Heidi Tiedemann Darroch

The War at Home: Writing Influenza in Alice Munro's "Carried Away" and Kevin Kerr's *Unity (1918)*

Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia, lyrics to tooth-ache. But no; with a few exceptions . . . literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind.

—Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill"

As Woolf's observation suggests, while the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic had a devastating toll in illnesses and fatalities, with an unusually high morbidity rate among young adults, literary portrayals of the Spanish flu have appeared in only limited numbers, both in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak and in subsequent decades. This essay considers two post-influenza depictions, a short story and a play. In Alice Munro's "Carried Away," two characters converse in a small town's deserted hotel bar in early 1919 during a final influenza outbreak. Louisa, the town librarian, tells a visiting salesman about her puzzling romantic interlude with a soldier, conducted entirely by letter. In the permissive environment of the pandemic, she and the salesman have a fleeting sexual encounter. During this same last flu spike, the wife of the town's factory owner dies; several years later, he marries the librarian, their relationship initiated, in a complicated way, by the librarian's earlier romantic entanglement with the soldier. These seemingly disparate but ultimately interconnected encounters are used in Munro's episodic story to highlight how happenstance and coincidence shape the protagonist (Fisher 150). Published in *The New Yorker* in 1991 and included in a lightly revised form in her 1995 collection *Open Secrets*, "Carried Away" shares key thematic and structural elements with a later work,[1] Kevin Kerr's

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 90 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

Governor General's Award-winning play *Unity (1918)*, first produced in the 1999-2000 season. Both texts depict the 1918 influenza pandemic by assessing the interplay of accident, fate, and chance; each includes epistolary elements, features dream and hallucination sequences, and uses gothic and comic elements to highlight the bleak ironies of the Spanish flu period in Canada. Both literary texts even incorporate the specific detail of the grisly decapitation of a young man in a work accident, suggesting that Kerr's work may be deliberately paralleling Munro's story.

But while these surface similarities are intriguing, the central commonality of the two works is their approach to representations of the conjoined histories of World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic. Munro and Kerr, I will argue, point to the ways in which commemoration of the influenza's victims is fundamentally different in character from the formal, institutional memorialization of the war dead. "Carried Away" and *Unity (1918)* emphasize that while the war and pandemic era saw the monumental collision of twin calamities, influenza losses could only be mourned individually, the extinguishment of each life a unique tragedy, but not one explicable within a framework of public heroism. Civilians were called on to make substantial personal sacrifices to care for the sick, and to ensure the ongoing operation of social institutions and connections during the influenza disaster, but their contributions have been largely forgotten.

The story and play consider how the juxtaposition of the war and the virus enable greater agency but also increased obligations for female characters precisely at the historical moment that (some) Canadian women were on the brink of being able to vote federally and as "New Woman" literature questioned the restriction of women to a life as wives and mothers. Munro provides an extended depiction of different forms of paid work, comparing physical labouring, sales and trade, and managerial occupations, while Kerr contrasts agricultural and domestic work with the relatively new professions of telegraph and telephone operator where care work is undertaken in a different form. By pointing to the way that influenza experiences were inflected by labouring status and gender, Kerr and Munro address a point equally salient in our own era: a pandemic's exacerbating effect on existing divides.

The 1918-1919 influenza pandemic had a devastating impact in illnesses and fatalities, further decimating a generation that had experienced

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 91 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

unprecedented losses during the First World War, including the deaths of soldiers sickened with influenza as the war was drawing to its close. Historically, influenza has "posed a continual threat to global public health since at least as early as the Middle Ages, resulting in an estimated 3-5 million cases of severe illness" and as many as 640,000 deaths worldwide in a typical year (Nickol and Kindrachuk 1). Twentieth-century influenza pandemics broke out in the 1950s and again in the late 1960s, but the 1918-1919 outbreak had by far the greatest impact due to both its high overall death toll and its disproportionate fatalities among young adults, with two-thirds of those who died between the ages of twenty and forty (Honigsbaum 2493). Colloquially termed the Spanish flu because it was widely reported in neutral Spain's news while other European countries had wartime censorship measures in place that limited news coverage, it killed an estimated fifty million people globally. Canada's losses of 55,000 deaths (Fahrni and Jones 4) nearly reached the level of the country's First World War casualties, although it is not uncommon to see claims that they exceeded them (as Kerr's play indicates in its "Notes on Events" preceding the main text of the play).

