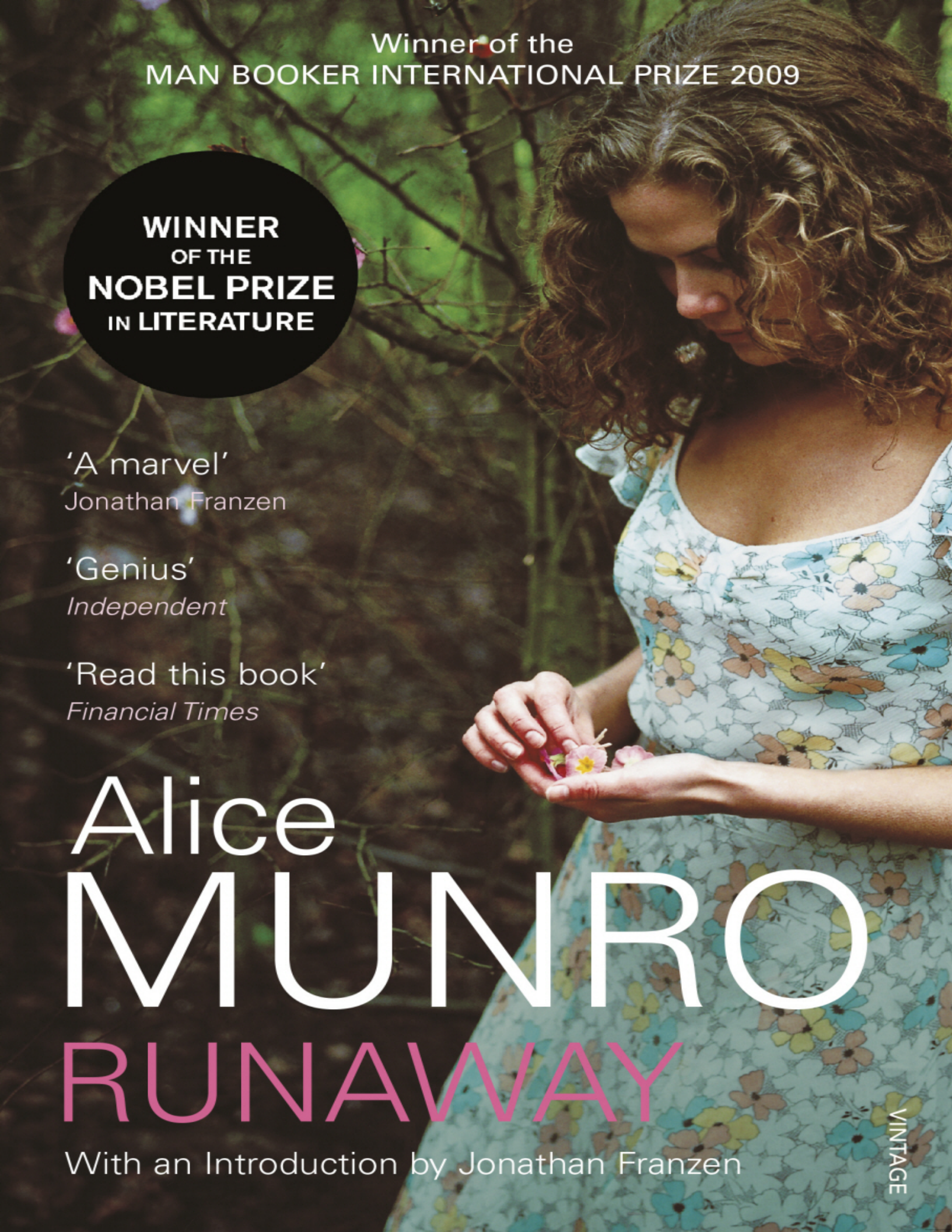
Winner of the
MAN BOOKER INTERNATIONAL PRIZE 2009
WINNER
OF THE
NOBEL PRIZE
IN LITERATURE
'A marvel'
Jonathan Franzen
'Genius'
Independent
'Read this book'
Financial Times
Alice
MUNRO
RUNAWAY
With an Introduction by Jonathan Franzen
VINTAGE

Contents

About the Book

The matchless Munro makes art out of everyday lives in this dazzling collection. At its centre are three stories connected into one marvellously rich narrative about Juliet – who escapes from teaching at a girls' school and throws herself into a wild and passionate love match.

Here are men and women of wildly different times and circumstances, their lives made vividly palpable by the nuance and empathy of Munro's writing. *Runaway* is about the power and betrayals of love, about lost children, lost chances. There is pain and desolation beneath the surface, like a needle in the heart, which makes these stories more powerful and compelling than anything she has written.

