
Alice Munro's Victoria

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While many critics have spent a good deal of effort arguing that Alice Munro's most essential place throughout her work has been Huron County, Ontario, I want here to take up another place which appears there: the legacy presence of British Columbia, particularly Victoria, in some of her stories. Doing so, a remark made by Joseph Brodsky as he began his detailed explication of W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" is relevant: "Because every work of art, be it a poem or a cupola, is understandably a self-portrait of its author, we won't strain ourselves too hard trying to distinguish between the author's persona and the poem's lyrical hero" (304). So Auden, so Munro: just as readers may often infer relation between her personae in Huron County and her own experience as a person there, so too might she be seen in British Columbia, in Victoria, and at Munro's Books on Yates Street there in "Differently" (1989) and "The Albanian Virgin" (1994).

West Coast images run through Munro's stories. Her "Material" (1973) offers a caustic sense of the preening egotisms of the male writer; set in Vancouver, it does so in part by featuring the insistent presence of that city's rain as a plot element. In *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) there are two stories—"The Office" (1962) and "The Shining Houses" (1968)—which feature Vancouver settings, and in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), that city figures both in the title story and in "Chaddeleys and Flemings: 1. Connection." Descriptions of it are to be found, briefly, in other stories: "Miles City, Montana" (1985), "Jakarta" (1998), and "Cortes Island" (1998). Munro never much liked Vancouver when she lived there (1952-1963)—the family lived most of their time in West Vancouver in a house surrounded by high shrubs. Two of their daughters were born there. During those years Munro was deep in childcare; as well, that time was her most difficult period as an artist: she was trying continually to write a novel, not succeeding, and often depressed. But in 1963 the family moved to Victoria to establish Munro's Books. This smaller city proved to be a great improvement for her. Most of the Munros' energies went into establishing themselves and surviving in this new place. She wrote less then and has said that, because of their shared goals, the first years in Victoria were the best years of her marriage (see Thacker 170-81).

This first store was located at 753 Yates Street. The family rented a house across from Beacon Hill Park, close enough to walk to work. After cleaning, painting, and preparing the store, Alice and Jim opened in September 1963. At that time, paperbacks were in transition—there was a difference between "quality paperbacks" (Penguin, Vintage, New Directions) and cheap paperbacks. The Munros stocked mostly Penguins and Pelicans. Both of them worked in the store, Alice in the afternoons and evenings, taking time away for childcare and housework. Both have recalled the struggles of

those first years and of having made something very real, and also of having become a part of the community in ways that had not occurred in Vancouver. Speaking to interviewers in the early 1990s, Alice Munro once said that "going to Victoria and opening a bookstore was the most wonderful thing that ever happened. It was great because all the crazy people in town came into the bookstore and talked to us" (qtd. in McCulloch and Simpson 253).

Victoria as a place and Munro's use of the store as setting appear first in two stories in Munro's third collection, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974). One of these, "Walking on Water" (1974), appears to have been partially inspired by a publicity stunt the comedian Pat Paulsen did in Victoria in November 1966 just before he vaulted to fame through the Smothers Brothers television show (Paulson).¹ Even so, the story illuminates Munro's perspective on the decade she spent in Victoria, a place very much a part of its times then, one caught up in the tumult of the 1960s. Alice and Jim disagreed over contemporary issues, for she was fundamentally liberal while he was more conservative. They began drifting apart. Thus just as *Dance* was coming together, and Munro's career was about to be really launched, the Munros' marriage had begun to unravel.

Given these facts, it is not incidental that among Munro's first stories to treat adultery is the second Victoria story in *Something*, "Tell Me Yes or No" (1973). Its effect is one of indeterminacy—in many ways it is not possible to tell exactly just what happens, the narrator claiming to have made everything up—but its plot centres on a confrontation between the narrator, who is the lover of a married man, and his wife, a woman who runs a bookstore. Casting her narrator as one of those people who came into the store, Munro created the wife's character by remembering herself in the bookstore on Yates Street, there and often

alone at night, awaiting those who came in, awaiting the human connections they brought. She imagined herself as she was then, making those memories of her presence in the store during those years part of the fabric of some stories.

