mr. Gorrie operated a boat? Was the death an accident, suicide, murder?

This story is so subtly written that events are not immediately clear. Typically, Munro offers only hints, although the young woman realizes that the Gorries once had an intense relationship. With harsh noises, the crippled Mr. Gorrie demands, “Did you ever think that people’s lives could be like that and end up like this? Well, they can.” This marriage is a wreck of love, a ruin.

As always, Munro exhibits masterful use of irony. In “Jakarta,” two young wives argue over D. H. Lawrence’s assertion that a woman’s happiness lies in a man and that her consciousness must be submerged in his. Kath is a proper Canadian wife and mother, but Sonje, her pot-smoking, commune-dwelling friend, is an American. Over the years, conservative Kath breaks away from her stuffy marriage to become strong and self-reliant. Sonje, who has routinely accepted her husband’s wish to switch sexual partners, remains faithful to him even after he disappears in Jakarta.

In other stories, a daughter seeks to ease a strained relationship with her abortionist father by revealing the birth of her child, but she is talking to a dead man. A young girl realizes that she is completely, utterly alone. In the best kind of horror story, one that will chill any parent’s blood, a woman tries to entertain her grandchildren with a game that turns sinister as she glimpses the danger, as well as the pain, implicit in any human contact.

Munro has stated in an interview that her need and desire to write has something to do with the fight against death, the feeling that we lose everything every day, and writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you’re doing something about this.

Despite her characteristic concern for honesty and her determination to tell only the truth, it seems in this passage that she may be wrong about one thing: It seems clear that Alice Munro’s writing is destined to last for a very long time.
Munro is one of Canada’s major writers and one of the best short-story writers anywhere. While she tried writing a novel with *Lives of Girls and Women*, her preferred form is the short story. She argues that a novel implies a continuity that is not mirrored in the lives of real people, who seem to move disjointedly from one experience to another. With the short story she can focus on the “intense . . . moments of experience” that constitute a life. With the exception of one novel, all of her published works have been collections of short stories.

The majority of Munro’s stories are set in Canada, often in southwest Ontario, now sometimes called “Munro Country,” the region of her childhood. Her hometown of Wingham, Ontario, becomes Hanratty in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Dalgleish in *The Moons of Jupiter*, or Jubilee in *Lives of Girls and Women*. The rural countryside, the poverty-stricken small towns, the farms, and the salt mines are well documented, as is the Canadian climate, which can be bleak, dark, and foreboding with its bitter cold, its snowstorms, and its ice. Even though some stories might be set in Victoria or Toronto, generally the protagonist has moved to the city and still retains some provincialism. Similarly with the stories set in Australia or Scotland, the protagonist is Canadian and comes into these new environments with Canadian eyes. In all of Munro’s stories, the reader gets a clear sense of place, whether the story is set in the Canada of today, of a hundred years ago, or of somewhere in between. In many cases the past and the present are juxtaposed so that there is a sense in which the past, though distant, is always present.

Just as Munro writes of the places that she knows, she also writes of familiar people. Her works, like those of many other writers, are autobiographically based, so much so that her hometown paper, the Wingham *Advance-Times*, once complained: “Sadly enough Wingham people have never had a chance to enjoy the excellence of her writing ability because we have repeatedly been made the butt of soured and cruel introspection on the part of a gifted writer.” Munro would deny the accusation. On the copyright page of her most autobiographical book, *Lives of Girls and Women*, she included, “This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact. My family, neighbors and friends did not serve as models.” Yet there is no mistaking the similarities of characters and events in her stories with those in her life. Her mother died from a slow, debilitating disease, as does the narrator’s mother in “Ottawa Valley,” the last story in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You*. Her father’s turkey farm serves as the setting for “Turkey Season” in *The Moons of Jupiter*. She and her first husband had many of the same differences in background as the protagonist and her husband in the stories in *Who Do You Think You Are?* Much of her life finds its way into her fiction, but that does not mean the fiction should be read as a documentary. Instead, Munro takes these experiences and rearranges them, filtering them through her imagination and forging them into stories of sensitivity.

The majority of Munro’s stories feature either girls or adult women as the central figures. The young girls, such as Rose in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, are slated to escape their impoverished beginnings primarily because they are sensitive and observant. Other stories chronicle the lives of ordinary, lower-middle-class women who have married young, have realized that life should be more than accommodating a husband and caring for children, and have left the safety of their homes to explore life’s possibilities. They go back to school, find a career, and form new relationships. The stories focus on moments in their lives in which the past has been discarded, the present is being confronted, and the future is uncertain. These women, though faced with strong evidence of the fragility of male-female relationships, seek lovers. As the narrator in “Hard Luck Stories” in *The Moons of Jupiter* explains, “There’s the intelligent sort of love that makes an intelligent choice. That’s the kind you’re supposed to get married on. Then there’s the kind that’s anything but intelligent, that’s like a possession. And that’s the one, that’s the one, everybody really values. That’s the one nobody wants to have missed out on.” Munro’s women willingly take risks in order to find that second type of love. The relationships might not last, but the women survive, wounded, perhaps, but intact.
Munro explores the intricacy of personal relationships, examining the ties that bind people together. She does not interpret the lives of her characters as much as involve the reader in the complexity of their lives, creating an unsentimental drama out of the personal experiences of her ordinary characters. As she suggests, “A story is a spell, rather than a narrative.” She examines the mother-daughter relationship from the perspective of the daughter in the stories of Who Do You Think You Are?, which range from the daughter being punished as a child in “Royal Beatings” to her committing her old, and increasingly senile, stepmother to the county home in “Spelling.” In “Moons of Jupiter” in the collection of the same name, the narrator is both parent and daughter. She is parent to her adult daughters, who have dismissed her from their lives, and is daughter to her hospitalized father, who has a serious, and soon fatal, heart condition. There are stories about the relationships of friends, such as that of Georgia and Maya in “Differently” from the collection Friend of My Youth, who share confidences about their marriages and their dreams; the sharing of a lover shatters their friendship. There are also stories about husbands and wives and lovers. Margot in “Wigtime,” also in Friend of My Youth, deals with her husband’s affair with a teenage girl by extracting from him a promise of a new house in exchange for her silence. The stories are about the hopes, dreams, disappointments, and betrayals that constitute personal relationships. Munro explores what the narrator in “The Stone in the Field” in The Moons of Jupiter calls “the pain of human contact.”

For Munro the truth can be suggested but never known completely. She relates her stories as though she and her reader are slowly discovering, or at least nearing, the truth. Her stories offer conflicting or multiple interpretations of the same situation. Sometimes the different versions result from the passage of time. Her stories, shifting effortlessly between the past and the present, suggest not only that the past influences the present but also that the present colors the interpretation of the past. Sometimes the same event might be viewed differently by several characters. For example, in the title story of Friend of My Youth, the narrator’s mother believes that the life of Flora, who had twice been denied the love of the same man, was one of noble self-sacrifice, but as the narrator says, “I had my own ideas about Flora’s story. . . . My Flora would be as black as hers was white. . . . What made Flora evil in my story was just what made her admirable in my mother’s—her turning away from sex.” In a Munro story, certainty is approachable but never reached.

Munro is praised for her craft in fashioning her stories. Realistic details and a few carefully chosen words create precise images and often suggest an entire life. She has been compared to Anton Chekhov for her understanding of the human psyche. Her characters are recognizable as the people one meets at work, at a party, or in a store. Her structuring of the narrative suggests the texture of real life with all of its doubts and uncertainties. She is a highly skilled writer whose stories are thought-provoking as well as entertaining. With the 1984 film adaptation of her story “Boys and Girls” and the 2007 adaptation of “The Bear Came over the Mountain” as the film Away from Her, Munro is reaching a larger audience.

“Half a Grapefruit”


Type of work: Short story

This work portrays a young girl who experiences self-discovery and comes to terms with her stepmother and her dying father.

“Half a Grapefruit” was first published in Redbook, then in the collection Who Do You Think You Are? in Canada, and the following year in the United States, with the volume being retitled The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose. It was thought that readers in the United States would not be familiar with the implication of the title’s question: a criticism of aiming above one’s origins. That is precisely one of the issues that “Half a Grapefruit” explores.
Even though the stories in *Who Do You Think You Are?* are each complete and self-contained, they can be read as a bildungsroman, chronicling the development of Rose as she grows up in poverty; spends a few years at a university; experiences marriage, rearing a family, and divorce; and finally reaches a measure of success as an actress and university professor. The stories are arranged chronologically, but each story is a blend of the past and the present. Thus, even though “Half a Grapefruit” focuses on Rose’s high school days, it concludes with a reference to Rose coming back to her hometown to make arrangements at a nursing home for her stepmother.

Rose, on her way to her high school, crosses the bridge that marks the boundary between her impoverished side of town, West Hanratty, and the more prosperous Hanratty. The only one from her West Hanratty grade-school class to attend high school, she keenly feels the difference between herself and the students from Hanratty. When the students are asked about their breakfasts, Rose lies, responding with “half a grapefruit” rather than “tea and porridge”—which would have marked her as a country girl. Her presumption is recognized, however, and for weeks, and even years, she hears, or imagines, people calling softly after her, “half a grapefruit.” It is the schoolmate’s equivalent of “Who do you think you are?”

Just who is Rose? She is not like her crass stepmother, Flo, who encourages the tales Rose brings home from school about lost Kotex or about one girl’s sexual encounters under a dark porch. Rose does not tell Flo about her own uncertainties or her dreams. Flo responds with tales about herself working in a glove factory at the age of fourteen. Nor is Rose entirely like her father. They share a love of books, but she lacks his discipline and ability to work with his hands. Worse, she is a “disgrace” to him because her bookish tendency does not correspond to her gender; in his eyes a woman “should be naïve intellectually, childlike, contemptuous of maps and long words and anything in books, full of charming jumbled notions, superstitions, traditional beliefs. Women’s minds are different,” he tells Rose.

Rose will eventually leave this harsh life but will have to endure the taunts and insults of her classmates, her stepmother, her father, and the townspeople to do so. Insulating herself, she becomes an observer and a limited participant. She watches the decline of her father’s health with the detachment of a stranger; she is able to verbalize the word “cancer” when no other family member can. Yet she can never entirely leave her childhood behind. Before her father’s final trip to the hospital, “[S]he understood that he would never be with her more than at the present moment. The surprise to come was that he wouldn’t be with her less.” The past is always part of the present.

“Bardon Bus”


Type of work: Short story

*The narrator, a middle-aged woman, is struggling to loosen herself from the grip of a broken love affair.*

“Bardon Bus” appears in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), a collection of eleven stories, all of which focus on “intense . . . moments” in the lives of the female protagonists, most of them middle-aged. The opening of the story sets the tone for what follows. Had the narrator been an old maid in another generation, she would have perhaps saved a letter and dreamed about an affair while continuing to milk the cows and scour the tin pails. She would have fantasized about surrendering herself completely to a lover who perhaps was a soldier, or “a farmer down the road with a rough-tongued wife and a crowd of children,” or a preacher. Yet though she is of a later generation, and though her actions reflect that, her obsessions are the same.

The narrator, writing a book on the history of a wealthy family, is staying in Toronto at a friend’s apartment. As part of her research on the family, she recently spent a few weeks in Australia, where she met an
anthropologist whom she had known slightly in Vancouver when she was a married college student. She, now divorced, and he, traveling without his third wife, embark on an affair that, because of the imposed brevity, seems perfect. On returning to Canada, however, she becomes obsessed with him, with the same intensity as the old maid of an earlier generation.

The narrator, like other middle-aged women populating Munro’s stories, is moderately successful in her career but is still rather fumbling in managing her relationships. The men in the story are no more adept at love, but their options are more varied. As Dennis, the anthropologist’s friend, points out, men can choose young women and start a new life with a new family. Older women, faced with wrinkles and menopause, cannot deny their mortality as easily as a man with a young wife can. The narrator, reacting to the inevitability of the aging process, chooses new clothes and gets a haircut but realizes that “you have to watch out for the point at which the splendor collapses into absurdity. . . . Even the buttercup woman I saw a few days ago on the streetcar, the little, stout, sixtyish woman in a frilly yellow dress well above the knees, a straw hat with yellow ribbons, yellow pumps dyed-to-match on her little fat feet—even she doesn’t aim for comedy.” The narrator is a survivor and wills herself free of her obsession and depression: “At the same time I’m thinking that I have to let go. . . . There is a limit to the amount of misery and disarray you will put up with, for love, just as there is a limit to the amount of mess you can stand around a house. You can’t know the limit beforehand, but you will know it when you’ve reached it.” The narrator is ready, and able, to move on.

“The Bear Came over the Mountain”

First published: 1999 (collected in *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, 2001)

Type of work: Short story

*After almost fifty years of marriage, Fiona enters an assisted-living facility, where she forms a close relationship with a resident to the extent of ignoring her husband on his visits.*

In “The Bear Came over the Mountain,” Munro explores how individuals react to their own aging or to the aging of their companions. The story opens with a scene of a young, vivacious Fiona proposing marriage to Grant. This incident is followed by another with Fiona, now seventy, preparing to enter Meadowlake, a new assisted-living facility. Grant and Fiona have been married for almost fifty years when she begins displaying signs of dementia. At first it is amusing; she leaves notes about her daily schedule, but then the notes start identifying the contents of the kitchen drawers. Soon she cannot find her way home. Fortunately they can afford Meadowlake.

Munro juxtaposes scenes from the past with the present, so the reader sees a saucy Fiona contrasted with a Fiona who seems not to recognize her husband. In a Munro story, ambiguity rules. Perhaps Fiona, in her actions, is now extracting vengeance for Grant’s earlier erasure of her in his numerous affairs.

The story also explores how people negotiate long-term commitments and how they rationalize their failure to uphold these commitments. Using flashbacks, Munro presents Grant’s earlier years as a professor who may have received his position because of Fiona’s father’s largesse to the university. Grant seduces his students; some are married women but some are identified as girls. Rationalizing his behavior, he argues that the times promoted free sex or that the older women longed for some excitement. He rationalizes his betrayal of Fiona by countering that he, unlike some of his colleagues, stayed in the marriage.

Although there is no suggestion that Fiona is aware of his infidelity, her behavior in Meadowlake can be explained by it. There she carries on a flirtation with Aubrey, a wheelchair-bound patient who was placed there by his wife, Marion, while she took a much-needed Florida vacation. When Aubrey leaves, Fiona, inconsolable, starts to deteriorate so much that a move to a more restrictive floor is contemplated.
Grant, desperate, visits Marion to suggest that her husband visit Fiona. Marion’s reaction is unexpected. She is not jealous but instead is concerned about the inconvenience of the visits and with protecting her financial security. She fears that Aubrey might prefer to live in the expensive facility. However, Marion is lonely and soon calls Grant, inviting him to a Legion dance. Although Marion is very different from the cultured and beautiful Fiona, Grant realizes that he can barter sex and a little companionship in exchange for Aubrey’s visiting his wife. When Grant sees Fiona again, he brings Aubrey. She is much improved, reading in a chair and not weeping in bed, playing a silly word game with him, and seeming to recognize him.

The story ends ambiguously, as many of Munro’s stories do. The reader is uncertain what causes Fiona’s improvement. The reader also wonders about Grant. Does he enter into an affair with Marion because of his concern for Fiona or is that just another of his rationalizations? Munro does not moralize; she presents her characters, leaving the readers to draw their own conclusions.

**Munro, Alice (Vol. 10): Introduction**

Munro, Alice 1931–

Munro, a Canadian short story writer and novelist, is known for her precise recording of personal experiences. Her stories chart the search for personal freedom in nostalgically rural settings. (See also CLC, Vol. 6, and Contemporary Authors, Vols. 33-36, rev. ed.)

**Munro, Alice (Vol. 10): Frederick Busch**

Alice Munro … writes stories you have to call "well-made."… They are journeymen's work. But they are no more than that, and by now … we ought to demand that a volume of stories delivers the thrilling economy, the poetry which makes the form so valuable.

Alice Munro's subject matter is ordinariness—disappointment, the passage of time—but she doesn't bring to her stories what, say, John Updike or Tillie Olsen do: extraordinary language, a mind in love with the everyday but able to exalt it so that we feel the magic in what is usual. Most of the stories [in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You"] concern the past, hidden from others but told to us … and the stories do seem formulaic.

The book is filled with lots of information on who did what to whom, and when, and where, but there is little emotional tension arising from the events. Everything is thought out, decided upon. Most of the dialogue, even, seems there for the sake of information, not for its own sake. And much of the writing seems to be designed to win our love rather than stun us with character or prose….

When the narrative voice of the story doesn't use winsomeness as a strategy, it takes refuge in Art: "I invented loving you and I invented your death. I have my tricks and my trap doors, too. I don't understand their workings at the present moment." Such a dependency on our sense of the artful paradox of contemporary writing—while the author permits herself to cease responsibility for her characters—is close kin to the childishness of "I wouldn't have looked in her drawers, but a closet is open to anybody. That's a lie, I would have looked in drawers, but I would have felt worse doing it and been more scared she would tell." In both cases, as in most of these stories, there is the kind of innocence of tone that can make you grin, but the way you grin at someone else's charming child: already forgetting. (p. 54)

Munro, Alice (Vol. 10): RAE McCARTHY MACDONALD

[In Alice Munro's vision there] are those of "the world," of society, of the accepted norms, and those "from the other country." ... people such as Miss Marsalles [in the title story of The Dance of the Happy Shades], whose innocence has made her, at the best, a fondly tolerated anachronism and, at the worst, a social embarrassment. Miss Marsalles, with [a] terrible faux pas, has placed herself in the same category as idiots, seniles, eccentrics, criminals, and the fatally ill, all of whom are uncontrollable, unpredictable, and, therefore, painful, embarrassing, and plainly unacceptable by "the world." (pp. 366-67)

The prevalence ... in Munro's work, of idiots, senile old people, suicides, the fatally ill, and that recurring image of the mother who is attacked by Parkinson's disease are guides to her controlling vision. Munro sees society and life as cruel and deforming. Those who appear to adapt or cope and survive are, in her eyes, more deformed in an internal, spiritual way, than those who are clearly retarded or maimed and unable to enter the struggle. In some stories, the obviously defective people seem better off and freer than those who have found acceptance in a "normal" world. In most cases, they work as a symbol or externalization of the suffering and deformity of the apparently healthy and adjusted characters. They are also a deflecting release valve for the tension that builds up from the reader's sense of repressed pain in Munto's world. (pp. 368-69)

In Lives of Girls and Women, no one idiot, invalid, or suicide externalizes the suffering of any one character; rather, they all reflect each other and compositely suggest the hidden illness of the apparent survivors. (p. 370)

Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You reveals the same divided universe as do Dance of the Happy Shades and Lives of Girls and Women. And it asks Munro's characteristic questions. "Walking on Water" and "Forgiveness in Families" both play with the old question, "Who or what is mad?" In "Memorial," the central character, who has been confronted anew with the rigidly defined world of her sister, thinks "the only thing we can hope for is that we lapse now and then into reality."... (p. 373)

Alice Munro's work bears the marks of a distinctive, vital, and unifying vision. Though this vision shows itself more complex and subtle with each of her books, the basic terms remain unchanged. Man finds himself divided into two camps, and the price of this division for both sides is loneliness and pain. The external deformities and violences of "the other country," the place of outcasts, are simply transferences of the unseen, hidden disfiguration of "the world," place of "survivors." Which group suffers most is a question without significance in a universe where men, the pathetic victims of chance, offer each other not kindness or encouragement, but suspicion and hate. (pp. 373-74)


Munro, Alice (Vol. 10): Patricia Beer

[Lives of Girls and Women] is not, the author says, autobiographical except in form. In fact, in form it more closely resembles a series of short stories, and it is no surprise to see that the author won a Canadian award in this genre. Each chapter of Lives of Girls and Women is virtually self-contained; characters who appear in more than one are nearly always reintroduced, however well we might reasonably be supposed to remember them. Yet each protagonist is closely connected with the central family; Del Jordan, the daughter, is the narrator throughout and though she is not the heroine of every episode it is very much her story. The first chapter, it is true, is set at a decided angle to the main narrative line; its hero, Uncle Benny, appears only peripherally in the later chapters—and his vicious mail-order bride never—but the effect is intriguing rather than confusing.
The title is accurate, for the book presents not only the growing up of a girl, her relationships with her family and her approaches and eventual introduction to sexual experience, but also the histories of her female contemporaries and older relatives, especially her mother. In other words, we are in *Kinflicks* country, but whereas *Kinflicks* tries, too hard for its artistic good, to be a, or even the, Great American Novel, *Lives of Girls and Women* obeys its own natural range and scope and is consequently much more successful. Neither does it fall flat into the long, lush grass of so many British autobiographies and novels about country adolescence. It is an honest book.…

The beginnings and endings of some of the chapters weirdly recall, if not the exact voice of *Penguin New Writing*, a good parody of it: "We spent days along the Wawanash River, helping Uncle Benny fish."… The best of the sexual scenes are completely explicit; their straightforwardness is necessary and the reverse of bawdy…. Alice Munro knows when not to be explicit; the often puzzled loves of the young are more reticently portrayed.

The book draws a clear distinction between youthful and adult emotional attitudes even when exactly the same things are happening…. One of the few criticisms that can be made of the book is that it often explains too much. The writing is in fact good enough to rely much more on implication than it allows itself to do.


**Munro, Alice (Vol. 10): Hallvard Dahlie**

[Alice Munro is] a writer who has quietly and firmly established herself over the past decade. In a very real sense, she occupies [two] fictional worlds: her fiction is rooted tangibly in the social realism of the rural and small town world of her own experience, but it insistently explores what lies beyond the bounds of empirical reality. Though she has said that she is "very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life," the substance of her fiction to date suggests that this excitement must also derive in part from her intuitive feeling that there is something else of significance just below that literal surface. This may be one reason why to date she has been more attracted to the short story than to the novel…. [That] more concentrated fictional form probably allows her to explore in a more imaginative and intense way the intangible aspects of her world: those shadowy and shifting areas between the rational and the irrational, between the familiar, comfortable world and sudden dimensions of terror, and between various facets of uncertainty and illusion.

These metaphysical concerns find their aesthetic and formal complements in the structures of her fiction, where a similar illusory balance operates between the conventional fictional elements of plot and character on the one hand, and on the other, a kind of psychological or even psychic verification or resolution of a particular dilemma. Though emanating from a recognizable sociological reality, the situations that are characteristically depicted in her fiction frequently transcend the literal bounds of our conscious realizations, and leave us with a residual uncertainty, puzzlement, or even despair. (pp. 56-7)

*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* … essentially picks up on the same themes and concerns as [Munro's] two earlier works, *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Lives of Girls and Women*. In most of this fiction, Munro is the chronicler of a particular region, that of south-western Ontario…. (pp. 57-8)

Alice Munro's fiction could profitably be examined in terms of the themes of isolation and rejection, which unfold in situations where human relationships are rarely cemented or consummated…. [For example, in the
short story "The Peace of Utrecht," home, the past, family ties—forces which are conventionally interpreted as positive forces—are … dramatized as disturbing elements, and the narrator even defines "home" as a "dim world of continuing disaster."… (p. 58)

It is [the] intangible or irrational impulses between the protagonist and some other element—other characters, the past or childhood, a code of morality or behaviour—which give Munro's fiction its haunting and disturbing quality…. In Munro's first two books, the emphasis was on the youthful protagonist trying to come to terms with the adult world, but in her latest collection it is frequently the other way around: grandmothers trying to understand granddaughters ("Marrakesh"), elderly sisters trying to make sense out of their common past ("Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You"), a sensitive old man just failing to come to terms with the younger generation around him ("Walking on Water"). (pp. 61-2)

[There is] an underlying element in Munro's fiction in general, and [it] is an irony which both enlarges the possibilities of experience and helps define her characters' specific attributes that operate within a given situation. In some cases, the irony is delightful and benign, as in "How I Met My Husband," which is not without its touches of an O. Henry or Somerset Maugham ending: inevitably combined with moral relief. (p. 65)

A more complex and essentially unresolved effect of irony and ambiguity is reflected in such stories as "Tell Me Yes or No" from her latest collection, or "The Office" from Dance of the Happy Shades. In this latter story, all the circumstantial evidence convicts the landlord right off: Mr. Malley is unpleasant, deceitful, dishonest, and perhaps even lecherous, in his dealings with the narrator, a writer who simply wished to use the office as a creative refuge away from her domestic demands. But there are many other layers of meaning here, and we are drawn into the basic dilemma about the nature of reality. The narrator, as a writer, rearranges words to create her version of reality that takes its authority through the workings of imagination; the landlord, as a hostile commentator on the whole idea of a woman writing outside the home, re-arranges or manipulates facts to create another version of reality, one that to the outsider is as credible as any work of fiction. What we have in this story is the simultaneous creation of two imaginative worlds, and in this process, Mr. Malley manages to transform his outrageous distortions into some semblance of truth. "I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him,"… muses the narrator, but it is clear from the unresolved conclusion of this story that Mr. Malley's violations of her version of reality cannot be easily dismissed. (pp. 65-6)

[There is] a recurring pattern in Alice Munro's fiction: the dramatization of the conjunction of existential terror or desperation and existential possibility within a total vision that is much closer to faith than it is to despair. Worlds are always qualitatively changed at the conclusions of Munro's stories, and though the causal changes have contributed to the unsettling of her protagonists, they characteristically point to an enlargement of possibilities rather than a restriction, or they imply a resolution already attained…. There is a strong sense of amazement at the human condition in Munro, a quality that seems to be born of a recognition that ordinary people have an intangible talent or gift: not necessarily for goodness or truth or beauty, though that happens, too, but more frequently for lucking it out, for intuiting a move or an action which will get them out of a present predicament. At times, her characters appear to drift into salvation rather than consciously elect it, and their emergence into new possibilities is frequently accompanied by [a] kind of amazement…. This kind of realization constitutes what can be defined as an existentialist resolution, a phenomenon particularly relevant to the twentieth-century comic protagonist, to which category Munro's characters can essentially be said to belong. (pp. 67-8)

The total evidence in Alice Munro's fiction ultimately dictates that she cannot easily be categorized, and to say that she writes essentially in the comic mode, or that she is moving consistently beyond realism, reveals only part of the complexity of her art and vision. Her accomplishments offer gratifying evidence that fiction of significant substance, of careful craftsmanship, and of sympathetic treatment of the complexities of human relationships, is very much alive in Canada. All this is of course very much in the tradition of the realism of
George Eliot or D. H. Lawrence or Robertson Davies, and as I indicated at the outset, Munro's fiction is strongly rooted in the realism of region and time. But in the Epilogue to Lives, [the protagonist] Del, by now an aspiring novelist and recorder of Jubilee's stories, recognizes the problems that she faces, as she visits Bobby Sherriff, out temporarily from the Asylum, and the last person she sees in Jubilee. "No list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting."

But Bobby from the Asylum reminds her—and us—that there is another world that is not so decipherable, as he suddenly rises in a graceful-grotesque manner and looks at Del in such a way that she construes his action "to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not know."… In a very real way, this unknown or irrational world has been as much a concern of Alice Munro as have any of the things she can list, and her very substantial contribution to our fiction lies in the successful way she has addressed herself to this dilemma, with the authority of the artist and the astonishment of the seer. (pp. 70-1)


Munro, Alice (Vol. 19): Introduction

Munro, Alice 1931–

Munro, a Canadian short story writer and novelist, is known for fiction that recalls with precision the texture and detail of ordinary life. Munro herself says that she is "very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life." Munro is preoccupied with the effects of the past, place, and local cultural values on individual life. She won the Governor General's Literary Award in 1969 for Dance of the Happy Shades and in 1978 for Who Do You Think You Are? (See also CLC, Vols. 6, 10, and Contemporary Authors, Vols. 33-36, rev. ed.)

Munro, Alice (Vol. 19): Brandon Conron

[Alice Munro's writing] captures the flavour and mood of rural Ontario…. During an interview in 1971, after acknowledging Eudora Welty as probably her favourite author, Munro remarked, "If I'm a regional writer, the region I'm writing about has many things in common with the American South...." (pp. 109-10)

Although there are obviously vast differences between Munro's own country and the American South, some attitudes are common to both societies: an almost religious belief in the land and the old rural cultural values; a sense of the past and respect for family history, however unremarkable or bizarre it may seem to outsiders: a profound awareness of the Bible which is reflected in the very language and images of speech; and a Calvinistic sense of sin.

Also influential in Munro's artistic development was journalist James Agee's experiment of integrating photography and text.... (p. 110)

[Her] intense feeling for the exact texture of surfaces and the tone of responses makes far greater demands than any cinemagraphic technique can adequately meet. It requires a style more akin to what in contemporary painting is often called "magic realism." Among those loosely categorized in this group, Alice Munro has noted a particular appreciation for the American Edward Hopper's paintings of ordinary places—a barber shop, seaside cottages, a small town street, roadside snack bar or gasoline station. Canadian painters like Alex Colville, Tom Forrestal and Jack Chambers have also influenced her. While all of these artists express themselves in individually different styles, the overall impression which they convey is one of acute perception of their environment. They exercise the selectivity of the expert photographer; yet by some
personal, humanizing stroke each object or nuance in their painting somehow appears to have a special significance in its relationship to the rest of the picture. There is a kind of illusionary three dimensional aspect, a super realism or magical and mysterious suggestion of a soul beyond the objects depicted, which leaves the viewer participant with greater insights and an increased sensitivity towards the world around.

Such an impression Alice Munro can create in her extended images, which often evoke in the reader an intuitive awareness of a story's entire impact. In Dance of the Happy Shades this technique can be observed in a number of descriptive passages. Frequently the author arrests or suspends motion before returning to action, as in the still painting description from "Thanks for the Ride" of a typical small town near Lake Huron, after the summer vacationers have gone home…. (pp. 110-11)

[While such Southern writers as Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Reynolds Price, and Eudora Welty] undoubtedly influenced Munro's descriptive style, it was their expression of the profound dignity of even the most trivial events of every day life to which she especially responded. Later, when she first discovered Patrick White through his Tree of Man …. this feeling for the inherent beauty of every earthly thing was reinforced: for her, too, a lowly ant or a gob of spit could be worthy of appreciative contemplation. There is a remarkable similarity between the imagery of White and Munro—probably because of their similar apprehension of the "holiness" of all aspects of life, in which "beautiful or ugly had ceased to matter because there was in everything something to be discovered."…

[The stories of Dance of the Happy Shades] treat the maturing process of the young as recalled later, and depend partly for their effect on a bifocal point of view that sees a situation from both an adolescent and an adult perspective. (p. 111)

A central story in this collection … is "Images," a young woman's recollections of an outing with her father. An intricate series of contrasts is presented: outdoor activity and the pervasive aura of an unexplained malady; apparent jollity and genuine misery; death and life; images and actuality…. This is a strange story, replete with concrete imagery and suggestive overtones, that demonstrates the author's acute perception of smells and tastes as well as of sights and sounds and their associations. (pp. 114-15)

This first volume reveals that Alice Munro can treat a wide range of themes with a technical framework that is, in her own words, "very traditional, very conventional." In all but three of these fifteen stories the point of view is that of a child or adolescent, modified or controlled to some extent by the lapse of time, new insights and perspectives between an incident and its recording. In only one is the narrator or reader's sensorium a male. In each, the characters are seen in a strongly presented physical setting, in which the surfaces of life, its texture, sounds and smells are described with exactness of observation and delicacy of language. The focus is fairly narrow and highly personal, in the sense that "the emotional reality," though not the events, is "solidly autobiographical."

Although the stories have no formal sequence, they effectively trace the development of a sensitive young girl into womanhood. They capture in dialogue, characterization and description the practicality and hardships, seasonal rhythms and vitality of rural and small town life, the barriers between the young and the old, the poor and the affluent, the sick and the well. Secrets and a lack of genuine communication between family members or friends often lead to guilty estrangements; unawareness of a situation, perhaps because of a selfish distaste for unpleasant things or a fear of ridicule, is common; the pressure to conform is relentless, and failure of will to make one's own life is too frequent. The treatment of these various themes is everywhere touched with humour, compassionate irony, and a comprehension of the absurd and grotesque. Common experiences become unique, yet universal, expressions of what it means to be alive during this period.

In … Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (1974), Alice Munro moves into a larger, more cosmopolitan world. Only six of the thirteen stories are rooted in what was formerly considered Munro country. The other
seven have contemporary urban settings…. There is a wider variety of characters also, fewer girls and young women and more middle-aged or elderly people. Most of the stories are longer. There is a mature awareness of the complexity and fragility of human relationships, the confusing standards of modern city life, and the conflict of generations. Satire is more common. These new aspects are ordered with the same characteristic perception, subtle interplay of emotions, droll sense of humour, and ironic compassion.

Although arbitrarily chosen thematic headings cannot adequately reflect the overlapping and variety of minor motifs in individual tales, four kinds of stories seem to emerge: first, those in which are blended a number of related themes—the essential individualism of each person, the impossibility of complete comprehension of one's own self let alone another's, the self-deception, buried resentments, and often unwitting vindictiveness of human personality; second, stories reminiscent of Dance in their focus on relatively simple emotional situations; third, stories which offer especially revealing insights into the author's technique; and finally, narratives in which a sense of personal guilt is pervasive.

The title piece, "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," a good example of the first group, is a finely orchestrated dramatization of the underlying tensions and ironies of close relationships…. Through the recurring images and allusions time flows easily backwards and forwards as on the little stage of Mock Hill a range of human emotions is portrayed with a gently comic undertone that is conveyed overtly in the names of the setting and characters.

