An interview with Alice Munro

Catherine Ross

The following interview with Alice Munro took place on October 12, 1988, at her home in Clinton, Ontario. For this CCL *issue on Memory Work and the Old-time Reader, we explored Alice Munro's recollections of her own childhood reading. Growing up in a community where reading was considered a suspect if not shameful activity, Munro was a secret addict, reading and re-reading certain favorite books in a desire for absolute possession. The interview investigates the links between reading and writing as Munro talks about the connections between rereading, making up imitative stories, and finally finding an authentic voice and personal vision.*

Ross: I'm interested in hearing about your reading, starting right at the beginning when you were very young.

Munro: I remember reading stuff in the Book of Knowledge. These books have some glaring faults--they're quite racist--and I would never give them to children now to read. But I loved them. There was something in these books called "Little Lessons in French" that I was drawn to because of the pictures of children and their nursemaid. There would be a line of French, a line of literal translation, and a line of idiomatic English. What I read first was the literal translation.

Ross: That's interesting.

Munro: Then *Mary, John and Peter* was my first reader. I learned that off by heart before I went to school. My mother bought me a copy, thinking she'd give me a head start with reading, as a lot of good middle-class parents do. I thought probably it would be too difficult to learn to actually read, but I could memorize the text according to the pictures. And I did this, and went to school, thinking that I could fool everybody into thinking that I could read. Somehow after a while I was really reading. I can't remember it being traumatic at all.

Then, I remember the first real *book* I read was the summer I turned eight. I had had my tonsils out and had to stay in the house in the summer. I picked up a book from the bookcase and it was Charles Dickens's *Child's History of England*. I wrote an article about this in the *Montrealer* years ago. I started to read it in the middle, which is still the way I start books. I just opened it and began to read. I didn't know that it was a history book. I didn't know anything about history, and I didn't know how to pronounce names properly. I began to read about trouble in Eerie-land, which of course was Ireland, and about the campaigns in Ireland during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. I read it like a fairy tale. And then I read all about Mary Queen of Scots. Do you

remember Thomas à Beckett and his friendship and falling out with Henry II? Well, there's a great scene in Dickens's *Child's History* where Beckett and Henry are riding through the streets of London and they see a poor beggar. King Henry says, "Would it not be a great thing, Archbishop, were you to give your ermine-trimmed cloak to that poor beggar? As a Christian, of course, you must wish to do this." And Beckett has to get out of it somehow. [laughter] How does Dickens know all this? But I never thought that at the time. Dickens had everybody's last words as they mounted the scaffold. And he included the details of battles--Harold being shot through the eye at the Battle of Hastings. This book was just a glorious adventure to me and I didn't know that I was learning history. I worked through, as I say, all sorts of difficult words without in the least trying to understand them. I think when I first read, I took it for granted that I had to get this pleasure, with only partial understanding. Perhaps there'd be one word in five which I wouldn't know. It never troubled me and I never asked anybody. I can't remember how I found out that Eerie-land was Ireland and that it was a place on the map, because I never asked. This was a very private pleasure. It was not particularly promoted in our family.

Ross: Yet your mother had promoted the reader.

Munro: My mother had wanted me to learn to read *Mary, John and Peter.* But, by the time I was about nine, I was seen in the family as suffering from a dangerous addiction, which was probably going to make it harder to get work out of me. If a book was there, I would pick it up and read. I'd stop in the middle of making a bed. I had chores to do every Saturday and I'd stop and start reading. I would even wash the dishes with a book propped up in front of me. These are signs of someone who's going to run into trouble.

Ross: They are certainly signs of inattention to housework!

Munro: Stories would be told to me--one of the cautionary tales that's told in a farming community is often about the housewife who fell into the habit of reading. It's like drug addiction. It makes her neglect her duties. It wasn't, in my time, seen as a habit that has *any* very positive qualities at all. I remember being told about somebody named Hessie Scott, who read to such an extent that the fluffballs under her bed were practically as big as footballs. The men would come in from working in the fields for their dinner at noon. The fire would be out, and Hessie would be sitting there reading. I was constantly warned about the feckless future that was probably in store for me if I didn't give up on reading. This promoted reading a lot with me because, I think, children often want to do what they're being warned against. So I was reading, as I say, pretty desperately by the age of nine or ten.

