Inside and outside the family

Alice Munro's short stories

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9 April 2002

Alice Munro, The Love of a Good Woman, New York:*Alfred A Knopf, 1998*

Alice Munro examines the world of small-town or suburban Canada primarily through the framework of the family, and the emotions she explores are potent. Against the threat of routine and confinement, particularly for women and children, Munro posits a hope for escape in nearly every one of the eight stories in this volume. Repressed memory, the dark past, and neglected desire (sexual or aesthetic) threaten to tear apart the well-woven fabric of unendurable daily life.

Strong feelings are often provoked by an exceptional event, one that seems uncharacteristic of the community, and even "exterior." The event, the outside world itself, is seldom understood, but it is disruptive. The stories communicate a sense of considerable amounts of time passing, of the changes that happen to an individual or a family over decades, and the lag of consciousness in catching up with these changes.

The title story of the collection, "The Love of a Good Woman," is a novella in three parts linked by the discovery and consequences of the local optometrist's death. The first part of the story concerns the three boys who discover the optometrist's car submerged in the local river—with his body inside. Munro describes the emotions that such a sight must create, especially in the young, as "something close in front of them, a picture before their eyes that came between them and the world." Everything usual and expected in their daily lives has been irrevocably superseded by the image of violent death.

Munro then describes the lives in each boy's home. One of the three has to await a drunken father, another returns to a family in which "drawbacks and adversity were not to be noticed, not to be distinguished from their opposites." Later the boys find the local constable, a man who refuses to wear his hearing aid. Finally they each go home, and one of them, after reading comic books for an hour, tells his mother about the corpse. One boy receives the nickname "Deadman" for his efforts. The powerful effect of their discovery on the boys goes unnoticed, and is repressed, probably for the rest of their lives.

The second section of the story introduces us to Enid, the next door neighbor of the optometrist and his wife. She is an informal nurse, without a degree, caring for dying people. This profession scandalizes her mother, a member of the local gentry, a class slightly above that of most of the people Enid cares for. Munro quickly establishes Enid as a nonconformist. In high-school, "She was well-liked and high-spirited and well-dressed and good-looking but she was slightly set apart.... Her hope was to be good, and do good, and not necessarily in the orderly, customary, wifely way."

Munro describes Enid's life as consistent with the routine and complacency of middle-class small-town life, but in fact Enid deals with its extreme margin: death and dying. Her life has become entering homes dominated by these unhappy souls, washing the clothes, cooking the meals, caring for the children and otherwise comforting people as the life goes out of them. Like the boys who discovered a dead body, Enid deals with the frank fact of death and dying in the midst of her community. Although none of her duties are unwomanly, Enid's nursing threatens the conventions of small-town life.

As she takes on a new charge, Mrs. Quinn, whose kidneys are failing and who is dying slowly of poisoning by uric acid, a darker side emerges within the reciprocal relations of caring and being cared for. Enid and Mrs. Quinn's husband, Rupert, whom Enid remembers from high-school, become attracted to each other. Strange and sexually explicit dreams trouble her. She becomes self-interested and feels guilty. *Is* she really a good woman?

In the third part of "The Love of a Good Woman," it becomes clear to the reader that Munro has been surreptitiously developing an atmosphere of suspense. Hints of wrongdoing and violence behind the community's self-satisfied complacency suddenly coalesce when Enid realizes that she knows a murderer. An internal conflict emerges: the authorities must be informed, but the murderer must be the one to inform them of his own free will, even if this places Enid's own life at risk or if it means that the crime will never be detected. The first reaction, to call the police, is the natural instinct of an adult of the time and place. Notions of good order are entrenched in Enid. She, however, responds to life with compassion. It is not only the crime that matters, but the criminal himself. Enid hopes that the murderer will behave morally.

Munro asks, can human beings improve despite the gravitational pull of personal advantage? Enid acts in such a manner to convince the murderer to act honorably and turn himself into the police: she will risk her own life to tell him so. The story suggests the possibility of humans molding their actions to a moral cause, but not without conflict and ambiguity.

The merits of this story—the precise imagery, the developing suspense, the emphasis on the responsibility to care for the young and the sick—are epitomized by Munro's creation of a character who tries to act with consideration for others, even for someone who may have committed an atrocious act, and at the expense of her own safety.

Munro gives us a more historically located sense of uneasiness in "Jakarta." In the early 1960s two young married women, Kath, a recent mother, and Sonje, are living with their families on an island near Vancouver, British Columbia. Sonje's husband, Cottar, is a left-wing journalist. He has even visited "Red China." Sonje herself has

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had to resign from her library job because "There was concern that in her job she might be promoting communist books and influencing children who used the library, so that they might become Communists."

In this story the subversive, as often in Munro, manifests itself through art. Both Kath and Sonje read serious fiction. On the beach one day Kath and Sonje discuss D.H. Lawrence's short story, "The Fox," about a woman who struggles to hold herself separate from her lover, a woman for whom marriage must mean the submersion of her soul in that of her husband-to-be. The story disturbs Kath who feels "bloated and suffocated with incoherent protest."

