

Alice Munro's Newest Prizes Bring Triumph to the Canadian Literary World

by Jennifer Nguyen

At 82 years old and several decades of sumptuous stories behind her, Alice Munro has still got it.

Giller Prize. Governor General's Literary Award. Man Booker International Prize. Now, Canadian author Alice Munro can add Nobel Prize in Literature (and a cool \$1.3 million CAD) to her long list of prestigious awards.

On October 10, 2013, excitement and exalted joy rippled through the literary world as the much-revered author was given the highest honour in literature and deemed a master of the contemporary short story by the Swedish Academy. As the very first Canadian and 13th woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, Munro has carved out a lasting place for herself in history.

What makes her win even more triumphant and significant is the fact that she is being celebrated for penning short stories, a form of literature that often takes a backseat to more lengthy novels.

Both Munro and her longtime editor, publisher and dear friend, Douglas Gibson, believe that her win will pave the way for other short story writers, especially Canadian authors.

In the beginning of her career, Munro had faced her fair share of criticism regarding her choice to write short stories and decided to try her hand at writing a novel. Thankfully for readers everywhere, Gibson was there to keep her from straying from what she does best.

“I told her, ‘You’re trying to write a novel and it’s stopping you from writing anything at all. They’re all wrong; you’ve got to stop doing that. Just keep on writing short stories. If you go on writing short stories, I will go on publishing them and you will never ever hear me ask you for a novel.’” recalls Gibson.

Munro’s stories often feature complex and troubled female characters living in rural Southwestern Ontario, a choice that is clearly inspired by her time spent living in Huron County, Ontario.

At first glance, it may seem like reading her books could be a claustrophobic and repetitive experience, but that assumption would barely scratch the surface and quite frankly, be dead

wrong. Indeed, her stories are marked by similar characteristics, but they also have a rich variety of characters and settings.

Munro is masterful at capturing emotions and creating situations that resonate with people who exist outside of the story's backdrop.

"She has this ability to take ordinary people leading ordinary lives and make great literature out of it," says Gibson with an understated yet obvious enthusiasm.

"These everyday characters could be schoolteachers, chambermaids or farmers. She focuses in on the magic of the life in [a normal setting] and suddenly it's universal. People from all over the world are reading it and saying, 'I can relate to this character'."

Even with such an illustrious and celebrated career behind her, she still remains incredibly humble. Munro admitted to the Canadian Press that she was "just terribly surprised" when it was announced that she won the coveted prize.

As evidenced by her deliberate avoidance of publicity, Munro has never been one for the spotlight. In an age where self-indulgence and flashy displays of one's accomplishments are encouraged, the desire to preserve her private life is an endearing and admirable trait. Then again, Munro doesn't belong to the generation of self-obsessed narcissists that live and breathe social media.

Although she naturally shuns publicity, she has still fed the curiosity of the interested public by giving a little bit, but never an excessive amount, of insight into what goes on in that brilliant mind of hers. Judging by the few on-camera interviews she is willing to give, Munro is articulate, cheerful and unrelentingly appreciative of the praise that she is given.

Beyond the words sprawled on the pages of a book, it seems that Munro's stories inspire a rich visual storytelling that seamlessly transitions onto the big screen.

"Alice doesn't write with the intention of turning her stories into film, but she is pleased with it. She certainly isn't offended by it," Gibson says with a laugh.

"She thinks it's great that her stories are able to reach a wider audience."

Back in 2006, Canada's very own Sarah Polley brought Munro's short story, *The Bear Came Over the Mountain*, to life in the film, *Away from Her*, a gripping and resonant story that chronicles an elderly couple's struggle with mutual infidelity.

More recently, Alice's collection of shorts, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, received the Hollywood treatment and premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September under the title, *Hateship Loveship*. The family drama stars a talented cast that includes Saturday Night Live alum Kristen Wiig, Guy Pearce, Hailee Steinfeld and Nick Nolte.

Interestingly enough, *The Bear Came Over the Mountain* is one of the nine short stories found in the latter book.

Aside from being a “genius”, as Gibson puts it, Munro just happens to also be an admirable human being.

“There’s no law in this world that says a great artist should also be a really good person. But when it happens, it’s incredible. It’s been 40 years of sheer delight working with such a wonderful person like Alice,” gushes Gibson.

“She’s always been generous, pleasant and modest. And I’ve gotten to see her get better and better as a writer.”

Despite her historic Nobel Prize win, it seems as if the outpouring of support and enthusiasm will not be enough to ignite her will to create new material for readers to devour. Gibson says that at age 82, Munro feels that it’s time to put down her pen.

“In the past when Alice would say she was going to retire, I’d tell people, ‘No way. You can definitely expect more from her.’ But unfortunately, she means it this time.” says Gibson with a touch of sadness in his voice.

However, given her decision to retire, the world can still enjoy Munro’s existing body of work and praise her for igniting a much-deserved interest in the short story form.

Thanks to the endless amount of press that the Nobel Prize win has given Munro and her work, those who were previously unfamiliar with her stories will now flock bookstores to see, or more appropriately, read what all of the fuss is about. From *Too Much Happiness* to *Runaway*, *Dear Life* to *Lives of Girls and Women*, readers will be privy to her expert storytelling.