Reading and Interviewing of Alice Munro

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Abstract This chapter takes stock of various responses to Alice Munro and her fiction in North America and Europe, in popular culture and social media, among literary critics and journalists. It addresses two ways of approaching Munro: by reading her fiction and by interviewing (or rather reading interviews with) the author. Mirosława Buchholtz explains the rationale of the whole project and outlines its structure. She present the volume as an effort to counteract hasty judgmental attitudes that dominate in short popular publications and to counterbalance them with academic (and yet highly readable) accounts of three kinds of activity at the interface of scholarly research: adaptation, editing, and teaching.

Nobel-Prize Laureates have often used the occasion of grand formal lecture at the gala in Stockholm to proclaim their literary manifestos. William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Saul Bellow, or Toni Morrison come to mind immediately as examples. Alice Munro's absence at the ceremony and the missing lecture were at that time blamed on her physical frailty. However, her admirers received something else instead, a video interview, which from its place on the Swedish Academy's website could be viewed by audiences all over the world at a time and in circumstances convenient to them. One might argue that what seems to be a mere substitute for a lecture is in fact much better suited to Munro's literary art than a formal ex cathedra speech. Although good interviews usually thrive on information and generation gaps, as well as on cultural, social, political, and perhaps many other kinds of difference, and although power relations in an interview are almost by definition skewed, the form of interview relies on the democratic assumption of approachability, to at least create such an illusion. In fact, an average reader is as likely to converse with Alice Munro as s/he is to shake hands with a British monarch. And yet, in the Nobel-Prize interview a representative of an average reader sits face to face with the famous and celebrated author and asks questions to which the author responds politely and, as it seems at least, with her heart on her sleeve, especially when she talks about her mother. This is a particularly moving moment and the one

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when the author's hands tell a story as evocative and desperate as her tongue. Like Munro's fiction, the interview is dialogic and antiauthoritarian but, also like her fiction, it opens the floor, rather than settling questions.

1 The Art of Interview

The illusion of sitting face to face with Alice Munro is almost perfect. At no point does the viewer see her interlocutor, though the shadow of his splayed fingers, sometimes armed with a pen, appears several times, evoking a horror movie. Most of the time we can see the author in a wicker chair and against the backdrop of bookshelves and a window with the view of her front yard (the front of a parked blue car is also immortalized in the vignette, people and cars are seen passing by). Occasionally, in short video films Alice Munro is surrounded by other people, as for example, during a walk in Ontario, or on a visit to Munro's bookstore in Victoria, BC, or else she is presented in older photographs which illustrate her memories. A male voice with a distinguishable, but by no means obtrusive, foreign accent asks questions off the screen, skipping from one topic to another, though giving special attention to two issues: the social background and the female perspective.

He begins by encouraging childhood memories, and the author recalls her first exposure to "The Little Mermaid," her effort to adapt the story to suit both her emotional needs and her sense of justice as they were at that time. She tells him (and the viewers) how she used to make up stories during her long walk to school. Asked about her woman's perspective, Munro offers a balanced response on the advantages and disadvantages of being a girl. Although men were doing important work as she was growing up, women had the freedom to read and tell stories. The interviewer does not seem to have an eye or ear for nuance, and chooses to pigeonhole Munro not only as a female voice, but also as a specialist in small-town Canadian life. Several other questions concern the technicalities of writing: getting started, handling a writing crisis, experiencing self-doubt, throwing stories away, or reworking them. The interviewer also wants to know what is the effect of growing older on her manner of writing and if Munro would have become an entirely different writer had she completed her university degree. Certain questions keep reverting, reformulated and yet always exhibiting somewhat childlike bluntness. For example,

> *Were you an early feminist?*
> I never knew about the word "feminism", but of course I was a feminist, because I actually grew up in a part of Canada where women could write more easily than men. The big, important writers would be men, but knowing that a woman wrote stories was probably less to her discredit than if a man wrote stories. Because it was not a man's occupation. Well, that was very much in my youth, it's not that way at all now.
> […]
> *And you were brought up in a working class home?*

> Yes.
> *And that's where your stories start as well?*
> Yes. I didn't realize it was a working class home, I just looked at where I was and wrote about it.
> […]
> *You seem to have a very simple view on things?*
> Do I? Well, yes. (Munro & Åsberg, 2013)

The brevity of some responses is indeed quite telling, and so also is Munro's body language—her smile, her laughter, and little gestures. She is nothing else but charming, even though the viewer can sense at times a certain irritated amusement of someone who has seen strange behaviour and knows how to react. It is no wonder that referring to the interview in a short essay for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Müller (2013) criticizes the interviewer and praises the Laureate. He observes the modest background of her apartment ("One can hardly say she lives in luxury," he writes), notes the little foundational myth narrated at the beginning of the interview (the story of how little Alice became an author while reformulating Hans Christian Andersen's tale), and praises Munro's youthful charm, which helps her make the best of the silly questions she receives during the interview. The form of interview in itself creates the atmosphere of spontaneity and intimacy, as Müller observes, but the gap between the interviewer and the interviewee is enormous. One can add that the man who sits in front of Munro is perhaps not intentionally disrespectful, but hasty and shallow, in other words, exhibiting the qualities that mark our time. Müller takes exception in particular to the obsessive reduction of Munro to the sphere of women's writing, even though, as she patiently explains, she did not even know the word "feminism" at the outset of her writing life and she rejoices at audiences that are not segregated according to their gender identity. Very much like the interviewer, though, Müller takes Munro's working-class status for granted.

It may be sheer coincidence that some, especially female, commentators on Alice Munro's fiction have also chosen the form of interview or—more generally speaking—dialogue. This is true about Sulej and Chutnik (2014), who exchange their observations in the Polish weekly *Wysokie obcasy* [High Heels] and Doris Kleinau-Metzler, who interviews the Berlin author Judith Hermann in the October 2013 issue of *a tempo*. Chutnik is a feminist writer and activist, whereas Hermann made a name for herself as the author of short stories. Chutnik does not play the role of an interviewed author in her exchange with Sulej, whereas the roles are distributed more traditionally and hierarchically in the case of the German duo.

With the youthful joy of reinventing the wheel, Karolina Sulej volunteers the definition of Munro's writing as "slow literature," and thus an analogy to slow food, slow life etc., but in English "slow" may also suggest slow-witted, which is not true about Munro's fiction and would do the author injustice. Sulej means, quite innocently and quite apart from the challenge of intercultural communication, the kind of literature that requires the reader to slow down, look closer, admire the detail, open up for the moment of pleasure. In other words, it is not literature in itself that is slow, but the way of reading. She sees Munro as an antidote to all literary fashions and her fiction as a textbook to empathy, which only reveals

Sulej's own needs as a reader. Munro's stories hurt, she argues, but they also sensitize the reader to reality. Chutnik does not seem to agree with the simplistic idea of slowness, though she makes no explicit statement to this effect. She does not see in Munro's fiction a nostalgia for some simple, neatly organized world. Instead Chutnik notices the germ of anxiety in each of Munro's characters. She describes that germ as vague and somewhat repulsive. Although the two conversationalists seem to talk at cross purposes, they agree that Munro's books are not meant to be read at one sitting, or—metaphorically speaking—devoured with rapacious eagerness. Too much of her fiction at one gulp might be, as they conclude, nauseating.

Judith Hermann's responses to Doris Kleinau-Metzler's questions—questions which are short and self-effacing at first and then longer and more personal—are less definitive than Sulej's or Chutnik's. In a self-searching manner, Hermann describes the evolution of her understanding of Munro's fiction at different stages of her own life. She tells a heart-rending story of her daily struggle to pick the right words and combine them in a right way, a struggle coupled with diminishing self-confidence. She gives examples of Munro's stories which moved her—usually because of some immediate relevance to her own life. To her, the word "instead" is crucial in the way Munro narrates human lives. Although apparently spelling disappointment, the substitute for something expected or desired brings consolation. She does not refer to the interview, but she might as well quote it as an example.

Despite the sincerity of responses, neither Munro nor the women commenting on her fiction offer a key or a password, or a definitive statement that can help us understand anything beyond their own current state of mind. There is no other way to Munro's fiction than reading and rereading it, following perhaps in the footsteps of earlier readers, but also daring to step aside, stop, and stray.

2 The Art of Reading

Just hours before "a lavish ceremony in Stockholm," at which Munro's daughter Jenny was to collect the award on the author's behalf, *The Guardian* hastened to report that at 82, Munro was "too frail to fly," and instead of a formal lecture, gave a 30-minute video interview, in which she "shared her joy at receiving the $1.3 m (£790,000) prize, and thoughts on being the 13th woman to win it" (Bury, 2013). The obsession with figures is evident in the introduction to the short *Guardian* article. The journalist clearly expects that the readers would like to know, first, how old the winner is, and second, what is the exact amount she won (in two currencies). She throws in some Nobel-Prize statistics and information about the running time of the interview for good measure. What then follows is a collage of quotes from the interview, focusing in particular on the Laureate's rural and female experience.

It may have been such a reductive summary that led a certain author—once-popular, urban through and through, and male to the point of being a mysoginist—to tweet that Munro was "so completely overrated." When other twitterati ridiculed him in response, the man who at 51 still wanted to live up to his

self-image as a cynical city brat, admitted to feeling like he had "beaten up Santa Claus." Someone asked Alice Munro for comment about being overrated, quoting the name of the critic. She asked "Who?" in response, implying apparently that she had never heard and/or could not care less. Social media have indeed changed the forms of communication beyond recognition in terms of speed and range, but—like traditional journalism—they also rely on succinct message and iconic presentation, again reducing people to stereotypical figures that come in pairs, often binary oppositions, such as: hick versus urbanite, Santa Claus versus Ebenezer Scrooge, housewife versus professional author.

There is a way though to wrench oneself free from the grip of hasty judgment. The traditional scholarship offers a healthy antidote in its reliance on the habit of careful study and of setting aside as far as possible one's inescapably located knowledge. The present study is a shared effort to understand Alice Munro's fiction, not in its entirety (an impossible feat), but rather by piecing together bits and pieces to come closer to the recognition of why and how she appeals to readers in various parts of the world. Some contributors seek to answer the question of how Alice Munro's fiction has been shaped by film adaptations and editorial procedures. Finally, a practical question is addressed of how her fiction has been or may be taught. The volume is accordingly divided into three parts that mirror the tripartite structure of the title: Understanding, adapting, and teaching.

In Part I entitled "Understanding" four scholars approach Alice Munro's fiction from a variety of perspectives to shed light on selected stories, but always with the intention to see also and as far as possible the bigger picture. **Dorota Filipczak** assumes, after Coral A. Howells, that "gender awareness" is crucial to Alice Munro's writings. She explores in her article the way in which gender and space are managed in "The Albanian Virgin" and argues that by examining a rigid division into male and female worlds in the traditional Albanian society, Munro brings to light the only exception that violates sexual segregation: the construction of a sworn virgin. Unsexed as a result of her own decision, approved by the patriarchal world, the sworn virgin who consorts with men is looked at in the article from the perspective of Judith Butler's critique of gender. Filipczak addresses the question of whether the construction confirms Butler's stance or undoes her "undoing" of gender. According to Filipczak, Munro is acutely aware of prohibitions and taboos that beset women in her own country, and creates a Canadian character who is then albanized to be later reclaimed and canadianized anew. The character's story is mediated to the reader due to the framing provided by the narrator, a bookshop owner preoccupied with Mary Shelley, whose take on gender and space is both reflected and subverted in the choices of Munrovian women.

Jędrzej Burszta focuses on the narrative techniques and attempts to pinpoint the uniqueness of her short stories. He examines the ways in which Alice Munro constructs the identity of her characters, which he sees as a process of weaving together the past and the present. Throughout the years, he claims, Munro has perfected her own individual brand of the short story, which led some scholars to the conclusion that she singlehandedly created a new quasi-genre, the so-called "Munro-type" short story (which since has influenced other writers). In his essay

Burszta seeks to connect the author's specific style of writing (e.g. literary influences of American literary regionalism, especially the Southern group and Flannery O'Connor), the narrative construction of her pieces, with certain themes interlocking with the general concept of "identity," in order to prove Alice Munro's originality and importance in the contemporary literature.

Magdalena Ładuniuk offers her reading of "Amundsen" as a key to the understanding of other stories by Alice Munro. She begins by arguing that the setting of "Amundsen" (included in *Dear Life*) comes as a surprise in the context of other Munrovian stories. The town of Amundsen is not only literally covered with snow and unpleasantly cold, but it also has a name that rings many bells: that of the legendary Arctic explorer. Although Munro's Amundsen is located only about 200 km away from Toronto, the connection she establishes between this small town and the Arctic is not accidental. Ładuniuk reflects on Munro's "Amundsen" as the story employing the metaphor of the Arctic exploration to comment on human relations, a technique she sees as typically Munrovian. She presents protagonists who undertake important missions, yet at some point become unable to continue or are forced to retreat. Unlike the eponymous Roald Amundsen, she argues, Munro's characters tend to be unfulfilled explorers who repeatedly fail to accomplish their life objectives.

Tomasz Sikora reads a selection of stories from *The Progress of Love* (1986) building the general interpretative framework around a literary (and, perhaps, epistemological) convention that he chooses to call Gothic Realism. The first part of the essay is a discussion of the proposed term (as applied to the work of Munro), mostly in connection to the notion of ambivalence, such as that described by Freud in his famous essay *The Uncanny*, i.e. the ambivalent relationship between what is "(like) home" and what is alien or "unlike home." In particular stories, Sikora finds many different kinds of ambivalence, which leads him to the conclusion that in the Canadian writer's work no positivity is ever pure and free of a "drop" of negativity. At the same time, however, "Munro's writing seems to offer a sense of astonishment over the fact that despite nothingness—there is the richness of the empirical world; despite fate—there is the openness of everything that happens; despite negativity—there is a positive bond (let us call it love) which somehow keeps people together."

Part II entitled "Adapting" consists of three essays on film adaptation and one essay on editing. **Ewa Bodal and Nelly Strehlau** study the 2013 adaptation of "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage." They begin with the observation that despite the critical acclaim and popularity Alice Munro's works have been enjoying for decades, the number of television and film adaptations of her stories has been surprisingly scarce. Their main aim is to explore the transition from the pages of Alice Munro's short story entitled "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" (first published in 2001 in the collection of the same title) to its 2013 film adaptation *Hateship Loveship*, directed by Liza Johnson. To that end, they juxtapose the short story and the film, analyzing the changes within the plot, the setting and the depiction of the characters from the original to its adaptation.

Emilia Leszczyńska focuses on the 1994 television adaptation of *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), offering a careful reading of selected scenes and characters. She is particularly interested in the circumstances that help the protagonist develop as a writer. The narrative of Del Jordan emerges in Leszczyńska's comparative reading of the book and the film as a *Künstlerroman* which culminates in the epiphany that writing amounts to living. **Paula Suchorska** also studies the adaptation of *Lives of Girls and Women* (1994), but she chooses as a point of reference Agnieszka Holland's *Washington Square* (1997) based on Henry James's novel of the same title. She explores the development of the two female protagonists, Catherine Sloper and Del Jordan, from weak and innocent girls to independent women. In her nuanced reading, Suchorska points out both similarities and differences between the protagonists, their role models and opponents.