Et's fantasy, plausible and ambiguous enough for a reader to speculate about its validity, is presented with splendid irony. She also sees a mythical parallel when Arthur in a foursome game of "Who am I?" chooses to be Sir Galahad…. (pp. 115-16)

Among the stories [appearing in Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You which are] most arresting for their critical insights into the author's technique are "Material" … [and] "Tell Me Yes or No."…. "Material" tells how a writer, Hugo, transforms a personal incident into fiction. His former wife muses about his publication with devastating satire…. Mocking the book jacket blurb, tearing apart its half lies of Hugo's experiences as "lumberjack, beer-slinger, counterman," she ridicules his image as "not only fake but out of date."…. This is a very complex, ironic and comical story that touches on such themes and tensions as the amorality of artists, creating from "scraps and oddments, useless baggage," a "hard and shining, rare intimidating quality"; the tenuous tie that holds men and women together in love, "as flimsy as a Roumanian accent or the calm curve of an eyelid, some half-fraudulent mystery"; the way that men, whatever their temperaments, know "how to ignore or use things…. They are not at the mercy." Dialogue, description, and reflection all unite in a realistic and ironic interplay of character and events to evoke in the reader a rich and varied response. (pp. 119-20)

In "Tell Me Yes or No" a narrator has an imaginary conversation with a dead lover as she recalls their affair and tells of a later trip to his home city…. Moving with the temporal fluidity of internal monologue, the story is rich in imagery, descriptive detail, and inner revelation as the narrator attempts to understand the deceased as well as their relationship for the previous two years. (p. 120)

In many of the stories already commented upon there can be noted an expression of a sense of guilt for uncharitable thoughts, acts of deceit or omission. In the last group to be discussed, regret and remorse are pervasive motifs. "Walking on Water," set in Victoria and suggested by a publicity stunt there of television comic Paul Paulsen, describes the tragic failure of a young Zen adherent's experiment in psychic control over matter, as seen through the perspective of a retired druggist. The difficulty of bridging the generation gap is vividly portrayed in realistic dialogue and sharp imagery, as he attempts to understand the sense of values of the flower people. His touching concern for their welfare and poignant foreboding reach a climactic note with his eventual feeling of disorientation in their brutally existential dismissal of the victim's fate…. (pp. 121-22)
"The Ottawa Valley," final story of this volume, is another reminiscence of a childhood experience by a mature woman.... In recalling [childhood incidents], the cousins' versions often vary and their different responses are comically revealing of their different temperaments and sensibilities. (p. 122)

The spectre of a gifted, eccentric and ailing mother haunts much of Munro's fiction, and appears either briefly or as a dominating figure in several of the collected stories. She is a central character in Lives of Girls and Women. Frequently associated with her is a daughter whose growing maturity brings a sense of guilt for her own lack of understanding or compassion. Another less individualized but equally recurring figure in various aspects is the man, whether single or married, who uses or ignores women and events at his own whim. There is also a whole range of other characters that have been imaginatively created out of vividly recalled memories. For the most part they are unsophisticated people who only vaguely comprehend the meaning of their own lives. The reader is taken with them through a series of rather subtle, low-keyed circumstances in which the continuum is often disrupted and then reestablished in a way that alters both the reader's as well as the characters' emotional awareness, and leads them both to a significant or fresh conception of the world. Most of the tales are presented from the first person point of view. Even in those few which happen to be written in the third person the narrative voice is that of the central figure. This technique allows an intimate rapport between reader and narrator. The blending of past and present often generates the energy of the story as the perspective continually shifts. In some tales the first paragraph is a microcosm of the whole; in others the ending contains the vital clues required to reveal the full deployment of fictional forces. Some move forward more by dialogue than description. In virtually all, the rhythm is achieved by a balance of the parts which defies rational analysis. (pp. 122-23)

Alice Munro's special distillation of personality is revealed in the quiet humour, gentle irony, and compassionate understanding with which she treats her themes. Her uniqueness lies not only in the special angle of vision from which her characters are seen, but also in the lasting impact which they have on the reader. They are memorable for themselves as well as for their symbolic significance. Many are representative of particular life patterns, revealed often in a single picture, in the fashion of Sherwood Anderson, of "lives flowing past each other." But they still remain individuals who become permanent personal possessions of the reader. Her writing is original, not for its technical innovation or interpretations of the atomic age, but rather for its fragile insights into the complexity of personal relationships. Her narratives spring from an imaginative, intelligent and unpretentious individuality to which fiction is a natural recourse. They are independent, absorbing, and realistic expressions of the profound disturbances and magic of ultimate human reckonings. (p. 123)


Munro, Alice (Vol. 19): Urjo Kareda

The ten stories in ... Who Do You Think You Are? share the same central character, a woman named Rose. We drop in on her life from early adolescence through middle age. Rose grows up in impoverished circumstances in a small Ontario town; she goes to university and marries a wealthy, appealing, and yet wholly unsuitable young man; she divorces him and, in middle life, achieves a manner of bruised success in her career as an actress and television personality.

It must be acknowledged immediately that the stages of this life are not altogether remarkable or startling. But the plainness of Rose's progress gives no real hint of the exceptional cumulative force of feeling that Munro is able to achieve in these linked stories.
As always with Alice Munro's writing, one wonders whether the precision and immediacy of the detail mean that the stories are autobiographical, more mirror-puzzles like her *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) with its warning: "This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact." Undoubtedly our yearning to attach autobiographical origins to Munro's stories is a tribute to the uncanny authenticity of their texture. She must have lived this or something very much like it, we feel, and by some miracle retained it whole. She has the ability to isolate the one detail that will evoke the rest of the landscape. In this remarkable, immensely pleasurable collection, we are never at a loss for location, be it physical or emotional. Munro's skill in perceiving the exact colouring of a moment never becomes the kind of rarefied, feathery delicacy that can make short stories arch or anaemic. Instead, she achieves a fertile, vigorous robustness: we respond to the fearlessness with which she alternates pain and comedy. Alice Munro has Chekhov's eye—and there is no higher praise—for the way in which we ourselves provide the blade which slits the thin, protective partition between what we think we would like to be and what in fact we are capable of being.

That war within us is explored throughout the collection….

Throughout these stories focused on Rose, Alice Munro also offers brief glimpses of lives lived against the odds. This may indeed be characteristic of writing that centres upon small towns, where the varieties of sensibility and opportunity are more swiftly grasped. In less deft and compassionate hands, this might have seemed merely a gallery of grotesques, but Munro gives these misshapen lives, this world of secondary characters possessing imperfect bodies or minds, a feisty vigour. (p. 62)

Alice Munro's instinct about the way in which we translate ourselves, the routes of fear or vanity or self-deception by which we allow ourselves to be deflected from the road we long ago mapped out, is what gives her writing its urgency and heartbeat. Her stories are the subtlest summings to reconsider our lives. Their effect reminded me of Gorky's description of Chekhov's presence: "Everyone unwittingly felt an inner longing to be simpler, more truthful, to be more himself." (p. 63)


**Munro, Alice (Vol. 19): Julia O'Faolain**

Deft with social detail, [Alice Munro] anchors her people firmly to class and place and commands the classic realist's strengths: moral seriousness, compassion, a sense of the particular. The disruptive elements are her characters' delusions, their yearnings and yarning, their snobbery and shames….

[The stories in "The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose", the American edition of "Who Do You Think You Are?"] are arranged chronologically; each is self-contained, but they all throw light on one another…. On one level their subject is the boundary between the marvelous and the ordinary. On another, it is the life story of a woman in whose grasp reality tends to slither like wet soap. Rose has a restless imagination because she moves from one social class to another and because, in the end, she puts her disability to use and goes into the theater….

There are flashes forward and back; moments of prescience and hindsight….

Alice Munro captures a kaleidoscope of lights and depths. Through the lens of Rose's eye, she manages to reproduce the vibrant prance of life while scrutinizing the workings of her own narrative art. This is an exhilarating collection.
Munro, Alice (Vol. 19): Jack Beatty

In *The Beggar Maid* the impressive Canadian writer Alice Munro has combined the form of the short story with the narrative interest of the novel to provide an unusual kind of literary pleasure. Each of these 10 stories is a contemplative and aesthetic whole; each contains a world of complication and suggestion, with its own particular emphasis and texture. Yet moving through each world and in our affections rising clear of all of them is a single novelistic destiny, Rose; we are not told her last name....

The stories are convincingly imagined and interestingly told, with sudden shifts in time that would stop the narrative flow of a novel but which this less linear hybrid happily accommodates. The later stories are good but deal with familiar material—marriage, divorce, the life of an independent woman; they owe their best moments to their dips into the past, their returns to [Rose's hometown, Hanratty, Ontario, the setting] of the early stories. Ms. Munro knows what it is like to breathe the disappointed air of provincial poverty, and through crude naturalistic detail—the look of turds frozen in piles of snow in the crumbling lavatory of Rose's school is an image I won't forget—as well as through delicate delineations of character, she recreates the Depression world of Hanratty on the eve of the wartime prosperity that would change it for better and worse. Everything in these stories is a mix of better and worse, of gain and loss, of misery and happiness. Moving, hard, lucid, they throw a "cloudy interesting, problematic light on the world."


Munro, Alice (Vol. 19): Ted Morgan

In the work of Alice Munro, whose volume of related short stories [*The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* is] of a high standard, the material seems [close] to the author's experience....

Munro is as good as John Updike in chronicling the hesitations and sidesteps of adultery, its secret rules and regulations, its Geneva conventions, and the dozens of practical details that must be dealt with to make the grand passion possible....

Munro is also very good on the mother-daughter relationship. Rose takes custody of her daughter Anna, but cannot manage the domesticity, so she gives her up, realizing that "poor, picturesque, gypsying childhoods are not much favored by children, though they will claim to value them, for all sorts of reasons, later on." Rose goes on to become an actress and television interviewer. I hope she will be heard from again, for she is immensely likable, and there is gallantry in her willingness to take risks, open herself to the chance of love, and measure herself against what she was and fled from. (p. 78)

Ted Morgan, "Writers Who Happen to Be Women," in Saturday Review (copyright © 1979 by Saturday Review; all rights reserved; reprinted by permission), Vol. 6, No. 20, October 13, 1979, pp. 76-8.
Munro, Alice (Vol. 19): Joyce Carol Oates

Alice Munro's heroine Rose, though said to be a successful and even "famous" Canadian television actress, returns again and again in her imagination to the claustrophobic world of her childhood and girlhood, in "Hanratty, Ontario," as if seeking a meaning—even a deathly meaning—in that otherwise ungenerous environment. Though her nature is tough as a "prickly pineapple" Rose is completely vulnerable to the signals, increasingly random and weak, sent out by Hanratty; she seems in a sense never to have left, and indeed Munro is careful to end The Beggar Maid with Rose back in Hanratty, in the Canadian Legion Hall where only the past—parochial, unredeemed by an intellectual grasp of its significance—exists, and the present is quite irrelevant. (pp. 87-8)

Lives of Girls and Women, the title of Alice Munro's first volume of fiction, might well serve as a title for all her work. Again, in The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose ..., Munro examines with her usual lyric precision the experience of a young girl growing up in Ontario, in a period that encompasses the Second World War and shades into the tumultuous present. The stories are all succinct and expertly crafted, frequently summarized as if they were, in a sense, nothing more than flickering images in Rose's restless mind. The 'story' of The Beggar Maid is over—Rose is now telling it to herself, in fragments, as if trying to piece together the disparate shards of her own life. For though Rose has suffered innumerable humiliations in West Hanratty, particularly at the hands of her step-mother Flo (who both is, and then again is not, "crazy"), she has survived nevertheless, and has even made a career for herself in a highly competitive field. (Though the details leading up to this career are unfortunately blurred.) (pp. 88-9)

The sub-title—Stories of Flo and Rose—is misleading, for the stories are all about Rose, are in fact recounted by Rose, and Flo is seen only from the outside; and the book is really a novel, not a collection of stories, since each of the "chapters" fits in gracefully with the others, and advances the plot (which is oblique and minimal, exactly as one might recall the "plot" of one's life). The most powerful passages are those which evoke, in a single strong image, or in a few fastidiously-chosen lines, Rose's troubled relationship with her step-mother. Growing up, moving beyond Hanratty and Flo, Rose enters a dismayingly vulgar, even banal world, though it is a world of greater affluence, and one in which she achieves her "success." Munro analyzes rather mercilessly Rose's relationships with men, the naiveté of her hopes and the inevitability of her disappointments, and one comes to feel that Munro shares ... the conviction that this is a time in which "men are angry with women; men are afraid of women." No one in Rose's experience (except a lover named Simon, doomed to die of cancer) impresses her with the strength of personality her step-mother had. And Flo, of course, is a "character"—intolerant, belligerent, somewhat mad. (p. 89)


Munro, Alice (Vol. 19): Thomas R. Edwards

Alice Munro's The Beggar Maid is a history not of endless love but of many loves that ended too soon. Here ten connected stories follow the early and middle life of a woman named Rose, born around 1930 in West Hanratty, Ontario, a shabby, depressed small town of the sort that talented and sensitive kids like Rose will do almost anything to get out of, only to spend the rest of their lives remembering what it was like.

Munro records the development of Rose's emotions without making them seem to "stand for" anything outside of Rose's own sense of her life. (p. 43)
[Each] story considers some remembered instance of love or desire that has been thwarted or transformed by the passage of time, but no definite conclusion emerges to make all the parts cohere. These things happened to Rose, they made a difference, she remembers them, if not fondly then at least respectfully. (pp. 43-4)

Alice Munro shares with some other Canadian writers of her generation—I’m thinking particularly of Margaret Atwood, Marian Engel, and Timothy Findley—a strong sense of how place and local circumstance can shape and interpret lives. Such an awareness could be called provincial, but it seems to me a strength for a novelist, a way of protecting fictional particularity from the temptation to homogenize things in order to pursue issues or themes. Though Rose's story bears directly, for example, upon the issues of contemporary feminism, in *The Beggar Maid* they are her own experiences and no one else's. For this, as well as for its quiet eloquence and its refusal ever to say more than is needed, Munro's book seems to me very fine. (p. 44)

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Munro, Alice (Vol. 19): William B. Stone

Not the least of the achievements of this remarkably satisfying collection [*The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*] may be the original use of a form which, by analogy with the roman fleuve, might be termed the conte fleuve. The ten tales … constitute, if one may use another foreign term, a Bildungsroman….  

Munro makes the most of her form; its flexibility allows surprises and twists in the narrative; new insights emerge at unexpected junctures; yet there is a progressive development of Rose's character and the reader's understanding of it. Nevertheless, however much the stories gain by being read together, each is capable of standing alone. Read in order, they become installments of a serial narrative; read in isolation, each begins, essentially, in media res and quickly establishes its own universe.

Munro’s descriptive power makes possible this establishment. Through an objective cataloging of selected physical objects and attributes, highlighted by Rose's subjective reactions and an effective occasional simile, we are shown, as though looking at a Walker Evans photograph, the essence of a particular world. A grocery store, a classroom, a rented apartment, a mansion, a Legion Hall—while such settings help define the limits against which the characters struggle, they are not the cruel traps of naturalist fiction; the description is frequently humorous. Indeed, humor plays throughout the book, producing one of its major joys. The frustrating logistical problems of sexual liason are made particularly funny…. (p. 353)

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Critical Essays: Munro, Alice (Vol. 6)

Munro, Alice 1931–

A Canadian short story writer and novelist, Ms Munro first received widespread recognition for her collection *Dance of the Happy Shades*. (See also Contemporay Authors, Vols. 33-36.)

The short story is alive and well in Canada, where most of [the] 15 tales [in "Dance of the Happy Shades"] originate like fresh winds from the North. Alice Munro … creates a solid habitat for her fiction—southwestern Ontario, a generation or more in the past—and is in sympathetic vibration with the farmers and townspeople who live there.
Realist though she is, the author elects to arrive at revelations rather than ironies…. Miss Munro poses more questions than answers—a refreshing strategy. (p. 48)


["Dance of the Happy Shades" is a collection of fifteen] short stories, warm and detailed but fundamentally sketchy, set in country places and small towns in southwestern Ontario. The background in these stories is beyond all doubt authentic. The interiors of the houses, the views from their windows, the walks the people take on the roads and streets of the places where they live—all these, and the weather, are made so real that a reader who had never heard of Canada would understand, and perhaps even half recognize, the world Alice Munro is describing. The conversations also are extremely well rendered. It is only when she comes to deal with personality and character that this writer's hand becomes weak and her work faint, so that in the end the stories can be compared to a series of excellent, irreplaceable photographs in which every leaf, every thread, every stick of furniture is as clear and clean-cut as the day the camera clicked, while the human hands and faces have faded away into a blank place that is beyond recall. (p. 186)


Among their many fine qualities, [the] tales [in Dance of the Happy Shades] of small-town Ontario life, mostly set in the Forties, are beautifully controlled and precise. And always this precision appears unstrained. The proportions so exactly fit the writer's thematic aims that in almost every case it seems that really no other words could have been used, certainly no more or less. (p. 633)


Alice Munro's collection of stories [Dance of the Happy Shades] is both a progress and a regression. They show her moving forward as a beautifully exact recorder of a limited yet profound experience, and they invite the reader to turn back to the detail of her remarkable novel, Lives of Girls and Women…. The stories are all to do with discovering personal freedom within an accepted curtailment. There is no intentional nostalgia although, strangely enough, one frequently finds oneself rather wistfully caught up in some of the scenes so perfectly evoked; and there is no distortion in the characterisation. Parents, schoolfriends and neighbours never suffer the quaint inflation of people found in so much 'sticks' literature. They are shown as neither contented nor bland, and without so much as an eccentric safety valve, yet never about to explode. Fatalism? Inertia? Whatever it is, it provides the interesting strength for the situations so finely explored here. (p. 777)

Ronald Blythe, in The Listener (© British Broadcasting Corp. 1974; reprinted by permission of Ronald Blythe), June 13, 1974.

Memory is important in Alice Munro's writing, since she is obsessed by time, but imagination is more important.

In her … collection of stories, Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You, there is one ["Material"] that insists on the difference between mere recall of the past and its retrieval as materials for art…. [The] narrator believes herself to have been a more noticing person than her husband. His stories when she reads them, disprove this.

She finds a character they both knew "lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvellous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make…. A fine and lucky benevolence." It's a fair description of Alice Munro's own work in Dance of the Happy Shades (which won the 1968 Governor
General's award) and Lives of Girls and Women (winner of the Canadian Booksellers Association's award in 1972).

[This later] collection is more complex. Readers who enjoyed the earlier books because they confirmed the reality of the Canadian small town experience for a certain generation, or because they seemed to reinforce some of the ideology of the women's movement, will find more of the same. But they will find something else, too. There is a hint at hermetic concerns in the first story, ironic suggestions of a quest for the grail. One of these hints echoes a passage in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing: a historic discourse on Indians becoming a search for identity, the lecturer a deep-sea diver in search of "something small and precious, hard to locate, as a ruby maybe on the ocean floor."

The famous stone that turns all to gold.

And in the midst of the more conventional stories of strong-boned Protestant women with grandmothers and aunts, stories that move quietly to their modest epiphanies or moral insights, there is a love story of poetic bravado in which the narrator imagines her lover is dead. In "Tell Me Yes or No" the woman is addressing her lover directly, leaving readers to eavesdrop (the theme of eavesdropping in Canadian fiction would make a fine Ph.D. thesis for the sort of scholar that likes that sort of thing) and she boldly invents for him another "mistress" in addition to his wife. "I invented loving you," she insists, "and I invented your death. I have my tricks and my trap doors, too." This is a long way from the bucolic innocence (for all its incidental irony) of a story like "How I Met My Husband," which, by the way, succeeded in coming across as a television play....

All the stories are told with the skill which the author has perfected over the years, narrated with meticulous precision in a voice that is unmistakably Ontarian in its lack of emphasis, its sly humour and willingness to live with a mystery. A friend once complained to me that Alice Munro's stories were dangerously close to the style of the fiction in women's magazines, and it's true that in some of her pauses one can imagine her putting on a kettle for a pot of tea, but this is only to say that she is a very feminine writer. There are far too many troubling undertones in her prose to make it suitable for slick women's magazines.

There is a sense in this collection that Alice Munro may be ready to take a new direction, away from the far off life of farm and small town. Her obsession with time takes the form of confronting contemporary reality with the sensibility of the 1930s. Sometimes (as in "Marrakesh") the sexual freedom of the present generation is deliberately viewed through the eyes of an old-fashioned farm woman, as if in wonder at the changes time has brought. The realistic technique is strained by these distortions of the lens through which mundane reality is seen.

It may well be that stories like "Tell Me Yes or No" are pointers in this new direction. Alice Munro has it in her to become one of the best story tellers now writing.


[One] is most impressed by the feeling behind [Miss Munro's] stories—the evocation of emotions, ranging from bitter hatred to love, from bewilderment and resentment to awe. In all her work—Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), Lives of Girls and Women (1972), and [Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You]—there is an effortless, almost conversational tone, and we know we are in the presence of an art that works to conceal itself, in order to celebrate its subject.

Miss Munro's fiction is always naturalistic, at bottom, but her characters and their reactions to life may be quite varied. She presents a wonderful variety of people ... [who] create their own suspense; we always want to know more about them, where they have come from and what fate is in store. Technique is never an end in
itself, but a way of revealing character.

Miss Munro does her fictional characters the rare honor of believing in them utterly. (p. 103)

Joyce Carol Oates, in The Ontario Review (copyright © 1974 by The Ontario Review), Number 1, Fall, 1974.

Munro, Alice (Vol. 95): Introduction

Alice Munro 1931–

(Born Alice Laidlaw) Canadian short story writer and essayist.

The following entry provides an overview of Munro's career from 1980–1995. See also, Alice Munro Criticism and volume 19.

Munro is one of Canada's most critically acclaimed contemporary authors. Often referred to as a regional writer because her fiction frequently centers on the culture of rural Ontario, Munro credits the short story writers of the American South, particularly Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, with shaping her fictional perspective. In Munro's works the mundane is juxtaposed with the fantastic, and she often relies on paradox and irony to expose meanings that lie beneath the surface of commonplace occurrences. Munro acknowledges the autobiographical influences on many of her stories, which are most often framed as episodic recollections that chronicle the emotional development of adolescent and adult female characters. Although some critics regard her collections as loosely structured novels, Munro insists they are short stories. Munro's first collection, Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), as well as two subsequent collections, Who Do You Think You Are? (1978) and The Progress of Love (1986), won Governor General's Literary Awards. It was her second book, however, Lives of Girls and Women (1971), that established her as a prominent figure in contemporary Canadian literature.

Biographical Information

Munro grew up on the outskirts of Wingham, Ontario, where her family struggled to maintain a decent living from her father's silver fox farm. She characterizes this locale as belonging neither to the town nor the outlying rural communities, and critics note that Munro sets many of her stories in similarly ambiguous areas. Munro was a diligent student and earned a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario in 1949. Married two years later, she moved with her husband to British Columbia where she concentrated on raising a family. Motivated by what she calls a personal selfishness and toughness, she compiled the stories that constitute Dance of the Happy Shades over a twelve-year period. In the early 1970s after her marriage had dissolved, Munro accepted a position as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario and a few years later moved to Clinton, Ontario, a few miles from her childhood home of Wingham, with her second husband. That same year some of her stories were accepted by The New Yorker, beginning her long association with the magazine as a regular contributor. Between 1979 and 1982 Munro toured extensively in Australia, China, and Scandinavia. In 1986 she received the first Marian Engel Award, given to a woman writer for an outstanding body of work, and in 1990 she won the Canada Council Molson prize for her "outstanding lifetime contribution to the cultural and intellectual life of Canada."

Major Works

The fifteen stories in Munro's first book, Dance of the Happy Shades, explore the personal isolation that fear, ridicule, and the inability to communicate often impose. Critics note that Munro's consistent focus on social
and personal divisions provides the collection with an ironic thematic unity. In several stories Munro examines the segregation of a town's misfits. She often creates characters who initially seem certain of their identities but who gradually begin to question the basic assumptions under which they live. The title story, "Dance of the Happy Shades," for instance, centers on an annual piano recital in which a group of retarded children are silently feared and ridiculed by mothers of the "normal" students. The story ends with an exceptional performance by a retarded girl that leaves the mothers stunned and uncomfortably impressed by her talent. In this piece, as in many of her short stories, Munro explores the sources of social inhibitions and exposes the insecurities of self-righteous and self-centered characters. Other stories in the collection are "coming-of-age" tales. In "Images," a young girl and her father meet an axe-wielding recluse in the woods. The girl establishes a bond with her father when she agrees not to tell anyone about the stranger's axe. In the end, however, she realizes that she too is "[like] the children in fairy stories who have seen their parents make pacts with terrifying strangers, who have discovered that our fears are based on nothing but the truth…."

The stories in Lives of Girls and Women and Who Do You Think You Are? are similar in their depictions of the development of their central characters, and for this reason are often referred to as "open-form" novels. In the former, Munro focuses on specific experiences that affect protagonist Del Jordan's perceptions of her changing environment. Critics have compared Lives of Girls and Women to James Joyce's künstlerroman Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), for Munro's portrayal of Del as an alienated and misunderstood artist is akin to Joyce's portrait of Stephen Dedalus. In this work's opening piece, "The Flats Road," Munro compares Del's adolescent perception of reality to that of her Uncle Benny, whose vision of life is overly influenced by the irrational ideals of his childhood. Although Del is young, she recognizes that her Uncle's behavior is abnormal, and she gradually becomes aware that his freedom and playfulness are fragile, sensing that they are continually threatened by the workings of everyday reality. By the story's end, Del attempts to write about her experiences and hometown but feels that her understanding has been limited by the entrapping and demanding nature of adult life. Like Lives of Girls and Women, Who Do You Think You Are? focuses on moments of confrontation in the protagonist's life. Although many commentators treat the work as a novel, Munro refers to it as a collection of "linked stories" that deal with the maturation of the central character, Rose. Critics note the prevailing depressive quality of the stories in Who Do You Think You Are? and comment on Munro's harsh depictions of Rose's relationships with men. While the abrupt time shifts and overlapping experiences in this work provide a multifaceted characterization of Rose, some critics have suggested that the cool objectivity of the third person narrative undermines the authenticity of the characters. Munro's other collections have also received widespread critical attention. Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (1974), The Moons of Jupiter (1982), The Progress of Love, and Friend of My Youth (1990), focus on the lives of mature characters and deal primarily with adult themes. Again in these collections Munro uses irony to create an overriding sense of uncertainty and insecurity in her characters. While some critics claim that these collections lack the vitality of her earlier works, others praise Munro's ability to reveal the subtleties and dynamics of adult relationships.

Critical Reception

Many critics echo the sentiments of Catherine Sheldrick who states that the stories of Alice Munro present "ordinary experiences so that they appear extraordinary, invested with a kind of magic." It is this emphasis on the seemingly mundane progression of female lives that prompted Ted Solotaroff to call Munro a "great stylist of 1920's realism, a Katherine Anne Porter brought up to date." Similarly, Joyce Carol Oates finds "the evocation of emotions, ranging from bitter hatred to love, from bewilderment and resentment to awe … [in] an effortless, almost conversational tone" evidence that "we are in the presence of an art that works to conceal itself, in order to celebrate its subject." Occasionally faulted for limiting herself to a narrow thematic range, Munro is, nevertheless, widely regarded as a gifted short story writer whose strength lies in her ability to present the texture of everyday life with both compassion and unyielding precision.
Munro, Alice (Vol. 95): Principal Works

Dance of the Happy Shades (short stories) 1968
Lives of Girls and Women (short stories) 1971
Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You: Thirteen Stories (short stories) 1974
Who Do You Think You Are? (short stories) 1978; also published as The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose, 1979
The Moons of Jupiter (short stories) 1982
The Progress of Love (short stories) 1986
Friend of My Youth (short stories) 1990
Open Secrets (short stories) 1994

Criticism: Helen Hoy (essay date Spring 1980)


[In the following essay, Hoy discusses the paradoxical elements of Munro's fiction.]

Royal Beating. That was Flo's promise. You are going to get one Royal Beating.

The word Royal lolled on Flo's tongue, took on trappings. Rose had a need to picture things, to pursue absurdities, that was stronger than the need to stay out of trouble, and instead of taking this threat to heart she pondered: how is a beating royal?

In this delight in language and exuberant pursuit of absurdities despite ensuing complications, Rose reveals herself, in Alice Munro's latest work Who Do You Think You Are?, to be very much a child of the author herself. Munro's own sensitivity to individual words and images, her spare lucid style, and command of detail have given her fiction a precision which is one of her most distinctive accomplishments. What an examination of the texture of her prose reveals, in particular, is the centrality of paradox and the ironic juxtaposition of apparently incompatible terms or judgements: "ironic and serious at the same time," "mottoes of godliness and honor and flaming bigotry," "special, useless knowledge," "tones of shrill and happy outrage," "the bad taste, the heartlessness, the joy of it." This stylistic characteristic is closely related to the juxtaposition, in the action, of the fantastic and the ordinary, her use of each to undercut the other. So, sensational revelations of evil in pulp newspapers which leave young Del Jordan reeling, bloated, and giddy must give way to the pale chipped brick, hanging washtubs, and brown-spotted lilac bush of her home, while, by contrast, an unwelcome, retarded cousin, Mary Agnes, is revealed, in her enigmatic, daring and composed touching of a dead cow's eye, to have unexpected mystery and secrets of her own. The linking of incongruities in language or action, however, is more than a stylistic technique or fictional quirk. It reflects Munro's larger vision, one which underlies all her fiction and which emerges as a central theme in Lives of Girls and Women and in several of the short stories in Dance of the Happy Shades and Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You. Paradox helps sustain Munro's thematic insistence on the doubleness of reality, the illusoriness of either the prosaic or the marvellous in isolation.

The freshness of language and image, which is Munro's great strength, she herself explains in an interview with Graeme Gibson: "I'm not an intellectual writer. I'm very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life, and it must be that this seems to me very meaningful in a way I can't analyze or describe…. It seems to me very important to be able to get at the exact tone or texture of how things are." This impulse she, of course, embodies in Lives of Girls and Women in Del Jordan who, as a maturing writer, attempts to pin her town to paper and realizes,
"no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting.

The last words hold the clue to Del's, and Munro's obsession with external realities: it is an obsession which Munro, in her interview with Gibson, says can best be compared to a religious feeling about the world. So too when another interviewer John Metcalf asks perceptively whether she glories in surfaces because she feels them not to be surfaces, she agrees, adding, "It's just a feeling about the intensity of what is there." In the struggle to capture this intensity about very ordinary things, paradox not surprisingly becomes one of Munro's most important tools.

Sometimes this persistent "balance or reconcilement of opposites or discordant qualities" (to echo Coleridge's celebrated definition of the imagination) occurs almost in passing as an unobtrusive feature of Munro's style, in her description, for instance, of the way children whimper monotonously "to celebrate a hurt" (italics mine). Often, though, the inherent contradictions in people and situations are more explicitly confronted. Paradox becomes Munro's means of capturing complex human characteristics whether wittily as in the description of successful academics as "such brilliant, such talented incapable men" or more seriously, gropingly as in Del's discussion of an egotism women feel in men, something "tender, swollen, tyrannical, absurd". In an attempt, in "Dance of the Happy Shades," to convey the reality of the Marsalles sisters, "sexless, wild and gentle creatures, bizarre yet domestic," Munro extends paradox into physical description itself, characterizing both as having kindly, grotesque faces, and eyes which are at the same time tiny, red, short-sighted, and sweet-tempered. The same incongruities multiply in the world encompassing Munro's characters. A housewife and writer finds herself sheltered and encumbered, warmed and bound by her home; a growing girl is both absolved and dismissed by her father's causal acceptance of her moment of rebellion; the struggle of wills between an amateur hypnotist and a stubborn old woman ends with her "dead, and what was more, victorious"; a teenage girl feels that her mother's concern creates for her an oppressive obligation to be happy, as another feels that her mother loves her but is also her enemy; a maiden aunt, stumbling on her niece and a lover naked and passionate, perceives them as strange and familiar, both more and less than themselves. A character's feelings for her relatives are described as "irritable … bonds of sympathy," a writer's techniques as "Lovely tricks, honest tricks". In these examples as in many, Munro employs not an elaborated paradoxical statement but a more concentrated phrase, an oxymoron, most often in the form of two parallel but incompatible verbs or adjectives. The startling fusion of warring terms gives to her style at its best a denseness and precision characteristic of poetry.

Paradox is most prominent in the fiction's portrayal of human character and emotional reaction. At times this is simply a means of suggesting inconsistencies, variations over time, as in Del's discovery (in contrast with her youthful belief in the absolute finality of some quarrels) that people can feel murderous disillusionment and hate, then go on to love again. More often, Munro explores the emotional contradictions persisting side by side in time. A character in "Tell Me Yes or No" not only expects her lover, like a knight, to be capable alternately of "acts of outmoded self-sacrifice and also of marvellous brutality," she also goes on to describe him as simultaneously mild and inflexible. Paradox, therefore, is frequently an admirable means of conveying the intense emotional ambivalence of adolescence: in response to an example of purely decorative femininity, for example, Del reveals, "I thought she was an idiot, and yet I frantically admired her". She finds the idea of sex totally funny and totally revolting, hopes and fears she will be overheard shouting the forbidden word "bugger," and later is both relieved and desolate at the loss of her lover Gamet. In the same way, of other adolescent girls, we are told that "any title with the word popularity in it could both chill and compel me," that "she was quivering … with pride, shame, boldness, and exhilaration" (note how "shame" here is even flanked by two differing contraries), and that the pregnancy and marriage of a friend "made me both envious and appalled". (In the last example, the friend herself is concomitantly characterized as "abashed and proud.") Lest we conclude, however, that Munro is mainly recording the confusions of youth, we might note that almost the same formula is applied to an adult woman, in her response to some men's invulnerability: "I envy and
despise". Rose's friend Clifford argues that his marital dissatisfaction is not simply a change of heart over time, informing his wife, "I wanted to be married to you and I want to be married to you and I couldn't stand being married to you and I can't stand being married to you. It's a static contradiction".