Much like the coronavirus pandemic, which began to spread in late 2019, influenza symptoms involve respiratory distress accompanied by fever and chills, cough, general weakness and body pains, nausea, and sore throat. With more deadly influenza strains, death results from lung hemorrhages and related pulmonary syndromes, most typically pneumonia. Historian Mary-Ellen Kelm explains that unlike most seasonal flu outbreaks, where the onset of symptoms such as fatigue and body aches is gradual, Spanish influenza developed astonishingly quickly: people struck with the illness "weakened and collapsed suddenly," then began coughing up blood, which also poured through their noses (32). Pneumonia propelled patients into a state of increasing debility with cyanosis (absence of oxygen in the blood) apparent in the state of a sufferer's mouth and tongue, hands, and feet. "Just before death, the afflicted turned blue and became exceedingly cold" from hypoxia as their congested lungs ceased to transport oxygen in their blood throughout their bodies (Kelm 32). Both the dramatic appearance of these symptoms and the short time between onset and life-threatening illness are central to how witnesses recalled the Spanish flu, depictions picked up on by Munro and Kerr, among others.

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 92 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

But in 1918, as the influenza virus spread across the country, Canada was ill-prepared to confront the influenza pandemic, with only a nascent public health system, a substantial number of doctors stationed overseas, and no national health department to coordinate a response. The key federal effort to contain the virus was to quarantine naval ships carrying infected men, preventing them from disembarking in busy eastern port cities (Humphries, "Limits" 23). Influenza was likely transmitted as troops moved across the country for overseas deployment, yet there was little effective coordination between the military and public health authorities.[2] Fatalities were concentrated in a four-week period in the fall of 1918, with deaths occurring so rapidly during this time that undertakers were unable to keep up. Bodies piled up, awaiting burial, and across rural areas in Saskatchewan "homes were discovered [with] whole families that had been dead for weeks" (Lux 48). With hospitals clustered in larger centres, rural and remote areas were left to rely on overwhelmed doctors and at-home care provided by mostly untrained female caregivers. Government officials urged women to accept caregiving responsibilities, with Ottawa's mayor telling women "they had a 'duty' to volunteer to nurse influenza victims," asking them to "abandon their patriotic knitting of socks for soldiers and 'get into the trenches themselves'" (Quiney 48).

While the Great War has been commemorated extensively in literature, the influenza outbreak has not, at least on the surface. Some critics have argued that the Spanish flu's enormous losses were impossible to comprehend, creating an overwhelming trauma that resisted both historical and literary representation (Branach-Kallas; Davis). Others have posited that, as critic Catherine Belling suggests, the absence of fictional portrayals of influenza can be explained by the fact that "the flu was less remarkable than war at a time when infectious disease was a daily fact of life," making it a "banal trauma" (56). The two recent monographs on influenza and literature take these opposing perspectives. Jane Elizabeth Fisher postulates that the absence of representations in the aftermath of the pandemic was a consequence of collective trauma, suggesting that "[r]elatively few writers had the will or insight to understand the emergent cultural meanings implicit in such a catastrophe" until decades had passed (4). Conversely, in *Viral Modernism* Elizabeth Outka argues that influenza's impact on modernist literature was powerful but has generally not been identified because of the

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 93 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

opaqueness and indirectness of flu representations, which would have been more legible to readers in the 1920s than to later critics. Outka insists that "[d]espite the pandemic's seeming disappearance, its traces are everywhere in the literature and the culture" (18).

