

Michelle Gadpaille

University of Maribor, Slovenia

Tjaša Mohar

University of Maribor, Slovenia

Celebrating the Precise, the Paradoxical and the “Pret-ty-Trick-y”¹ in Alice Munro’s Fiction

Preciznost, paradoksalnost in tisto »pre-cej pre-bri-sa-no«² v zgodbah Alice Munro

When in 2013, a colleague called me up exclaiming “We won! We won!” I am ashamed to admit that my response was puzzlement: WHAT had we won? And who were WE? It was the Canadian fiction writer Alice Munro who had just won the Nobel Prize for literature, and “we” indicated Canadians and the whole expatriate industry of Canadian literary scholarship. We had, indeed, scored a major coup for short fiction, its writers, and readers.

It was validating to learn later that the reaction from Munro herself had been similar. According to *The Guardian* (Higgins 2013), the author felt “kind of dazed” about the win. In contrast, the speech at the Nobel awards ceremony expressed no hesitation. Peter Englund, Secretary for the Nobel Prize Committee for literature in 2013, credited Munro with having come close “to solving the greatest mystery of them all: the human heart and its caprices” (Award Ceremony Speech). The commendatory phrase that resonated around the world was the summative “master of the contemporary short story,” but Englund steered closer to the bond between storyteller and story listener: “If you have never before fantasised about the strangers you see on a bus,” he opined, “you begin doing so after having read Alice Munro” (The Nobel Prize 2013).

In Slovenia, we, too, jumped on that Munro bus, celebrating her life, work, and achievement with two events in Maribor, including book exhibits and literary readings at the Faculty of Arts, Maribor (Gadpaille, Mohar, and Zupan 2013) and the University Library (Gadpaille and Mohar 2013). In common with other Canadianists from across Europe, we contributed to the burgeoning scholarship based on her weighty life’s oeuvre. New translations appeared, along with measured evaluation of existing ones. The translations of *Too Much Happiness* and *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* from 2011 received fresh attention from the critics and the media in 2013, and these were soon joined by new translations by the Munro scholar, Tjaša Mohar: *Dear Life* (2014), *Runaway* (2015), and *The View from Castle Rock* (2017).³ An innovative theory appeared, positing the use of transactive memory

¹ From Munro’s story “Passion” in *Runaway* (Munro 2004).

² From the Slovene translation of the story “Passion” (Slov. “Strast”) from *Ubežnica* (Munro 2015).

³ Slovene titles: *Ljubo življenje*, *Ubežnica* and *Pogled z grajske pečine*.

as the basis for Munro's mysteriously compelling narratology (Gadpaille 2016). The Central European Association for Canadian Studies produced a volume on the impact of Canadian writing in the member countries since 1990, with one part dedicated to cataloguing work on Munro and Cohen and their reception. Even during the pandemic, collaborative work continued, with an event called *Tricks and Other Ceremonies* joining students in Rijeka to those in Maribor (Gadpaille, Mohar, and Onič 2021a), and in May 2021, an online lecture in which Tjaša Mohar, Tomaž Onič and Michelle Gadpaille scooped up participants from across Europe: *Alice Munro's Fiction: Calling all Readers, Writers and Lovers* (2021b). Additionally, two articles were published in Slovene on the occasion of Munro's 90th birthday, popularizing Munro among the general public; one appeared in the newspaper *Večer* (Mohar 2021a) and the other in the literary magazine *Zvon* (Mohar 2021b).

The CEACS challenged its members to celebrate Munro's 90th birthday in whatever way seemed feasible in a year of lockdowns and distanced education. As one response, in November 2021, the conference *Alice Munro at 90* (Budapest, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary: Eötvös Loránd University) assembled an online group of Munro experts. At this conference arose the idea for this special issue on the work of Alice Munro.

Although it might seem that the topic of Munro's fiction has been exhausted, these eight articles, originating from diverse countries, testify to the continuing fascination with Munro's exploration of ordinary women's lives. Contributor Ana Penjak places Munro's work next to the high modernist short fiction of James Joyce, in which company it holds its own. In "Female Body as a Source of Shared (Hi)stories: On Munro's Del and Joyce's Eveline" Penjak finds parallels between the circumscribed lives of Joyce's Dublin women and the lives of girls and women in Huron county, Ontario, applying a feminist methodology.

Michelle Gadpaille's "'Country speech': Regional and Temporal Linguistic Layering in Alice Munro's Fiction" draws attention to the tiniest of linguistic elements – speech tags – to uncover a split in Munro's fiction between two forms of discourse: country and cosmopolitan. By foregrounding speech tags attributing certain expressions to communities removed in time and space, Munro's narrators create layers of voice that evoke distance mediated by time, education, class snobbery and city living. Meanwhile, country voices break through the dominant discourse to privilege remembered phrasings. Another contribution focusing narrowly on grammatical features of Munro's style is Katja Težak's "Adverbials of Time, Time Expressions and Tense Shifts in Alice Munro's 'Dance of the Happy Shades'". By highlighting stylistic features that mark both time and stasis, Težak demonstrates Munro's distinctive technique for adjusting readerly position vis-à-vis the narrator's timeline.

Contributor Iris Lucio-Villegas Spillard, on the other hand, exemplifies the thematic approach that has been current in Canadian literary studies since the 1980s: "Honey, Where Are the Kids?": Motifs of the Past, Water, and Photography in Munro's Stories Featuring Dead Children" brings together six stories linked by common themes of children's drowning, and shared motifs of water. Working from Munro's biography, Spillard convincingly posits an autobiographical origin for the figure of the lost child in Munro's fiction.