In fact, the matter-of-fact union of incompatible tendencies is Munro's means of bringing life, precision, and complexity to her depiction of emotions generally. Occasionally, as in the example just given, she actually acknowledges and spells out the paradoxical nature of such feelings: "They [Del's aunts] respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it. This was strange; they could believe absolutely in its importance and at the same time convey their judgement that it was, from one point of view, frivolous, non-essential". (Compare this incidentally with a later character's mingling of "flattery and a delicate sort of contempt" in her conversation with a man). Similarly the reader is deliberately drawn into a contemplation of the paradoxical quality of Milton Homer's unsocialized behaviour in *Who Do You Think You Are?* as the narrator, describing his goggling, leering expressions as both boldly calculating and helpless, involuntary, asks if such a thing is possible. More often, we simply have subtle touches in the portrayal of characters, even minor characters—a landlord with an "affable, predatory expression," an aunt "flashing malice and kindness," a grandmother whose renunciation of love is a "self-glorying dangerous self-denying passion," the same grandmother predicting problems with "annoyance and satisfaction," an unhappy lover bound by rules "meaningless and absolute." The same duality is found on a larger scale with more central characters too, like the pathetic heroine of "Thanks for the Ride," whose combination of defiance and need, scorn and acquiescence is summed up in the final sound of her voice, "abusive and forlorn".

At one point in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del somewhat ironically characterizes the Anglican liturgy as presenting "lively emotion safely contained in the most elegant channels of language" (italics mine). In contrast to this, Munro's own technique, rather than using language to defuse emotion, creates a resonance or current, releases an intensity through the juxtaposition of oppositely charged words or ideas. The effect is not a wild splattering of emotion—in the careful precision of Munro's language, and a certain intellectual detachment as well, there is some of the control attributed here to the liturgical ritual—but it is controlled energy, a galvanic interaction between the poles of the paradox rather than a safe elegance. Through the originality not of craziness but of unexpected revelation, Munro's oxymorons have something of the same vitality as the bizarre childhood rhyme about fried Vancouvers and pickled arseholes, which so pleases Rose for what she calls "The tumble of reason; the spark and spit of craziness".

So positive emotions are unexpectedly qualified—"heartless applause," "smiling angrily," "hungry laughter," "accusing vulnerability," "aggressive bright spirits"; negative ones are similarly—"tender pain," "semitolerant contempt," "happy outrage," "terrible tender revenge"; and even an epithet like absurd, which might seem sweeping and inarguably dismissive, must coexist with its opposite: Del's mother in her youthful enthusiasm is "absurd and unassailable," Del, naked, feels "absurd and dazzling," and a boy reassures a drunken girl, with "a very stupid, half-sick, absurd and alarming expression." While such pairings can sometimes become automatic or mechanical in Munro's writing, most often the originality of the details produces a slight, revelatory wrenching of assumptions and perspective.

We should note that the effect of paradox in Munro is never to invalidate, rarely even to diminish either of the contradictory impulses. Characteristically, in fact, she employs the unifying conjunction "and," disregarding for her purposes conjunctions of limitation or concession. As Cleanth Brooks says of the technique in poetry, the ironic or paradoxical union of opposites "is not that of a prudent splitting of the difference between antithetical overemphases." So, Del in ignoring her aunts' dreams feels "that kind of tender remorse which has as its other side a brutal, unblemished satisfaction," quotes sentimental poetry "with absolute sincerity, absolute irony," and comments explicitly about her youthful curiosity over sex, "Disgust did not rule out enjoyment, in my thoughts; indeed they were inseparable" (italics mine). The contradictory emotions retain their individual intensity.
In her examination of human inconsistency, Munro presents the contradictions not only within emotions but also between emotion and behaviour. Again there is often little attempt to reduce the inconsistency or explain why actions defy their motivations; the two conflicting realities are simply juxtaposed—"The thought of intimacies with Jerry Storey was offensive in itself. Which did not mean that they did not, occasionally, take place," "The ritual of walking up and down the street to show ourselves off we thought crude and ridiculous, though we could not resist it," "not bothering to shake off our enmity, nor thinking how the one thing could give way to the other, we kissed'. At times, in fact, Munro actually uses human perverseness itself as the explanation for behaviour, in identifying the "aphrodisiac prickers of disgust" in the appeal of the idiotic saintly whore or the perversely appealing lack of handsomeness of the lecherous minister Rose encounters. Faced with an invitation to sneak away to a dance, Del feels paradoxically, "I had no choice but to do this … because I truly hated and feared the Gay-la Dance Hall."

The unexpected challenge to common assumptions which is the source of such paradoxes' power need not always be spelled out. The same shock of recognition, Coleridge's union of "the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects," is achieved when, for instance, Del's mother's radical defence of women's independence is described unexpectedly as innocent in its assumption of women's damageability, when Del comments on the concealed jubilation and eagerness to cause pain in parents' revelations of unpleasant realities, when the narrator of "Shining Houses" makes a matter-of-fact, parenthetical reference to the way people admire each other for being drunk, or when Rose reveals that outspoken hostility does not pose the threat to one of her friendships which genteel tact would. The freshness of perception which Alice Munro brings to very familiar situations lends itself to the creation of observations such as these which remain startling, although the underlying paradox is never articulated.

Indeed Munro sometimes even seems to go through an initial process of making the strange familiar so that she can then go on paradoxically to justify the originally familiar (but now strange) as also possible. An interesting example of this occurs in Who Do You Think You Are? in Rose's analysis of her reconciliation with Patrick, her fiancé. Disregarding any immediate, popular explanations like romantic love (and through silence apparently dismissing them as naïve), Munro accustoms the reader to more sophisticated, sceptical analysis by consideration of such similarly complex motivations as comradely compassion, emotional greed, economic cowardice, and vanity (with only subtle hints of glibness). Only then, ironically, does she reveal Rose's secret explanation, which Rose has never confided and which she cannot justify, namely that she may have been motivated, oddly enough, by a vision of happiness. The paradoxical revelation of unacknowledged, even denied, but recognizable aspects of human behaviour has, in the context of worldly characters and readers, been taken a step further here and turned on itself. Having directed attention towards less obvious explanations of behaviour, Munro then revitalizes from a new perspective a vision of innocence and good will which has paradoxically become unexpected.

Verbal paradox, however, particularly cryptic oxymoron, remains a more distinctive feature of Munro's style, and, as many of the examples already cited suggest, functions particularly as a means of definition, of zeroing in on the individual qualities of an emotion or moment. More than evocativeness, it is precision which she seeks in the description of "a great unemotional happiness," "sophisticated prudery," or a character "kind but not compassionate." In light of Munro's love for clear images and her insistence on her inability to put characters in a room without describing all the furniture, it is interesting that many of these paradoxes involve abstract not concrete language (an aspect of her style easily overlooked). It is the exactness and poetic explosiveness of the internal contradiction which give them their vividness. Admiring the discontinuities of modern experimental prose, Munro has complained that her writing tends "to fill everything in, to be pretty wordy." As this discussion suggests, however, while within a traditional narrative form and concerned with articulating rather than simply suggesting, her use of language generally is not discursive or rambling, but tight, economical, exact.
Paradox for Alice Munro, at the same time, is more than simply a means of definition and a stylistic tool for clarity; it reflects her vision of the complexity of human emotion, as we have seen, and of the human situation more generally. Munro defines writing itself as "a straining of something immense and varied, a whole dense vision of the world, into whatever confines the writer has learned to make for it." In the short story, "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," the protagonist Et is disgruntled to discover that her sister, bad-tempered and hot amid the steam and commotion of washday, is at the same time classically beautiful, "that the qualities of legend were real, that they surfaced where and when you least expected". Et's disgruntlement, we are told, occurs because she dislikes contradictions or things out of place; the implication is that she is rejecting reality, which Munro characterizes as inherently contradictory. Among the contradictions of existence, one of the most fundamental in the author's eyes is that of the coexistence of the ordinary and the mysterious, seen in this example and spelled out in some of Munro's oxymorons. So the fiction speaks of the "open and secret pattern" of the town Jubilee, the smoky colour of a sweater "so ordinary, reticent, and mysterious," and the "terrible ordinary cities" of Uncle Benny's experience. (Compare, incidentally, a similar insistence on "the poetry and wonder which might reveal themselves in the dunghill, and ... the dunghill that lurks in poetry and wonder" in the work of Robertson Davies, an insistence I have discussed elsewhere. The comparison is illustrative. Although Davies takes care in his fiction to root the marvellous in the commonplace, he nevertheless suggests a romantic world of good and evil found within and yet transcending everyday reality. For Munro, on the other hand, everyday existence reveals nothing beyond itself but is simply marvellous in itself. Notice in the interview with Metcalf, cited above, Munro's conclusion that, for her, surfaces are not surfaces; this formulation avoids the dualistic argument that surfaces are not merely surfaces.) The exploration of the prosaic and the marvellous runs through Munro's fiction, is developed most extensively in Lives of Girls and Women, and becomes more complex and ambiguous in Who Do You Think You Are?

Not surprisingly in light of Munro's fascination with tangible reality, discussed above, her fiction challenges romanticism which ignores the commonplace. A character warns, "Life is not like the dim ironic stories I like to read, it is like a daytime serial on television. The banality will make you weep as much as anything else", while another, introduced to her mother's childhood home, experiences the disappointment of confronting "this source of legends, the unsatisfactory, apologetic and persistent reality". In Who Do You Think You Are? the reality of harmless, malicious, eccentric Becky Tyde contradicts her extravagant role in town tales of beatings, incest, infanticide, and Rose from her own experience challenges male fictional versions of the idiotic saintly whore for their omission of drooling, protruding teeth, and phlegmy breathing. This is not a reductive elimination of imagination, but a reestablishment of balance, as are the contrasting revelations of fantastic elements, like the mystery of Et's sister's beauty, in apparently ordinary experiences. In the fiction, the extravagant and the unimaginative stand in relation to each other in much the same way as do incompatible social realities in Who Do You Think You Are?: "What Dr. Henshaw's house and Flo's house did best, in Rose's opinion, was discredit each other. In Dr. Henshaw's charming rooms there was always for Rose the raw knowledge of home, an indigestible lump, and at home, now, her sense of order and modulation elsewhere exposed such embarrassing sad poverty". The ultimate reality revealed is a paradoxical mixture of both. As Alva concludes at the end of "Sunday Afternoon," when she discovers a new excitement and power but also a new mysterious humiliation in her sexual attractiveness to her employers' friends, "things always came together".

The basic thrust of the short story "Dance of the Happy Shades," for example, is the confrontation, through the exquisite piano-playing of a retarded girl, between the pragmatism of "people who live in the world" and the casual acceptance of miracles of a pathetic old piano teacher, Miss Marsalles. Although the emphasis of the story, narrated from a commonsense viewpoint, is on the momentary revelation provided by this "one communiqué from the other country where [Miss Marsalles] lives," neither vision triumphs. Rather, we are told that as soon as the child has finished playing, "it is plain that she is just the same as before, a girl from Greenhill School. Yet the music was not imaginary. The facts are not to be reconciled". Similarly, the portrayal of the music teacher Miss Farris in Lives of Girls and Women, which begins with her doll-house
home apparently containing no secrets or contradictions, ends with two conflicting pictures of her, one of her absurdly naïve flamboyance around town, the other of her apparent suicide by drowning: "Though there is no plausible way of hanging those pictures together—if the last one is true then must it not alter the others?—they are going to have to stay together now". In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," a child's introduction to a secret love in her father's past causes her to compare his life to an enchanted landscape, ordinary and familiar while it is observed but changing mysteriously immediately afterwards. And the short story "Images" is actually structured on an easy movement away from and back to unexceptional everyday existence, as a young girl is introduced to a bizarre and frightening acquaintance of her father's. Suggesting both the reality of an ever-present mythic or nightmare world and the absorption of the marvellous into daily experience, it concludes by comparing the heroine to "the children in fairy stories who have seen their parents make pacts with terrifying strangers, who have discovered that our fears are based on nothing but the truth, but who come back fresh from marvellous escapes and take up their knives and forks, with humility and good manners".

*Lives of Girls and Women* sets out, even more directly, to investigate the nature of reality; *Real Life*, in fact, was the original title for the book. Del Jordan's growth, besides being an examination of contrasting options available to women, is an exploration of the realities of evil, death, religion, sex, and art. In this process, a series of self-contained, often mutually exclusive worlds, both communal and individual, are played against each other and against Del's uncertain sense of "real life": the world of bizarre and inventive evil of the tabloids; Uncle Benny's helpless vision of an unpredictable and unmanageable universe; the anarchical world of boys' mysterious brutality; the sealed-off country of Aunts Elspeth and Grace with its intricate formalities and private language, set against Del's mother's world of "lumps in the mashed potatoes and unsettling ideas"; Uncle Craig's world of facts and public events; the comforting created worlds of books; the solid ground of spelling bees and arithmetic problems, and the fanciful world of the school operetta, each challenging and temporarily cancelling the other; the hothouse atmosphere of winter, encouraging daydreams, and the ordinary geography of springtime; Owen's world of intense play, pitiously contrasted by Del to her own real one; the cool ordinary light of commercial classes and unreality of more academic studies; Jerry Storey's world of science and mental gymnastics; and Naomi's "normal life" of showers, hope chests, gossip, and sexual diplomacy, contrasted with a romanticized nineteenth-century life of rectitude and maidenhood. Munro is doing more here than simply identifying differences in life-styles. These visions, internally coherent and explicitly identified as independent worlds, in most cases vie with each other for the exclusive right to define experience. In the end none has ultimate authority; each is clearly presented as one reality in the context of others.

The insufficiency of many of these worlds lies in their disregard for life's complexity, their allegiance to either romanticism or empiricism at the expense of the other. Del's own tendency towards undiscriminating romanticism is presented ironically, or undercut by insistent everyday realities. She is mocked for her expectation of a pure depravity in the town prostitutes, "a foul shimmer of corruption," and for her insistence on seeing the ordinary details of their lives (the newspaper, dotted curtains, geraniums in tin cans) as merely "tantalizing deception—the skin of everyday appearances stretched over such shamelessness, such consuming explosions of lust." Her night-time fantasies of Frank Wales are followed by real dreams "never so kind, but full of gritty small problems, lost socks, not being able to find the Grade Eight classroom." Irony appears even in Del's final position after ending her sexual involvement with Garnet: "Now at last without fantasies or self-deception, cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past, grave and simple, carrying a small suitcase, getting on a bus, like girls in movies leaving home, convents, lovers, I supposed I would get started on my real life." Romanticism, though far more subtle, persists here, for her litany of alternatives, "Garnet French. Garnet French. Garnet French./Real Life," involves a disregard (in one sense, at least) for the reality of her own past experience. (This concern becomes explicit in "Forgiveness in Families" when a character muses that everyday routines are dismissed as mere preparation for life until the fact of death gives them value.)
Again though, while romanticism is challenged, ordinary reality is shown to contain its own mystery. Uncle Craig, in his disposable, vacated condition after death, is presented as the conductor of dangerous unknown forces which could flare up in the midst of the funeral rituals. Although the simple rowdiness of the Catholic children and shabbiness of their church fail to cohere with the sensational legends of their exotic and dangerous faith, and although Del's pursuit of a dramatic religious revelation must accommodate her need to go on living as usual with her family and her fear of literally bumping into things with her eyes closed, a spiritual reality is not discounted. Del finally asks, "Could there be a God not contained in the churches' net ... God real, and really in the world, and alien and unacceptable as death? Could there be God amazing, indifferent, beyond faith?" (roman type mine). Munro uses Del to mock sentimental fictional accounts of sex which employ symbolism, of a train blasting through a tunnel, for instance, to evade the reality; certainly her own account of Del's loss of virginity demythologizes sexuality through a clear-eyed unromantic emphasis on the numerous factual details of painful belt buckles, aching arches, indiscriminately visible bare buttocks, and entangled underpants. Nevertheless she does not strip sex of its power and wonder, showing Del also experiencing miraculous revelations which make even the term "pleasure" explosive, and crossing over "into a country where there was perfect security, no move that would not bring delight ... a floating feeling, feeling of being languid and protected and at the same time possessing unlimited power."

Just as death, religion, and sex reveal themselves ironically to be both more prosaic and more fantastic than at first appears, so do human beings. Del's experience of Mr. Chamberlain's masturbation undermines her expectant belief in a mad dreamlike plunge through decent appearance into absolute impersonal depravity and pure passion, revealing that "people take along a good deal—flesh that is not overcome but has to be thumped into ecstasy." Here, too, though, among the realities people take along are "all the stubborn puzzle and dark turns of themselves." Del goes through the same process, on a more sophisticated level, with Garnet. In his attempt to baptize her and force her into the mould of his world, we have a conflict between the legendary and the real, with Del realizing that she has wanted to keep him sewn up in his golden lover's skin, not wanted him out of the context of their magical game of sex, not wanted the real Garnet. Even here, however, the reality of Garnet which she must now acknowledge includes his secrets; complexities, mysteries persist even in prosaic existence.

Because the everyday world has marvels of its own, they need not be artificially imported into it. This paradoxical insistence that the truest mysteries are to be found not beyond but within the most uninspired facts, Munro underlines in the novel's final vignette, of the Sherriff family. Del's black gothic tale, her extravagant fictionalized portrayal of mad Bobby Sherriff and his sister Marion, a suicide victim, collapses in the face of the ordinariness of their home, the wicker chairs and souvenir vase, Bobby's deferential offer of cake and matter-of-fact discussion of vitamin deficiencies: "It is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there." And yet that insistent reality includes the mystery of Marion's act of suicide, unillumined by the school portrait of her stubborn unrevealing face. It includes too (in place of the spectacular revelations of madness Del has been naïvely desiring) Bobby's final enigmatic gesture, a letter in an unknown alphabet, when with private amusement he rises on his toes like a plump ballerina in wishing Del luck. It is such persistent, unfanciful, yet mysterious facts which inspire Munro's most explicit formulation of the work's theme and her own paradoxical vision (a formulation, incidentally, which in the concreteness of its imagery emphasizes the power of the ordinary): "People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum."

With Who Do You Think You Are?, a new ambiguity enters Munro's dialectic of the ordinary and the marvellous. The work continues the usual discounting of unenlivened empiricism: Flo's mockery of people's pretensions and diversions, her delight in seeing people brought down to earth, and her quite literal flaunting of dirty laundry are shown to be deficient, in her aggressive blindness, for instance, to the splendour as well as the inadequacy of glossy, indolent, over-weight Cora, Rose's childhood idol. Irony plays too over conventions (of Hanratty's "living link with the past" or of the saintly whore) and fantasies (Rose's childhood idol. Irony
plays too of angora sweaters or vision of long-suffering care for her belligerent, aging step-mother) for their ignoring of reality. Munro continues furthermore to reveal the true sublimity of the mundane: Flo's generous performance of a difficult calisthenic feat at a moment of family tension takes on some of the luminosity of a fabulous American airship whose existence has just been discredited. (At times a darker note, found also in the earlier works, colours such revelations, as in Rose's discovery when beaten by her father that familiar witnesses, the linoleum, the kitchen calendar, the pots and pans, can participate in this grotesque act, that "treachery is the other side of dailiness" [italics mine].)

At the same time, distinctions between the illusory and the real have become less confident and straightforward in this work, and the focus of objections to the visionary has changed somewhat. Rose is discomfited to discover the relative accuracy of her step-mother's lurid warnings about lechers disguised as ministers; what Rose and the reader reject at first glance as evident "nonsense" becomes difficult to differentiate from actual occurrence. Rose's own dream of someone falling instantly and helplessly in love with her is discredited not because it is fanciful and impossible but because, as she discovers with Patrick, the idea of worship is preferable to the reality: "It was a miracle; it was a mistake. It was what she had dreamed of; it was not what she wanted." The incompatibility of dream and reality has become more complex, no longer simply a matter of mutually exclusive spheres. Rose's romantic involvement with Clifford alters her morning kitchen with stained coffee pot and jar of marmalade into a dazzling scene, "exploding with joy and possibility and danger." Is this an illusion or an actual transformation of reality? Irony colours her expectation of a glittering secret or a conflagration of adultery, the affair does fizzle out anticlimactically, Rose is tempted to condemn her suffering as the self-inflicted pain of ridiculed fantasy, and, in retrospect, she prefers to focus instead on "small views of lost daily life" like her daughter's yellow slicker. Yet we receive no final verdict on the substantiality of that past passion and grief, and even the narrator's tone has become more noncommittal.

The ambiguity intensifies in the depiction of Rose's encounter with Simon; although this story culminates in a familiar synthesis of the marvellous and the commonplace, the same absence of certainty in identifying idle fancy and arid materialism continues. Some of Rose's predictions about the future of this friendship—that she will persist in the "foolishness" of a miserable obsession because of intermittent "green and springlike reveries," that a return to her job will bring the shock and yet comfort of "the real world"—designate the involvement as a delusion. Its ultimate rejection though (like the rejection of Patrick's worship) is not a pragmatic if reluctant concession to probability. Fleeing involvement with Simon, Rose realizes she has been fleeing the realization of her dreams of love as much as disappointment and the collapse of dreams; whether successful or unhappy, love she believes removes the world for you. The choice seems to be between a particular material reality, represented here by the comforting solidity of thick, glass, restaurant ice-cream dishes, and another, still possible reality. Rose requires "everything to be there for her, thick and plain as icecream dishes" and feels that love robs you of "a private balance wheel, a little dry kernel of probity" making this awareness possible. The weight of the narration seems to come down on the side of mundane reality (lacking here, significantly, the everlasting radiance Del eventually perceives in all the small physical details of her world). This triumph of uninspired but adequate tangible reality over the marvellous which can invade but also distort the real world is not, however, the definitive conclusion of the episode. Rose's appraisal of the limiting effects of love ends with the ambiguous phrase, "So she though." Rose has fled "the celebration and shock of love, the dazzling alteration"; her subsequent startled discovery of Simon's death from cancer reveals the susceptibility even of this matter-of-fact existence to "disarrangements which … throw the windows open on inappropriate unforgettable scenery." Like Lives of Girls and Women then, Who Do You Think You Are? does disclose not only the importance but also the mystery of the ordinary. At the same time, the narrator here displays a greater unwillingness, even in retrospect, to make assertions about the nature of specific events, an unwillingness reflected in Rose's lingering uneasiness that in her acting and in her life, she may have been "paying attention to the wrong things, reporting antics, when there was always something further, a tone, a depth, a light, that she couldn't get."
Like her heroine Rose, caught between Patrick's contempt for her artistic friends and her friends' contempt for her reactionary husband, Munro demonstrates what is ruefully described as an ability to "see too many sides of things;" it is this complexity of vision which informs both themes and style in her fiction.

**Criticism: Alice Munro (essay date September 1982)**


_In the following essay, Munro explains how she writes and how reality figures into her work._

Whenever people get an opportunity to ask me questions about my writing, I can be sure that some of the questions asked will be these:

"Do you write about real people?"

"Did those things really happen?"

"When you write about a small town are you really writing about Wingham?" (Wingham is the small town in Ontario where I was born and grew up, and it has often been assumed, by people who should know better, that I have simply "fictionalized" this place in my work. Indeed, the local newspaper has taken me to task for making it the "butt of a soured and cruel introspection.")

The usual thing, for writers, is to regard these either as very naive questions, asked by people who really don't understand the difference between autobiography and fiction, who can't recognize the device of the first-person narrator, or else as catch-you-out questions posed by journalists who hope to stir up exactly the sort of dreary (and to outsiders, slightly comic) indignation voiced by my hometown paper. Writers answer such questions patiently or crossly according to temperament and the mood they're in. They say, no, you must understand, my characters are composites; no, those things didn't happen the way I wrote about them; of course not, that isn't Wingham (or whatever other place it may be that has had the queer unsought-after distinction of hatching a writer). Or the writer may, riskily, ask the questioners what is real, anyway? None of this seems to be very satisfactory, people go on asking these same questions because the subject really does interest and bewilder them. It would seem to be quite true that they don't know what fiction is.

And how could they know, when it is, is changing all the time, and we differ among ourselves, and we don't really try to explain because it is too difficult?

What I would like to do here is what I can't do in two or three sentences at the end of a reading. I won't try to explain what fiction is, and what short stories are (assuming, which we can't, that there is any fixed thing that it is and they are), but what short stories are to me, and how I write them, and how I use things that are "real." I will start by explaining how I read stories written by other people. For one thing, I can start reading them anywhere; from beginning to end, from end to beginning, from any point in between in either direction. So obviously I don't take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere, with views and neat diversions along the way. I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It's more like a house. Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way. This is the nearest I can come to explaining what a story does for me, and what I want my stories to do for other people.

So when I write a story I want to make a certain kind of structure, and I know the feeling I want to get from being inside that structure. This is the hard part of the explanation, where I have to use a word like "feeling," which is not very precise, because if I attempt to be more intellectually respectable I will have to be dishonest.
"Feeling" will have to do.

There is no blueprint for the structure. It's not a question of, "I'll make this kind of house because if I do it right it will have this effect." I've got to make, I've got to build up, a house, a story, to fit around the indescribable "feeling" that is like the soul of the story, and which I must insist upon in a dogged, embarrassed way, as being no more definable than that. And I don't know where it comes from. It seems to be already there, and some unlikely clue, such as a shop window or a bit of conversation, makes me aware of it. Then I start accumulating the material and putting it together. Some of the material I may have lying around already, in memories and observations, and some I invent, and some I have to go diligently looking for (factual details), while some is dumped in my lap (anecdotes, bits of speech). I see how this material might go together to make the shape I need, and I try it. I keep trying and seeing where I went wrong and trying again.

I suppose this is the place where I should talk about technical problems and how I solve them. The main reason I can't is that I'm never sure I do solve anything. Even when I say that I see where I went wrong, I'm being misleading. I never figure out how I'm going to change things, I never say to myself, "That page is heavy going, that paragraph's clumsy, I need some dialogue and shorter sentences." I feel a part that's wrong, like a soggy weight; then I pay attention to the story, as if it were really happening somewhere, not just in my head, and in its own way, not mine. As a result, the sentences may indeed get shorter, there may be more dialogue, and so on. But though I've tried to pay attention to the story, I may not have got it right; those shorter sentences may be an evasion, a mistake. Every final draft, every published story, is still only an attempt, an approach, to the story.

I did promise to talk about using reality. "Why, if Jubilee isn't Wingham, has it got Shuter Street in it?" people want to know. Why have I described somebody's real ceramic elephant sitting on the mantelpiece? I could say I get momentum from doing things like this. The fictional room, town, world, needs a bit of starter dough from the real world. It's a device to help the writer—at least it helps me—but it arouses a certain baulked fury in the people who really do live on Shuter Street and the lady who owns the ceramic elephant. "Why do you put in something true and then go on and tell lies?" they say, and anybody who has been on the receiving end of this kind of thing knows how they feel.

"I do it for the sake of my art and to make this structure which encloses the soul of my story, that I've been telling you about," says the writer. "That is more important than anything."

Not to everybody, it isn't.

So I can see there might be a case, once you've written the story and got the momentum, for going back and changing the elephant to a camel (though there's always a chance the lady might complain that you made a nasty camel out of a beautiful elephant), and changing Shutter Street to Blank Street. But what about the big chunks of reality, without which your story can't exist? In the story "Royal Beatings," I use a big chunk of reality: the story of the butcher, and of the young men who may have been egged on to "get" him. This is a story out of an old newspaper; it really did happen in a town I know. There is no legal difficulty about using it because it has been printed in a newspaper, and besides, the people who figure in it are all long dead. But there is a difficulty about offending people in that town who would feel that use of this story is a deliberate exposure, taunt and insult. Other people who have no connection with the real happening would say, "Why write about anything so hideous?" And lest you think that such an objection could only be raised by simple folk who read nothing but Harlequin Romances, let me tell you that one of the questions most frequently asked at universities is, "Why do you write about things that are so depressing?" People can accept almost any amount of ugliness if it is contained in a familiar formula, as it is on television, but when they come closer to their own place, their own lives, they are much offended by a lack of editing.
There are ways I can defend myself against such objections. I can say, "I do it in the interests of historical reality. That is what the old days were really like." Or, "I do it to show the dark side of human nature, the beast let loose, the evil we can run up against in communities and families." In certain countries I could say, "I do it to show how bad things were under the old system when there were prosperous butchers and young fellows hanging around livery stables and nobody thought about building a new society." But the fact is, the minute I say to show I am telling a lie. I don't do it to show anything. I put this story at the heart of my story because I need it there and it belongs there. It is the black room at the centre of the house with all other rooms leading to and away from it. That is all. A strange defence. Who told me to write his story? Who feels any need of it before it is written? I do, so that I might grab off this piece of horrid reality and install it where I see fit, even if Hat Nettleton and his friends are still around to make me sorry.

The answer seems to be as confusing as ever. Lots of true answers are. Yes and no. Yes, I use bits of what is real, in the sense of being really there and really happening, in the world, as most people see it, and I transform it into something that is really there and really happening, in my story. No, I am not concerned with using what is real to make any sort of record or prove any sort of point, and I am not concerned with any methods of selection but my own, which I can't fully explain. This is quite presumptuous, and if writers are not allowed to be so—and quite often, in many places, they are not—I see no point in the writing of fiction.

Criticism: Lorraine M. York (essay date 1983)


[York is a Canadian educator and critic. In the following essay, she discusses the postmodernist elements of Munro's fiction and relates how her work incorporates several theories of photography.]

But o, photography! as no art is,
Faithful and disappointing! that records
Dull days as dull, and hold-it smiles as frauds,
And will not censor blemishes
Like washing-lines and Hall's Distemper Boards …

—Philip Larkin, "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album"

In various writings and interviews, Alice Munro has often expressed interest in photography and photographic realism. In an "Open Letter" to a small Wingham, Ontario journal, Jubilee, Munro summarized her feeling about the emotional power of local detail by referring to an Edward Hopper painting. This canvas, entitled "The Barber Shop," is a fairly static, symmetrically-composed, sunlight-flooded interior scene; yet for Munro it becomes "full of a distant, murmuring, almost tender foreboding, full of mystery like the looming trees." This Conradian phrase, so akin to Marlow's concept of "the truth disclosed in a moment of illusion," [Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim, 1958] reveals precisely that which characterizes the vision of Munro and the photographic realists—paradox. In fact, it was while reading Susan Sontag's On Photography, a searching commentary on the art which is couched in paradoxical terms, that I realized that Munro's fiction reveals those very same paradoxes and syntheses. Although studies have been written outlining the use and frequency of paradox in Munro's fiction (most notably Helen Hoy's "Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro's Fiction," ) there has been no satisfactory answer as to why paradox is so congenial to her particular way of "fictionalizing" experience.

Munro's fiction, like the Edward Hopper painting and like the work of photographic "realists" from the 1920's on, centres on the paradox of the familiar and the exotic. What Victor Shklovsky termed "defamiliarization"
(ostraneniye), the making strange of common experience, is precisely what the German Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) group and Americans like Paul Strand and Edward Weston wished to accomplish in their photography. Weston, with his close attention to surface textures, took the most prosaic and humble of objects—a paprika—and transformed it into a lusciously-textured object resembling a sitting nude. Closer to Munro's own concerns, however, is the work of a journalist-photographer team to which she makes fleeting reference in an interview with John Metcalf—that of James Agee and Walker Evans. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men takes the humblest of human subjects—Alabama tenant farmers in the 1930's—and combines literary and visual images to turn them into hauntingly strange visions of both nobility and despair.

To return to one of the central paradoxes of the photographic vision, one discovers that characters in Munro's fiction witness both the familiar and prosaic becoming unfamiliar, even threatening and the reverse process as well. In "The Ottawa Valley" it is the foreboding sense of sickness and loss which turns the most familiar of presences—the mother—into something dark and remote:

She went on as if she had not heard, her familiar bulk ahead of me turning strange, indifferent. She withdrew, she darkened in front of me, though all she did in fact was keep on walking along the path that she and Aunt Dodie had made when they were girls … It was still there

This remarkably compressed passage contrasts the vulnerable present with the comforts to be found in memory (unshifting as it is) and in physical objects.

Objects, however, as many of Munro's characters realize with profound amazement, have a mysterious inner layer as well; they possess the hidden potential to turn treacherous or supremely indifferent. As the young protagonist in "Day of the Butterfly" witnesses the future of an unpopular schoolmate "turn shadowy, turn dark" in the hospital ward, she also has a new vision of the schoolgirls' hypocritical gifts as "guilt-tinged offerings." She muses that "they were no longer innocent objects to be touched, exchanged, accepted without danger." In the last event, then, she avoids the danger that is human sympathy; Myra's parting gift to her is indifferently shrugged off as "the thing."

