

INTERVIEW WITH ALICE MUNRO

Recently, Alice Munro toured Australia courtesy of the Literary Board. Copies of her books barely beat her to Adelaide, and I found just before she arrived that few people had even heard of the writer whom the Melbourne *Age* later dubbed "a prize Canadian."

The prizes make up an enviable list. The one that brought Munro to our hemisphere, the Canada/Australia Literary Prize for 1977, was originally designed to ensure that artists such as Munro would not remain unknown to Australian audiences. Since an Australian receives the honours (\$2,000) in alternate years, he or she gets a chance to capture the Canadian public — Thomas Shapcott won in 1978. Given jointly by the Australian Council and the Canada Council, the award acknowledges the excellence of a writer's entire work to date.

Munro's history as a writer, though, is certainly not all glory. Neither romantic, pedestrian, nor tragic, it reveals something about her personality, her talent, and her difficulties in being a woman who writes. Munro's background is rural; the agricultural community in which she grew up unintellectual, if not actually anti-intellectual. She was born near Lake Huron in Wingham, Ontario. Luckily, her home territory influenced her in a positive way. Though it didn't convince her not to write, it did convince her that it was worth writing about. While at the University of Western Ontario, she started publishing stories about the region. Her first marriage took her to Vancouver, where over a long period she continued to treat in her fiction the places she had left. A bit like James Joyce, Munro says that she needs to be away from the environment she wants to capture.

Munro's career, then, took time to develop. Compared to other writers her age, her output hasn't been large. She partly attributes this fact to caring for a husband and three daughters. In fact, her initial explanation (re-evaluated in the following interview) about why she began writing short stories, instead of novels, depends upon that domestic situation. A short story offered a limited goal, something she could finish in between other responsibilities. Though Munro's stories had often appeared in magazines, and had been anthologized over the years, she did not actually publish a collection until 1968. That first literary child, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, won the Governor-General's Award the year it came out. In 1972, her first novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*, won the Canadian Booksellers' Award. Another collection of stories, *Something I've Been*



Alice Munro, Adelaide 1979.

Meaning to Tell You, followed in 1974, and marked a wider range of subject and a refining of her style. Then came the Canada/Australia Literary Prize that brought her to Australia in March 1979. Her latest book, unfortunately not yet available here, is called *Who Do You Think You Are?* (released in the US as *The Beggarmaid*). Munro's books answer that question for her: an accomplished artist. Her most recent effort has just claimed the Governor-General's Award for its author for the second time. In fact, she had to curtail her visit to Australia in order to be back for the presentation ceremonies.

Alice Munro's work, however, rather than a list of her prizes, will hopefully have impressed audiences during her recent tour. When she read "Spelling," a story from *Who Do You Think You Are?*, at Flinders University, the silence, lack of fidgeting, and concentrated expressions showed that people really listened. Her softspoken but clear voice let the direct, unpretentious, thought not unsophisticated prose speak for itself. The person as well as the artist came out during the discussions that followed.

Munro is articulate, humourous, and approachable, as natural as her naturally curly hair (which she's waiting for some interviewer-at-a-loss to ask about). The combination of her personality and her prose opened up a new and yet familiar world to her audiences – the landscape is often rural Ontario, but it easily evokes memories in all of us, even though, like Del Jordan (one of her heroines), we didn't grow up on a silver fox farm. As in Flannery O'Connor, an American writer from the South whose work Munro admires, the specificity of the landscape does not preclude the universality of her characters.

Most frequently, Alice Munro deals with the turning points of childhood adolescence, and middle age, and the rituals that surround those turning points. The crises she describes are believable and universal because they are firmly grounded in an environment. Although much of her fiction takes place in the towns or cities where she's lived, not all of it is autobiographical. She has, though, an intimate relationship with her material. Generally, Munro says that she internalizes what she borrows or invents so that it becomes part of her. She can then, in a sense, remember things that never happened. As Del Jordan says in *Lives of Girls and Women* about the novel she constructs in her mind, which involves her hometown, Jubilee:

All pictures. The reasons for things happening I seemed vaguely to know, but could not explain; I expected all that would come clear later. The main thing was that it seemed true to me, not real but true, as if I had discovered, not made up, such people and such a story, as if that town was lying close behind the one I walked through every day. (p.206)

Whether her work employs a first-person narrator or a third, Munro usually presents the story from the central character's point of view. Her style seems effortless (also like Flannery O'Connor's), but her fictional world has a surety and impact no random observer of life could achieve. She can recreate a child's first realization that she is "only a girl"; a young boy's exhilarating and bewildering first sexual encounter; a sister's recognition that hatred for her brother has absorbed a good part of her life; a stepdaughter's guilty, bitter-sweet triumph over her senile step-mother. These experiences appear in the earliest as well as the latest books.