About the Author

****Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature****
Alice Munro was born in 1931 and is the author of twelve collections of stories, most recently *Dear Life*, and a novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*. She has received many awards and prizes, including three of Canada's Governor General's Literary Awards and two Giller Prizes, the Rea Award for the Short Story, the Lannan Literary Award, the WHSmith Book Award in the UK, the National Book Critics Circle Award in the US, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for *The Beggar Maid*, and has been awarded the Man Booker International Prize 2009 for her overall contribution to fiction on the world stage. Her stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Paris Review* and other publications, and her collections have been translated into thirteen languages. She lives with her husband in Clinton, Ontario, near Lake Huron in Canada.

Also by Alice Munro:

Dance of the Happy Shades
Lives of Girls and Women
Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You
The Beggar Maid
The Moons of Jupiter
The Progress of Love
Friend of My Youth
Open Secrets
Selected Stories
The Love of a Good Woman
Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage
The View From Castle Rock
Too Much Happiness

In memory of my friends,

Mary Carey

Jean Livermore

Melda Buchanan

Alice Munro

RUNAWAY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Jonathan Franzen

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

INTRODUCTION:
What Makes You So Sure You're Not the Evil One Yourself?

ALICE MUNRO HAS a strong claim to being the best fiction writer now working in North America, but outside of Canada, where her books are No. 1 bestsellers, she has never had a large readership. At the risk of sounding like a pleader on behalf of yet another underappreciated writer – and maybe you've learned to recognize and evade these pleas? The same way you've learned not to open bulk mail from certain charities? Please give generously to Dawn Powell? Your contribution of just 15 minutes a week can help assure Joseph Roth of his rightful place in the modern canon? – I want to circle around Munro's latest marvel of a book, *Runaway*, by taking some guesses at why her excellence so dismayingly exceeds her fame.

1. *Munro's work is all about storytelling pleasure*. The problem here being that many buyers of serious fiction seem rather ardently to prefer lyrical, tremblingly earnest, faux-literary stuff.

2. *As long as you're reading Munro, you're failing to multitask by absorbing civics lessons or historical data*. Her subject is people. People people people. If you read fiction

about some enriching subject like Renaissance art or an important chapter in our nation's history, you can be assured of feeling productive. But if the story is set in the modern world, and if the characters' concerns are familiar to you, and if you become so involved with a book that you can't put it down at bedtime, there exists a risk that you're merely being entertained.

3. *She doesn't give her books grand titles like* Canadian Pastoral, Canadian Psycho, Purple Canada, In Canada *or* The Plot Against Canada. Also, she refuses to render vital dramatic moments in convenient discursive summary. Also, her rhetorical restraint and her excellent ear for dialogue and her almost pathological empathy for her characters have the costly effect of obscuring her authorial ego for many pages at a stretch. Also, her jacket photos show her smiling pleasantly, as if the reader were a friend, rather than wearing the kind of woeful scowl that signifies really serious literary intent.

4. *The Swedish Royal Academy is taking a firm stand*. Evidently, the feeling in Stockholm is that too many Canadians and too many pure short-story writers have already been given the literature Nobel. Enough is enough!

5. *Munro writes fiction, and fiction is harder to review than nonfiction*.

Here's Bill Clinton, he's written a book about himself, and how *interesting*. How *interesting*. The author himself is interesting – can there be a better qualification for writing a book about Bill Clinton than actually being Bill Clinton? – and then, too, everybody has an opinion about Bill Clinton and wonders what Bill Clinton says and doesn't say in his new book about himself, and how Bill Clinton spins this and refutes that, and before you know it the review has practically written itself.

But who is Alice Munro? She is the remote provider of intensely pleasurable private experiences. And since I'm not interested in reviewing her new book's marketing campaign or in being entertainingly snarky at her expense, and since I'm reluctant to talk about the concrete meaning of her new work, because this is difficult to do without revealing too much plot, I'm probably better off just serving up a nice quote for Alfred A. Knopf to pull –

> Munro has a strong claim to being the **best fiction writer** now working in North America. ***Runaway is* a marvel**

– and suggesting to the *New York Times Book Review*'s editors that they run the biggest possible photograph of Munro in the most prominent of places, plus a few smaller photos of mildly prurient interest (her kitchen? her children?) and maybe a quote from one of her rare interviews –

> Because there is this kind of exhaustion and bewilderment when you look at your work. . . . All you really have left is the thing you're working on now. And so you're much more thinly clothed. You're like somebody out in a little shirt or something, which is just the work you're doing now and the strange identification with everything you've done before. And this probably is why I don't take any public role as a writer. Because I can't see myself doing that except as a gigantic fraud

– and just leave it at that.

