Interview by Eleanor Wachtel, *Writers & Company*

Alice Munro and Eleanor Wachtel

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Interview by Eleanor Wachtel, *Writers & Company*¹

Alice MUNRO has been called a writer's writer and many writers both in Canada and internationally do love and admire her work. But Alice Munro is also a reader's writer. She writes with such intelligence, depth and compassion, carrying her readers with her in her explorations of character in search of some kind of understanding, no neat resolutions, just trying to figure things out, in an elegant, moving way. Whenever I see that *The New Yorker* has a story by Alice Munro, I save it up as a treat, a reliable pleasure, and afterwards, to talk about with friends: what is she doing now? Alice Munro has won virtually every prize available to a Canadian short story writer, from three Governor General's Awards, starting with her very first book, *Dance of the Happy Shades* in 1968, to the American National Book Critics Circle Award and the Trillium. She's won the Giller Prize twice now. She was the first Canadian to win both the PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in short fiction and the Rea Award for the short story.

Alice Munro was born in Wingham in southwestern Ontario almost 75 years ago. She studied at the University of Western Ontario for two years, then married at twenty and moved to Vancouver. In 1976, she returned to Ontario, settling in the nearby town of Clinton. I went to Goderich, a slightly bigger town on Lake Huron, just up the road from Clinton, still in Alice Munro country, to meet with her at Bailey's Restaurant – I would call it Alice's Restaurant if that did not sound too much like an old song. But it's the place where she likes to have lunch and meets friends, as well as visiting journalists, biographers, whatever. She has a regular table at the back, and a particular seat at the table. Given that she is reluctant to do interviews, she was remarkably candid, relaxed, thoughtful, and forthcoming. Here is our conversation from November 2004, just before she won her second Giller Prize.

Eleanor WACHTEL

The title of your new book Runaway actually fits many of these stories. They're about women in flight, running to or from relationships or ways of living. Did you feel that current underneath the stories as you were writing them?

Alice MUNRO

No, I didn't feel that. I never start out with any kind of connecting theme or any plan, and everything just falls the way it falls, usually. But I like the title, I do like it very much now. And you noticed, I suppose, that all the titles are one word. Now, that's a reaction against the last book which, if you remember, was *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. And nobody could ever remember that title. Now I knew one wouldn't be able to remember it, but I liked it so much I insisted on it. So, this time, I went back to one-word titles for each of the stories. I thought of the power of one word, and I liked that a lot, but I don't know if I'll go on that way.

1. The editor wishes to thank the following persons, most gratefully: Lynn Blin for contacting Eleanor Wachtel, and Eleanor Wachtel for sending us the material and granting us the permission to publish the interview in its entirety. A much shorter version of it was published in *Queen's Quarterly* in 2005.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Keeping with the idea of Runaway, in your 1998 collection, The Love of a Good Woman, you had a line about a woman who flees a marriage for another man, and you write, "so her life was falling forwards, she was becoming one of those people who ran away – a woman who shockingly and incomprehensibly gave everything up for love, other observers would say wryly, meaning sex."² What is it these women run away from? Is it convention and expectation?

Alice MUNRO

I think they run away from a life – they can look ahead and they can see what their whole life is going to be. I think they run away from this. You wouldn't call that a prison exactly, they run away from some kind of predictability, and not just about things that will happen in their lives but the things that happen in themselves. Though I don't think most of my characters *plan* to do this; they don't say, "There's a certain stage of my life when I'll get out of this." And in fact I think the people who run away are often the people who've got into things the most enthusiastically, they think this is it! – and then, they want more. They just demand more of life than (what) is happening at the moment. And sometimes this is a great mistake, of course, it's always a little different, a good deal different than you'd expect it. But, it's something that particularly women in my generation tended to do this because we'd been married young, we'd been married with a very settled idea of what life was supposed to be like, and we were in a hurry to get to that – that safe married spot. And then something happened to us when we were around 40, and all sorts of women then decided that their lives had to have a new pattern. And I don't know if that will happen to women who are the next generation, or the generation after that – I can think of my granddaughters' generation – because so many things happened to them before they're 40, maybe enough has happened. And they pick a life and go on with it, without these rather girlish hopes of finding love, finding excitement.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Why girlish hopes? What do you mean?