Alice Munro's fiction, then, remains faithful to the complexities of human nature. She charges her work with irony, humour and, above all, compassion. Her first three books are available in Australia: *Dance of The Happy Shades* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson); *Lives of Girls and Women* (The Women's Press); and *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson).

I recorded the following conversation with Alice Munro at Radio 5UV, the University of Adelaide, on Friday, March 23, 1979, during her recent visit to Australia.

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JK: How much do you work on writing as a craft? Do you ever think consciously about symbols?

AM: I work a great deal in that I revise. It isn't what you might call polishing, it's really an attempt to get at the truth of what I want to say. But the truth isn't anything like a message, it isn't anything like a structure. It certainly wouldn't contain conscious symbols. So I really don't know how to describe it. It's as if I had a picture in my mind, which meant something very important or I wouldn't be bothered to write about it at all. A picture shall we say of an event, something happening. I just try to get it clearly, very clearly, and to tell why it's important to me.

JK: You've written both a collection of short stories and two books that seem to run a mid-line between story and novel. How do you conceive of the difference between the two genres?

AM: Well my mid-line books, which have been called novels by their publishers, are linked stories really. So I've never really written a novel. I don't think much about these forms except as the question is forced on me by other people. In the beginning, publishers were anxious to get a novel from me and they'd say, you know, "send us a novel, and then

we'll publish your stories." Well, after a time this passed, and they were willing to publish the stories. So I don't have this to worry about anymore. But in those days I did try to write novels, and I came up against great difficulties. I explained it by saying I'm a housewife, and I don't get the big stretches of time you need to write a novel. I could never see six months ahead. So a story. I could let everything go, and write it and be finished with it, and then take up my regular work again.

But I don't think that was the reason at all. I think the reason was more in the way I look at things, the way I see things happening, because in the latest book I'm dealing with a whole life, with a woman from the age of about six or seven to say mid-forties. And there's certainly plenty of material there for a novel. But I think I see things as happening in discrete ways, in segments. I don't see parts of lives as necessarily leading to other parts. In fact, I'm continually surprised at what happens in people's lives, particularly now, when so many of us move around, and many of us don't live in traditional societies anymore. And I meet people I haven't seen for twenty years, and they, their ideas, their whole mode of living is nothing I could have predicted. So this seemed to me perhaps an accurate way of recording a person's life.

JK: Yes, actually in many of your stories, especially in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, I find that your characters have a revelation at the end, a self-contained revelation, an epiphany that reminds me of the epiphanies of Joyce's characters in *Dubliners*. But whereas Joyce's characters can't usually make use of their insights, your characters sometimes can. They act, however tentatively, such as the sister in "Forgiveness in Families."

AM: Yes, that's true, I think it's one thing to have an insight; I think all of us experience this. You have an insight, you understand something, but to act upon it is another thing altogether. I'm as you know not a formal Christian. I wouldn't say even that I'm religious, but I believe in a kind of grace. And in some of the stories people I think discover that they can have the insight, but they need grace to act. And this is of course always the question. I think the character in "Forgiveness in Families" says something about how difficult it is. She goes out and she tries to talk with her new insight to her mother and her brother, and it's like walking on eggs, or something like that. You can never be sure that you can do it.

JK: But you have to give her credit for trying.

Lives of Girls and Women has often been described primarily as a novel of development, and as one that admirably portrays the emotional and physical world of the child and the adolescent. But how significant is

the other dimension to that novel, the one that treats the heroine as artist? Is Del Jordan, your heroine, intended to be the portrait of a developing artist as well as of a developing woman?

AM: Well, yes, of course she is. And when I wrote the book I was very tempted sometimes to leave out those bits. At first I think I was just doing the portrait of an adolescent girl, and I always wanted to do her as an artist as well. But of course this is so much more difficult, that just when I was revising the book towards the end, I almost took the last section out. And then I felt that it would be wrong to do that, though the last section makes the book in a way more awkward. It introduces a bit of a new element, far too late in the book, but I left it in because the portrait of Del simply isn't full enough without it.

JK: Perhaps because she didn't realize what direction she was going in until the end.

AM: Of course not. She herself would not recognize what she was doing, and so it was really a bit hard. I think I should have worked that in a bit better with her earlier experiences, because she was becoming an artist all the time. And perhaps this is some of my problem about having to put things into short stories. Rather than work the artist, the artistic development, in with the sexual development, I make two separate segments of them.

JK: Well, actually it seems she almost sacrifices one for the other by losing her virginity the night before her matric exams, which sort of takes her mind off writing.

AM: Yes, she does.

JK: It seems that on occasion you've used the artistic surrogates in your work to voice your dissatisfaction with the rate or range of your own development. The female character at the end of *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, in the final story, says that she has not been able to get at or to get rid of her mother by telling this story: "Which means 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" (p.246). Why do you end the entire collection on this note of reservation?