In Who Do You Think You Are? the source of this threat is an objective nature which is simply indifferent to human sentiment. As Rose gradually foresees her argument with Flo reach its malicious climax, she fixes her eyes upon the shoddy linoleum tiles. At this moment she sees with frightening clarity that even familiar objects are not man's familiars:

Those things aren't going to help her, none of them can rescue her. They turn black and useless, even unfriendly. Pots can show malice, the pattern of linoleum can leer up at you, treachery is the other side of dailiness.

Distortion of the commonplace becomes specifically identified with art—photographic art, in fact—in the epilogue to Lives of Girls and Women, entitled "The Photographer." Like Del's fictional treatment of Marion Sheriff, the art of her photographer has the frightening power to create grotesqueness from surface innocence:

The pictures he took turned out to be unusual, even frightening. People saw that in his pictures they had aged twenty or thirty years. Middle-aged people saw in their own features the terrible, growing, inescapable likeness of their dead parents … Brides looked pregnant, children adenoidal. So he was not a popular photographer …

Munro applied this theory of the dual nature of art—both creative and parasitic—to her own writing in a manifesto statement which echoes Rose's musings about the other side of dailiness: "There is a sort of treachery to innocent objects—to houses, chairs, dresses, dishes and to roads, fields, landscapes—which a
writer removes from their natural, dignified obscurity and sets down in print." Such visual paradox, then, underlines the more morally troubling paradox of the writer who "murders to create" by representing yet altering elements of the experienced world.

Perhaps more bewildering for Munro's protagonists is the experience of the inverse paradox—the exotic becoming familiar. Del Jordan, after her sexual flights of fancy with a black negligé as stage prop, reflects after Mr. Chamberlain's sexual theatrics, "I could not get him back to his old role, I could not make him play the single-minded, simple-minded, vigorous, obliging lecher of my daydreams. My faith in simple depravity had weakened." Earlier, this faith in depravity had been slightly shaken by the shabby ordinariness of the newspapers and potted geraniums of the local whorehouse; by "the skin of everyday experiences stretched over such shamelessness, such consuming explosions of lust." Such bathetic transformations of the exotic into the merely prosaic fill the writings of other Canadian postmodernists, most notably Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*. When the Royal Porcupine is diminished to the point of becoming ordinary Chuck Brewster, Joan Foster becomes alarmed and disillusioned: "But I didn't want him to spoil things, I didn't want him to become gray and multi-dimensional and complicated like everyone else. Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?" [*Lady Oracle*, 1976.]

The frequent appearance of clearly "odd" characters has often been noted by reviewers of Munro's work, but to characterize these figures as belonging to some aberrant "other world" is, I believe, another example of making distinctions when syntheses are more in order. As in the photographs of Diane Arbus, the grotesque makes its appearance in Munro's stories in order to make us reform our Gestalt—our conceptions of what is "odd" and "normal." The eccentric hermit Joe Phippen, whom Ben Jordan takes his daughter to meet in "Images," is not so much a creature from a competing world as an additional scrap of knowledge which Del must synthesize in order to construct an "image" of her father:

> Like the children in fairy stories who have seen their parents make pacts with terrible strangers, who have discovered that our fears are based on nothing but the truth, but who come back fresh from marvellous escapes and take up their knives and forks … like them, dazed and powerful with secrets, I never said a word.

Unlike Sherwood Anderson, to whose work Munro's has often been compared, Munro would never say (as Anderson did of *Winesburg, Ohio*) that "All the men and women the writer had ever known had become grotesque." Rather, oddity is another element in the synthesis of life in the fictional small town. "It is not true," Munro once commented, "that such a place will not allow eccentricity. Oddity is necessary as sin is … Within these firm definitions … live bewildered and complicated people."

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* this bewildering reconciliation of truth and illusion becomes the dominant theme of the collection. I agree with Helen Hoy that Munro passes into a subtler "dialectic of the ordinary and the marvellous" but not merely in terms of the recognized illusoriness of Rose's adventures. Rather, it is a self-aware dialectic of an artistic nature especially which reaches a synthesis that is typically postmodern. It is no accident, for example, that the final, title story of the volume begins with the "comic" figure of Milton Homer and ends with the "tragic" figure of Ralph Gillespie. In the description of the town parade—an event which mixes theatricality (socially-sanctioned "showing off") and "real" identities—Milton Homer accentuates this blurring of fantasy and fact: "Nobody looked askance at Milton in a parade; everybody was used to him." This overlapping of fiction and fact, wherein oddities become acceptable, is evidenced in his epic-serious name and is beautifully captured in the episode in which young Ralph Gillespie changes the title of Keats's sonnet to "On First Looking Into Milton Homer"! In fact, this subtle bridging of these two figures becomes even more significant at the end of the story, when Ralph Gillespie, *imitator* of Milton Homer, becomes a "fiction" which Rose is unable to read:
The thing she was ashamed of, in acting, was that she might have been paying attention to the wrong things, reporting antics, when there was always something further, a tone, a depth, a light, that she couldn't get and wouldn't get. And it wasn't just about acting she suspected this … She had never felt this more strongly than when she was talking to Ralph Gillespie.

Instead of prodding Ralph about his talent for mimicry, much as she might do in a public interview, Rose realizes that she might have delved further, beyond the surface fiction to the essential story of one man's life. This synthesis is completed only after Ralph's death which leaves Rose with the knowledge that "she felt his life, close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own." Thus, the blurring of the distinctions between fact and fiction which lies at the basis of postmodernist fiction develops with increasing intensity in Munro's art, as the "Photographer" as artist and Del as experiencer fully merge in Rose—the artist of experience.

If the photograph is the meeting place of the known and the unknown, it is no less the meeting place of motion and stillness in human experience. The photograph is the static moment snatched out of the perpetuum mobile of time—what French photographer Cartier-Bresson described in a now-famous utterance as the "decisive moment." As such, it has been seized upon by postmodernists as a contemporary example of what T. S. Eliot called "the still point of the turning world"—the breathless moment of intersection between the time-driven and the timeless. In architecture, we witness the continuum of flowing water in a curiously static setting (the home) in Frank Lloyd Wright's Bear Run House. In the visual arts, David Hockney's tiger is arrested in midpounce with the following admonition printed above its ferocious head: "No, this is not in motion!"

In their very form, Alice Munro's interconnected short story collections, Lives of Girls and Women and Who Do You Think You Are? function on the same borderline between motion and stasis; each self-contained story is an image in itself, linked to the larger continuum by the main character and a roughly chronological progression. To those who wrongly approach these series of linked images as a traditional novel, however, gaps are bound to appear. This is no shortcoming but a conscious choice on Munro's part, for this imagistic effect closely resembles the very texture and process of memory.

On a more minute level, Munro uses this photographic stillness in motion consciously and overtly to create her "decisive moments." One such moment occurs at the end of Lives of Girls and Women with the spontaneous act granted by Bobby Sheriff to Del Jordan. His sudden rising upon his toes Del as artist interprets, in a self-conscious fashion, as having "a concise meaning, a stylized meaning—to be a letter, or a whole word, in an alphabet I did not now." The alphabet which Del is just beginning to learn is the flux and flow of human life, and the letter or word—those special, mysterious acts of men and women—are the keys to the code. Munro uses the same linguistic analogy, never forgetting the vital link between literary device and human experience, in Who Do You Think You Are?. In "Spelling," Rose visits a home for the aged, soon to be the home of her stepmother, Flo, and observes an old woman whose only participation in life is to spell out loud words supplied by others. Rose (and Munro) choose words charged with vitality which become curiously static:

  Forest F-O-R-E-S-T …

  Celebrate. C-E-L-E-B-R-A-T-E.

This contrast between the isolated, lifeless linguistic fragments and the lush vitality of the concepts which they suggest when experienced in continuity speaks volumes about the aridity of the home, and of solitary aging itself. It is intriguing, indeed, that Susan Sontag should refer to photography on exactly this dual level, as "a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing."
Munro even incorporates this contrast between motion and stasis into her imagery: in "A Spanish Lady," a woman's self-contained musings about her own troubles are jarred by the sudden death cry of an old man in a train station. She becomes transfixed in more senses than one:

It seems as if I should not leave, as if the cry of the man dying, now dead, is still demanding something of me, but I cannot think what it is … What we say and feel no longer rings true, it is slightly beside the point. As if we were all wound up a long time ago and were spinning out of control, whirring, making noises, but at a touch could stop, and see each other for the first time, harmless and still.

The implicit image of the spinning top, its vibrant colours never perceptible until we timidly stretch out a finger to interfere, to participate, is the perfect image of our everyday experience and of our all too characteristic reticence.

Here, as elsewhere, Munro is at one with her self-conscious contemporaries. Michael Ondaatje, in *Coming Through Slaughter*, overtly uses the photograph of jazz master Buddy Bolden as a symbol of the meeting of stillness and fluidity in art—and experience. There is a constant melting and blurring of the lines separating subject and object, experience and fiction, as, for example, when the narrator or researcher of Bolden's story reflects, "When he went mad he was the same age as I am now. The photograph moves and becomes a mirror." Again, the static fact becomes fluid fiction, as the members of the group photograph (their names typographically set on the page in the position they assume in the photo at one point by Ondaatje) melt into voices giving testimony, telling their own stories along with that of Buddy Bolden. In all editions of the novel this interaction between print and image is preserved through the prominent displaying of the actual photograph on or inside the cover.

This photographic seizing of the moment becomes an overt model for Munro as well in the collection which includes "The Spanish Lady"—*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*. On the very last page, the photograph becomes the act of writing, of capturing and thus exorcising experience. The narrator tells us, first of all, that if she had been making a "proper story" out of her experiences, she would have altered certain details. This affirmation of fidelity to experience then assumes a visual form: "Now I look at what I have done and it is like a series of snapshots, like the brownish snapshots with fancy borders that my parents' old camera used to take." Referring to her fictional creation as a journey, she claims to have undertaken it with the sole purpose of capturing for all time her mother—"To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of her," but all in vain, for her edges "melt and flow." Thus, as Eliot reflects, we are left with "the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" for "Only through time is time conquered."

As this comparison suggests, Munro moves to explore the further paradox of art as both power and vulnerable helplessness. In other Canadian postmodernist novels, most notably Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and Hubert Aquin's *Blackout*, the association of fiction-making and power is set in an intensely sexual and political frame of reference. In the case of Aquin, though, this attempt at mastery—of one's experience, one's own national identity—is continually frustrated, for the novel, like the land which lies behind it, is the constant object of a power-struggle among several controlling powers. Is this attempt to gain power over the threat of extinction really so different from the power which Del Jordan learns to exercise over her dominating lover, Garnet, and eventually over the recalcitrant details of experience? Earlier in her development, after the death of Uncle Craig, this power over extinction is sought by Del through the mastery of knowledge:

I followed her [Del's mother] around the house, scowling, persistent, repeating my questions. I wanted to know. There is no protection unless it is in knowing. I wanted death pinned down and isolated behind a wall of particular facts and circumstances, not floating around loose ignored but powerful, waiting to get in anywhere.
This wish for power, for security, becomes tied to a sexual theme as Del fights both a literal and metaphorical battle against being submerged by her lover in "Baptizing." "I felt amazement," she marvels, "not that I was fighting with Garnet but that anybody could have made such a mistake, to think he had real power over me."

Finally, the theme of artistic power over chaos is established in the epilogue, with the actual physical presentation of the lists of prosaic details which Del compiles and orders with sacred devotion:

And no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting.

Interestingly, this drive to control through representation of concrete objects, besides reaching back to Neolithic cave paintings, turns up in a surprisingly parallel passage in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: "If I could do it," writes Agee. "I'd do no writing here at all. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement ..." This consideration of the power that photography and fiction hold, to bind together disparate chunks of the world, links Munro's work to the very impulses of mimesis in man.

At the same time, however, the other half of the paradox is completed with the realization that fiction and photography reveal to man the utter hopelessness of ever ordering the chaos of the outer world or the inner landscape. Both outer and inner chaos break forth, for example, in Margaret Atwood's poem, "Camera," in which the lover's insistence that both scenario and woman become immobilized for his "organized instant" is frustrated by the emotional wreckage of the scene. As though through a "zoom" lens, we are taken beyond the imagined chaos of dispersed leaves and coats flapping from tree-tops to the true eye of the storm:

travelling towards the horizon
there has been a hurricane
that small black speck
travelling towards the horizon
at almost the speed of light
is me

As in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" or The Journals of Susanna Moodie, this imposition of order and stasis (comparable in spirit to the fixity of the camera's view) is cynically rejected as untenable and even sadistic. Indeed, as in Ondaatje's novel, one senses the same grinding tension between photographic image and flowing experience—a tension which is ultimately darker than Munro's energetic study of paradox.

Nevertheless, in Lives of Girls and Women, we note a similar, though milder, process of undercutting as in the Atwood poem, after Del's brash description of her lists, with her disheartening comment, "The hope of accuracy we bring to such tasks is crazy, heartbreaking." This artistic hoarding of detail is tellingly associated with Del's saving of her own life in "Baptizing," for the simple reason that writing, for Munro, is the constant "hedge" against the chaos that is death. She observed to Graeme Gibson that writing "has something to do with the fight against death, the feeling that we lose everything every day, and writing is a way of convincing yourself perhaps that you're doing something about this." How fascinating it is, then, to see that Munro's work, like that of Aquin, displays the curious paradox which Robert Alter notes of the self-conscious novel in our century; that while it is a celebration of generation, it more often than not proves to be "a long meditation on death" [Robert Alter, Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Conscious Genre, 1975].

The reason for such an abundance of paradox in contemporary literature lies in the age-old conflict between Romantic and Classical impulses—those of sympathetic identification and aesthetic detachment. Munro's work, representative of the twentieth-century hybrid, often reveals both conflicting tendencies. In "The Office," for example, the writer's final mental portrait of her persecutor, Mr. Malley, poses delicately and
painfully this question of sympathy and distance:

Mr. Malley with his rags and brushes and a pail of soapy water, scrubbing in his clumsy way … at the toilet walls … arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust. While I arrange words, and think it is my right to be rid of him.

Like the plants and teapot which Malley forces on the young writer, the "gifts" which experiences bestow on their authors have their own price, their own nagging demands which cannot be ignored. This, in effect, is the same realization which Rose reaches in *Who Do You Think You Are?*. While she is prevented from turning a letter from Flo into a public storytelling exhibition by "a fresh and overwhelming realization" of the "gulf" which lies between her and her past, she nevertheless comes to recognize through Ralph Gillespie that the gulf is also a living link. In terms of the photographer's art, Susan Sontag sums up these, and many of the other conflicting tendencies already noted in Munro's art, with characteristic insight:

Photography, which has so many narcissistic uses, is also a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation to the world; and the two uses are complementary. Like a pair of binoculars with no right or wrong end, the camera makes exotic things near, intimate; and familiar things small, abstract, strange, much further away. It offers, in one easy, habit-forming activity, both participation and alienation in our own lives and in those of others.

Like the photographer, then, who establishes distance through a selective rectangular frame, writing is both a selection and a distancing. Nevertheless, as Cartier-Bresson observed of his art, "in order to 'give a meaning' to the world, one has to feel involved in what he frames through the viewfinder." This precept should be remembered by critics who deplore the constraint and morbidity of Munro's "town," for Munro affirms her link to her created world in characteristically paradoxical terms: "Solitary and meshed these lives are, buried and celebrated."

Like her postmodernist contemporaries, Alice Munro is intensely fascinated by the burials and celebrations, links and gulfs, fictions and nonfictions of the world around her. By fusing these disparate elements into the synthesis which is paradox, Munro accomplishes what a recent reviewer observed of Cartier-Bresson: "He has brought his intuition to the surface of his skin and he has kept it there, bonding into single entity photographer, camera, time, and the objective world." In fact, like all sensitive men and women in a disconcerting, exhilarating age, Alice Munro is "coolly obsessed with humanity."

**Criticism: George Woodcock (essay date Summer 1986)**


[Woodcock was a Canadian educator, editor, author, and critic. In the following essay, he explores realism in Munro's writing, particularly as it relates to her younger female characters.]

But the development of events on that Saturday night; that fascinated me; I felt that I had had a glimpse of the shameless, marvellous, shattering absurdity with which the plots of life, though not of fiction, are improvized. (Alice Munro, *Dance of the Happy Shades*)

There is a challenging ambivalence in Alice Munro's stories and her open-ended episodic novels, a glimmering fluctuation between actuality and fictional reality, or, if one prefers it, a tension between
autobiography and invention which she manipulates so superbly that both elements are used to the full and in
the process enrich each other.

The paperback edition of Munro's second novel, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, bears on its cover the
reproduction of a neo-realist painting by Ken Danby, called "The Sunbather." It has no illustrative function;
none of the episodes that make up the novel concerns or even mentions sunbathing. Yet it is hard to think of a
painting that could have been better chosen to convey the special tone and flavour of Munro's writing.

A girl sits naked on a partly shaded patch of grass, her knees drawn up, her arms resting on them, her cheek
resting on a wrist. Everything is rendered with the meticulous exactitude that only tempera, as a medium,
makes possible—the tones of the gently tanning skin perfectly caught, the grass blades spiky yet pliable in the
darkening green of high summer; the girl's face shows neither joy nor discontent, but a kind of indrawn
pensiveness. Yet the realism, precise and particular as it may be, is much more than mimetic. The artist is not
merely representing life, not merely recording how a particular girl with rather greasy hair and a largish
bottom looked when she sat on the grass on a certain day in July. He is creating an image, outside time and
place, that stands in our minds not merely as a painted surface, but as an epitome, a focussing of several
generalities that come together in its eternal moment—generalities like youth and girlishness and the benison
of sunlight and the suggestion of fertility that we sense in the girl's broad hips and at the same time in the
springing green of the grass and weed leaves among which she sits.

And this, except that she is using words rather than paint to impress her images on the mind, is very near to
what Alice Munro tries to do. Just as magic realist painters create a kind of super-reality by the impeccable
presentation of details in a preternaturally clear light, and in this way isolate their images from actuality, so
Munro has combined documentary methods with a style as clear as the tempera medium in painting. In this
essay I propose to discuss the methods in the hope of illuminating the ends.

Alice Munro has been rightly reluctant to offer theoretical explanations of her methods, for she is quite
obviously an anti-dogmatic, the kind of writer who works with feeling ahead of theory. But even on the
theoretical level she is shrewd in defining the perimeters of her approach, perhaps negatively rather than
positively. She once, for example, in an essay written for John Metcalf's *The Narrative Voice*, entitled "The
Colonel's Hash Resettled," cautioned against attempts to read symbolism excessively into her stories. And she
was right, for essentially her stories are what they say, offering their meaning with often stark directness, and
gaining their effect from their intense visuality, so that they are always vivid in the mind's eye, which is
another way of saying that she has learnt the power of the image and how to turn it to the purposes of prose.

Her visuality is not merely a matter of rendering the surface, the realm of mere perception, for she has
understood that one of the great advantages of any effective imagist technique is that the image not merely
presents itself. It reverberates with the power of its associations, and even with the intensity of its own isolated
and illuminated presence. Munro herself conveyed something of this when John Metcalf, remarking on the
fact that she seemed to "glory in the surfaces and textures," asked whether she did not in fact feel "surfaces'
not to be surfaces," and she answered that there was "a kind of magic … about everything," "a feeling about
the intensity of what is there."

When Alice Munro first began to write, her work tended to be undervalued, except by a few exceptionally
percipient readers like Robert Weaver, because her tales of Ontario small-town life were taken to be those of a
rather conventional realist with a certain flair for local colour. And realism at that time, following its decline
in the visual arts, was going into a somewhat lesser eclipse in literature. Canada was becoming aware of
modernism, and this meant that for a time at least writers were concerned with thematic and symbolic fiction
rather than with anything that savoured of the mimetic.
Alice Munro has always been one of those fortunate and self-sufficient writers who never really become involved in movements or in literary fashions. From her start she had her own view of life, largely as she had lived it herself, and her aim was to express it in a fiction distinguished by craftsmanship and clear vision rather than by self-conscious artifice. It was a curiously paradoxical method of self-cultivation and self-effacement that she followed, for she has always written best when her stories or the episodes in her novels were close to her own experience in a world she knew, yet at the same time she cultivated a prose from which authorly mannerisms were so absent that it seemed as though the stories had their own voices. In the process Alice Munro became, next to Marian Engel, perhaps Canada's best prose stylist.

But linked to the pellucid clarity of that voice, or voices, there was always the intense vision—and in this context I mean vision as a power of visualizing. The comparison with magic realist painters that I made early in this essay is not merely an analogical one, for Munro is always deeply concerned with describing, with establishing scenes and people clearly in the mind's eye, and as in real life, so in her stories, we establish our conception of the character of people first by recognizing what they look like and how they speak, and then, such familiarity established, proceeding inward to minds and feelings. The photographic element in her presentation of scenes and characters as visualizable images is an essential factor in her writing.

The camera, of course, does not always lie, but through the photographer's conscious selectiveness and even more through the tendency of the lens to isolate the image from the chaos of actuality, it does offer us a different reality from that which we normally perceive. In an interesting essay entitled "Alice Munro and the American South," J.R. (Tim) Struthers discussed the influence on Munro of writers like Eudora Welty and James Agee, and in doing so he talked of the way in which both these writers were fascinated by the possibilities of photography as a medium and its relationship to the kind of realistic writing which they carried on. They saw the special literalness of the photograph not as a usurpation of the role of imaginative perception but as a means of enhancing it. In this sense Struthers talks of Munro as having a "visual or photographic imagination," and as an example he cites the ending of a harrowing little story of the scalding death of a baby, "The Time of Death," which appears in her first volume of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. The story drifts away into its intended anticlimax as the little shabby neighbourhood absorbs the minor tragedy and then, at the very end, the narrator steps backward out of the stunted lives of the characters and stands like a photographer taking a middle-distance shot of the setting:

There was this house, and the other wooden houses that had never been painted, with their steep patched roofs and their narrow, slanting porches, the wood-smoke coming out of their chimneys and dim children's faces pressed against their windows. Behind them there was the strip of earth, ploughed in some cases, run to grass in others, full of stones, and behind this the pine trees, not very tall. In front were the yards, the dead gardens, the grey highway running out from town. The snow came, falling slowly, evenly, between the highway and the houses and the pine trees, falling in big flakes at first and then in smaller and smaller flakes that did not melt on the hard furrows, the rock of the earth.

This paragraph, which terminates the story, is not only a good example of Munro's ability to create sharply visual images, still shots, that stir our feelings, in this case pitying despair. It also, by an echo many readers must have recognized, establishes her links with an earlier strain of realism, that of the James Joyce of *Dubliners*. The Joyce story I mean, of course, is "The Dead"; though the title of the story is reminiscent of Munro's, the main action of the story is quite different from hers, but in the end there is the final paragraph in which, as in "The Time of Death," the idea of death and the image of snow are brought together:

Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly into the Bog of Allen, and, farther westward, softly falling over the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay
thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

The resemblance is tenuous but haunting, and the echo is quite clear. I am not suggesting that there is a conscious borrowing here, for, as all writers know, recollections of their reading can lodge in recesses of the mind until they are called up to fit into the *bricolage* that the imagination makes out of the resources of memory, conscious and unconscious alike. More important, perhaps, is the general resemblance between the kind of realism that Alice Munro developed during the 1950s and that of the early days of modernism, the kind of realism one finds not only in the early Joyce and—more lyrically expressed—in the early Lawrence, but also in their continental European contemporaries like Thomas Mann and Italo Svevo. There is the same tendency towards the *Bildungsroman*, whether manifest in a novel or disguised in a cluster of related stories; the sense of a society observed with oppressive closeness from within by someone who wants to escape; the concern for the appalling insecurities created by what was then called social climbing, and now is called upward mobility; the agonized awareness of the perils of moving through the transitions of life, from childhood to adolescence, from adulthood to age.

While Alice Munro's approach has a great deal in common with this European realism of the early part of the century that trembled on the edge of modernism, without herself going forward—as some of the modernists like Joyce and Wyndham Lewis did—from realism to the extremes of formalism, it has little in common with the kind of prairie writing that represented realism for Canadians during the decades between the great wars. Writers such as Robert Stead, Martha Ostenso and Frederick Philip Grove were concerned with the pioneer farmers and their struggle with the frontier lands of the great plains. Alice Munro was dealing with a society that had long passed out of the pioneer stage, and represented a decaying established culture rather than a frontier one. The problem of those who inhabited it was not, as it had been with Grove's characters, to conquer the wilderness without being destroyed in the process, but to escape before one had been dragged down into the mental stagnation and physical decay of the marginal farmlands of Ontario.

Alice Munro herself grew up in this background, and much of the content of her stories and novels, if it is not strictly autobiographical, does echo the experiences of her youth. Like Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women*, she was brought up on a farm where her father bred silver foxes without ever prospering greatly; her mother, like Del's, was a bright, frustrated woman, whose iconoclastic cast of mind contradicted her social ambition, and who died of Parkinson's disease. Again like more than one of her heroines, Munro married and moved west to British Columbia, which gave her another terrain for her stories; also like them, she stepped out of a disintegrating marriage and returned to Ontario. In other words, she wrote of what she knew best, and while each of her stories lives within its own complete world and is not a mere mirroring of the writer's life, it is inevitable that the fictions she drew out of the intensely remembered country of her childhood should be more convincing than those she conceived in British Columbia, where she was never completely at home.

Turning to the books themselves, there are three collections of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* and *The Moons of Jupiter*, and two novels, *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* They have appeared at fairly symmetrical intervals, between three and four years from one book to the other, and up to now they have alternated in form, a novel of related episodes following a collection of miscellaneous stories.

*Dance of the Happy Shades* appeared in 1968. It was a late date in terms of Munro's writing life, for she had been publishing stories sporadically since the early 1950s, and I remember when I met her round about 1955 I did so with pleased recognition, since I had already read and admired some of her stories. I am sure I became aware of them through Robert Weaver, who more than anyone else "discovered" her, broadcasting her stories on various CBC programmes he ran, publishing them in *Tamarack Review* when it began in 1956, and including them in his Oxford anthologies, *Canadian Stories*, of which the first appeared in 1960.
Munro's experience was not unique; it was that of almost all Canadian writers of fiction, who during the 1950s and 1960s had to face a reaction against the short story on the part of both book publishers and popular magazines in Canada. It was only in the later 1960s, largely because of the success with which Weaver had introduced stories to radio audiences, that publishers once again began accepting collections and finding that willing readerships existed.

Once Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades* appeared in 1968, her acceptance by Canadian readers was assured, and her later volumes were successful not only in Canada, but also in the United States, where the marginal agrarian communities she portrayed were recognized as familiar, and where reviewers, ignorant of other Canadian writers, almost automatically compared her with American analogues like John Cheever and Joyce Carol Oates. In fact, like Al Purdy with his poetic rendering of the "degenerate Loyalist" heritage of Ameliasburgh and thereabouts, Munro offers the portrait of a distinctively Canadian society and does it in a distinctively Canadian way. Her sense of the interplay of setting and tradition is impeccable, so that there are really two ways of reading Munro, the exoteric one of the reader who knows a good story when he comes upon it, and reads it with enjoyment and not too much concern for authenticity, and the esoteric one of the Canadian who is likely to read it with a special sense of its truth or otherwise to the life and land he knows.

Perhaps because, unlike the later collections of stories, it is gathered from the writings of a relatively long period—at least fifteen years as against three or four—*The Dance of the Happy Shades* is more varied and tentatively venturesome than the later volumes. It shows the author trying out different modes and approaches. There are stories, like "The Office," that rather self-consciously explore the problems of women setting out as writers in an unsympathetic environment. There are others, like "The Shining Houses," a study of the callousness young property owners can show in defending their "values" (i.e. the selling prices of their homes), that are as ambivalently suburban as anything by John Cheever. "Sunday Afternoon" is a little social study, highly class-conscious for a Canadian writer, of the relations between a country girl hired to serve in a rich middle-class home and her brittle-brainless employers. And in "Thanks for the Ride" Munro makes a rare foray across the sex line and tells in the voice of an adolescent boy the story of his first lay; in fact, the point of view is deceptive, since the real interest of the story lies in the portrait of his partner Lois, a fragile yet tough working-class girl, much used by men and yet—in her coarse independence—strangely inviolate.

Most of the remaining stories fall into a group of which the main theme is childhood and growing up in the Ontario countryside, with action centred sometimes on the farm operated by the father of the central character and sometimes in the nearby town where the mother at times lives separately and where the girl attends school. The father-dominated farm represents the world of nature and feeling, a world devoid of ambition. The mother-dominated house in town represents the world of social and intellectual ambition, just as the school is the setting where the heroine establishes her relationship with her peers among the small-town children but also develops her desire to escape into a broader world. In some of the stories the mother, living or remembered, is shown advancing into the illness—Parkinson's disease—that will accentuate the oddity which most of her neighbours have already mocked in her.

The three stories of childhood, "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Image" and "Boys and Girls," are perhaps the most important of this group, both for their vivid evocation of the decaying rural life a century after the pioneers of Upper Canada, and for their delineation of the relationships between parents and children in hard times.

"Walker Brothers Cowboy," the opening story of the book, takes us to a time when the silver fox farm has failed and Ben Jordan has taken up peddling the patent medicines, spices and food flavourings distributed by Walker Brothers. The story, told by his daughter who does not name herself, begins by relating this time of stress and need to the slightly better past on the farm. The girl's mother, also unnamed, tries desperately to maintain self-respect in a situation she sees as a demeaning loss of social standing, even though she lives physically better in the town than on the farm.
Fate has flung us onto a street of poor people (it does not matter that we were poor before, that was a different kind of poverty), and the only way to take this, as she sees it, is with dignity, with bitterness, with no reconciliation. No bathroom with claw-footed tub and a flush toilet is going to comfort her, nor water on tap and sidewalks past the house and milk in bottles, nor even the two movie theatres and the Venus Restaurant and Woolworths so marvellous it has live birds singing in its fan-cooled corners and fish as tiny as finger-nails, as bright as moons, swimming in its green tanks. My mother does not care.

The father, more self-contained, more ironic, finds ways to live with Depression conditions and salvage his pride. As the story opens we see him walking with his daughter beside Lake Huron and telling her how the Great Lakes were gouged out of the earth by the ice coming down in great probing fingers from the north. Clearly the girl prefers her father's company to her mother's:

She walks serenely like a lady shopping, like a *lady* shopping, past the housewives in loose beltless dresses torn under the arms. With me her creation, wretched curls and flaunting hair bow, scrubbed knees and white socks—all I do not want to be. I loathe even my name when she says it in public, in a voice so high, proud and ringing, deliberately different from the voice of any other mother on the street.

Travelling his route of the desperate dusty farmlands, Ben Jordan makes fun of his situation by improvising as he rides a kind of endless ballad of his adventures on the road, and this becomes a kind of *leitmotiv* one day when he sets out with the girl and her brother and, leaving his Walker Brothers territory, takes them to a farmhouse where a woman who was once his sweetheart is living. The clean bare farmhouse with Catholic emblems on the walls and an old woman dozing in a corner becomes a kind of stage on which is revealed to the girl that people we know may have dimensions to their lives of which to this point we have been unaware. The sense of something theatrical and unreal and different from ordinary life is given by the fact that Ben Jordan and his old sweetheart Nora Cronin name each other, but nobody else in the story is named. The strangeness of the hitherto unknown past is framed within the nameless ordinariness of the present.

In "Image" a different kind of framing takes place. The story begins with the girl, again unnamed and again mainly a spectator, remembering the coarse cousin, Mary McQuade, who comes in to act as a kind of nurse in family crises and who is now filling the house with her overbearing presence because the mother is ill. The father—once again Ben Jordan but now an unspecified farmer—runs a trapline down by the river, and one day he and the girl go down to harvest the muskrats. On their way they encounter a crazy recluse, Joe Phippen, who patrols the river bank with an axe in search of imagined enemies. They go to the cellar where Joe has been living since his house burnt down; for the girl it seems like an underground playhouse, except for its sinister smells and a mad cat the hermit feeds whisky. As they leave the cellar Ben Jordan cautions the girl when she gets back to tell nobody in the house about the axe. At table with Mary McQuade he relates the story of Joe and his drunken cat, and Mary is filled with indignation.

"A man that'd do a thing like that ought to be locked up."

"Maybe so," my father said. "Just the same I hope they don't get him for a while yet. Old Joe."

"Eat your supper," Mary said, bending over me. I did not for some time realize that I was no longer afraid of her. "Look at her," she said. "Her eyes dropping out of her head, all she's been and seen. Was he feeding whisky to her too?"

"Not a drop," said my father, and looked steadily down the table at me. Like the children in fairy stories who have seen their parents make pacts with terrifying strangers, who have discovered that our fears are based on nothing but the truth, but who come back from
marvellous escapes and take up their knives and forks, with humility and good manners, prepared to live happily ever after—like them, dazed and powerful with secrets, I never said a word.

In this story the filial link is complete. The father puts his trust in his daughter, and she keeps it in a kind of complicity to protect the strange and eccentric and unpopular in human behaviour—a complicity that will re-emerge in Munro's fiction.

But in "Boys and Girls" the trust between father and daughter is broken, and that is one of the complex aspects of growing up, involving as it does the girl's gradual realization of the difference between the sexes that in the end, and no matter what Freud may have said, makes fathers see sons as their successors and makes men stand together.

