

Brian Fawcett / PROVOCATIONS

Something is wrong with Alice Munro

You can relax. Canada's most exquisite living writer is doing fine. She's living in a small, exquisite Ontario town, writing small, exquisite stories. As far as I know she's in good spirits and her health is sound. Phones Audrey Thomas, Robert Weaver and John Metcalf on successive nights to chat, I hear.

Maybe I should qualify what I just said. I'm one of her readers, not a personal friend. I've never actually met her, but from what I'm told I'm confident that I'd like and admire her, just like I do her stories.

But while I'm cheerfully prepared to go on liking her stories, the fact that she's become an almost unassailable cultural icon has begun to trouble me. In these years leading up to the millennium, as fewer and fewer people regard literature as a necessary part of their daily cultural apparatus, I'm developing the nagging instinct that perhaps I shouldn't like her stories so much.

Let me develop that instinct a little. Alice Munro's stories are too *small* to be thought of — as they are almost unanimously by those with a grasp of Canadian writing that extends beyond Farley Mowat — as the best and most important literary artifacts Canada produces. For sure, her stories are almost perfectly structured and crafted. They're filled with miracles of subtlety so exquisite that they drive educated folks over the age of 40 nearly out of their comas. Canlit industrialists across the nation shudder with delight when a new volume of her work hits the bookstores, knowing that if a free desk copy doesn't come their way unasked, in two or three years they will find it important enough that they'll saunter down to a bookstore and actually buy a copy.

You may have already noted, reader, that my complaint is not really about Alice Munro the person or writer, but about the conditions of literary culture that can make a talented but somewhat antiquarian miniaturist our most revered living writer. She is an exquisite writer in an era no one could describe as exquisite.

I know what I'm suggesting isn't polite, but don't dismiss me as a crude barbarian just yet. As a master of the modernist short story, Munro's skills and formal preoccupations are those of a 19th Century writer. At best, she has mastered a literary form that stopped bending

people's minds a half century ago. Have a hard look at the conditions of political, technological and cultural life under which we now labour. Then have a look at what the modernist short story sets out to accomplish.

A formally correct short story develops a small texture of reality — usually centering on one or two characters — and turns it in subtle moral and material lighting conditions so that we see how wonderfully complex and fragile human beings are, and how textured psychological reality is. Somewhat shyly and indirectly, such stories are a defense of what is humane and good. They are also, provided that one is trained to such things, aesthetically gratifying and even interesting. But the modernist short story is still a very small bite at the enormously enlarged complexity of the human condition. Notwithstanding Freud and Jung, and with a cold stare at 75 years of essentially unproductive psychoanalytic attempts to tamper with the human psyche without tampering with the violent world it operates in, the short story (and contemplative psychology) is diminishing in its relevance and centrality to the human condition.

So that there's no mistaking what I'm saying, I'll put this as crassly as I can. What good is the modernist short story in a world where Walt Disney's heirs and shareholders are running our national and global culture, where mainstream North American consciousness has been overrun with consumerism and cartoons? What real defense of what is humane and good does a short story offer against the grinning professional sentimentalists of the *Cosby* Universe?

If I were prepared to be utterly bloody-minded, I'd point out that most of the characters Alice Munro offers us in her stories are wounded people slipping inexorably into incapacity. Most of the subtleties she renders are diminishment, retreats into privileged silence, anguish or sentimentality. Again and again, her protagonists can imagine no other material world than the one they're in. But because I respect Munro's skills, and enjoy subtleties, I won't point out any of those things.

Instead, let me make this proposition: every era has its central subject matter, one that provides essential focus to artistic and political life. These subject matters constitute something like what Mayakovsky optimistically called the "social command." What I'm talking about is half way between that and what was earlier called a "moral imperative." In the 1950s and 1960s, when the ascendant literary figures of our era were in their formative stages, particularly in North

America, that subject matter was centred around liberation. The “subject matter,” of course, took various forms: sexual liberation, the economic liberation of the working class, women’s liberation from the cultural domination of males are three we’ll recognize instantly. In its most simple formulation, the “subject matter” was the individual, and how individuals got what they wanted and needed. If the era were to be reduced to a single question it would be this: *Why can’t (or how do) I get what I want out of life.* It was a question without a single answer. Instead, it bred preferred formal, technological and expressive paths across the culture.

One of those paths pretty much describes the artistic milieu of Alice Munro in Canada, and writers like John Updike or Raymond Carver in the United States. Each became a master of the modernist short story, the perfect vehicle for dramatizing the subtle permutations of an era preoccupied with private liberations. (This same milieu also created Norman Mailer and the Harlequin universe, but that’s an issue I’ll defer for later scrutiny.)

It seems to me that in the 1980s and the 1990s, the central questions and focusing subject matter have changed dramatically. Today we’re less citizens than we are consumers, and in our willy-nilly rush to get what we want, we’ve largely overlooked the fact that private liberation doesn’t create a liberated world. In burning up the planet’s resources, we’ve driven ourselves to the point of intellectual, economic, and ecological collapse. This era’s “subject matter,” therefore inevitably focuses on issues of government and governance — of resources, information, and ourselves. And today’s question — not yet entirely clear — might be this one: *Why (or how) in an era of total information, is everyone and everything deceiving us?*

I don’t think the modernist short story contains the necessary range to approach that issue, and its insights give us very little relevant equipment to work with. We got liberated in the last thirty years, and the Leviathan swallowed us anyway. We’re in a different game now, and the rules and tools are going to be different — perhaps radically different.