AM: Well, because it's very important to me. I think I would certainly stand by that story. In fact in a way that's the most important story I've written to myself, because it's about the artist's function as I see it. It's about why I write, the problems with the material, what the material is like, and what the result is like. And as I think I say in that story, if I had been making just an effective story of it, I saw a place to end it. But

then I went on, sort of outside the frame, and commented on it, because it wasn't just to be an effective story. And I think the discovery in that story, which is my own, is that you come to writing, or perhaps to any art, with total faith, that it is going to be sufficient, it is going to transform life in a way that is so important, so dazzling, that this is the total end of your life. But it in fact provides perhaps more satisfaction to the reader than to the writer. The writer knows always that the final truth is not to be got at, and I think, like other discoveries of middle age, this is something you learn to live with.

JK: Like a host of other contemporary writers, at one time or another you have tried to communicate your insights about writing by teaching it. Many people, educators among them, feel that writing can't be taught, at least creative writing. How do you now feel about teaching?

AM: In the first place I've only taught creative writing to make a living. I wouldn't ever become a creative writing teacher if I could make enough money as a writer. Then having taken on the job, I try to give it the best I've got, of course, and I, too, am not at all sure that writing can be taught. I think people who are going to be writers anyway can perhaps be helped. I think there are points at which someone could have helped me, except I seriously doubt whether I would have paid any attention. So there may be discoveries that people could help you make, but some people (especially writers, who are so stubborn) have to make their own discoveries. So in writing classes, I would first of all try to understand what a person, a student, was trying to do, and then given them whatever help I could along the way to doing it better. Then, of course, I could be helpful in practical ways because I am a professional writer, and that is the only help I could give that I am absolutely sure would be of use.

JK: You've often been called a "female writer," a "short story writer," or a "regional writer." Those labels are usually applied by people wanting to define your limits. In fact, you have turned you limited background to advantage. Since you have defined yourself as a woman writer at times, could you first explain exactly what you mean by that label?

AM: I simply mean a woman who writes. And as for these other labels, I don't think about them much, because being a writer of any kind has been very difficult for me. Every time I start to write a story, I never know if I'll be able to do it or not, so it's not as if I had a choice between being the writer I am and being a greater writer. I just feel enormously relieved to have done as much as I've done.

JK: Has anyone ever taken you to task for being either too much of a feminist or not enough of one?

AM: Oh, I think so. I think I disappoint on both grounds. Often when I'm interviewed in Canada, the interviewer, if a man, will invariably ask why are there so many women writers in Canada. And I think there's a feeling here that something has gone wrong with the culture, that women writers are in the ascendancy as they are. But from the other direction, too, I think perhaps some feminists think I haven't been unambiguously enough on their side. I don't know, I don't worry about things like that; because, you know, in a hundred years we're all going to be seen, all of us writing now are going to be seen, as creatures of our time. And it's going to be seen how we were moulded by things we can't see at all, so there's no use worrying.

JK: Can you give any encouragement to Australian writers trying to write out of their own experience, who have been coping with the "tyranny of distances" and with a small population?

AM: Well, I think you know the important thing is to feel strongly enough about your material. If you feel that it's important enough to do this artistic job on whatever it is you're doing, then you won't worry about all these other things. And then you discover of course other writers. I think when I discovered the writers of the American South, I was enormously encouraged, because they were working from material whose claim for the world's attention was in fact no greater than mine, than my material. In other words, to many people it would seem grotesque. I'm talking about the South, and I'm talking about the rural background which I work from myself: full of depressions, difficulties, which are perhaps not shared by urban people. You have to just believe that it's very important. It didn't even occur to me to wonder whether it was universal or whether anyone would be interested in reading about it. The thing was that I wanted to write about it enough. Once you start worrying about how people are going to react to your writing, well I think that's a very bad sign.

JK: You've come back home in a sense in Canada. Moved full circle. You live now in Clinton, Ontario, near the place where you grew up. How does it affect your writing being back where you began?

AM: Well, it does a bit in that most of the writing about Huron County, where Clinton is and where I grew up, was done while I lived in Vancouver and Victoria. And now I'm writing about Vancouver and Victoria mostly. So that I always seem to have to be at a distance from the place that I write about. It's been good in a way; it's removed me from the place that I now want to write about. It could influence me if I let it. I think maybe I spend a bit of energy making sure that it doesn't, since I live in a community whose prohibitions are very strict, whose tastes in literature

are nineteenth-century, if there are any tastes at all, whose shock level is very, very low. Since I appear a fairly conventional person, I don't welcome conflict of this kind. And so I think I constantly have to make an effort not to write more acceptably in the terms of the community I'm living in.

JK: Well, thank you for coming from your distances to ours.

AM: Thank you.