Ross: What sort of things were you reading then?

Munro: After *Child's History of England,* I started probably into the L. M. Montgomery books, which I could get out of the Sunday school library. I worked through all of those--the Anne books, the Emily books, the Pat books, and the lesser known ones like *Jane of Lantern Hill.*

Ross: How about *Kilmeny of the Orchard* and *The Blue Castle*?

Munro: Yes, both of those. And there are two story girl books, *The Golden Road* and *The Story Girl*. I worked through those books for years and I loved them all. And I can remember that when I read *Emily of New Moon* I realized that I was reading something different. *Emily* to me was the watershed book of my life. When I was reading *Emily*, I wasn't getting the same satisfactions that I had got from all the other books. Those other books were predictably worked out, as much of our reading is, to give us satisfactions at certain prescribed points. But something in *Emily* bothered me. For one thing, it starts out with the little girl's father's death. She finds out that her father is going to die, and then he indeed does die, and a lot of really unpleasant relatives come along. They're not just sort of unpleasant on the surface, the way Marilla is in *Anne of Green Gables*. Some of them are fairly nasty, and Emily is dependent on these people. It's the *David Copperfield* or *Jane Eyre* situation to which every child responds--the struggle of the soul of the child in the keeping of the adults.

Ross: So you got from the *Emily* book something quite different from the satisfactions offered by the other Montgomery books?

Munro: Well, *Emily* wasn't satisfying; it was disturbing. I didn't like it. I thought, when are the good times going to come? When are the funny bits going to come? When is everything going to be all right? L. M. Montgomery does soften things quite a bit, but there's still an underlying menace. There's a true literary quality in *Emily* that I had not found in any other book before. So when I was finished with it, I was rather upset and didn't like it. Then in about two years I went back to it and then read it again, because those satisfactions were the ones that I was now seeking.

Ross: The first time you read *Emily*, you'd be around nine?

Munro: Nine, yes, probably. Then I remember a great event when I was about twelve. By that time I had started to write poetry. On one 24th of May school holiday, my girlfriends and I went on our bicycles into the country, taking a picnic lunch. We went to an old abandoned house we knew of. It was beautiful and the lilacs were out. In the living room of the house, there were still some things that had just been left behind--dishes and a few books. I picked up a book and the cover had been torn off it so I couldn't really tell what it was. But I saw that it was poetry, and so I put it in my bike carrier and I took it home. Actually it was a collection of Tennyson. Part had been torn away, but there was a lot left. And what was left were great, long narrative poems by Tennyson, which nobody reads much nowadays, like *The Princess* and *Enoch Arden* and of course *The Idylls of the King* and *In Memoriam* and many of those morose lyrics with women's names.

Ross: Like *Mariana* and *Maud*.

Munro: Yes, "Come into the Garden, Maud" and the one about the nymph that Paris is deserting.

Ross: *Oenone*.

Munro: I didn't know who Tennyson was. I'm not even sure if I knew that these poems were by Tennyson, but I loved them. I wrote imitations of them for three or four years afterwards.
Ross: What do you think you were responding to in these poems?
Munro: There's melody in Tennyson that's easy to catch on to. I think that's it.
Ross: So it was all those open vowels and those m's and liquid l sounds?
Munro: Yes, yes. There's something about the murmuring in immemorial elms. [laughter]
Ross: Yes, "The murmuring of innumerable bees."
Munro: Get that--"immemorial elms"--well, who isn't going to respond? And later you laugh about this, of course, and are a little embarrassed by your earlier tastes. But I've got past that. I'm not embarrassed any more. And then I liked the stories too, especially the nymph getting deserted by Paris. That's very sad. *The Princess* bored me a little bit. It was trying to have an intellectual content and I didn't go for that at all. But the ones that were purely emotional, where the language was very melodic and polished, I loved and I tried to write imitations.
Ross: What else were you reading around this time?
Munro: When I was ten or eleven, I was also reading all the *Campfire Girls*. I also read a book I hated called *Beautiful Girlhood*. I was given it by a female relative, probably on my eleventh birthday, around the time of coming into puberty. That's when there's an idea of socializing a young girl. I still remember the verse in the front of the book by Charles Kingsley: "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever." [laughter] I immediately knew this was a book that I was *not* going to be pleased with. Of course I read it anyway, in a horrible state of anger--not an anger I could communicate to anybody--with a solid recognition that beautiful girlhood was not going to be for me.
Ross: You felt that this book had been singled out for you, to alert you to a danger.
Munro: Oh yes! I think it was given to me in quite a pointed way. In those times--and the idea is certainly with us still--books for children were thought of as socializing agents. They were thought of as tools of education. This book was very heavily into the joys of motherhood--not the joys of sex--motherhood. Ideas about how the child should be educated have changed a great deal. We would now perhaps give a young girl of eleven a book which said, in effect, "It's important to be clever; never mind being good." But we would still be trying to influence the girl in a certain way, telling her, "You can be a lumberjack. You can be a brain surgeon." But the message is there. And I think any child reader worth his or her salt is going to recognize that and rebel. I don't think you like books to tell you how you should think about things or how you should think about yourself or what you should do. If you've learned to value

