



Alice Munro

WRITING HER LIVES

In this excerpt,
Alice Munro
(then Alice Laidlaw)
is fresh from high
school and in the
first year of her studies
at the University
of Western Ontario,
where she meets
her future husband,
Jim Munro.

BY ROBERT THACKER

Recalling her university years, Munro says that she loved her time there, “being in that atmosphere, having all those books, not having to do any housework. Those are the only two years of my life without housework.” Not that she has greatly minded such work, either before university or after, but those two years at Western stand singular in her memory: “to have that concentration of your life, that something else was the thing you got up in the morning to do, and it was all reading and writing, studying.” Munro enrolled initially in the journalism program as something of a cover, so that she would not have to say that she wrote fiction—though, given the contributor note in the April 1950 *Folio* [the university’s student literary magazine] that has her major as Honours English “with an emphasis on creative writing,” it was not much of a cover. The journalism program required English, and that first year Munro also took English history (which she says she already knew backwards), economics, French conversation, and psychology. Those enrolled in programs like journalism—that is, with some sort of applied focus—were put in the same sections of these courses and were seated alphabetically. Thus Alice Laidlaw met Diane Lane—a first-year pre-business student from Amherstburg—who became a friend and roommate.

Both students had come from small towns, neither had

much money (though Laidlaw was the more strapped), and each, initially, roomed with someone she knew from home. During that first year, each found that she was not enjoying the association with her original roommate. So the two took to spending time together at the public library, where Munro had a part-time job two or three afternoons a week sorting and reshelving books (as she also did at the Lawson library on campus on Saturday afternoons). Eventually, Munro moved into the same rooming house as Lane—the upstairs of a house belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Buck at 1081 Richmond Street—where she lived through her second year. Mr. Buck’s brother Tim was the leader of the Communist Party of Canada and had been in jail. The Bucks “rented the entire upstairs of their house, and it was a place where vaguely intellectual non-sorority-type girls lived.” Munro recalls that “we were all fairly poor, and we all cooked these messes we made on hotplates.” Socially, at the time, she remembers, “Western

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was fraternity, sorority. Not too serious.” That second year was “interesting, but fun, because I was then with people at University who were more or less like me.” Munro captures some of this in an unpublished draft story called “The Art of Fiction,” which draws on her time at Western. The narrator writes, “During my university years I lived in a house which was not really very big and which sheltered seven other girls, a landlady who wove her own skirts and belonged to a Bell Ringers Society, and a periodically confined lovesick Siamese cat.”

During their first year, both young women took the same English 20—a survey of British literature—class from Robert Lawrence and, through him, they came to the attention of the English department. Just as in high school, Munro made her mark by what she wrote: as a student she did not have much to say in class, but Lawrence read “The Dimensions of a Shadow,” a story she wrote that became her first publication. The English department was seeking students for its honours program, and both Laidlaw and Lane were successfully recruited. Munro recalls that some time during that first year she was approached by Professor Murdo MacKinnon about switching to English. By that time, she remembers, she had “run afoul of economics” so she asked him if she would have to take more economics. No, he replied, she would need only to pick up the Latin she had missed that first year. So she shifted to English for her

second year. That year she took aesthetics from Carl Klinck, eighteenth-century British literature from Brandon Conron, a course in drama from Eric Atkinson (“the best course I took”), French poetry, Greek literature and translation, and another course in English history “from a dreadful man” who “read from notes.” Although Munro says she spent about half of her time at Western writing, she did very well in her courses—apart from economics. At the end of her second year, she won a prize for the highest marks in English.

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During her first year at Western, Alice Laidlaw was sitting across from another student in the Lawson library. He was eating some candy, a piece of which he accidentally dropped on the floor. This young man had had his eye on Laidlaw and, looking at the candy on the floor as he was wondering what to do, he heard her say, “I’ll eat it.” Thus Alice Ann Laidlaw met James Armstrong Munro. Jim Munro was from Oakville, the eldest son of Arthur Melville Munro, a senior accountant at the Timothy Eaton company in Toronto, and his wife, Margaret Armstrong Munro. Just under two years older than Alice, Jim was in his second year studying Honours History when he met her. Growing up in Oakville and through high school, he was interested in the arts; he listened to opera and classical music, took art classes, and acted in plays. Jim had seen Alice around the university and had noticed her, but did not know anything about her; he did not know that she was a writer until, when he asked around about her, he was told that Alice Laidlaw “was *Folio’s* new find.” Recalling himself then, Jim Munro says he was “full of poetry and romantic notions”—he remembers then being under the influence of a book, *The Broad Highway* by Jeffrey Farnol, about a young man who falls for a high-spirited girl. He mirrored the story when he met Alice Laidlaw—“I really fell hard for her.”

Describing Alice Laidlaw when she was a student at Western, Doug Spettigue, a classmate, recalls that “she was shy and small and had a very white face, freckle-sprinkled, and chestnut hair. . . . You thought you could stare right through those quiet eyes and the girl would disappear. But she didn’t. There was an unexpected strength there, and even then a confidence that some of the rest of us, noisier, may have envied.” **R**

[Watch a video clip of Alice Munro at www.ReadMagazine.ca.](http://www.ReadMagazine.ca)

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