

Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You

Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You. Alice Munro. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974. Pp. 256.

Most of the stories in this collection are about women and a number are about women who "deceive themselves and uselessly suffer, being exploitable because of the emptiness of their lives and some deep but indefinable, and not final!--flaw in themselves," as the female narrator in "Tell Me Yes or No" puts it. Such a person is Et in the title story, "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," who means to but doesn't tell her doting, guileless brother-in-law that his wife never loved him and committed suicide because she loved someone who did not love her. Et, the plain, steady woman known for her good sense, plays second fiddle to her beautiful sister and hides the truth while she administers housekeeper comforts to good-natured Arthur. Such a woman too is the narrator of "The Spanish Lady" or the woman in "Forgiveness in Families"--they uselessly suffer guilt or shame or frustration or even self-hatred because of some "flaw in themselves," some inability to pursue their own interests.

The woman narrator in the story "Material" is bitter and baffled. She looks at both the destruction of her marriage and the success of her former husband with a good deal of resentment. She is angered at the way he used her and went on to use other women to safeguard his position as aspiring author. The bitter thing for the wife, now ex-wife, is to discover that his self-interest has paid off for him. The

story Hugo has written is a perfect one and she is filled with admiration for the achievement. But she is also infuriated at his exploitation of his experiences, his friendships, as "material" for his writing. She realizes, however, that her second husband, an engineer, is not unlike Hugo. Both men have "decided what to do about everything. . .they are not at the mercy" and she is torn between blaming them and excusing them and she can both "envy and despise" them. There is envy because men are able to grasp what they want. They are ruthless in fulfilling their own needs. They don't have to deal with the "unpleasant world" of personal relations--they let their wives do that. She is ashamed when she provides Hugo with stories about Dotty because she sees herself as betraying friendship. But that no more bothers Hugo than it bothers him that he will flood Dotty's basement rooms by turning off the pump if doing so adds to his comfort and gives him the conditions he needs to carry on his writing. She sees Hugo as a colossal fraud but still she is faced with the fact that he has done what she has not done--written the perfect story, immortalized himself and his "material," Dotty. He has accomplished something, she has done nothing but carp. The author seems to be asking if it is inevitable that in order to be an artist one must be ruthlessly self-centred. Is it true as Hugo's defenders would say that artists "are not as other men are?" And I think the question is raised, can a woman writer,

trained as she has been for endless generations to put herself second or third after husband, children, parents, become this ruthless creature who can see her whole existence as merely so much material to make her own work of art.

In "How I Met My Husband," Edie, an uneducated housemaid, realizes too late that "women should stick together and not do things" like lying to protect an unfaithful lover because Edie, herself, becomes the next victim and castaway. It is Edie who stops waiting for a letter from her lover and decides she is not going to be like other women doing this with their lives, waiting: "If there were women all through life waiting, and women busy and not waiting, I knew which I had to be." She is a nearer relation to Hugo than is immediately apparent. In "Forgiveness in Families," a woman who loved and cared for her mother realizes that she is disappointed when her mother recovers from a serious illness made worse by a foolish son's neglect because again her spoiled brother will escape the punishment he deserves for his self-centredness. The doting mother is convinced that the prayers of her shallow, hypocritical son have saved her life rather than the daughter's getting her to hospital on time. In "The Found Boat," two young girls are accepted by the neighbourhood boys when the girls find a boat for them which they all join in repairing and sailing on the river. For

a sweet, short while the boys and girls forget their sex--"they thought of each other now hardly as names or people"--until once more their differences become important and the community they had achieved is destroyed. In the last story, "The Ottawa Valley," the narrator, a writer, grapples with another kind of problem, writing as a way of disposing of one's past, writing as an act of liberation which doesn't always succeed. In this story about her childhood the narrator speaks of the difficulty of capturing her mother in her stories: "It is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to get rid of her, and it did not work;" and perhaps it did not work because a writer must be a Hugo to reach that pinnacle of indifference to the "material" that achieves the perfect story.

I find this collection of Alice Munro's stories more interesting and varied than her earlier Dance of the Happy Shades and as good as the novel Lives of Girls and Women which I think is very good indeed. Perhaps I have made these stories sound like heavy going with my emphasis on the problems of women as people and writers, but they are not. Alice Munro writes the most readable prose of anyone I can think of writing in Canada today. If she can meet the challenge of the novel form, she may become our most important writer.

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