Alice MUNRO

Well, they seem to me often to be rather youthful ideas – ideas that somewhere there is a passion that *will* last, or that there is a passion that surpasses everything else in life, that you can just tear everything apart, and pick up, and go on somehow. I think that's rather a youthful idea. But I think women of my age didn't hit this youthful phase until we had our middle age first. We had our kids and our homes and our husbands and our quite programmed lives. And there was this thing about – "there's got to be more in my life than that!"

Eleanor WACHTEL

And they were attracted to a certain recklessness.

Alice MUNRO

In men or in themselves?

2. Editor's note: "The Children Stay."

Eleanor WACHTEL

Maybe both?

Alice MUNRO

I think in both. The idea that one is doing a reckless thing! The character you're talking about – I can't even remember that story you're reading from, but I take your word for it it is from my book. [Laughter] It sounds familiar.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Well, the one where she runs away, that one is from "The Children Stay."

Alice MUNRO

She finds that running away has considerable penalties she didn't count on, the way she finds this is one of the things you discover. Well, runaways do find this, that's one of the things you discover. I don't think they find out something that they altogether regret, but they regret a good deal, and I think that's maybe the thing you find out about life, that whichever road you take – I'm saying things that are so banal I can hardly believe it – which ever road you take, there are difficulties, there are problems, there are things you'll have to give up and things you'll miss, and that's what I've written about a good deal.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Are men the main route of escape or transformation for these women?

Alice MUNRO

In my generation they certainly were, we didn't, I think, see any other things. And they are a pretty traditional one too, you know. Men for women and women for men, and falling in love is still one of the big, big ways to change your life, and to give yourself this tremendous charge of excitement, and hope, and it's still one of the most important things we have.

Eleanor WACHTEL

In several stories, a romantic connection is thwarted by circumstance and what seems to be leading to a sexual union turns into something else entirely. But something emotionally important, or even life-changing still happens.

Alice MUNRO

Yes, I like that. I like that to work in stories. I like the change not to be the change that you thought you were getting into, and for something to come that is completely unexpected, as if life had a mind of its own and would take hold of you and present you with something you hadn't anticipated. I can't remember now which stories do that, but I mean I'm always hoping it will happen [laughter].

Eleanor WACHTEL

You were telling me about the importance of falling in love, I haven't done a count here, although one reviewer of your last book noted that infidelity, romantic encounters outside marriage occurred in seven of the nine stories.

Alice MUNRO

What happened in the other two? [Laughter]

Eleanor WACHTEL

What does that subject give you as a writer?

Alice MUNRO

Writers are always writing about infidelity, it's so dramatic. At least, maybe writers, again, of my generation because we just didn't have as much adventure before we were married. And there's all this thing of the wickedness of it, the secrecy, the complications, the finding that you thought you were one person and you are also this other person. The innocent life and the guilty life – my God, it's just full of stuff for a writer. I doubt if it will ever go out of fashion.

Eleanor WACHTEL

I'd like to talk about sex.

Alice MUNRO

OK.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Canadian writers Audrey Thomas says you're the only writer who really truly examines women's sexuality. American novelist Mona Simpson says you've "done for female sexuality what Philip Roth did for male sexuality."

Alice MUNRO

Truly?

Eleanor WACHTEL

That's what she says, although she says "covering much the same period (though it would seem they knew vastly different women)." [Laughter] Does it surprise you?

Alice MUNRO

It surprises me mightily. I wouldn't have thought that at all. I think I write about sex just the way almost everybody I read writes about sex. I write about it with a great deal of interest, and trying to be as truthful as I can, in a way. Or to think about what people really go through, and what they think and how they feel about it. I think that every writer does that. John Updike writes a lot about sex [hesitates] who else? All of us do. It's just a main subject, and has been for a long time. Charlotte Brontë was writing about sex. I suppose Jane Austen was too. Yes, oh she *was*, for Heaven's sake – where do you get a hero like Darcy, unless you're writing about sex? No, I don't think about this at all. In fact, I don't ever think about what kind of fiction I write, or what I am writing about, or what I'm trying to write about. When I talk to you now, I try to think about this, I try to come up with some explanation. But when I'm writing, what I do is think about a story that I want to tell. We were talking about the story "Passion," and I wanted to tell first about the girl's relation with the family and then about this wonderful moment when she runs away with a man who, after all,