She did this emphatically in the two particular stories in which Victoria and the Yates Street store most figure, "Differently" and "The Albanian Virgin." In each there is no mistaking the biographical connection and, more than that, each shows both a depth and precision of analysis and remembrance. In "Differently," the narrator's day-long return to Victoria for a visit from Ontario frames an extended reminiscence; Georgia had been a young mother there, then married to Ben, a naval officer. They met and befriended Raymond and Maya, a couple who live in a house which is clearly based on the Munros' there, and in which Raymond still lives with another wife during Georgia's visit. Maya is dead. Georgia now visits Raymond there in the story's frame.

Munro recreates 1960s Victoria here in considerable detail, focusing on Georgia and Maya's friendship. They "became friends on two levels. On the first level, they were friends as wives; on the second as themselves" (226). With their husbands, the four "talked about movies, politics, public personalities, places they had travelled to or wanted to travel to. Maya and Georgia could join in then" (226). Together, the two women "talked in a headlong fashion about their lives, childhoods, problems, husbands" (227). Maya confides to Georgia that she has been having affairs; she got pregnant by one man and had an abortion; she ran off with another, her "true and desperate love" (229), and Raymond went to get her and took her back. She's still seeing a mutual friend, Harvey, for "Exercise," Maya says (229).

Georgia, her own husband away on his yearly summer cruise with the navy, "got a part-time job in a bookstore, working several evenings a week" (229). It was hot, so she

"combed her hair out and stopped using most of her makeup and bought a couple of short halter dresses" (229). Here Munro recreates herself in Victoria, still in her thirties:

Sitting on her stool at the front of the store, showing her bare brown shoulders and sturdy brown legs, she looked like a college girl—clever but full of energy and bold opinions. The people who came into the store liked the look of a girl—a woman—like Georgia. They liked to talk to her. Most of them came in alone. (229)

But more than just recreating herself then, Munro elaborates just how being in the store made her feel, and why being there was important to her:

Georgia took the store seriously. She had a serious, secret liking for it that she could not explain. It was a long, narrow store with an old-fashioned funnelled entryway between two angled display windows. From her stool behind the desk Georgia was able to see the reflections in one window reflected in the other. (230)

So Munro felt then, and she writes this in a reversal of her longtime former practice of remembering and writing about Huron County from British Columbia. There is a precision and a surety here that recreate the details and feel of 1960s Victoria: "At times the store was empty, and she felt an abundant calm. It was not even the books that mattered then. She sat on the stool and watched the street—patient, expectant, by herself, in a finely balanced and suspended state" (231).

Returned to her visit with Raymond in the story's present, Georgia takes her leave of him to walk through Victoria back to her bus, to catch the last ferry to the mainland. He offers a ride, but "She says no, no, she really wants to walk. It's only a couple of miles. The late afternoon is so lovely, Victoria is so lovely. I had forgotten, she says" (242). Raymond thanks her for coming. Georgia leaves, and as she does Munro ends the story with an evocation of Victoria as place, her younger self within it:

She doesn't think about [their parting kiss] as she walks back to town through the yellow-leafed streets with their autumn smells and silences. Past Clover Point, the cliffs crowned with broom-bushes, the mountains across the water. The mountains of the Olympic Peninsula, assembled like a blatant backdrop, a cut-out of rainbow tissue paper. She doesn't think about Raymond, or Miles, or Maya, or even Ben.

She thinks about sitting in the store in the evenings. The light in the street, the complicated reflections in the windows. The accidental clarity. (243)

Munro leaves her character here, less with Georgia's regret than with her acceptance of being, of life as it is. There in Victoria noting the place's vaunted scenery but more especially sitting on that stool appreciating its "accidental clarity." That clarity is a moment in time, a moment in a place, a moment in a life: the complexity brought and borne by the reflections of those two angled panes of glass that Munro—and Georgia—looked through, all those years ago, onto Yates Street.