In Canadian literature, influenza appears only a handful of times in fiction before 1990. The earliest depiction I could locate is J. G. Sime's 1921 *Our Little Life: A Novel of To-Day* (Martin); several decades later, the devastating impact of influenza on a small Ontario town is portrayed, albeit off-stage, in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business.*[3] Depictions of Spanish flu are far more prominent in early-twenty-first-century fiction, including Ami McKay's *The Birth House* (2006), Frances Itani's *Deafening* (2003), and Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* (2020), the latter set in a Dublin maternity ward for flu sufferers at the height of the epidemic. These contemporary portrayals emphasize female caregiving and self-sacrifice, which are echoed in Kerr's play, as I discuss below, treating the battle against influenza as a home front initiative. Contemporary fiction has not yet explored, however, how Indigenous nations in Canada were acutely vulnerable during the Spanish flu due to dispossession, malnutrition, and overcrowded housing, as well as incarceration in residential schools where contagious diseases were endemic (Kelm 25, 29). Some northern villages were entirely wiped out, with the effect especially devastating in Labrador, where infection spread rapidly as a supply ship made its way along the coast, transmitting the virus (Budgell).[4] Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* is set during a later 1950s Canadian influenza epidemic and features a Salish village devastated by repeated waves of contagious disease, including smallpox and tuberculosis (Leggatt).

As the two most prominent literary works set during the Spanish flu period, Alice Munro's "Carried Away" and Kevin Kerr's *Unity (1918)* take up complex tasks of representation and historical memory, blending personal (fictional) lives with broader events. Kevin Kerr's tragicomic and gothic drama *Unity (1918)* is set in the small town of Unity, Saskatchewan and opens in the fall of 1918 with three young women on stage: Beatrice (Bea) is steadier and more responsible than her impulsive younger sister, Sissy; Mary is Bea's tender-hearted best friend, in love with a soldier who has not yet returned home. Kerr introduces a series of ominous forebodings of looming disaster against a backdrop of tragic farce, as a discharged soldier named Hart arrives

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 94 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

in town in search of his estranged father and tells the young women of the spread of flu in Halifax and Montreal. While Kerr elects to explore the perspectives of multiple characters, Munro's story initially appears more focused on the romantic life of small-town librarian Louisa. "Carried Away" features four sections, with the first one describing Louisa's tentative epistolary courtship with a soldier hospitalized after an injury occasioned at war. Both texts allude to or include multiple forms of narrative that represent the war and the flu's spread, from town gossip and personal letters to newspaper and historical accounts.

In both Kerr's work and Munro's, influenza's infectious qualities are emphasized in the use of letters, but Kerr follows a more typical approach of associating influenza infection with panic and dread. More specifically, while in *Unity (1918)* letters are feared as a literal source of the spread of a virus, Munro considers how romantic passion is both analogous to the symptoms of influenza and encourages recklessness about the virus. When Mary learns of the death of her fiancé Richard from influenza, she is desperate to read his final letter; in an effort to assist, Rose, who works in the telegraph office, offers to "bake the letter for a bit to kill those nasty buggers," inadvertently setting it on fire and leaving Mary with only ashes, in an inadvertent parody of cremation (54). In "Carried Away," Jack writes to Louisa that his fatalism about the prospect of returning to Carstairs is "*like being sick with a fever,*" enabling him to confess his feelings for her because he does not believe he will ever see her again (11, emphasis original). Louisa, similarly in thrall, elects to keep the library open at the height of the pandemic, fearing she might miss Jack's return. She contracts influenza, requiring a hospital stay, but Jack does not turn up, as far as she is aware (although she learns later in the story, after Jack's death, that in fact he had been a regular—but anonymous—library visitor). Fisher comments that in Munro's story, unlike in other fictional pandemic narratives, "disease is presented as an apparently favorable way in which to be 'carried away'" (151).

Louisa exchanges letters with two suitors, but while these transmit passion rather than illness, both are subtly connected to disease. Letters are a recurring stylistic feature of Munro's fiction, used to "multiply, defer, and condense meaning" (Löschnigg 97), and they also offer an opportunity for dramatic irony, as Munro's readers become privy to information not available

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 95 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

to the correspondents themselves. At the end of the first section of "Carried Away," readers learn that a young woman named Grace is secretly engaged to Jack, a fact which Louisa does not glean until many months later. While their correspondence enables Jack to conceal his prior romantic commitment from Louisa, it allows her to consciously construct a desirable portrait of herself, an extension of her self-image as a romantic heroine who is also an autonomous working woman. Their class differences are identified by Jack, when he notes that he himself has not completed high school and worked at the town's main industry, Douds' Factory, before the war. He perceives Louisa as a "cut above," the kind of woman who might be engaged to an officer, an elevation of Louisa's status that seems to flatter her. Jack and Louisa's letters, then, serve to enable each writer to shape and distort their own self-presentation.