is married, and has great problems of his own, and how during the course of that day, she understands what his problems are — and they're not particularly connected with sex. They're really connected with not being able to bear a life. And so I wanted to take her much further, into what she understands about other people. And then, of course, there's a turn-around at the end because in my life as a young girl, and in the life of this young girl, money was so *terribly* important. Just to have a *little* money. So I wanted to bring that into what seemed to be a story about feelings. But I didn't *say* these things to myself, I just thought, what happens next? And, so that was what happened next. But at the end, really, she is given a start in life, which, I think, are the last words of the story, by another person's tragedy and by her own flightiness and inconsistency. I like it when stories turn out in an unexpected way that does not seem too forced, and that story pleased me because I thought it did.

Eleanor WACHTEL

You take her farther than she expected is what you're saying, because the initial attraction is sexual, and the brother is more attractive to her than her own fiancé.

Alice MUNRO

This is often true with women, I think, that the man who has troubles, the man who is brooding and dark, and unhappy, and whom you could perhaps make happy, is very attractive. And so he is very attractive to her. He is full of mystery, and he is older. And so she thinks that something is going to happen, probably some sexual awakening is going to be the answer to her life, and it's going to happen on this day. She doesn't really think that too clearly, but her feelings are urging her that way. He teaches her to drive, which is an unexpected bonus, and so, things are not as we expect.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Just, there is an aside on writing about sex. You are credited with getting the "F" word into The New Yorker with a short story, you were the first person...

Alice MUNRO

Yes, but I can't remember. And I can't remember in what context it was used!

Eleanor WACHTEL

But obviously persuasive, because you persuaded Mr. Shawn to admit it.

Alice MUNRO

I was so innocent and ignorant. I didn't know about Mr. Shawn, and everybody who knew about *The New Yorker* knew about Mr. Shawn, and the way he had made these rules about the things you couldn't write about and the words you couldn't use. And I didn't know this. I thought that they were making Mr. Shawn up, that he was this sort of figure who wouldn't allow these things into *The New Yorker*. But, of course he was very real. But I think it was in dialogue that it was used. And I just had to use it, and so I wouldn't give in, and so they agreed. And then, for a while, in every story

there was something like this. There was a story called “Lichen”³ which had an image of pubic hair, and that was a very dicey thing with Mr. Shawn. By this time I knew he was real. But he finally gave in on that too. So it was much more difficult in those days. But I never started out thinking that this *will* be unacceptable, I was always kind of surprised, because I just didn’t figure things out.

Eleanor WACHTEL

You did say that you were terribly disturbed when you first read D.H. Lawrence, or depictions of...

Alice MUNRO

Oh yes, I was awfully disturbed by his – I thought he was such a wonderful writer. He’s a very sort of purple writer – very heavy prose. But it seemed that he was trying to find out things that no one else had done, and I thought he was great. And then, one of the things he found out, as far as I can figure it, was that women shouldn’t have any *consciousness*. There’s this story – is it called “The Fox”? – and it’s about how the woman should always be like the reeds, washing under the water so she never breaks the water of her mind. She’s just in this stage and it sounded quite like a vegetable stage. That way, she is somehow living through the man – now I’m not saying this very well – but she is anchoring the man in her nature, her unconsciousness, her life-in-the-body, which the man needs. But the life-in-the-world is his. She strengthens him so that he can have it. I don’t find this at all an agreeable idea. In fact I find it just horrifying, I guess because it came from a writer whom I so admired. And it tied in with so much that I had already learned about women, about what women *should* be, only it seemed to go even further than these ideas did. And it just frightened me. I guess if it frightened me, what if it’s true? This is the gospel of sex that one should follow, and yet it seemed to be downright impossible. Do you remember that the woman was *not* to have a sexual climax, this was wrong somehow, she was just to be in this kind of readiness and floating state all the time. But she did nothing for her self, the idea of her self had to be submerged, and I found that disturbing. And I found a lot of what I read disturbing, Tolstoy’s idea of women too. Do you remember the end of *War and Peace*, how Natasha is so happy because she’s always wanted to be only a mother and to only think about her children, and their little childhood illnesses and so on. And even worse in *Anna Karenina*, Levin has the big thing towards the end, a big religious struggle – what does he believe? And how is he to exist? What is his relationship to God and man? And he goes for a walk, and he meets Kitty and the nurse maid, of course, and the baby, coming out of the woods and he thinks that she does not have to think about any of that, she accepts everything, she doesn’t have a mind that functions like his. And that means of course that she is nearer to nature and to God, and how nice for her, and that he admires her for it. But that also depressed me a lot, and other things he says in that book about how Anna can’t go into society because she is living with Vronsky, and she is an adulteress woman, she can’t go out to tea parties with other ladies. And because of this, she teaches a little girl, a little peasant girl to read, but she just does that to fill her time because, really, she is cast off from society. She too, who is one

