Alice Munro's Bestiary

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A Book of Human and Non-Human Animals

By

Héliane Ventura

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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To dear life

When I was writing *Lives of Girls and Women*, some of the things in there came from things my daughters did when they were ten or eleven. … They used to go to the park and hang down from their knees and scare people, pretending to be monkeys.

Alice Munro, “What is.”

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INTRODUCTION

This volume highlights the contribution of animals to Alice Munro's fictional representation of the world from her initial stories in her first volume, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) to her last ones in *Dear Life* (2012). It explores the construction of characters through animal imagery, and some of the sources behind this imagery, in 51 short stories out of 14 volumes. All collections of short stories from the entirety of the Munrovian oeuvre are represented here, but unequally so. The stories collected in *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974) and *The Progress of Love* (1986) testify to a paucity of animal imagery, and, therefore, the volume displays the analysis of two animals in two stories only out of these two collections. By contrast, it investigates animal imagery in nine stories featuring twelve animals in the first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades,* and five stories presenting nine animals in the eleventh collection, *Runaway* (2004), while most of the other collections are examined through three to five stories and an equal number of animals. The overall result of 63 entries is alphabetically organised and ranges from ADDER to WOLFHOUNDS. This alphabet book does not lay claim to exhaustivity: not all references to animals have been listed. The animals have been selected because of their relationality with the characters depicted and the light they shed on the story in which they are mentioned.

Adopting an alphabetical listing of animals precludes a chronological panorama starting with Munro's first collection and finishing with her last one. The first entry, "Adder", references a story from *The Love of a Good Woman* dating from 1998 that reaches back to the anagrammatic practice of Antiquity; the last entry, "Wolfhounds", references a story from *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* dating from 2001 that reaches back to Norse Sagas. However, a chronological listing of animals represented in the stories has been maintained in the cases when the same animal is referenced several times, notably for dogs and horses, the most recurrent species in Munro's oeuvre.

The purpose of this volume is to highlight some of the transnational or transatlantic sources of Munro's references to animals and the methodology that has been favoured is that of close textual analysis. Each of the sixty-three entries begins with a quote from Munro's oeuvre which features a reference to an animal, whether this animal is a literal or metaphoric beast.

The analysis of the stories develops from the animal mentioned in the quote and underscores its intertextual resonance across world literature.

The first hypothesis upon which this volume relies is that Munro's deployment of animal imagery is underpinned by identity and indeterminacy. The traits Munro lends to human beings are directly taken from the behaviour or symbolism attributed to animals and the animal behaviour she depicts is drawn from human action. She animalises human beings, and she anthropomorphises animals, creating the type of species trouble which echoes Francis Bacon' s famous reply to David Sylvester:

> Well, of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher's shop, I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal.[1]

The identification of Munro's characters with animals is not sentimental or decorative. It is based on a recognition of identity derived from her childhood on a farm in southwestern Ontario in the first half of the twentieth century, experiencing at close range encounters with domesticated creatures as well as wild animals. In the words of Gilles Deleuze speaking of Francis Bacon's paintings, the process of identification is

> not an arrangement between man and animal, it is not a likeness, it is a process of being fundamentally identical, a zone of indeterminacy deeper than sentimental identification: the man who suffers is a beast, the beast who suffers is a man. It is the reality of becoming.[2]

Munro dedicates her writing to highlighting this zone of indeterminacy.[3] When the young narrator from "Boys and Girls" opens the gate to liberate the mare called Flora and prevent her from being butchered, she tries unsuccessfully to operate her own vicarious liberation from the stifling constraints which endanger her sense of self. When Alex Walther, the faithless anthropologist, is compared to a St Bernard at the end of "Bardon

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[1] See the interviews with Francis Bacon by David Sylvester in 1963, 1966, and 1979. Francis Bacon, "One Continuous Accident Mounting on Top of Another," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2007, https://blog.artedv.com/francis-bacon-interviewed-by-david-sylvester/.

[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon Logique de la Sensation* (Paris : Éditions de la Différence, 1981), 21. My translation.

[3] Coral Ann Howells perceptively called Munro's art "the art of indeterminacy". See: Coral Ann Howells, "Alice Munro's Art of Indeterminacy: *The Progress of Love*," in *Modes of Narrative: Approaches to American, Canadian, and British Fiction,* eds Reingard Nischik and Barbara Korte (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1990), 141-152.

