

Tindal Street Masterclasses

Masterclass by Gaynor Arnold

No. 10: Like strong perfume Alice Munro will knock you for six

My fellow authors have championed the advantages of brevity and wit. Quite right, too. But it would be wrong to suggest that all short fiction needs to be either witty or brief. Alice Munro's stories are longer than most, and her wit has such depth it seems more like wisdom. She has been described as 'the greatest short story-writer alive today'. Yet I suspect that many people don't know her name. Okay, she *is* Canadian, but she has been continually published worldwide over the last forty years. Born in south-west Ontario in 1931, she burst upon the literary scene in 1968 with *Dance of the Happy Shades*. The headline in her local paper trumpeted 'Housewife Writes Book!' She has gone on to gain the Governor General's Award three times, the highest achievement for a Canadian writer. Yet she remains a modest person, living still in the kind of small town from which she draws her inspiration, among the people she writes about with such understanding and compassion.

So, what's so great about her? Well, the psychology of character and subtlety of plot that is normally only found in novels is abundant in each of Munro's short stories. It's a concentrated essence of story-telling, and, like strong perfume, it can knock you for six. Her stories have their surprises, but they are ambiguous surprises: as deceptive, layered and inconclusive as human beings themselves. She has tremendous wisdom, yet she is the most unshowy of writers. She engages with the big issues of life through observation of the small things: the suppressed resentments, the packed-away clothes, the hoarded mementos – the things that we all see, we all know about, and (if we take the trouble), we can all describe. She is a chronicler of the lives of women and girls, of

mothers and daughters (often stepmothers and daughters), of sisters, of ageing aunts and parents, of lovers and of friends. Her settings are small, isolated Canadian towns called names like Jubilee and Hanratty, with their churches, libraries, schools and Town Halls, and population deeply imbued with the Presbyterian ethic. Her characters work in turkey farms, in sawmills or in factories, or they may be teachers or librarians. She is immediately engaging, too. Take this opening passage from *Carried Away*, a story set at the end of the First World War:

In the dining room of the Commercial Hotel, Louisa opened the letter that had arrived for her that day from overseas. She ate steak and potatoes, her usual meal, and drank a glass of wine. There were a few travellers in the room, and the dentist who ate there every night because he was a widower. He had shown an interest in her at the beginning but had told her that he had never before seen a woman touch wine or spirits.

The white tablecloths were changed every week and in the meantime were protected by oilcloth mats. In the winter the dining room smelled of these mats wiped by a kitchen rag, and of coal fumes from the furnace, and beef gravy and dried potatoes and onions – a smell not unpleasant to anyone coming in hungry from the cold. On each table was a little cruet stand with the bottle of brown sauce, the bottle of tomato sauce, and the pot of horseradish.

The scene is set very barely; hardly any adjectives, and then only the simplest ones – white, dried, brown, hungry – and yet the whole dining room is evoked: its emptiness accentuated by the presence of only a few diners, the crude food smells not just in the air, but emanating from the mats themselves, wiped with a rag that undoubtedly has had many dubious uses below stairs. We immediately know the Commercial Hotel is unsophisticated, a little seedy, a place of habit, where the boiler is old, where the cook has cooked the same thing for years, where thrift imposes itself on the tablecloth. It's not a place for the energetic or ambitious. But Louisa, we see, is different. Louisa drinks wine (and maybe spirits). She is single, and eats alone, but has an appetite for what she likes. Already we sense what will become clearer in the course of the story – what is true in many of Munro's stories – that the protagonist is set apart in some way from the mainstream of society. Louisa's past is not known to the people among whom she now

lives as Town Librarian. She *has* a past, of course, but Alice Munro does not go into detail. That would be too novel-ish. She casts us a few crumbs in a tangential fashion - and we have to pad out the rest for ourselves. Louisa is about to embark on a correspondence with the soldier whose letter she is reading. They write about books. He asks for a photo. She sends one. He says he loves her. She knits him a muffler. She keeps the library open for him. She waits and grieves when he does not appear, not knowing he has already returned, and married a local girl. She finds out, and is distraught. Then he leaves her a scribbled message at her desk: *I was engaged before I went overseas*. He doesn't say why he strung her along. They never meet, and he never writes to her again. Louisa has another life with another man. The story suggests as much as it explains. *I was engaged before I went overseas*. Is that a shallow excuse? Or is his heart being wrenched from his chest by the terrible dilemma? We aren't told. Writers wishing to emulate Munro need to ask: What can I imply by my choice of words? What is better not said at all? What single action will spirit up the whole character? What piece of dialogue can indicate the pain, boredom or passion of the person beneath? And to achieve such beauty and simplicity in your writing, you need to pare the language down to the bone – *white, dried, brown, hungry*.

Gaynor Arnold was born in Cardiff, and after graduating from St Hilda's College, Oxford, she trained as a social worker. She currently works for Birmingham's Adoption and Fostering service. Her debut novel, Girl in a Blue Dress, was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2008.