3. Editor’s note: *The Progress of Love*.

of his most intelligent women, doesn't have, she *cannot* have real interests – I'm just rattling on about this because it bothered me so much! And I think that doesn't bother women now at all, because they read this just like something from the Middle Ages. But to me it was something very real, something that was just there like claws trying to fasten me down.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Alice Munro, in Runaway, many of the stories are quite harrowing – the threat of violence, death, suicide – loss is frequently present. There's always been a quality under the surface of your fiction, but do you have a sense that your stories are becoming darker?

Alice MUNRO

I think they are. This, again, is not *at all* on purpose. I would like to be writing very cheerful stories so that people felt better if they read them. But I hope that people do feel better when they read my stories. I don't think having this *content* means that stories need to be, or fiction needs to be depressing. I really don't believe that, because that sort of fiction doesn't depress *me*. As you become older, maybe there are more things like this, sort of coming close to your life, and things you know about. It could be that. But again, it's nothing I intended. I am trying to think of how it would happen in some of those stories. Well, in a story that ends up with the mother losing her daughter,⁴ I was really trying to talk about how that could happen and how it could be a kind of almost natural thing. I think some things that are seen as tragic can also be just things people do. In that story, the daughter has a choice, I don't know if people have picked up on this, she has a choice to live quite honestly, which means just ditching her mother, or to live with a number of conventions, and very mixed emotions, which is the way most of us live with our parents, maybe all of us do. Instead, she gets out. Not because her mother is a terrible person, not because she has any great grievance – she has a whole lot of grievance – but everybody does. She just goes on, and this is terrible for her mother. In a way, she probably doesn't understand, because it is only when you get quite old that the bonds to your children become emotionally so central to your life. And when you're in middle age, or a little younger than middle age, the bonds to your parents are there, but there are mostly nuisances. They're partly nuisances, they're extreme difficulties. They are not your major emotional gratification. And so that's what that story was really about. And I guess that it seems such a sad story, but not to me. It seems there is sadness in it – that isn't the same thing as being a sad story.

Eleanor WACHTEL

It's part of a trilogy of stories,⁵ and one of the subjects that runs through it seems to be about faith and the main character⁶ actually has an explosive argument about the existence of God, and then her mother has faith in her, and then her daughter, apparently, goes on a spiritual search, this is described as having been raised in a house that wasn't a faith-based home.

4. Editor's note: "Silence."

5. Editor's note: "Chance," "Soon," and "Silence."

6. Editor's note: Juliet. The three stories are often referred to as "the Juliet trilogy."

Alice MUNRO

Yes, but I didn't intend this to be central. Well, of course, it's important, but in the story⁷ the mother,⁸ as a young woman, has an argument about the existence of God and cannot affirm her mother's faith, because it would be denying her self, her whole being, which is still young and fragile. I feel that she has to do that. And her mother, no doubt, suffers from it. Then it happens that her daughter leaves *her*.⁹ And I think the daughter's looking for faith is just *one* sign of wanting to get away, wanting to make her own life. It's not that it's faith that *in particular* she is searching for, she's searching for whatever is there that has been explicitly denied her. Say, if her home had been very repressed and sex had been the thing that was never mentioned, she'd be going after that, I think. She's getting away. And then she gets so far away, she can't come back. Maybe too because [her] mother, the central character, is harder to get away from, because she's not very repressive. But, she's still too much.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Alice Munro, I'm sitting with you here in Goderich, a southwestern Ontario town on the shores of Lake Huron, near the heart of Alice Munro country, as it's come to be called. You write about a lot of places but you continue to set stories around here, where you were born and have lived for a lot of your life. How do you stand back and see the possibilities of a place, fictionally, when it is so familiar to you?