6. *Because, worse yet, Munro is a pure short-story writer*. And with short stories the challenge to reviewers is even more extreme. Is there a story in all of world literature

whose appeal can survive the typical synopsis? (*A chance meeting on a boardwalk in Yalta brings together a bored husband and a lady with a little dog . . . A small town's annual lottery is revealed to serve a rather surprising purpose . . . A middle-aged Dubliner leaves a party and reflects on life and love . .* .) Oprah Winfrey will not touch story collections. Discussing them is so challenging, indeed, that one can almost forgive the *New York Times Book Review*'s former editor, Charles McGrath, for his recent comparison of young short-story writers to 'people who learn golf by never venturing onto a golf course but instead practicing at a driving range.' The real game being, by this analogy, the novel.

McGrath's prejudice is shared by nearly all commercial publishers, for whom a story collection is, most frequently, the distasteful front-end write-off in a two-book deal whose back end is contractually forbidden to be another story collection. And yet, despite the short story's Cinderella status, or maybe because of it, a high percentage of the most exciting fiction written in the last 25 years – the stuff I immediately mention if somebody asks me what's terrific – has been short fiction. There's the Great One herself, naturally. There's also Lydia Davis, David Means, George Saunders, Lorrie Moore, Amy Hempel and the late Raymond Carver – all of them pure or nearly pure short-story writers – and then a larger group of writers who have achievements in multiple genres (John Updike, Joy Williams, David Foster Wallace, Joyce Carol Oates, Denis Johnson, Ann Beattie, William T. Vollmann, Tobias Wolff, Annie Proulx, Tom Drury, the late Andre Dubus) but who seem to me most at home, most undilutedly themselves, in their shorter work. There are also, to be sure, some very fine pure novelists. But when I close my eyes and think about literature in recent decades, I see a twilight landscape in which many of the most inviting lights, the

sites that beckon me to return for a visit, are shed by particular short stories I've read.

I like stories because they leave the writer no place to hide. There's no yakking your way out of trouble; I'm going to be reaching the last page in a matter of minutes, and if you've got nothing to say I'm going to know it. I like stories because they're usually set in the present or in living memory; the genre seems to resist the historical impulse that makes so many contemporary novels feel fugitive or cadaverous. I like stories because it takes the best kind of talent to invent fresh characters and situations while telling the same story over and over. All fiction writers suffer from the condition of having nothing new to say, but story writers are the ones most abjectly prone to this condition. There is, again, no hiding. The craftiest old dogs, like Munro and William Trevor, don't even try.

Here's the story that Munro keeps telling: A bright, sexually avid girl grows up in rural Ontario without much money, her mother is sickly or dead, her father is a schoolteacher whose second wife is problematic, and the girl, as soon as she can, escapes from the hinterland by way of a scholarship or some decisive self-interested act. She marries young, moves to British Columbia, raises kids, and is far from blameless in the break-up of her marriage. She may have success as an actress or a writer or a TV personality; she has romantic adventures. When, inevitably, she returns to Ontario, she finds the landscape of her youth unsettlingly altered. Although she was the one who abandoned the place, it's a great blow to her narcissism that she isn't warmly welcomed back – that the world of her youth, with its older-fashioned manners and mores, now sits in judgment on the modern choices she has made. Simply by trying to survive as a whole and independent person, she has incurred painful losses and dislocations; she has caused harm.

And that's pretty much it. That's the little stream that's been feeding Munro's work for better than 50 years. The same elements recur and recur like Clare Quilty. What makes Munro's growth as an artist so crisply and breathtakingly visible – throughout the *Selected Stories* and even more so in her three latest books – is precisely the familiarity of her materials. Look what she can do with nothing but her own small story; the more she returns to it, the more she finds.

This is not a golfer on a practice tee. This is a gymnast in a plain black leotard, alone on a bare floor, outperforming all the novelists with their flashy costumes and whips and elephants and tigers.

'The complexity of things – the things within things – just seems to be endless,' Munro told her interviewer. 'I mean nothing is easy, nothing is simple.'

She was stating the fundamental axiom of literature, the core of its appeal. And, for whatever reason – the fragmentation of my reading time, the distractions and atomizations of contemporary life or, perhaps, a genuine paucity of compelling novels – I find that when I'm in need of a hit of real writing, a good stiff drink of paradox and complexity, I'm likeliest to encounter it in short fiction. Besides *Runaway*, the most compelling contemporary fiction I've read in recent months has been Wallace's stories in *Oblivion* and a stunner of a collection by the British writer Helen Simpson. Simpson's book, a series of comic shrieks on the subject of modern motherhood, was published originally as *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life* – a title you would think needed no improvement. But the book's American packagers set to work improving it, and what did they come up with? *Getting a Life*. Consider this dismal gerund the next time you hear an American publisher insisting that story collections never sell.

7. *Munro's short stories are even harder to review than other people's short stories*.

