



Book Club Set

Dear Life

By Alice Munro

About the Author



Alice Munro was born in Wingham, Ontario in Canada. Her father was a fox and mink farmer and her mother was a teacher. Munro began writing as a teenager. She also studied at the University of Western Ontario and worked as a library clerk. After marrying she moved with her husband to Dundarave, West Vancouver, and moved again in 1963 to Victoria, where the pair opened a bookstore. Since the late 1960s, Munro has dedicated herself to writing. Alice Munro is married with two daughters from her first marriage.

Alice Munro has dedicated her literary career almost exclusively to the short story genre. She grew up in a small Canadian town; the kind of environment that often provides the backdrops for her stories. These often accommodate the entire epic complexity of the novel in just a few short pages. The underlying themes of her work are often relationship problems and moral conflicts. The relationship between memory and reality is another recurring theme she uses to create tension. With subtle means, she is able to demonstrate the impact that seemingly trivial events can have on a person's life.

Retrieved from: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2013/munro/facts/>

About the Book



Suffused with Munro's clarity of vision and her unparalleled gift for storytelling, these tales about departures and beginnings, accidents and dangers, and outgoings and homecomings both imagined and real, paint a radiant, indelible portrait of how strange, perilous, and extraordinary ordinary life can be.

Alice Munro's peerless ability to give us the essence of a life in often brief but always spacious and timeless stories is once again everywhere apparent in this brilliant new collection. In story after story, she illumines the moment a life is forever altered by a chance encounter or an action not taken, or by a simple twist of fate that turns a person out of his or her accustomed path and into a new way of being or thinking. A poet, finding herself in alien territory at her first literary party, is rescued by a seasoned newspaper columnist, and is soon hurtling across the continent, young child in tow, toward a hoped-for but completely unplanned meeting. A young soldier, returning to his fiancée from the Second World War, steps off the train before his stop and onto the farm of another woman, beginning a life on the move. A wealthy young woman having an affair with the married lawyer hired by her father to handle his estate comes up with a surprising way to deal with the blackmailer who finds them out.

While most of these stories take place in Munro's home territory - the small Canadian towns around Lake Huron - the characters sometimes venture to the cities, and the book ends with four pieces set in the area where she grew up, and in the time of her own childhood: stories "autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact." A girl who can't sleep imagines night after wakeful night that she kills her beloved younger sister. A mother snatches up her child and runs for dear life when a crazy woman comes into her yard.

Retrieved from: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/13530981-dear-life>

Discussion Questions



1. The title of this story comes from the account the mother gives the narrator of hiding her, when she was an infant, from a strange and threatening woman who used to live in the family's house (318). This and other salient memories combine to create a picture of an often difficult family life: the mother's physical decline, the failure of the father's fox farm and his later work in a foundry, the failure of the narrator to return home for her mother's funeral. Does this story seem to embrace the idea that a significant task for the writer is to extend understanding, imagination, and empathy into one's own past, and to make amends for errors, cruelties, and misjudgments there?
2. What are Greta's feelings toward her husband and her marriage as she is leaving for Toronto? What remains unspoken between them? 2. Discuss what Katy understands and experiences on this journey (see especially the description at the bottom of page 26). What does Katy feel about Greg, and then about Harris Bennett? Why does Munro end the story as she does, with Katy pulling away from her mother? Does the story suggest that there is an inevitable cost when a woman attempts to break through the limitations of her life?
3. Discuss the paragraph beginning, "It would become hard to explain, later on in her life, just what was okay in that time and what was not" (6), in light of Greta's actions. She is a poet: How troubling is the gap between her identities as wife and mother, and as poet and artist?
4. What do Oneida and the narrator have in common? How are they very different? The narrator is embarrassed that she has taken care of him when he was ill, and assumes that he is "like a neuter to her" (146–147). Why does he misunderstand Oneida's willingness to care for him, and her desire to live with him (148)?
5. What does the sight of the baby skunks evoke, at the end of the story? What light does the narrator's preface (133-34) bring to your sense of what has happened between him and Oneida?