Alice MUNRO

I just always feel there's more to be discovered about this place. I don't have to *ever* think that I've finished with it, and the changes in it and the things I know about it. And in a way I don't like to be described as a regional writer and I'm annoyed sometimes if people think I write about a sort of idyllic [world], or a sort of pastoral because I'm seen as someone who writes about small towns and the country. It almost seems to me by accident that I write about those people, it's because I know their houses and I know certain things about their lives, but I don't think of them as particularly different from people you might find anywhere in the world. It's just something I do without thinking about it. I don't know if I could write as easily about someone – nearly everybody I write about has lived, or lives in a place that I have lived in. So maybe I'm not very good about imagination. Except that I once did a story about Albania,¹⁰ and I liked that a lot, and I liked writing about Albania. Yes, yes. But usually I don't use anything exotic. I might like to, but there's always something else that I have to do first, but isn't exotic at all.

Eleanor WACHTEL

How has small town life changed?

7. Editor's note: "Soon."

8. Editor's note: Juliet.

9. Editor's note: In "Silence," the final story of the Juliet trilogy.

10. Editor's note: "The Albanian Virgin," *Open Secrets*.

Alice MUNRO

Oh, it's changed enormously. There's so much tolerance now. When I went to school, people laughed at anyone who was disadvantaged. Now, everybody knows that you don't make fun of people for their problems. At least, you don't do it publicly, and you don't do it in a very obvious way. But when I went to school, we did. Also nobody would ever claim to be an agnostic in a small town – no more than they would in the United States today, I believe. But, now it's acceptable. And the rules about sex have changed completely. So that women my age live with their lovers. That's quite amazing. And there's just a freedom to live a pleasanter life, I think, it's much more compassionate, much more understanding. You could probably even announce that you did like poetry. [Laughter]

Eleanor WACHTEL

You lived in British Columbia for more than twenty years, and you still winter on Vancouver Island. Do different landscapes suggest different stories or characters for you?

Alice MUNRO

No, no. I just put them. You see I don't think about the whole story, that sort of comes all of one piece and when I wrote, say, "The Children Stay," I just saw it happening on Vancouver Island, and particularly at Miracle Beach, because I had to have them go away to a place, like that and there it was. So I saw them there. But I don't know if a particular kind of story is written in those places or not, namely because I'm simply not very analytical about what I do.

Eleanor WACHTEL

What was it like for you to move back to small-town, southwest Ontario after having been away – that was in the mid-seventies – for twenty-odd years?

Alice MUNRO

Well, that *did* influence my writing because I had written about growing up here, and I thought I was finished with anything about this area. When I moved back, I started seeing things entirely differently. I didn't see them right away in present-day time but I saw a lot of things that had to do with social class, and the way people behave to each other, that a child doesn't see. So I wanted to go into it again. That's what I did. As for me, personally, it was surprising, it was unexpected. But I liked a lot of things about it, very much, I love the countryside, that I can't get over. And I like going skiing around, cross-country skiing in the winter, all that kind of thing. I liked living with my husband and making our life, I liked our house, I liked our backyard, all kinds of things were good. And also, I was now an independent woman. I was not someone who had grown up there and stayed there. And if people were talking about me, or judging me, I didn't know. So that was okay.

Eleanor WACHTEL

What about social class? Did you become aware of – that you wanted to ...?

