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Alice Munro’s Object Lessons

By LEAH HAGER COHEN

The Germans must have a term for it. Doppelgedanken, perhaps: the sensation, when reading, that your own mind is giving birth to the words as they appear on the page. Such is the ego that in these rare instances you wonder, “How could the author have known what I was thinking?” Of course, what has happened isn’t this at all, though it’s no less astonishing. Rather, you’ve been drawn so deftly into another world that you’re breathing with someone else’s rhythms, seeing someone else’s visions as your own.

One of the pleasures of reading Alice Munro derives from her ability to impart this sensation. It’s the sort of gift that requires enormous modesty on the part of the writer, who must shun pyrotechnics for something less flashy: an empathy so pitch-perfect as to be nearly undetectable. But it’s most arresting in the hands of a writer who isn’t too modest — one possessed of a fearless, at times, fearsome, ambition.

From the beginning, Munro has staked her claim on rocky, rough terrain. Her first dozen books are rooted mostly in southwestern Ontario, mostly in the lives of women. Although the stories are, on the surface, bastions of domesticity — they’re full of mothers and daughters and aunts and cousins, darning and gardening, aprons and cakes — Munro flays this material with the unflinching efficiency of a hunter skinning a rabbit. More recently, in “The View From Castle Rock,” she broadened her narrative territory by venturing both into 17th-century Scotland and beyond the boundaries of conventional fiction, mining her family history to produce an unabashed amalgam of invention and fact. Her new book, “Too Much Happiness,” represents at once a return to her habitual form and a furthering of her exploratory sensibilities.

The collection’s 10 stories take on some sensational subjects. In fact, a quick tally yields all the elements of pulp fiction: violence, adultery, extreme cruelty, duplicity, theft, suicide, murder. But while in pulp fiction the emotional climax coincides with the height of external drama, a Munro story works according to a different scheme. Here the nominally momentous event is little more than an anteroom to an echo chamber filled with subtle and far-reaching thematic reverberations.

In “Wenlock Edge,” a college student visits a wealthy man in his home, where she is invited to dine and then to read aloud . . . naked. “And may I ask you please — may I ask you please — not to cross your legs?” he says before sitting opposite her. This scene, swollen with shame and eros, with intimations of power and predation, ends without apparent incident. Only later does the narrator come to understand that the violation, the humiliation from which she may never recover, lies in her unquestioning acquiescence. “A far greater shame it seemed now, than at the time. He had done something to me, after all.”

In “Dimensions,” a triple murder occurs, but it neither drives the plot nor crowns its arc. Instead, the story focuses on the tentative rekindling of animus in a bereft mother, sparked first by a most unlikely, most unpalatable, source and then, in the final, beautiful pages, by the urgent need for her to use her own reanimating breath. (A note about the word “beautiful”: Munro isn’t interested in standard literary aesthetics. She doesn’t traffic in the artful, the lyrical or the euphonious. When she savages your heart, it’s with language almost ostentatious in its refusal to be pretty.)
Refusal is an important element in Munro's fiction. Time and again, whether with minute gestures or on a grand scale, her characters refuse to obey convention and rebel against authority. The young mother in “Deep-Holes” continues to nurse her 5-month-old infant despite her geologist husband's disapproval. (“He thought Sally was far too casual about the whole procedure, sometimes going around the kitchen doing things with one hand while the infant guzzled.”) In “Face” — one of two stories told from a man's perspective — a character's protest against an enforced separation takes the form of self-mutilation. And the narrator of “Child's Play,” after informing us that children “are monstrously conventional,” relates how she and a childhood friend transgressed not simply against propriety but against human life itself. We are shocked, shocked — only to realize, seconds later, that it's the shock of recognition. We have entertained similar notions; we are that way too.

Munro's own contrarian streak is displayed in the structure of her narratives. Many writers begin a story in medias res, but a Munro story is liable to end in the middle of things — that is, well before (or well beyond) the moment when a reader expects to find resolution. The very shape of things, along with our sense of what is important and why, seems to shift as we proceed. The real story keeps turning out to be larger than, and at canted angles to, what we thought it would be. The effect is initially destabilizing, then unexpectedly affirming.

In the introduction to her 1996 volume of “Selected Stories,” Munro reveals an endearing idiosyncrasy: “I don’t always, or even usually, read stories from beginning to end. I start anywhere and proceed in either direction.” She goes on to explain that she doesn’t read in order to find out what happens so much as to experience the world of the story, to inhabit it for a while, “wandering back and forth” in it, discovering the ways it alters her perspective. This Alice-in-Wonderland propensity, this inclination to regard fiction as a dynamic creation and the reader as a mutable participant, may provide a key to reading Munro.

More than that, it suggests something provocative about the uses of fiction, about its moral purpose as well as its potential to have an impact on our lives.

The final, title, story delivers something else again. Picking up on the methodology of “Castle Rock,” it imagines the life of a historical figure, in this case Sophia Kovalevsky, a 19th-century Russian mathematician and novelist. Munro allows the seams between research and imagination to show, and the result is something bold and strange and unexpectedly moving. Near death, Sophia imagines life's sorrows becoming "something like a plague in a ballad, part of an old story," while events and ideas seem to be ‘taking on a new shape, seen through sheets of clear intelligence, a transforming glass.” I can think of no better way to describe Munro's own singular abilities.

It has become practically de rigueur for reviewers to refer to Munro as “our Chekhov,” so I wondered whether Sophia’s nationality might represent an authorial wink. As for the comparison, I don’t know. On the basis of mutual brilliance it may be apt. But wasn’t it John Donne who said “comparisons are odious”? And at this point in Munro’s career, how much can it add? What is certain is this: She is our Munro. And how fortunate we are to call her that.

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