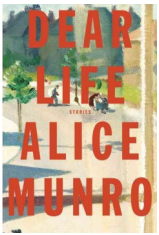


Dear Life: Stories



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No other author manages to squeeze so much historical detail and under-the-surface emotion into her short stories as Canadian writer, Alice Munro. Her short fiction has enthralled me for years. Although she's written a novel or two, almost her whole output - 17 published books - is in the short story form.

In Munro's stories time is never strictly chronological. Munro artfully flits between the present and the past. She never loses control. Her transitions are seamless; the reader never has to search or root around for the correct time and place. Also, important to these stories is the emotional arc. *Dear Life* is her most personal collection yet. To the ten stories included, Munro has added four memoir pieces that are not fiction, although Munro said that she fictionalized certain elements of them. If you've read the author's other collections, you'll recognize the farmland and small towns near Lake Huron, marked by poverty that Munro returns to again and again. There's also the young girl or woman breaking away from her family, seeking a better life. Sexuality often becomes a main theme and the endings are seldom happily-ever-after, but more like life, both good and bad, always complicated.

The author's father raised foxes and minx but unfortunately began just before 1928 when the market crashed. As a child she helped take care of the animals. Because her mother developed Parkinson's disease young, Alice also cooked the meals and did most of the housekeeping. When her father finally gave up the fur trade and took a dangerous night job in a factory, she packed his large evening meal.

The most absorbing memoir piece describes a summer Alice suffered from a bad case of insomnia where she often had thoughts about killing her little sister in the bunk below. To escape, she snuck out of the house each night and watched the trees limbs jostle each other and gazed at the stars. One morning - very early--her father joined her and she realized that he'd been aware of her night travels all along.

The stories themselves describe departures, misconceptions, and love affairs gone astray. In "Train" a returning soldier jumps off the locomotive and begins a new life to avoid his high school sweetheart who is meeting him in a pale green dress that she made for the occasion. He begins a platonic relationship with an older woman in which he cares for her farm in a small town down the road from the one where he was born. Early on, he realizes that when small town residents don't find what they need nearby, they go to the city instead, so he is safe from his past. When his housemate/employer gets cancer and they go to Toronto together, he disappears again for a new life.

The haunting "Gravel" tells the story of a divorce from a young child's view and how she fails to save someone very dear to her. Their mother gets theatre-fever in the 1960s and leaves her staid husband and their traditional middle class life for a handsome actor and a trailer on the poor side of town. In these and all Munro's stories, the reader learns a little more about humanity.

For another interesting story collection, with several stories set in backwoods Ontario also, try Margaret Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*.

Posted by Dory L. on February 6, 2013

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