Alice MUNRO

Oh, I wanted to write more about the class I lived amongst when I went to school, when I started to school. In Wingham, there was an area outside of town which was full of people who were suffering from the Depression, only I did not know that at the time. And it was a very rough school, the school that I went to. And I hadn't really thought about that for a long time. I hadn't thought about the way these people lived and the difference between them and the people who lived in the town over the bridge, and who had marginally better lives, some of them even a good deal better. But, as a child, it doesn't matter whether you're growing up poor or rich, I think. You don't take much account of the way you're growing up, and what the rules are around you, in that way of money and the kind of job you have, and so on. So I did go into that again, and I described the school a lot, because it was pretty horrific. And it was so richly interesting, because there were boys going there until they were sixteen, or seventeen-years old because they could not get jobs. And I'm not talking about high school, I'm talking about public school, and so they were pretty well running things. There was a great deal of physical violence, and things were pretty amazing to me because I was being raised at the edge of this community as a kind of little middle-class girl. And I was an only child. And to come into this was astonishing. And probably so painful that for a long time I didn't think about it. But then I wanted to write about it, the way it was. Because there were sort of wonderful things about it too. Our favourite game was funerals. Somebody got to be the corpse, that was the most favourite thing, and the person would be lying out and we'd pick flowers – weeds really – and go with great armfuls of flowers, and put them on the corpse. This doesn't sound dreadful at all, it sounds rather touching. And we'd wind up and we'd all get a chance to march past the dead person, and cry and carry on. But the trouble was that the most important people got to be the corpse first, and then everybody got a turn but by the time it was my turn, everyone had lost interest in the game. And the mourners were few, and the flowers were few, and they were playing something else. We made up a lot of things like that. Oh yes, it was really pretty wild. And the teachers just didn't come out at all. I think they locked the doors all through recess.

Eleanor WACHTEL

When you say violence, it wasn't violence against you?

Alice MUNRO

Oh, yes. Beaten up with shingles, I remember. And I was a terrible coward. I wasn't very good about this at all. But I did learn things. I learned things that I wouldn't have learned so quickly any other way, about how people are. And how many people were like this because they were leading really deprived lives. Maybe that isn't the only reason, there were like this because it was fun, but also because they were people who didn't have enough fuel for the winter. People would stay in bed all day, and things like that. It was kind of like a Chekhov village.

Eleanor WACHTEL

You're saying you were an only child because you were the eldest, so at that point you were...

Alice MUNRO

Yes, that's dreadful, saying an "only child." That's how an elder child talks. I wasn't an only child. I had a baby brother, a baby sister at home, but I wasn't counting them at the moment.

Eleanor WACHTEL

You do have a lot of empathy for your characters, the characters in your stories who are limited by their circumstances, whether it's a matter of economics or societal expectations, or obligations of family.

Alice MUNRO

I grew up with a lot of people like that. In fact, most people I knew. For instance, when I finished high school, I got a scholarship and I could go to university, but had I not got a scholarship. You see, to get a job *in* the city, you had to get away *to* the city, and you had to be able to support yourself for maybe two weeks before you could get a job. Impossible. So there were things that people don't understand so well now, I think. I didn't think of that as particularly unfair, and I *still* think of my life as *really* interesting, a great life for a writer. It gave me a lot of confidence as a writer because I was the only person I knew who tried to write when I was a teenager, and I didn't know anybody else who read as much and so I thought I was a really uniquely gifted person; it was only going to take until I was about twenty-one or twenty-two years old before my first novel would burst on the world. And so if I'd been going to, say, Jarvis Collegiate in Toronto, I might have had a very different idea of the competition!

Eleanor WACHTEL

What did give you the ability to pursue your aspirations back then?

Alice MUNRO

It never occurred to me not to. A big ego, I would think. Because at first, when I was about eight, I planned to be a movie star, and this continued for two or three years. Then I sort of slipped into writing, a slightly downgrade because I still think a movie star would have been more wonderful. I wanted to make up stories and I was making up stories in my head. And by the time I was about eleven, I really thought that I had to write them down. That's what you did with stories, you didn't just let them fade, you wrote them. And it was not even the thought that people would end up reading them but the *book* – there would be a *book* with your story in it – the thing itself. It really never occurred to me until much later, when I was around thirty, that I might not be able to do this. So the confidence lasted for a long time, and then it just went with a big whoosh. So it was hard when it went. There was no problem with that at all, all the time I was growing up. And I think maybe children who grow up in an environment where they *do* feel strange and a bit outlawed, can develop, if they're lucky, if there isn't too many bad things happening to them. If they're lucky I think they can develop this alternate world which is going to hang on for them. And I was lucky. I've mentioned being beaten up at school but I always had enough to eat. I was taken to the doctor when I was sick, and my mother got me into the town school,

so I didn't have to go to that school more than two years. And things happened and I was allowed to go to high school – many people had to quit and get jobs. It never occurred to me. I think gifted people are sometimes quite selfish, because it didn't occur to me that I should go and work in the glove factory, or work in Steadman's store, do something like that, in order to help my family. No. I was going to have this magical life – I was going to *do* this thing that was so important.