Munro also makes it clear that even when romantic relationships are not mediated by the epistolary form, her characters continue to respond to one another based on fleeting impressions that rely on incomplete or inaccurate observations. Louisa's two subsequent relationships are also directly connected to influenza. After her disappointment when Jack fails to return to meet her, Louisa has a brief affair with a travelling book salesman, Jim Frarey, an interlude enabled by the influenza's spread, which has left the hotel largely deserted, enabling them to be alone and unobserved. Jim is startled, however, when their sexual relationship is consummated, and it appears that Louisa was previously less sexually experienced than her stories of epistolary courtship had suggested to him. Around the same time, the local factory owner, Arthur Doud, loses his wife, who dies "in 1919, in the last flurry of the Spanish flu, when everyone had got over being frightened" (26), enabling his subsequent receptiveness to Louisa after his efforts to atone for Jack's death in his factory results in him becoming a regular library visitor who, like Jack before him, perceives a unique and superior quality in the librarian. By exploring the Spanish flu's impact on personal relationships and romantic entanglements, Munro points to how the upheaval of this pandemic radically shifted the trajectory of individual lives while also eroding social and sexual mores. The effect for Louisa is greater freedom and social mobility, unexpected benefits in the midst of the profound losses of life and love experienced by other characters in the story. But these twists and turns in Louisa's life are also the consequence of misconceptions. Jim believes her to

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 96 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

be worldly and sexually sophisticated, while Arthur's perceptions are shaped by his incomplete information about why she asks him about the circumstances of Jack Agnew's death.

As an orphan without siblings and a single woman without children, Louisa is exempt from many of the caregiving responsibilities that mothers, sisters, and neighbours took on during the Spanish flu pandemic, a key topic explored in Kerr's play. As the first efforts to prevent influenza from reaching the town fail, women are tasked with caring for the sick, with even greater urgency after the town's only doctor falls ill. With influenza spreading, it becomes women's duty to wage a different kind of war (Kerr 76, 102-03) and they recruit each other to join the effort. A reluctant Bea, who demurs due to her lack of training and experience, is cajoled by claims that "[w]omen are naturally good at taking care of others. Men, even doctors, are weaker than women"; other women even allege, improbably, "You'll get the flu faster by not helping" (76). The play's concluding song echoes this sentiment, with its lyrics about women's battles: "Women, rise / Take your place among soldiers, then . . . It's everybody's victory" (112). But this apparently celebratory mood is undercut by the accumulating losses in Kerr's drama, and the deaths of several of the major characters, whose deaths from influenza are as much the product of unfortunate location and timing, he implies, as the deaths of young men in World War I's carnage. "Carried Away," conversely, is notable for the absence of Munro's typical depictions of gendered caregiving, a marked feature of her work exemplified by the multiple nurses and nurse surrogates that populate her work. As Amelia DeFalco explains, many of Munro's stories explore the way that "the gendering of caregiving has serious ethical and political implications" (109), from the nurturing responsibilities assigned to mothers (and occasionally abdicated by them) to the resentment Munro's female characters experience when forced to provide prolonged care for elders or the sick. In "Carried Away," however, female nurturing is confined to Louisa's relatively limited gestures of care toward Jack. She asks what he needs, and she attempts to knit him a warm wool muffler. Although Louisa spends time in hospital with influenza, she does not mention the care she received; nor is the nursing of Arthur's sick wife noted. Instead, in "Carried Away" Munro sets aside the care work associated with influenza to focus instead on the complex dynamics of reading and writing, labour and capitalism (Clark; Lecker).

