

Alice's looking glass



By Ruth Latta

Seventy-eight-year-old Alice Munro has given her readers worldwide *Too Much Happiness*, (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 2009, \$32.99 hc. 978-0-7710-6529-3) – her latest collection of short stories. Early in her career, at home with young children, Munro was labelled Canada's "housewife/writer". Later, her work was called "Canadian Gothic", because many of her stories involved strange events and troubled relationships in rural/small town Ontario. These labels were never quite accurate and do not fit *Too Much Happiness*. A few of these edgy stories have rustic settings, but the collection as a whole takes us from tough urban streets to the British Columbia woods to 19th century Europe.

Of Munro's fifteen books, only two, *Lives of Girls* and *Women and Who Do You Think You Are?*, resemble novels, in having linked stories arranged chronologically, with the same main character in each. In *Too Much Happiness*, each story is independent of the others and each is insightful.

The first and grimmest, *Dimensions*, shows us Doree, a young woman visiting her criminally insane husband in an institution. Always domineering and controlling, he finally went over the edge and committed a horrible crime. Doree's counsellor advises her to quit communicating with him and to "move on." Doree keeps visiting him in the hope of gaining an insight into horrendous past events. She wonders: "Wasn't it possible that what he said was true – that he had come out on the other side. And who was to say that the visions of a person who had done such a thing and made such a journey might not mean something?" Finally, a seemingly supernatural event, rather than rational counsel, convinces Doree to "move on."

Women's lives have always interested Munro. In this collection, in *Wenlock Edge*, a young woman takes action against amoral people who disrespect and exploit decent ones. In *Deep Holes* and in *Face*, we find mothers trying to protect sons against fathers' cruelty. In each case, though, the father still looms large in the son's psyche. In *Some Women*, a young couple returns to the husband's family home for the summer. He lies ill upstairs; she commutes twice a week to a university to teach a summer course. Local women disapprove of the wife because of her education and her decision (probably a mutual decision with her husband) to maintain her career.

In *Free Radicals*, an elderly, recent widow, in remission from cancer, outwits a killer on the run. Ironically, she is lectured by a cop on the folly of leaving her keys in the car and of living alone.

Too Much Happiness, the title story, is based on a real person, Sophia Kovalevsky, a 19th century Russian novelist and mathematician who has a crater on the moon named after her. “Mathematics,” wrote Kovalevsky, requires “great fantasy” – as does fiction writing. The title seems ironic; Kovalevsky exemplifies the plight of the exceptional woman. The University of Stockholm, where she teaches and does research, is not an academic plum, but at least her colleagues and their wives regard her as “an oddity they approve of.” Her aged mathematics mentor considers her ability in mathematics as “a gift to [him] and [him] alone.” Her wealthy fiancé is “glad she has something to absorb her, though she suspects he finds mathematics not trivial but somehow beside the point.”

My favourite story, *Fiction*, centres on a music teacher named Joyce, whose soulmate is lured away by an unattractive but needy female employee. Several Munro stories in other collections show beloved males (lovers, spouses, sometimes fathers) falling for unprepossessing, pathetic sirens. In an effort to monitor the affair between her husband and his inamorata, grief-crazed Joyce befriends the usurper’s child. Years later, happily remarried in Vancouver, she runs into the girl, now a grown woman. By chance she learns that the friendship she extended to the child, so insincere in intention, was important to the little girl. Can the two reconnect as adults?

As Shakespeare advised, Munro “holds a mirror up to nature” – human nature, and takes readers, as that other Alice did, through the looking glass, into others’ hearts and minds.

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