Eleanor WACHTEL

It also meant – going back to your theme right at the beginning of the conversation about running away, in some sense, [running away] from family responsibility, as the oldest daughter.

Alice MUNRO

Yes. This is a thing that I'll be able to feed on for guilt for the rest of my life, that I did *not* stay home. I did *not* look after my mother, I did *not* keep house though my brother and sister were still quite young. I just left them. And, well, I came home from university every couple of months and did major housecleaning and jobs, but I still left. And without, at that time, any qualms. My parents were really quite good. They never asked me to stay.

Eleanor WACHTEL

When did the guilt come?

Alice MUNRO

Oh, by the time I was safe. You never feel guilty while there's still a possibility or an opportunity to make up for what you've done. When I could have gone back home, I didn't feel guilty. But as soon as I was free, and nobody could make me go back, I did feel guilty. I could afford to feel guilty then. And I've felt guilty since. I say I feel guilty, but I'm glad I did what I did, because I think if you stay and if you're a housekeeper (and certainly no one would have married me, I was too weird).... I would have got too frightened to leave. By the time my mother died, I would have been too frightened to go out into the world. So... so!

Eleanor WACHTEL

This has become your subject.

Alice MUNRO

This has become my subject. Yes. Writers are very economical, nothing is wasted.
[Laughter]

Eleanor WACHTEL

And your mother has become your subject.

Alice MUNRO

Very much so, yes. Yes.

Eleanor WACHTEL

What about your father?

Alice MUNRO

Oh well, fathers and mothers had separate spheres. And my father was outside. And I was inside with my mother, doing housework. And so, all my conflicts were with my mother. And my father was allowed, by me, to be a figure outside this. And when I was older I had a great relationship with my father because he also read, and he wrote a book when he was dying. We were terribly good friends, and he was *very* understanding. He never criticized anything I did. And the first books were *not* easy for him to take, living still in a town where people didn't read fiction and didn't know where fiction had gone. And there was all this language, and all this sex, and he had to put up with all of this. And he never blamed me for it, he liked my books, yes.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Did it surprise you ... did you have any idea he had a book in him?

Alice MUNRO

Well, I was beginning to when I was older. I didn't know him that well when I was a child. He wrote columns for a local magazine and things like that. And then he started to write this book and he became really involved in it, and the last time I visited him in the hospital, he was sitting up in bed in his pyjamas, saying "what do you think about that character so and so?" [Laughter]. And so I told him that, if he didn't pull out of the operation, I would make sure that the book got published and I did.¹¹ And I was really happy about that. It gave him such delight! But I think he wouldn't have thought that there was a connection between himself and that world where there were publishers and books were written, if he hadn't seen that I did it. And then he really thought that it was possible for anybody to do it. I remember when I told him that Margaret Laurence was a friend of mine because he'd been reading a book of hers that he got out of the library, and he said, "But Alice, she's a *really* good writer!" [Laughter] and that meant that he felt the connection, and that it wasn't something unreal. And so he could try it himself.

Eleanor WACHTEL

A while back you said that you didn't know how you'd feel if your daughters wrote about you.

Alice MUNRO

Did I say that? Well one of my daughters *has* written about me!¹²

Eleanor WACHTEL

Exactly, a memoir. How did you feel?

Alice MUNRO

In a way I felt very lucky because I thought that it was honest and fairly gentle. When she was doing it, I felt good too; we try to say it isn't, but growing up the child of someone who has been successful and is sort of famous, is difficult. It is a particular difficulty, and especially if the thing the parent does quite easily could be the thing

11. Editor's note: *The McGregors*, published in 1979.

12. Editor's note: Sheila Munro.

you want to do yourself, or that you have a talent for. And so I thought that it was very good that she just decided to come right out with this, and write about it. I also knew that if you dish it out, you have to take it. So there we were! And we're very good friends.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Alice Munro, memory shapes many of the stories and that relationship between the older and the younger selves in the life of [your characters]. Grace, in "Passion" for instance, is literally revisiting the places where she spent time with the Travers family. What do you find interesting about having a character look back and reconsider her past?