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 97 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

Influenza's physical manifestations are also not mentioned in Munro's story, while they are highlighted at several points in *Unity (1918)* as characters struggle through fatal or near-fatal bouts of the illness. Mary is seen coughing and convulsing just before her death; Hart, dying of influenza that he may have unwittingly spread throughout the town, asks Bea to tell him what colour his feet are, having heard "a doctor on the train in Montreal say that when the feet turn black there's no hope" (105). The physical vulnerability of bodies is increasingly central to *Unity (1918)* as characters who were convinced they were immune or protected by safety measures fall ill in turn, and Sunna, the undertaker's preternaturally strong teenaged niece and an Icelandic immigrant, struggles to keep up with the necessary burials.

The body's fragility is emphasized in the instances of decapitation that appear in both literary texts, dismemberments that echo the bodies similarly mutilated and disfigured in the war. As historian Joanna Bourke points out, "[t]he First World War led to amputations on a scale never seen before, or since" (33); while limbs were particularly vulnerable, "all parts of the body were at risk: head, shoulder, arm, chest, intestines, buttock, penis, leg, foot," with more than 40,000 men losing limbs and just over 60,000 suffering serious head or eye injuries (33). In the play and the story, freak accidents occasion grisly deaths. In *Unity (1918)* a young farmworker falls in front of a piece of machinery. Sunna carries the young man's body home over one shoulder, his head in a "makeshift satchel" slung over the other (49). Her casual treatment of the body results from her pragmatic familiarity with corpses, at odds with the more formal and ceremonious way that Arthur Doud, encountering his first serious accident in his factory, treats Jack Agnew's body. After quickly taking charge of a bloodily chaotic scene on the factory floor, Arthur carries the head, placing it adjacent to the corpse and adjusting his jacket over top, a respectful gesture honouring Jack's dignity that Louisa will later term "remarkable" when he recounts his memories of that day. In the portrayals of these two accidents, Munro and Kerr contrast the spectacular dismemberment of male bodies with the far less graphic depiction of female sufferers of influenza.

While Kerr's play features only the influenza's first fall outbreak, linking it to the war as soldiers were returning to Canada, Munro's expansive work incorporates subsequent historical events, like the Depression and the Second

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 98 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

World War. More unexpectedly, it also revives a largely forgotten nineteenth-century historical incident that during the 1930s served the needs of the growing labour movement. At the end of the story's third section, Arthur Doud, who had become an habitué of the library after returning Jack Agnew's library books in the wake of his sudden death, impulsively asks Louisa if they might be married. The final section of the story then jumps forward several decades, and we learn that following their marriage Louisa left her library position to help Arthur run the factory, first through the lean years of the Depression and then through a more prosperous (but fraught) postwar era. Now a widow, Louisa continues to be preoccupied by the factory's challenges, even as her health declines. She travels by bus to London, Ontario to see a heart specialist and in the waiting room reads about a ceremony to take place that afternoon commemorating the Tolpuddle Martyrs, English agricultural workers who had been transported to Australia for taking an oath (in effect, committing themselves to resisting the lowering of their wages), and who are now recognized as early labour rights activists. What jumps out at Louisa is the name of one of the speakers, although she assures herself that Jack Agnew is not an uncommon name, and that it is a mere coincidence. Nonetheless, she is drawn to the ceremony, although she is inclined to deflate its significance: "'*Martyrs*' is laying it on somewhat," Munro describes Louisa thinking. "They were not executed, after all" (42, emphasis mine). In fact, largely forgotten for decades, the men were not dubbed the Tolpuddle Martyrs until the mid-1930s, during centenary commemorations of their exile (Griffiths 62). Historian Clare Griffiths argues that terming the men "martyrs" served a rhetorical purpose at that time that "offered inspiration, transforming the pathos of the men's position into something more akin to strength and agency" and providing a crucial antecedent to contemporary labour struggles (63-64). Munro considers here how the past can be refashioned to become useful in the present, which implicitly acknowledges that failures to commemorate and recall a historical experience, such as the Spanish flu, may involve a lack of Canadian society's present lack of need for it.