In contrast, Gertrud Szamosi has chosen a single collection for her thematic analysis, “The Human Geometry of Deathscapes and Homes in Alice Munro’s *The View from Castle Rock*.” Employing the theory of spatiality, Szamosi traces these thematized loci from Scotland to Ontario, to arrive at an image of the narrator as more Munro than otherwise in this collection.

Jason Blake and Simon Zupan contribute an innovative article, “Thresholds and What Seems to Be: Munro’s First Sentences,” using stylistics software and, surprisingly, word clouds, to investigate the mystery of Munro’s story openings. The authors deftly combine quirky statistics (e.g., the average length of a Munro opening sentence) and close reading to defamiliarize sentences that the avid Munro reader had skimmed over, thus sending the reader back to contemplate patterns and coincidences hitherto unperceived. Instead of covering Munro’s whole oeuvre, as Blake and Zupan did, Murat Öner has chosen to focus on a single early story in the article “Whispers and Dances: (De)Construction of Heterochronism in Alice Munro’s ‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’” but to apply an unusual interpretive approach. By employing a Foucauldian spatial concept, Öner illuminates the distinctive narrative structure of this story, allowing us to see it as composed of micro-narratives, linked rhizomatically to other stories in the collection *Dance of the Happy Shades*.

In the article titled “Destiny of a Nobel Laureate in a Small Book Market: Alice Munro in Slovene Translation”, Tjaša Mohar investigates the possible reasons for Munro’s late introduction to Slovene readers and the continued underrepresentation of her works in Slovene translation, providing an insight into the dynamics of the translation and publishing industry in Slovenia.

This is the second issue of *ELOPE* to focus on an individual Canadian author; Volume 17, *Atwood at 80*, began the trend. Such apparent editorial bias reflects more than local interest and expertise, although it does that, but also the global appeal of a young national literature that has recently come of age. Canadian literature has enticed European readers and critics by its historicized paradigms of wilderness and survival but, paradoxically, has achieved peak recognition in the works of two authors who defy such paradigms. We read the short fiction of Munro, not because it is Canadian but because it holds us disturbingly spellbound by its tricky mirroring of our most secret doubts about the brief, time-bound span of human lives. These eight contributors are all under that spell and invite future readers to join them.

The guest editors wish to thank all those who worked behind the scenes to bring this special issue to fruition, including our doughty reviewers, the Budapest organizers of *Alice Munro at 90*, and the journal editors: Smiljana Komar, Mojca Krevel and Andrej Stopar.

References

- Gadpaille, Michelle. 2016. “Transactive Memory and the Narrative Appeal of Alice Munro’s Fiction.” In *The Relationship Between the Patient and the Doctor: Conference Proceedings. 25th Conference on Medicine and Law*, edited by Suzana Kraljić, Jelka Reberšek Gorišek, and Vesna Rijavec, 1–8. Maribor: Lexonomica Press.
- Gadpaille, Michelle, and Tjaša Mohar. 2013. “Alice Munro – Nobel Prize Winner for Literature 2013.” Literary Evening of the Department of English and American Studies and the University Library of Maribor, Glazer Hall UKM, November 14, 2013.

- Gadpaille, Michelle, Tjaša Mohar, and Tomaž Onič. 2021a. "Alice Munro: Tricks and Other Ceremonies." Guest lecture to undergraduate students of Canadian Literature at the University of Rijeka, via Zoom, January 11, 2021.
- . 2021b. "Alice Munro's Fiction: Calling All Readers, Writers and Lovers." MS Teams Online Lecture, May 20, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/109423930476086/videos/540871670284103/>.
- Gadpaille, Michelle, Tjaša Mohar, and Urška Zupan. 2013. "Alice Munro, Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature 2013." Exhibition and literary reading at the opening, Exhibition Centre, Faculty of Arts, Maribor, October 22–November 5, 2013.
- Higgins, Charlotte. 2013. "Alice Munro Wins Nobel Prize in Literature." *The Guardian*, October 10, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/10/alice-munro-wins-nobel-prize-in-literature#:~:text=Munro%20is%20the%20second%20Canadian,Bellow%20%E2%80%93%20and%20the%2013th%20woman>.
- Mohar, Tjaša, and Michelle Gadpaille. 2019. "Alice Munro and Leonard Cohen: Ambassadors of Canadian Culture in Slovenia." In *Canada Consumed: The Impact of Canadian Writing in Central Europe (1990–2017) = Le Canada à la carte: influence des écrits canadiens en Europe centrale (1990–2017)*, edited by Don Sparling and Katalin Kürtösi. 223–40. Brno: Masaryk University.
- Mohar, Tjaša. 2021a. "90 let nobelovke Alice Munro: številne njene zgodbe še čakajo na slovenski prevod." *Véčer*, October 27, 2021.
- . 2021b. "Nobelovka Alice Munro je dopolnila 90 let." *Zvon, kulturno-družbena revija* 24 (6): 71–75.
- Munro, Alice. 2015. *Ubežnica*. Celje: Celjska Mohorjeva družba.
- . 2004. *Runaway*. New York: Vintage Books.
- The Nobel Prize. 2013. "Award Ceremony Speech." <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2013/ceremony-speech/>.