

Dear Life

Reading Guide

Book description

Dear Life is a series of finely drawn snapshots into the lives of people living in small towns around Lake Huron in Canada. From a young girl experiencing all the pain of her first dance, to an old woman telling the same story over and over, all of life is here, in its dangerous and strange glory. It is, perhaps, Alice Munro's last collection of stories, and the one with which she won the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature.

The collection is made up of fourteen stories. Moments of change, chance encounters and that twist of fate which leads a person off an accustomed path and on to a new way of thinking and being – these compact tales challenge anyone who thinks a short story isn't as satisfying as a novel. Whilst the stories and the characters in them are grounded around Lake Huron, there are departures, too. A poet, finding herself in alien territory at her first literary party, is rescued by a seasoned newspaper editor, and is soon hurtling across the continent, young child in tow, towards a hoped-for – but completely unplanned – meeting. A young soldier, returning to his fiancée from the Second World War, steps off the train before his stop and onto the farm of another woman, beginning a life on the move. In Munro's hands, ordinary life is dangerous, strange, radiant and indelible. The book ends with four powerful pieces, 'autobiographical in feeling', set during the time of Munro's own childhood, in the area where she grew up. Munro describes this quartet as 'not quite stories' but 'the first and last – and the closest – things I have to say about my own life'. Suffused with Munro's clarity of vision and her unparalleled gift for storytelling, these and the other stories in Dear Life are cause for celebration.

Author biography

Alice Munro was born in 1931 and is the author of twelve collections of stories, most recently *Too Much Happiness*, and a novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*. She has received many awards and prizes, including three of Canada's Governor General's Literary Awards and two Giller Prizes, the Rea Award for the Short Story, the Lannan Literary Award, the WHSmith Book Award in the UK, the National Book Critics Circle Award in the US, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for *The Beggar Maid*, and has been awarded the Man Booker International Prize 2009 for her overall contribution to fiction on the world stage. Her stories have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Paris Review* and other publications, and

her collections have been translated into thirteen languages. She lives with her husband in Clinton, Ontario, near Lake Huron in Canada.

Nine things you need to know about Alice Munro...

1. Her birth name was Alice Laidlaw.
2. She was born on July 10, 1931, just outside Wingham, Ontario, which has made frequent appearances in her stories (renamed Jubilee, or Hanratty).
3. Her father, Robert Laidlaw, was a direct descendant of James Hogg, author of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*
4. She has said she began to escape into books after her schoolteacher mother was diagnosed with an unusual form of Parkinson's when Alice, the oldest of three children, was 10 years old.
5. She won a scholarship to study journalism at the University of Western Ontario, where she supported herself by selling her blood and picking suckers from tobacco, among other jobs. She published her first story, 'The Dimensions of a Shadow', as a student in 1950.
6. With her first husband, Jim Munro, she opened a bookshop, Munro's Books, which is still trading today in Victoria, British Columbia. Their USP was to stock paperbacks almost exclusively, at a time when many traditional booksellers despised them.
7. Her second husband, geographer Gerry Fremlin, was an old friend from university. They decided to get married after meeting up again over three martinis.
8. When she won the Man Booker International Prize in 2009, Judge Jane Smiley described her work as 'practically perfect'
9. She is the first Canadian citizen to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. (Saul Bellow was born Canadian but took US citizenship in 1941, 26 years before he won the Nobel).

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/oct/10/top-ten-things-about-alice-munro>

Critical reception of *Dear Life*

'Deep and surprising and unsparing' Helen Simpson, *Guardian*
'A slight sense of withholding gives Munro's prose its gracefulness, and allows intimacy without danger. After many years, many collections and many wonderful stories, readers may feel they know everything about Alice Munro, especially as so many of her characters lead lives similar to her own. In fact, we know very little about her. This is one of the reasons readers become dizzy with love for Munro. This other reason is that she is so damn good' Anne Enright, *Guardian*

'In this book Munro has laid bare the foundations of her fiction as never before. Lovers of her writing must hope this is not, in fact, her finale. But if it is, it's spectacular' Ruth Scurr, *Spectator*

