

WESTERN NEWS

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ALICE MUNRO

2013 NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE



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ALICE MUNRO NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE CELEBRATES CANON OF WESTERN ALUMNA

BY JASON WINDERS

WHEN THE CALL came, Alice Munro, LLD'76, was nowhere to be found.

"The Swedish Academy has not been able to get a hold of Alice Munro," tweeted the arbiter of the Nobel Prize at 7:04 a.m. EST Oct. 10. "Left a phone message. #NobelPrize #Literature."

Moments earlier, the Western alumna and former writer-in-residence was announced as the winner of 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature, becoming the first Canadian woman to take the award since its launch in 1901. Munro, 82, is only the 13th woman given the award.

News quickly made its way around the world. Only problem, the winner had yet to be officially notified by the academy. "@Nobelprize.org is trying to reach #AliceMunro for our traditional phone interview, still voice mail. #NobelPrize," tweeted the academy at 8:47 a.m.

The search continued until noon when, finally, a connection was made. "We reached #Alice Munro, phone interview soon to follow! #NobelPrize in #Literature."

To be fair, Munro wasn't completely in the dark about her career-defining award. She clued into the news earlier in the day as media started calling her home.

"Unbelief. I really couldn't believe it; I was so happy," Munro said of the news. "I haven't gotten over the delight yet. Because I work, generally, in the short story form, this is a special thing to get this recognition."

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ALICE MUNRO // CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

Munro, originally from Wingham, Ont., has been called ‘Canada’s Chekhov.’ Similar to the work of the Russian short-story master, plot is usually secondary. Her stories revolve around small epiphanies encountered by her characters, often when current events illuminate something that happened in the past.

“Alice Munro is Canada’s finest writer,” said Western professor David Bentley, a Distinguished University Professor and Carl F. Klinck Professor in Canadian Literature. “We can take special pleasure in the fact that her extraordinary career began here.”

Munro’s first connection to Western’s Department of English came while she was an undergraduate student pursuing an English major. As a student, she published three short stories in Western’s undergraduate English magazine, *Folio*, from 1949-51.

She returned to Western in 1974-75, when she held the post of writer-in-residence. During that time she was working on her collection, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which won the Governor’s General’s Award.

“This is the 40th anniversary of the start of our writer-in-residence program, the oldest program in Canada, so we are especially thrilled that Ms. Munro’s Nobel Prize came through this year,” said Bryce Traister, English and Writing Studies chair. “We are privileged and humbled to be able to play even this small part in her storied career.”

Munro is beloved by readers around the world for her striking portraits of women living in small-town Ontario. Her last series of stories is the 2012 collection *Dear Life*, and her excellence has been recognized with numerous writing awards, including the Man International Booker Prize in 2009, Giller Prize in 1998 and 2004 and Governor General’s Literary Award.

“Most writers and critics agree that she is probably the most important living practitioner of the short story in the Anglophone world,” Traister said. “And the same would agree that she is probably one of the most accomplished prose stylists in any genre. Her work brings out the complexities of inner-life. She finds the extraordinary and the wondrous residing in the most ordinary and everyday events, and writes about those things in a way that finds the graceful, the beautiful, the terrible, and the tragic in all of us.”

Munro’s name is among authors commonly mentioned when the Nobel committee considers the annual literature prize. Past winners include literature luminaries such as George Bernard Shaw, Ernest Hemingway, Herman Hesse, T.S. Eliot and Toni Morrison, with the last three prizes awarded to Chinese writer Mo Yan, Sweden’s Tomas Tranströmer and Spanish scribe Mario Vargas Llosa.

Canadian-born, American-raised writer Saul Bellow won in 1976. In 2005, Munro sat down for an interview with the *Alumni Gazette*. During that intimate conversation, she discussed her time at the university, and how it shaped her career and life.

Born in 1931, Munro did not graduate from Western. But, she was very quick to note, she did not drop out either.

“I’ve read time and time again in stories about myself that I dropped out of Western,” she said. “I did not drop out. I was on a two-year scholarship that paid half my tuition and I could make up the rest. I also had an Ontario bursary and a part-time job all the time I was in school and I sold my blood. I could make it. But scholarships in the arts were only two years long and I don’t know what you were expected to do after that. So, I would like that fact to be made known. I wish I’d have graduated and I wish there was more money available for the arts. I don’t see why that can’t happen.”

