



THE STORYTELLERS BOOK CLUB PRESENTS

The Progress of Love

Alice Munro

(McClelland & Stewart, 1986, now available from Penguin)

This was the very first book that I brought out under the Douglas Gibson Books imprint. I had originally signed it for publication in my role as Publisher of Macmillan of Canada, but when I left that company to join McClelland & Stewart, Alice decided that she wanted to come with me.

You can read about the ensuing legal dispute in Robert Thacker's fine biography, *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*. It went on for some time, and included a wonderful letter from Alice to Macmillan, explaining why she wanted to leave and follow me. It sang my praises and said, in part, "I came to Macmillan because of Doug, and his respect for my work changed me from a minor 'literary' writer who sold poorly into a major writer who sold well." In the end, Alice was freed to join me at my new imprint, although M&S had to pay what I called "a ransom" to join me in my new publishing venture.

This background made me even more determined to publish the book as well as I possibly could. As the perfect picture for the book's cover I chose Alex Colville's realistic painting *Elm Tree at Horton's Landing* (to be seen at the Art Gallery of Ontario). This leads me to the discussion points.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. The original book cover painting by Alex Colville shows an elm tree. Half of its branches are flourishing; half are dying. Which stories in *The Progress of Love* seem to you to be represented by this tree?
2. The English writer Claire Tomalin reviewed this book in the *Observer*, saying, “Read not more than one of her stories in a day, and allow them to work their spell slowly; they are made to last.” Did you slow down to read just one story a day? If so, how did that affect your reading? If not, did you see any benefit to reading the stories back to back?
3. The jury for the 2009 Man Booker International Prize, given to Alice Munro for Lifetime Achievement, said, “She brings as much depth, wisdom, and precision to every story as most novelists bring to a lifetime of work.” How well do the attributes “depth, wisdom, and precision” apply to the first story, which lends its name to the collection? How appropriate is it as the title of this group of stories?
4. That first story opens with these words: “I got a call at work, and it was my father. This was not long after I was divorced and started in the real-estate office. Both of my boys were in school . . .” Bang, bang, bang — straight into the direct, everyday voice of the narrator, even though it’s going to be a couple of paragraphs before we realize that she is hearing that her mother has just died. What does this opening tell us about the way this story is going to be told? (It is embarrassing for me to be reminded by Robert Thacker that this opening, which I admire here, was edited by me to produce this effect.)
5. What does Alice Munro gain, or lose, when she chooses to tell stories like this one in the first person (“I got a call”), as opposed to stories like “Lichen” in the third person? (Interestingly, when the story “The Progress of Love”

appeared earlier in the *New Yorker* it was in the third person, but Alice rewrote it for the book; she does things like this, and a smart editor goes along with her.)

6. “Lichen” has a startling, intimate image represented in the title. When the story ran in the *New Yorker*, the very conservative editor William Shawn commented, “The central image gave me misgivings, but the writer has earned the right to use it.” Were you startled by the lichen image, and by how Stella’s former husband used the photograph? Do you agree with William Shawn? Would he have made the same decision with a male writer’s story? Should he have?
7. “Monsieur les Deux Chapeux” has two male characters, Colin and Ross, at its centre, and it involves manly work like rebuilding a car, which rebuts the foolish claim that Alice Munro’s work is like Jane Austen’s in its exclusive concern with feminine matters. But while the central story is Colin’s acceptance of his role as his brother’s keeper, what do you think his mother, Sylvia; his wife, Glenna; and even the late arrival Nancy bring to the story?
8. “Miles City, Montana” has clear roots in Alice Munro’s own life. (Alice and her husband once drove their two young daughters from Canada’s west coast back to Ontario, going through Montana, where a swimming accident roughly like this one actually took place.) Does that make the telling of the story stronger? Does knowing that the story is partly based on fact affect the way you see it?
9. Does “Fits,” involving a murder-suicide, counter the idea that Alice Munro writes about everyday life in small towns where nothing much happens? And what does the story suggest about the role of gossip and local news as the lifeblood of any small town — and of trust as the lifeblood of any relationship?
10. “The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink” covers more

than fifty years in the lives of the cousins Edgar and Sam, and of Callie, the maid at Kernaghan's boarding house, where they stay. We see the story through Sam's eyes (though not through his first-person words, which is a neat trick), and the key moment comes when the boys make their escape on the train to the alien world of Toronto. Were you surprised when the story turned around just as the train left the station and three lives were changed? And, earlier, is the sexual encounter (referred to by Callie as "that stupid business," with results that "reminded her of when somebody blew their nose") the least erotic three-way sex scene in literary history? Do you know a worse one?