The action of this story takes place entirely on the fox farm. In a passage of admirably clear and restrained description Munro creates the feeling of the place and details the daily tasks the girl performs as she helps her father, keeping the pens supplied with water and spreading grass over them to prevent the foxes' pelts from being darkened by sunlight. Her little brother also helps, but she jealously guards the main tasks for herself, and resents her mother's attempts to trap her into household tasks. The curiously detached centre of all this activity is formed by the foxes which, despite generations of captivity, have not ceased to be wild animals, hostile and intractable:

Naming them did not make pets out of them, or anything like it. Nobody but my father ever went into the pens, and he had twice had blood-poisoning from bites. When I was bringing them their water they prowled up and down on the paths they had made inside their pens, barking seldom—they saved that for nighttime, when they might get up a chorus of community frenzy—but always watching me, their eyes burning, clear gold, in their pointed malevolent faces. They were beautiful for their delicate legs and heavy, aristocratic tails and the bright fur sprinkled on dark down their backs—which gave them their name—but especially for their faces, drawn exquisitely sharp in pure hostility, and their golden eyes.

One has the sense that although loyalty to her father would never let her admit the thought, these wild captive creatures have earned the girl's sympathy, and what happens shortly afterwards seems to confirm this. She begins all at once to realize that her cherished position in the little world of the farm has become insecure:

This winter also I began to hear a great deal more on the theme my mother had sounded when she had been talking in front of the barn. I no longer felt safe. It seemed that in the minds of the people around me there was a steady undercurrent of thought, not to be deflected, on this one subject. The word girl had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word child; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment. Also it was a joke on me….

The critical point comes shortly afterwards, when her loyalties are all at once tested, and her response is as astonishing to her as it is to anyone else. Her father buys superannuated horses to slaughter for fox food; occasionally there will be a perfectly healthy animal among them for which in these days of increasing mechanization a farmer no longer has any use. A mare of this kind, whom they call Flora, is bought and kept over winter. She is a nervous animal, in some ways almost as proud and intractable as the foxes, and on the day she is being taken out to be shot she breaks away into a meadow where a gate has been left open. The girl and her brother are sent to close it.
The gate was heavy. I lifted it out of the gravel and carried it across the roadway. I had it halfway across when she came into sight, galloping straight towards me. There was just time to get the chain on. Laird came scrambling through the ditch to help me.

Instead of shutting the gate, I opened it as wide as I could. I did not make any decision to do this, it was just what I did. Flora never slowed down; she galloped straight past me, and Laird jumped up and down, yelling, "Shut it, shut it" even when it was too late….

The mare, of course, is eventually caught and killed. And then, at mid-day dinner, her brother Laird tells on the girl:

My father made a curt sound of disgust. "What did you do that for?"

I did not answer. I put down my fork and waited to be sent from the table, still not looking up.

But this did not happen. For some time nobody said anything, then Laird said matter-of-factly, "She's crying."

"Never mind," my father said. He spoke with resignation, even good humour, the words that absolved and dismissed me for good. "She's only a girl," he said.

I didn't protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true.

Two themes that will recur in Munro's later writing have been introduced; the burden of femininity, and the need to break free. They take on increased importance in her first novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*. This appears to have begun as another collection of stories that had enough of a common strain for the publisher to suggest she might turn them into a novel; its origin survives in the episodic and rather discontinuous structure of the work.

*Lives of Girls and Women* really completes the three stories I have just been discussing. The inconsistencies that existed between them are ironed out. Ben Jordan is still the father and he runs a fox farm. The other characters are now all named, the girl becoming Della (or Del), the mother Ida, the brother changing to Owen, and with this naming everything seems to become more precise in intent. Even the locality is named, for the farm is on Flats Road in the disreputable outskirts of the town of Jubilee, and the action alternates between the farm and the town, where Ida takes a house where she and Del live except in the summer months.

The eight parts (significantly they are named but not numbered, so that they seem as much stories as chapters) really serve two functions. Each is an exemplary episode, self-contained even though its characters spill over into the other episodes, so that it can stand on its own. Yet, in the classic manner of the *Bildungsroman*, each episode builds on the last, revealing another side of Del's education in life, and as the progression is generally chronological, the continuity becomes that of a rather conventional novel, which begins in the heroine's childhood and ends when, as a young woman who has just allowed a love affair to divert her from winning a scholarship, she turns to the world of art and begins her first book.

The general inclination of *Lives of Girls and Women* is indeed that of a portrait of the artist, and the first-person voice in which it is told is appropriate. It looks back to the final and title story of *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which tells of the last party of an old music teacher who astonishes and annoys her middle-class pupils and their parents by producing a girl from a school for the retarded who is clearly, whatever her intelligence, something near to a musical genius:
Miss Marsalles sits beside the piano and smiles at everybody in her usual way. Her smile is not triumphant, or modest. She does not look like a magician who is watching people's faces to see the effect of a rather original revelation; nothing like that. You would think, now that at the very end of her life she has found someone she can teach—whom she must teach—to play the piano, she would light up with the importance of this discovery. But it seems that the girl's playing like this is something she always expected, and she finds it natural and satisfying; people who believe in miracles do not make much fuss when they actually encounter one. Nor does it seem that she regards this girl with any more wonder than the other children from Greenhill School, who love her, or the rest of us, who do not. To her no gift is unexpected, no celebration will come as a surprise.

The sense of art as a miracle, and the sense also of some special kind of intelligence that recognizes it recurs in Munro's books, and it is linked with the idea that there are levels of access to truth which have nothing to do with what in the world passes for wisdom or intelligence.

This is shown quite clearly in the first chapter—or story—of *Lives of Girls and Women*, "The Flats Road," where the central character is an eccentric, Uncle Benny, who lives in a house full of junk on the edge of the bush and works as a hired man on Ben Jordan's fox farm:

> Probably the reason he kept on working for my father, though he had never worked steadily at any other job, was that my father raised silver foxes, and there was in such a business something precarious and some glamorous and ghostly, never realized, hope of fortune.

It is through Uncle Benny that Del and her brother begin to learn the perilous wonders of the natural world, represented by the great bog with its ravenous quicksands that stretches beyond his home; it is through him that they begin to recognize the inexpressible strangeness of human relations, represented by his disastrous adventure with a mail-order wife:

> So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling reflection, the same, but never at all the same. In that world people could go down in quicksand, be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; luck and wickedness were gigantic and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen; defeats were met with crazy satisfaction. It was his triumph, that he couldn't know about, to make us see.

Through the remaining chapters of *Lives of Girls and Women* runs the recurrent theme of people who, whether they intend or know it, "make us see." In "Heirs of the Living Body" it is the old great-aunts preserving a model of the idealized Victorian Ontario farm life as they provide for their brother, Uncle Craig, who spends his time writing a vast prosaic chronicle of the history of his district. When he dies, his sisters give Del his manuscript, remarking: "He had the gift. He could get everything in and still make it read smooth." And ironically, though Del rejects Uncle Craig's manuscript by losing it, this is what her narrative seeks to do, to get everything in that is of importance, and to "make it read smooth"—the realist's ambition.

In other chapters her mother's intellectual restlessness, her own search for a faith that seems to meet her poetic expectations of religion, and the frenetic dedication to a parody of art which inspires the hysterically flamboyant teacher Miss Farris who produces the school operetta every year (and having lived to the limit of her own style commits suicide), are all stages on the path to self-realization and to realization of the true nature of the world along which Del is proceeding. So in the strangely poised title chapter, "Lives of Girls and Women," Del's sexual fantasies about middle-aged Mr Chamberlain come to a climax in more ways than one when he takes her out to the country and masturbates in her presence. It could have been a shocking and traumatic experience, but Del takes it in her ironic stride, already at heart the observer-writer to whom everything is grist to the mill. This comes out at the end of the chapter, when her mother makes the statement
that gives chapter and book their common title:

There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals….

It sounds like a good feminist statement until, talking of "self-respect," Ida Jordan makes it clear—at least in Del's mind—that she is talking about the caution and calculation which "being female" must impose on women,

Whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same.

And this is precisely what Del attempts, becoming involved in a love affair with a fervent young Baptist, being so submerged emotionally as to lose the scholarship her brilliance at school has led her to expect, but retaining enough of a will to reject finally his desire to overpower her mentally as well as sexually; resisting his attempt to baptize her forcibly, she brings their relationship to an end.

Her love burnt out, her scholarly ambitions abandoned, Del turns to the writing she has dabbled with over the years, and sets about composing a highly Gothic novel about a Jubilee family all of whose children have ended tragically, in suicide or madness. And then, by chance, she meets one of the sons, recently released from his mental home, and finds how false her perceptions have been, like the distortions of a bad photographer. Writing, she decides, must be true to the spirit of what it portrays, to its often unsensational reality. And it is in this realization, we are free to assume, though Munro never says it directly, that Del has written the book we have just read.

If one reads it in connection with the earlier stories to which it is so closely linked, Lives of Girls and Women is a remarkable achievement both in human understanding and in technical prowess, presenting a psychologically and emotionally convincing episodic narrative of a questing child's development into a young woman on the edge of artistic achievement, and using a quasidocumentary form so effectively that we are always aware of the imagination shaping and illuminating the gifts of an obviously vivid memory.

The second novel, Who Do You Think You Are?, is a much less convincing book than Lives of Girls and Women, in both emotional and aesthetic terms. It too is a Bildungsroman, extending well beyond childhood into the darker times of middle age with its failed marriages, humiliating love affairs and mundane careers. The story of Rose, her upbringing in the rural slum of West Hanratty, and her subsequent and doomed marriage to a rich fellow student, develops the theme of social climbing and its perils that is already present in Lives of Girls and Women. The novel, again a series of loosely connected episodes, is written in the third person, and this shift in point of view accompanies—perhaps even creates—a notable change in tone from the earlier book. In Lives of Girls and Women the sense of familiar authenticity was sustained by the fact that the aspirant writer as central character was assumed to be both participant and observer. In Who Do You Think You Are? the participant is observed, and there is a kind of hard objectivity to the book with its relentless social documentation of low life in West Hanratty at the end of the Thirties. Though Munro does make a largely successful attempt to project the inner life of her principal character, the other leading figures in the novel, like Rose's crotchety stepmother Flo, her violent father and her snobbish husband, are shallow projections, almost caricatures, portrayed with none of the feeling and understanding that characterized the presentation of the father and mother, Ben and Ida Jordan, in the earlier novel.

Yet, though the general tone of Who Do You Think You Are? is at once harsher and more brittle than that of Lives of Girls and Women, there is a variation of quality within the book, and the first four chapters, which
deal with childhood in Ontario, are the most effective. When the action moves into other places, notably the alien realm of British Columbia, the documentary background becomes more uncertain, and as Munro deals with the problems of adults living out their erotic fantasies she seems too near her subject for the special kind of luminous objectivity that characterizes the stories of childhood and adolescence to develop.

An excerpt from "The Jack Randa Hotel," in Open Secrets

After Will went away, it seemed to Gail that her shop was filling up with women. Not necessarily buying clothes. She didn't mind this. It was like the long-ago days, before Will. Women were sitting around in ancient armchairs beside Gail's ironing board and cutting table, behind the faded batik curtains, drinking coffee. Gail started grinding the coffee beans herself, as she used to do. The dressmaker's dummy was soon draped with beads and had a scattering of scandalous graffiti. Stories were told about men, usually about men who had left. Lies and injustices and confrontations. Betrayals so horrific—yet so trite—that you could only rock with laughter when you heard them. Men made fatuous speeches (I am sorry, but I no longer feel committed to this marriage). They offered to sell back to the wives cars and furniture that the wives themselves had paid for. They capered about in self-satisfaction because they had managed to impregnate some dewy dollop of womanhood younger than their own children. They were fiendish and childish. What could you do but give up on them? In all honor, in pride, and for your own protection?

Gail's enjoyment of all this palled rather quickly. Too much coffee could make your skin look livery. An underground quarrel developed among the women when it turned out that one of them had placed an ad in the Personal Column. Gail shifted from coffee with friends to drinks with Cleata, Will's mother. As she did this, oddly enough her spirits grew more sober. Some giddiness still showed in the notes she pinned to her door so that she could get away early on summer afternoons. (Her clerk, Donalda, was on her holidays, and it was too much trouble to hire anybody else.)

Gone to the Opera.

Gone to the Funny Farm.

Gone to stock up on the Sackcloth and Ashes.

Actually these were not her own inventions, but things Will used to write out and tape on her door in the early days when they wanted to go upstairs. She heard that such flippancy was not appreciated by people who had driven some distance to buy a dress for a wedding, or girls on an expedition to buy clothes for college. She did not care.

Alice Munro, in her Open Secrets, Random House, 1994.

A similar criticism applies to the later stories contained in Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You and The Moons of Jupiter. Reading them, one becomes aware how little Munro has changed as a writer since the early period of the 1950s and the 1960s when she first attracted the attention of readers. She is still at her best as the magic realist. She has not moved, like so many of her contemporaries, into fantasy, or into an experimental use of memory like that of Margaret Laurence, while the episodic and open-ended form of her so-called novels arises not from any deconstructionist intent, but, I suggest, from the kind of perception that sees life discontinuously, episode by episode.

In making these remarks I do not mean to suggest that the later stories are unimpressive. They are always skillful in their presentation of human situations, and the prose never falters. There is not a sloppily written piece among them. As studies of generational distancing, some of the stories seen from the viewpoint of old people, like "Walking on Water" and "Marrakesh," are entirely convincing, while here and there are still
marvelously lucid evocations of childhood and adolescence like "The Found Boat" and "The Turkey Season." Much less satisfying are the stories of middle-aged women with elusive lovers, and here the very impeccability of the writing seems to emphasize the psychological hollowness. At times, in recent years, one feels that Munro has fallen into the trap of virtuosity. She is so good at the kind of story she has always written that she seems never to have felt the need to try anything different. The result has been a certain leaching of character from her writing; some of her later stories are so well made that they seem anonymous, like those New Yorker stories which might have been written by any one of a number of North American virtuos; indeed, the Munro stories of which this seems especially true, like "Dulse" and "Labour Day Dinner" in The Moons of Jupiter, in fact appeared in the New Yorker.

I am conscious, remembering what I expected of Munro when I first read her early stories and Lives of Girls and Women, of a disappointment with her career seen as a whole. Most of her early stories and some of the later ones are among the best ever written in Canada. But those whom we think of as major writers, while they do not necessarily evolve in the sense of becoming always better, do tend to metamorphose and so indefinitely to enlarge their scope, as poets like Earle Birney and Dorothy Livesay and novelists like Robertson Davies and Timothy Findley have done. In this respect Alice Munro has remained fundamentally unchanged, applying the same realist techniques with the same impeccable skill and merely varying the human situations. Her potentialities have always been major; her achievements have never quite matched them because she has never mastered those transformations of form with which major writers handle the great climactic shifts of life. She has written of all the ages as she first wrote of childhood, and that is why her lives of girls are so much more convincing than her lives of women.

**Criticism: Lorraine York (essay date Winter 1987)**


In the following essay, York discusses the theme of connection in Munro's work, primarily in Lives of Girls and Woman and The Moons of Jupiter.

"Connection," muses the young narrator of the story section bearing the same title in The Moons of Jupiter, "That was what it was all about." The same claim could well be made for Alice Munro's fiction. Although she is often praised for her creation of fictional places—Jubilee, Hanratty, Logan—it is also true that Munro has defined a linguistic area no less peculiar to herself. That area is, of course, partly defined by her spirited use of the oxymoron (amply discussed by Helen Hoy and Lorraine McMullen), but even individual words may be trademarks of Munro's sensibility. My own list of "Munro words" includes: "humiliation," "familiar," "shameful," "hopeful," "amazing," and especially "connection." More than any other term, "connection" sums up the fundamental vision of Alice Munro's fiction.

This emphasis on connections and connectedness—whether religious, sexual, historical, or aesthetic—has become increasingly marked in Munro's works, starting with Lives of Girls and Women. In her first collection of short stories, Dance of the Happy Shades, "connection" is not a key term at all; it rarely, if ever, appears in any of the fifteen stories. Fourteen years later, however, in The Moons of Jupiter, "connection" has become a frequent verbal touchstone, the title of the first section of the very first story ("Chaddeleys and Fleimens"), and a fundamental organizing motif, drawing together the entire collection of stories.

Appropriately, connections first become of interest to Munro in her first book of interconnected stories: Lives of Girls and Women. Connections fascinate Munro profoundly in this work because they are precisely the substance and aim of Del Jordan's search: connections between herself and the external world, and between religious, sexual, and artistic experiences. Indeed, the whole collection chronicles a young female artist's drive
to perceive connections between her inner and outer worlds.

Del's search—and ours as readers—begins with an investigation of the connections sought by two characters—Uncles Benny and Craig. (Interestingly, the men also represent two kinds of connection to Del—one is her "false" uncle and one is her uncle by blood.) Uncle Benny, though not a blood connection, has ultimately more to teach Del about connections than does her legal relative. Although Benny is mystified by the workings of the outer world—the connections between Jubilee and the metropolises of Kitchener and Toronto, for instance—he represents a subtler, more mysterious connection for the young Del. "So alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same." When Del attempts to express Benny's connections with the universe by writing out in Joycean fashion his cosmic address ("Mr. Benjamin Thomas Poole, The Flats Road, Jubilee, Wawanash County, Ontario, Canada, North America, The Western Hemisphere, The World, The Solar System, The Universe"), Benny does indeed become a troubling, distorting "Poole": "Where is that in relation to Heaven?" he persists. Through Benny, Del glimpses a whole array of connections which defy or "lie alongside" rational thought—superstitious, intuitive, or religious connections which she will investigate further in Lives of Girls and Women.

Benny's pulp newspapers have, of course, provided Del with a connection to the world of depravity and violence, but Benny's life, his "troubling distorted reflection," has also brought before her eyes the inescapable interconnectedness of human lives. She muses on her parents near the end of "The Flats Road" section: "they did not look at each other. But they were connected, and this connection was as plain as a fence, it was between us and Uncle Benny, us and the Flats Road, it would stay between us and anything." Lives of Girls and Women is, to a great extent, a dramatization of this idea of connections.

Uncle Craig, on the other hand, is a character who has his connections with the outside world, his place in the cosmos, neatly sorted out: "He saw a simple connection between himself, handling the affairs of the township, troublesome as they often were, and the prime minister in Ottawa handling the affairs of the country." Craig has devoted himself to chronicling the social connections of the pioneers of Wawanash County, and the microcosmic domestic connections of the Jordan family: "And to Uncle Craig it seemed necessary that the names of all these people, their connections with each other, the three large dates of birth and marriage and death … be discovered … and written down here, in order, in his own large careful hand-writing." Although Craig is a fanatical devotee of connections, he lacks both the connection with the abstract or mysterious and the sense of human connectedness which Del has associated with Uncle Benny; his connections are mere data, and his work cuts him off from other human beings, as he sits doggedly typing in his office, significantly locking out the laughter of Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace.

Del, then, has had an opportunity to study two modes of connection—one which involves superstition and chaos and one which involves their opposites, calculation and order; her task in Lives of Girls and Women will be to find a way of uniting the two. At this early stage, though, Del suffers more often than not from acute feelings of unconnectedness. When she is tickled and tormented by her cousin Mary Agnes she reflects, "I was amazed as people must be who are seized and kidnapped, and who realize that in the strange world of their captors they have a value absolutely unconnected with anything they know about themselves." Understandably, Del reacts to this sense of unconnectedness by trying to gain the upper hand, by trying to sever her connection with the "strange world" of other human beings: she bites Mary Agnes. "When I bit Mary Agnes," she confesses, "I thought I was biting myself off from everything. I thought I was putting myself outside, where no punishment would ever be enough."

Following Uncle Benny's lead, Del initially looks to "Heaven" for a sense of connectedness. Indeed, she seeks a higher connection, an assurance that "all those atoms, galaxies of atoms, were safe all the time, whirling away in God's mind." Soon, though, Del discovers that these connections are, for her, imposed and unsatisfactory; they do not bear any relation to her own experience. "The idea of God," she confesses, "did not
connect for me with any idea of being good, which is perhaps odd." Later, during the Good Friday service at the Anglican church, she perceives that Christ himself, because he was partly mortal, may have experienced the same split between divine plan and individual experience when he was on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Briefly, the minister said, oh very briefly, Jesus had lost touch with God … He had lost the connection…. But this too was part of the plan." Del, however, entertains the thought that this was "the last true cry of Christ”—his final testimony to the unconnected nature of the universe.

Closely related to this concept of religious connection in \textit{Lives of Girls and Women} is the concept of sexual connection. When Del is riding with Mr. Chamberlain through the countryside prior to their sexual "encounter," she recalls that "In some moods, some days, I could feel for a clump of grass, a rail fence, a stone pile, such pure unbounded emotion as I used to hope for, and have inklings of, in connection with God." Now, though, she can only reflect in both excitement and dismay that the landscape has become "debased, maddeningly erotic." Sex, we soon see, can no more give Del the sense of connectedness than could religion; it cannot even rival her former religious feeling. Ironically, her first sexually charged meeting with Garnet French takes place during a revival meeting—a strong indication that this sexual connection, too, will prove as fleeting and unsatisfactory to her as her earlier flirtation with religious belief.

As a child, then as an adolescent, Del tends to see sexuality as a purely physical rather than spiritual connection. When her Uncle Bill and Aunt Nile visit the Jordans, Del never imagines that her aunt and uncle might indulge in sexual relations: "decent adults," she thinks, "made their unlikely connection only for the purpose of creating a child." Later, this mechanistic view of sex is fostered in Del and her friend Naomi by their covert readings of Naomi's mother's sex manuals: "Care should be taken during the initial connection...."

In spite of her adolescent fascination with the physical aspects of sexual connection, Del ultimately desires a spiritual connection as well. "It was the stage of transition, bridge between what was possible, known and moral behavior, and the magical, bestial act, that I could not imagine," she confesses. "Nothing about that was in Naomi's mother's book," she adds. Because Del does yearn for a spiritual or "magical" connection in her sexual life, she is particularly upset when she reads a New York psychiatrist's theory that women's mental connections are purely physical; that when a boy and a girl look at the moon, "The boy thinks of the universe, its immensity and mystery; the girl thinks, 'I must wash my hair.'" Ironically, in Del's relationship with Garnet, these stereotypes are completely reversed; Del desires physical and intellectual enlightenment in sex and Garnet mistrusts everything beyond the literal: "Any attempt at this kind of general conversation, any attempt to make him think in this way, to theorize, make systems, brought a blank, very slightly offended, and superior look into his face. He hated people using big words, talking about things outside of their own lives. He hated people trying to tie things together." In Garnet, Del, the seeker of connections, finds her natural enemy: a man who is entirely anti-connection.

When Del turns from sex to art as a means of making connections, she is unwittingly illustrating her mother Addie's words, "There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men." Even though Del disparages her mother's advice, she breaks the old male-female power connection in "Baptizing" and decides finally that it is up to her to make her own connections with the external world. "Unconnected to the life of love, uncolored by love," she dazedly realizes, "the world resumes its own, its natural and callous importance." In her art, Del discovers that it is the physical world, in all its rich and diverse detail, to which she must seek connection. When she meets Bobby Sherriff in "Epilogue: The Photographer," she realizes how she has let this crucial connection lapse in the novel she has been writing: "I hardly connected him with my mad Halloway brother" she confesses. Just as a younger Del discovered that she could not make a connection with spiritual forces by wandering about with her eyes shut, because she was afraid "of bumping into something," the Del of the epilogue discovers that the physical world provides the artist with the only connection to the transcendent that she needs.
In *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, Munro focuses on a particular element of this connection between the artist and the world: the vital connection between self and others. "Material," for instance, is a story concerned with the way artists use and transform human relationships in their work. The narrator sees that Hugo has used the "harlot-in-residence," Dotty, for the purposes of his fiction, and she also sees that "This is not enough" because she alone maintained a personal connection with Dotty while they were living in the same building with her. (Hugo's turning off the water pump which services Dotty's basement apartment is a striking example of his tendency to sever human connections.) On the other hand, the narrator's present husband, Gabriel, though he shares with Hugo the knowledge of "what to do" with material (Gabriel is an engineer), at least has what Hugo lacks—a sense of human connection. It is Gabriel who persuades the narrator to buy the book containing Hugo's story for her daughter Clea: "He is interested in Hugo's career as he would be interested in the career of a magician or popular singer or politician with whom he had, through me, a plausible connection, a proof of reality."

Often, in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, characters lament the absence of these human connections in their lives. In "Walking on Water," Mr. Lougheed's glimpse of the animalistic sexual connection of the flower children, Rex and Calla, increases his own sense of alienation from this younger generation. Although the couple's "essential connection" is abruptly broken when they see Lougheed, "their voices joined … in laughter that seemed" to the Mr. Sammler-like Lougheed "not only unashamed but full of derision." Interestingly, this episode is later echoed in "Marrakesh," when Dorothy unwittingly stumbles upon the lovemaking of her granddaughter, Jeannette, and Blair King. She, too, has experienced the lack of connection that Lougheed and many other Munro characters share: "She believed then … that Jeannette was in some important way a continuation of herself. This was not apparent any longer; the connection had either broken or gone invisible." Instead, the body of her grand-daughter basking in the sun becomes a "hieroglyph" to Dorothy, a visual sign of the human connection that can never fully be recovered.

In "Winter Wind," Munro argues explicitly and eloquently that the artist, in particular, must not lose faith in these human connections, frail and elusive though they may be. The mature narrator interrupts her story about her grand-mother's life to ask herself how much of this story is based on her knowledge of fact and how much her intuition and imagination. Finally, she decides that the latter qualities may yield a truth far superior to that deduced from Uncle Craig-like fact: "Without any proof I believe it, and so I must believe that we get messages another way, that we have connections that cannot be investigated, but have to be relied on."

Munro does investigate these human connections, but her investigations are neither purely rational nor scientific; they are fictional and intuitive. In *Who Do You Think You Are?*, for instance, she examines a character whose sense of unconnectedness is far more acute than that of Del Jordan. Rose suffers from a chronic sense of disjunction: her father is both a secretive reciter of poetry and a hate-filled child beater; West Hanratty, her home, is divided by a river (and by economic conditions and opportunities) from Hanratty proper. Even when Rose is older and more prosperous, this sense of unconnectedness continues to plague her; she senses that "the barriers between people were still strong and reliable; between arty people and business people; between men and women." Rose has a glimpse of other barriers between humans when she tries to read one of her stepmother Flo's letters to an assembled company and suddenly feels a "fresh and overwhelming realization" of "the gulf that lay behind her." This unconnectedness to one's past—to one's Hanratty, Jubilee, or Logan—becomes a major concern in Munro's work, especially in her next collection, *The Moons of Jupiter.*

In *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Rose tries in various ways to attain a sense of connectedness, some more successful than others. Her attempts to forge sexual connections are disastrous, mostly because she expects to derive her essential identity from them. She marries Patrick because he will worship her, make her his "White Goddess," his "Beggar Maid," and she later grasps at Simon because he is "the man for my life." "Without this connection to a man," the narrator observes. "she might have seen herself as an uncertain and pathetic person; that connection held her new life in place." Only dimly, by the end of the collection, does Rose suspect that
the only person for her life is herself, and that the important connections to discover are those between herself and her past.

The latter realization, in particular, comes slowly to Rose, for her past seems, from the vantage point of the present, bizarre; it seems to be material for shocking, dramatic stories to be told at cocktail parties. Even as a young girl she reflects that "Present time and past, the shady melodramatic past of Flo's stories, were quite separate." "Town oddity" Becky Tyde, like Bobby Sherriff, seems cut off from her legendary role; "only a formal connection could be made," muses Rose. Eventually, Rose reaches beyond this merely formal connection with her past when she returns to Flo and Hanratty in "Spelling." Like Helen in "The Peace of Utrecht," Rose discovers scraps of her old writing—in this case, old letters she sent to Flo from Vancouver—"False messengers; false connections, with a lost period of her life." Although these scraps of writing do not awaken the texture and feeling of the past, as do Helen's notes about the Peace of Utrecht, they do, at least, force Rose to acknowledge that her connections with the past have been false, and that she must forge honest ones in the future.

Ironically, at the end of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Rose attempts to forge honest connections with a man she has not seen for forty years—Ralph Gillespie. For Rose, trying to understand Ralph is akin to trying to understand herself; both are mimics, imitators whose imitations of life have become stale, even dangerous. Here, at last, Rose finds the most honest connection of her life: "What could she say about herself and Ralph Gillespie, except that she felt his life, close, closer than the lives of men she'd loved, one slot over from her own?"

The subtitle of Alice Munro's *The Moons of Jupiter* could very well be "Connections," for here she studies the problem in greater depth than in any previous work. Here, too, she gives voice most strongly to the idea that art may be the most reliable means of forging an honest connection with the past.

Family connections, and the guilt or pride they may instil in us, are a central concern of both sections of the first story—sections which are closely interconnected. In the first, "Connection," the narrator claims that her maternal cousins provided "A connection with the real, and prodigal, and dangerous, world." Years later, when one of those cousins, Iris, visits the narrator and her husband in their pretentious Vancouver-area home, it becomes apparent that this connection has vanished; Iris is now out of place, uneasy in an unfamiliar suburban world. Nevertheless, the narrator's act of throwing a lemon meringue pie at her husband when he openly deplores her vulgar connection reveals more emphatically than any words could the persistence of an essential connection with the cousins. It reveals, more specifically, a connection with the cousins' world of jokes and hilarity (throwing a pie is, of course, a stock comic routine). For all of the cousins' pride in their supposedly aristocratic connections in the Old World, this brash exuberance is their true legacy and birthright. (A comic but macabre version of this family pride appears in "Accident," where Frances' sister-in-law Adelaide flaunts her "connection" with an "undertaker … in another town" [he is her uncle] by using the latest mortuary terminology.)

Guilt aroused by family connections is the corresponding motif of the second section, "The Stone in the Field." The sight of even an eccentric non-relative, Poppy Cullender, in the family parlour humiliates the narrator: "I disliked his connection with us so much...." Later, she likens one of her paternal aunts to Poppy, and claims that she "couldn't really think of her as my aunt; the connection seemed impossible." Whereas the maternal cousins thrive on connection (they sing interconnected rounds, and they never return to Dalgleish after one cousin's death because, as Iris sadly writes, "the circle was broken"), the paternal aunts are completely unconnected to the outside world. Not only do they have no telephone connections, they spurn physical connection: "No embraces, no touch of hands or laying together of cheeks" in that household, the narrator recalls. And yet, mysteriously, their circle remains unbroken; the sisters remain secluded with each other for the rest of their lives, occasionally sending Christmas cards to the narrator which arouse in her not nostalgia but "bewilderment and unexplainable guilt."
Largely as a result of this unexplainable guilt, the narrator, like Rose, makes a concerted effort to return to her childhood town, to forge those forgotten or disparaged connections with her past. Ironically, though, the object of the narrator's search is not a living connection at all; it is a huge stone which marked the grave of a mysterious hermit who was rumoured to be an admirer of one of the paternal aunts. The narrator's failure to find this unmarked gravestone, and her discovery of an up-to-date, businesslike farm in its place give ample testimony to the elusive nature of connections. These are the connections which cannot be "investigated," tracked down, and pinpointed, but which must remain as mysterious and as unlocatable as the stone in the field.

In *The Moons of Jupiter*, Munro elaborates upon the idea that art can be the stone in the field, the marker of our connections with the past. Characters often come across scraps of history while working on a writing project; the narrator of "The Stone in the Field" finds the newspaper notice about the hermit's death while reading microfilm "in connection with a documentary script I was working on, for television." The narrator of "Bardon Bus" is working in Australia "in connection with" a "book of family history which some rich people are paying me to write." (Ironically, this writer who is investigating family connections which are entirely unconnected to her forms a false ménage with a man referred to as "X."). Work and life are continually connected, interwoven.

More specifically, fiction and story-telling are prime means of creating connections out of an experience which is often choppy and chaotic. In "Visitors," Mildred compares the storytelling techniques of the two brothers Albert and Wilfred. Whereas Albert baldly presents the facts as separate and unrelated particles, Wilfred is a weaver of connections: "In Wilfred's stories you could always be sure that the gloomy parts would give way to something better, and if somebody behaved in a peculiar way there was an explanation for it." Connections, then, are more pleasing to ponder aesthetically and emotionally. Nevertheless, Munro also reveals the dangers inherent in insisting that connections always be made. At the end of "The Stone in the Field," the narrator admits that "If I had been younger, I would have figured out a story" about the hermit and her aunts, a story which would have featured "a horrible, plausible connection" between the hermit's silence and his death. Connections, when drawn so neatly in life or in fiction, Munro suggests, can hinder imagination and understanding instead of promoting both, as they are supposed to do. Maturity, for the narrator and for the writer, involves a refusal to "believe that people's secrets are defined and communicable, or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognize."

In *The Moons of Jupiter*, Munro follows her own advice; she presents not the final, immutable connections in people's lives but, more frequently, their desperate attempts to find connections. Many characters suffer an acute lack of connection between their inner experience and the world around them: Lydia, in "Dulse," who in the wake of her lover's rejection "could not make the connection between herself and things outside herself"; the narrator in "The Turkey Season" whose feelings about the mystery of the universe cannot "be connected with anything in real life"; and the woman in the story Kay tells in "Bardon Bus," who sees her old lover and "can't connect the real man any more with the person she loves, in her head." Maturity for these characters, too, often means accepting that connections may not always be possible or even necessary; as Mildred realizes in "Visitors," the reason Wilfred once gave for his weeping at night is probably "only distantly connected with the real reason. But maybe it was as close as he could get."