At Western, she met her future husband, Gerry Fremlin, BA’50, a geographer/cartographer, who died in April. “But just very briefly because he was a senior. I had written a story that I wanted to publish in *Folio*, which was their literary magazine, and he had some poetry in *Folio* so I wanted to meet him,” she said. “Also, I rather liked his looks.”

She continued, “Isn’t that why girls used to go to school, to meet guys and to get a diamond ring before you graduated, which I never expected to happen to me because I was not wildly popular in my youth. I was very weird. I was very, very weird. I wasn’t eccentric in appearance or in manner, I don’t think, but all my interests were just off the map.”

Months after that one brief meeting, Munro remembers getting a letter from Fremlin. “It was a fan letter, a real fan letter, which was nice but what I really wanted was for him to ask me out!”

He didn’t and within a year, she married James Munro and moved to British Columbia. Shortly after that, she had the first of her three daughters, an event she admits “quite amazed me.”

Munro didn’t see Fremlin again for more than 20 years until, in 1974, she left her marriage and with daughters in tow, returned to London where she accepted an academic appointment as writer-in-residence at Western. The rest, as they say, is history.

She and Fremlin became reacquainted, eventually married and moved into the Fremlin family home on this quiet street in Clinton. And she went on to become a literary giant of international renown, a dream she first remembers forming when she was a farm girl growing up in Wingham.

“I planned on being a writer at an early age,” she said, recalling her primary school days. “I was so involved in just hoping to be a writer and planning what I would write. That started when I was about 11 years old. The most important thing in my life was to do that.”

When asked if her public persona, the person we read about and hear about and see on TV, is the ‘Real Alice.’

“Not quite, no,” she said. “You have to be more up to be that person. A Huron County person hasn’t been trained to be very up. You train to be very down; sort of, oh, very down to earth. And I find people in the great world can interpret this as being sort of off-putting. We may have big egos, but we have, early on, learned to hide them.”

When Munro does indulge in her ego, she does it playfully and with frugality. Instead, it is modesty that she uses as a shield to skillfully protect her secret. One of the many honours that have been bestowed upon her is an honorary degree from Western in 1976, the only such degree she has ever accepted.

“They’re honours that people like to give you but I only took the one from Western because it was my undergraduate school,” she said. “I haven’t taken one from anywhere else, because often they like to get a speaker and I’m not into doing speeches.”

She continued, “I don’t want to bad mouth honours, they’re fine. For people who see a writing career in those terms, I think they work very well. But I always feel I’ve got to really protect my energy because the writing is still what I should be doing and, well, maybe not now, because I’m so old. I may not write another book. But up until now my whole thing has been protecting my time and my energy.”

The CBC and Alumni Gazette contributed to this report.

Probing deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum

“People’s lives ... (are) dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable — deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum.”

— Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women*

BY D. M. R. BENTLEY

OVER THE LAST four decades and more, Alice Munro has emerged as one of the world’s consummate writers. Consistently refusing the option of writing novels, she has used the short story as a vehicle for narratives of remarkable psychological depth and insight that also capture and convey the texture of life in rural and small-town southwestern Ontario.

So brilliantly achieved are Munro’s short stories she has been likened to Anton Chekhov, who famously compared the short-story genre to “lace,” a metaphor that nicely points to one of the keys to Munro’s success: exquisitely crafted pieces that consist of fabric and what lies between, what we see and what we can see



BENTLEY

through, the universal surrounded by the particular. Such is the concise economy of Munro’s short stories that one reviewer found it “difficult to remember why the novel was ever invented.” Munro’s meteoric rise to national and international acclaim began in the 1960s with the publication of short stories in various Canadian magazines, and then the publication in 1968 of *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which won that year’s Governor General’s Award for Fiction. Thirteen collections of short stories followed, as did two more Governor-General’s Awards, two Giller Prizes, the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, the Man Booker International Prize, and, of course, the Nobel Prize for Literature, the *ne plus ultra* of literary recognition.

