

# ALICE MUNRO'S NOBEL PRIZE:

## Helping popularize an unpopular genre

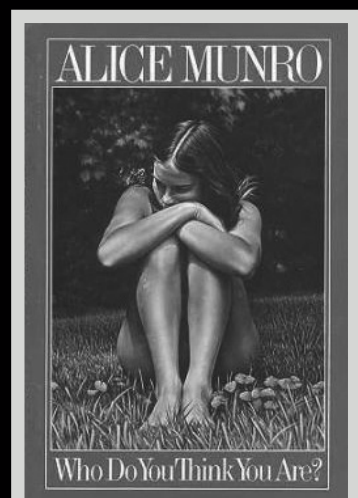


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## Introduction



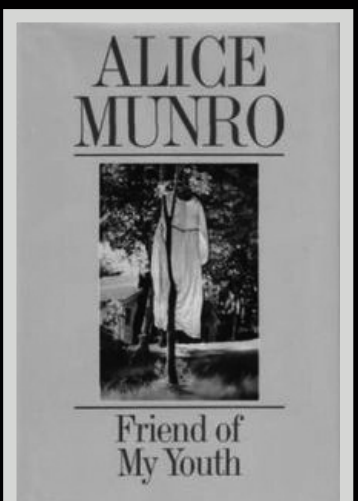
In October 2013 Alice Munro was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Praised on the Nobel website as the “master of the contemporary short story”, the first Canadian to earn the prize for literature, and the 13th woman to win, this award not only boosted the author’s already substantial reputation but helped garner popular and critical attention for the short-story genre.

**This research project explores the way Alice Munro’s Nobel Prize has been celebrated not only as a victory for Canadian literature but also as a victory for a transnational literary form: the short story.**

Before this victory, Munro was far from unknown. She had written 14 collections and earned multiple prestigious literary awards. But despite Munro’s wide acclaim as a short-story writer, the genre had long been “devalued by the industry, and even by society” (Hall). In non-academic contexts, the short story is just not as popular as the novel.

**In comparing the genre’s critical and public reception before and after Munro’s Nobel win, this project explores how Munro’s victory has helped popularise the short story. This shift in popularity may result in a shift in the literary hierarchy that has dominated popular discussions of Canadian literature.**

## Methodology



**Study involved review, analysis and summation of:**

- Books, articles, interviews and online sources regarding critical reception of Alice Munro before and after winning Nobel Prize
- Review of three major newspapers to achieve cross-national coverage: *The Globe and Mail*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*
- Additional media sources: online interviews, reports, and blogs
- Munro’s short stories, as well as biographies and analyses of the Canadian short story

## Results

Prior to October 2013, outside of the academy, Alice Munro’s writing had been far less “popular” than that of such Canadian authors as Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje.

- Lisa Allardice of *The Guardian* suggests that:  
**“This lack of recognition and wider readership is blamed on Munro’s dedication to genre”.**
- Both Robert Thacker and Douglas Gibson write of Munro’s commitment to the short story and the **early pressure to produce a novel** (344, 161).
- Gerald Lynch writes, **“Everyone wants a novel, and publishers’ declarations that story collections do not sell . . . become self-fulfilling prophecy”** (13).

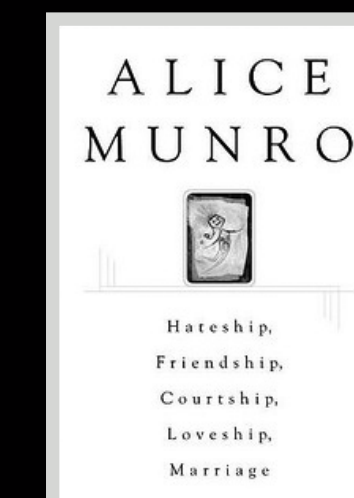
Following the announcement of the Nobel Prize, the media generated new language which extolled what had long been considered an undervalued genre, the short story.

- Russell Smith of *The Globe and Mail* announced: **“This is a win for short stories themselves”**, and reasoned that **“the contemporary short story is too damn artsy for mass popularity....”**
- Munro made a similar statement: **“I hope this would happen not just for me but for the short story in general...And I would like it to come to the fore, without any strings attached so that there doesn’t have to be a novel”** (“Alice”).
- Lynn Coady, who earned the 2013 Giller prize for her short-story collection *Hell Going*, commented: **“Wow, maybe short stories are on the ascendancy”** (Ahearn).

While the media was quick to emphasize Munro’s Canadian identity as well as her use of the Canadian landscape, her victory was linked to the short story genre in international terms.

- Chad Pelley blogs that **“2013 was arguably, finally, The Year of the Short Story for Canada”, stating that “It was the year Coady took the Giller with a collection, and the world gave CanLit’s short story champion, Alice Munro, a Nobel Prize. It was the year everyone’s favourite publisher launched an imprint just for short stories”.**
- Karl Ritter and Malin Risin report: **“...she has long been an ambassador for the short story”.**

## Conclusion

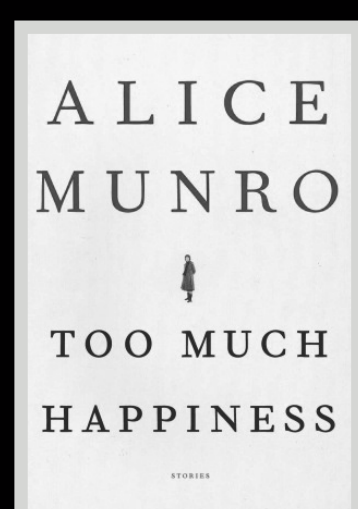


**This study demonstrated how Alice Munro’s Nobel Prize victory garnered a renewed public interest, not just in her work, but in the specific literary genre with which Munro is associated.** Presently, the form is “considered to be a particularly vital genre, if not the flagship genre of Canadian literature” (Nischik 1), but when cast against the novel, it is often seen as the “underappreciated literary cousin” (Kaufman). Although Munro’s Nobel Prize is undoubtedly a major achievement for Canada and Canadian literature, it has also prompted literary critics to reconsider the status of literary genres and to pay renewed attention to the craft of writing. While it is too soon to tell if the short story will gain a comparable popularity to the novel, the Nobel Prize, as *The Globe and Mail*’s Russell Smith observes, **“will bring a vast new audience not just to a Canadian writer but also to an intricate, puzzling and hugely rewarding art form”.**

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