

Alice Munro

1931 –
Literature — 2013



Several years ago we published a book about Canada and the Nobel Prize. In it, we outlined the history of the prize established by Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel in 1901 and awarded each year in five categories: Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, Literature and Peace. An economics prize was introduced later. *Canada and the Nobel Prize* profiles the many Canadians who have received this prestigious award, beginning with Frederick Banting and his 1923 award in Medicine for the discovery of insulin. Throughout the years, Canadians have been well-represented in all categories except Literature. Canadian-born American writer Saul Bellow and Ernest Hemingway are the only Nobel literature winners with a connection to Canada: a curious omission since there have been many world-famous Canadian writers and the country has a rich and valued heritage in world literature.

This lack of recognition has now been corrected with the awarding of the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature to Alice Munro. Highly respected and much-honoured as Canadian master of the short story, Munro has been referred to as “the Canadian Chekov.”

Her books are not about spies, muscular superheroes, intrigue, violence, depravity or even history-changing events. Her long and successful writing career has concentrated instead on quiet human dramas and contemporary stories that deal with ordinary people living in rural and small-town Ontario—a world that she knows well and that is instantly recognizable to many readers. Concentrating mainly on true-to-life situations of women and girls, Munro’s writing delves into how human interactions attempt to rationalize the chaos of life and the continuum of time — past, present and future. That she has used the under-recognized genre of the short story to weave her literary magic makes her achievement all the more extraordinary.

Alice Munro was born and grew up in Wingham, Ontario, in the rich farmland south of the Bruce Peninsula. She studied journalism at the University of Western Ontario in nearby London and married fellow student James Munro. Their move to British Columbia to raise their family and open a bookshop in Victoria helped rekindle the interest in writing she had had from her teenage years. *Munro’s Books*

is still there, near the Empress Hotel and is well worth a visit.

It was in BC that Munro wrote her first published books, beginning with *Dance of the Happy Shades* in 1968. After her divorce from James Munro in 1972, she moved back to Ontario and eventually settled in Clinton, where she lives today. Her experiences in small-town Ontario gave her the atmosphere for the stories she would continue to produce throughout her writing years, up to and including the collection *Dear Life*, published in 2012. Winner of the Trillium Book Award, Ontario's leading award for literature, Munro declared earlier this year that *Dear Life* would be her last book ... but time will tell.

In all, Munro has written 14 books of short stories, two of which have been adapted into much-acclaimed Canadian films.

Winning the Nobel Prize is the pinnacle of Munro's writing career, placing her in the ranks of giants of world literature, such as Ernest Hemingway, Doris Lessing, Winston Churchill, Pearl Buck, George Bernard Shaw, Albert Camus, Thomas Mann, John Steinbeck, Harold Pinter. However, it is not the first major award in her career: she was the recipient of the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2009; the Giller Prize in 1998 and 2004; and the Governor General's Literary Award in 1968, 1978 and 1986.

Husband Gerald Fremlin, whom she married in 1976, died earlier this year, but would have loved to see her add this most prestigious of accolades to her achievements.

It was significant, I thought, that the photo the *New York Times* used when reporting her Nobel Prize showed Alice Munro in her kitchen, dishes stacked in the sink and a window out to her garden behind her. It visually defines our attitude toward her, why Canadians have long claimed her as one of our own. She is one of us with no pretensions, a person and writer comfortable in her own world — our world.

The Nobel Prize awards ceremony will take place on December 10 in Stockholm, Sweden.