

Making Up Real Things

Alice Munro, *The View from Castle Rock*, Chatto & Windus, 2006. 349 pages. ISBN: 9780701179892

For over half a century Alice Munro has been writing sane, patient stories about unpredictable women whose convention-fenced lives in rural Canada are full of open gateways through which immeasurable horrors come in, and impatient, anarchic imaginations rush out. Her name is often paired with that of her far showier compatriot Atwood, whose inventive feats go on in the skies while Munro walks firmly, lovingly, over the same tract of earth, carefully looking under stones. Critical studies and biographies are already accumulating; laudatory review snippets spill over to the inside covers of her books: 'genius...miraculous... Mansfield... Chekhov... Joyce'. Jonathan Franzen's introduction to her superb 2004 collection *Runaway* proselytised fiercely, as if gathering worshippers to a new religion.

While all this noisy admiration was going on, Munro travelled to the Scottish lowlands, got on a shoppers' bus to dreary Ettrick and rooted about in the rain for the graves of her ancestors. This is the valley from which her family emigrated, having first looked out from Castle Rock in Edinburgh and (with the help of a little brandy) mistaken Fife for the New World that would become 'home'. Ettrick is also the starting point for Munro's latest collection, in which she imagines the lives of her forbears, and places stories from her own life in relation to them. The pioneer families send out feelers to the future; Munro follows her roots back into the past. It is intensely personal, and it feels like a slow, rich summing up.

The View from Castle Rock begins and ends in graveyards. Some of the characters in these stories are dubious about the significance of these places; it doesn't always seem worth travelling miles 'to say goodbye to a stone'. Munro thinks it worth crossing continents to do so. The epilogue finds her trampling around amid rampant poison ivy on a little patch of wild land between a golf course and a string of new houses, looking in vain for the grave of her great-great-grandfather. No sign. But 'I could pursue this', she says, 'It's what people do': 'we can't resist this rifling around in the past, sifting the untrustworthy evidence ... insisting on being joined to dead people and therefore to life'.

When life is at risk, this urge to join up with the past is at its most urgent. In the last story of the sequence Munro fills in the time left to her before an operation by investigating crypts in ancient cemeteries. More trampling - and some visits to the college library which (perversely) won't let her take out books because she did not graduate. So there she is, one of the great

Canadian writers of the twentieth century, borrowing her husband's library ticket, evading suspicious librarians and 'poking about' in the stacks, passing herself off as a grey-haired amateur genealogist. An unremarkable species: following leads and tracing histories is just 'what people do'.

Munro does it differently. *The View from Castle Rock* is the result of much rifling, trampling, poking, but it refuses to be straightforwardly investigative family history. Letters, journals and epitaphs are the starting points from which fiction takes off, so this book contains what Munro calls 'a curious re-creation of lives'. The ancestral imaginings of the first section (wryly entitled 'No Advantages' after an eighteenth-century account of Ettrick that describes the parish as having just that, 'no advantages') are joined in a formally structured diptych with the personal fictions of the second half. The stories here are based on Munro's own life but are, again, freely invented. This cross-breeding of genres (memoir, history, fiction) makes clear – yet again – why Munro has rarely needed to deviate from the short story: she can translate all other literary forms into her own. The capacious genre she has invented and perfected for herself can be epic, lyric, tragic, novelistic – and many things at once. These genealogical-autobiographical stories pay more attention 'to the truth of life than fiction usually does' she says, 'but not enough to swear on'. There's a playful challenge in that comment: it is Munro's joyful assertion of her right to go on 'making it up'.

The triumph of 'making it up' is the story that underlies all these stories. The struggle for the right to invent, and to think for thinking's sake, is carried on tenaciously beneath the struggle to clear land, build houses, feed children. It is a right not easily won: Munro's story-tellers are forever embarrassing their relatives, holding forth while others cringe. Her heroines are people who want to invent themselves and others, but are told to be quiet and eat their dinner. This has been going on through all her fiction, and through four centuries of Laidlaws: 'Self-dramatisation got short shrift in our family', she remarks, referring back to the myth-makers and fabulists of Ettrick but recognising the same conflicts around her own kitchen table. In the endless daily round of physical survival, moments of dreaming and lying under trees become principled defiances. Munro studies communities in which love of 'Nature' (a conspicuously romantic word) must be hidden, and in which imaginative intelligence is often put 'in the same category as a lump or an extra thumb', classed as a disability that prevents one from getting things done. Reading is held responsible not only for arrogance but for madness and delusion, as in the enormous, desolate story 'A Wilderness Station', which appeared in *Open Secrets* (1994) and demands to be read again alongside *The View from Castle Rock*.