More than any writer since Chekhov, Munro strives for and achieves, in each of her stories, a gestaltlike completeness in the representation of a life. She always had a genius for developing and unpacking moments of epiphany. But it's in the three collections since *Selected Stories* (1996) that she's taken the really big, world-class leap and become a master of suspense. The moments she's pursuing now aren't moments of realization; they're moments of fateful, irrevocable, dramatic action. And what this means for the reader is you can't even begin to guess at a story's meaning until you've followed every twist; it's always the last page or two that switches all the lights on.

Meanwhile, as her narrative ambitions have grown, she's become ever less interested in showing off. Her early work was full of big rhetoric, eccentric detail, arresting phrases. (Check out her 1977 story 'Royal Beatings'.) But as her stories have come to resemble classical tragedies in prose form, it's not only as if she no longer has room for inessentials, it's as if it would be actively jarring, mood-puncturing – an aesthetic and moral betrayal – for her writerly ego to intrude on the pure story.

Reading Munro puts me in that state of quiet reflection in which I think about my own life: about the decisions I've made, the things I've done and haven't done, the kind of person I am, the prospect of death. She is one of the handful of writers, some living, most dead, whom I have in mind when I say that fiction is my religion. For as long as I'm immersed in a Munro story, I am according to an entirely make-believe character the kind of solemn respect and quiet rooting interest that I accord myself in my better moments as a human being.

But suspense and purity, which are a gift to the reader, present problems for the reviewer. Basically, *Runaway* is so good that I don't want to talk about it here. Quotation can't

do the book justice, and neither can synopsis. The way to do it justice is to read it.

In fulfillment of my critical duties, I would like to offer, instead, this one-sentence teaser for the last story in Munro's previous collection, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001): A woman with early Alzheimer's enters a care facility, and by the time her husband is allowed to visit her, after a 30-day adjustment period, she has found a 'boyfriend' among the other patients and shows no interest in the husband.

This is not a bad premise for a story. But what begins to make it distinctively Munrovian is that, years ago, back in the 1960's and 1970's, the husband, Grant, had affair after affair with other women. It's only now, for the first time, that the old betrayer is being betrayed. And does Grant finally come to regret those affairs? Well, no, not at all. Indeed, what he remembers from that phase of his life is 'mainly a gigantic increase in well-being.' He never felt more alive than when he was cheating on the wife, Fiona. It tears him up, of course, to visit the facility now and to see Fiona and her 'boyfriend' so openly tender with each other and so indifferent to him. But he's even more torn up when the boyfriend's wife removes him from the facility and takes him home. Fiona is devastated, and Grant is devastated on her behalf.

And here is the trouble with a capsule summary of a Munro story. The trouble is I want to tell you what happens next. Which is that Grant goes to see the boyfriend's wife to ask if she might take the boyfriend back to visit Fiona at the facility. And that it's here that you realize that what you thought the story was about – all the pregnant stuff about Alzheimer's and infidelity and late-blooming love – was actually just the set-up: that the story's great scene is between Grant and the boyfriend's wife. And that the wife, in this scene, refuses to let her husband see Fiona. That her

reasons are ostensibly practical but subterraneanly moral and spiteful.

And here my attempt at capsule summary breaks down altogether, because I can't begin to suggest the greatness of the scene if you don't have a particular, vivid sense of the two characters and how they speak and think. The wife, Marian, is narrower-minded than Grant. She has a perfect, spotless suburban house that she won't be able to afford if her husband returns to the facility. This house, not romance, is what matters to her. She hasn't had the same advantages, either economic or emotional, that Grant has had, and her obvious lack of privilege occasions a passage of classic Munrovian introspection as Grant drives back to his own house.

> [Their conversation had] reminded him of conversations he'd had with people in his own family. His uncles, his relatives, probably even his mother, had thought the way Marian thought. They had believed that when other people did not think that way it was because they were kidding themselves – they had got too airy-fairy, or stupid, on account of their easy and protected lives or their education. They had lost touch with reality. Educated people, literary people, some rich people like Grant's socialist in-laws had lost touch with reality. Due to an unmerited good fortune or an innate silliness . . .
>
> What a jerk, she would be thinking now.
>
> Being up against a person like that made him feel hopeless, exasperated, finally almost desolate. Why? Because he couldn't be sure of holding on to himself against that person? Because he was afraid that in the end they'd be right?

I end this quotation unwillingly. I want to keep quoting, and not just little bits but whole passages, because it turns out that what my capsule summary requires, at a minimum, in order to do justice to the story – the 'things within things,' the interplay of class and morality, of desire and fidelity, of character and fate – is exactly what Munro herself has already written on the page. The only adequate summary of the text is the text itself.

Which leaves me with the simple instruction that I began with: Read Munro! Read Munro!

Except that I must tell you — cannot not tell you, now that I've started – that when Grant arrives home after his unsuccessful appeal to Marian, there's a message from Marian on his answering machine, inviting him to a dance at the Legion hall.