Alice MUNRO

In that particular story¹³ I wanted to show where Grace had ended up, but I also wanted to show the difference – I like to have people trying to find something of their past, and then looking at what they really find, like the whole area has changed and the house is there but doesn't mean anything anymore. And I just thought that was a good way to get into the story. Also, if I write about the past, I suppose I'm a little self-conscious about writing about the past, so I anchor it in the present, because there is a feeling sometimes that people who write about the past are writing about a time that is much easier to understand, and is safe. A reviewer did say that I chose the past to write about because I would be safe there. Now I don't feel that I am safe there, but I know that people have this kind of, I think, quite false nostalgic idea about the past being a pleasanter, gentler time – my God, gentler! [Laughter]

Eleanor WACHTEL

There's a line in another story¹⁴ where there's this older woman and her children say, be careful you don't live in the past, and she says, no, no, what she wants to do "is not so much to live in the past as to open it up and get one good look at it."

Alice MUNRO

This is what I want to do too, obviously, and I try to do it over and over again. But there is a sort of feeling, like the feeling her children have, that you have to go on, all the time. And I am so involved in everything that I've lived, that I never want to let go of it until I've done something with it. And that is not just to write and sell a story, but to see – to find out what I can see in it. And so I don't suppose I'll ever catch up with myself.

Eleanor WACHTEL

What tense do you live in now?

Alice MUNRO

Oh, I inhabit the present now, and I inhabit it with a sense of grabbing it. I don't inhabit the future much for obvious reasons. I don't know how much there is of it. And for the same reason, I want to – oh, this will sound very clichéd – I want to

13. Editor's note: "Passion" in *Runaway*.

14. Editor's note: "Powers" in *Runaway*.

appreciate every bit of life I can. It's not that I do that all the time but I am conscious of *wanting* to do that. It's almost like another "I should," I should be perfectly happy because, after all, I'm not dying and my heart is fixed up, and I live in this nice place, things like that! But I can be *just* as irritable, loaded with things to do, as I ever was. So, life doesn't really change that much. [Laughter]

Eleanor WACHTEL

Last fall you said that that you'd decided there was not going to be another book, and then here is Runaway.

Alice MUNRO

Did I say that last fall?

Eleanor WACHTEL

It was quoted in The Guardian, October 2003.

Alice MUNRO

Well, all right, I must have done that interview sooner than that. I must have been insane, I really must have been! But I guess I try to live in two realities, because I'm afraid of bringing out a book, always. I'm afraid of being responsible for all this stuff, and having to sort of stand behind it, I want to go on and write more stuff. And yet the obvious thing is to bring out a book. When I get enough stories, that's what I do. And yet I honestly believe, like I believe right now, that except for the book that I've almost finished and which will probably come out in two or three years, I feel that I won't do it any more after that. I feel that there is some kind of wonderful plateau you get to where you don't have to write anymore, and you don't have to go around interviewing people anymore. You're just sort of happy all the time. This is sort of the idea of retirement. I don't know if it works or not.

Eleanor WACHTEL

Why do I not believe you?

Alice MUNRO

Because you've known me for a long time, and you know I lie. But I'm not lying about this. There is a thought in me, and has been for a long time, that there's a kind of happiness that consists in not having to work hard at something, to strive at something. There is just a kind of place where you get and everything is comfortable, and you are satisfied. And you're not trying anymore to do something. Because when to try to write you always think, this is impossible, I'm not bringing it off, it's not working, and when I get through this, I'll be so happy. Well then, you get through. Why don't you stop? I don't know...

Eleanor WACHTEL

After 50 years of publishing – since you first published a story – 35 years of publishing books but 50 of publishing – being celebrated internationally by critics and readers as someone who never disappoints, does that help or hinder the writing?

Alice MUNRO

Oh, it hinders it. I think, OK, wait till next time. Some time this is going to come crashing down, and I sort of hope I'll be so old I won't care. Or I will have got to that plateau we were talking about. Oh, what will I do there? Play golf? No, I can't play golf, so I don't know. Maybe go for long walks and really appreciate things. But often I'm thinking about something else. That's it. To be *not* thinking. Isn't this an ideal state that you're only thinking and only feeling about the present, and you're not thinking about what you have to do, or what may happen. Isn't that a kind of Nirvana or something...?

Eleanor WACHTEL

What a privilege to have the chance to talk to you again. Thank you very much.

Alice Munro in Goderich, Ontario in November 2004
just before she won the Giller Prize for *Runaway*.

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