

Editorial

IN A RECENT ARTICLE IN *The Atlantic* magazine (Dec. 2006: 128–33) Mona Simpson effusively praises the Canadian short-story writer Alice Munro, calling her “the living writer most likely to be read in a hundred years,” and wondering why someone of her extraordinary accomplishments isn’t correspondingly extraordinarily famous. (Outside Canada, that is; here, as Simpson correctly points out, she’s “a deity on the order of Japan’s Living National Treasures.”) One contributing factor, Simpson suggests, is that Munro is a “most unexotic Canadian,” well hrrumph, but I do have to admit that when I’m in the US and start a sentence with the words “In Canada ...” the person I’m talking to often suddenly remembers a pressing engagement elsewhere. But I’m pretty sure that would happen too if I mentioned Belgium or Paraguay or New Zealand. People in the US tend not to be very interested in what’s going on in much of the rest of the world.

Anyway, what especially caught my attention in this article was Simpson’s speculation that another reason for Munro’s failure to attain international superstardom is that she has written only short stories “in an age that doesn’t particularly value them.” Whoops! When did people decide they were no longer interested in short fiction? Why didn’t anyone tell me?

In support of her claim about this decline, Simpson points out that *The Atlantic* has stopped publishing it in its regular issues, and that *The New Yorker* publishes less of it than it did twenty years ago. Not exactly conclusive evidence. “No one would ever suggest today that fiction helps sell any magazine,” she continues. Well, I’ve heard that suggestion—many times—about *this* magazine—but then, this is a most unexotic Canadian magazine, so maybe it doesn’t really count. (No, this is false modesty. I often hear from people in the US and in Europe that they’re familiar with this journal, and especially enjoy our short fiction. So there!)

Anyway, nobody has told our writers about this decline. More and more of them send us stories every month. You haven’t noticed it, but the number of associate editors listed on our masthead has increased considerably over the past few years. This has been necessitated mostly by a substantial increase in the number of short stories we receive.

A revealing trend I've noticed is the growing number of authors whose little enclosed biographical notes reveal that they're in, or have recently finished, academic creative writing programmes. I'm not positive that this is a wholly good thing. There is a tendency in today's university to create programmes to try to teach every skill that's worth acquiring; but in many cases, especially with the recently invented academic disciplines, it's doubtful that the skill can really be taught. When a skill has a *method*, it can be taught; for example, future dental hygienists can be shown which little scraper to use, how to stick it into the patient's gums to produce maximum pain, and so on; but there doesn't seem to be a method for writing. ("Writing is easy," said Gene Fowler. "All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead.") And it's questionable that the usual appurtenances of the academic disciplines—tiny distinctions, jargon, and heavy-duty theory—will be of any help to writers. But I'm assured that creative writing programmes can do a lot of good simply because they make their students do a great deal of it, and subject what they do to lots of criticism. If anything can teach good writing, this can. In any case, I'm happy to see the growth of academic creative writing programmes for another reason: it shows that people—large numbers of them—want to become good writers. The paramount concern of many universities these days is the B.I.S. number. This is an acronym for 'Bums In Seats.' (I'm not kidding: this really is a term we hear more and more in the university.) Programmes are started, and receive continued support, only when the number-guys in the university administration think they'll be popular enough to make a profit. Three cheers, then, or two anyway, for creative writing programmes: they're the canary in the short-story mine that shows that the atmosphere still supports life.

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