a story for the values a story has, then you become very suspicious of the message-story.

Ross: You hated *Beautiful Girlhood*. What else did you enjoy?

Munro: Well, the next great, great book was *Wuthering Heights*, which I read when I was fourteen. *Wuthering Heights* really excited me beyond *anything* that was happening in my real life. I think I probably read it thereafter constantly for four or five years. I was really reading it all the time. My mother hid it at one time--she hid it under the mattress in the spare room--because she had heard that it was a disturbing book and she didn't like my obsession with it. I don't know whether she thought this was a sexual obsession. In some ways I think it was. I think *Wuthering Heights* is the ancestor of all the romances with the strong, brutal hero.

Ross: The Heathcliff figure.

Munro: The Heathcliff figure, of course. Only Emily Brontë doesn't domesticate Heathcliff in the end, which the Harlequin romances do.

Ross: Even in *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester at the end is more or less blinded, being led away by Jane.

Munro: Oh yes, yes! The whole male thing is made harmless by the blinding. But none of that happens to Heathcliff. He's just as rotten when he dies as he's ever been. And women still fall in love with him. I think that every girl who falls in love with Heathcliff thinks that she's going to be Catherine if she meets a Heathcliff. She never figures she's going to be Isabella [laughter] and neither did I. But in addition to this sexual thing, there was something else about *Wuthering Heights*--the evocation of place. You know how, when you reread a book, you sometimes think, I'll just go back and reread that little part. well, I would think of just a little description that I'd want to read again--maybe how Ellen and Cathy are walking across the moors on their way to Wuthering Heights and the way the streams are flowing through the grass. There was that real density about place that transcends the story completely. And there is a vein of underlying mysticism that was powerfully attractive to me at that age. After that I was probably reading what would be called adult books.

Ross: As you look back over the stories that were important to you, what I'm hearing you say is that you were reading all the time, often indiscriminately. But there were highlights: the Dickens, the Montgomery books, *Wuthering Heights*.

Munro: Yes. And poetry. Discovering Tennyson was very important, because for about a year or so, when I was about twelve, what I read was mostly poetry. Not just Tennyson, but all the poetry in the reader. People like Bliss Carman and Keats. In the *Books of Knowledge* there was also a poetry section. I didn't just read the French lessons in the *Books of Knowledge*. I went through the volumes later and read all the other sections. Each book had a poetry section which I read. Then I read the story section, which was fairy stories and a lot

of retelling of legends. That was where I first read about Cupid and Psyche and about--who's the beautiful Norse god?

Ross: Balder.

Munro: And so those were the main childhood books. But of course, behind all those childhood books I've mentioned, I was just reading anything and everything. When people talk about their reading, they tend to mention the respectable books. I mentioned Tennyson, for instance, but at the same time I was reading *Gone with the Wind* compulsively. I read it over and over and over again. Maybe that was the same sexual thing--maybe it was Rhett Butler. But no, *Gone with the Wind* is just a very, very well managed book. It's much better written and better organized than many best sellers that I've looked at in later years. And I read everything we happened to have in the house, and the books that came into our house all came in totally by accident. So my reading was just here and there, and all over. I read what was in the Sunday school library, which was mostly L. M. Montgomery. I remember trying to read *Don Quixote* and *Pilgrim's Progess* because I had heard they were great books, but I definitely just skip read them. I did a lot of skip reading fairly early. I had no conscience at all about having to read all of a book.

