

# Essential Alice Munro: The only prerequisite for reading the Nobel laureate is having lived

By BEN DOLNICK

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Before I'd read Alice Munro — when my knowledge of her amounted to an offish word cloud ("older woman," "Canadian," "short stories") — I imagined that the experience of reading her books, if I ever bothered to, would be like listening to classical music on fancy headphones in a college library: civilized, subtle, probably sleep-inducing.

But then I actually read Munro, and she lifted off my headphones in order to whisper an insane, unforgettable piece of gossip about that anxiety-stricken TA over by the copy machine. It turns out that Alice Munro — Nobel laureate, Author Most Likely to Endure, object of universal writerly reverence and envy — is not just important, but fun. Her books don't belong on a high shelf; they belong in the passenger seat of your car, in the tote bag you bring to the grocery store. She writes about penises that look "bunt and stupid, compared, say, to fingers and toes with their intelligent expressiveness"; old people who smell like rank flower water; the way that couples breaking up occasionally interrupt the solemn proceedings to have passionate sex.

The prerequisites for appreciating Vladimir Nabokov, for example, include an appreciation for cryptography, a rudimentary knowledge of chess and a passing familiarity with Alexander Pushkin. The prerequisites for reading Munro are having lived.

Before her retirement in 2013, she wrote 14 short story collections (a couple of which may try to pass themselves off as novels — don't believe them). Almost all her stories take place in rural Ontario and follow the general contours of her life: the childhood on a struggling farm; the chronically ill mother; the early, unsuccessful marriage; the romantic escapades and agonies.

This fixity of focus, this tendency to return, like a patient in psychoanalysis, to the same cluster of significant autobiographical incidents, has led some critics (perhaps with a dab behind the ears of *deus ex machina*) to treat her as a minor talent. Enough with the intelligent, anguished heroines waiting at rural train stations! Give us Saul Bellow with his lion-hunting Henderson, Norman Mailer with his century-swallowing fever dreams!

This is stupid for lots of reasons, but one of them gets at a quality of Munro's that is hugely important but hard to articulate. Her writing, once ingested, lives on in a different part of the brain than that of most writers. After 20 years of reading her and raving about her to anyone within earshot, I can recite hardly a single sentence. But I remember moments from her books (Lottar wrapped in the lice-infested rug. Del walking drunk along the edge of the grass) more vividly than I remember entire years of my life. She goes out of her way not to be a phrasemaker; much of her writing has the marmy, urgent, working-it-out-in-real-time quality of someone writing by hand on a bouncy bus. She makes memories instead.

I sense your panic, your anxious smile, as if you'd just handed back the petition I'd cornered you into signing. (Ooh, short stories, how fun, I'll definitely check those out!) So let's address the short story thing.

There's something reassuring about novels — you know where you stand with them. Even if all you've read is "Moby-Dick," you can say with a straight face that you've read Herman Melville, just as a visitor to Paris can say she's been to France. Short stories, however, though don't have capital cities. You can wander and wander through their collected works and still feel as if you're missing the main attractions. You never know quite when you've earned a passport stamp.

Here's a cheat sheet from a long-term resident. If you read this handful of stories, spanning the entirety of her career and organized by the phase of life they concern, you will know Munro. You won't be done with her — God, no — but you'll know whether you have the particular set of sensitivities and susceptibilities that make her, for some of us, indispensable.

And if you do, you'll have a new set of memories.

**I want to relive early adolescence in all its intensity and anguish.**

"Lives of Girls and Women" (1971) bills itself as a novel, but it's not, not really. It's a collection of linked short stories, all to do with the Ontario childhood of a girl named Del (who happens to closely resemble Munro). It's also the best book about growing up that I've ever read. The way you know it's not a novel is that you



Canadian author Alice Munro at her home in Clinton, Ontario, Canada, in 2013. The master of short stories died on Monday at the age of 92.

can read it "chapters" out of order, or entirely alone, and they work just fine. My favorite is "Changes and Corrections," in which Del and her class prepare for the school's annual opera.

Just as during the war you could not imagine what people thought about, worried about, what the news was about, before there was a war, so now it was impossible to remember what school had been like before the excitement, the disruption and tension, of the opera.

There's a tendency, I think, to dismiss a writer's books about childhood as a necessary sort of preparatory housecleaning, before the real authorial work can get underway. But some books reveal childhood for what it is: the only portion of our life that we experience freshly, without the dull overlay of cultural hearsay muddling everything. You'll read "Lives of Girls and Women" the way that a long-retired veteran might read an account of his war: I can't believe I lived through all that.

**I want to revisit that part of my 20s when I was burning with ambition but, in reality, stared out the window and rode the bus a lot.**

"In Cortes Island," part of the collection "The Love of a Good Woman" (1996), a Munro-sexy young woman, whom everyone calls "our little bride," lives with her young husband in the basement of a Vancouver house belonging to an old couple named the Gories. The protagonist is, like many Munro protagonists, unhappily determined to become a writer.

"I bought a notebook and tried to write — I did write, pages that started off authoritatively and then went dry, so that I had to tear them out and twist them up in hard punishment and put them in the garbage can," she remembers. "I did this over and over again until I had only the notebook cover left."

The sudden hopelessness of early artistic struggle has never been depicted so well. But the real joy of this story is Mrs. Gorie, the landlady. She is the exemplar of a type that Munro has a particular genius for portraying: the overbearing nightmare of a neighbor.

"Her eyebrows were pink — a variation of the pinkish red of her hair. I did not think the hair could be natural, but how could she have dyed her eyebrows? Her face was thin, roamed, weary; her teeth large and glistening. Her appetite for friendliness, for company, took no account of resistance."

Napoleon Bonaparte, surely the most famous resident of the Mediterranean island of Elba, said, "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake." At the bridge table, it is an art to give your opponent a chance to make a mistake. In today's deal, how should the play go in four hearts after West leads the club jack?

It is a matter of personal preference what you open with East South hand. Some would begin with an ace heart, arguing that if they bid four

The little bride became a writer after all.

**I miss the years when the only thing that made me crazier than my kids was the thought of anything happening to them.**

One of the activities that Munro's characters are perpetually doing — in addition to riding buses and having affairs — is drowning, or nearly drowning. "Miles City, Montana," in "The Progress of Love" (1986), is the best of those stories. Parents of small children are advised to pour themselves stiff drinks.

One summer a woman and her husband are driving, with their two little daughters, across the country to visit family. The adults are testy; the kids are bored. In Montana they stop at a fenced-off public pool and convince the sullen lifeguard to let the girls swim.

No one dies (I feel OK in spotting *us* story to this extent, since otherwise you might sensibly decide that it's too brutal to read) but the precariousness of things is laid terrifyingly bare. The narrator ruminates on how close they came to disaster.

There's something truly about this kind of imagining, isn't there? Something shameful. Laying your finger on the wire to get the safe shock, feeling a bit of what it's like, then pulling back.

Nothing in this shock feels safe.

**I wonder what it would feel like if my kids grew up and stopped talking to me.**

Late Munro is, stylistically, a wholly different thing. The prose is sparer, more wintry. The psychology is as gutting and astute as ever.

Take "Silence," from the collection "Runaway" (2004). A semiretired former TV host named Juliet (sort of a public-spirited interview show as one of Munro's favorite all-careers has come to pick up her 20-year-old daughter, Penelope, at the end of a six-month silent retreat. And she's almost embarrassed by how desperate she's been to see Penelope again.

But upon arriving at the retreat center, Juliet learns from another figure in Munro's pantheon of unpleasant, ostensibly friendly women that Penelope has changed her mind. She doesn't want to be picked up, and in fact doesn't want to see or speak to her mother at all.

The estrangement and silence — motherish-ly, creating a kind of hollow at the center of Juliet's life. "My father used to say of someone he disliked that he had no use for that person," she thinks. "Couldn't those words mean simply what they say? Penelope does not have

a use for me."

The most painful depiction of parental bewilderment this side of Philip Roth's "American Pastoral."

**It feels like spooky medical things have started happening to me and everyone I know.**

The Bear Came Over the Mountain" is, justifiably, Munro's most famous story. Julie Christie starred in the movie version, called "Away From Her." When the book it's in, "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" (2001), came out, it felt as if the whole literary culture, which to that point had been politely appreciative, collectively gasped: "Dear God, this woman is amazing."

A 70-year-old woman named Fiona begins misplacing things, getting lost on her way home from stores she's driven to a thousand times. Before long, her husband, Grant, is moving her into an assisted living facility called Meadowlake.

Fiona turns out to be not only cute at Meadowlake — she thrives there. Soon she has a boyfriend, and Grant finds himself remembering, with an enormously complex stew of jealousy and regret and appreciation, his own long-ago infidelities.