'Alice Munro is one of our greatest living writers, and this new collection of stories...is essential reading for anyone who cares about literature, storytelling and language, or who savours the deep

enjoyment of a writer at the height of her powers...These stories remind us of the world Munro was born into...And they remind us, therefore, how lucky we are to have Munro herself and her subtle, intelligent and true work' Naomi Alderman, Financial Times
'Another dazzling collection of short stories, provincial and universal in equal measure' Sara Wheeler, Observer

Author interview

Extracts from a rare interview with Munro – taken from *The Paris Review, The Art of Fiction no. 137*

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever revise a story after it's been published? Apparently, before he died, Proust rewrote the first volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past*.

MUNRO

Yes, and Henry James rewrote simple, understandable stuff so it was obscure and difficult. Actually I've done it recently. The story "Carried Away" was included in *Best American Short Stories 1991*. I read it again in the anthology, because I wanted to see what it was like and I found a paragraph that I thought was really soggy. It was a very important little paragraph, maybe two sentences. I just took a pen and rewrote it up in the margin of the anthology so that I'd have it there to refer to when I published the story in book form. I've often made revisions at that stage that turned out to be mistakes because I wasn't really in the rhythm of the story anymore. I see a little bit of writing that doesn't seem to be doing as much work as it should be doing, and right at the end I will sort of rev it up. But when I finally read the story again it seems a bit obtrusive. So I'm not too sure about this sort of thing. The answer may be that one should stop this behavior. There should be a point where you say, the way you would with a child, this isn't mine anymore.

INTERVIEWER

You've mentioned that you don't show your works-in-progress to friends.

MUNRO

No, I don't show anything in progress to anybody.

INTERVIEWER

How much do you rely on your editors?

MUNRO

The New Yorker was really my first experience with serious editing. Previously I'd more or less just had copyediting with a few suggestions—not much. There has to be an agreement between the editor and me about the kind of thing that can happen. An editor who thought nothing happened in William Maxwell's stories, for example, would be of no use to me. There also has to be a very sharp eye for the ways that I could be deceiving myself. Chip McGrath at the New Yorker was my first editor, and he was so good. I was amazed that anybody could see that deeply into what I wanted to do. Sometimes we didn't do much, but occasionally he gave me a lot of direction. I rewrote one story called "The Turkey Season," which he had already bought. I thought he would simply accept the new version but he didn't. He said, Well, there are things about the new version I like better, and there are things about the old version I like better. Why don't we see? He never says anything like, We will. So we put it together and got a better story that way, I think.

INTERVIEWER

How was this accomplished? By phone or by mail? Do you ever go into the New Yorker and hammer it out?

MUNRO

By mail. We have a very fruitful phone relationship, but we've only seen each other a few times.

INTERVIEWER Were you always writing?

MUNRO

Since about grade seven or eight.

INTERVIEWER

Were you a serious writer by the time you went to college?

MUNRO

Yes. I had no chance to be anything else because I had no money. I knew I would only be at university two years because the scholarships available at that time lasted only two years. It was this little vacation in my life, a wonderful time. I had been in charge of the house at home when I was in my teens, so university was about the only time in my life that I haven't had to do housework.

INTERVIEWER

Did you get married right after your two years?

MUNRO

I got married right after the second year. I was twenty. We went to Vancouver. That was the big thing about getting married—this huge adventure, moving. As far away as we could get and stay in the country. We were only twenty and twenty-two. We immediately set up a very proper kind of middle-class existence. We were thinking of getting a house and having a baby, and we promptly did these things. I had my first baby at twenty-one.

INTERVIEWER

And you were writing all through that?

MUNRO

I was writing desperately all the time I was pregnant because I thought I would never be able to write afterwards. Each pregnancy spurred me to get something big done before the baby was born. Actually I didn't get anything big done.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had a specific time to write?