Bus", he is simultaneously pinpointed as a rake *and* a rescuer. Munro disturbs the nature/culture, human/non-human, ethical/non ethical ontologies with comparisons to animals that symbolically abrogate distinctions between human beings and beasts.

The second hypothesis is that Munro draws on and departs from the well of conventional animal imagery to fashion new symbols and images that are simultaneously realistic and uncanny, usual and unorthodox, celebratory and satirical. From their inception in the second century, with a Greek anonymous text called the *Physiologus,* to their expansion probably in the 11th century with Isidore de Séville's *Etymologies*, bestiaries have identified certain character traits with animals and used this identification to teach lessons of morality and ethics. Preachers indirectly denounced human foibles by availing themselves of the character traits which were conventionally attributed to certain animals:

> just as ants were industrious, so foxes were crafty, kites rapacious, lambs tender, pelicans selfless, and wolves ravenous.[4]

Munro relies on conceptions of animals that date back to classical and early Christian writing and spread across the Western world through illuminated manuscripts and sermon exempla during the Middle Ages. She taps into the tradition of medieval bestiaries and, like the preachers or authors influenced by this received wisdom, she elaborates on the canon of images. For instance, when she chooses to entitle the story of a philanderer and a wanton wife "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" (2001), she relies on a conception of the bear as a lustful animal indulging in sexual activities without restraint.[5] However, she does not always adhere to the usual representation, often reversing it into its contrary. For example, she predicates her representation of frogs on their rich symbology in the Middle Ages, especially in connection with death and sexual sin, but she expatiates on the sexual significance of frogs by suggestively eroticising their young bodies in "The Flats Road" (1971). Instead of anathemising frogs, she celebrates the awakening of senses in the teenagers in search of baits for Uncle Benny. Mixing pleasure and pain, she underscores the youngsters' excitement at squishing the frogs' bellies and at having their legs lashed by sword grass. As a result, the lessons her animals teach depart from Christian doctrine and traditionally strict moralities. They are mostly unorthodox and

[4] Blake Beattie, "The Cardinal's Frogs: Constructing Animal Imagery in Two Fourteenth-Century Curial Sermons," *Medieval Sermon Studies* 62.1 (Oct 2018): 29.
[5] Michel Pastoureau, *Bestiaires du Moyen Âge* (Paris : Seuil, 2011), 71-76.

paradoxical, exemplifying undomesticated, often lawless, or even fierce behaviour.

The third hypothesis in this volume is that Munro uses animal imagery to propose a moral philosophy predicated on reversibility and the interchangeability of opposites. The most illuminating example is to be found again in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and regards the symbology of bears founded on their alleged lechery. As evidenced by Robert McGill, Grant proves "his own fidelity to Fiona by facilitating her 'infidelity' to him".[6] Thus Munro's story becomes an uncommon exemplum, communicating a pastoral message which is not in keeping with dogma. Munro does not conjure up animal imagery to denounce evil or show the path to God because she disallows a Manichean worldview. Just as she blurs the divide between human and non-human, she troubles the difference between opposite moral categories. As John Thieme argued, in Canadian texts, animals sometimes stand for

> a world which may exist before Western rationalist thought imposes dualistic modes of description. They represent life before discourse, before history, and before gender stereotyping.[7]

Munro's animals belong to a pre-verbal world of undifferentiated states in which the roots of trees are compared to crocodiles and their branches to the antlers of a deer. Simultaneously, the same animals are depicted with human traits and belong to a cultural imagination shaped by the foundational sources of the Western world.

The last hypothesis is that Munro's animal stories engage in covert dialogue with myth, with emblem, with fable, with poetry, with drama, and the objective of this study is to reveal some of the wide-ranging source texts partly concealed under an apparently local and realistic prose. There is no denying that some of Munro's animals are exclusively local. Skunks, for example, are not to be found in any Latin bestiaries for the obvious reason that they are autochthonous animals of the Americas and do not live anywhere else. There remains that, as convincingly demonstrated by Jean-Jacques Lecerle,[8] Munro's skunks in the story entitled "Pride" (2012) do

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[6] See: Robert McGill, "No Nation but Adaptation 'The Bear Came over the Mountain,' *Away from Her*, and What It Means to Be Faithful," *Canadian Literature* 197 (Summer 2008): 100.