Munro drew upon that store again in "The Albanian Virgin," one of the *Open Secrets* stories. When she comes to describe Victoria there, the perspective is both distant and intimately knowing—structurally, the city stands as an opposite pole to Albania within the story, where much of it takes place. Its narrator is a woman fleeing the complications of her former life in London, Ontario, a woman who moves to Victoria in March 1964 and opens a bookstore. Describing it, she says "I had painted the walls of my bookstore a clear, light yellow. Yellow stands for intellectual curiosity" (104). So Munro creates another young woman coming to Victoria at about the same time she herself did, though shorn of a husband and children. But this story's focus is on the woman who had been the Albanian virgin. Though a first-person narrative, that fact is not evident until well into

the story—before that, readers see this woman in Albania by way of what seems a third-person omniscient narrative, a reminiscence placed in the mind of the narrator.

When the narrator appears and accounts for herself and her bookstore and Victoria, she is like Alice Munro in Victoria: a bookstore owner whose interest is piqued by an odd couple who come into the store. Thus she writes,

Charlotte and Gjurdhi must have come into the store together, but I did not understand that they were a couple until it was time for them to leave. Charlotte was a heavy, shapeless, but quick-moving woman, with a pink face, bright blue eyes, and a lot of glistening white hair, worn like a girl's, waving down over her shoulders. (115)

Her husband is "just one of a number of shabby, utterly uncommunicative old men who belong to the city somewhat as the pigeons do, moving restlessly all day within a limited area, never looking into people's faces" (117). These two are among "the crazy people" Munro described who came into the store. Equally, Munro details other regular customers as well as the casual but knowing society that develops through the store—she describes just what owning the Yates Street store felt like to her day-to-day.

Yet, and though Munro never states it as so, Charlotte and Gjurdhi are also the former Albanian virgin and the priest she meets in Albania, the priest who helps her escape the bandits and, evidently, runs away with her—to Victoria, ultimately. The narrator spots them, gets to know them some, wonders over their histories and stories, and loses them. They disappear. When she looks for them, she cannot find the nearby apartment building where they lived and she once had dinner with them: "The change in the apartment building seemed to have some message for me. It was about vanishing. I knew that Charlotte and Gjurdhi had not actually vanished—they were somewhere, living or dead. But for me they had

vanished" (126). Considering what this means to her, the narrator is affected, offering a passage that should reasonably be seen as a coda for late Munro:

My connection was in danger—that was all. Sometimes our connection is frayed, it is in danger, it seems almost lost. Views and streets deny knowledge of us, the air grows thin. Wouldn't we rather have a destiny to submit to, then, something that claims us, anything, instead of such flimsy choices, arbitrary days? (127)

This woman, writing this, is just about to be claimed again by Nelson, the lover she left behind in London. This was just as Charlotte probably was claimed, years ago as she fled her bandits and found the priest—probably Gjurdhi—"waiting on the dock" (128) for her in Trieste. A bit crazy, but real life in Munro's hands.

Altogether, Munro's Victoria stories reveal her elaborating her own decade there from 1963-1973. She remembers the time spent alone in the Yates Street store, its physicality, its views, and she recreates her younger self sitting on a stool there, revisiting her feelings, her connections, her being, the shapes of her understandings. She recreates "the accidental clarity" of those years, as "Differently" shows. With "The Albanian Virgin," she folds those experiences into a larger story that ranges far beyond Canada to bring Albania to Victoria, but to see it as a place like any other, where humans live, perceive, delight, and wonder.

NOTE

- 1 This article in the University of Victoria newspaper announces Paulsen's return visit to campus as part of his 1968 spoof presidential campaign, noting that he "launched into national fame in Victoria after his 1966 campus appearance when he strode through the crowd of 200 gathered on the Causeway to watch him walk on the water. He raised his arms for silence, stepped off the wharf and promptly sank out of sight" (3). I wish to thank Tracy Ware (Queen's University) for bringing the Paulsen connection to my attention.

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