

2006 Medal Day

A record crowd gathered to watch writer Alice Munro receive the Edward MacDowell Medal in Literature on Sunday, August 13th. Approximately 1,500 visitors took in the crisp air, clear skies, and exciting work in the open studios of our artists-in-residence, not to mention the thought provoking words delivered by the speakers and Alice Munro. And all were treated to the first glimpse of the MacDowell Centennial, fully described in the preceding pages of this issue.

We invite you to share, or relive, the Medal Day experience in these pages by reading the illuminating talk about Alice Munro's work given by her longtime friend and literary agent, Virginia Barber. You'll also want to be sure to read what the Medalist herself said, as even her very short experience at the Colony provided immediate and uncanny inspiration. Finally, mark your calendars now for a very special Medal Day next year under the (Centennial) tent!



Virginia "Ginger" Barber (left) and Alice Munro.

Virginia Barber

What a pleasure to be here. One of the first people who befriended me when I became a literary agent was Phoebe Larmore, Margaret Atwood's agent. Knowing how much I admired Alice Munro's writing—and also knowing that Alice Munro had no agent—Phoebe said I had to write her. This was a new concept, that you *wrote* somebody like this, but I finally screwed up my courage in 1976 and sent a letter to Alice Munro. Alice replied, thanking me for my offer, but saying that she didn't believe she needed an agent. Looking at the amount and quality of her work that had already been published, she might well have thought so, that she didn't need any help. When Alice was 18 years old she published her first story, "The Dimensions of a Shadow." Shortly afterwards, Robert Weaver began to read her stories on the CBC radio, and publish them in *The Tamarack Review*. Other supporters also

discovered Alice, even though she had written and published only a few stories. She was busy at home in Vancouver, as a wife and a mother. She was also busy learning her craft, trying to write at night when the children were in bed.

In 1960, when a new editor took over the small magazine, the little magazine *The Montrealer*, he walked in and found an enormous pile of slush—this is the gracious term the business uses for unsolicited manuscripts. This was a pile of short stories that daunted him, but diligently he read them—every one—and he rejected every one except "Dance of the Happy Shades." He was eager to publish this story, but there was no author's name, no date, no address. So he started asking around his Canadian contacts if anyone could identify the author. No one could. He published letters in magazines—both in Canada and the United States—and eventually a poet in Vancouver saw the letter and realized she'd heard that story read on the

CBC, and she got in touch with Alice Munro. When *The Montrealer* bought the story, Alice took the poet to lunch and they became friends. This tale is recounted in Robert Thacker's biography of Alice Munro, a book recently published, and one I recommend to you.

Alice's first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, was published in 1968; *Lives of Girls and Women* appeared in 1971; *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* appeared in 1974. These were the extraordinary books that awed me and compelled me to write Alice again, this time sending along a wonderful first novel called *The Autobiography of My Mother* by a writer I represented, **Rosellen Brown**. It gives me a lot of pleasure to say Rosellen Brown is here with us today. Alice read Rosellen's book, and replied that an agent who represented writing like that was somebody she wanted to work with.

Once I had Alice's permission to represent her, I asked her to send me some unpublished stories. Lisel Eisenheimer at *McCall's* magazine had published two stories by Alice Munro in 1973, but nothing had appeared either before that or after, and I was eager to gain her a bigger audience in the United States. Alice's stories eventually arrived in my office—with no name and no date. As soon as I had read these stories another agent and I invited the young *New Yorker* editor Charles McGrath (known as "Chip") to lunch. Chip said later that he knew I wanted something, but he didn't know what. The "what" I wanted was to make certain that he read these stories by Alice Munro

I was going to hand him, and didn't put them on the slush pile. She had been sending stories to *The New Yorker* but getting rejections.

Chip did read them, and *The New Yorker* began its now long and admirable relationship with Alice Munro by publishing both "Royal Beatings" and "The Beggar Maid" in 1977. I continued to submit the stories to a wide array of magazines, and in 1977 another story appeared, this time through Ann Mulligan Smith at *Redbook*. In 1978 *Viva* magazine (now defunct) published two stories by Alice, and *Redbook*, *The New Yorker*, *Ms.*, and *Ploughshares* published one each. *The New Yorker* quickly offered us a first-read contract for Alice, and thereafter we had fewer stories free to offer elsewhere. But when we did we got them published in wonderful magazines such as Ben Sonnenberg's *Grand Street*, and through Michael Curtis at *The Atlantic Monthly*. Also in 1978, we drew a contract with Doug Gibson, then at MacMillan and now with his own imprint at McClelland and Stewart in Canada, for Alice's fourth book, and with Ann Close at Alfred A. Knopf. The book was published in the United States as *The Beggar Maid*, and these two editors—Doug and Ann—have been with Alice ever since.

As many of you know, Alice's stories take place in a fictionalized Wingham, the town in Huron County where she grew up. Others are set in Vancouver, where she lived when she was married to Jim Munro, and where she still has an apartment. But the Ontario settings were most in her mind's eye at this time, and these early stories have much description of the landscape and of small-town life. From her stories, we know this life well.

"Who do you think you are?" and "What do you want to know for?" are well-known phrases that are used as titles of Alice's stories. These phrases connote themes that often appear in her stories, and they carry personal meaning for this author. Writers weren't particularly admired in the Huron County of this time. To be a writer was to put on airs, to act as if you were better than others, to be too nosy about people's lives and behavior. Besides, weren't writers mostly doing all of this just to avoid real work? Or, if you wanted to study something or ask questions about a place or an event or a person, the response was likely to be: "What do you want to know for?" The concept of acquiring knowledge for its own sake, with no immediate practical purpose, seemed suspect and wasn't encouraged after you left school. But instead of abiding by the mores of her time and place, Alice made stories that exist as affirmations drawn from denials of those mores. There's nothing modest, or shy, or weak, or sweet, about these stories—they can bite.

If you want to follow a character whose casual indifference to her own emotional brutality will shock you, just look at Et in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You." Perhaps the phrase "something I've been meaning to tell you" was once innocuous, suggesting only that the speaker was forgetful, but it isn't so simply used in this story. As the tale progresses, the phrase moves from preceding a statement of mild and amusing insult to being preface to a poisonous power. It is Et, the older sister of Char (and look how their



Books by Alice Munro displayed at Medal Day.

names have been cut down to size: Et and Char) who never misses finding a flaw in somebody, or discerning a weakness. Her gift for casually firing off zingers with the innocence of a baby has given her both a fond reputation as the town's local terror and a comforting sense of her own power. Et has grown up to be an old maid and a seamstress, content to live the constricted life of this town, content not to stand out, other than for her zingers, not to ask for grander adventures. It is Et who embodies the town's values and mores; Char is smothered by them.

The course of the story moves down darker paths, and when Et spontaneously invents a fiction and presents it as truth, its cruelty may well have killed her sister. Was Char's death a suicide or a heart attack? We can't say, yet this story, told in the third person but through Et's eyes, still manages to reveal Et's unacknowledged jealousy and resentment of Char. Through that ill will alone, she's implicated in her sister's demise. Et eventually moves in with Char's husband, something she always wanted. She's comfortable with him and with her life, but also comfortable in knowing that one day she might tell Arthur the truth about Char's real love life—real, if long ago. We understand that truth could destroy Arthur, although Et never labels her knowledge as potentially destructive. Instead, as she looks at the picture of Char still on Arthur's dresser after all these years, she thinks he shouldn't die without knowing. As Alice writes, "He shouldn't be allowed." He shouldn't be allowed, I think it means, his innocent ignorance or his happiness and his memories of Char, or his unaltered love for her. And so, it's often on the tip of Et's tongue to say, "There's something I've been meaning to tell you."

Although this story may begin with hints of Eudora Welty, especially in our amusement at Et's early sallies, it ends more in the stonier realms of Flannery O'Connor. But it is, of course, very much Alice Munro: her countryside, her people, her themes. We find spirits kindred to Et and Char in other stories, and most particularly in "The Beggar Maid" with Flo and Rose—surely two of her most outstanding characters, creations. We should note that whatever criticisms Alice's fiction levels at her country's values, her own attachment to these places and people remains and continues to inspire her.

"Material" deals with another of Alice's key themes: the issue of the relationship between a writer's work and his real life. The female, first-person narrator had 20 years ago been married to Hugo, a writer whose reputation has slowly grown. During their marriage, Hugo wrote and his wife did all the rest: cooking, cleaning, caring for their daughter, maintaining a quiet place for Hugo's work. She also tried to be kind in attending to Dotty, an unhappy woman who lives in the basement of the house. In thinking of her life with Hugo, she remembers a year when the rainy season set in and the old basement water pump began to run, continuously thumping, wrecking Hugo's sleep and his writing. One day Hugo shuts off the pump, causing a flood in Dotty's apartment, ruining most of her belongings. But he's too busy to think about it, much less to accept any responsibility.

Now, 20 years later, here in her hands is a story by Hugo. She begins to read and realizes it's about Dotty. To her shock, it's a good story. This is a quote: "How honest this is, and how lovely, I had to say as I read,



Picnickers on the lawn at Medal Day.

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Special thanks to Alfred A. Knopf Publishers and Vintage Books.



Alice Munro

Thank you so very much. I guess you can see how much I didn't need Ginger! I'd forgotten all that stuff about not signing the stories, but she's perfectly right — that's why I didn't do it, and I still have trouble signing things. I think it's because, as she said, I'm never quite satisfied, and somehow I'm always retreating a little bit because I think I can do more next time. The thing about stopping writing — I say it with perfect honesty, I believe it. I believe that there's such a thing as a normal life, and that I am going to find it someday.

When you get to be 75 I think you should be looking for this normal life, and that is what I had thought I was going to do. And so I got busy this summer reading books for the Giller Prize, which is a very important literary prize in Canada. I even brought a book with me, and I read it while I was here. This morning after breakfast I went upstairs to read some more of this book, and such is the effect of this place that I lay on the bed reading, and I got an idea. It's true, this is absolutely true — it just sort of came in on the air through the window. I got an idea for a story that I wanted to write, and I neglected my duty. I just lay there and thought about the story.

So I can see what happens to people here, and I do think it is remarkable. I want to thank you for that, and I want to thank you so much for this Medal, and I want to thank so many people who've been helpful to me. Ginger mentioned some of them — Ginger herself is a very important one — but Robert Weaver, and Doug Gibson in Canada, and my editor Ann Close, and my editors at *The New Yorker* — Chuck McGrath, Dan Menaker, Alice Quinn, and Deborah Treisman — all of whom are very important in my writing life. And my two husbands, who have both been men who believed that a woman doing really serious work, not just amusing herself, was possible. In my generation those men were not that easy to find, and the fact that I nabbed two of them is certainly lucky. So, thank you very much. Thank you to all the people here who work so hard at The MacDowell Colony. I've had a wonderful time, and I wish I could stay. Thank you.

there is Dotty, lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make. It is an act of magic; there is no getting around it. It is an act, you might say, of a special, unsparing, unsentimental love, a fine and lucky benevolence." (What a passage; what a writer!) She decides to write Hugo to acknowledge his achievement. "I found a pen and got the paper in front of me to write my letter and my hand jumped. I began to write short, jabbing sentences that I had never planned. "This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn't. You are mistaken, Hugo." For the wife there's something missing: It's that pump — the beating heart of the home — which Hugo has denied.

The questions remain for Alice. First is the practical reality. How does a woman who is a wife, a mother, and a housekeeper, find *time* to write? Even if she had

a husband, as Alice did, who consistently supported her writing, solving that practical matter became as difficult as the other question: What is the relationship between a realistic writer and his material? Alice Munro has struggled with these issues, and has written many times in various guises about the effort to capture reality honorably and honestly. Partly she means without artifice or literary tricks, but she also means that one must respect what she is using. Alice will tell you she always begins a story from something in reality, even if it is only an image. The kernel of the real remains in the story, and even if all else is pure fiction it must become real — it must have that beating heart of lived life.

Alice's stories are written in her particular language. Overwriting, tricky writing, noisy writing that calls attention to itself — none appears in her stories. Instead,

a reader finds the precisely selected word, compelling rhythms, and when called for, the evocation of beauty or a powerful emotion. The stories often begin with fairly plain language in a brisk pace. Here are some opening sentences, four, selected at random: "At the end of the summer, Lydia took a boat to an island off the southern coast of New Brunswick, where she was going to stay overnight." "When I was 14, I got a job in the turkey barn for the Christmas season." "I used to dream about my mother, and though the details in the dream varied the surprise in it was always the same." "Years ago, before the trains stopped running on so many of the branch lines, a woman with a high, freckled forehead and a frizz of reddish hair came into the railway station and inquired about shipping furniture."

Then I opened *Selected Stories* at random and my eye fell in the middle of a paragraph: "Lawrence wore a carefully good-natured expression, but he looked as if something hard and heavy had settled inside him — a load of self-esteem that weighed him down instead of buoying him up." That's one of her witty, psychological insights. Thinking very highly of yourself can be a burden; it has to be justified every day. So, he has to get up and assemble this expression every day. With simple opening sentences, we enter stories that are never simple; they become psychologically complex, precisely detailed, economically and rhythmically well managed — stories that often carry a swift, powerful, emotional charge.

One that got me occurs in the stories about Juliet. There are three of them, and *The New Yorker* published them all together in one issue — quite a tribute. They're now collected in *Runaway*. You may remember that in the first story, Juliet is a risk-taking, confident young woman setting off on a vacation. But she's hoping to find a man she met on a train sometime previously (and she does). In the second story she's a mother, living with her lover but now visiting her own parents. She still perceives herself as something of a hippie — freer, cleverer, more sophisticated than her mother. Sarah, the mother, has an incurable heart disease, but Juliet doesn't spare her. She displays her assumed superiority by insulting her mother's friend, the minister (she doesn't believe there is a God, she says). She also tells one and all, even if they haven't asked, that she isn't married but lives with her child's father and that she's very happy.

We've seen earlier in the story how much Sarah still loves her, and how much they used to share. Bedridden and weak, Sarah registers her daughter's irritation, and she bursts out: "When it gets really bad for me, when it gets so bad I . . . You know what I think then? I think all right. I think, soon . . . soon, I'll see Juliet." But Juliet doesn't reach across the gap; she says nothing. She simply goes on living, and replays the old patterns of mothers and daughters, who can become the most important people in the world to one another until, at a certain age, the daughter must separate. If you're lucky, as either a daughter or a mother, a new relationship will be formed through the years. That doesn't happen for Juliet.

Relationships among people — parents and children, girls and women, friends, lovers, husbands and wives

—all of whom live in particular places with particular social rules and regulations . . . this is much of the stuff of Alice’s work. And to me, in her hands, the stuff of a magical alchemy.

I’ve been blessed to travel with Alice Munro such a long way. We’ve become friends who understand one another’s ways. For example, I’ve learned why Alice used to send out unsigned stories: She’s rarely satisfied with her work. She’s not quite ready to claim it yet. It needs to be a little bit better. She makes hard demands on herself. Once she called me and said, “I’m giving a dinner party tonight, and I’m more nervous about that than I am about these three stories I’m working on. So I threw them in the mail to you today.” Ever after, if I’ve gone too long without a batch of stories, I call Alice and say, “Alice, it’s time to give another dinner party.”

I’ve also learned that nearly every time Alice completes a book she opines that it will be her last. She’s used up all of her material; she has nothing to say. After the publication of *Runaway* in 2004, she said the same sort of thing, and this time I suggested she write a nonfiction book about her Laidlaw ancestors —material she’s been interested in since we met. But in spite of the extraordinary number of letters, diaries, journals, and printed material reaching back to the 1700s in Scotland, nonfiction wasn’t satisfying. How could she fill the historical gaps? But even more, what did they look like? What did they say to one another? What were they feeling? So, we quickly agreed: Turn it into stories. And that material is the first hundred or so pages in her new book, *The View from Castle Rock*, which will be out in November.

Also included in this volume are some stories she had withheld from collections as being somewhat different from her usual fiction. As Alice writes in the foreword to this volume: “You could say that such stories pay more attention to the truth of a life than fiction usually does, but not enough to swear on.” We look forward to the November publication of this new book, her 11th volume. Just recently there was a brouhaha in Canada because a reporter heard Alice Munro say that *The View from Castle Rock* would be her last book. I think some of the headlines read: “Munro Quits Writing.” But this time we have an excellent riposte for Alice: We already have some new stories, which *The New Yorker* is visibly publishing. And so I hope in a year or two reviewers will have a 12th volume to alert all us readers to. These reviewers have consistently compared Alice Munro to other great writers. Some point to similarities with Eudora Welty, and others to Willa Cather. In her ability to capture the insides of romance and marriage, she’s been compared to Henry James. Some say her stories bring characters in a region as powerfully alive as James Joyce’s Dublin or William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, and her women stand equal to John Updike’s men. She’s our Chekhov, she’s our Flaubert. Yes, she’s all of this, but most and best of all she’s our Alice Munro.



Studio Tours



An important part of every Medal Day comes when the public is invited to wander through the studios and interact with artists-in-residence. These photos represent just some of what can be observed among the 32 studios where great art first emerges.