[7] John Thieme, "Beyond History: Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands*," in *Re-visions of Canadian Literature*, ed. Shirley Chew (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1984), 74.

[8] Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "Pride and Discretion," *Caliban* 57 (2017): 151-161.

engage with emblem literature which is generally considered to have begun in the 16th century with the Italian lawyer, Andrea Alciato, whose Emblem Book (*Emblemata*) was first printed in Augsburg in 1531. The same story which does feature a very Canadian encounter with wild animals also engages in covert dialogue with the American skunks of both Robert Lowell's poem "Skunk Hour" (1958) and Seamus Heaney's entitled "The Skunk" (1979).[9]

Ultimately, the volume intends to exemplify the fact that writing back to the tradition of medieval bestiary and its origins in Antiquity, Munro has achieved in her contemporary or neo-Victorian Canadian stories the universality that Roland Barthes ascribed to the act of storytelling itself: "international, transhistorical, transcultural, the story is here, like life ".[10]

[9] See: Héliane Ventura, "From Shame to Pride," *Caliban* 57 (2017): 139-150.
[10] Roland Barthes, "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," in *Poétique du Réci*t, ed. R. Barthes, W. Kayser, W. C. Booth, Ph. Hamon (Paris : Seuil, 1977), 8. My translation.

ADDER

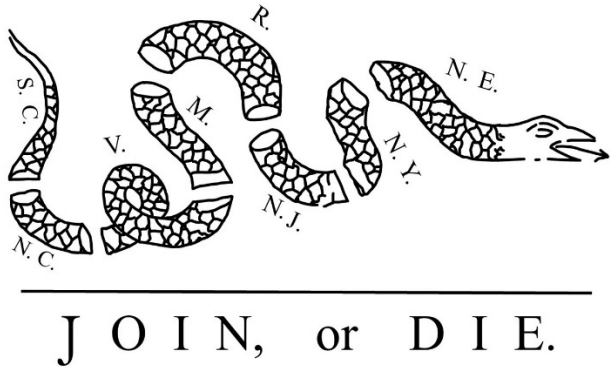

Illustration 1. Benjamin Franklin, "Join or Die," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 9, 1754. Drawing adapted by Laurent Ventura, 2024.

> *But what calmed her down eventually was the lettering on a cardboard box. There was a pile of cardboard boxes which Ann had packed things in when she and Derek had moved back here from Toronto, a couple of years ago. One of them had a silhouette of a toy battleship on the side, and the word* DREADNOUGHT. *The first part of the word—*DREAD*—was in red lettering. The letters shimmered as if written in neon tubing and issued a command to Karin that had to do with more than the word's meaning. She had to dismember it and find the words inside.*
> *"What are you laughing at?" Derek said, and she told him what she was doing. The words came tumbling out miraculously.*
> *Read. Red. Dread. Dare. Era. Ear. Are. Add. Adder. "Adder" was the best. It used up all the letters.*
> *"Amazing," said Derek. "Amazing Karin. Dread the Red Adder."*
>
> Alice Munro, "Rich as Stink," *The Love of a Good Woman.* [1]

In "Rich as Stink", Munro enmeshes fear and playfulness. The adder that is conjured up is not literal: it is made up of letters that are differently arranged.

[1] Alice Munro, "Rich as Stink," *The Love of a Good Woman* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998), 229.

From the first part of the word "DREADNOUGHT", Karin creates a series of other words, the last and most comprehensive being "adder", which takes up all the letters of the word "dread". To rearrange letters to compose another word is a process called anagram which has been in existence since Antiquity and has spread all over Europe during the Middle Ages as an empowering literary device, a figure of encryption, which enabled poets to conceal or reveal an identity, or to convey confidential information. In the nineteenth century, Samuel Butler has arguably produced the most famous anagram with the publication of *Erewhon* (1872), generally considered to mean "nowhere".[2]

The anagrammatic practice was notably revived in the twentieth century by surrealists and experimental writers in France who created an acronym to designate themselves as part of the *oulipo*: "*ouvroir de littérature potentielle*" (Workshop of potential literature). Like Raymond Queneau, one of the most famous members of the workshop, Munro renews language by creating new combinations which shake loose the assemblages of ordinary life. Treating language as a game, she causes Karin to scramble and unscramble data. Karin recombines the letters she sees on cardboard boxes and recreates a new word from the original one. Through the permutations Karin engages in, Munro encourages readers to discover other texts under the primary one, unleashing festive alternatives that have a mocking, or deriding ring.