6. As in "Pride," a man underestimates a woman who is attached to him: discuss what is different about the motivations and desires of the characters in the two stories.
7. How surprising is it when Corrie realizes that Howard has been keeping the money supposedly meant for Lillian's blackmail payments? How does Corrie figure this out? How do you interpret the final paragraph?
8. After the removal of a tumor, Belle is in a strange state of mind and tells Jackson about what happened on the day her father stepped in front of an oncoming train (196-98). She is relieved to have spoken about this memory. What effect does this conversation have on Jackson? What makes Jackson decide not to return to the hospital, or to Belle's house, which he stands to possibly inherit?
9. Do the story of Jackson's relationship with Ileana Bishop, and what we learn about his stepmother's abuse, offer an adequate explanation for Jackson's transient life? What are the human costs, in this story, of what Belle calls "just the mistakes of humanity" (198)?
10. At what point do you understand that the narrator is having a dream? What strange details indicate this? What is dreamlike about the narrator's efforts to find the doctor's office?
11. In what ways does the story most accurately represent the disorientation and confusion that come with aging and memory loss?
12. Franklin wrote a poem about his passionate affair with Dolly just before the war, and now, when he is eighty-three, Dolly turns up selling cosmetics. Is the narrator's reaction overblown?
13. What is comical or incongruous about this story? What does it say about the intersection of aging, memory, and passion?
14. What aspects of the mother's behavior are troubling to her daughter and make her welcome an alliance with Sadie? What is admirable about Sadie, especially given the time period?
15. What is strange or uncanny about the idea that Sadie, in death, might have moved her eyelid? The narrator thinks, "this sight fell into everything I knew about

- Sadie and somehow, as well, into whatever special experience was owing to myself" (269). How do you interpret this moment and its meaning?
16. The narrator attributes the strangeness of her thoughts that particular summer to a special status, "all inward," conferred on her by learning that during a routine appendectomy, the doctor had removed a tumor "the size of a turkey's egg" (275, 272). She says, "I was not myself" (276). What do you make of the narrator's efforts to explain the reasons for her state of mind and the worry that she could strangle her little sister (277)?
 17. How does the encounter with her father help the narrator to deal with her fear about her thoughts? Why is it significant to the impact of this encounter that in this family, emotional troubles or worries usually go unexpressed?
 18. How is the mother's character revealed in her reaction to the presence of a prostitute at the dance, as channeled through the daughter's observations? Why does the narrator find the voices of the soldiers so intriguing and so comforting?
 19. What does the story express about the difficult relationship between mothers and daughters, especially regarding the mother's supposed role as model and mentor in her daughter's adolescence?
 20. What is the effect of the collection as a whole, given the order, pacing, and content of the stories? What view of life does it project?
 21. Compare the treatment of women by men in "Train," "Amundsen," "Haven," and "Corrie." Why do these women allow themselves to be lied to or taken advantage of? What is the dynamic that permits an uneven power relationship?
 22. Compare the endings of several stories. Do they end in a state of suspension or resolution? Think about how the endings invite questioning, reflection, and interpretation.

Retrieved from:

<https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-reading-guides/fiction/9549-dear-life-munro?start=3>

Author Interview

In your stories, there is often a stigma attached to any girl who attracts attention to herself—individualism, for women, is seen as a shameful impulse. Did it take a great effort to break through that in your own life, and put yourself forward as a writer? Was it normal for girls from rural Ontario to go to university when you did?



I was brought up to believe that the worst thing you could do was “call attention to yourself,” or “think you were smart.” My mother was an exception to this rule and was punished by the early onset of Parkinson’s disease. (The rule was for country people, like us, not so much for towners.) I tried to lead an acceptable life *and* a private life and got by most of the time O.K. No girls I knew went to college and very few boys. I had a scholarship for two years only, but by that time I had picked up a boy who wanted to marry me and take me to the West Coast. Now I can write all the time. (That was what I’d intended since I was at home. We were poor but always had books around us.)

You’ve written so much about young women who feel trapped in marriage and motherhood and cast around for something more to life. You also married very young and had two daughters by the time you were in your mid-twenties. How difficult was it to balance your obligations as a wife and a mother and your ambitions as a writer?

It wasn’t the housework or the children that dragged me down. I’d done housework all my life. It was the sort of open rule that women who tried to do anything so weird as writing were unseemly and possibly neglectful. I did, however, find friends—other women who joked and read covertly and we had a very good time.