Munro's surprising turns and shifts from the opening "Spanish Flu" section to the concluding "Tolpuddle Martyrs" section, the titles assigned to the segments, suggests that in her expansive, sprawling, and lengthy short story she is moving towards the kind of formal innovation that marks the later

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 99 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

part of her career, where an interest in history and how it is told is a key feature of her writing. In this labour history context, Jack Agnew's surprising posthumous reappearance in the story, first at the ceremony and then to speak to Louisa as she awaits her bus at the station, aligns Jack's own decapitation in the factory accident with a grander narrative of workers' sacrifice to voracious capitalist production. Jack's status as a prominent union leader harkens back to the fact that decades earlier he surreptitiously removed Bertrand Russell's *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* from the Carstairs library and held onto it for a lengthy period (Munro 26-27). Robert Lecker's insightful analysis of "Carried Away" as an assessment of the "postwar, postindustrial fall that is identified with the commodification of all forms of human activity" (103) suggests that Jack's book selection may be influenced by the attribution of Bolshevism to Canadian labour activism in the post-World War I period (114). Lecker contrasts Jack, representative of one of the many workers maimed or killed in industrial accidents in this era, with Louisa's managerial status in the library and then at the factory. While Louisa once imagined her future with a man who read broadly and critically, she ultimately marries a man who views the library with satisfaction as the product of his own family's benevolence. Ultimately, Munro demonstrates that Louisa's life is shaped by both broader historical events and, more intimately, by incidents of chance and accident.

Unity (1918) takes a bleaker approach to the issue of commemoration and historical memory, pointing to the ironic gap between how each individual experiences being alive as a singular and unprecedented event and how each life matters relatively little if a longer historical view is taken. Kerr critiques through dark humour how some deaths are lionized as heroic and worthy of commemoration while others—from accidents, influenza, or childbirth—are rendered ridiculous, trivial, or forgettable. The deaths of non-combatants in the play are conveyed unsentimentally and sometimes with grim humour about the body's status as an inconvenient object that must be disposed of appropriately. The corpse of a woman who died in childbirth is carted in a wheelbarrow by her husband, the body still expelling the pungent flatulence for which she was known. When her body tumbles out of the wheelbarrow, horror is mixed with black comedy. As influenza deaths mount, the play's tone becomes more sombre. The town attempts a quarantine and, when that

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 100 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

fails, seeks to cast the virus as foreign to Unity. When Michael is among the first to fall ill, his sickness is attributed to him being from outside the community, "as if those germs just flew from the infected towns looking for familiar faces," Bea notes caustically (61-62). But Kerr's depiction of Michael's abrupt collapse from influenza on the farm field can be viewed, Marissa McHugh suggests, as analogous to "a wounded soldier overseas, falling in battle," although he is not celebrated but rather expelled from the town, she acknowledges (57). As Neta Gordon explains, through the depiction of influenza, "Kerr suggests that deaths that cannot be situated within a collective retrospective sacrificial narrative are not deemed significant" (121), a claim that the female characters both endorse (as when Mary insists on a symbolic gravesite for her dead fiancé, lost to influenza rather than the battlefield) and resist (as when Sissy mourns her own sweetheart, abandoned by Unity after he falls ill). But arguably Kerr goes even further, implying that while as a reader or audience member we temporarily empathize with the suffering his work describes, this form of remembering the past is contingent on a response to an invented character and does not create enduring commemoration of the Spanish flu's millions of victims.

Kerr and Munro evaluate how particular deaths are characterized and mourned, with battlefield deaths accorded a status as public events that deaths from influenza are not granted. Wartime propaganda ensured that acts of heroism were valorized both morally and aesthetically: in *Unity (1918)*, Bea rhapsodizes over Hart, who has lost his sight, describing him as "[a] wounded soldier. So beautiful, so horribly beautiful" (23). Later in the play, Hart attempts to disabuse her of her romantic illusions about how soldiers suffer injury and death, mocking the variations on a "stupid story about some stupid guy who's run out of ammunition" yet manages to single-handedly take on the enemy (81). The reality, Hart insists, is "the guy sitting in a trench with his lousy jammed-up standard-issue rifle that has only fired one shot before busting . . . his pants full of his own shit because he's been there for three days," stranded between the decaying corpses of his fellow soldiers (81). With less graphic detail, Jack, writing from the front to Louisa in "Carried Away," recounts how a fellow soldier's death from a heart attack amid war's dangers has become a source of mirth, a loss that served no national purpose. A more complex instance is Jack's death in the factory accident,