11. "Mr. Cryderman," I said softly. I felt wonderfully lightened, not burdened, by my lie. 'It's him.'" Was this for you the turning point in "Jesse and Meribeth"? Did you enjoy the irony of an invented lie turning toward the truth as the story unfolds? And how common among young girls is the sort of "tender, loyal, boring friendship" Jesse had with MaryBeth Crocker? And how do you like (and Alice Munro is superb at catching the niceties of class, and pride) Aunt Edna, the professional cleaning lady, who "made us understand that we were all superior people in spite of, or perhaps because of, relative poverty"? (The Scottish poet Robert Burns praised "honest poverty," and this sentence seems to me, born and raised in Scotland, to reflect Alice's Scottish-Canadian roots.)
12. "Eskimo" was singled out by some reviewers as the weakest story in the book. Do you agree? I admire how the claustrophobic setting of a plane ride "in a jumbo jet over the Pacific Ocean" somehow allows Alice Munro to explore the life of Mary Jo and her affair with Dr. Streeter, her employer — and the decency that makes her want to help others. What strengths do you see in this story? Which story did you find the weakest in the collection?
13. "A Queer Streak" is the longest story in the book. Actually, it's two stories, with a separate title for each part. The first,

“Anonymous Letters,” shows the devastating effect such letters can have on a family — and even when the mystery of who sent them is solved, their mere existence ruins Violet’s plans for a settled life as a minister’s wife. Were you surprised by the young minister’s reaction? (Alice Munro knew at first hand the power of anonymous letters. In 1978, when she appeared at a local Huron County meeting to speak up for Margaret Laurence’s novel *The Diviners* to the outrage of pious locals who wanted to ban it, she later received a number of vicious anonymous letters.)

14. The second half of “A Queer Streak,” entitled “Possession,” centres on Violet’s nephew Dane, briefly introduced in the first half as “her timid-looking, fat son, who had the odd name of Dane.” Do you think that the two stories should have been kept separate, or that the overlapping of the characters — with the second half including Violet’s death just after the fire — made it sensible to combine them as one story about two generations?
15. “Circle of Prayer” (the last story that Alice wrote in time for this collection) is about Trudy and her teenage daughter Robin, who lays a valued family necklace in the coffin of a dead friend who was not really close to her. But some readers find that, as often happens with Alice Munro, their attention is drawn to other characters, like Trudy’s torn ex-husband, Dan (“If you go, that’s it”), or Kelvin, the helpful guy at the hospital (“Up town, a man said to him, ‘Hey, which one of them two is your girlfriend?’”). Who caught your attention in this story?
16. “White Dump,” split into three parts, is one of the most complex stories in the book. With Laurence at the centre, it includes several generations, including his mother, Sophie (“Old Norse”); his first wife, Isabel; and his daughter Denise (whose brother can’t understand why she “is still so bound up with these people”). Do you agree that this story is really, as I think, about the impact of time? And did you notice how

expertly Alice uses time here, letting the family history unfold gradually? One example: when Laurence is recalling his fortieth birthday present, a family trip in a plane with a local pilot, he talks of going in his mother's car — "Remember she'd had a bad experience that morning with the hippies?" There's no further mention of it until many pages later, when Sophie goes for her usual naked, early morning swim in the lake and sees figures emerge on the shore. The "bad experience" begins.

17. In the same way, the birthday flight introduces Isabel to the pilot, who is never named. Robert Thacker, the great Alice Munro scholar, has written that the real turning point in the story is when, in the modern-day conversation, Laurence asks Denise abruptly, "How is your mother?" and we move on to what he calls "the real subject," the moment when Isabel "resolved to act on the sudden attraction she felt for a man she happened to meet" . . . with far-reaching results for the whole family. Do you agree? Or were there other key moments for you, other "real" stories?
18. When Isabel drove to meet the pilot the day after the birthday flight, were you surprised? How impressed were you by the cover stories she had prepared for meeting him, and by how their meeting unfolded?
19. In the air, the pilot talks about what it's like to fly in an electric storm, and how St. Elmo's Fire flashes from his fingertips. I wanted to call this story "St. Elmo's Fire," but Alice decided to stick with "White Dump." Which title do you think better suits the story?
20. Robert Thacker and I agree that our favourite stories here are "the bookends," the first and last stories. What is your favourite story in this collection? Why?

The Progress of Love won the Governor General's Literary Award for 1986 and has been hailed around the English-speaking world as

one of the finest short story collections ever published. In Canada, *Saturday Night* magazine's David Macfarlane called it the "best collection of stories — the most confident and, at the same time, the most adventurous — ever written by a Canadian." Since then, Alice Munro (and Douglas Gibson Books) has published eight other collections of new stories: *Friend of My Youth* (1990); *Open Secrets* (1994); *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998); *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001); *Runaway* (2004); *The View from Castle Rock* (2006); *Too Much Happiness* (2009); and *Dear Life* (2012). Do you prefer any of these books to *The Progress of Love*?

A final note: my loyal friend Alice has written a generous foreword to my book of publishing memoirs, *Stories About Storytellers*. You can find more stories about Alice in that book's final chapter, which hails her as a "Not Bad Short Story Writer."

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