DAVID STAINES

Introduction

On 14 November 2004, Jonathan Franzen reviewed Alice Munro's *Runaway*, her tenth collection of short stories, in the *New York Times Book Review*; his article began:

> Alice Munro has a strong claim to being the best fiction writer now working in North America, but outside of Canada, where her books are No. 1 best sellers, she has never had a large readership . . . I want to circle around Munro's latest marvel of a book, 'Runaway,' by taking some guesses as to why her excellence so dismayingly exceeds her fame.[1]

Two years later, Margaret Atwood opened her collection *Alice Munro's Best: Selected Stories* with the statement:

> Alice Munro is among the major writers of English fiction of our time. She's been accorded armfuls of super-superlatives by critics in both North America and the United Kingdom, she's won many awards, and she has a devoted international readership. Among writers themselves, her name is spoken in hushed tones. Most recently she's been used as a stick to flog the enemy with, in various inter-writerly combats. 'You call this writing?' the floggers say, in effect. 'Alice Munro! Now *that's* writing!' She's the kind of writer about whom it is often said – no matter how well-known she becomes – that she ought to be better known.[2]

In the *Guardian*'s account of the development of the short story genre on 11 September 2013, Tessa Hadley heralded Munro as one of the ten finest short fiction writers of all time. 'Munro has changed our sense of what the short story can do as radically as Chekhov and Mansfield did at the beginning of the 20th century', she stated. 'There's never a false or fussy note, as Munro penetrates in words into the hidden roots of how we choose to live, and why we act.'[3]

And then on 10 December 2013, Munro was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. 'It is a challenge to find an unessential word or a superfluous

phrase. Reading one of her texts is like watching a cat walk across a laid dinner table', Peter Englund, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, stated in his presentation speech:

> A brief short story can often cover decades, summarizing a life, as she moves deftly between different periods. No wonder Alice Munro is often able to say more in thirty pages than an ordinary novelist is capable of in three hundred. She is a virtuoso of the elliptical and – as the Academy said in its brief prize citation – the master of the contemporary short story.[4]

'The master of the contemporary short story', Alice Munro has devoted her writing career to a careful exploration of the genre of the short story, questioning its boundaries, expanding its length (her early stories were ten pages long, her later stories up to seventy), and challenging the common understanding of its purpose and power. From her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, published in 1968, to her most recent, *Dear Life*, published in 2012, she has explored the many dimensions of human life. As the Nobel Prize presentation speech made explicit, she has 'come close to solving the greatest mystery of them all: the human heart and its caprices'. And all this within the supposed confines of the short story.

For Munro, reading a short story is like entering a house. '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', she stated in 1982. '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.'[5] Her fiction reveals the recurring problems of everyday life, everyday life being the focus of the mature narrator in *Lives of Girls and Women*: 'People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable – deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum.' Her stories are kitchen linoleum with the deep caves of people's aspirations and failings just beneath the surface. 'It's a drama in people's lives that I think a writer is naturally attracted to', she observed in 1991,[6] and when she spoke at the shortlist announcement for the Giller Prize in 1994, she reiterated her particular perspective: 'I chose the writers who seemed to me to have the truest voices and the most reliable skills and who gave me as a reader the most lively and constant pleasure.' In November 2013, she reflected, in her official interview about the Nobel Prize, 'I want my stories to move people. I don't care if they're men or women or children. I want my stories to be something about life that causes people not to say "Oh, isn't that the truth," but to feel some kind of reward from the writing.'

Introduction

This *Companion* presents a kaleidoscope of critical views on Alice Munro and her fictional and non-fictional works. Distinguished and informed authorities write about the excellence of her writings, offering their original insights into her unique universe.