I want to apologetically as little as possible about this story, except to say: It contains the greatest wistful small scene I've ever read, and it's probably the purest delectable test of whether Munro is for you. Dip this story in your psyche, swirl it around and wait for the pink stripe of Literary Wonderment to appear.

**The spooky medical things have fully arrived — now what?**

Munro's last collection, "Dear Life" (2012) — published when she was 81 — contains one of her most efficiently chilling stories. "In Sight of the Lake" is about the mounting terror of the confusion of a woman named Nancy who sets out on a simple errand only to find herself enmeshed in a series of ever-more-disconcerting complications. This is Munro's Franz Kafka story, her eerie into the land of Kazuo Ishiguro.

How could Munro bear to be so cleareyed about old age as she was entering it? I can only imagine that she came to find her own literary voice as comforting, and as necessary, as her readers did. She will, I have no doubt, one day be writing very devastating stories about how St. Peter's ear hair has grown unruly since his wife left him.

**I'm beginning to think all this author worship is a bit off.**

One embarrassing aspect of being a Munro maniac is that she is as pitilessly clear on the foibles of literary adoration as she is on everything else.

In "A 45-year-old poet named Lydia, fleeing an unhappy relationship, spends a few days at a guesthouse on an island off the coast of New Brunswick. This island, Lydia learns, happens to be where Willa Cather used to spend her summers — an aging Cather superfan named Mr. Stanley tells her so. He too, is staying there, and either spends his days tracking down residents who happen to have met Cather or in a camp chair where he "can sit underneath the window where she wrote and looked at the sea."

Lydia, for her part, mostly agonizes about the wreckage of her relationship. At one point she sits down to have breakfast with Mr. Stanley, who wants, of course, to talk about Willa Cather. He's just been to see a woman who once met Cather. The woman was going through relationship difficulties of her own. Mr. Stanley says, and Cather gave her some advice.

Lydia snaps:

"What would she know about it anyway?"

Lydia said.

Mr. Stanley lifted his eyes from his plate and looked at her in grieved amazement.

Later, having calmed down a bit, Lydia thinks:

How did she live? That was what Lydia wanted to say. Would Mr. Stanley have known what she was talking about? If she had asked how did Willa Cather live, would he not have replied that she did not have to find a way to live, as other people did, that she was Willa Cather?

What a lovely, durable shelter he had made for himself. He could carry it everywhere and nobody could interfere with it.

This, from the collection "The Moons of Jupiter" (1982), is Munro at her brutal best. She is an author of 16 books who recognizes that books are not ultimately the thing. That life is all its impossible, hilarious, burning difficulty, can't be defeated or made comprehensible by artistic design, however brilliant the designer. I'll be in my camp chair.

## Give him a chance to make a mistake

Napoleon Bonaparte, surely the most famous resident of the Mediterranean island of Elba, said, "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake."

At the bridge table, it is an art to give your opponent a chance to make a mistake. In today's deal, how should the play go in four hearts after West leads the club jack?

It is a matter of personal preference what you open with East South hand. Some would begin with an ace heart, arguing that if they bid four

hearts, they might miss a slam. As against that, opening one heart might allow West into the auction with a one-spade overall, and perhaps the opponents can make four spades or have a cheap sacrifice.

And since a slam is mathematically unlikely, socking it to the opponents with four hearts would be the choice of most experts.

Since the opening lead marks East with the club ace, declarer is in danger only if East takes the first trick and shifts to a high diamond, with West holding that ace.

Then South could lose one club and three diamonds.

To try to reduce that risk, declarer should call for dummy's low club at trick one. Some Easts would automatically make the mistake of playing low. Then South would win at least one overtrick, since West cannot profitably shift to diamonds.

But East should notice the strong aroma of rodent wafting across the table. What is declarer doing? He must want to keep East off the lead. So East should

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Philip Alder

overtake with his club ace and switch to the diamond queen. In a class I ran earlier this year, every South covered with dummy's club queen, but most Easts won and returned a club!

North 65-10-20	
♠ A K Q J 3 6	
♥ K 3	
♦ 5 3 2	
♣ K Q	
East 8-7-3-2	
♠ 7 3 2	
♥ A 3	
♦ A 7 10	
♣ A 7 10	
South 5	
♠ A Q J 10 7 6 4	
♥ K 7 5	
♦ 4	
Dealer: South	
Vulnerable: Neither	
South West North East	
4♥ Pass Pass Pass	
Opening lead: ♠ J	