Several decades later Kent, Kath's now-divorced husband, looks up Sonje in Oregon. He is retired and has his third, much-younger wife with him. In the course of his visit, we learn that Cottar had died of an illness back in 1960 in Jakarta, though the circumstances of his death are vague and suspect. Kent recalls a dinner that he and Kath and Sonje and Cottar had that summer with another couple, friends of Cottar's, older, libertine and clearly left-wingers. Kent remembers what they talked about: the Rosenbergs, the brutality of the RCMP toward the Indians. But he had insisted then, that "in spite of what you say, life is getting better."

Kent has not changed his political opinions in the years since, "But he wondered about the anger in that room, all the bruising energy, what had become of it." The reader senses that everything had been steeped in a frustrated desire for escape, but to the Kent of years later this comes across only in a shadowy way. In Oregon, he wonders more about real-estate prices. In another flashback, this time from Kath's point of view, the people and events of a farewell party for Cottar begin to peel her away from Kent's conventionality. Cottar's friends suggest, without ever really spelling it out, the liberation of unfettered sexuality, a channel for the dissonance that has been welling up in Kath.

The older Sonje tells Kent that she does not believe Cottar is dead. She believes that it is possible he is working for the poor, working at some illegal effort. She plans, it turns out, to look for Cottar on the streets of Jakarta. She knows that Jakarta has the largest mosque in Asia, though there is not a whiff in the story of the disaster that overtook that country in the 1960s. There is only a vague longing for the past or the potential for radical change that was so much more evident at an earlier time, which neither Kent nor Sonje realized in their own lives, while others did.

Munro creates something of a beacon in Cottar and his leftist friends. They are bohemian, judgmental and pretentious, but they all lived life with purpose. This impression of Cottar is so strong that Sonje even believes that he can have defeated death. Kent, for his part, can tell Sonje, "I don't dream." In "Jakarta" there is a longing for lost opportunities, but those who have rebelled against the confines of life stand a chance of regretting less.

Emotional escape is also a concern in "The Children Stay." Pauline and Brian and their two daughters are on vacation with Brian's parents, also near Vancouver. Brian is a loving man, but foolish and oppressive. Pauline becomes involved in a community play, a rendition of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. She falls in love with the cynical, ill-mannered director. Routine of family life and child-rearing press down upon her. On an impulse she runs away with the director, and Brian insists on keeping the children.

One can feel the male arrogance crawling up Pauline's spine, as well as the expectations to conform, to behave, to play a scripted role as wife and mother. Here also is a sense of time passing without positive results. In the end, years later, we discover that the affair with the director was only a brief moment in her life. But her children have never forgiven her for abandoning them. These are the burdens of revolt, and, as often in Munro there is no satisfaction in escape, but staying seems like an even bigger disaster.

Of the other stories, I particularly admired "My Mother's Dream," about a woman with an infant living with her sisters-in-law after her husband, a man she barely knew, is killed in the Second World War. One sister-in-law attaches herself in a manic fashion to the child. The mother seeks refuge in playing the violin, which she has studied professionally before her marriage. Life is simultaneously calmed and shattered by art. Interestingly, Munro has the story narrated by the infant herself, again from a great remove in time.

In these and the other stories in the collection, Munro gives us accurate and telling images of personal revolt. These come almost exclusively within the family. This is the strength and weakness of her fiction. These stories are involved with the outside world only from this angle. It is natural and perhaps inevitable that one reacts to the discomfort, pain and even spiritual oppression within the family, but, in Munro's world, one also runs the risk of making disastrous mistakes by leaving or disrupting domestic life. This is legitimate emotional territory, and it needs to be explored, but the very confines *within* the subject matter direct us to the confines *of* the subject matter: in Munro's stories the exterior, concrete social and historical life, fails to play a role.

It doesn't have to be like this, of course. Small-town existence and middle-class concerns have evoked some of the greatest explosions in North American literature. The feeling in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, for example, is not one of quashed revolt, but of ecstatic liberation, of the possibilities of life inherent in big cities, and of painful but optimistic yearning for them. In Munro, on the contrary, there is almost a fatalism about the possibility of making life better. Is that because it can't be made better by simply rejecting family life, but by digging out the roots of the family in the larger social world? Readers hoping for the dynamic throb of revolt, the sense that there is a larger world to be unapologetically embraced, will have to look elsewhere.

But if they want insight into the dissatisfaction that has been breeding for many years now in the most intimate realms of love and motherhood, then this book is an important guide. Munro shows the lack of ease that many women, especially, have felt within the structure of family; she asks if it is possible to be free in one's intimate relations. It is because the author poses this question, as much as for the aesthetically pleasing build-up of suspense, the revealing imagery and the demands on the imagination, that one should read and enjoy *The Love of a Good Woman*.

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