Canadian writer Alice Munro 1931–2024, an assessment

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When Nobel Prize-winning Canadian short story writer Alice Munro died in May, the media was full of praise for her work and many heartfelt tributes followed in the spring and summer. And for legitimate reasons: Munro was one of the most affecting, committed short story writers of her generation.

Born in 1931 in Wingham, in Huron County, Ontario, she published her first story in 1950, and her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades,* in 1968. Over the next 44 years she published 14 collections containing some 150 stories. She has had devoted admirers for decades and has been the subject of numerous academic conferences and doctoral theses.

Munro is widely regarded as having remade or, according to others, breathed new life into the short story form and is frequently compared to masters in the field such as American John Cheever (1912–1982) or the great Russian short story writer, Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), whose work influenced the course of short story creation over the last century.

The adulation of Munro in certain circles, however, has abated since July, when her daughter, Andrea Skinner, alleged that her mother's second husband, Skinner's stepfather, Gerald Fremlin, had sexually abused her from the age of nine. Although Skinner revealed this to Munro in1992, the author ultimately stayed with and defended Fremlin. He was convicted of sexual abuse in 2005.

If the allegations are true, they certainly speak against Munro as a human being and a parent. On their own, nonetheless, the facts of her personal life will not affect any serious assessment of her work. An author's moral failings are not the basis on which to judge her art. Class society damages and distorts personalities, including artistic personalities, but a substantive writer's efforts nevertheless have an objectively truthful, revealing character. Of course, the #MeToo hysteria has done a great deal of damage in muddying these waters.

Will there be a movement to rescind Munro's Nobel Prize? The University of Western Ontario has already decided to "pause" naming a chair after her. This week, the *New York Times Magazine* featured an assessment of Munro on the cover of its print edition. While the article did not entirely renounce her, it aired second and third thoughts about the Canadian author. The *Times* is voicing the embarrassment of the media and literary establishment about its longtime advocacy of what were perceived to be feminist aspects of Munro's stories.

Certainly, a convincing argument can be made for Munro-the-artist's siding with downtrodden and abused children. Since her work has been associated in particular with uncovering the inner, often hidden or suppressed lives of girls and women, her daughter's claims may raise questions about intellectual or psychological fissures in her art. But this leads us on to our own assessment of Munro's place in world literature, based not so much on how she led her private life, but on the social and historical forces that formed her art and the meaning it had for large numbers of people.

Aside from brief periods she spent in British Columbia, Munro lived most of her life in southwestern Ontario, in a part of the province that is largely agricultural. The region is the setting for many of her stories, and her people for the most part represent the middle layers of the population—farmers, teachers, petty businesspeople. Poverty occurs in her work, but it is a subdued, rural poverty. Any general awareness or collective sentiment is usually limited to small-town innuendo. Often her women, especially young women, endure—or fear—abuse and discomfort, some degree of repression, whether they recognize it or not.

Munro is a serious artist. Her work can unravel complex and confused feelings. Her stories are full of insights into "middling" people's lives and often surprise her characters and her readers. Her language is unadorned but precise, almost always in command of tone and sensibility.

"Boys and Girls" (1968) begins:

> My father was a fox farmer. That is, he raised silver foxes, in pens; and in the fall and early winter, when their fur was prime, he killed them and skinned them and sold their pelts to the Hudson's Bay Company or the Montreal Fur Traders.

Thirty years later, "Queenie" (1998) opens like this:

> Queenie said,? "Maybe you better stop calling me that," and I said, "What?"
> "Stan doesn't like it," she said. "Queenie."

Her stories have a generally static quality. The semi-rural lives remain on the whole full of concerns and personal difficulties that do not rise to the level of genuine tragedy. There can be real distress and trepidation, but, overall, any disruption is set in a minor key. People do up and leave the relatively self-satisfied and inhibited Ontario communities, usually to pursue college degrees or to become professionals. But, as a rule, there is little sense of the development of Canadian life nor an inkling as to where it might be heading.

What strikes us now about Munro's fiction*,* above all, and despite her many gifts, is its constrained and myopic character. The *Times Magazine* piece and much else published this year about her are oblivious to serious problems not simply in Munro's work, but in the work of a whole generation of writers of the last 40 or 50 years and its own "lag of consciousness" in catching up with vast changes, that is, with actual, concrete social life and history.

It is something of a cliché today to say that Munro's stories can cover decades and slide easily between past and present. This is an aesthetic strength, and one of the pleasures of reading her, but it also reveals artistic problems that have beset Munro and many others. These passages tend to take place apart from history, in Munro's case, especially the history of

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Canada, but also the history of the world at large.

In “The Bear Came over the Mountain,” (1999, adapted as a film, *Away From Her*, with Julie Christie and directed by Sarah Polley, in 2006) a retired professor, Grant, visits his wife, Fiona, who has dementia, in an assisted living home. Fifty years pass in the story. A half century! These are postwar people, who have lived their lives in middle-class comfort, but without giving a thought to broader processes and circumstances apparently. Fiona’s mother, from Iceland, is a left-winger, and political conversations at her house are “shrill.” In the story, this is the distant past, a footnote.