In *The Moons of Jupiter*, therefore, the process of working towards connections is more valuable than the product—the connections themselves. The best illustration of this maxim appears in the title story. The narrator's father, awaiting a heart operation in a Toronto hospital, is a man who takes pride in his ability to perceive connections, even if he cannot always understand how he has arrived at them: "I ask my mind a question. The answer's there, but I can't see all the connections my mind's making to get it. Like a computer." Nevertheless, he believes that there can be an answer (the names of the moons of Jupiter, for instance) and he believes that he can attain it through connections. His daughter, on the other hand, finds her faith in such processes seriously diminished. She discovers that sometimes answers are relative; for instance, when she
attends the planetarium show she learns that all of the information about the planets which she had learned as a child has been updated, curiously transformed. Similarly, she finds that she cannot make the separate elements of her life connect; it is as though they were moons orbiting a planet. In particular, she sees that her children will follow paths of their own. In the last scene, this new acceptance is signalled by her refusal to go back to the museum to see "the relief carvings, the stone pictures." Like the past, the stone reliefs will always be there; she needn't see them and master the idea of them, in order to affirm their existence, just as the narrator of "The Stone in the Field" needn't find the stone in order to assert her connection with the past. Connections in Munro are of central importance, they are "what it was all about," as the narrator of "Connection" says, and yet they needn't be pursued, for they are all around us and deep inside us.

**Criticism: Judith Timson (essay date 7 May 1990)**


*[In the following essay, based on an interview with Munro following the publication of Friend of My Youth, Timson relates the importance and discipline of writing in Munro's life.]*

After a writer has been ranked with Chekhov, accused of perfection and called one of the greatest short-story writers in the world, it can be an intimidating task to write again. But, for Alice Munro, apparently nothing has changed. "I write the way I always have," she says. "I sit in a corner of the chesterfield and stare at the wall, and I keep getting it, and getting it, and when I've got it enough in my mind, I start to write. And then, of course, I don't really have it at all." Munro's fans, and the growing recognition and superlatives that her work receives internationally, belie such modesty, bred in the bone of the small-town Ontario native. The publication this spring of her newest collection, *Friend of My Youth*, was an instant literary event not only in Canada but also in the United States, where the writer and her work have garnered rave reviews. Prominent American author Cynthia Ozick hit the high note on the new book's dust jacket, declaring, "She is our Chekhov." But Munro tempers that praise by noting, "*Entertainment Today* called it 'Sex lives of Canadians.'"

Munro's stories, most of them intensely personal accounts of the lives of women of her generation, born in the 1930s and 1940s, have captivated readers around the world. There is now an identifiable Munro country, powerfully mapped out by such earlier collections as *Lives of Girls and Women*, *The Moons of Jupiter* and *The Progress of Love* (which won Munro her third Governor General's Award, in 1986). For 13 years, her work has appeared regularly in *The New Yorker*, and her editor there, Daniel Menaker, describes her as "a kind of trailblazer, structurally and esthetically." An Alice Munro story zooms effortlessly through time zones, spans generations and offers up more detail and description than do many full-length contemporary novels. It also offers a kind of emotional honesty, said Menaker, which suggests that "the author, along with her characters, has gone through a very painful and disciplined examination of self."

On a recent visit to Toronto to launch her seventh book, Munro appeared to be flourishing as much as her reputation, wearing a pink top with a long scarf of pinks and reds. At 58, she is a writer who is still exploring new ways to do what she does so well, and still surprising even herself with the results. In a story called "Meneseteung," she tells the tale of Almeda Roth, a Victorian-age poet in small-town Ontario, an unmarried woman who, through her flowery poetry, tries to deny the primitive quality of the life around her. It is a tricky work because parts of it, including excerpts from Roth's book of poetry and her obituary, suggest that she was a real person, brought to life from some dusty newspaper clippings. But, in fact, the whole thing, including the poetry, is out of Alice Munro via the chesterfield. And the author recalled that, when she finished the story, "I was excited—I thought it was good."

The remark was followed by a whooping laugh—self-congratulation was practically a capital offence in southwestern Ontario, where Munro grew up and where many of her stories are set. "The worst thing you
could ever do was to make a fool of yourself," she said, "and any kind of self-promotion or self-exposure runs this risk."

By now, Munro has become used to the risks of self-exposure, and she has no need of self-promotion. She adamantly refused to do the usually requisite cross-country book tour, and instead would submit to only five media interviews. In an age in which even celebrated authors have to peddle themselves and their work as talk-show curiosities, Munro's decision to firmly close the door on a certain kind of literary celebrity is notable. She describes her last book tour as "too physically debilitating—I never slept." It was not that she hated the attention. "It's a terrific ego trip and it really gets me high," she said. "But I get used to shooting my mouth off and then I go home and how do I get into that other life, that other person? I feel that whatever it is that is the private person gets drowned."

The private person lives quietly in Clinton, Ont., 35 km from Wingham, where she was the first of three children born to turkey and fox farmer Robert Laidlaw and his wife, Anne. Munro shares a modest house with her second husband, Gerald Fremlin, a retired cartographer. In an earlier life, while living on the West Coast with her bookseller husband James Munro, she raised three daughters.

She recalls that she had to learn how to write short stories between getting apple juice, answering the phone and letting the cat in. "It nearly drove me crazy," she admitted. Munro expresses no regrets about how she brought up her children—"I loved being a mother, I wasn't a monster to them." But one of her most persistent fantasies, she said, is to return to early motherhood "and just enjoy it," free from what her publisher and longtime friend, Douglas Gibson of McClelland and Stewart, describes as "an almost puritanical discipline surrounding her work." Now, she preserves her writing time and energy "with a great deal of guilt and misery," she said.

Munro's guilt illuminates the difference between male and female writers of a certain age: it centres on the personal obligations that have gone unfulfilled. "From the age of 11, art was my religion," she said. "Nothing in my life seemed more important to me." She worries about not having been there when certain people needed her: "This question comes up, especially for a woman of my age. It's spending time with people when I know it would make a difference to them. It's writing the letter, making the hospital visit." She added: "This is what women have always done. They've kept the human warmth of life going. Well, twice in my life I had a chance to do something, to nurse my mother and my mother-in-law, but I didn't give myself over to it because I wanted to write. Of course, no male writer in middle age would even have considered doing it."

Munro's regrets, however, have nothing to do with the demands of the outside world. In contrast to other high-profile writers, including Margaret Atwood and Pierre Berton, who spearhead political causes and act on behalf of the writing community, she easily turns down almost all requests to do so. "I can slough off that duty quite easily," she said. "These people are asking me to do something because I am a writer. If I do it, I will no longer be a writer."

It is possible to read an Alice Munro story and never quite know why a simple observation, or an unassuming sentence, placed at a certain point, adds up to genius and revelation. It simply does. In the title story of her new book, the narrator examines her feelings for her dead mother while telling the tale of two sisters who love the same man. She describes an old farmhouse in the Ottawa Valley, "a torrent of unmerciful light pouring through the window." But the light that Alice Munro sheds on her characters is more forgiving, filled with compassion and humor. In the story "Wigtime," her central character, Margot, is almost pathetic as she dresses up in a wig and dark sunglasses and goes off in a rented van to catch her husband in the throes of a weekend liaison with their teenage babysitter. The point of the story, however, is more than dread and betrayal. It is getting what you want: Margot not only manages to keep her husband in the marriage, but blackmails him into buying her the house of her dreams, complete with an almond-colored kitchen and "swooping pale green figured curtains." Said Munro: "Everyone has such contempt for the suburban
housewife and her acquisitions, but I wanted to glorify her.”

Munro’s characters are, for the most part, ordinary small-town people—schoolteachers, housewives, appliance-store salesmen, retired ministers—who circle back relentlessly to various pivotal events in their lives, as if to finally learn their lessons. Most of them have some sort of subversive quality about them. Half the stories in Friend of My Youth deal with adultery, and few writers portray the female adulterer better than Munro. "This might be a problem in Huron County," said the author, recalling at least one editorial directed against her in The Wingham Advance-Times. She captures her female protagonists, like Brenda in the story "Five Points," wearing tight white pants and too much perfume, poised to sin. Brenda, walking down a country road to meet her lover, is wearing high heels "just for this walk, just for this moment of crossing the road with his eyes on her, that extra bit of pelvic movement and leg length they give her."

Munro acknowledges that she has a fascination with adultery and the "double life it creates, especially for a married wife and mother who is expected to live her life for other people. Instead, she can be living this secret, exploratory life." Her female characters often use adultery as a way to escape their lives and are unabashedly, in the way they view men, part of an earlier generation. "I don't understand the emotional lives of women under 35.," said Munro. She questioned the impact that AIDS is having on the pursuit of romance. "Surely," she said, "it's an interesting thing if passion, which all through literature has been celebrated as a thing that cannot be gainsaid, can be changed through fear of illness and death. I feel, as a writer, I should know about this."

Friend of My Youth is more sombre than Munro's previous books, and her heroines are not as full of high hopes and the certainty that their lives will be transformed by fame and passion. Munro acknowledged that the buoyancy "may have gone down a bit," but she does not link the change in mood to her age or her feelings about her own life. "I think I'm an extraordinarily lucky person," she said. "I was born poor in what is perceived to be a backwater. I don't have a lot of strength of character. To be able to do what I want has been extraordinary luck. I just feel something in my life has gone terribly right."

Munro had originally planned to make Friend of My Youth her last collection of short stories, after which she would write an autobiography. "That hasn't worked out—yet," she said. "I can't seem to control what interests me." What interests Munro still is stories, and more stories. And, if she remains true to her pattern, in four years there will be another collection—another torrent of merciful light.

Criticism: Mary Jo Salter (review date 14 May 1990)


[Salter is an American poet and critic. In the following review, she praises Munro's portrayal of imperfect women in several of the stories from Friend of My Youth, but questions the author's range.]

Choosing a favorite among Alice Munro's stories is no easy task, but for me one of them would be "Accident," from The Moons of Jupiter, her collection published in 1983. Frances is a music teacher at the high school where her married lover, Ted, teaches science. They are groping stark naked in Ted's supply room when the school secretary (who, like most people in the Ontario town of Hanratty, knows about the affair but has politely, up until now, kept that knowledge from the lovers themselves) bangs on the door to tell Ted that his son, Bobby, has died in a car accident.

The lovers soon learn that Bobby has not died—though he will, some hours later—and while they wait in separate places for news, Ted realizes that he has an opportunity to make a superstitious bargain with God: save Bobby, and I'll give up Frances. But Ted, an atheist (or, you might say, a believer in Accident), rejects
his own superstition even before Bobby dies, and vows to keep Frances regardless. He even refuses his son a church service, in a selfish rebellion against his wife's family. Nor does he seem terribly sorry for his wife when, in the aftermath of their only son's death, she finally learns about Frances. In fact, in a sudden, cold, thorough upheaval of his life, Ted proposes to Frances, and she accepts—but not before understanding that Ted is not what she hoped he was, and that she never knew much about him or wanted to, apart from sex.

In themselves these events would make quite a story. Instead, cut to thirty years later (a common, but unpredictably varied, Munro device). We are at the funeral of Adelaide, a sadistically pious character who would not be out of place in a Flannery O'Connor story, and who on the day of the accident had asked Frances, as if out of innocent curiosity, whether she thought God was "paying back for" the affair.

Well, Adelaide is now "paid back" for her bad manners and her morbidity, the reader might ungenerously reflect. That's one reason Munro locates us at Adelaide's funeral. Another is to bring Frances back to Hanratty, which she and Ted had left on their marriage, so that she may reencounter the blameless man whose car had been the vehicle, so to speak, of her life's transformation. "If he had not gone out in the snow that day to take a baby carriage across town," Frances thinks (and note the tactfully unelaborated symbol of the baby carriage), she

would not live in Ottawa now, she would not have her two children, she would not have her life, not the same life. That is true. She is sure of it, but it is too ugly to think about. The angle from which she has to see that can never be admitted to; it would seem monstrous.

Here, again, is a chilling potential conclusion to the story. Another writer as skilled and honest and knowing as Munro—and there cannot be many—might well have wrapped it up at this moment. But then a peculiar phrase pops into her character's head:

*What difference*, thinks Frances. She doesn't know where that thought comes from or what it means, for of course there is a difference, anybody can see that, a life's difference. She's had her love, her scandal, her man, her children …

But it doesn't matter. Not only because she is still "the same Frances," as she uncomfortably realizes, but because people don't matter. For all the intensity of their relations (which Munro conveys early on with the sexy scramble in the supply room), for all the grief a child's death should occasion, and the disgust we may feel in seeing a parent not deepened by that death but merely deflected to another course, people are not terribly distinctive or important; and we all end up, like Bobby and Adelaide, in a casket.

This is a vision of life customarily reserved for poets, with their penchant for looking down on humanity from a great and generalizing height. But in the heart of the best fiction writer, who is more keen on telling stories about people than on displaying narrative or descriptive technique, has to be a belief that people are unique; that a story about Frances in particular, say, is worth telling. What moves and unnerves me each time I look at "Accident" is the simultaneous impression Munro gives that we are all both irreplaceable and dispensable. The story's title in a single word offers a further paradox: every link in the plot's chain derives from the accident, but an accident is, after all, only random.

Another of Munro's most distinguished stories, "Miles City, Montana" (from her 1986 collection *The Progress of Love*), also concerns the accidental death of a child. The unnamed woman narrator frames her tale with a childhood memory of the drowning of a neglected boy, Steve Gauley. The main story (also a memory) now begins: the narrator, her priggish but somewhat loved husband, Andrew, and their two young daughters, Cynthia and Meg, are on a car trip from Vancouver to Ontario. The mother loves the "shedding" of her domestic life; at home, besieged by neighbors and the telephone, she has wanted "to hide so that I could get busy at my real work, which was" (and here we might fill in something useful, something respectful toward an
otherwise unfulfilled female character, like "graphic design"; but Munro continues) "a sort of wooing of
distant parts of myself." We know precisely, are delighted and pained by, what she means: How often does
life allow us this wooing?

She goes on:

I could be talking to Andrew, talking to the children and looking at whatever they wanted me
to look at—a pig on sign, a pony in a field, a Volkswagen on a revolving stand—and pouring
lemonade into plastic cups, and all the time these bits and pieces would be flying together
inside me. The essential composition would be achieved. This made me hopeful and
lighthearted. It was being a watcher that did it. A watcher, not a keeper.

In a few pages, it is this mother's very joy in being a watcher, not a keeper that will nearly kill her child.
Having stopped to allow the children a swim in a lifeguarded pool (but the lifeguard is kissing her boyfriend
at the critical moment), the narrator is absently eyeing a popsicle stick gummed to her heel, philosophizing
about the "singleness and precise location" of objects, when it occurs to her: "Where are the children?"
Three-year-old Meg, that single, singular object, is located at the bottom of the pool; and by a miracle, she is
fishied out and returned just in time to life.

But the "accident," in the largest sense, isn't over: these parents will again fail their children. Earlier, the
narrator's general account of her marital arguments (which might be continuing to this very day, as far as we
knew) had concluded with this all-inclusive, single-sentence, lacerating paragraph: "I haven't seen Andrew for
years, don't know if he is still thin, has gone completely gray, insists on lettuce, tells the truth, or is hearty and
disappointed." And one day, when the children who have so trustingly returned to the back seat of the car
achieve some distance from their parents—parents who wanted to believe themselves more attentive than poor
Steve Gauley's—they will have to learn to forgive "whatever was flippant, arbitrary, careless, callous—all our
natural, and particular, mistakes."

Not surprisingly, and yet with unforeseeable twists, more revelations about accidents occur in Munro's new
collection, *Friend of My Youth*. In the marvelously wide and deep "Oh, What Avails," a three-part story
spanning decades in the lives of Joan (who will derail a successful marriage for a mostly happy series of
affairs) and her brother Morris (who loses the use of an eye at age four, when he steps on a rake), both
protagonists are half-blind, agreeable victims of external chance and their own internal limitations.

That's partly the legacy of their cheerful, feckless mother, who never even thought to take the unfortunate boy
to an eye specialist: "Couldn't she have gone to the Lions Club and asked them to help her, as they sometimes
did help poor people in an emergency? No. No, she couldn't," Munro amusingly offers, by way of something
just short of an explanation. Every problem in this beautifully plotted story falls short of solution—a
technique suited to carry the mature Joan's intimations of mortality:

[She] is aware of a new danger, a threat that she could not have imagined when she was
younger…. And it's hard to describe. The threat is of a change, but it's not the sort of change
one has been warned about. It's just this—that suddenly, without warning, Joan is apt to think:
*Rubble*. Rubble. You can look down a street, and you can see the shadows, the light, the brick
walls …—you can see all these things in their temporary separateness, all connected
underneath in such a troubling, satisfying, necessary, indescribable way. Or you can see
rubble. Passing states, a useless variety of passing states. Rubble.

No conscious-seeming "style" adorns these sentences. Indeed, if ever there was a writer whose sentences both
ornate and plain are essentially invisible, each a well-washed window through which we may see life as she
does, it is Munro. Those who do want to remind themselves of the windowpane of style between writer and
reader might consider how that unlovely word "rubble" is repeated enough times that the sound alone acquires an intended meaninglessness.

Munro shouldn't be mistaken for an absurdist, however; the discourse on rubble doesn't end where I have lopped it off. A new paragraph begins with hope, however feeble or possibly ill-fated: "Joan wants to keep this idea of rubble at bay. She pays attention now to all the ways in which people seem to do that." In another story here, "Differently," the randomness and rubble of life are themselves a source of hope for Georgia, who after remembering the marriage she smashed up and the friendship she allowed to die is grateful for a transcendent moment of forgetfulness, an "accidental clarity."

But the most haunting lines in "Differently" appear earlier, where Georgia wonders whether her sons keep pictures of her ex-husband in their homes. "Perhaps they put the pictures away when she comes to visit," she thinks. "Perhaps they think of protecting these images from one who did him hurt." Or, Munro invites us to speculate, they think of shielding the malefactor herself. Protective isn't lavished on the innocent only; we want also to shield the guilty from too piercing a recollection of their crimes. And why? Perhaps as insurance against guilt for our own crimes, committed in the past or waiting in the future. Munro doesn't say; she respects our intelligence, our right to sift on our own the cruel world she shows us.

Cruel and bizarre things do happen in this book, as in all of Munro's collections; and although that staple of modern fiction, sexual betrayal, crops up repeatedly, its power to surprise us is in itself unexpected. Munro's stories often strike us, like life itself, as "stranger than fiction"—that's why we trust them. In the title story, the member of an obscure and punitive religious sect gets his fiancée's sister pregnant and marries her instead; years later he passes over the long-suffering former fiancée again to marry another woman—his dead wife's hateful, tarty nurse. In "Five Points," an Eastern European girl, ugly and fat, pays all the boys in town for sex, until she has emptied the till of her parents' store and they are forced in shame and financial ruin to close it. The not particularly passionate wife in "Oranges and Apples," whose cynicism is "automatic and irritating," takes up her worshipful, jealous husband's tacit invitation to sleep with the friend he found spying on her with binoculars.

There's a tonal harshness, too, which we welcome: the immediate revisions and reappraisals by which Munro strips away illusions that she had at first offered us. In "Friend of My Youth," for example—a many-tiered story about deceit, punishment, forgiveness, death, romantic love, and the love of parents and children—the narrator, remembering her mother, writes:

I felt a great fog of platitudes and pieties lurking, an incontestable crippled-mother power, which could capture and choke me. There would be no end to it. I had to keep myself sharp-tongued and cynical, arguing and deflating. Eventually I gave up even that recognition and opposed her in silence.

This is a fancy way of saying that I was no comfort and poor company to her when she had almost nowhere else to turn.

That final sentence is heart-breaking, but it represents, however bitterly, an attempt to laugh. A similar, if lighter, mixture occurs in "Differently," where Georgia's friend has an affair with a man who deserts her in a hotel, after which "she developed frightful chest pains, appropriate to a broken heart. What she really had was a gall-bladder attack." Ever accommodating, her husband comes to take her to the hospital, and then on vacation in Mexico! Or in "Goodness and Mercy," where a daughter escorts her fatally ill mother on a cruise to Europe and then to the hospital in Edinburgh; after all her solicitude, her nearly continuous attendance by land and sea, she is not there when her mother dies but "a couple of blocks away, eating a baked potato from a takeout shop." That the daughter is rather plump, not very much in need of a baked potato, makes the moment more maddening and poignant and, yes, funny.
The recurrence of daughters attached to dying mothers in "Friend of My Youth" and "Goodness and Mercy"—a subject also addressed superbly in the early novel-in-short-story-form The Beggar Maid—raises the interesting question of authorial range. Nearly every major character in this book, as in Munro's others, is a woman; most are adulterers; most are seen over a span of some years; most are perceptive and articulate about their own longings and failings; and every story except for "Friend of My Youth" is recounted in the third person. Such a clustering of similarities is often the sign of a limited writer, and, probably, an autobiographical writer (not necessarily, of course, the same thing).

Yet although Munro strikes me as exactly the sort of person I would care to know, I don't at all have the feeling that I do. Like the machinery of her sentences, she is in some important way admirably invisible. Munro writes of certain attributes—selfishness or carelessness, for example—with the authority of one who has "been there"; but she is remarkably selfless in her presentation of material that may, in this way or that, be autobiographical. And given other similarities among her stories—their rueful but not lugubrious tone, the acute sense her characters suffer of the ineffability of life's lessons—the mutations Munro achieves in characterization and plotting are even more impressive. Finally, though, it is the largeness of Munro's wisdom that confirms her range. When, at the end of the intricately designed mansion of a story "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass," Munro's woman protagonist wonders, "Meanwhile, what makes a man happy?" and can only speculate, "It must be something quite different," this is no abdication of authorial responsibility; it is a door boldly opened into another room.

One of the things we discover in that mysterious annex that Munro opens up, in story after story, is that all of us have been telling stories too. Many of Munro's characters (novelists, poets, actors, editors, teachers, journalists) are themselves employed as makers or interpreters of tales, but so is the housewife in "Miles City, Montana" who sees the "wooing of distant parts" of herself as her "real work." When she hopes that "the essential composition would be achieved," she is speaking of her life; but Munro is also speaking through her of the composition of this story, whose self-reflexiveness reminds us that we can never leave ourselves out of any truth, or truths, we apprehend. Munro is not merely rehashing the fiction writer's commonplace that all points of view are subjective and relative; she is giving us credit for attempting, nonetheless, now and then, an impossible overview of our lives.

A rage to consider everything simultaneously—not just the "distant parts" of the self but of other selves and, indeed, of a universe of objective fact—is the frustrated, mystical longing at the heart of nearly every story Munro has written. The "distant" is conceived not only in space but in time—hence those perspectives, clairvoyantly convincing, that Munro gives us of thirty years after, twenty years before. The short story has rarely been used (successfully) for so long-reaching a purpose. "Too many things," as the creative writing instructor in "Differently" chides his student; "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."

Good advice, perhaps, to the writer of average talents, but it would not interest Almeda Joynt Roth, the nineteenth-century poet Munro invents in the most ambitious story in this volume, "Meneseteung." In a sort of grand, clearheaded delirium, and one of the most inspired moments in any of these extraordinary stories, Almeda demands of herself a God-like vision, a fusion of poetry's timeless themes and fiction's time-specific, place-specific raggedness:

Isn't that the idea—one very great poem that will contain everything and, oh, that will make all the other poems, the poems she has written, inconsequential, mere trial and error, mere rags? Stars and flowers and birds and trees and angels in the snow and dead children at twilight—that is not the half of it. You have to get in the obscene racket on Pearl Street and the polished toe of Jarvis Poulter's boot and the plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower …
Alice Munro knows that you must get all of that in—the bits and pieces of accident flying together into the deliberate whole of art—and once again, in *Friend of My Youth*, she has done it.

**Criticism: Reamy Jansen (essay date Winter 1989–90)**


*[In the following excerpt from a longer essay discussing several writers, Jansen analyzes the roles of male characters and the theme of loneliness in Munro's fiction, especially in the story "Wood."]*

Loneliness in [Raymond] Carver often conveys the sense of leaping into a well, followed by a desperate attempt to break the fall. Loneliness in the work of Alice Munro occurs in a broader context and is more the consequence of a darkly deterministic worldview. The flat, featureless landscapes of her Southern Ontario towns are mirrored in the lives of her depleted but idiosyncratic characters. The spectral and alien lives of the men who inhabit this world appear to her female protagonists as riddles incapable of solution. Married or not, her men are outsiders. With varying degrees of distance, husbands haunt the outskirts of domestic arrangements as if their humanity was beyond the pale.

Munro’s women appear to take the measure of their own unhappiness from the depth and distance of male isolation. In her earliest stories, Munro's pattern for men is already in place. The recluse, who dominates the consciousness of Munro's younger female characters, demarcates the extreme of social distance. Reclusive isolation attracts Munro's women as an image of freedom from the world of domesticity and repels them as evidence of the seemingly unbreachable psychic and affective distance between men and women.

Generally, though, Munro's men situate themselves in the world between the home and the "no man's land" of the bush. Frequently, we find the Munro husband doing his work in an outbuilding. He rarely involves himself with the town. There is often a feral quality to such work—a number of fathers are fox farmers or trappers. Del Jordan's father in *Lives of Girls and Women* raises silver foxes, an enterprise Del sees as "precarious and unusual … glamorous and ghostly". Rose's father, in *The Beggar Maid*, another collection of related stories, whose furniture-repair business makes him seem superficially more civilized than the other fathers and husbands, is the king of Munro's eccentric males. An isolate, nameless throughout most of the volume, he works in a shed behind the house, his unfathomable interior life hinted at by private and fragmentary mutterings that Rose occasionally overhears—"Macaroni, pepperoni, Botticelli, beans." Once, she catches a fugitive line from *The Tempest*, "The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces," suggesting that men live entirely in the mythic realms of their own romantic imaginings. To Rose such kingdoms are obviously superior to the mundane worlds women inhabit.

We never entirely understand what propels Munro's men to the backs of yards, to sheds and cages, to the shadow lands beyond the hearth. Yet their inchoate, inarticulate, primitive wildness fascinates Munro women before marriage, although its attraction fades after mating, when the men are sent, or migrate, from the house. The dynamic suggests a grim and implacable biological determinism.

Men's inexplicableness—their attraction, their impulse towards separateness—is what Munro has begun to explore in her more recent work. A turning point in her examination occurs in the story, "Wood", her most sustained look into male loneliness and the way out. In a rare departure from her usual narrative methods, Roy Fowler's story is unmediated by a female observer; we see Roy as he is. "Wood" tells of a wood-cutter attracted to the bush, and unfolds with fable-like simplicity. Roy Fowler has married into his wife's extended family of Voles, Pooles, and Devlins. A tribal group, his wife's family has a "limited interest in people like Roy." Partly as a consequence of this exclusion, Roy finds himself more and more drawn from his regular
business of sign painting, an activity carried on, not surprisingly, in a "shed behind the house". He increasingly feels the pull of his "other interest, which is private but not secret; that is, everybody knows about it but nobody knows how much he thinks about it or how important it has become to him: wood-cutting." This drift worries his wife, but her concern doesn't lessen his desire to journey more often into the bush. Indeed, his thoughts about wood are becoming "covetous and nearly obsessive."

Munro gives this tale of isolation greater force by including two related themes that she has been developing since her first stories in Dance of the Happy Shades: the encroachment on nature by greedy, commercial impulses, and the human capacity for self-deception. Encroachers, as Munro portrays them, do not simply clear land and set down tract housing and shopping malls. What disturbs her most are the distortions of reality and rationalizations that serve this domination: everywhere there is denial of what is being done and false romanticizing of the commonplace and the everyday.

In Munro's later stories, encroachment becomes an ironic emblem of the complacent and egotistic illusions of civilization, and her isolates are its most profound, if not most articulate, critics. The motif of encroachment often resonates another Munro concern—self-deception. Here is the closest she has come to connecting a theory of fiction with a theory of life:

Self-deception seems almost like something that's a mistake, that we should learn not to do. But I'm not sure if we can. Everybody's doing their own novel of their lives. The novel changes—at first we have a romance, a very satisfying novel that has a rather simple technique, and then we grow out of that and we end up with a very discontinuous, discordant, very contemporary kind of novel. I think that what happens to a lot of us in middle age is that we can't really hang on to our fiction anymore.

If Roy Fowler is trying to compose a "romance" in the bush (the metaphorical stance of most Munro males), too much of his action is determined by others' fictions. He seeks loneliness journeying down the path of self deception. Many of Roy's signs depict the pastoral illusions that local farmers still cling to:

They always want a background of rolling farmland … even though the pigs and turkeys … never see daylight, and the cattle are often fattened in feedlots.

Perhaps part of the attraction of real trees in the bush is that they seem to be free of this distortion.

It may be our fate, though, to come full circle to the things we wish to avoid. Roy falls in the woods because he is in the grip of another fiction, a story of a rival woodcutter in his domain (and the lovingly Miltonic catalog of "his" trees is clearly a correlative of "The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces" declaimed by Rose's reclusive father). This tale is told to Roy by Percy Marshall, a Munro solitary who has declassed himself, a farmer turned eccentric scavenger, with an ear for rumors of deals and money matters. Percy is a disturbing vision of what Roy fears becoming, a farmer turned eccentric scavenger, with an ear for rumors of deals and money matters. Percy is a disturbing vision of what Roy fears becoming, and Roy accepts Percy's story of "a fellow … under contract to the River Inn to get them all the wood they need for the winter." Percy later embellishes the "fellow" into a "housepainter." Readers will recognize what Roy does not, that Percy is speaking of Roy, who once sold wood to the River Inn. The inn is another symbol of encroachment, "a resort hotel built on the ruins of an old mill" where the wood they burn, "they just burn it for the looks." Roy is so anxiously turning this story over in his mind that he cannot see through the romance of what Percy has told him. Instead, he worries, foolishly goes alone to the bush, and almost immediately injures himself on the snowy ground, whose white covering disguises the ruts that trip him. The injury is so severe that he must crawl back, and during this time of rebirth Roy deconstructs the embellished fiction he has hitherto believed:

The truth is that the paperhanger, the decorator, the housepainter … is Roy himself…. Everything connected with the River Inn turns into some big fable…. Around here any set of
While unraveling the tale, Roy has made it back to the truck, and Munro concludes "Wood" with Roy's achieving a "decent sense of victory." The story's final word is "safe": the woods are still safe for Roy, he is safe from the River Inn and the fictions that emanate from it, and he may be safer, more secure within himself. He may even be able to return to the women in his life.

Munro offers no easy answers, but she gives us the most sustained view of a decent man's drift into the isolation of a grotesque world, and then of Roy's "long, successful crawl" to a less fictive view of life. Certainly, one gets the sense from Munro that much of the resigned and saddened loneliness of her women is contingent upon the illusory isolation of the men. If men like Roy can live closer to themselves, they will be able to live closer to home.

Of course, one can't leave this Munro story without noting that "safe" may also promise a host of treacherous ironies. It may be that we need to add another characteristic of the short story to those we've enumerated: it doesn't console. The short story examines loneliness but does not solve it. If it gives no direct answers, it has communicated the feel of loneliness and especially male loneliness. It is a feeling as irreducible as a nail in the heart. As long as the cultural body remains anemically post-modern, short stories will illumine the solitary corners of our lives.

Criticism: Carol Shields (review date 7 February 1991)


[Shields is a Pulitzer-prize winning novelist, poet, and critic who has lived in and written about Canada. In the following review, she favorably reviews Friend of My Youth, calling it a book on which every page contains "particular satisfactions of prose that is supple, tart and spare."]

The Canadian writer Alice Munro once likened a good short story to a commodious house whose every room possesses an exterior door. So accommodating a house, she wrote, is capable of admitting visitors through any number of openings, just as a story can be entered by way of its separate sections or paragraphs or even its individual sentences or words. The rewards for the reader, she suggests, have to do with language rather than with the sequence of narrative, the rhythm and surprise of linguistic persuasion overriding the fortunes of those who populate the pages of novels—what these characters want and what they eventually get.

It is a pleasure, then, to open Alice Munro's new collection of short stories, Friend of My Youth, and find on every page the particular satisfactions of prose that is supple, tart and spare, yet elegant and complex. A typical Munro sentence, with its exact and loving syntax, gestures toward worldliness, toward literary sophistication and art, while at the same time guarding, by means of her unpredictable cadences and spirited vocabulary, the particular salt and twang of rural Ontario—the corner of the universe that Alice Munro calls home. Her voice is unmistakably her own. Artlessness collides with erudition in almost every paragraph, but in Munro's hands these contradictions seem natural, just one more manifestation of a planet whose parts are unbalanced, mismatched, puzzling and random.

Friend of My Youth is Alice Munro's seventh book. Readers familiar with her work are often taken with the lovely fresh suddenness of her titles. Dance of the Happy Shades, her first book (1968), finds its name in a young child's piano piece, a name brimming in the title story with the kind of minor-key paradox that spills out into the whole of the book. Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (1974) pays tribute to a favourite theme, the accidental or unintentional gaps in communication that crown us with misery or misunderstanding or, very occasionally, with salvation. Who Do You Think You Are? (1978, published in England under the title
The Beggar Maid picks up as a running thread that familiar rebuke to those who have the audacity to reach beyond the expectations of others. Munro's new book takes as its reference the flowery, scented phrases once used, twenty or thirty or forty years ago, in the salutations of letters. 'My dearest Mary, my darling Ruth', 'My dear little Joanne', 'My dear old friend Cleta', 'My lovely Margaret', 'Friend of my youth'.