Opening the collection is 'From Wingham to Clinton: Alice Munro in her Canadian Context', David Staines's bio-critical chapter, which explores the roots of her writings in rural Huron County in southwestern Ontario. Born in Wingham and residing now in Clinton, about thirty-five kilometres to the south, Munro fashions her work from the people and incidents of the county. Initially scorned by some townspeople for her studies of the narrow and restricted lives of the county people she creates, she is now an acknowledged figure of international importance, and the restricted lives speak to the larger human experience beyond the local settings. Tracing Munro's writing life from her childhood readings, including the works of Lucy Maud Montgomery and Emily Brontë, through her delight in discovering the writers of the American South, especially Eudora Welty, the chapter chronicles her steady vision of the infinite wonders, both positive and negative, of the small town. Growing up herself on the margins of her rural society, Munro finds her own understanding of life mirrored in the fiction of female southern writers. And Canada, where she has lived all her life, is her artistic and personal home, the centre of her life, and she is the careful and perceptive observer and chronicler of life in Huron County and, by extension, in the world.

Complementing the opening chapter is Merilyn Simonds's chapter, 'Where Do You Think You Are? Place in the Short Stories of Alice Munro', a steady and sympathetic look at Munro's treatment of place in her fiction and non-fiction. Regarding the world as 'an imperfect Eden, hanging with fruit but writhing with snakes', Munro depicts her people against the background of rural life. And though her 'place' expands to encompass the immediate worlds beyond Huron County, including Stratford, Kitchener, and Toronto, the larger distances within Canada, including Kingston, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Victoria, and the distant lands of Albania, Australia, Indonesia, and Scotland, she always returns to her own 'place', here instead of there, to understand the complicated attitudes in her writings to the often bewildering 'local' sense.

The third chapter, 'The Style of Alice Munro', focuses on Munro's style: 'style as the basket of syntactic moves habitual to an author, but also style as tilt, the characteristic lean or bearing of the author as she represents herself through her writing'. Using 'Lives of Girls and Women' from the book of the same name as his analytical text, Douglas Glover argues that Munro reaches for complexity and irony over interpretation, preferring to note distinctions

rather than similarities in her constant struggle to resist closure. A statement provokes a counter-statement or a further complication, and the stories progress through the accumulation of such contraventions.

In Chapter 4, '"Oranges *and* Apples": Alice Munro's Undogmatic Feminism', Maria Löschnigg analyses the feminism of Munro and her fiction. Munro's stories are not explicitly addressed to female readers, the fiction being written for 'men or women or children', and though Munro has never thought of herself as being anything but a woman, Löschnigg argues that she is both a feminist and *not* a feminist author, drawing her evidence through readings of her fiction.

The next three chapters look directly at Munro's individual artistic achievements. In Chapter 5, 'Alice Munro and her Life Writing', Coral Ann Howells, herself the author of *Alice Munro*, a pioneering 1998 study, examines Munro's literary non-fiction, isolating it as much as is feasible from her fiction. Observing the various treatments of Munro's life in successive renditions, she finds that Munro's literary non-fiction 'is as full of gaps, shifting perspectives, fleeting moments of revelations, and as endlessly open to revision as her fictions'.

In the sixth chapter, Margaret Atwood turns her critical eye to a study of Munro's second book, *Lives of Girls and Women*, seeing it as a *Bildungsroman* and a *Künstlerroman* depicting the growth of a young artist into her maturity. She analyses the book under four headings – the Drowned Maiden, the Crazy Person, the Failure, and the Storyteller – using a fifth heading, Performance, for her study of the Epilogue. This female version of an artist's portrait leaves its protagonist, Del Jordan, 'at the threshold', the same position where James Joyce left his hero in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'The door is open, and the young writer is about to step through it.'

Unlike *Lives of Girls and Women*, which has a unifying protagonist, *The Moons of Jupiter*, Munro's fifth book, is a collection of her short stories. In 'Re-reading *The Moons of Jupiter*', the seventh chapter of this *Companion*, W. H. New describes the painstaking care with which Munro fashions her individual books. From his account of the history of composition of the volume, he traces its growth into a collection, 'a coherent and interactive, formally adventurous inquiry'. Like other contributors to this volume, he finds the book refusing unilateral closure: 'it calls for a different kind of recognition: to realize that going back – re-reading – means beginning again'.