Through all this Munro has remained so modest and unassuming that, as someone who heard her interviewed on the CBC last week observed, “it was as if she had been complimented on her flower bed.”

In 1974-75, Munro was writer-in-residence at Western and in 1976 the university awarded her an honorary degree. But her connection to Western began decades earlier in 1949, when she came here with the intention of majoring in Journalism.

In 1950-51 she changed her major to English and found in the English Department’s undergraduate magazine, *Folio*, a hospitable home for her first three published stories: *The Dimensions of a Shadow*, *Story for Sunday* and *The Widower*. All three contain stylistic and thematic intimations of Munro’s mature work, but they are also remarkable for the glimpses that they afford of her rapidly absorbing, surmounting, and transmuting influences and ideas. Prominent among these were the psychological theories of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud and the stylistic devices and thematic concerns of the short stories of James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and D.H. Lawrence’s *The Horse Dealer’s Daughter*.

“I worked in the library,” Munro said years later, “and I stumbled on books ... The most important work I did ... was reading in the library.”

The shadow of *The Dimensions of a Shadow* is, in Jung’s terms, a manifestation of the “repressed personal fantasies” of its protagonist, a 33-year-old schoolteacher who is infatuated with a handsome boy in her class. In contrast, *Story for Sunday* is a Freudian tale of a girl of 15 who is kissed by her Sunday school teacher and, after seeing him kissing another girl, sublimates her pubescent desire in religion.

Both short stories are suffused with Lawrencean sexuality: in the former, three girls – southwestern Ontario’s first Three Graces – have “long light limbs, and their soft mouths and the tender fullness of their cheeks ... (are) only for pleasure,” and in the latter the young girl (whose name, Evelyn, suggests her susceptibility to temptation) is “empty of everything but the sweetness of sensation” after the teacher has “bent to kiss her and stroke her cheek with his long soft-tipped fingers.”

All three short stories end in a Joycean epiphany and all three contain closely observed and precisely rendered details of their settings: for example, in *The Widower*, the “green blinds” of its protagonist’s grocery store hide a window adorned with “bright stickers advertising Salada Tea, and Coca-Cola.” Above the store, his deceased wife Ella’s room contains “her geraniums and African violets, her lace doilies on the chesterfield, [and] her painted silk screen trying to hide a little black stove in the corner.” The room is “faintly, mustily scented with her” partly because, although he sees his marriage as a life of quite desperation from which he has at last gained freedom, he remains haunted by her presence. “Ella might as well not be dead,” he thinks at the end of the short story; “it would be better, more comfortable.” Exploration of the “deep caves” beneath the “linoleum” has begun.

For financial reasons, Munro did not complete a degree in English, but it was at Western that she began to publish evidence of the extraordinary talent that would lead more than 60 years

later to the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Western professor D.M.R. Bentley is a Distinguished University Professor and Carl F. Klinck Professor in Canadian Literature.

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Finding validation in the remarkable unremarked

BY JAN PLUG

AFTER READING ALICE Munro for the first time, I decided to lend my copy of *Dance of the Happy Shades* to my mother, and then my sister. There is little reason to think either would have read Munro otherwise. In one small southern Ontario town after another, our house was like those around it: I owned copies of *Black Beauty* and *Hansel and Gretel*, and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* had its place in our living room. Otherwise, there was hardly a book to be found. In other words, we were more likely to appear as characters in a Munro story than to have read one.

Sure enough, both my mother and my sister found themselves in Munro, one in a girl with a velvet dress, the other in a girl taken for a ride. Such moments are anything but simple, for Munro’s portrayal of small towns — of ‘our’ towns, we say too easily, of ‘my’ people — is unapologetic, unflinching, uncompromising. The honesty of her vision of a sometimes bleak life, of its constraints, its absence of prospect, its violence even, can be overwhelming.



PLUG

But this is also the measure of her esteem for that life: never to have looked away, to have fallen prey to sentimentality, for instance.

The Nobel is recognition of nothing but Munro’s work, of course, of no one but Munro herself. Still, perhaps there is no great fault in finding in it some small validation of the unremarked and unremarkable lives Munro records, the girls who leave school to become switchboard operators, the boys whose thumbs are ground to a point in a factory accident.