Such beseeching endearments are scorned by the woman who is the narrator of the book's title story. 'My dearest Mary, my darling Ruth'—these are the terms used by the narrator's mother when writing letters to her old school friends; they represent, to the daughter's mind, self-conscious pleas for attention, powdery, pathetic appeals for love, for validation. She is enraged that her mother, who is dying slowly of a paralysing disease, can find the energy to pick up a pen and enter into a conspiracy with falsehood. "I have friends all over the country," she would say defiantly. "I have dear, dear friends."

In fact, the mother clings to a skewed remnant of memory. As a young woman ("a young woman with a soft, mischievous face and shiny, opaque stockings on her plump legs"), she went off to the Ottawa Valley to teach in a one-room country school, and there she boarded with a local family, the Grieves sisters, one of them married, the other not. This eccentric household—they are members of the strict Cameronian religious sect—enacts before the young woman's eyes a drama bubbling with melodrama and farce. The teacher lives with them through a season of death, passion and betrayal, taking everything in, but maintaining a curious and giddy detachment; she is young, after all, and engaged to be married, her tenure with the Grieves family is short, she can afford dispassion, even a measure of generosity.

Years later, though, she looks back and romanticises the experience. If only she were a writer, she tells her grown-up daughter, she would put it all in a novel and title it The Maiden Lady. Her memory is prepared to sift and resettle actual events, touching up certain episodes, assigning blame and reward, and bringing the story to rich, ripe resolution. The daughter is offended by her mother's cheap and easy distortions. She herself, given a chance, would tell the story differently, bringing hardness to its turnings, bearing down on its erotic suggestiveness. The gulf between mother and daughter widens, and this is where Alice Munro, having brought us this far, overturns our expectations. We are ready to be reassured, to be told that the daughter will come to an understanding of her mother, that we are on the cusp of one of those slightly embarrassing but nevertheless satisfying archetypal reconciliations.

It is not to be. The mother stands by her account, refusing revision or compromise and announcing to her daughter, by means of a mocking smile, her claim to a kind of exalted loneliness. The story, in fact—and it is the finest in the collection—makes a powerful and positive statement for the integrity of the self which is preserved by a steadfast resistance to the notions of others. To be understood, Munro suggests in the radiant, divergent final paragraph, is to be invaded or colonised: hanging on to your own life may mean the excommunication of all others.

Relying on the complexity of its narrative threading, on detail, voice and perspective, the story offers one further aesthetic surprise: a range of sympathy capable of embracing both the mother's brave self-delusion and the daughter's stubborn rejection of romanticism. The forces of grace and blame are assigned with a cool eye, with an even hand, and this willingness to allow for contradiction blows across Alice Munro's fiction like a gust of oxygen.

The enchantment to be found in Munro's books lies in the countless, vivid shocks of recognition between reader and writer. The stories deal with the rewards and punishments of erotic love, with girls becoming women, and sometimes, particularly in the early books, with how women make compromises in order to remain human. She writes, too, about how people survive the lives they're born into, their moments of shame, displacement and illumination. Many of the stories are cunningly hinged to moments in time: these stories draw breath from narrowly avoided accidents, the mock suicide, the almost-tragedy, the near brush with happiness.
Details of place are strikingly, almost photographically evoked. Once, speaking about a book she loved as a child—it happened to be Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon*—Munro admitted to having been drawn in by what was 'going on behind, or beyond, the proper story ... life spreading out behind the story, the book's life'. In the same way, her own work owes its vividness to the attention she pays to atmosphere, the listed contents of parlours and kitchens, handbags and pockets. She is wonderful describing faces, gestures, a pitch of voice, an article of clothing, the private clamour of an object or thought that drifts out of the past and forms a connection with the present.

In a superb story, 'Miles City, Montana', from an earlier book, the narrator, a young married woman, describes what she calls her 'real work'. This work is not just looking after her husband and house and children, but, as she says, the 'wooing of distant parts of myself'. These distant parts, these concealed layers of existence, excavating them and holding them up to the light of day—that is what forms the substance of Munro's fiction.

After her first book of short stories in 1968, her publisher, and her readers too, waited eagerly for her to produce a novel. It has not happened, though *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), with its linked stories and common protagonist, is sometimes thought of as a novel. She is, it has turned out, a writer more at home with shorter structures. Always concerned with the authenticity of material, it may be that she believes that the episodes that make up our lives conform to the hummocky shape of the short story rather than to the slow rising action of the conventional novel, with its final rewards and resolutions, obstacles overcome and goals realised—a pattern that has not proved all that useful to the experience of women.

Munro has gone a long way toward reshaping the short story for her purposes, or rather unshaping it. Strange bits of the world go into her work: digressions of every sort, family histories, notes on cultural artefacts (she has an eye for such notations), newspaper articles, old letters, and, very often, seemingly random anecdotes beaded on a thin string of narrative. It is as though the disorderly men and women who inhabit her pages require extra elbow room; wonderful new openings are for ever appearing—into the past, the future, into a joke or a dream or a flight of fancy. Some stories come out as one long sigh, but others are broken into segments or even, as in the story 'Oh, what avails', into miniature chapters with their own titles. The meaning of a Munro story emerges from this complex patterning rather than from the tidiness of a problem/solution set-up or the troublesome little restraints of beginnings, middles and ends.

The time line moves all over the place. Sometimes she will stop a story and say, 'I forgot to tell you that—' Sometimes, as in 'Oh, what avails', she fast-forwards into the future, presenting a scene in which a woman imagines how her husband will welcome her home after a weekend of adultery. Yet another story, 'Differently', concludes by shifting into an old time-frame, a woman revisiting not the scenes of high drama and conflict in her life, but a rare buried moment of peace and reflection. Munro is good at handling long windy stretches of time, whole lifetimes or generations, and the stories here seem even bolder in this respect.

Occasionally, as in the story 'Five Points', she will take two apparently separate stories and turn them, one against the other, eliciting sparks of reference and discord. The story-within-a-story, that staple of Victorian fiction, turns up in 'Goodness and Mercy'; other stories work along a strand of loosely related incidents, one opening into the next like a set of rooms; this discursiveness, this willingness to ramble and remark and wonder, resembles nothing so much as the way women, sitting over a mug of tea, tell each other stories, of confession and consolation, stories that seem dredged from some cosmic lost-and-found bureau or pieced together out of shared scraps.

Underlying the fluidity of structure is a formal complexity; the trace of deliberation is lightly drawn on even the most sprawling and diffuse material. Munro is a writer who cares deeply about the shape her books take. A few years ago, shortly before the publication of one of her collections, she realised that the arrangement of the text had gone awry, that certain stories did not belong together; it was a writer's nightmare; locked into a contract, she would have to live with the flawed book or else assume the not inconsiderable cost of printing.
new galleys. She made the second choice, and ended up with the book she wanted.

Her new book contains one story, 'Meneseteung', that is about fiction, the materials that go into a narrative, the how of a story rather than the what. Little flags from the past—newspaper reports, scraps of verse and gravestone inscriptions—play against the 'I' of the narrator and the 'she' of the narration. This may sound like a bowl of postmod bubble soup, but the story charms; it also disturbs. Its subject, the genteel lady poet, Almeda Roth, yearns for the substance of authentic love.

One thing she has noticed about married women, and this is how many of them go about creating their husbands. They have to start ascribing preferences, opinions, dictatorial ways. Oh, yes, they say, my husband is very particular. He won't touch turnips. He won't eat fried meat. He can't stand organ music. He would kill me if I took one puff of tobacco. This way, bewildered, sidelong-looking men are made over, made into husbands, heads of households. Almeda Roth cannot imagine herself doing that. She wants a man who doesn't have to be made, who is firm already and determined and mysterious to her.

A man appears in the role of rescuer, a widower named Jarvis Poulter, and for a brief moment it seems he may be the one to save her. But the narrative turns out to rest on a micro-circuitry of lost opportunities, missed connections.

Munro seldom offers accounts of her work; she claims she would rather not let her left hand know what her right hand is doing. But a credo of sorts can be located in an earlier story, 'The Stone in the Field'. The stone in question marks the grave of a mysterious farm labourer, a Mr Black, the illicit lover of one of the farmer's daughters—or so legend suggests. The narrator, hungry for legends of her own, visits the field and finds that the stone has been removed. A kind of relief sweeps over her, for she has grown suspicious of the desperation that drives people to make stories of mere stones. And she knows that the manufactured stories can never match the potency of the real; the connections are too easily arrived at, too pat, too consoling, and too selfishly derived. 'I no longer believe that people's secrets are defined and communicable,' she says, 'or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognise. I don't believe so.'

Occasionally one of Munro's stories remains enigmatic, even after several readings. For years I've puzzled over a story called 'Fits', while delighting in its texture, and I am baffled now over one of the stories in this new book, an absorbing, sharply detailed story called 'Hold me fast, don't let me pass', which is (I think) about the porous nature of history, how much of it simply drains away to nothing. All the elements of the story seem in place, and yet it refuses, in its wider sense, to open up for me. Nevertheless, I'm sure the key is there if I can only find it.

Munro is careful about leaving keys. A reader can almost always find in the closing pages of a Munro piece a little silver ingot of compaction, an insight that throws light on the story. These sentences are often her most graceful, and they are skilfully embedded in the text, cushioned by the colloquialism and ease that define her writing. In 'Pictures of the Ice', for example, a retired clergyman and his young housekeeper cherish their secrets but find redemption in complicity. We require, it seems, in our moments of courage or shame, at least one witness. 'No matter how alone you are,' the housekeeper thinks, 'and how tricky and determined, don't you need one person to know?' Georgia, the main character in 'Differently', buffeted by time, disappointed by love and friendship, thinks: 'People make momentous shifts, but not the changes they imagine.' There is something old-fashioned and solid about these statements, generously, even humbly offered.

Criticism: Katherine J. Mayberry (essay date Fall 1992)
Storytelling is the central activity of the characters of Alice Munro's fiction. It is of course the principal task of Munro's narrators—those characters who organize and focalize the events and reflections constituting the short stories; and it is also the frequent activity of a large group of secondary characters whose storytelling is narrated by the chief narrators and thus recessed within the main narrative. Whether seeking or evading truth, all of these characters enlist narrative as the central weapon in their dogged and usually inconclusive struggle with the disturbances born at the intersection of their pasts and their presents. All are impelled to manage their pain, ignorance, and occasional glimpses of knowledge by telling. Some are more successful than others in their struggles, but success, when it occasionally comes, seems more a matter of luck than desert, and is rarely a direct dividend of the narrative act.

Eventually, most of Munro's narrators, both primary and secondary, come to recognize, if only dimly, the imperfection and inadequacy of their medium. In most cases, this inadequacy is a function of the essential incongruence between experience itself and the narrative that would render it, an incongruence complicated by the necessary mediation of memory. The uneasy relationship between language and experience is a recurring concern of Munro's work—one that she neither solves nor despairs of solving. It is stated as early as Lives of Girls and Women, where a more experienced Del judges as "crazy, heartbreaking" her earlier project of fitting "every last thing … radiant everlasting" within the narratives she would write. And with somewhat different implications, it dominates a late work like "Friend of My Youth," where the problem of narrative fidelity is confounded still further by the issue of proprietorship. As legatee of her mother's stories about her youth, the narrator insists on reshaping them into stories that will better suit her own version of the person she needs her mother to have been: "I saw through my mother's story and put in what she left out."

The 1977 volume Moons of Jupiter is one of Munro's most intensely focused examinations of the capabilities and limitations of narrative. A collection of disturbing stories about middle-aged people—mostly women—facing often humiliating uncertainties, Moons has been called "a menopausal progression" [Beverly J. Rasporich in Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro, University of Alberta Press, 1990], a look at "the persistent psychological puzzle of women's masochistic complicity in their own humiliation" [Ildiko de Papp Carrington, Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro, Northern Illinois University Press, 1989], and (by Munro herself) an examination of "what men and women want of each other." But Moons is also a work about what stories can do, about the relationship between truth and narrative, between knowing and telling. Confused and uncertain, the women of this volume are groping for knowledge of an unknowable male other: Lydia in "Dulse" telling a psychiatrist about her abusive relationship with Duncan; the narrator in "Bardon Bus" talking her way through a broken affair; Mrs. Cross in "Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd" trying to devise a story about the speechless Jack. Repeatedly, it is through stories, through placing themselves and these others within narrative, that these women seek knowledge, a resolution of their confusion. To tell, they hope, is to know. While some of these characters are temporarily relieved of the pressures of uncertainty, it is not, for the most part, the narrative process that affords this relief. Countless factors conspire against the composition of narrative truth—the failure of memory, the failure of nerve, the discontinuity between past and present, the alienation of language from experience. The stories these women tell must remain incomplete and finally barren of the truths they are seeking.

"Hard-Luck Stories," the tenth story in Moons of Jupiter, is the most direct treatment of the problem of narrative in the volume. Its principal characters storytellers and its principal dramatic action their storytelling, "Hard-Luck Stories" is a supremely meta-narrative work. The story-telling characters, Julie and the unnamed narrator, are not merely accessing the past through their narrative, not merely remembering, but creating,
respectively, "entertaining" and "interesting" stories for an audience of one—the silent and predatory Douglas. These characters are self-conscious storytellers, whose divergent management of the activity of telling affords a deep look into Munro's understanding of the narrative act. Through the stories of Julie and the narrator, Munro probes the impulses, varieties, capacities, and limitations of narrative, insisting once more on the uneasy, discontinuous relationship between narrative and experience, and identifying the various versions of lies and uncertainties that no narrative can escape.

Like all of Munro's work, "Hard-Luck Stories" virtually defies plot summary. The story opens in the present tense, with the narrator meeting her friend Julie for lunch. Cryptically, they refer to a day two months earlier when they had been given a ride home from a conference by Douglas Reider, a previous acquaintance of the narrator. The narrative then moves back in time to the day referred to in the first section—the afternoon of the drive. While this afternoon, which includes the drive and a lunch shared by the three, is the principal setting of the story, we are taken back still further in time by three stories told by the two women as they eat lunch with Douglas. Their stories, two by Julie and one by the narrator, relate events occurring at different points in the women's pasts; their common subject is the deceits and stratagems that men practice on women. The telling of these hard-luck stories, which is rendered in direct, quoted speech, constitutes the main action of the work.

In their confessional rendering of sexual confusion and psychological disequilibrium, Julie's stories appear to be concerned with representing difficult personal truths. As a preface to the first story, she admits to having been bulimic at the time:

I was one of those people who gorge, then purge. I used to make cream puffs and eat them all one after the other, or make fudge and eat a whole panful, then take mustard and water to vomit or else massive doses of epsom salts to wash it through. Terrible. The guilt. I was compelled. It must have had something to do with sex. They say now it does, don't they?

And she refers to her condition at the time of the second story as "Miserable [and] mixed-up." In each story, Julie represents herself as a credulous victim of the deceits of disturbed men—the first a mental patient pretending to be a graduate student, the second Julie's group therapist, pretending a passionate interest in Julie while sleeping with several other group members.

While the content of Julie's stories seems to be the stuff of wrenching confession, their manner is anything but pained. As the narrator recognizes, Julie's self-exposure is measured and self-conscious: she "set herself up to be preposterously frank. There was something willed and coquettish ... about this." Julie's words have little to do with the past that they would seem to represent; they mark instead a virtual severance of past and present, experience and language. Her narrative cuts her off from the experience it is ostensibly representing. We see evidence of this in the quality of her confession about bulimia quoted above, in the yawning gap between the bulimia itself—this powerful but speechless register of miserable protest—and the spare, businesslike language with which Julie renders it. Whatever pain expressed itself in that eloquent body language of bulimia is nowhere evident within Julie's recounting of the experience. And we see the gap between language and experience again in her reference to the condition of her inmate almost-lover. When the narrator exclaims upon hearing from Julie that "He'd tried to cut his throat," Julie answers, "It wasn't that bad. He was recovering."

Julie's language here and throughout her two stories is in a dialect common to a number of Munro characters—characters whose stories, with their controlled language and tone, operate at a considerable remove from the original events. The narrative of these characters exploits the inevitable discontinuity between language and experience; for them, narrative functions as a virtual false counter, standing for something, surely, but not for the lived experience their narratives pretend to render. Though variously motivated, the narrative modes of these characters are strikingly similar, marked by flat, sparse, spare language and linear chronology. For these characters, language behaves, protecting its users from the vitality
and pain that might be uncaged by a less provident use of the medium. This is the narrative method used by Prue, the title character in another story in the *Moons* volume, whose "anecdotes" pry the told impossibly far apart from its lived antecedent.

She presents her life in anecdotes, and though it is the point of most of her anecdotes that hopes are dashed, dreams ridiculed, things never turn out as expected, everything is altered in a bizarre way and there is no explanation ever, people always feel cheered up after listening to her; they say of her that it is a relief to meet somebody who doesn't take herself too seriously, who is so unintense, and civilized, and never makes any real demands or complaints.

This is also the method of Wilfred, the younger brother in "Visitors," whose repertoire of stories is predictable and repetitious. As his wife recognizes,

In Wilfred's stories you could always be sure that the gloomy parts would give way to something better, and if somebody behaved in a peculiar way there was an explanation for it. If Wilfred figured in his own stories, as he usually did, there was always a stroke of luck for him somewhere, a good meal or a bottle of whiskey or some money.

While the careful stories of characters like Prue and Wilfred may temporarily keep deep troubles at bay by depriving them of vivid language, these troubles insist on expression, ingeniously finding translation into a different discourse. Prue's mute rage at Gordon expresses itself in her petty thefts of his belongings ("She just takes something, every now and then"), and Wilfred's unutterable sadness surfaces in crying fits deep in the night.

Given their context of psychic disequilibrium ("I felt I wasn't too far from being loony myself"), Julie's cool and breezy narratives must share some of the protective, distancing motivations impelling Pure and Wilfred. But another agenda also drives her: her stories, with their blithe and studied self-exposure, have the practical effect of attracting Douglas. Her confession to Douglas seeks neither expiation nor representation, but seduction. It is a trick of language and time that converts one thing into another (a painful experience into a "ridiculous" story), just as Julie herself can exchange her earlier "hiking boots and … denim jacket" for a pink dress and flowered hat. Her preposterous frankness, her insistent insertion of sexuality into conversation with a man she has just met, is a not-so-thinly-disguised "come-hither" strategy that meets with complete success: Douglas is attracted to her, and, as we learn from the opening of the story, they become lovers. Julie's stories do, in a sense, authorize or empower her, in that their intentions are realized.

But we cannot be sanguine for her chances for happiness, for her hopes of finding "the one kind [of love] nobody wants to think they've missed out on." For as we learn from the narrator's story, which recounts the ending of her earlier relationship with Douglas, like the inmate and the therapist, Douglas is another man who deceives and uses women. The practical effect of Julie's narrative calls into question Gayle Greene's claim that "all narrative is concerned with change … [that] there is something in the impulse to narrative that is related to the impulse to liberation." For Julie's story merely delivers her into another round of the same cycle, into an affair with a hard and voyeuristic man, about whom the best that can be said is, he "is better than crumbs."

While Munro is not being harsh or moralistic about characters like Julie and Prue, their disinclination to revive their pasts through their narratives surely disqualifies them from the ranks of her heroines. As a writer of narratives whose recurring subject is the past and the use we make of it, who stubbornly insists on a thing called truth while repeatedly despairing of our ability to reach it, Munro appears not to endorse such an ultimately barren and repetitious narrative strategy, valorizing instead those narrative strategies (like the one practiced by the narrator of "Hard-Luck Stories") more dedicated to, if not more capable of, approximating truth. And while she doesn't always reward those characters who work this way, she *does* present the Julie's
and Prue's as trapped in the ignorance constructed by their stories, condemned to reenact rather than to
understand their past.

Like Julie's stories, the narrator's single story in "Hard-Luck Stories" is about a man's manipulation of a
vulnerable woman. But subject matter is the only common feature of the women's stories; the narrator's
motives, methods, and intents are vastly different from Julie's. For the narrator, as for Del in Lives, words are
consequential and vital, with physical properties of their own that, combined with the proliferation of
associative logic set in motion by their use, are capable of sensuous, rich, sometimes uncontrollable
signification. For Julie, the statement "He'd tried to cut his throat" is a cool, dry factual statement that can be
easily contained and qualified by "It wasn't that bad. He was recovering." For the narrator, the statement
associates itself with "suicide," a word with an almost unbearably physical reality: "Mention of suicide is like
innards pushing through an incision; you have to push it back and clap some pads on, quickly." The narrator's
story demonstrates repeatedly the connection between language and physical experience, the ability of a word
to call up, not shut down, a reality beyond the context of its present use. We see her acceptance of this
connection in her account of an earlier conversation with Douglas:

I asked him on the way up what Keith and Caroline were like, and he said they were rich. I
said that wasn't much of a description. He said it was Caroline's money, her daddy owned a
brewery. He told me which one. There was something about the way he said "her daddy" that
made me see the money on her, the way he saw it, like long lashes or a bosom—like a
luxuriant physical thing.

This somaticizing of language is necessary to any narrator who seeks to resuscitate experience through
language, through stories about the past. Unlike Julie, Prue, and Wilfred, the narrator's use of language
invigorates rather than vitiates her narrative. Thus it continues the experiment initiated by Del in Lives—that
insistence on the physical properties of both sides of the signifying transaction—the visual, oral properties of
written and spoken language and the sensuality of its referents.

We can't know, of course, how close the narrator's story comes to the events it narrates. This is a comparison
quite impossible for Munro or any writer to make, as the original experience—if indeed it existed at all—is
unpresentable. But all the evidence suggests that the narrator's story is a far more faithful account than Julie's
stories were. Whereas Julie's stories are compact summaries of her experiences, with little attempt made to
recreate conversations or the effect the events had on her, the narrator remembers the language of the
conversations she had that evening, recounts carefully her reaction to the evening's events—not, as far as we
can tell, her reaction as mediated by the intervening time or the present, but her reaction at the time.

Then she [the hostess] said in her wispy voice how much she loved the way it was in the
winter with the snow deep outside and the white rugs and the white furniture. Keith seemed
rather embarrassed by her and said it was like a squash court, no depth perception. I felt
sympathetic because she seemed just on the verge of making some sort of fool of herself …
the man I was with got very brusque with her, and I thought that was mean. I thought, even if
she's faking, it shows she wants to feel something, doesn't it, oughtn't decent people to help
her?

The most crucial difference between the stories of Julie and the narrator lies in what they are seeking. Julie's
stories, though accounts of past events, are concerned with what they can effect in the present and the future;
they demonstrate little concern with understanding the painful past that she rather cheerfully recounts. But the
narrator does not tell her story as she would don a new dress—in order to achieve a certain effect. She is after
something quite different, as she suggests when she distinguishes the effect of her story from Julie's: "It may
not be very entertaining…. But it is interesting." The different roots of the two words are revealing: tenir, to
hold, in the first; esse, to be, in the second. The narrator's story will have something to do with being, with
essence, with experience; Julie's holds that essence back.

Not until the narrator has finished her story do we realize that the "man I was in love with" was Douglas himself, that a member of her audience is a principal character in the story she tells. It is this fact that helps us realize what she is after in giving this account: she is after no less than the actual experience itself as it was, a perfect retrieval of the past through narrative. Such a retrieval is only possible if the narrator can replace not just herself, but Douglas as well into the past. To gain Douglas's participation in the narrative would be to collapse present into past, to negate somehow the time that has elapsed between the original event and her story. If the recalcitrant present will cooperate, if Douglas will agree to be put back in the experience, the narrator stands a chance of understanding this troubling experience. And it is this desire for understanding that drives her narrative; she tells so that she may know, so that she may understand the role of the other (Douglas).

The narrator's project is more coincident with Del's ambitions than with the reminiscences of later narrators in The Progress of Love or Friend of My Youth. Neither Del nor this narrator seeks to recover a past event by demonstrating its messy amalgamation with experience intervening between past and present; both would re-create experience by excising it, perfect and whole, from the matrix of the past. But in "Hard-Luck Stories," this tactic fails; time will not be collapsed, Douglas will not fill in the blanks, knowledge cannot be achieved. Douglas neither confirms nor denies the narrator's account; he remains the other that won't be contained, re-placed, understood. His recalcitrance leads the narrator to recognize the futility of her story, its inability to freeze time by replicating the past and yielding the knowledge she seeks: "I could be always bent on knowing, and always in the dark, about what was important to him, and what was not."

While the narrator's narrative project closely resembles Del's in Lives, the stakes to be won by its achievement have increased considerably. In perfectly retrieving the past, the narrator not only could gain understanding of that past, but also could realize the virtual identity between the concepts of inclusiveness ("every last thing") and timelessness ("everlasting"). Her attempt to revive the past is also an attempt to stop time altogether, to fend off the changes overtaking her. She shares this ambition with a number of other characters in the volume—with Lydia, in "Dulse," and the narrator in "Bardon Bus," both desperately trying to understand failed relationships, and with Albert in "Visitors," stubbornly insisting on the truth of his narrative about Lloyd Sallows—"It's not a story. It's something that happened." All middle-aged, these characters are concerned with change and death; in trying to suspend the past in narrative, they are trying to stop time, to ward off the death coming nearer to all of them. But as the abrupt insertion of the graveyard at the end of "Stories" reminds us, death will not be stopped by a trick of language or by any other contrivance. As the narrator realizes, language and story-telling are mocked by the obdurate fact of death: "I heard the silly sound of my own voice against the truth of the lives laid down here."

However pessimistic "Hard-Luck Stories" may be about narrative—about its ability to retrieve the past, yield understanding, challenge the flux of time—it does not leave its struggling characters utterly hopeless. For the narrator, Julie, and Douglas (and indeed many of the characters in this and other volumes) do find solace, though not where they were seeking it, not in the stories they tell. As if to point up the inefficacy of narrative, Munro often offers its opposite as a source of comfort. Repeatedly, it is within the unmediated, unprocessed image and act that her characters find at least temporary peace. The three characters in "Hard-Luck Stories" are granted a moment of grace through the form of a trillium stitched on a foot-stool in a country church:

I was pleased with this homely emblem…. I think I became rather boisterous, from then on.
In fact all three of us did, as if we had each one, secretly, come upon an unacknowledged spring of hopefulness.

The source of their pleasure in the trillium goes unidentified, the connection between the emblem and the comfort it casts remains uninterpreted, and hence, Munro seems to insist, the image is particularly powerful. A
similar moment comes at the end of "Dulse," when Lydia, after desperately seeking shelter in the stories she tells her psychiatrist and her new telephone worker friends, finds relief in the seaweed left her by Vincent: "Yet look how this present slyly warmed her, from a distance." Though Munro must present these moments within narrative, they remain the most immediate, unmediated, uninterpreted moments in the stories. It is as if she is saying that peace, truth, knowledge are unavailable through discourse, intellection; that they are accessible only within the unlocked, untranslated, silent image that, like Keats's "silent form dost tease us out of thought."

Munro's understanding of the function of narrative is mordantly paradoxical. Throughout her career, she has insisted on the existence of pre-linguistic experience, of a truth that originates outside of, independent of language. This truth is wholly experiential and wholly personal, never going beyond the bounds of individual perception. Particular and circumscribed, it would seem a simple truth, though as Munro's vision matures, its constitution grows increasingly intricate, its excision from the surrounding web of falsehoods, uncertainties, silence, and alternative perceptions increasingly difficult. But simple or complex, this truth admits little access. The approaches attempted by most of Munro's characters are memory and narrative—virtually equivalent faculties in that they both order past experience, re-collect lived moments within a chronological frame. These characters attempt to understand their experience by going through it again, and only language allows this review. But as "Hard-Luck Stories" demonstrates, to go through it again is to change it utterly; there can be no coincidence between the experience itself and the language that would render it. Narrative is finally not the province of truth; to tell is at best to revise, but never to perfectly revive. The narrator's position at the end of "Hard-Luck Stories" is, for Munro, the predicament of all narrators who seek understanding through language—the predicament of being "always bent on knowing, and always in the dark."

**Criticism: Josephine Humphreys (review date 11 September 1994)**


[Humphreys is an American novelist whose book on the disintegration of family life, Dreams of Sleep, won PEN's Ernest Hemingway Prize in 1985. In the following review, she praises Open Secrets as a collection of stories that "dazzles with its faith in language and in life."]

On a winter night in 1919, in a hotel dining room in Carstairs, Ontario, a librarian who's had a few drinks begins to tell her darkest secrets to a salesman she barely knows. "It's a lesson, this story," the librarian says. "It's a lesson, this story," the librarian says. "It's a lesson in what fools women can make of themselves."

The story, aptly entitled "Carried Away," is the first in Alice Munro's new collection, Open Secrets, her eighth work of fiction. And in fact, all the stories in Open Secrets are lessons. Ms. Munro's work has always been ambitious and risky precisely because it dares to teach, and by the hardest, best method: without giving answers.

Sometimes even the characters themselves have only a fuzzy notion of what their own stories mean. "Carried Away" isn't really about women making fools of themselves. And none of these eight stories are easy to predict. Just when meaning seems almost revealed, the story changes, veers, steps off a cliff.

The librarian, for instance, tells of the soldier who wooed her by mail during World War I, then came home and married another girl. After she confesses the details to the salesman and asks, "Do you think it was all a joke on me? Do you think a man could be so diabolical?" the salesman says, "No, no. Don't you think such a thing. Far more likely he was sincere. He got a little carried away. It's all just the way it looks on the surface." Then the salesman seduces her.
For many writers, that would be enough. The story, already 20 pages long, would indeed show how women make fools of themselves. But trust Ms. Munro never to be satisfied with a premature ending. Some five years later, an accident occurs in the sawmill at the local piano factory, "a particularly ghastly and tragic accident" in which the librarian's soldier "had the misfortune to have his sleeve caught by a setscrew…. His head in consequence was brought in contact with the circular saw…. In an instant the unfortunate young man's head was separated from his body."

Few writers would dare such a move, and fewer still could make it work. But Ms. Munro does. The narrative fabric into which this horrible event is woven is tight with a sense of time and place, a solid realism that allows even the bizarre to appear normal. And, as it turns out, decapitation isn't the final twist in the story, or even the most bizarre. Two more follow, a marriage and a vision, and the story concludes with a flashback that proves what we may by now have suspected: Ms. Munro's fiction is out to seize—to apprehend—the mystery of existence within time, "the unforeseen intervention," the unique quality of a person's fate.

Human apprehension of mystery has to start with language, our technique for rehashing and examining experience for any traces of meaning. So in Open Secrets people are continually telling and hearing stories—sometimes more than one at a time—in confessions, letters, rumors, ballads, conversations, newspapers. But some parts of life aren't quickly apprehendable through language. Puzzles of love, time, death, spirit—these are the open secrets, near-at-hand mysteries that can't readily be talked or written into clarity, but that nevertheless can be relentlessly turned and poked and studied until, with some luck, they yield something—a lesson that's partial and ambiguous but likely also to be momentous.

Every story in the collection contains some sort of startling leap, whether it's a huge jump forward in time (more than 100 years in "A Wilderness Station"), a geographical change (as in "The Jack Randa Hotel," when a woman follows her runaway husband to Australia to spy on him) or a sudden switch in viewpoint that changes the whole nature of the story. Mishaps and accidents twist through like killer tornadoes, throwing everybody off course. By thus expanding—you might even say exploding—the fictional context, Ms. Munro reaches toward difficult truths.

Perhaps the most exploded story in the collection is "The Albanian Virgin," which begins with the exotic narrative of a Canadian woman held captive in a remote Albanian village during the 1920's. But after five pages there is an interruption: "I heard this story in the old St. Joseph's Hospital in Victoria from Charlotte, who was the sort of friend I had in my early days there."

The narrator is a young woman of the 1960's who has fled both a marriage and a love affair on the other side of the continent. And her narrative is interrupted from time to time by a return to the Albanian adventure. The result is a bold assault on the assumptions and expectations of traditional fiction, with remarkable success.

Generally, we think of fiction as a process of gradual revelation. But what if a story can do the opposite—and still succeed? Just after the librarian in "Carried Away" arrives in Carstairs, she looks out at the bare winter trees: "She had never been here when the leaves were on the trees. It must make a great difference. So much that lay open now would be concealed." Gradually, time and experience obscure the easy lessons. Our lives leaf out. What we once thought true may be lost under the ongoing and always surprising accumulation of event and perception.

It's no coincidence that almost every story in Open Secrets has as its time frame the span of an entire life, for these stories draw upon the complexity of a mature, long-vigilant sensibility. And lifelong learning isn't easy. In "Vandals," a woman perseveres in a troubled marriage: "She learned, she changed. Age was a help to her. Drink also."
The only real guard against despair, against the "devouring muddle" and a life of "arbitrary days," is to make a narrative of the self, constantly reinterpreting the accumulated life. People whose lives have not panned out, like Millicent in "A Real Life," who talks her friend Dorrie into marrying a stranger, can thus achieve a compensatory wisdom, limited but powerful, and vaguely mystical.

In the title story, Maureen Stephens's supposedly lucky marriage has taken a sexually horrifying turn. And when a local girl disappears from a hiking trip, the lost girl reminds Maureen of how girlhood itself vanishes. She remembers her own secret recklessness. "To be careless, dauntless, to create havoc—that was the lost hope of girls." She experiences odd hallucinatory moments when she sees things that "seem to be part of another life that she is leading," as if she were "looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it."