Her new creations are remarkably ambivalent and enigmatic. Using a reference to a snake, she taps into the ambiguity of a contradictory symbol. As Eve's seducer, the snake is the very embodiment of evil but entwined on Hermes's wand it becomes a powerful evocation of peace. The messenger of the gods seeing two snakes fighting each other threw his staff in their midst to separate them. They both curled around the staff and on the visual representations that are made of them (the caduceus for example), they emblematise the reconciliation of antagonistic forces.[3] In Munro's text the red adder is a polysemic combination, that has popular, literary, biblical, and historical connotations. Through homophony, it conjures up the image of a popular American hero: Red Adair, an oil well firefighter who founded the Red Adair Company in 1959 and made himself famous for extinguishing oil well fires in Kuwait.[4] The veiled allusion to the extinguisher of fire is

[2] Samuel Butler, *Erewhon, or, Over the Range* (London: Trübner and Ballantyne, 1872).
[3] Alain Gheerbrant, Jean Chevalier, "Caducée," *Dictionnaire des symboles* (Paris : Bouquins Éditions, 1969), 153.
[4] *The Scribner Encyclopedia of American Lives*, s. v. "Adair, Paul Neal ("Red"),"

remarkably ominous in a story that revolves around a dramatic domestic accident; Karin puts on Ann's wedding dress and the veil on her head and shoulders catches fire as she descends the stairs, because the wind flickers the candle's flame. By encrypting the Red Adair company in Karin's anagram, Munro allusively anticipates the accident and at the same time suggests the possibility of the child's rescue.

Many other cryptic allusions hover around the red lettering Karin transforms into a red snake. In American literature, one red letter looms particularly large: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, which alludes to Hester Prynne's adultery.[5] The young woman is made to wear the letter of infamy embroidered on her dress because she has borne a child out of wedlock. We find in Munro's text a repurposing of the red lettering in a context that strikes a sharp contrast with the values of seventeenth-century New England. If Hester Prynne is branded by the Puritans and made to display her shame publicly on the front of her dress, Karin's mother dresses like a hippie and sporadically lives with Derek who is still lawfully wedded to Ann while Ann continues to be Rosemary's nearest neighbour and friend. Munro rescripts adultery as an inevitable affair between apparently consenting and knowing adults. However, in characteristically ambivalent fashion, she inserts a cautionary reminder into her text. By transforming the word dread into adder, she sets up a principle of reversibility which provides her red adder with saving and smarting connotations at the same time.

We can also discover, in this clever linguistic game, unsuspected political allusions to historical events, on account of the activities Derek and Rosemary indulge in. Rosemary is an editor who helps Derek bring his book to completion. Derek's book, according to Karin is "sort of about the explorer La Salle and the Indians".[6] According to Rosemary: "It was interesting, but it was confused. First La Salle was all that interested him and then he got onto Pontiac, and he wanted to cover too much and he was never satisfied".[7] Derek's book resonates against the red adder because the new combination created by Karin encapsulates half-veiled allusions to the Indians. For one thing, the Indians used to be referred to through the racial slur "redskins", and for another, some of them (the tribes and bands from the Rocky Mountains) were referred to as snake Indians. Thus "Dread the Red Adder" can be interpreted as encapsulating a warning for Derek; by

https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/adair-paul-neal-red.

[5] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1850).

[6] Munro, "Rich as Stink," 222.

[7] Munro, "Rich as Stink," 227.

tackling the subject of First Nations and trying to write a book about them, he is trespassing on a territory that is not his own, discussing cultural elements of a minority group without adequate training or authority.