This is why it is so moving to find Munro making excuses for her presence in the library. She is still fending off those who are suspicious of story-tellers, and she is still telling stories about those who have had to do the same. When the desire to read, to learn and to imagine is accepted as natural she feels that something great has been achieved. While investigating the strange crypt she calls on local people to ask what they know, and in the process she notices 'something new'. For once no explanations are needed. No-one suggests that they have better things to think about, 'Real things, that is. Real work'. These are not literary people, or even 'city people', one of them even turns out to have worked on the Laidlaw turkey farm. They are, like Munro, descendents of the pioneers, and amid all the practical necessity they have found room in their lives for looking and wondering.

Munro is drawn to wonderers, but she is fair – and sometimes very funny – in her dealings with anti-wonderers too. Exasperated by her family's displays of ascetic devotion to fact, Munro makes brilliantly ironic use of their surviving papers. A journal made on the crossing to Canada doggedly records every detail of the weather, while steering clear of those unwieldy human affairs that Munro delights to fill in. The journal-writer's sister-in-law gives birth, but this does not seem to count for much: 'we having a surgeon on board nothing happened', and so back to the weather. It's up to Munro to suggest that long-suffering Agnes has been hallucinating for days, feeling that she is beaten by waves, drinking poison, supporting a cow on her stomach. But lest we think the journal-writer heartless, there is a suggestion that he longs to touch Agnes, and cannot bear to write about her. Perhaps, then, it is tacit love, not indifference, that has edited her out of history.

Munro's career has been devoted to those times when 'nothing happened', nothing except the raging, savage emotional adventures that make up people's lives. She attends to what is omitted from records and what is easily forgotten. ('I forgot Mr Mountjoy almost immediately', she says, at the end of a story which has slowly, elliptically remembered him.) But there are many writers who specialise in 'nothing happened', and what distinguishes Munro is the bizarre, unmediated relationship between the forgettable and the extraordinary. There is no middle ground, so that the hum-drum jostles with the sensational - and Munro is as much a sensationalist as the Victorian gothic fantasists her heroines so like to read. Not permitted to 'draw attention' to themselves in life, her people die spectacularly. There are macabre accidents and theatrical suicides – in sawmills, under trains. Houses are treacherous places where dressers fall on children, where gas lamps explode. There are senseless deaths and acts of wild justice: a violent father is electrocuted in a barn, not having put on the habitual rubber boots that might have saved him.

This new collection, more than its predecessors, plays down the grotesque and is circumspect about sensations. Grim fascination is permissible, but never theatre or sentiment. All is narrated evenly, calmly, in prose that is as resistant to metaphor as the Presbyterian preachers of Ettrick. So while Munro is scathing about religious righteousness (her fiction warns very seriously against judgements and condescensions), the religious culture of her ancestors has left its mark on her aesthetically. Here, more than ever, she is a protestant writer, respectful of plain style. Her language is transparent like clear church windows. Nothing is blurred or tendentious; there are no quick pleasures or rhetorical extras.

She demands patience and close attention. It is hard work keeping up with all her great-great uncles and friends of cousins (the family tree I was sketching went wrong at the fifth generation and I never quite regained my bearings). None of these pieces except the last is so completely absorbing as Munro at her very best (the Juliet stories in *Runaway*, 'Carried Away' in *Open Secrets*). It is not always *necessary* to turn the page. But to do so is to appreciate, with Munro, the grandeur of cumulative small acts, the routine cruelty of relationships, the wisdom earned by attending carefully to what is easily overlooked. For all their suddenness and surprise these are slow-release stories that grow larger and larger while you are away doing other things. You turn around and there they are again, filling practical life with fantasies. They inhabit the pause in a conversation, and that bit of unknowable waste land between the golf course and the houses.

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