In the final chapters, three critics stand back and wonder about the thematic power of Munro's fiction. Looking at her whole corpus, Robert McGill examines an anti-progressive strain in her writing in Chapter 8,

'Alice Munro and Personal Development'. Based on his understanding of the shape of her career, which is distinguished by recursion more than by transformation or straightforward 'improvement', he argues that her fiction self-reflexively calls attention to its poetics of return and review, a poetics that also turns out to be a hermeneutics, for her stories encourage readers not only to look closely at life itself but also to look at it repeatedly.

In Chapter 9, 'The Female Bard: Retrieving Greek Myths, Celtic Ballads, Norse Sagas, and Popular Songs', Héliane Ventura begins with *Dance of the Happy Shades* and continues through to Munro's last volume, examining her bardic affiliation through her 'covert or overt references to Homeric songs, Scottish minstrelsy, Nordic sagas, American folklore, and Canadian songs'. These many references reveal her strong power of recall, a facet of her character strongly criticized in her own childhood, and they suggest an astonishing range of literary allusions throughout her writings.

In the concluding chapter, 'The Mother as Material', Elizabeth Hay examines the prominent figure of the mother in Munro's fiction from the early story 'The Peace of Utrecht', through 'The Ottawa Valley', to the final lines of the final story in *Dear Life*. Exploring Munro's guilty use of such personal material, Hay shows how Munro tries to escape her mother as subject matter. Throughout her long writing career Munro probes this topic, 'branches out from it, leaves it behind, returns to it once again'. In this way she continues to employ her narrative strategy of revisiting similar situations in order to observe them from fresh angles, all the while pressing against the limitations of the subject.

In light of Munro's receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature, these ten writers have read and re-read her corpus many times, each occasion bringing new insights into the nature of her fictional worlds. And each reading brings fresh and revealing thoughts on her complex writing.

Fifty years ago, at the same time that Munro was organizing her first collection of short fiction, Allen Tate, the American poet and critic, gathered twenty-six distinguished writers to reflect on *T. S. Eliot: the Man and his Work*. One of the writers was Ezra Pound, who could capture, in four paragraphs, only a fragment of Eliot. 'His was the true Dantescan voice – not honoured enough, and deserving more than I ever gave him,' commented Pound. 'Am I to write "about" the poet Thomas Stearns Eliot? Or my friend "the Possum"? Let him rest in peace. I can only repeat, but with the urgency of 50 years ago: READ HIM.'

Reflecting on the significant achievements of Munro, the ten contributors believe that the most important thing to do – in terms of her remarkable fiction and non-fiction – is to read her. And then, after reading, one can re-read her to begin to understand the power of her literary creations. 'If you

read a lot of Munro's works carefully', as the Nobel Prize presentation speech stated, 'sooner or later, in one of her short stories, you will come face to face with yourself; this is an encounter that always leaves you shaken and often changed, but never crushed.'

Notes

1 '"Runaway": Alice's Wonderland', *New York Times Book Review* (14 November 2004), 1.
2 Alice Munro, *Alice Munro's Best: Selected Stories*, with an Introduction by Margaret Atwood (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006), vii.
3 'Tessa Hadley's Top 10 Short Stories', *The Guardian* (11 September 2013).
4 Alice Munro, *Vintage Munro* (New York: Vintage, 2014), 209.
5 Alice Munro, 'What Is Real?', in John Metcalf (ed.), *Making it New: Contemporary Canadian Stories* (Toronto: Methuen, 1982), 224.
6 Eleanor Wachtel, 'An Interview with Alice Munro', *Brick* 40 (winter 1991), 53.

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DAVID STAINES

From Wingham to Clinton

Alice Munro in her Canadian context

Huron County lies in rural southwestern Ontario, nestled along the southeastern shore of Lake Huron, one of the five interconnected Great Lakes of North America. A beautiful lake, it is 'no piddling pond in the rocks and pines but a grand freshwater sea, with a foreign country invisible on the other side. There all the time – unchanging. Bountiful Lake Huron that spreads a blessing on the day. Behind the farms and fences and swamp and bush and roads and highways and brick towns – there all the time.'[1]

According to the first official records of the Huron District Assessment Rolls of 1842, the total population of the townships that later were included in modern Huron County was 3,894. Now, along with its many villages and hamlets, the county is home to five towns, the port town and county seat of Goderich on Lake Huron (approximate population 7,500), and four smaller towns: Clinton towards the centre of the county (approximate population 3,200), Exeter towards the south (approximate population 4,800), Seaforth towards the east (approximate population 2,300), and Wingham towards the north (approximate population 2,900). The most agriculturally productive county in Ontario, Huron is a lush landscape of hills and valleys, prosperous farms and farms now for sale or abandoned, and home to a host of small rural communities dotting the horizon.