The couple encounter anxiety and trouble. Grant has affairs and is flummoxed when Fiona takes up friendship with a man in the home. There is love lost and forgotten, infidelities, but the story, over a half century, does not add up to much. Why does it need to pass though decades? The passage of time only serves to heighten the modesty and even banality of the characters’ goals and purposes, but not in a tragic manner. The author seems all too uncritical about their aims or aimlessness.

In “The Albanian Virgin” (1994) a woman in Victoria, British Columbia, in contemporary times remembers hearing a story about a Canadian woman in the 1920s who falls in with a clan of Albanians in what is now Montenegro. They are deeply patriarchal and for her own safety she must adopt the Balkan custom of being a “pledged virgin,” a woman who forswears sex and is allowed the freedoms and privileges of a man. The recalled episode significantly overshadows the main storyline in which the narrator has left her husband because of an affair and opened a bookstore.

The story boldly passes back and forth in time, but here also, one cannot find a coherent, purposeful framework in which to place these two diverse worlds. There is clearly a reason they are brought together—above all, the feminism that had gained ascendancy in the middle class during Munro’s lifetime, and for which she became a standard-bearer to many readers and critics—but the organic, historical connection (or stark opposition) between the Balkans of the early 20th century and North America in the late 20th century is not brought out.

One of her later books, *The View from Castle Rock* (2006) reaches further past into historical settings in Scotland, where many of Munro’s ancestors came from—including James Hogg, the Scots poet, essayist and novelist and friend of Sir Walter Scott. But in these stories too, there is no meaningful contrast of the past with the present and they largely ignore the sweep or significance of centuries.

Munro, in other words, leaves out much of the world that she experienced and knew firsthand from the “quiet” 1950s to the protests and convulsions of the 1960s and 1970s in Canada, including a massive strike wave and the imposition of martial law in Quebec under the War Measures Act. It is worth noting that one of the more notorious social disasters in recent Canadian history, the e-coli contamination of the drinking water supply of Walkerton, Ontario in 2000, which sickened more than 2,000 people and resulted in seven deaths, leaving others with chronic illnesses, occurred essentially a stone’s throw from Munro’s “home territory.”

These events find their echo in Munro, but only faintly, and it is the slow and somewhat low-stakes liberalization in the lives of people, their rethinking of their place in the world in terms of jobs, marriages and family that count. There is an element in her fiction that argues, like one of her characters in “Open Secrets” (1993): “Olden times. Who wants ’em back?” But this comes under the heading of relatively small change.

Munro’s somewhat complacent embrace of small-town life is troubling. There is much that is provincial, narrow and pinched in the region she inhabited and portrays. Never do we sense an overall critique or rejection of its backwardness and conservatism. The element of conciliation, accommodation, of taking the path of least resistance seems present in her writings. Part of the admiration for Munro came to her by default—for which she is not to blame, of course. Her quiet, modest but fierce dramas tended to stand out in a sea of bland best-sellers, sex confessions, cold and cynical postmodernist “new” novels, and identity politics obsessions.

In the 1980s and 90s, when Munro reached her maturity as an artist, Marxism and the primacy it gives to lawful historical development and the activity of the working class were being attacked by varieties of identity politics and postmodernism. Munro, who taught for many years at Western Ontario, could not have failed to be influenced by these trends, directly or indirectly. Certainly, the scholarship about Munro’s work is dominated by those outlooks.

A current of (over-)modesty and restraint runs through her work, a reluctance to discover any “grand narratives” animating the lives of her people, a fashionable “micro-politics.” Munro’s stories almost always concern small-town, small-scale Ontarians without many pretentions, and, by way of relief, some who have made an escape, but one both emotionally and materially moderate.

Several stories take place during the Second World War, with the Depression still fresh in the memory of the rural characters. “Dear Life,” (2011) for example, suggests a strong element of autobiography, as many of Munro’s stories do: a precocious girl is growing up with a father who raises minks and a schoolteacher mother.

One day, the girl’s mother tells her daughter that an elderly, perhaps “crazy” woman has been snooping around the house. Many years later, the narrator, who now lives in British Columbia suspects their house may have originally belonged to the old woman’s family. The story is sensitively told, but what does it add up to? A feeling of loss, of time passing, of middle-class sympathy for the poor, but not much more. The past might be regrettable, but it is done with.

The short story form, in which Munro chose exclusively to work, has its advantages: events and characters can be swiftly and even “poetically” encompassed. It is the mode suitable for epiphanies and startling, sudden shifts, often at story’s end. It may also, however, lend itself to a minor and blinkered view of the world. One suspects that for Munro a longer form might have opened up possibilities for social and psychological development, or at least challenged her along those lines. It might have raised questions about why people left the unsatisfying, stifling communities where they grew up, how different one period in a person’s life (and a society’s) was from another, and so on. But the focus on the shorter form seems to be a decision on Munro’s part that meant: This far and no farther.

None of this is intended to be the final word, but one thing is clear: Munro’s work, for all its accomplishment, points toward wider problems in artistic and literary culture in the second half of the 20th century and early 21st century that remain with us.

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