The trouble was the writing itself, which was often NO GOOD. I was going through an apprenticeship I hadn’t expected. Luck had it that there was a big cry at the time about

WHERE IS OUR CANADIAN LITERATURE? So some people in Toronto noticed my uneasy offerings and helped me along.

Dear Life” includes four pieces that you describe as “not quite stories ... autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact.” (One of them, the title piece, “Dear Life,” ran in The New Yorker as a memoir, not a story.) These pieces seem almost dreamlike—fragmentary, flashes of half-remembered, half-understood moments from your childhood. Are they based on diaries you kept at the time?

I have never kept diaries. I just remember a lot and am more self-centered than most people.

Your mother plays a role in all four pieces. You said in a 1994 interview in The Paris Review that your mother was the central material in your life. Is that still true?

My mother, I suppose, is still a main figure in my life because her life was so sad and unfair and she was so brave, but also because she was determined to make me into the Sunday-school-recitation little girl I was, from the age of seven or so, fighting not to be.

I was surprised to see you characterize this section of the book as the “first and last” thing you had to say about your own life. It seems that many of your stories have used elements of your childhood and of your parents’ lives. Your 2006 collection, “The View from Castle Rock,” was based on your own family history, wasn’t it?

I have used bits and pieces of my own life, but the last things in the new book were all simple truths. As was—I should have said this—“The View from Castle Rock,” the story of my family, as much as I could tell.

You discovered, when researching that book, that there had been a writer in every generation of your family. Did you have a sense of that legacy when you were becoming a writer yourself, or did you see your aspirations as sui generis?

It was a surprise that there were so many writers lurking around in the family. Scots people, however poor, were taught to read. Rich or poor, men or women. But oddly I had no sense of that, growing up. There was always a hounding to master the arts of knitting and darning (from my aunts and grandparents, not my mother). Once I shocked them mightily by saying that I would THROW THINGS OUT when I grew up. And I have.

When you were writing in the early days, were there other writers you consciously modeled your work on, writers you cherished?

The writer I adored was Eudora Welty. I still do. I would never try to copy her—she's too good and too much herself. Her supreme book, I think, is "The Golden Apples."

How did you settle on the short-story form—or did it settle on you?

For years and years I thought that stories were just practice, till I got time to write a novel. Then I found that they were all I could do, and so I faced that. I suppose that my trying to get so much into stories has been a compensation.

Often when I'm editing a story of yours I'll try to cut something that seems completely extraneous on page 3, and then when I get to page 24 I suddenly realize how essential that passage was. The stories read as though you had written them in one long breath, but I'm betting that you spend a lot of time thinking about how and where to reveal what.

I do a lot of fooling around with stories, putting things here and there. It's conscious that I suddenly think, Oh, that's all wrong.

Do you find writing difficult, as a rule? Has it got any easier over time?

I do and don't find writing difficult. Nice bang away at the first draft, then agonizing fix-up, then re-insertions, etc.

A couple of times in the past decade or so you've said that you were going to give up writing. Then suddenly new stories arrived on my desk. What happens when you try to stop?

I do stop—for some strange notion of being “more normal,” taking things easy. Then some poking idea comes. This time, I think it's for real. I'm eighty-one, losing names or words in a commonplace way, so...

Though each of the stories in “Dear Life” has an openness—even a forgiving quality—the pile-up of regret and disorientation in your characters' lives adds up to a slightly bitter conclusion. Few of these stories of women's lives end without loss or sadness. I'm sure this is an irritating question, but do you consider yourself a feminist writer?

I never think about being a feminist writer, but of course I wouldn't know. I don't see things all put together in that way. I do think it's plenty hard to be a man. Think if I'd had to support a family, in those early years of failure?

Is there a story in “Dear Life” that you have particular affection for? One that gave you more trouble than the others?

I'm partial to “Amundsen”—it gave me so much trouble. And my favorite scene is in “Pride,” the one where the little baby skunks walk across the grass. Actually, I like them all pretty much, though I know I'm not supposed to say so.

Retrieved from:

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/on-dear-life-an-interview-with-alice-munro>

Other Links and Resources



- Nobel Diploma: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2013/munro/diploma/>
- Alice Munro, In her Own Words: 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgKC_SDhOKk
- Alice Munro Festival of A Short Story: <https://www.alicemunrofestival.ca/>

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BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: