director of innovative initiatives such as the National Eating Disorder Information Centre and the Body Image Project at Women's College Hospital in Toronto. Her research explores cultural representations and life history narratives of body and identity.

DAUGHTERS AND MOTHERS IN ALICE MUNRO'S LATER STORIES

Deborah Heller
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REVIEWED BY
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In Alice Munro’s early cycle of stories Lives of Girls and Women (1971) the protagonist and narrator Del concludes from her family’s and community’s stories that “[s]tories from the past could go like this, round and round and down to death; I expected it” (“Princess Ida”). Particularly women’s life stories, which rhyme “womb” with “tomb,” words that Del “got . . . mixed up” (“Heirs of the Living Body”). However, the heroine of this autobiographical Bildungsroman—Munro called the book a novel—escapes in each of the sections from another set of models and norms that would confine her to such a circular fate. Instead, she will transcend it by transforming her experiences of girls’ and women’s lives into fiction—the creative move that Margaret Atwood defined a year later, in Survival (1972), as the only route of escape from typical victimhood in Canadian literature.

Deborah Heller’s study focuses on a daughter’s guilt about her filial failings towards her mother. Holding the present ransom to the past, this circular force is not a theme in Lives of Girls and Women, and Del’s mother is hardly more prominent than other characters and institutions whose influence Del needs to understand and circumscribe so that they cannot act as obstacles on her own path. However, in many of her stories Munro has treated more darkly what she has named her “central material . . . in life.” Against a background of earlier treatments, Heller discusses the recurrence and transformations of the “cycle of guilt, punishment, forgiveness, and redemption” in stories of three late collections: “My Mother’s Dream,” in The Love of a Good Woman (1998); “Family Furnishings,” in Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage (2000); and “Soon” and “Silence,” in Runaway (2004).

“My Mother’s Dream” is narrated by the daughter from her egocentric pre-natal and infant sensations combined with hindsight empathy with her mother’s equal self-assertion. In the process of narration the fight between daughter and mother, as “monsters to each other,” results in their achieving their respective self-hoods. “Family Furnishings” is again narrated by a daughter, in this case a writer by vocation. The story exhibits three daughters in different families with different mother-daughter relations. As in Lives of Girls and Women it is the art of writing that provides an exit from the compulsions of the past, the “family furnishings.”

In an earlier study of Munro, the essay “Getting Loose: Women and Narrative in Alice Munro’s Friend of My Youth,” in Literary Sisterhoods: Imagining Women Artists (2005, reviewed in this journal), Heller has shown the narrating heroines’ getting loose from the boundaries of both gender and genre and assuming with their narrative authority also moral authority.

The three Juliet stories, of “Soon” and “Silence,” shift the protagonist’s perspective from filial to maternal, from Juliet as “rejecting daughter” to Juliet as “rejected mother.” In the absence of “moral logic” in this apparent retribution, since her daughter’s rejection is not attributed to any failing on the mother’s part, Heller argues that Munro substitutes “poetic justice” for cosmic justice, the concept of Greek tragedy that Juliet was reading about at the start of the story and the existence of which the stories seem to deny together with “a transcendent spiritual order.” However, Heller’s distinction between cosmic and poetic justice seems less clear when she says that Juliet is rejected by her daughter “as by some iron law of retribution.” As early as in Lives of Girls and Women Munro favours unorthodox reflections on divine justice when Del, in the story “Age of Faith,” concludes her testing of all the confessional church services in Jubilee with the following speculation based on her own experience: “Could there be God not contained in the church’s net at all . . . God real, and really in the world, and alien and unacceptable as death? Could there be God amazing, indifferent, beyond faith?”

Daughters and Mothers complements Heller’s essay in Literary Sisterhoods. Her accounts of the stories and her interpretations are perceptive, economic, and clear, with a nice attention to Munro’s shifts of tone, from the pathetic to the farcical. The book is short, omitting theoretical framing—what too often is a stretching on a Procrustean bed—as well as engagement with other scholars’ debates. The few notes usefully cite some of Munro’s remarks about the autobiographical impulse in her writing. The topic of the book is of interest to scholars of Munro and to others studying mother-daughter relations; the book would be stimulating for book clubs. In interviews Munro has repeatedly spoken of her guilt as daughter and mother: “wanting other things.” Her readers have been hugely grateful for both this wanting and the narrative transformation of the guilt, which offers, in Heller’s words, “a universal resonance.”

Gisela Argyle, Senior Scholar of Humanities at York University in Toronto, has published Germany as Model and Monster: Allusions in English Fiction, 1830s-1930s (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), another book and articles on Victorian literature and comparative literature, as well as literary translations from German into English and the converse.

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