Ross: What you just said about starting a book in the middle or just choosing to read only a certain passage is interesting.

Munro: I still do that. And I've discovered that not many people do read books this way. Some people feel it's rather an affront to do so, I think. But I've very seldom started a story, even a short story, at the beginning. It seems that what I can get out of the story is evenly present throughout. It's a flavour.

Ross: And you don't see the middle part as depending upon reading the beginning?

Munro: No. I know that the story does. But the story is the least of my worries now. And must have been always.

Ross: It's interesting that you always have taken an approach to reading that downplays plot.

Munro: Yes, I don't think plot line ever mattered that much to me. As an adult, I've read books that I would stay up until three in the morning to finish, because I had to know what happened. But those, in general, have not been the books that I have really responded to or loved. They've been books that created a specific suspense and excitement. Of books I've read in recent decades like that, I think of *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* It's a very interesting book in terms of technique, but there isn't a passage I would go back to reread.

Ross: You distinguish between books with plot interest that you take in in a big chunk and the ones with texture that you go back to and reread and savour certain passages.

Munro: Yes, yes. I go back to read little bits of Jane Austen all the time, and then I find I'm reading the whole novel. I read her, not for that kind of tex-

ture, but for scenes. For getting a bunch of people together in a room and having them do something. I love that in her.

Ross: Can we go back to something that you said earlier? You read the Montgomery stories because they were in the Sunday school library. Those are the only books you've mentioned with a Canadian setting.

Munro: I did read other stories that had a connection with Canada. I read a book I loved called *Susannah of the Mounties*. I was very young then and for months I wished to move to the Yukon. From the Sunday school library I read the Glengarry books, which I liked pretty well but the religious message was a bit obvious. A bit later, in high school when I was maybe about fifteen, I remember discovering Hugh McLennan. I read *Two Solitudes* and *The Precipice* and was enormously excited that these were Canadian books. I didn't discover Morley Callaghan until later, when I was at university. There was a Canadian novelist named Grace Campbell who wrote something called *Thorn Apple Tree.*

Ross: *Thorn Apple Tree*, as I remember, was very much a matter of depicting day-to-day life on a pioneer farm.

Munro: It was a very effective, quiet book and very prettily presented with little woodcuts at the beginning of each chapter. I remember liking that book so much that I started doing an imitation of that kind of thing about pioneer life. It was in my head; I wasn't writing it down. By then, I was doing imitations of everything I read. But, you know, with the L. M. Montgomery books, I didn't think much about the Canadian setting. Prince Edward Island was as remote to me as Maine would have been. My feeling about Canada hadn't developed enough at that time that it reached out to the seacoasts.

Ross: One reader has told me that she could relate to the L. M. Montgomery books, not so much in terms of the external circumstances but in terms of the human relationships, especially between the generations.

Munro: That's true, and that's where Montgomery is so good, really. So she's always on the brink of being what I would think of as a serious novelist. That sounds like a terribly patronizing thing to say and I don't mean it to be like that. She's very good about human relationships, but usually she stays within certain conventions.

Ross: The personal fiction that she might have written, she perhaps could never write because of the circumstances of being a minister's wife.

Munro: This is what I feel. I feel her life is a great tragedy because she had a much greater talent than got out. That's one of the worst things that can happen to anyone. Far better not to have a talent, or to have a very minor talent that you can fulfill, than to have a big one that is unfulfilled. So much was against her. You can say that she could have left her family and gone to New York or Boston. But it was almost impossible. But she did not, either, completely turn her back on the conventions of her time. They were too strong for her. The bonds were very much on her, and what you say about being a

minister's wife is part of it. But I think they were self-imposed as well. Self-censoring is the most dangerous thing, and writers are often not aware of it. Since I came back to live in a small town, I find I have to be continually on the lookout for signs of it in myself, because I want to be liked. I don't want to be seen as a disturbing person.

Ross: You think you might be censoring out possible stories without even being aware of it.

Munro: If you didn't watch it you could, yes. I think I watch it. [laughter]

Ross: I find it interesting that all this reading was for you very much a solitary activity.

Munro: Oh! Solitary and on the verge of being shameful because it was not promoted in my family, for practical reasons, because they saw me as a future farmer's wife, and it was not approved in the community, there was a whole lot of ridicule attached to anybody who read. Though it was okay to read *The Bobbsey Twins* and that kind of stuff, but reading was seen as something you grew out of. If you were the right kind of person, reading became less and less important. Even people who believed in doing well at school and getting ahead didn't believe in reading as a pleasurable activity. It was seen as an addiction, I think. This never bothered me or stopped me very much. It was just that I would never have dreamed of talking about it to anybody.

Ross: And nobody that you grew up with shared the same interest?

Munro: Well I think early on there were, at the stages of *The Campfire Girls* and even into the L.M. Montgomery books. After that, no. When I picked up Tennyson in that house, I was with my girlfriends. I never said "Oh, look at this!" I just stashed it away, because I felt the life I had with them was one thing and this life where I read Tennyson was another thing. I didn't find it very difficult to keep these two lives going. It's been a great help to me in later life--it has meant that I could survive in the suburbs as a housewife.

Ross: So you would disguise yourself. . .

Munro: Constantly, as an ordinary person. I'm really good at it.

Ross: But underneath there's a secret life. [laughter]

Munro: Of course, a lot of people know now. I haven't managed to keep it all that secret.

Ross: You've mentioned several times that you made up stories in your head like the ones that you'd been reading. How soon did that start?

Munro: Oh, terribly early. Oh, by the time I was seven or eight I think I was trying to do stories in my head. Another of the important books was Hans Christian Andersen, which I read when I was very young. I couldn't bear "The Little Mermaid" because it had such a terrible ending. That is one of the saddest love stories ever written and I couldn't bear it. So I started making up a happy ending and I made up an ending that I liked a lot better. I remember walking around and around in the yard, when I was very small, making up that ending. With a story that I loved, I would go back and read it over and

over again. It was a desire for possession. I guess it was like being in love. I could not possess it *enough*, so I made up my own story that was like it. And I certainly did that. All through high school, I made up a fake *Wuthering Heights*. Before that I was making my own imitations of the poetry and before that of the historical novel.

Ross: You wanted a way of possessing the work more fully. After you had read it and reread it and reread it, and you still hadn't got it entirely, you would make it your own by writing it.

Munro: Yes. The reading itself just was not enough. It's hard for me to understand how people, who love reading as much as I did, stop with reading. I would think everybody would then start making up their own stories.

Ross: I think people do that, but they're not as good at it as you are.

Munro: Maybe they're not as single-minded. That's what being good amounts to, that you just keep on and on and on and on. My first imitations were not remarkable in any way. Anybody who reads a lot probably develops a kind of facility and can pick up the rhythms of sentences they've read. But to make the leap from something that is an imitation to something that is truly your own has to come when something in the outside world, when something in life itself, forces itself on you. And then you can use the facility you've learned with all the imitations.

Ross: When would you say this happened for you?

Munro: Mid twenties, probably. Not until I'd been writing, not even until after I'd been published for a while. I was publishing very skilled imitations for some time. Not even all that very skilled, but they were publishable.

Ross: And then there was a break-through story?

Munro: Yes. I think there were a couple of breakthrough stories. "Thanks for the Ride" was probably a kind of breakthrough story. Before that I had been writing a fake Carson McCullers story, a fake Faulkner story, a fake whoever I'd been reading last. I wrote "Thanks for the Ride" when I was twenty-two. I can remember sitting typing it when my first child was a baby in the crib beside the table where I had the typewriter. It was just an anecdote somebody had told me. The anecdote broadened out so that I could see its social base in a way that interested me. I began to write a story that interested me and that was not suggested by any story in a book. But that development just happens; it's something you can't force. I think it'll happen to anybody if they keep writing long enough. There's nothing wrong with writing imitations. It's the only way, I think, to learn.