Also: that Grant has already been checking out Marian's breasts and her skin and likening her, in his imagination, to a less than satisfying litchi nut: 'The flesh with its oddly artificial allure, its chemical taste and perfume, shallow over the extensive seed, the stone.'

Also: that, some hours later, while Grant is still reassessing Marian's attractions, his telephone rings again and his machine picks up: 'Grant. This is Marian. I was down in the basement putting the wash in the dryer and I heard the phone and when I got upstairs whoever it was had hung up. So I just thought I ought to say I was here. If it was you and if you are even home.'

And this still isn't the ending. The story is 49 pages long – the size of a whole life, in Munro's hands – and another turn is coming. But look how many 'things within things' the author already has uncovered: Grant the loving husband, Grant the cheater, Grant the husband so loyal that he's willing, in effect, to pimp for his wife, Grant the despiser of proper housewives, Grant the self-doubter who grants that proper housewives may be right to despise him. It's Marian's second phone call, however, that provides the

true measure of Munro's writerly character. To imagine this call, you can't be too enraged with Marian's moral strictures. Nor can you be too ashamed of Grant's laxity. You have to forgive everybody and damn no one. Otherwise you'll overlook the low probabilities, the odd chances, that crack a life wide open: the possibility, for example, that Marian in her loneliness might be attracted to a silly liberal man.

And this is just one story. There are stories in *Runaway* that are even better than this one – bolder, bloodier, deeper, broader – and that I'll be happy to synopsize as soon as Munro's next book is published.

Or, but, wait, one tiny glimpse into *Runaway*: What if the person offended by Grant's liberality – by his godlessness, his self-indulgence, his vanity, his *silliness* – weren't some unhappy stranger but Grant's own child? A child whose judgment feels like the judgment of a whole culture, a whole country, that has lately taken to embracing absolutes?

What if the great gift you've given your child is personal freedom, and what if the child, when she turns 21, uses this gift to turn around and say to you: your freedom makes me sick, and so do you?

8. *Hatred is entertaining*. The great insight of media-age extremists. How else to explain the election of so many repellent zealots, the disintegration of political civility, the ascendancy of Fox News? First the fundamentalist bin Laden gives George Bush an enormous gift of hatred, then Bush compounds that hatred through his own fanaticism, and now one half of the country believes that Bush is crusading against the Evil One while the other half (and most of the world) believes that Bush *is* the Evil One. There's hardly anybody who doesn't hate somebody now, and nobody at all whom somebody doesn't hate. Whenever I think about politics, my pulse rate jumps as if I'm reading

the last chapter of an airport thriller, as if I'm watching Game Seven of a Sox-Yankees series. It's like entertainment-as-nightmare-as-everyday-life.

Can a better kind of fiction save the world? There's always some tiny hope (strange things do happen), but the answer is almost certainly no, it can't. There is some reasonable chance, however, that it could save your soul. If you're unhappy about the hatred that's been unleashed in your heart, you might try imagining what it's like to be the person who hates you; you might consider the possibility that you are, in fact, the Evil One yourself; and, if this is difficult to imagine, then you might try spending a few evenings with the most dubious of Canadians. Who, at the end of her classic story *The Beggar Maid*, in which the heroine, Rose, catches sight of her ex-husband in an airport concourse, and the ex-husband makes a childish, hideous face at her, and Rose wonders

> How could anybody hate Rose so much, at the very moment when she was ready to come forward with her good will, her smiling confession of exhaustion, her air of diffident faith in civilized overtures?

she is speaking to you and to me right here, right now.

Jonathan Franzen, 2004

RUNAWAY

CARLA HEARD THE car coming before it topped the little rise in the road that around here they called a hill. It's her, she thought. Mrs. Jamieson—Sylvia—home from her holiday in Greece. From the barn door—but far enough inside that she could not readily be seen—she watched the road Mrs. Jamieson would have to drive by on, her place being half a mile farther along the road than Clark and Carla's.

If it was somebody getting ready to turn in at their gate it would be slowing down by now. But still Carla hoped. *Let it not be her*.

It was. Mrs. Jamieson turned her head once, quickly—she had all she could do maneuvering her car through the ruts and puddles the rain had made in the gravel—but she didn't lift a hand off the wheel to wave, she didn't spot Carla. Carla got a glimpse of a tanned arm bare to the shoulder, hair bleached a lighter color than it had been before, more white now than silver-blond, and an expression that was determined and exasperated and amused at her own exasperation—just the way Mrs. Jamieson would look negotiating such a road. When she turned her head there was something like a bright flash—of inquiry, of hopefulness—that made Carla shrink back.

So.

Maybe Clark didn't know yet. If he was sitting at the computer he would have his back to the window and the

road.

