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BOOKS: Munro's footing slips on 'Castle Rock'

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Abstract (Abstract): Soon after, the energetic title story introduces the people who made the passage over, moving briskly from one character to the next on their chaotic voyage. It would be a triumph as fiction, except that [Alice Munro] keeps interrupting her own gorgeous prose to quote from actual accounts of the voyage, which only undercuts her authority as narrator. After a remarkable scene in which a man offers his daughter to one of Munro's ancestors in exchange for land, the author peels us off for a journal entry: "We were becalmed the 21st and 22nd but we had rather more wind the 23rd."

The wafting between genres stops in the second half of the book, as Munro delves deeper into her own life in pieces like "Lying Under the Apple Tree" and "Hired Girl," in which she looks back on her young self from older eyes. She is a cunning, slightly deceptive child, suggesting that even then Munro knew she could shape her world into fiction. By the time she hits "Home," a piece about her father getting ill, Munro is fully in stride.

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Full text: FICTION

The View From Castle Rock: Stories. By Alice Munro. Knopf. 349 pages. $25.95.

Verdict: Autobiography intrudes on perfect prose.

For almost 50 years, southwestern Ontario has been Alice Munro's Yoknapatawpha County, her Winesburg, Ohio. So thoroughly has Munro explored every dimly lit farmhouse and every dead-end knoll of this universe in the middle 20th century, it is easy to forget that --- like William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson before her --- she had to invent a place before it could become so real.

Such forgetting is not possible with "The View From Castle Rock," Munro's latest and oddly unbalanced collection of stories. In a foreword, she explains the book's matter-of-fact origins. "I was doing something closer to what a memoir does --- exploring life, my own life," she writes, "but not in an austere or rigorously factual way."

In other words, "The View From Castle Rock" is an embellished memoir. It just never takes on the ballast of fiction, which it claims to be. Stories struggle to pull free from their autobiographical roots, drawing our focus to matters of Munro's lineage rather than to her characters' emotional lives. In the first story, "No Advantages," we learn that Munro's clan's name is Laidlaw and that her forebears came from a farm in Scotland called Far Hope.

"Hope means a bay, not a bay filled with water but with land," she writes, anticipating the landlocked life that her ancestors found in America. The tale, such as it is, seems earthbound itself, a chronicle without a story arc or dramatic turn.

Soon after, the energetic title story introduces the people who made the passage over, moving briskly from one character to the next on their chaotic voyage. It would be a triumph as fiction, except that Munro keeps interrupting her own gorgeous prose to quote from actual accounts of the voyage, which only undercuts her authority as narrator. After a remarkable scene in which a man offers his daughter to one of Munro's ancestors in exchange for land, the author peels us off for a journal entry: "We were becalmed the 21st and 22nd but we had rather more wind the 23rd."

It's easy to understand why someone entering her middle 70s would be drawn to this sort of genealogical dig, but it's disorienting to see a writer as sure-footed as Munro with so little control over her material. The wafting between genres stops in the second half of the book, as Munro delves deeper into her own life in
pieces like "Lying Under the Apple Tree" and "Hired Girl," in which she looks back on her young self from older eyes. She is a cunning, slightly deceptive child, suggesting that even then Munro knew she could shape her world into fiction. By the time she hits "Home," a piece about her father getting ill, Munro is fully in stride. "Time and place can close in on me," she writes, describing how she returned home to do some farmwork as her father lay sick in a hospital bed. "It can so easily seem as if I have never got away, that I have stayed here my whole life."

"The View From Castle Rock" makes clear what many of Munro's readers have long suspected --- that her personal past has been a wormhole into her own imagination. Perhaps the mythology she has created over 11 collections is not far from the truth. And yet, in pulling back the curtain on her writing process, Munro has reminded us that the flourishes in her fiction, the exquisite refining of the raw material from her life, make all the difference in the world.

John Freeman is president of the National Book Critics Circle.

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