MUNRO

When the kids were little, my time was as soon as they left for school. So I worked very hard in those years. My husband and I owned a bookstore, and even when I was working there, I stayed at home until noon. I was supposed to be doing housework, and I would also do my writing then. Later on, when I wasn't working every day in the store, I would write until everybody came home for lunch and then after they went back, probably till about two-thirty, and then I would have a quick cup of coffee and start doing the housework, trying to get it all done before late afternoon.

INTERVIEWER

What about before the girls were old enough to go to school?

MUNRO

Their naps.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote when they had naps?

MUNRO

Yes. From one to three in the afternoon. I wrote a lot of stuff that wasn't any good, but I was fairly productive. The year I wrote my second book, *Lives of Girls and Women*, I was enormously productive. I had four kids because one of the girls' friends was living with us, and I worked in the store two days a week. I used to work until maybe one o'clock in the morning and then get up at six. And I remember thinking, You know, maybe I'll die, this is terrible, I'll have a heart attack. I was only about thirty-nine or so, but I was thinking this; then I thought, Well even if I do, I've got that many pages written now. They can see how it's going to come out. It was a

kind of desperate, desperate race. I don't have that kind of energy now.

INTERVIEWER

When you start writing a story do you already know what the story will be? Is it already plotted out?

MUNRO

Not altogether. Any story that's going to be any good is usually going to change. Right now I'm starting a story cold. I've been working on it every morning, and it's pretty slick. I don't really like it, but I think maybe, at some point, I'll be into it. Usually, I have a lot of acquaintance with the story before I start writing it. When I didn't have regular time to give to writing, stories would just be working in my head for so long that when I started to write I was deep into them. Now, I do that work by filling notebooks.

INTERVIEWER

You use notebooks?

MUNRO

I have stacks of notebooks that contain this terribly clumsy writing, which is just getting anything down. I often wonder, when I look at these first drafts, if there was any point in doing this at all. I'm the opposite of a writer with a quick gift, you know, someone who gets it piped in. I don't grasp it very readily at all, the "it" being whatever I'm trying to do. I often get on the wrong track and have to haul myself back.

INTERVIEWER

How do you realize you're on the wrong track?

MUNRO

I could be writing away one day and think I've done very well; I've done more pages than I usually do. Then I get up the next morning and realize I don't want to work on it anymore. When I have a terrible reluctance to go near it, when I would have to push myself to continue, I generally know that something is badly wrong. Often, in about three-quarters of what I do, I reach a point somewhere, fairly early on, when I think I'm going to abandon this story. I get myself through a day or two of bad depression, grouching around. And I think of something else I can write. It's sort of like a love affair: you're getting out of all the disappointment and misery by going out with some new man you don't really like at all, but you haven't noticed that yet. Then, I will suddenly come up with something about the story that I abandoned; I will see how to do it. But that only seems to happen after I've said, No, this isn't going to work, forget it.

INTERVIEWER

Can you always do that?

MUNRO

Sometimes I can't, and I spend the whole day in a very bad mood. That's the only time I'm really irritable. If Gerry talks to me or keeps going in and out of the room or bangs around a lot, I am on edge and enraged. And if he sings or something like that, it's terrible. I'm trying to think something through, and I'm just running into brick walls; I'm not getting through it. Generally I'll do that for a while before I'll give it up. This whole process might take up to a week, the time of trying to think it through, trying to retrieve it, then giving it up and thinking about something else, and then getting it back, usually quite unexpectedly, when I'm in the grocery store or out for a drive. I'll think, Oh well, I have to do it from the point of view of so-and-so, and I have to cut this character out, and of course these people are not married, or whatever. The big change, which is usually the radical change.

INTERVIEWER

That makes the story work?

MUNRO

I don't even know if it makes the story better. What it does is make it possible for me to continue to write. That's what I mean by saying I don't think I have this overwhelming thing that comes in and dictates to me. I only seem to get a grasp on what I want to write about with the greatest difficulty. And barely.

INTERVIEWER

Do you often change perspective or tone?