Huron County is also home to Alice Munro, a writer who lived for twenty years in British Columbia and has travelled as far away as Australia and the Scandinavian countries, but a writer who usually makes her artistic and her personal home in this rural Ontario world. Born in Wingham on 10 July 1931 and residing now in Clinton, about thirty-five kilometres to the south, she crafts her remarkable stories from the people and incidents of the county, making her ordinary world extraordinary through her art.

'I think of houses and streets and rooms and faces as what I put into the stories', she said in 1983. 'But I never think I am writing a story about Wingham or I'm writing a story about a Southwestern Ontario small town.

Ever. I just use that stuff because it is familiar to me. It's what I know about.'[2] Fifteen years later, she reflected:

> The reason I write so often about the country to the east of Lake Huron is just that I love it. It means something to me that no other country can – no matter how important historically that other country may be, how 'beautiful,' how lively and interesting. I am intoxicated by this particular landscape, by the almost flat fields, the swamps, the hardwood bush lots, by the continental climate with its extravagant winters. I am at home with the brick houses, the falling-down barns, the occasional farms that have swimming pools and airplanes, the trailer parks, burdensome old churches, Wal-Mart, and Canadian Tire. I speak the language.[3]

That same year, she added, 'I love the landscape here. We go for long walks; they're the most wonderful walks you can imagine.'[4]

Huron County, 'a closed rural society with a pretty homogeneous Scotch-Irish racial strain going slowly to decay',[5] fostered the narrow values of many of its people. Munro lived in

> a culture that has become fairly stagnant. With a big sense of righteousness. But with big bustings-out and grotesque crime. And ferocious sexual humour and the habit of getting drunk and killing each other off the roads. There's always this sort of boiling life going on. I'm always surprised when people say your stories are about such – ohhhh – well they don't say *dull*. That wouldn't be polite, but *restricted* lives and people. I always think the country I was born and brought up in is full of event and emotions and amazing things going on all the time.[6]

Parochialism, mean-spiritedness, and vengeance on those who would rise above its narrow confines, what could these attitudes promote? 'In the community where I grew up, books were a time-waster and reading is a bad habit, and so if even reading is a bad habit, writing is an incomprehensible thing to do.'[7] 'My home town is hostile', she reflected in 1982. 'The newspaper actually came out with an editorial against me. This official viewpoint gave carte blanche to a lot of kooks. I have actually received letters that say things like who do you think you are, or we're sick and tired of seeing your old mug in the paper. They are sad, black letters, full of anger, and almost illiterate.'[8] She later commented:

> The *Wingham Advance Times* wrote a blistering editorial criticizing me, calling me a 'warped personality'. It didn't surprise me or hurt me because you know what you can expect if you try to do anything that comes out of your real self. If you've grown up in this kind of community you should know that you're not going to be rewarded for doing something honest or real.[9]

Yet that negativity has slowly changed to pride in Munro's achievement. In 2002 the town of Wingham opened the Alice Munro Literary Garden, a

tribute to its most illustrious native. As recently as 2013, Munro reflected on her longstanding fascination with the area: 'To me, it's the most interesting place in the world. I suppose that's because I know more about it. I find it endlessly fascinating.'[10]

Though born in Wingham, Alice Laidlaw, later Munro, was raised outside the town's boundaries on a farm two kilometres west of the town. 'Our nine-acre farm', she remembers,