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 101 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

which is viewed as ironic for a different reason: he survived war with a minor injury only to die in a freak factory accident. His death occasions detailed news coverage, with the article "reprinted in the paper a week later" to allow the story to circulate even further (24). His funeral is "very large . . . attended even by people from neighboring towns" who had not known him but "wished to pay tribute to the sensational and tragic manner of his death." Had he died on the battlefield, an equally "sensational and tragic" death would have been his fate, but the news representation would have been sanitized and fictionalized, as Kerr suggests, for public consumption. Conversely, influenza's victims, as Davis argues, could not readily be made part of national mourning: "[S]oldiers died heroically, but the sick just died," with the consequence that "soldiers have been remembered while the sick have been forgotten" (61) and the Spanish flu losses comparatively neglected.

The 1918-1919 pandemic has had a long epidemiological shadow. "Descendants of the 1918 pandemic influenza virus strain have been the cause of almost every seasonal influenza A infection worldwide" since then, including the pandemics of "1957, 1968, and 2009 . . . earning the 1918 viral strain the nickname 'The Mother of all Pandemics'" (Nickol and Kindrachuk 3-4), a peculiarly apt name for an illness so closely associated with women's domestic care for the sick. While female caregivers were endowed with extraordinary responsibilities during the influenza pandemic, the war period also increased the range of permissible activities and occupations for women. Both facets of the gendered nature of influenza are explored in these works: in *Unity (1918)*, where self-sacrificial care is tinged with masochism when a woman elects to deliberately infect herself in the wake of the news that the man she loves is committed to someone else; and in "Carried Away," where the protagonist experiences greater social license because of the war and the pandemic, leading her to a series of somewhat risky liaisons with men before she settles into a marriage that assures her security. Reading the works of Munro and Kerr amid the recent coronavirus outbreak, it is startling to encounter parallel public health measures, including the use of masks, social distancing, and quarantine orders within a cultural climate of pervasive anxiety. In our own pandemic era, conversations about the gendered labour of remote schooling and increased childcare responsibilities have focused on what parents (and especially mothers) have lost in the labour market.

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 102 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

It remains to be seen whether this influenza-like outbreak will be commemorated in more frequent and enduring ways than the 1918-1919 Spanish influenza, which remains the benchmark—medically and culturally—for understanding a modern pandemic illness as a fatal and not merely inconvenient malady.

NOTES

1 For readers interested in *The New Yorker* version, see the Works Cited page. All citations are from the Vintage edition.

2 The original source of the Spanish flu is still debated, with the US and China identified as the most likely points of origin. In his book *The Last Plague*, which describes Canada's public health response to the influenza pandemic, Humphries observes that "[d]uring 1917 and 1918, 94,000 Chinese workers were shipped across Canada by the British from China" as part of the war effort, a possible means of transmission in this country (78). In "The Site of Origin," John M. Barry postulates that Spanish flu's most likely origin was Haskell County, Kansas, where a doctor documented an influenza epidemic in the early winter of 1918 (2-3). Other theories theorize multiple points of spread on more than one continent, and a spread whose rapidity was heightened by the conditions of deprivation in military camps as the war neared an end.

3 I am grateful to the anonymous reader who reminded me of this example.

4 An anonymous reader brought Budgell's work to my attention.

WORKS CITED

Barry, John M. "The Site of Origin of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic and its Public Health Implications." *Journal of Translational Medicine*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2004, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC340389/. Accessed 2 July 2021.

Belling, Catherine. "Overwhelming the Medium: Fiction and the Trauma of Pandemic Influenza in 1918." *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2009, pp. 55-81, doi:10.1353/lm.0.0046. Accessed 2 July 2021.

Bourke, Joanna. *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War*. Reaktion Books, 1996.

Branach-Kallas, Anna. "Trauma Plots: Reading Contemporary Canadian First World War Fiction in a Comparative Perspective." *Canadian Literature*, no. 238, 2019, pp. 47-64, doi.org/10.14288/cl.v0i238.190445. Accessed 2 July 2021.

Budgell, Anne. *We All Expected to Die: Spanish Influenza in Labrador, 1918-1919*. ISER, 2018.