MUNRO

Oh yes, sometimes I'm uncertain, and I will do first person to third over and over again. This is one of my major problems. I often do first person to get myself into a story and then feel that for some reason it isn't working. I'm quite vulnerable to what people tell me to do at that point. My agent didn't like the first person in "The Albanian Virgin," which I think, since I wasn't perfectly sure anyway, made me change it. But then I changed it back to first again.

INTERVIEWER

How consciously, on a thematic level, do you understand what you're doing?

MUNRO

Well, it's not very conscious. I can see the ways a story could go wrong. I see the negative things more easily than the positive things. Some stories don't work as well as others, and some stories are lighter in conception than others.

INTERVIEWER

Lighter?

MUNRO

They feel lighter to me. I don't feel a big commitment to them. I've been reading Muriel Sparks' autobiography. She thinks, because she is a Christian, a Catholic, that God is the real author. And it behooves us not to try to take over that authority, not to try to write fiction that is about the meaning of life, that tries to grasp what only God can grasp. So one writes entertainments. I think this is what she says. I think I write stories sometimes that I intend as entertainments.

INTERVIEWER

Unlike your family stories, a number of your stories could be called historical. Do you ever go looking for this kind of material, or do you just wait for it to turn up?

MUNRO

I never have a problem with finding material. I wait for it to turn up, and it always turns up. It's dealing with the material I'm inundated with that poses the problem. For the historical pieces I have had to search out a lot of facts. I knew for years that I wanted to write a story about one of the Victorian lady writers, one of the authoresses of this area. Only I couldn't find quite the verse I wanted; all of it was so bad that it was ludicrous. I wanted to have it a little better than that. So I wrote it. When I was writing that story I looked in a lot of old newspapers, the kind of stuff my husband has around—he does historical research about Huron County, our part of Ontario. He's a retired geographer. I got very strong images of the town, which I call Walley. I got very strong images from newspaper clippings. Then, when I needed specific stuff, I'd sometimes get the man at the library to do it for me. To find out things about old cars or something like that, or the Presbyterian church in the 1850s. He's wonderful. He loves doing it.

For the complete interview (which is far longer than this) please go to <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1791/the-art-of-fiction-no-137-alice-munro>

A discussion about short stories

Munro is frequently cited in debates around the short story. Her supporters, among them the Man Booker International jury, who awarded her the prize in 2009, cite her work as the perfect example of a form which, in the age of the Internet and dwindling print runs, is ever-threatened. However, others, such as Christian Lorentzen in the London Review of Books, object to such grand claims. Here are some suggestions to kick off a discussion about the merit, and relevance, of the short story as a form.

- In his article, Lorentzen claims that Munro's 'critics begin by

asserting her goodness, her greatness, her majorness or her bestness, and then quickly adopt a defensive tone, instructing us in ways of seeing as virtues the many things about her writing that might be considered shortcomings'. Do you think the limited setting and scope of the stories in *Dear Life* are shortcomings, or achievements in themselves?

- Traditionally, short stories appeared in magazine such as the *New Yorker*, sandwiched between a long harrowing article on global conflict and an interview with a politician. Lorentzen argues that by putting all the stories together in one volume, rather than respecting their traditional 'place', they lose their effectiveness and become difficult to read. Do you agree? Would you rather have read the stories in *Dear Life* one at a time, completely separate from one another? How do you think this would have changed your reading experience?

- Leading on from this, do you think that this traditional place for short stories still exists today, or has the Internet changed this entirely? And, if you hadn't read short stories before, has Munro made you want to read more of them? If so, why?

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n11/christian-lorentzen/poor-rose>

Further resources

Alice Munro's earliest published story can be found in issue 12 of *Her Majesty*, a Paris-based literary magazine.

<http://www.heroyalmajesty.ca/issue-12/>

Tributes from A.S. Byatt, Colm Toibin, Margaret Atwood, and many more, to mark Munro's Nobel Prize

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/11/alice-munro-byatt-enright-toibin>

Further reading

Other masters of the short story include Anton Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Helen Simpson and Tessa Hadley.