Fiction is the telling that startles, the telling that teaches. In Open Secrets, Alice Munro has written stories of tremendous strength, stories resembling the factory women she describes in "Spaceships Have Landed": "They came jostling and joking down the stairs and burst out onto the street. They yelled at cars in which there were people they knew, and people they didn't know. They spread disorder as if they had every right." Heedless of convention, hazarding everything, firmly convincing us of the unseen good despite acknowledging our fears and harrowing experiences, Open Secrets is a book that dazzles with its faith in language and in life.

**Criticism: Ann Hulbert (review date 22 December 1994)**


[Hulbert is an American editor and critic. In the following review, she favorably analyzes the stories in Open Secrets, commenting on the provincial setting of Carstairs, Ontario, and the unremarkable, quiet lives of its inhabitants.]

Alice Munro is the latest and best proof that a provincial literary imagination can be the most expansive kind of imagination there is. Fixated on lives in out-of-the-way Canadian places and dedicated to the short story rather than to what she has called "the mainstream big novel," she finds pioneering energy in the "feeling of being on the margins": it inspires the desire and the power to remake boundaries. For Munro, marginality has nothing to do with isolation, and everything to do with "connection. That was what it was all about," she writes in The Moons of Jupiter (1983). In seven collections of stories and one novel, she has shown fate, and also fiction, to be a rather miraculous matter of unexpected linkages and leaps.

"When you live in a small town you hear more things, about all sorts of people," Munro once explained. "In a city you mainly hear stories about your own sort of people." And when those towns abut on farms, which are edged by woods, you have very different worlds constantly colliding, within and between families. In Munro's unillusioned vision, the contrasts don't harmonize bucolically. They are jarring, and her vigorously supple style registers the prosaic details and the poetic depths of the jumble. "Stars and flowers and birds and trees and angels in the snow and dead children at twilight—that is not the half of it," a small-town poet realizes in "Meneseteung," a story in Munro's previous collection, Friend of My Youth (1990). "You have to get in the obscene racket on Pearl Street and the polished toe of Jarvis Poulter's boot and the plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower."

The models for Munro's brand of regional consciousness have been, she has said, the writers of the American South. Especially the women among them—Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers—have helped to embolden her to claim the far corners of her rural enclaves as literary territory, to elevate "the
freakish, the marginal” as major figures in her fictional universe. And the Southerners have also plainly helped to confirm Munro’s conviction that such remoteness from the ever more deracinated, commercial commotion of this century offers a special vantage on it. She betrays no trace of the defensive insecurity about her region’s place on the map that Margaret Atwood has called "the great Canadian victim complex." On the contrary, the particular, peripheral sense of place that inspires her fiction gives her the assurance to matter-of-factly take up an especially large theme, the disorienting power of time.

In her stories, many of which have the geographical density and the historical sweep of novels, the plots again and again turn on the ways the past has of unsettling the present. Her characters—like their author—are forever trying to find some pattern, however tenuous, in the choices and accidents, the continuities and rebellions, of their lives. They privately set great store by those moments when, as a character in a story from The Progress of Love (1986) puts it, life's "bits and pieces would be flying together inside me. The essential composition would be achieved." But they don't expect the compositions to be seamless by any means, or to hold firm.

And they aren't inclined to broadcast their narrative efforts, for shyness is rampant in Munro's rural Canada. ("I can tell you," the protagonist's mother says in Lives of Girls and Women, 1971, "there are members of your father's family who would not open their mouths in public to say their house was burning down.") Up north the yarn-spinning tradition lacks the Southern-style public flair, which complicates the writer's role as eavesdropper. To rescue the "essential compositions" is itself a feat of capturing and extrapolating from bits and pieces of unobtrusive tale-telling. "Even in that close-mouthed place, stories were being made," Munro writes in Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (1974). "People carried their stories around with them."

From the start, Munro's fiction has invoked the classic provincial odyssey of escape, with the important revision that the main figures in the drama are girls and women: the imaginative and proudly intrepid daughter, or wife, or ex-wife, or spinster struggles to move beyond her poor and proudly introverted family and region. Escape means, among other things (such as love and sex, often adulterous), the chance to tell a story about the struggle. But Munro has always specialized, and never more daringly than in her new collection, Open Secrets, in exploding the odyssey's conventions as she assembles those stories. The journey from narrow country past to more spacious cosmopolitan future, though it beckons as liberation, is almost always revealed as a disconcerting illusion. The true path turns out to be a much more capricious trail from one shifting territory to another.

The Ontario town of Carstairs, in or near where all but two of the stories in Open Secrets mostly take place, is the familiar Munro country of the past. Yet this time she draws attention to just how unfamiliar this vanished world is, where before she often resurrected it with fond (though never softly nostalgic) immediacy through the artistic retrospections of her provincial escapees. "Now that she was sure of getting away," Munro writes of her heroine, Rose, in The Beggar Maid, "a layer of loyalty and protectiveness was hardening around every memory she had, around the store and the town, the flat, somewhat scrubby, unremarkable countryside."

In the new collection, Munro's "borderline cases," as she once described her main characters, aren't budding creative interpreters, and they don't escape in the traditional sense. They're odder specimens, and their less self-consciously rendered versions of the place have an indigenous, rough-hewn quality. In Carstairs—more joltingly than in its predecessors Jubilee, Hanratty, Dalgleish—Munro is preoccupied with disconnections and unpredictable, implausible reconnections between then and now, between here in town and there beyond it. In turn, the jaggedness of the juxtapositions doesn’t feel predictably post-modern; more than a sense of relativist muddle, there is a sense of miracle in the transformations that have taken place.

"A Real Life" is a good introduction to the physical and social landscape that grounds Munro's world, and to her provincial saga, which she here stands on its head. In her three main characters she deftly maps her typical prewar rural territory, with its well-defined social intersections, which are not conventional class
stratifications. "In her reasonable eccentricity, her manageable loneliness," Dorrie Beck lives on the edge of farmland, happiest when out trapping in the woods, like a grownup child or a trusted animal. ("A man in the area," Munro comments in her fondly comic vein, "had named a horse after her.") Millicent, once a schoolteacher, is now a farmer's wife who keeps a shipshape farming household, and just slightly off-beat friends, since the proper town ladies don't invite her to tea: along with Dorrie (whose house is on her land), Millicent depends on the company of Muriel Snow, the rather scandalous, unmarried music teacher, forever on the lookout for a man.

But this social geography does not turn out to dictate destiny in any formulaic way. Instead Munro unfolds a kind of counter-legend of liberation. Muriel, the classic candidate for leaving town in a cloud of dust, hitches up with a censorious minister. It's Dorrie, the character most rooted in "a life of custom, of seasons," who escapes in an outlandish fashion, married off to an Australian briefly visiting in town. And it's well-settled Millicent who cagily sees to it, when Dorrie balks at the last minute, that her departure actually comes to pass. Yet mixed in with the triumph, Munro admits a hint of melancholy in the way things work out in the long run. Dorrie's innocent independence in Carstairs retains an allure that her adventures in exotic places (she dies climbing a volcano in New Zealand) somehow can't match. And Millicent's great pride in having helped to fulfill a fantasy is shadowed by disappointment in reality.

Social geography and destiny are even more unsetled, not surprisingly, when Munro turns to the more distant past of Carstairs. Her interest is more explicitly historical than ever before in "A Wilderness Station," which opens with the town's original clearing in the mid-nineteenth century, and in "Carried Away," which begins in the disarray of the homefront during World War I. These formative moments of the past serve as a stage for a rather different and earlier provincial saga, which for Munro has always hovered not far behind the mid-twentieth-century drama of frustration and escape: the frontier story of adventurous arrival.

In the two stories the provincial present is revealed to rest on foundations of the most fortuitous kind. Reversing the rural-town-insider-becomes-worldly-outsider story, Munro here relates how the least likely outsiders become the anchors of the town, thanks to completely implausible and violent twists of fate. In "Carried Away" a traveling librarian stays in Carstairs, only to see the soldier she'd hoped to marry (having corresponded with him, but never having met him) decapitated in a freak accident at the local piano factory. She ends up marrying his boss and, now a member of the foremost commercial family in town, eventually runs the factory herself. "A Wilderness Station" is a variation on the same theme. An orphan recruited by mail to marry a homesteader discovers after her husband has been killed in the woods that the cause is his axewielding brother (not a falling branch, as claimed), but she keeps the secret. The strain of the deception turns her into an eccentric, while her brother-in-law goes on to join a thriving clan that boasts among its descendants a prominent Canadian politician.

It's not easy to convey the texture of these stories, which are epistolary ("A Wilderness Station" entirely, "Carried Away" in part) and full of stories within stories and multiple perspectives. Here Munro's narrative audacity—she routinely includes more plot turns and more angles of vision than most other short story writers would dare—calls special attention to itself. The effect is precisely the disequilibrium she has in mind. We're drawn in by the immediacy of the letters, and yet simultaneously distanced by their fragmentariness, by the elusiveness of the voices in them; the documents are pieces of unreliable second-hand evidence which are meant to do the work that, in Munro's earlier fiction, confident memory has often done. The stories close, tellingly, with glimpses of the erstwhile librarian and orphan, now ancient ladies, struggling to make their memories conform to an utterly transformed world.

"Changing your perceptions of what is possible, of what has happened—not just what can happen, but what really has happened": that feat of imagination and memory, Munro has said, has come to seem ever more pressing as she has gotten older (she is now in her sixties). The truly momentous journey isn't so much a matter of emerging from cramped provincial home into the wide world as of making it from "that time" to
"now," through all kinds of "disconnected realities." It was a challenge that struck an old man back in
_Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You_ as nearly overwhelming:

Nobody could get from one such time to another, and how had he done it?... It was sensible
perhaps to stop noticing, to believe that this was still the same world they were living in, with
some dreadful but curable aberrations, never to understand how the whole arrangement had
altered.

More recently, a character in _Friend of My Youth_ worried over the fragility of any effort to find coherence in
life's fragments: you can see them "in their temporary separateness, all connected underneath in such a
troubling, satisfying, necessary, indescribable way. Or you can see rubble. Passing states, a useless variety of
passing states. Rubble."

Munro in _Open Secrets_ doesn't hesitate to dig yet more deeply into time's rubble, insisting on the _useful_
variety of passing states, not only within Carstairs but beyond it. She is a regional writer without borders, as
she proves in the most unusual of the eight stories in the collection. In it she leaps across one of the
historically least passable of all boundaries, Albania's.

"The Albanian Virgin," a story within a story, is a hybrid of extremes: "one such time" is made alien, "now" is
thoroughly unmoored, and the links between them almost baffle belief. The plight of the narrator of the
framing story, who is nameless throughout, is familiar from Munro's preceding books, especially _Friend of
My Youth_. A shaky newcomer to Victoria, British Columbia, from London, Ontario, where she has left a
betrayed husband and a lover, she is the provincial astray: one of Munro's women adrift in the changing city
of the Sixties, marriages behind them, the drama of their country childhoods crowded out of mind by more
recent loneliness and guilt. Like her predecessors, this woman, cut off from friends and family, sets up a
half-baked commercial enterprise (in this case, a bookstore), less to make money than to find some solace
among strangers.

The narrator establishes a curious bond, "both intimate and uncertain," with the strangest of the strangers, a
velvet-cloaked older woman named Charlotte and her husband, Gjurdhi, shabby in his equally peculiar
costume and yet also somehow ferocious. Munro manages to make the narrator's odd friendship with these
ragged creatures seem outlandish and yet also completely and prosaically real, a vivid piece of Victoria life
during a transitional period: they're in a sense hippies before their time, except that the narrator retrospectively
appreciates "the risky authenticity that marked them off from all these later imitations."

Just how jarringly, surreally authentic they are only gradually becomes clear as Charlotte, who falls ill and
goes to the hospital, spins out the story within the story to the narrator who sits at her bedside. Ostensibly the
saga is Charlotte's idea for a movie—an eccentric old woman's scheme for cashing in on the market for
fantasy, and the perfect way to bore a captive hospital visitor. The story is theatrical—about a young Canadian
woman visiting the Dalmatian Coast in the Twenties who gets abducted into an Albanian tribe and is rescued
by a fierce-looking, gruffly protective Franciscan priest of the region. And yet it mocks precisely the
Hollywood "historical epic" that jumps from one fabricated climax to another. For Charlotte's tale has a kind
of mundane marvelousness that would drag quaintly on the screen but is mesmerizing on the page.

And as the pieces of that far-away fable fall together, the story subtly links up with the trio in Victoria. The
narrator isn't quite sure what to make of what she hears. But she like the reader, is gradually drawn to feel that
the tale is, as Charlotte mumbles late into it, "from life"—that it really _has_ happened, as it could have, the
reader realizes with amazement: forty years earlier, in remotest Albania, Charlotte would have been a young
woman and everything would have been undreamably different. The narrator's numbness in the wake of her
own peregrinations fades as it dawns on her what far-flung realms have been traveled by this wandering pair.
The story works its uncanny effect on another level as well, and marks it as not only (only!) a radical innovation for Munro but also a kind of symbolic culmination. In venturing so far from her traditional landscape, Munro has stumbled on a place in which her peculiar and powerful version of the provincial story meets a ritualized reflection of itself. The young Charlotte is taken prisoner because she boldly sets off alone on her European tour, one of those Munro heroines who reject their small world's assumption for women that "a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were called for." The irony of Charlotte's fate is that she is trapped all over again in a clannish, isolated culture, where gender less demurely but just as absolutely divides life: "Women were with women and men were with men, except at times in the night (women teased about such times were full of shame and denial, and sometimes there would be a slapping)."

The salvation from the narrowness of this mirror world lies in a tribal rite of marginalization: Charlotte, now known as Lottar, is anointed a "Virgin" by the clan, an outsider status that entails an androgynous identity and a ruggedly independent existence far from the village. Like Munro's more familiar rite of passage for rebellious girls, which it exoticely parallels, Lottar's rescue is liberating, but only provisional; there will be yet another escape. As so often in Munro, the search for a new balance almost always means the discovery of new ambivalence. This precarious predicament, far off in Albania, has become in Munro's hands "shockingly like, and unlike, home." Such jolts of recognition amid strangeness, and of strangeness amid the familiar, inspire the most haunting—and exhilarating—kind of disorientation. It is the restless provincial's spiritual staple, and Munro's seemingly boundless imaginative subject.

**Criticism: Joan London (review date 1995)**


*In the following review, London praises Open Secrets as a mature work of Munro's that contains "stories of formidable urgency and integrity."*

Alice Munro has established an international readership based solely on the short story (in Australia we would use Frank Moorhouse's term and call her two novels 'discontinuous narratives'), an achievement which at this moment, in English, is rivalled only by that of Raymond Carver.

Her publishing life spans two decades of exceptional experimentation in the short story form, from postmodern metafiction to 'dirty' realism, from such writers as Barthelme, Barth and Carver in North America, Cower, Moorhouse and Garner in Australia. In the early eighties it reached a peak of critical approval and apparent popularity, which has now receded. In its single defining feature—brevity—the short story has always served as a vehicle for 'having a go', for the 'one-off', for starting out in fiction, or taking a break from longer work. Perhaps this is what keeps the form healthy, edgy, pluralistic: some of the best short stories have come into being this way. But to persist with the short story, collection after collection, to pursue its development over a long period, amounts to a vision as expressed through the form.

From the first, Alice Munro wrote her own sort of story. The form seemed integral to her voice and approach and it developed within her work as indistinguishable from the growth of her own experience and thought. In her practice the short story seems to have come alive, continually expanding its possibilities and range. Along the way she has created a following, and influenced a generation of short story writers.

It is probably always the case with major writers who are widely read by their contemporaries, that the particular story they have to tell is the one their generation is waiting to hear. Although the heartland of her fiction is rural Ontario, and her most direct antecedents are Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers, Alice Munro's more contemporary version of rural life has fore-grounded the experience of women. The central consciousness of her earliest stories was that of a very young, angry, ambitious woman in
a country town, like Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) who walks the streets of Jubilee "like an exile or a spy, not sure from which direction fame would strike, or when, only convinced from my bones out that it had to." The desire for escape and fulfilment and the issues this raised—such as the life and death struggle with the mother—exactly coincided with the flowering of the women's movement in the seventies, and with the determined reclamation of female experience in the writing of the era. And in the no-nonsense, righteous, Scottish/Irish conservatism of Alice Munro's country folk in town after fictional town, it was possible to identify the forces that a young woman of spirit was up against. Growing up in Jubilee or Hanratty or Dalgleish in the forties was not so different from growing up in suburban Australia a generation later.

Dislocation, it seems to me, is what usually makes a writer first break into a sustained work. Dislocation in time or place, dislocation from a former sense of self. This is mirrored in Alice Munro's earlier fiction: the escape from the provinces is usually achieved through marriage, which is sudden, surprising, dreamlike and entrapping. The young wife finds herself cut off from her ambitions, her class and the country roots which turn out to be after all her emotional touchstone. That is the first dislocation. The second is divorce, in which the eyes are set free to examine marriage and adultery and all the subsequent sexual relationships of the unattached woman. No other writer I can think of has explored so widely the centrality of sex within her cast of characters, or brought into such piercing focus the nuances of the couple, endlessly recast and replayed. And once again this preoccupation was in tune with contemporary experience and women's interest in defining themselves within it.

Dislocation is also a source of the texture of her work, the density of reference to the physical world, the attempt to capture the spirit of a place or person or feeling, of what Virginia Woolf called 'the thing in itself'. At the end of *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del Jordan says:

> It did not occur to me then that one day I would be so greedy for Jubilee … I would want to write things down … I would try to make lists … And no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark and walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting.

*Open Secrets*, Alice Munro's most recent book, has dismayed some of her readers. For such a sturdy realist to introduce a ghost, a spaceship, portentous visions, dreams and coincidences, not to mention a love pursuit in disguise which ends up in Brisbane and risks a music-hall farfetchedness, is perhaps to court disquiet in the readership she has set up.

Yet she has been signalling these changes for some time now. Increasingly in her later work there has been a sense of challenge to closure, to the constraints of the form, an attempt to draw ever closer to the unyielding rawness of life. Some stories from her last two books would not be out of place here. One of the pleasures for me in this book was to sense both the connection with former work and the step forward, the exhilaration of breakthrough.

These stories are longer. Collection by collection her stories have lengthened, loosened, and as their scope has widened, the juxtapositions of their composition have become more extreme. She has always written of the past, the recent past or that of a generation earlier, but in *Open Secrets* her compass swings wider, goes back further—one of the stories is located in the pioneering past of 150 years ago—and then swings forward, bringing her characters' lives and those of their descendants into modernity, following them through to their effective end. The historical detail, the rendering of the tone, mores, decorum of the period, often through letters, is wonderfully achieved.

All but one of the stories is set in, or sets off from, Car-stairs, another version of Munro's country town. But if the earlier stories were about dislocation, these stories hinge about return. Return to a former site where a
drama has occurred, or to a relationship which at the time seemed to be definitive, or to an aspect of experience which is only now seen to be definitive. The return to the home town, the meeting between the one who stayed and the one who got away, or between ex-lovers or spouses: this is familiar Munro territory. But over the years the meditative framework has changed. 'Great writers', said Chekhov, 'not only find a truth, but wrap it up and take it somewhere.' In *Open Secrets*, the emotions of these experiences are not only defined, they are given their retrospective place in the passage of the life. The transforming medium is that of time.

There is a sense of an overview, of pieces being put into place in the puzzle: a sense too of pieces which don't fit and the gaps that are left. Louisa in 'Carried Away', at the end of her life says: "It was anarchy she was up against—a devouring muddle. Sudden holes and impromptu tricks and radiant vanishing consolations."

Within this vision, the connections made between lives may seem startling, may reach across continents and generations, or across the surface skin of what we accept as real: the ghost, the spaceship, the warning dream, while never 'proved', are shown as real forces in the life in which they occur. The endings, rather than homing in, may be jokily flat, or open out, situate in mystery, linger in feeling like "the darkness collecting, rising among the trees, like cold smoke coming off the snow."

There is an awareness of darkness in these stories, of dark forces which can only be sensed or felt. At the core of each there is a death, or imminent death, or an act of violence, often unsolved, unable to be explained. In *Open Secrets*, Munro takes a long look at unknowing, leaves some ends daringly untied, and for a story-teller this is risky. And yet every element in the stories seems meaningful. Traced through time, the mysteries are part of a widening acceptance of the eternal, 'radiant' opacity of life.

Sex and death: the source of the drama, and in these stories the two forces are intimately linked. But in counterpoise to this is a state of rest, from what she calls "a din, a battering, a sound of hammers in the street," the wrenching disturbance of sexual relationship. Some stories are set at the moment of cross-over.

'The Albanian Virgin' is the story which has attracted the most attention, not only because it is the first of Munro's stories to have an 'exotic' setting outside Canada (unless you count Brisbane), but because the figure of the Virgins, the woman who is allowed a life of independence provided she gives up sex, is such a resonant symbol for women, and one which recurs throughout this book. It is almost impossible not to read the story of Lottar's capture and escape in the Albanian mountains as allegory. In fact it can be read as a sort of mythical version of the provincial journey undertaken by the young women in Munro's earlier stories: the desire for adventure, the rebellious setting-off, the entrapment within a community of women-as-carers, the unwitting bride, and then the brief sojourn as a Virgin alone on the mountainside, discovering her own resourcefulness. But the Franciscan priest who rescues Lottar falls in love with her, a realization as they part that takes "the breath out of her body, as she knew too late." Her fate has been decided. Like Dorrie in 'A Real Life', like Louisa in 'Carried Away', she is 'carried away' by a transforming force, chooses to leave the Virgin state for sexual love.

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This is not, however, a romantic vision. Forty years on, the Franciscan priest is her husband, Gjurdhi, an obsessive peddler, "a mangy but urgent old tiger." The narrator of 'The Albanian Virgin', one of Munro's confused young women who has left her husband (it is the early 60s), who, in an episode which parallels Lottar's escape is claimed by her lover Nelson, disguised in fedora and trenchcoat, says of her subsequent married life with Nelson:

    We have been very happy.

    I have often felt completely alone.
There is always in this life something to discover.

The days and years have gone by in sort of blur.

On the whole I am satisfied.

This could be offered as a version of her life by any of the long-married women in this book: ordinary women whose lives have been formed by accommodation (as perhaps have the husbands' too: one character talks of "chubby husbands … bent on a lifelong course of appeasement"), but also by what can be seen as extraordinary moments, so that this list of truisms is both confirmed and challenged.

Fedora and trenchcoat: the notion of disguise in the love quest has long fascinated Munro. It is the theme of the story 'Wigtime' in *Friend of My Youth* (1990). It was first mentioned in her definitive meditation on obsessive love, set in Brisbane, 'Bardon Bus' (*Moons of Jupiter*, 1982). In 'The Jack Randa Hotel', Munro returns to Brisbane, and the story of the pursuit from Canada of Will by Gail, in disguise, the hair-dye dripping down her neck in the Australian heat, takes the quest to painstaking, absurd lengths. Perhaps for Australian readers, observed as others see us, even the setting is a little surreal, "this country of non-stop blooming and impudent bird life," of men rowdily drinking beer beneath dazzling jacaranda blossoms, of women with "dim, soft, freckly, blinking faces." It's as if the whole action of the story surreally enacts the caperings, the antics, the pain that people put themselves through for love. And get through. Gail watches an unpleasant old man in a wheelchair who lives in her apartment building with a young male carer. She catches the young man crying one night outside at the rubbish bins and, in a moment of identification with him, realizes he is the old man's lover. Gail's identity is revealed to Will from an ambulance just as the old man, who has collapsed and is clutching her hand, the hand of a stranger, dies. When Will comes after her, calling to her through her keyhole, she finds that "Words most wished for can change … Love—need—forgive. Love—need—forever … hammers in the street." This time death is the transforming force. She runs away from Will, from the mad game of her quest, and flies home. From there, playfully, bountifully, like a god tossing up a 'shower of gold', she relents to life again, and throws the ball in his court.

Unaccountable forces create a field of energy in the story 'Spaceships Have Landed'. Rhea, in 1953, drunk, kisses her boyfriend Billy Doud's friend, Wayne, also drunk, at the back door of the local bootlegger's house. Just before she passes out, she hears him say "I'd like to fuck you if you weren't so ugly." The next day she summons him and confronts him about this comment, sitting on the porch of her father's house, while, in typical Munro detail, she cleans eggs with a piece of steel wool. Suddenly, momentously, they run away together, marry, have three children and 'five times as many lovers', grow old together. His comment is never explained. But it has been the galvanizing force for the subsequent course of Rhea's life. It connects with the subtle sexual unease, an unspoken misogyny at the bootlegger's house, and in her sessions parked in the car with Billy Doud. It creates "the clear space in her head with the light buzz around it" that she experiences on the porch as she cleans eggs. And this, imagistically, connects with the empty space of the old fair-grounds in the river flats, where that very same night, a neighbour Eunie Morgan was taken to a luminous spaceship, and her life too was forever changed.

Moments of insight, glimpses of a more stringent, unknowable reality, have always been hallmarks of Alice Munro's fiction. But in *Open Secrets*, this reality is drawn in as a player, is enacted in the narrative itself.

It is a mature vision. Alice Munro is in her sixties now, and sometimes in the sense of risk, of ease, of playfulness, of mischievous disregard for the conventions, these stories reminded me of the late work of Patrick White, or of Elizabeth Jolley. There is more than a whiff of mortality, a deepening resonance about them, as in all the greatest short stories. I would rate *Open Secrets* as the best, so far, of her later work as I rate *Lives of Girls and Women* the best of the early work and *The Moons of Jupiter* of the middle period. Harold Bloom elects her to the canon with *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You*. 
Is she still writing the story we want to hear? It is always difficult to judge the contemporary climate, but ours, I think, is or has been an intellectual era in literary endeavour, both in its writing and reception. There is a consciousness of finding a position. Its origin may be emotional but its location, its field of reference, is intellectual. It has yielded some bright treasures and broken some complacent patterns, but in fiction, especially the short story, it's a little as if, in John Updike's phrase, we 'hug the shore', don't quite trust where the open sea will take us. Alice Munro reminds us that there is such a thing as thinking fictionally, in which the focus, the ultimately cold eye of the writer's imagination holds so closely to the given, to the particularity of character, to 'the thing in itself' that its revelation resists self-consciousness, resists orthodoxy, and resides in the experience of the lives she has so deeply explored. And at this stage in her career, in the last years of the twentieth century, the accumulation of experience, story after story, is almost cosmic in its vision.

It can be harder, I think, to read a collection of short stories than a longer form. So many beginnings and endings. One life after another at its moment of intensity. So many little worlds set up which then have to justify their own meaning and sense of closure. Not subject to an overriding narrative project, the short story arises from a very direct response to experience. Its intensity can only be sustained by feeling. Above all, it cannot afford complacency, staleness, or the blunting of feeling.

Alice Munro continues to write stories of formidable urgency and integrity. She does it every time. She does it again and again.

**Munro, Alice (Vol. 95): Further Reading**

**Criticism**


Lauds *Friend of My Youth* as a "small masterpiece."


Interview in which Munro discusses the purpose of her fiction.

Carrington, Ildikó de Papp. "What's in a Title: Alice Munro's 'Carried Away'." *Studies in Short Fiction* 30, No. 4 (Fall 1993): 555-64.

Explores how the title "Carried Away" reflects the story's structure and action.


Praises *The Moons of Jupiter* for its sympathetic female characters, its structure, and its craft.

Compares the heroines of *The Beggar Maid* and *Lives of Women and Children* and discusses Munro's writing process.


Brief, laudatory review of *Open Secrets*.


Positive review of *Open Secrets*.


Favorable review of *The Progress of Love*.


Uses Munro's short story "Menesetung" as a basis for a discussion of metaphor versus metonymy.

Hoy, Helen. "'Rose and Janet,' Alice Munro's Metafiction." *Canadian Literature*, No. 121 (Summer 1989): 59-83.

Detailed discourse on the evolution and publishing history of the book that became *Who Do You Think You Are?*


Compares Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* to Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House*.


Laudatory review of *Open Secrets*.


Essay explores the meanings of melancholy and realism in Munro's fiction.


Proposes that *Open Secrets* is an example of "maximalist" fiction.


   Discusses issues of communication and maturation in respect to Del in Lives of Girls and Women and Rose in Who Do You Think You Are?


   Detailed review of Lives of Girls and Women, comparing it to Victorian poetry.


   Positive review of Open Secrets.

Additional coverage of Munro's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: Contemporary Authors, Vol. 33-36R; Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series, Vol. 33; Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 53; Major Twentieth-Century Writers; and Short Story Criticism, Vol. 3.
Analysis

Analysis: Discussion Topics

What types of initiation do Alice Munro’s characters undergo?

Examine Munro’s treatment of the various relationships between women. What kinds of male-female relationships does she explore?

Munro was one the first women writers to explore frankly all aspects of sexuality from a female perspective. How does her treatment of this subject differ from that of male writers you have read?

What techniques does Munro use to conceal information in a story, and what are their effects?

How do her frequent departures from chronological time affect a story?

How does she employ the device of double vision to enrich a story?

Analysis: Other Literary Forms

The line between long and short fiction is sometimes blurred in Alice Munro’s work. Although principally a writer of short fiction, she has also published a novel, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), which she prefers to view as a group of linked stories. On the other hand, some reviewers, including author John Gardner, have suggested that the stories in *The Beggar Maid* are so intricately related that the book could be viewed as a novel. Most critics, however, treat it as short fiction.

Analysis: Achievements

Alice Munro has gained recognition as a consummate writer, principally of short, psychological fiction. She received the Governor General’s Award (Canada’s highest literary award) for *Dance of the Happy Shades*, *The Beggar Maid*, and *The Progress of Love*. Her novel *Lives of Girls and Women* won the Canadian Booksellers Association Award in 1972, as did *Open Secrets* in 1995. In 1990 the Canada Council awarded her the Molson Prize for her contribution to Canada’s cultural and intellectual life. In 1977 and 1994 she received the Canada-Australia Literary Prize, and in 1995 *Open Secrets* won the W. H. Smith and Son Literary Award for the best book published in the United Kingdom. Munro received the National Book Critics Circle Award from the United States in 1999 for *The Love of a Good Woman*.

Analysis: Discussion Topics

Many of Alice Munro’s characters grow up in a small town. How does the provincial culture influence their adult lives?

How do Munro’s characters face the problems associated with their aging and accept the inevitability of their mortality?

In Munro’s stories, relationships between men and women, especially between husbands and wives, are examined. What seems to be the primary difficulties encountered in these relationships?
In Munro’s stories, do women have a harder time achieving autonomy than do men? Explain why this would be so.

Munro does not pass judgment on her characters. She suggests that the truth can never be known with any certainty. As seen in some of her stories, what are some of the obstacles to discovering the truth?

**Bibliography**


Canitz, A. E. Christa, and Roger Seamon. “The Rhetoric of Fictional Realism in the Stories of Alice Munro.” *Canadian Literature*, no. 150 (Autumn, 1996): 67-80. Examines how Munro’s stories portray and enact the dialectic between legend-making and demythologizing; discusses techniques that Munro uses to adapt the opposition between fiction and reality to the expectations and ethical beliefs of her audience.


Clark, Miriam Marty. “ Allegories of Reading in Alice Munro’s ‘Carried Away.’” *Contemporary Literature* 37 (Spring, 1996): 49-61. Shows how the stories in Munro’s *Friend of My Youth* and *Open Secrets* dismantle the foundations of realist narrative, figuring or disclosing the many texts in the one and so refiguring the linked practices of writing and reading; claims that “Carried Away” addresses allegorically the politics of the library and the ethics of reading.

Crouse, David. “Resisting Reduction: Closure in Richard Ford’s ‘Rock Springs’ and Alice Munro’s ‘Friend of My Youth.’” *Canadian Literature*, no. 146 (Autumn, 1995): 51-64. Discusses how Ford and Munro deal with the problem of realistic closure and character growth in their short stories by manipulating time. Shows how they use various narrative devices to give more interpretive responsibility to the reader.


Hiscock, Andrew. “‘Longing for a Human Climate’: Alice Munro’s *Friend of My Youth* and the Culture of Loss.” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 32 (1997): 17-34. Claims that in this collection of stories, Munro creates complex fictional worlds in which character, narrator, and reader are involved in the business of interpreting versions of loss, tentatively attempting to understand their function and status in a mysteriously arranged reality.

Mayberry, Katherine J. “‘Every Last Thing Everlasting’: Alice Munro and the Limits of Narrative.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 29 (Fall, 1992): 531-541. Discusses how Munro’s characters use narrative as a means of coming to terms with the past, how they manage their pain by telling. Argues that most of Munro’s narrators come to realize the imperfections of narrative because of the incongruence between experience and the story’s effort to render it.


Nunes, Mark. “Postmodern ‘Piecing’: Alice Munro’s Contingent Ontologies.” *Studies in Short Fiction* 34 (Winter, 1997): 11-26. A discussion of Munro’s postmodernist focus on narrative strategies. Argues that quilting and piecing in the stories are metaphors for narrative. Instead of suggesting a disruptive postmodernism, quilting in women’s writing functions as an icon for the recuperation of fragmented traditions into a healed whole.


Smythe, Karen E. *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992. A generic study of Munro’s stories based on the premise that her fiction, with its emphasis on loss and the importance of story telling as a way of regaining knowledge of the past, enacts a poetics of elegy.