

Alice Munro: Reputation in Shreds

In the Toronto Star of July 7, 2024, the novelist Alice Munro's daughter Andrea Skinner revealed to the world the sexual abuse inflicted on her as a child by her stepfather, Munro's second husband Gerald Fremlin. Almost as disturbing as this well-documented account of the sexual exploitation of a child is the frigid reception Skinner received from her mother when she came to learn what Fremlin had done. Exhibiting the opposite of the intelligence that illuminates her fiction, Alice Munro took the position that whatever her daughter experienced at the hands of her husband was not her concern. As Skinner reports, Munro declared that "she had been 'told too late,' she loved him [that is, Fremlin] too much, and that our misogynistic culture was to blame if I expected her to deny her own needs, sacrifice for her children, and make up for the failings of men." Thus, Munro sided with her child's abuser not because she believed him innocent (she never claimed that) but because she loved him despite his depredations and was unwilling to play the culturally approved part of the self-denying woman. In effect, if anyone or anything was to blame in this affair, it was that catch-all villain, the culture. Both before and after Fremlin pled guilty in open court to indecent assault in 2005 (some thirty years after the fact), Munro remained loyal to him.

It was when Andrea Skinner read a glowing portrait of her mother in the New York Times magazine of October 24, 2004 that she finally decided to take her case to the authorities. As she writes,

[W]hen I was 38, I read an interview in the New York Times with my mother, in which she described Gerald Fremlin in very loving terms. She said she was lucky to have him in her life, and declared that she had a "close relationship" with all three of her daughters, including me. For three weeks I was too sick to move, and hardly left my bed. I had long felt inconsequential to my mother, but now she was erasing me.

I wanted to speak out. I wanted to tell the truth. That's when I went to the police to report my abuse.

Given that Alice Munro freely admits in the Times feature that she has “no moral scruples,” it may have come easily to her to lie about her relationship with one of her daughters. Strangely, the confession itself appears as a sort of merit—a fitting and attractive trait for a woman of vision not bound the norms and expectations of others.

If readers in 2004 could not have imagined that Munro treated one of her children virtually as a non-person, neither could they have imagined that she rejected her in the name of the same ethos of self-determination which appears wholly admirable and uplifting in the pages of the New York Times. Refusing to part ways with the man who climbed into his stepchild's bed when she was nine and later threatened to kill her if she informed the police, Munro maintained to her daughter's face that she had every right to

satisfy her needs as she saw fit. In the Times feature she speaks in the abstract of “self-fulfillment.”

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Despite professing to be “close” with each of her daughters, Alice Munro does admit in the Times to mixed feelings over being a mother. A key passage reads as follows:

Although Munro is close today [that is, in 2004] with her three daughters—who she says, with a wry smile, get together “mostly to discuss me”—and is an enraptured grandmother (“I’m crazy about little kids,” she says. “I used to be cooler about them”), she candidly admits to an ever-present ambivalence about the maternal role, which she saw as foisted upon her by the expectations of her time, rather than actively chosen. “I have never had the longing to have children,” she muses.

If maternal responsibilities were “foisted” upon her by something as alien as “the expectations of her time,” it is hard to see why Alice Munro would feel merely a free-floating “ambivalence” about them. At some point they will arouse actual hostility. That point was reached when she learned of Fremlin’s assaults on her daughter and, after breaking with him for a time, resolved the conflict of loyalties in his favor. She actively chose Fremlin over Skinner, and as if to demonstrate that this was indeed a deliberate decision, not a caprice, remained with him till the end. Implicitly applauded by her interviewer for having the candor to admit that she did not want the children with whom she purports to be on warm

terms, she freed herself of unwelcome responsibilities by cutting off the daughter who needed her most, when she needed her most.

One wonders what Munro really meant in telling her interviewer that motherhood was “foisted” upon her. Did she become pregnant three times against her will? Only a difference of shading distinguishes this woman who seems to feel that she never chose to be a mother from the woman who rebuffed her daughter with the argument that she does not answer to society or her children. (“Our misogynistic culture was to blame if I expected her to deny her own needs.”) If Alice Munro were alive today and in full possession of the mental powers she lost in her later years, she might well be astonished to find herself vilified in the press for being the self-determining woman portrayed radiantly in the foremost newspaper in the United States.

In an aside in the same passage where Munro “candidly admits” her unease as a mother, it is noted that she “happily owns up to having ‘no moral scruples.’” The parenthetical nature of this observation suggests that the interviewer attaches no great importance to it, though the manner in which Munro admits to not having moral hang-ups and reservations transforms their absence from a defect into something like a grace. What did this absence of scruples come to in practice? Allowing Fremlin to abuse her child and freezing this child out thereafter.

Skinner reports that when she was 11, “In front of my mother, [Fremlin] told me that many cultures in the past weren't as ‘prudish’ as ours, and it used to be considered normal for children to learn about sex by engaging in sex with adults. My mother said nothing.” That Alice Munro let this grooming remark pass made her complicit in her child’s

abuse. Presumably she let it pass not because she dared not speak and not because she did not perceive its glaring implications but because she judged prevailing morality as repressive and historically contingent. While the Times feature does not, of course, justify the sexual initiation of children, it does refer in passing to the “inhibiting strictures” of Munro’s upbringing. Fremlin evidently proposed to liberate his stepdaughter from the unhappy effects of such narrow rules.

The Times interviewer reports with wonder that at one point in the course of conversation, Alice Munro seemed “as though she were having an argument with . . . all those who would tell her how to behave or how to write.” Only a fool would tell Alice Munro how to write, but was her daughter a fool to plead with her to show human decency? Her response to this plea was to say in effect, “No one tells me how to act.” That she took Fremlin’s side both before and after he was prosecuted suggests strongly that her loyalty to him was indeed a considered decision, a defiance of anyone—including a daughter—who would presume to tell her what morality required. The fact is that much or all of Munro’s conduct that now stuns us with its solipsism and moral blindness can be justified with the sort of liberation language so stylishly employed in the Times magazine. A woman who chafed under “the expectations of her time” turned her back on her daughter when and because the daughter “expected her to deny her own needs.” A woman portrayed enchantingly as an “excavator of . . . our most brazen impulses” condoned her husband’s brazen depravity.

Perhaps some of the readers delighted by the portrait of Alice Munro in 2004 recoiled in outrage at the disclosure in 2024 that she sided with the man who sexually

exploited her child. Did they realize that Munro's betrayal of her daughter reflected the same disdain of conventional norms and expectations idealized two decades before?

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