Beyond anticipating Derek's failure, the language game around the adder can also be envisaged as making a comment on the sexual politics evidenced by the story. Derek is treating both Rosemary and Ann with great callousness, moving from one to the other and back again when he needs or ceases to need their presence at his side. He instrumentalises Rosemary by making her work as an editor for his book without paying her a salary, and he benefits by Ann's sale of her house to go on a second wedding trip with her. His predatory behaviour is determined by economic interest and a sense of his own supremacy. He subordinates his wife, his editor, and her daughter who all end up aching to please him. Munro depicts her male character through a satirical gaze, just as she scathingly ironises her female characters. Derek is arguably one of her most arrogant and unsympathetic characters. When he teaches the ten-year old Karin how to smoke pot, he proves irresponsible and perverse. To use a speciesist slur, Derek could be called a red adder and it is conceivable that Munro covertly levels this reproach at him through a self-reflexive device. The man who fails to write a book on "redskins" is himself a red adder, exerting his poisonous tricks on all the women he approaches.

Thus, the story in which the warning "Dread the Red Adder" is inscribed acquires the value of a cautionary tale depicting the behaviour of human reptiles. By donning Ann's wedding dress, Karin tries to change skin but usurps Derek's wife's identity. Her improper identification has dire results, partly mitigated by her capacity to renew herself:

> Everybody thought she was just the same except for her skin. Nobody knew how she had changed and how natural it seemed to her to be separate and polite and adroitly fending for herself. Nobody knew the sober, victorious feeling she had sometimes, when she knew how much she was on her own.[8]

Karin is simultaneously depicted as an unnatural snake who cannot shed her burnt skin and a "natural" and metaphorical adder who coldly moves forward with great agility and duplicity. With Karin's description as a "separate" and cunning human being in a burnt skin, Munro proposes a supplementary repurposing of canonical references which is extremely subversive. Karin is cut off from the rest of the world on account of her burnt face but also because she refuses to be alienated by emotional ties; she secretly abides by a form of self-sufficiency that runs contrary to Christian

[8] Munro, "Rich as Stink," 253.

precepts as, for instance, enunciated by John Donne in his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* from Meditation XVII:

> No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; … any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.[9]

Karin's apprenticeship after her dramatic accident leads her to reject the fellowship that links human beings to each other. Her victorious self-reliance is a secret declaration of independence with political undertones which ambiguously ties in and clashes with foundational episodes in the context of American history. On July 4, 1776, the thirteen colonies declared themselves independent sovereign states no longer subject to British colonial rule. Twenty-two years earlier, in his newspaper *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (May 9, 1754), Benjamin Franklin published a political cartoon of his own making, showing eight American colonies as separated parts of a long snake with the caption "Join, or Die".[10] His summons was effective, and union eventually ensured the victory of the American colonies in the French and Indian War in 1763. With her secret and victorious feeling of being entirely on her own, Karin simultaneously endorses and reverses Franklin's injunction. She asserts her autonomy, trusting her own sovereignty while coldly and calculatingly paying lip-service to social expectations.

Through the description of Karin's emancipation, Munro writes back to at least three sets of conventions, the literary, the historical, and the interpersonal. She counters the edifying authority of bestiaries by showing the successful transformation of a young girl into a political animal, she opposes the historical injunctions of a dominant nation by crediting an ambivalent separation, and she singles her character out for being a double-dealing loner. Simultaneously, she taps all the resources and the ambivalence of the snake symbolism by showing that Karin has eventually become sly, cunning, and determined not to allow other adders to ensnare her.[11]

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[9] John Donne, *The Works of John Donne*, ed. Henry Alford, Vol. III (London: John W. Parker, 1839), 574-75,

[10] Vincent Virga, Alan Brinkley, et al., *Eyes of the Nation: A Visual History of the United States* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 51.

[11] For an illuminating Brontëan reading of "Rich as Stink" based on the image of the damaged consort see: Marjorie Garson, "Alice Munro and Charlotte Brontë," *The University of Toronto Quarterly* 69.4 (September 2000): 783-825.

BAT

Illustration 2. Guyart des Moulins, *Bible historiale,* first half XIV century, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Ms Fr.160, folio 40.