Maybe the best we can do is to say, in her own words, “Thanks for the ride.”

Jan Plug is a professor in the Department of English and Writing Studies.

Celebrating the small things that matter

BY BRYCE TRAISTER

EVEN BEFORE the Nobel came calling, Alice Munro could hardly have been called Western’s “best kept secret.”

For two years, she was a student here, a scholarship winner from Huron County and an English major of all things, before leaving university to get married and start a family. This is what many women from southwestern Ontario — and everywhere else, for that matter — did back in the 1950s, even when there wasn’t enough money for university degrees, as was the case for Ms. Munro.

Following some of her early successes — *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) and the iconic *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) — she returned to Western in 1974-75 as the writer-in-residence. Back then, there was a feeling it might “be rather nice for the university to bring back someone who went here very briefly and has since managed to build up quite a reputation as a writer of fiction.”

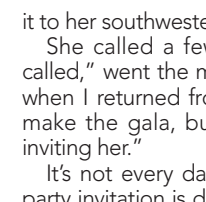
That was 1973. A few years later, Western conferred an honorary doctorate on her.

Today, Ms. Munro, the 2013 Nobel Laureate in Literature, is both Western’s first Nobel winner and the oldest living alumna of Western’s writer-in-residence program. At 40 this year, Western’s writer-in-residence program, hosted by the Department of English and Writing Studies, is the longest running university program of its kind in Canada.

This past summer, we invited Ms. Munro to be part of an event we’re having next month to celebrate this milestone. In this day and age, we tend to send invitations over email, as facebook notifications or via webpages. But this was Alice Munro, and an e-invite would not do. So, against the better of advice of folks who have encountered my penmanship, I handwrote an invitation and mailed it to her southwestern Ontario address.

She called a few days later. “Alice Munro called,” went the message I found on my desk when I returned from a coffee run. “She can’t make the gala, but wanted to thank you for inviting her.”

It’s not every day that a department head’s party invitation is declined by Alice Munro. The whole thing seemed, and still seems to me in the wake of the excitement over her Nobel recogni-



TRAISTER

tion, so right, so appropriate to both her reputation and achievement. Anyone who listened to that now famous phone interview last week heard the humility, credible even in the face of the staggering achievement.

“I just want to thank you very much,” was the first thing she said. “This is a wonderful thing for me, and a wonderful thing for the short story.” Her lingering surprise and unfeigned joy found expression as gratitude, and as hope her recognition would lead to greater interest worldwide interest in the short story and in Canadian writing and writers.

In January of this year, Western’s Department of English officially merged with the Program in Writing, Rhetoric and Professional Communication to become the Department of English and Writing Studies. We undertook this for a number of reasons, one of which was to celebrate the creation of a new Honors Specialization in Creative Writing and English Language and Literature, which began in Fall 2012.

(I’ve already started calling it the ‘Munro degree’ in my head.)

Not only does the degree, through something like happenstance, reflect the course of study Ms. Munro began back in the early 1950s, but also it may be the case a future winner of the Nobel, or the Governor-Generals, or the National Book Award, or the Giller Prize (Ms. Munro has won them all) is sitting today in Larry Garber’s *Creative Writing Workshop*, or Terence Green’s *Writing Short Fiction* course.

One gets the feeling Ms Munro is perfectly happy letting the rest of us make a big deal about her achievement. It’s kind of what we do in arts and humanities departments after all. We celebrate and think critically about literature and art, and how these things might be said to matter in today’s world. She is now on the same list as Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Neruda, Albert Camus and William Faulkner.

And Toni Morrison. Ms. Munro was quite rightly appalled at how few women — 13 out of 106 — have received this recognition.

In the case of Alice Munro, there’s something very satisfying about Nobel’s recognition of a body of work almost entirely comprised of a ‘secondary’ genre (the short-story), largely written about ordinary people (housewives, farmers, librarians) and written by a woman from a distinctly un-famous part of the world. As it turns out, these small and unimportant things somehow matter. But don’t take it from me.

Read any story by this unparalleled master of fiction writing, and you will see for yourself.

Western professor Bryce Traister is the chair of the Department of English and Writing Studies.