But Mrs. Jamieson might have to make another trip. Driving home from the airport, she might not have stopped for groceries—not until she'd been home and figured out what she needed. Clark might see her then. And after dark, the lights of her house would show. But this was July, and it didn't get dark till late. She might be so tired that she wouldn't bother with the lights, she might go to bed early.

On the other hand, she might telephone. Any time now.

This was the summer of rain and more rain. You heard it first thing in the morning, loud on the roof of the mobile home. The trails were deep in mud, the long grass soaking, leaves overhead sending down random showers even in those moments when there was no actual downpour from the sky and the clouds looked like clearing. Carla wore a high, wide-brimmed old Australian felt hat every time she went outside, and tucked her long thick braid down her shirt.

Nobody showed up for trail rides, even though Clark and Carla had gone around posting signs in all the camping sites, in the cafes, and on the tourist office billboard and anywhere else they could think of. Only a few pupils were coming for lessons and those were regulars, not the batches of schoolchildren on vacation, the busloads from summer camps, that had kept them going through last summer. And even the regulars that they counted on were taking time off for holiday trips, or simply cancelling their lessons because of the weather being so discouraging. If they called too late, Clark charged them for the time anyway. A couple of them had complained, and quit for good.

There was still some income from the three horses that were boarded. Those three, and the four of their own, were out in the field now, poking around in the grass under the trees. They looked as if they couldn't be bothered to notice

that the rain was holding off for the moment, the way it often did for a while in the afternoon. Just enough to get your hopes up—the clouds whitening and thinning and letting through a diffuse brightness that never got around to being real sunshine, and was usually gone before supper.

Carla had finished mucking out in the barn. She had taken her time—she liked the rhythm of her regular chores, the high space under the barn roof, the smells. Now she went over to the exercise ring to see how dry the ground was, in case the five o'clock pupil did show up.

Most of the steady showers had not been particularly heavy, or borne on any wind, but last week there had come a sudden stirring and then a blast through the treetops and a nearly horizontal blinding rain. In a quarter of an hour the storm had passed over. But branches lay across the road, hydro lines were down, and a large chunk of the plastic roofing over the ring had been torn loose. There was a puddle like a lake at that end of the track, and Clark had worked until after dark, digging a channel to drain it away.

The roof had not yet been repaired. Clark had strung fence wire across to keep the horses from getting into the mud, and Carla had marked out a shorter track.

On the Web, right now, Clark was hunting for someplace to buy roofing. Some salvage outlet, with prices that they could afford, or somebody trying to get rid of such material secondhand. He would not go to Hy and Robert Buckley's Building Supply in town, which he called Highway Robbers Buggery Supply, because he owed them too much money and had had a fight with them.

Clark had fights not just with the people he owed money to. His friendliness, compelling at first, could suddenly turn sour. There were places he would not go into, where he always made Carla go, because of some row. The drugstore was one such place. An old woman had pushed in front of him—that is, she had gone to get something she'd forgotten and come back and pushed in front, rather than going to

the end of the line, and he had complained, and the cashier had said to him, “She has emphysema,” and Clark had said, “Is that so? I have piles, myself,” and the manager had been summoned, to say that was uncalled-for. And in the coffee shop out on the highway the advertised breakfast discount had not been allowed, because it was past eleven o’clock in the morning, and Clark had argued and then dropped his takeout cup of coffee on the floor—just missing, so they said, a child in its stroller. He said the child was half a mile away and he dropped the cup because no cuff had been provided. They said he had not asked for a cuff. He said he shouldn’t have had to ask.

“You flare up,” said Carla.

“That’s what men do.”

She had not said anything to him about his row with Joy Tucker. Joy Tucker was the librarian from town who boarded her horse with them. The horse was a quick-tempered little chestnut mare named Lizzie—Joy Tucker, when she was in a jokey mood, called her Lizzie Borden. Yesterday she had driven out, not in a jokey mood at all, and complained about the roof’s not being fixed yet, and Lizzie looking miserable, as if she might have caught a chill.

There was nothing the matter with Lizzie, actually. Clark had tried—for him—to be placating. But then it was Joy Tucker who flared up and said that their place was a dump, and Lizzie deserved better, and Clark said, “Suit yourself.” Joy had not—or not yet—removed Lizzie, as Carla had expected. But Clark, who had formerly made the little mare his pet, had refused to have anything more to do with her. Lizzie’s feelings were hurt, in consequence—she was balky when exercised and kicked up a fuss when her hoofs had to be picked out, as they did every day, lest they develop a fungus. Carla had to watch out for nips.

But the worst thing as far as Carla was concerned was the absence of Flora, the little white goat who kept the

horses company in the barn and in the fields. There had not been any sign of her for two days. Carla was afraid that wild dogs or coyotes had got her, or even a bear.