> *A sick person's mind, a dying person's mind, could fill up with all kinds of trash and organize that trash in a most convincing way. Enid's own mind, when she was asleep in this room, had filled up with the most disgusting inventions, with filth. Lies of that nature could be waiting around in the corners of a person's mind, hanging like bats in the corners, waiting to take advantage of any kind of darkness.*
>
> Alice Munro, "The Love of a Good Woman," *The Love of a Good Woman.* [12]

In informal language, to have bats in the belfry means to be crazy or eccentric. This old-fashioned idiomatic expression may account for the metaphor initially used in relation to Mrs. Quinn and possibly to Enid herself. Mrs. Quinn is Enid's patient in the longest short story in Munro's oeuvre. Positioned as the first story in the volume of the same name, "The Love of a Good Woman" (1998) is seventy-five-page long and was granted an explanatory and recapitulative subtitle, "A Murder, A Mystery, A Romance", in the *New Yorker* version (1996) which preceded its final publication. The plot hinges upon the last months in the life of a young farmer's wife, Mrs. Quinn, tended by a hired nurse, Enid, and both behave

[12] Alice Munro, "The Love of a Good Woman," *The Love of a Good Woman* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998), 74.

in an eccentric manner. On the verge of death, Mrs. Quinn keeps telling bizarre stories. That the optometrist, Mr. Willens, was her lover, that Mr. Quinn, her husband, murdered the optometrist, that together they put the body in the optometrist's car and lowered it into the river, to make it look like an accident and a drowning.

Is she trying to ruin her husband's reputation to prevent the nurse from marrying him after she has died? Is she self-importantly fabricating deceitful stories about some deeds of darkness? In the Western imaginary, the bat is associated with darkness, if only because it only flies at night, and the devil himself is represented with the wings of a bat because he fears the light of day. The cries of the bat are associated with the laughter of the demented.[13] At night when Enid sleeps in her patient's room to be close to her in case of need, she has the strangest dreams which reveal the vilest sex-fantasies. On the last day of her patient's life, she utterly neglects her to the extent that she can hardly be regarded as the "good woman" of the title, despite her usual good nature and life of dedication to her task. Mrs. Quinn is equally disqualified. In the words of Ildiko de Papp Carrington, she is "an unfaithful wife, a neglectful mother, and a slatternly housewife".[14] There is even a lurking suspicion that she may be the optometrist's murderess, trying to pass her husband off as the culprit. A lot of critics have wondered about the origin of the title; Catherine Sheldrick Ross asserts that the title sounds "as if taken from some quotation"[15] but does not identify the exact source.

It is safe to assert that the source is filmic. Munro makes references to canonical films in a great number of stories,[16] and one can hypothesise she has watched many silent movies. One of them, *Sunrise: a Song of Two Humans*, by Murnau (1927) graphically revolves around "the love of a good woman".[17] The film script (itself adapted from a German short story, "The Excursion to Tilsit", by Herman Sudermann) shares many common structural elements with Munro's story like, for instance, the possibility for

[13] Pastoureau, *Bestiaires du Moyen Âge,* 214-215.
[14] Ildiko de Papp Carrington, *Controlling the Uncontrollable The Fiction of Alice Munro* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 168.
[15] Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Too Many things: Reading Alice Munro's 'The Love of a Good Woman,'" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 2.3 (2002): 786-810.
[16] To provide one example only, consider the reference to *Hiroshima, mon amour* by Alain Resnais, in "Chance": Alice Munro, "Chance," *Runaway* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2004), 48.
[17] *Sunrise: A Song of two Humans*, directed by F. W. Murnau (1927, Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2014), DVD.

a woman to be criminally drowned in a boating accident.[18] The film introduces a male character who is torn between his love for a good woman (his wife) and the love for a satanic dark lady (his mistress). The mistress persuades him to drown his wife in a boating excursion, but he finally resists temptation and repudiates the evil woman. Munro's treatment of the theme of adultery is inverted because it concerns the woman's unfaithfulness, and much more subtle because it is characterised by indeterminacy. There is no knowing whether Mrs. Quinn was unfaithful to her husband and there is no knowing whether Mr. Quinn killed the optometrist. The ending of the story is even more elusive as the nurse is about to embark on a small river boat with Mr. Quinn and ask him to give an account of himself. The possibility of his drowning her to prevent her from denouncing him remains an option.