Ross: It sounds as if you had the right apprenticeship for being a writer.

Munro: I had a marvellous apprenticeship. And there were other things about it. Socially it was wonderful. I lived just beyond Wingham; our backs were to the farming community but there was a river in between, so we weren't really part of that; and between us and Wingham, there was a kind of ghetto. I've been taken to task by the Wingham paper for how I've described it, but

it was a kind of rural slum where I first went to school. This was unusual--not really a small town environment but the people on the fringe of a small town. After two years of school there, my mother, by various fenagling, got me into the town school. She was worried about my education. I went to the school in Wingham, which was an ordinary small town environment. In this way, I got this look at a big range of society. I was always an outsider and you just couldn't ask for a better beginning for a writer. If my father had been a doctor and I'd just gone to school in Wingham, or even if my father had been a farmer and I'd gone to a country school, I wouldn't have seen such a big range of people and attitudes and even language by the time I was seven. This is something that you absorb. You use it for your survival when you're a child because survival is the main thing you're interested in. But it's all there later.

Ross: And you can go back to it .

Munro: Yes. Not just as information but as the way this gives you of looking at the world. I think this is very important, very useful, for a writer. Mind you, it's fairly difficult for a person. [laughter]

Ross: We've been talking about your experiences as a reader and as a writer. Changing our focus a bit, is there any advice you could give to parents who want their child to be a reader?

Munro: I don't think you have to push anything that is a real pleasure. I think any parent who really believes that reading is a pleasure is going to leave it alone. Do you worry about whether your child is going to discover ice cream? You don't say, "Here are all these wonderful flavours. Let's go down to the ice cream store. Wouldn't you like mocha walnut?" You take it for granted that you don't have to do this. I always felt that way about reading. I don't think of it as a virtue; I think of it as a pleasure. I think books should be available. I wouldn't have become so much of a reader without the fact that there were some books in our house, though they were a very odd assortment-- without the *Books of Knowledge* and the Sunday school library. As long as books are available and children know about them, then, if they're going to be readers, they'll become readers. After all, you wouldn't want an entire world full of readers. Maybe nothing would get done; maybe nobody would want to be an engineer.

Ross: But despite what you say about leaving children alone to become readers or not as they choose, we still want our own children to become readers.

Munro: That's quite true. When one of my own showed a strong resistance, I did try to entice her. We do things that we say we don't do. I tried to entice her with, "Wouldn't this be a nice book? My, this is an interesting story." Of course, she responded to this by reading nothing but *Peanuts* comic strips. And then somehow, I don't know how, one day she just started reading a book. But it certainly wasn't on my urging, or a book I had promoted.

Ross: Let me end on the topic of rereading. Some people say, "There are so many books out there that I don't have time for rereading."

Munro: That's like saying "There are so many flavours of ice cream, I'll never have chocolate again." Or "There's so many nice men to make love to, I'll never stay with this one." I don't take that approach to life. You either see things that way or you don't. I don't see reading in that sense. The books that are important to me, I figure on rereading some time. Most of the books I own I probably have reread, or reread in part. Also some books change according to your own age and your situation in life. I've read *Anna Karenina* several times and the first time I read it I really identified with the young girl, Kitty, and her illness and her dreadful humiliating love for Vronsky. And when I read it again, I identified with Anna. And then I reread it and I identified with Dolly. [laughter] This was at the height of my mother period--poor Dolly's always worried about getting the washing done and she can never rise to the occasion because of her constant preoccupations. The book had just shifted this much. And then I read it again and I didn't identify with any of the women. I read it in a much calmer, overall way. And so there are books like that that change for you.

Ross: Probably any really good book will do that, if it's rich enough. As you change, you respond to levels in the book that you hadn't noticed before.

Munro: Yes. And there are ways that certain writers have of looking at the world that I sometimes want to reexperience. You read a few pages of Proust and you no longer think that ordinary things, like stuff on this coffee table, is boring. There is that feeling of everything being so deeply absorbing. Every true writer's voice seems to come out of a special conviction, a way of looking at experience, which you sometimes just feel like getting in touch with.

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