

Letter from Canada

John Degen

Early on October 10, 2013 I was on my way to a previously arranged television interview when news came over my car radio that Alice Munro had won the Nobel Prize for Literature. It's a rare occasion indeed when events directly affecting my job are delivered to me over the airways. I had to pull my car to the kerb and take it all in. Alice Munro was one of the founding members of the Writers' Union of Canada. She was present at the somewhat boozy, raucous establishing meeting in Ottawa in 1973. Legend has it she led the group in a round of Danny Boy at the hotel bar.

The CBC television crew had been coming to my office to ask about subscription ebook selling schemes, an item that would undoubtedly have been buried near the end of the newscast; instead we recorded a lead piece about Canadian literature's sudden international fame. For one brief moment, writing – *short-story* writing – was shouldering hockey, the weather, and politics from the top of the news cycle in Canada. Golden times.

Did the Nobel Prize change things for Canadian writers? The media seemed obsessed with this question. Had we all just won something – a new respectability, access into an elite club? Typically Canadian response, really – someone outside Canada has told us we're good at something! Did we know Alice Munro was a 'master of the contemporary short story', as the Nobel folks described her?

Well, yes, we did. Students of Canadian literature have been reading the work of Alice Munro in our schools since the early 1970s. She is part of an established canon of Canadian literature superstars for university courses, along with Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Margaret Laurence and Michael Ondaatje. For those who've known and loved Ms Munro's work, who've learned from it and emulated it, we had in a way all won the Nobel Prize. Still, how does one quantify the benefit?

BookNet Canada, an agency that collects and analyses sales data, tracked a Canadian sales increase for Munro's books of 4,424% between 21 September and 19 October. The week of the prize itself saw a 6,650% increase. But the actual numbers tell the real story of Canadian literature within Canada. In the week she won the Nobel, and before the prize was announced, Munro's books had sold just 94 units across this vast country. After the prize was announced and before that week was done, she sold 6,345 units (several of those to my mother). In other words, until the Nobel announcement, Munro was not really making a living from her writing at home.

Fewer people live in Canada than in California, which has a land mass about 20 times smaller and almost certainly a shorter average drive to the nearest bookshop. In the domestic Canadian market, anything above 5,000 copies is considered a bestseller, which means it is next to impossible for a Canadian writer to make a living from just being a Canadian writer. Happily for Alice Munro, her work crosses borders, and has long found readers

in the larger US, UK and foreign-language markets. Canadian publishers, serving a tiny market across a huge geography, survive for the most part on razor-thin margins for domestic sales. If even the very best Canadian stories will move only 100 units commercially in a typical week, where is the economic incentive to tell Canadian stories? That we even have a Canadian publishing industry is a testament to the cultural dedication of all those employed by it. They're certainly not in it for the money.

Educational sales make a big difference, of course. Many a Canadian writer's annual earnings have been given a significant boost by having their work included on curriculum lists in K-12 (primary and secondary) and post-secondary schools. Tell an essentially Canadian story that resonates with Canadian teachers, and you may be in for a significant windfall covering years, if not decades. One colleague told me recently he made more from licensing revenue for one short story in photocopied coursepack collections over the last 20 years than he did from most of his books. Note the use of the past tense.

Canadian schools have taken the opportunity of a recent tweak to Canada's Copyright Act to excuse themselves from paying royalties on copied work. For my colleague, those essential royalty payments on that one short story no longer arrive, and considering he is now well past retirement age, this has a disastrous impact. His work is still being read by students across the country, and still being taught as often (if not more), but he is no longer compensated for that use. Canadian writers and publishers are not sitting back on this issue. A court challenge has already been launched to try and protect licence revenues, but it will take years to be decided and in the meantime writers and publishers are suffering precipitous losses at the hands of our own educational system. Imagine: if the schools' legal claims hold, it will be possible for them to create a photocopied or digital coursepack collection of one story from each of Alice Munro's 14 original collections and create a royalty-free Alice Munro reader. And they will.

Alice Munro has been rightly praised for the Faulknerian regional/universal balance she strikes in her writing. Most of her work is set in a small, rural Ontario county whose real counterpart is an hour's drive from my front door in western Toronto. I know Alice Munro and her characters not just because I've studied the work in a classroom, but because in so many ways they are my next door neighbours. There is a kind of magic to the way she translates that familiar domestic reality into narratives read and appreciated by *New Yorker* subscribers. And yet, it is still a commonplace for Canadian writers to hear from agents that our work is too Canadian to make inroads into the international markets where, clearly, the real money is. Combine this persisting attitude and our schools' short-sighted money grab and one might wonder if Canadian writers won a prize at all. ■



John Degen is executive director of the Writers' Union of Canada. He is a novelist and poet. His 2006 book *The Uninvited Guest* was shortlisted for the Amazon.ca First Novel Award.