The plot of "The Love of a Good Woman" hangs on a desire for truth, but the story is characterised by its opacity. As suggested by Dennis Duffy it remains "a dark sort of mirror", like the instrument of the optometrist itself.[19] The entire first part deals with secondary characters who finally disappear from the story without their function being elucidated. Duffy proposes illuminating interpretations for their presence such as "foreshadowing the descriptions of the unhappy families to come", providing contextual information upon hierarchical societies which have made "a vow of silence and denial", or exhibiting "the sheer joy that transgression within a repressive society entails", but there remains that internal coherence is deliberately lacking even though the story is not disjointed. The events narrated are radically dissociated, cut off from each other: the stability of the whole is undermined, and doubt cast on all the characters in the plot, not only Mrs. Quinn and Enid, but also the optometrist and Mr. Quinn. Their common ability to hide the truth, the manipulations they indulge in are illustrated through the image of the bats in the belfry which recapitulates the illusions maintained by all the characters in the dark chambers of their minds.[20]

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[18] Hermann Sudermann, *The Excursion to Tilsit* (1917), trans. Lewis Galatière (New York: H. Liverright, 1930). This theme is also to be found in Theodore Dreiser's novel, *An American Tragedy* (1925) adapted for the screen by Joseph von Sternberg in 1931.

[19] Dennis Duffy, "'A Dark Sort of Mirror': 'The Love of a Good Woman' as Pauline Poetic," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 66 (Winter 98), n. p., Academic Search Premier.

[20] The story has given rise to a wealth of highly informed criticism, some of which is quoted in the bibliography. See in particular Dennis Duffy, Coral Ann Howells Judith McCombs, Judith Miller, Ildiko de Papp Carrington, Catherine Sheldrick Ross.

BEAR

Illustration 3. Albertus Magnus, *On Animals*, between 1256 and 1260, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Ms Latin 16169, folio 286r.

"*The Bear Came Over the Mountain*"

Alice Munro, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage.*[21]

This is the title of Munro's last story in her tenth volume, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loves*hip, *Marriage,* published in 2001. This story has enjoyed a remarkable popularity, and its success has increased with its adaptation for the screen by Sarah Polley in 2006 in a movie called "Away from Her".[22] The title has elicited a great deal of commentaries and interpretations since no bear is literally featured in the short story. Critics have looked for figurative or allegorical meanings and, in her filmic adaptation, Sarah Polley has gone so far as to make the main male character, Grant, played on screen by Gordon Pinsent, look like a hairy, debonair bear with a heavy, stocky gait.

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[21] Alice Munro, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001), 274.
[22] *Away from Her*, directed by Sarah Polley (2006; Toronto: Mongrel Media, 2007), DVD.

No critic so far has suggested that the reference to the bear coming over the mountain could also apply to the female character and yet Fiona's itinerary precisely leads her from one side of the mountain to the other. Because she suffers from a degenerative disease, she decides to opt for a long-term residential care home, a place called Meadow Lake, and she leaves the farmhouse where she had lived with her husband since his retirement. When she settles in the medical facility, she crosses the boundary between one side of the mountain and the other. After the initial thirty-day compulsory separation from Grant, she does not seem to remember that he is her husband, and she develops very strong emotional ties with another boarder, called Aubrey. Aubrey, who is partly afflicted with paralysis and speech impediment, takes a temporary stay in this establishment on the other side of the mountain while his wife is on holiday.

Fiona spends all her time with him, mimicking thus the behaviour of the she-bears described in medieval bestiaries. According to Michel Pastoureau, she-bears are attributed a particularly lustful behaviour:

> Bears are certainly obsessed with romantic passion and indulge in it without restraint. But it is the females who, unable to curb their desire, pursue the males day and night.[23]

Munro inscribes Fiona's passion into the text allusively through a series of innuendoes that cannot pass unnoticed. For instance, Fiona and Aubrey's romance develops in the conservatory which is called a "bower". In Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590), the bower of bliss is a beautiful but disreputable place, a symbol of lust and indulgence, that must eventually be destroyed.[24] Even more indirectly, Fiona's transformation in the medical facility is suggested through a revelatory grammatical mistake made by Kristy, one of the nurses:

> You'd think it'd be the old guys trying to crawl in bed with the old women, but you know half the time it's the other way round. Old women going after the old men. Could be they're not so wore [sic] out, I guess.[25]

The quasi homophony between "wore" and "whore" suggests Fiona's licentiousness and indirectly establishes her sexual activities through this Freudian slip of the tongue, this tell-tale crack of language. Although Kristy

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[23] Pastoureau, *Bestiaires du Moyen Âge,*74. My translation.
[24] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590), ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt, Book II, xii (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 136-139.
[25] Munro, "The Bear Came over the Mountain," 293.