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Open Secrets

By Alice Munro

Alfred A. Knopf. 304 pp.

Asked at age 37 about her diverse career as poet, teacher, cowhand and pilot, Diane Ackerman said, "I don't want to get to the end of my life and find I have lived just the length of it. I want to have lived the width of it as well."

Alice Munro writes the way Ackerman wants to live. For nearly two decades, Munro has produced short stories of such extraordinarily rich texture that they often feel like a novel in 40 pages. Their deadly accurate detail and apprehension of subtle emotion give her stories weight and mass. And their depth makes them live even more vividly in memory than they first did on the page.

Her latest collection of eight interconnected stories is vintage Munro. Set mostly in the fictional Canadian town of Carstairs and covering 100 years, these stories insist that there are no ordinary lives, for each person's experience forms a unique, many-forked road of joy and pain, of dreams fulfilled and unfulfilled.

In "Carried Away," vibrant young Louisa begins a correspondence with a man who has just gone off to fight in World War I. We watch the ardor of the letters deepen, but only after a leap of three decades forward do we learn that both Louise and Jack marry other people and that Jack loses his life in a gruesome accident at the factory owned by Louisa's husband. Munro shows Louisa's loves and risks, moments of folly and equanimity, and how all these sear their imagery into her mind—only to have her memory of her relationships with Jack and others radically transformed by a spectral vision in middle age. She had had the experience but missed the meaning.

"An Albanian Virgin" offers a story within a story. A Canadian woman is captured and imprisoned by a violent band caught up in the politico-religious bloodbath of the Balkans. Intriguing in itself, her story takes on greater immediacy as it is told to another Canadian woman who has left both husband and lover to begin a fresh life. These stories braid into a complex exploration of freedom vs. intimacy, isolation vs. confinement, showing a wide range of ways women are shaped and entrapped by a combination of social forces and their own desires.

After an adventurous, hippie young womanhood, Gail settled into a comfortable and, she believed, stable marriage to Will in "The Jack Randa Hotel." Then she learns about betrayal. She learns that "men made fatuous speeches (*I am sorry, but I no longer feel committed to this marriage*). They offered to sell back to the wives cars and furniture that the wives themselves had paid for. They capered about in self-satisfaction because they had managed to impregnate some dewy dollop of womanhood younger than their own children. They were fiendish and childish. What could you do but give up on

them?" At 56, Will has run off to Australia with a 28 year-old. But Gail does not give up on him. She follows him. She may, in fact, be on the verge of getting him back before wondering whether she is clutching a part of her life that may be dead.

Covering a century, "A Wilderness Station" presents a man who brings to the wilderness a bride from a home for orphans. Using an epistolary format showing absolute mastery of the storyteller's art, Munro follows the wake of the man's almost immediate, violent death, probing issues of truth and guilt and memory and the dehumanizing and paternal ways women have been treated by even well-meaning men.

The final story, "Vandals," is a powerful account of kindness rewarded by cruelty. Simultaneously shocking and completely plausible, this ingenious story adumbrates the needs and hopes reflected in the lives of two strong women a generation apart.

For many years now, you could place few safer bets than that next year's "best story" anthologies will contain a tale by Alice Munro. Her latest, and possibly best, collection suggests you can feel safe about that bet for years to come.