Incidentally, I am thoroughly aware that the demand for moral competence for literary form puts me on unfashionable and even dangerous ground — on intellectual quicksand, actually. But if I take the moderately unorthodox step of recognizing that culturally significant narrative is not eternally boundaried by the regulations

concerning 19th Century “fictional” narrative, the quicksand turns out to be merely a shallow pothole. If I take yet another step, this time to examine the degree to which modern media, particularly television, have corrupted and co-opted fictional narrative, the perspective changes again, and the pothole disappears. Suddenly, the relativism of contemporary literary practice starts to look like either another shuck for maintaining an unexamined status quo, or an unforgiveable kind of naivety.

Just so the record is straight, I’d dearly love to live in a world in which the perceptual universe of someone like Alice Munro had real cultural and, better still, political currency. Like most writers, I’m most comfortable working with the problems of private consciousness. After all, that’s what I was trained to do. I’m also a former Ezra Pound scholar, and I have the deepest possible respect for the literary traditions of Western civilization. I’d love to believe, as Pound did, that if we all read the Great Books and honoured the Great Writers, local and global, all the evils in the world would disappear. Brian Mulroney would not be Prime Minister, Dan Quayle would be delivering letters for the post office in some midwest American town, Iran would not be trying to cut Iraq’s asshole out (and vice versa), Pol Pot would be dead, and so forth. But I’m not so blinded by mortgages and personal fitness classes and croissants that I miss seeing that we live in a world that is emphatically *not* respectful of Alice Munro’s perceptual universe. Instead, what I see is a world that is daily becoming even less respectful of it, one that it is declining into a new kind of ignorance and barbarity.

In every Western country, sales of literary fiction have been diminishing for almost a decade. In Canada, the average sales of a literary fiction title is now below 2000 copies, and that’s factoring in Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Professor Davies and W.P. Kinsella — not very good compared to the 20,000 to 30,000 of a run-of-the-mill Harlequin Romance title does, and positively anaemic compared to the millions who watch *Cosby* each week on television.

The problem doesn’t lie entirely with the audience, or with the power of consumerist-oriented media, although it’s easy to lay the blame on them. Increasingly, I’m convinced that the reluctance of writers to examine the formal properties and boundaries of literature has left writers, and literature, less able to capture today’s realities than other artistic (and commercial) media.

So, instead of whining about it or threatening a cultural apocalypse, let me propose a few changes that might begin to rectify the situation. The changes I'd propose follow pretty much what has gone on in nearly every other artistic discipline. But their application to literature, because the medium of literature is language, and because literature has a historical kinship with discourse, might have considerably more dramatic results than it has had in other disciplines. By making a radical adoption of the assemblage techniques used in other art forms and by making a hard-nosed evaluation of where and why print-based literacy is relevant and indispensable, literature could make a belated but profound re-entry into mainstream 20th century culture and thought.

Explaining what that might involve requires an examination of today's key question noted above. The question asks us, first of all, to reverse most of the perceptual priorities that have served literature during our lifetime. If we try to answer it, the structure and content of what is coming at us, and why, becomes more important than what kinds of needs and abilities we give expression to. The integrity of our receiving apparatus and the sincerity of our interpretation will become far less meaningful. What will count are the number and complexity of field receptors that can be brought into play, and the sophistication of data interpretation.

At the very least, the situation calls for writers to have a long, cold look at the sanctity of literary genres, and their separation from discourse, particularly in fiction and poetry. Historiography, reportage, philosophical analysis and a massive influx of data also need to be brought into the legitimate — and even obligatory — working apparatuses of literary writers, along with a dose of murderous scepticism concerning the word "fiction."

A first step for writers to make would be to examine the field to determine which literary forms are obsolete, and why. An obvious method of doing that would be to see which have been superseded by other narrative mediums like television and film. Here, it quickly becomes apparent that if the sole criterion to determine "effectiveness" was audience appeal, we'd have to abandon conventional fiction altogether to those media, except for the narrow market aimed at those who use fiction to render them semi-conscious during periods of voluntary or involuntary inactivity — hospital stays, train or plane trips, bad marriages, etc. That isn't good enough, just as determining

the value of a literary work in terms of its internal aesthetic consistencies isn't good enough (even though exactly what criteria writers should be using is far from apparent).

Probably the best way to proceed is to determine the contexts in which printed literature remains more effective and efficient than any other medium. For instance, what film and television do not do well at all is to transfer the complexity and verticality of reality — the parataxis of private, political and universal instrumentation that penetrates events. With rare exceptions, both mediums tend to sacrifice parataxis to sleekness and tonal manipulation. Likewise, neither medium naturally supports feedback, contingency, or leisurely review. A literature of assemblage would turn itself to those gaps and confidently develop them. Yet in practice, the formal timidity of literature has done almost the opposite. During the 20th century the re-academization of knowledge has effectively given over the universal to science and philosophy, the political to journalism and the social sciences, leaving literature to dither politely over those rapidly shrinking precincts we *hope* are private.

Literature originally meant written thought, and it's "written thought" that needs to be renovated if literature is to continue to have even the slightest cultural value in the future. Writers need to invade every other intellectual discipline, not as dedicated specialists but as intellectual generalists — as conceptual assemblers seeking to secure the full vertical density of human reality.

Right now, the field is relatively empty and open. In recent years, John Berger, Primo Levi, Eduardo Galeano and a few others have all made profound forays into it. Because women writers have had less reason to support the status quo, they've more generally been trying to make inroads from several directions and under ideologically difficult and variable dispensations. And of course, Marshall McLuhan overflowed the field 25 years ago, but he was flying so high he mistook it for the Global Village and thought it would belong to television. It doesn't, and it can't.

But Alice Munro, and the majority of fiction writers today, have lost sight of the field or don't know it exists. And that is what is wrong.