She had dreamt of Flora last night and the night before. In the first dream Flora had walked right up to the bed with a red apple in her mouth, but in the second dream—last night—she had run away when she saw Carla coming. Her leg seemed to be hurt but she ran anyway. She led Carla to a barbed-wire barricade of the kind that might belong on some battlefield, and then she—Flora—slipped through it, hurt leg and all, just slithered through like a white eel and disappeared.

The horses had seen Carla go across to the ring and they had all moved up to the fence—looking bedraggled in spite of their New Zealand blankets—so that she would take notice of them on her way back. She talked quietly to them, apologizing for coming empty-handed. She stroked their necks and rubbed their noses and asked whether they knew anything about Flora.

Grace and Juniper snorted and nuzzled up, as if they recognized the name and shared her concern, but then Lizzie butted in between them and knocked Grace's head away from Carla's petting hand. She gave the hand a nip for good measure, and Carla had to spend some time scolding her.

Up until three years ago Carla never really looked at mobile homes. She didn't call them that, either. Like her parents, she would have thought "mobile home" pretentious. Some people lived in trailers, and that was all there was to it. One trailer was no different from another. When Carla moved in here, when she chose this life with Clark, she began to see things in a new way. After that she started saying "mobile home" and she looked to see how people had fixed them up. The kind of curtains they had hung, the way they had painted the trim, the ambitious

decks or patios or extra rooms that had been built on. She could hardly wait to get at such improvements herself.

Clark had gone along with her ideas, for a while. He had built new steps, and spent a lot of time looking for an old wrought-iron railing for them. He didn't make any complaint about the money spent on paint for the kitchen and bathroom or the material for curtains. Her paint job was hasty—she didn't know, at that time, that you should take the hinges off the cupboard doors. Or that you should line the curtains, which had since faded.

What Clark balked at was tearing up the carpet, which was the same in every room and the thing that she had most counted on replacing. It was divided into small brown squares, each with a pattern of darker brown and rust and tan squiggles and shapes. For a long time she had thought these were the same squiggles and shapes, arranged in the same way, in each square. Then when she had had more time, a lot of time, to examine them, she decided that there were four patterns joined together to make identical larger squares. Sometimes she could pick out the arrangement easily and sometimes she had to work to see it.

She did this when it was raining outside and Clark's mood weighted down all their inside space, and he did not want to pay attention to anything but the computer screen. But the best thing to do then was to invent or remember some job to do in the barn. The horses would not look at her when she was unhappy, but Flora, who was never tied up, would come and rub against her, and look up with an expression that was not quite sympathy—it was more like comradely mockery—in her shimmering yellow-green eyes.

Flora had been a half-grown kid when Clark brought her home from a farm where he had gone to bargain for some horse tackle. The people there were giving up on the country life, or at least on the raising of animals—they had sold their horses but failed to get rid of their goats. He had heard about how a goat was able to bring a sense of ease

and comfort into a horse stable and he wanted to try it. They had meant to breed her someday but there had never been any signs of her coming into heat.

At first she had been Clark's pet entirely, following him everywhere, dancing for his attention. She was quick and graceful and provocative as a kitten, and her resemblance to a guileless girl in love had made them both laugh. But as she grew older she seemed to attach herself to Carla, and in this attachment she was suddenly much wiser, less skittish—she seemed capable, instead, of a subdued and ironic sort of humor. Carla's behavior with the horses was tender and strict and rather maternal, but the comradeship with Flora was quite different, Flora allowing her no sense of superiority.

"Still no sign of Flora?" she said, as she pulled off her barn boots. Clark had posted a Lost Goat notice on the Web.

"Not so far," he said, in a preoccupied but not unfriendly voice. He suggested, not for the first time, that Flora might have just gone off to find herself a billy.

No word about Mrs. Jamieson. Carla put the kettle on. Clark was humming to himself as he often did when he sat in front of the computer.

Sometimes he talked back to it. *Bullshit*, he would say, replying to some challenge. Or he would laugh—but could not remember what the joke was, when she asked him afterwards.

Carla called, "Do you want tea?" and to her surprise he got up and came into the kitchen.

"So," he said. "So, Carla."

"What?"

"So she phoned."

"Who?"

"Her Majesty. Queen Sylvia. She just got back."

"I didn't hear the car."

"I didn't ask you if you did."

“So what did she phone for?”

“She wants you to go and help her straighten up the house. That’s what she said. Tomorrow.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her sure. But you better phone up and confirm.”

Carla said, “I don’t see why I have to, if you told her.” She poured out their mugs of tea. “I cleaned up her house before she left. I don’t see what there could be to do so soon.”

“Maybe some coons got in and made a mess of it while she was gone. You never know.”

“I don’t have to phone her right this minute,” she said. “I want to drink my tea and I want to have a shower.”

“The sooner the better.”

Carla took her tea into the bathroom, calling back, “We have to go to the laundromat. Even when the towels dry out they smell moldy.”

“We’re not changing the subject, Carla.”

