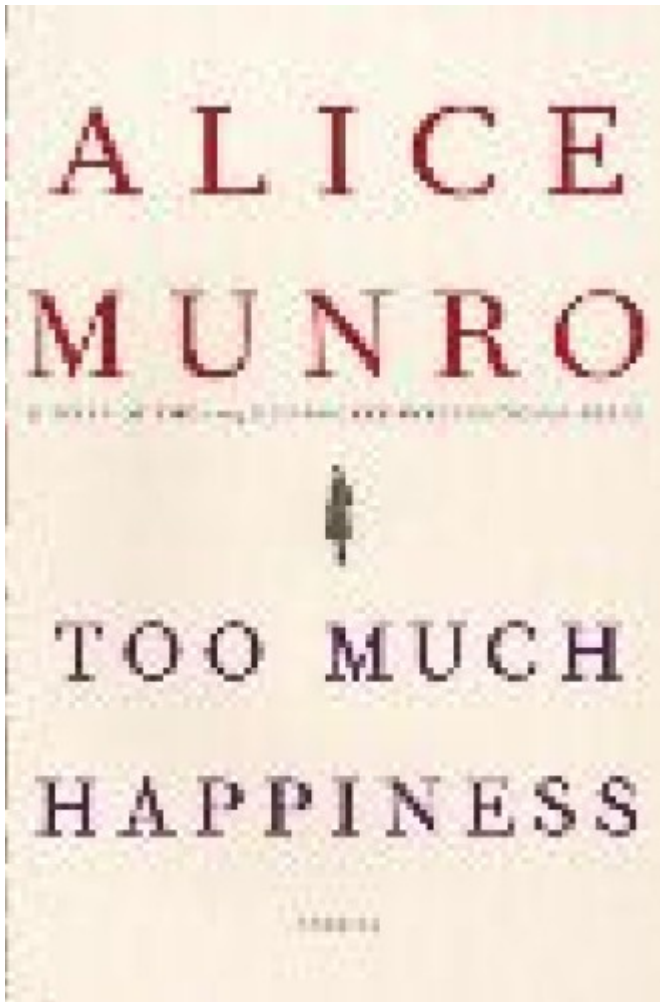


Too Much Happiness: Stories

reviewed by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Too Much Happiness: Stories

Alice Munro
Knopf

My favorite writer isn't for everybody. Or maybe she is. She writes only short fiction, and her subject matter rarely strays from the farms and small towns of southwestern

Ontario. She almost never tells a story in linear fashion. Often I must read a story twice to figure out what happened. Despite her modest refusal to join literary circles and her steadfast attention to rural settings, countless fellow writers have hailed her as a master. (Jonathan Franzen devoted a 3,600-word piece in the *New York Times* to “the best fiction writer now working in North America.”) At one time such fans had to introduce her to a wider audience. No longer an undiscovered treasure, earlier this year Alice Munro was awarded a Booker Prize for her career. Now comes *Too Much Happiness*, with a title that is not entirely ironic.

When a woman suffers unspeakable tragedy at the hands of a difficult man, she rejects religious consolations but finds a measure of freedom just the same. A boy with a port-wine birthmark meets a girl who wants to share his disfigurement. A college student has a kinky, bizarre, but not altogether unpleasant assignation. A dying man takes great pleasure in his chatty, vulgar, utterly alive nurse: “Her ignorance woke a pleasure that melted on his tongue, like a lick of toffee.”

Just why are these characters showered with such pain and such happiness? Is Munro a Gothic writer at heart who sees life and fiction as somehow redemptive? I don't think so. A lot happens here, as if she wants to confound those readers who expect small epiphanies. Yet her stories do move toward an uneasy peace with the world.

In “Deep-Holes,” a woman rediscovers her estranged son, who is now living in voluntary poverty at an urban mission. He's as prickly as ever but claims to be happy. By the end of their awkward visit, they are estranged again, and the mother returns to her solitary home, wondering how his monkish life can bring him any satisfaction. Then comes the kicker: “It was possible, too, that age could be her ally, turning her into somebody she didn't know yet. She has seen the look on the faces of certain old people—marooned on islands of their own choosing, clear sighted, content.”

Munro's previous collection, *The View from Castle Rock*, was one of her finest and had the added charge of being largely autobiographical. This new collection could have been merely excellent, but I'm happy to report that at the age of 78 Munro remains as experimental as ever. The story “Fiction,” ostensibly about what happens when a marriage ends, turns into a meditation on the nature of fiction, the impulse to claim artistic ownership of life's most painful and random events. “Child's Play” directly invites us to identify the narrator with Munro, then pulls the rug out from

under that game.

My own preference is for the stories in which she ranges farthest from her own experience—journeying deep into another era, as in “Carried Away,” or to another place, as in “The Albanian Virgin” (both from 1995’s *Open Secrets*). In *Too Much Happiness* she does both in the long title story about the real-life 19th-century Russian mathematician and novelist Sophia Kovalevski. A woman ahead of her time, Sophia has finally found love with Maxsim, an enormous man of outsized charms, and has obtained work in Stockholm as the first female professor of mathematics in Europe. In other words, she has too much happiness. By the laws of averages and fiction, something must happen to her. Munro, who can be clinical, one might even say mathematical, in how she reveals things, invests a lot of herself in this fellow novelist, and the tale unfolds in leisurely, luminous fashion, with hardly a hint of the left turn it will take. By the end, though, the reader will understand that there have been plenty of clues along the way, that this young woman’s fate is at once sadder and more wonderful than one might have guessed.

In the past, Munro has seemed uninterested in religious experience, except for a certain dim-witted variety, which she has portrayed as self-confining, like marriage. One character in this collection lights upon a poem by Walter de la Mare, an anticredo. It begins hopefully enough (“There is no sorrow / . . . Beyond repair”), but ends with clear-eyed acceptance of oblivion (“Your place forgotten / You not there”). It’s possible that these are the limits of Munro’s belief as well. But lately she has shown a good deal more curiosity about how faith works in the real world—how it might assuage guilt and offer a way past the terrible things we do to one another.

See, for example, an unnerving tale about two girls who meet at church camp and form a bond over their cruel treatment of a special-needs girl. What happens in their childhood is awful enough. But then we come upon these onetime friends in their old age, as one asks the other’s help in arranging a confession with a priest. The narrator, uncomfortable in church and anxious to get out of this request, nonetheless finds herself going through with it. She says, “You’d think I might break open, be wise to break open, glimpsing that vast though tricky forgiveness. But no. It’s not for me. What’s done is done. Flocks of angels, tears of blood, notwithstanding.” Despite this stoic assertion, she has indeed sought forgiveness—through writing professionally about cultures that venerate “remarkable, even awesome” persons with special needs. It just never occurs to her that writing is a kind of atonement.

Alice Munro has looked deeply enough into her own heart to appreciate such self-deceptions and contradictions. Even the worst characters receive a measure of her sympathy. But that's just what gives her best work what I believe is a spiritual dimension. She is a discriminating person who refuses to judge, and that paradox is what makes her fiction so appealing, such a blessing.