The aim of **Grzegorz Koneczniak**'s article is to discuss Alice Munro's literary activity within selected aspects of editorial and textual studies explored by Konrad Górski (1895–1990) in his major book entitled *Tekstologia i edytorstwo dzieł literackich* [Textual and Editing Studies into Literary Works]. Górski's study addresses textual and editorial terms, research methodologies, and field-specific descriptions predominantly with reference to Polish literary heritage. Koneczniak argues that the manner in which the Canadian short-story writer has cooperated with her editors and literary agents gives contemporary validity to Górski's editorial and textual theories initially developed in 1956.

The challenge of teaching Alice Munro's fiction is the focus of attention in Part III of the present book, which consists of essays and interviews approaching the subject from a variety of perspectives. **Héliane Ventura**, whose contribution to Alice Munro studies has been immense, explores a theoretical perspective whose applicability to teaching literature is undeniable. The relational method which she employs in her reading of selected stories—Munro's earliest and latest narratives—allows her to prove that rather than merely opening the door to rural Ontario, Munro's fiction throws wide open the gates of world literature, inviting comparison with the works of William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, or James Agee. **David Staines**, the editor of the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro* (2016) shares his experience of teaching Canadian literature first in the United States and then in Canada, even though, as he observes, he has never taken a course in Canadian literature himself. The field developed and began to flourish relatively recently thanks to scholars such as Staines.

These two contributions are followed by four interviews. The questions I pose may sound similar or the same, but the answers are not, which shows how different the ways of reading and interpreting of Munro's fiction may be. In one case, I juxtapose the interviews with two scholars from different generations and different parts of the world. **Keiko Beppu** has made a name for herself in Japan and outside as a literature scholar and successful translator of Anglophone books, including fiction and non-fiction by Henry James. **Anca-Raluca Radu** had the benefit of studying Canadian fiction in Germany before becoming a university teacher herself. In the other case I place together two interviews with very experienced Polish scholars both of whom are first and foremost experts in American literature:

Agnieszka Salska and **Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich**. Their responses not only provide information about their own experience, but also contain many helpful ideas for current and future teachers of literature.

In the article following the interviews, **Grzegorz Koneczniak** analyzes and interprets empirically collected data on essays and theses, written by students at major Polish universities, in order to determine the presence of Alice Munro in the subjects explored in diploma projects at the BA, MA, and PhD levels. Similar to Professor Ronnie D. Carter's enormous archive research into theses on English studies in Poland, Koneczniak extracts—from the online catalogues of Polish universities—data on diploma projects on Munro's life and works. The scope of his research also includes essays and theses published on the website of the Polish Association for Canadian Studies.

Finally, **Mirosława Buchholtz** addresses the question of whether Munro's fiction teaches a "lesson" or conveys a "message." Analyzing and comparing two of Munro's stories: "The Office" and "To Reach Japan" and using Henry James's "The Lesson of the Master" as a point of reference, Buchholtz points to authorship, or agency in general, as a crucial issue in Munro's fiction (and life) and hence an important, though by no means straightforward, lesson for her readers.

There have been and will no doubt come many more books on Alice Munro. Recent publications include, for example, a volume which proves that students can not only enjoy reading Alice Munro's fiction but also write publishable essays on it. Eva-Sabine Zehelein, the editor of *For (Dear) Life: Close Readings of Alice Munro's Ultimate Fiction* (2014) encouraged fourteen students who participated in her seminar on *Dear Life* in the winter term 2013/2014 to write essays on the stories included in Munro's la(te)st volume. The result (available also at least in part as a Google Book) will certainly prove helpful in further teaching beyond its original setting at the University of Regensburg. The volume edited by Zehelein is a commendable effort especially as it hinges on close reading, which is where all serious scholarship should begin. Further insights are to be expected from the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*.

Our book is addressed to teachers and students who have read or intend to read Alice Munro's fiction, would like to compare notes with other readers, and find new ways of approaching one of the most fascinating authors of our time, who in her quiet unassuming way keeps reading and interviewing us in her fiction.

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