Clark, Miriam Marty. "Allegories of Reading in Alice Munro's 'Carried Away.'" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1996, pp. 49-61.

Davies, Robertson. *Fifth Business*. Macmillan, 1970.

Davis, David A. "The Forgotten Apocalypse: Katherine Anne Porter's 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider,' Traumatic Memory, and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918." *Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2011, pp. 55-74.

DeFalco, Amelia. *Imagining Care: Responsibility, Dependency, and Canadian Literature*. U of Toronto P, 2016.

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 103 2021-09-05 10:42 AM

Donoghue, Emma. *The Pull of the Stars*. HarperAvenue, 2020.
Fahrni, Magda, and Esyllt W. Jones, editors. *Epidemic Encounters: Influenza, Society, and Culture in Canada, 1918-20*. U of British Columbia P, 2012.
Fisher, Jane Elizabeth. *Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War: Women's Narratives of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
Gordon, Neta. *Catching the Torch: Contemporary Canadian Literary Responses to World War I*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2014.
Griffiths, Clare. "From 'Dorchester Labourers' to 'Tolpuddle Martyrs': Celebrating Radicalism in the English Countryside." *Secular Martyrdom in Britain and Ireland: From Peterloo to the Present*, edited by Quentin Outram and Keith Laybourn, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 59-84.
Honigsbaum, Mark. "Spanish Influenza Redux: Revisiting the Mother of all Pandemics." *The Lancet*, vol. 391, 2018, pp. 2492-95.
Humphries, Mark Osborne. *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada*. U of Toronto P, 2012.
—. "The Limits of Necessity: Public Health, Dissent, and the War Effort during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic." Farhni and Jones, pp. 21-47.
Itani, Frances. *Deafening*. Praeger/Greenwood, 2003.
Kelm, Mary-Ellen. "British Columbia First Nations and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19." *BC Studies*, no. 122, 1999, pp. 23-47.
Kerr, Kevin. *Unity (1918)*. Talonbooks, 2002.
Lecker, Robert. "Machines, Readers, Gardens: Alice Munro's 'Carried Away.'" *Essays on Canadian Writing,* no. 66, 1998, pp. 103-27.
Leggatt, Judith. "Raven's Plague: Pollution and Disease in Lee Maracle's *Ravensong*." *Mosaic*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2000, pp. 163-78.
Löschnigg, Maria. "Carried Away by Letters: Alice Munro and the Epistolary Mode." *Alice Munro's Miraculous Art: Critical Essays*, edited by Janice Fiamengo and Gerald Lynch, U of Ottawa P, 2017, pp. 97-119.
Lux, Maureen Katherine. "The Impact of the Spanish Influenza Epidemic in Saskatchewan, 1918-1919." 1989. University of Saskatchewan, MA thesis.
Martin, Ann. "Visions of Canadian Modernism: The Urban Fiction of F. R. Livesay and J. G. Sime." *Canadian Literature*, no. 181, 2004, pp. 43-59.
McHugh, Marissa. "The Invasion of the Home Front: Revisiting, Rewriting, and Replaying the First World War in Contemporary Canadian Plays." 2013. University of Ottawa, PhD dissertation.
McKay, Ami. *The Birth House*. Knopf, 2006.
Munro, Alice. "Carried Away." *The New Yorker*, 21 Oct. 1991, pp. 34-61, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1991/10/21/carried-away. Accessed 2 July 2021.
—. "Carried Away." *Open Secrets*, Vintage, 1995, pp. 1-58.
Nickol, Michaela E., and Jason Kindrachuk. "A Year of Terror and a Century of Reflection: Perspectives on the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919." *BMC Infectious Diseases*, vol. 19, no. 117, 2019, pp. 1-10, doi.org/10.1186/s12879-019-3750-8. Accessed 2 July 2021.
Outka, Elizabeth. *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. Columbia UP, 2019.
Quiney, Linda. "'Rendering Valuable Service': The Politics of Nursing during the 1918-19 Influenza Crisis." Fahrni and Jones, pp. 48-69.
Sime, J. G. *Our Little Life: A Novel of To-Day*. 1921. Tecumseh, 1994.

CanLit.245.TEXT.PRINT.indd 104 2021-09-05 10:42 AM