> had an unusual location. To the east was the town, the church towers and the tower of the Town Hall visible when the leaves were off the trees, and on the mile or so of road between us and the main street there was a gradual thickening of houses, a turning of dirt paths into sidewalks, an appearance of a lone streetlight, so that you might say we were at the town's farthest edges, though beyond its legal municipal boundaries. But to the west there was only one farmhouse to be seen, and that one far away, at the top of a hill almost at the midpoint in the western horizon.[11]

The farm was a dangerous locale. 'We lived outside the whole social structure because we didn't live in the town and we didn't live in the country', she recalls. 'We lived in this kind of little ghetto where all the bootleggers and prostitutes and hangers-on lived. Those were the people I knew. It was a community of outcasts. I had that feeling about myself.'[12]

Munro's father, Robert Laidlaw (1901–76), born near the village of Blyth – about midway between Wingham and Clinton – was a shy only child, the product of a prosperous marriage of Presbyterian Scots. Although his parents wanted him to attend university, he dropped out of school to pursue a life of hunting and trapping in the bush, selling pelts of foxes, muskrat, and mink. In 1925 he purchased his first pair of Norwegian silver foxes and started to breed them in pens he built on his father's farm. Munro's mother, Anne Clarke Chamney (1898–1959), came 'from a much poorer home, a poorer farm' than her father's residence, this one in Scotch Corners not far from Carleton Place in the Ottawa Valley. A member of the Church of England, she had escaped a confining home life to complete high school in Carleton Place and 'become a schoolteacher by her own desperate efforts',[13] both in Alberta and in Ontario. The two married in 1927, and money from Anne's teaching helped to purchase the nine-acre farm outside Wingham: 'they came and picked out the place where they would live for the rest of their lives, on the Maitland River just west of Wingham in Turnberry Township in the County of Huron'.[14] As they embarked on fox-farming, they had too few monetary resources, and the era of such farming – given the imminent depression and, later, the Second World War – was almost ending.

For the first five years of her life, Alice was the cherished only child. Then her brother, Bill, was born in 1936, her sister, Sheila, in 1937. Her long walks to school were a time of passionate daydreaming; indeed her childhood was a time of fantasies, though her fantasies would become more formal, more detached, less personal daydreams. 'When I was quite young I got a feeling about Wingham', she reflected,

> which is only possible, I think, for a child and an outsider. I was an outsider; I came into town every day to go to school, but I didn't belong there. So everything seemed a bit foreign, and particularly clear and important to me. Some houses were mean and threatening, some splendid, showing many urban refinements of life. Certain store-fronts, corners, even sections of sidewalk, took on a powerful, not easily defined, significance. It is not too much to say that every block in that town was some sort of emotional atmosphere for me.[15]

Munro read Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' when she was seven: 'I started making up a happy ending and I made up an ending that I liked a lot better.'[16] She read Lucy Maud Montgomery for the first time when she was nine or ten years old, and although she devoured *Anne of Green Gables*, Montgomery's first novel, she was more pleased by *Emily of New Moon*, her later novel:

> I decided that it was 'good but different.' By 'good' I meant that it kept me reading at a speedy clip through a series of home-and-school adventures, provided me with a fair number of fearful thrills, and ended with upsets righted and the child-heroine vindicated after her trials, optimistically facing adolescence and a sequel. That was the kind of book I liked, and I read plenty of them. By 'different' I meant that there were other things about the book that got in my way, slowed me down, even annoyed me, because I sensed a different weight about them, a demand for another kind of attention, the possibility of some new balance between myself and a book, between reader and writing, which took me, the reader, by surprise, and did not let me off so easily.[17]

Munro finds ultimately that she cannot address the essence of Montgomery's world:

> I've been trying to say what it was that the ten-year-old reader found that was 'different.' These are the same things the eleven- and twelve- and even the fourteen-year-old reader kept going back for. But I have a sense of things I haven't said that are perhaps the most important. In this book, as in all the books I've loved, there's so much going on behind, or beyond, the proper story. There's life spreading out behind the story – the book's life – and we see it out of the corner of the eye. The mail pails in the dairy-house. Aunt Elizabeth pouring the tallow for the candles. The slightly repulsive splendour of the parlour at Wyther Grange. The corners of the kitchen at New Moon. What