Even after she’d got in the shower he stood outside the door and called to her.

“I am not going to let you off the hook, Carla.”

She thought he might still be standing there when she came out, but he was back at the computer. She dressed as if she was going to town—she hoped that if they could get out of here, go to the laundromat, get a takeout at the cappuccino place, they might be able to talk in a different way, some release might be possible. She went into the living room with a brisk step and put her arms around him from behind. But as soon as she did that a wave of grief swallowed her up—it must have been the heat of the shower, loosening her tears—and she bent over him, all crumbling and crying.

He took his hands off the keyboard but sat still.

“Just don’t be mad at me,” she said.

“I’m not mad. I hate when you’re like this, that’s all.”

“I’m like this because you’re mad.”

“Don’t tell me what I am. You’re choking me. Start supper.”

That was what she did. It was obvious by now that the five o’clock person wasn’t coming. She got out the potatoes and began to peel them, but her tears would not stop and she could not see what she was doing. She wiped her face with a paper towel and tore off a fresh one to take with her and went out into the rain. She didn’t go into the barn because it was too miserable in there without Flora. She walked along the lane back to the woods. The horses were in the other field. They came over to the fence to watch her. All of them except Lizzie, who capered and snorted a bit, had the sense to understand that her attention was elsewhere.

. . .

It had started when they read the obituary, Mr. Jamieson’s obituary. That was in the city paper, and his face had been on the evening news. Up until the year before, they had known the Jamiesons only as neighbors who kept to themselves. She taught Botany at the college forty miles away, so she had to spend a good deal of her time on the road. He was a poet.

Everybody knew that much. But he seemed to be occupied with other things. For a poet, and for an old man —perhaps twenty years older than Mrs. Jamieson—he was rugged and active. He improved the drainage system on his place, cleaning out the culvert and lining it with rocks. He dug and planted and fenced a vegetable garden, cut paths through the woods, looked after repairs on the house.

The house itself was an odd-looking triangular affair that he had built years ago, with some friends, on the foundation of an old wrecked farmhouse. Those people were spoken of as hippies—though Mr. Jamieson must have been a bit old for that, even then, before Mrs. Jamieson’s

time. There was a story that they grew marijuana in the woods, sold it, and stored the money in sealed glass jars, which were buried around the property. Clark had heard this from the people he got to know in town. He said it was bullshit.

"Else somebody would have got in and dug it up, before now. Somebody would have found a way to make him tell where it was."

When they read the obituary Carla and Clark learned for the first time that Leon Jamieson had been the recipient of a large prize, five years before his death. A prize for poetry. Nobody had ever mentioned this. It seemed that people could believe in dope money buried in glass jars, but not in money won for writing poetry.

Shortly after this Clark said, "We could've made him pay."

Carla knew at once what he was talking about, but she took it as a joke.

"Too late now," she said. "You can't pay once you're dead."

"He can't. She could."

"She's gone to Greece."

"She's not going to stay in Greece."

"She didn't know," said Carla more soberly.

"I didn't say she did."

"She doesn't have a clue about it."

"We could fix that."

Carla said, "No. No."

Clark went on as if she had not spoken.

"We could say we're going to sue. People get money for stuff like that all the time."

"How could you do that? You can't sue a dead person."

"Threaten to go to the papers. Big-time poet. The papers would eat it up. All we have to do is threaten and she'd cave in."

"You're just fantasizing," Carla said. "You're joking."

“No,” said Clark. “Actually, I’m not.”

Carla said she did not want to talk about it anymore and he said okay.

But they talked about it the next day, and the next and the next. He sometimes got notions like this that were not practicable, which might even be illegal. He talked about them with growing excitement and then—she wasn’t sure why—he dropped them. If the rain had stopped, if this had turned into something like a normal summer, he might have let this idea go the way of the others. But that had not happened, and during the last month he had harped on the scheme as if it was perfectly feasible and serious. The question was how much money to ask for. Too little, and the woman might not take them seriously, she might be inclined to see if they were bluffing. Too much might get her back up and she might become stubborn.

Carla had stopped saying that it was a joke. Instead she told him that it wouldn’t work. She said that for one thing, people expected poets to be that way. So it wouldn’t be worth paying out money to cover it up.

He said that it would work if it was done right. Carla was to break down and tell Mrs. Jamieson the whole story. Then Clark would move in, as if it had all been a surprise to him, he had just found out. He would be outraged, he would talk about telling the world. He would let Mrs. Jamieson be the one who first mentioned money.

“You were injured. You were molested and humiliated and I was injured and humiliated because you are my wife. It’s a question of respect.”

Over and over again he talked to her in this way and she tried to deflect him but he insisted.

“Promise,” he said. “Promise.”

This was because of what she had told him, things she could not now retract or deny.

Sometimes he gets interested in me?