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A Reason to Read: Fiction-Affirming Fiction in Alice Munro's *Open Secrets*

Nicholas Frangipane

Nick is a senior at Bridgewater State College. He originally wrote a much shorter version of this paper for Recent British Fiction, but it spiraled out of control and appears in its current form due, largely, to the encouragement and assistance of Dr. Michael Boyd. Nick hopes to continue on to graduate school and pursue a career in academia.

Several years ago I took a class in Ethnic American literature. Near the end of the semester the professor had been pacing the front of the classroom and told us he had been thinking about death; it probably didn't help that we had been recently discussing existentialism in the work of Richard Wright. At the last minute he changed the question on the final, he asked, simply, *does literature matter?* I thought very carefully and I decided the answer was *no.*

I reasoned that if there was no literature little would change. People would still eat, they would still go to work, they would still go to sleep at night and they would certainly still get drunk and make babies and the species would go on. They would watch television instead, perhaps. I reasoned that if everyone who studied English was simultaneously wiped off of the earth no one outside our field would notice (barring, hopefully, our friends and loved ones). Working at Barnes and Noble for years I noticed that rarely does someone who is not studying English buy something particularly literary. We sold mostly magazines and children's books.

English studies began to seem like an elaborate game. I thought, why guess at the meaning of, say, *Gravity's Rainbow* when Pynchon is still alive? Couldn't he, perhaps under duress if necessary, just tell us? I realize that in these days of post structuralism and its variants the author is no longer an oracle who can supply us with answers to the meaning of even his own work, but it felt like we were playing an elaborate game, like an extremely complex crossword puzzle. English studies have radically changed since they were first introduced, when they were principally a way to instill morals; now if literature even attempts such a thing it risks not being considered serious literature at all.

At the end of the exam I had to say no, perhaps it doesn't matter. I, of course, continued to read, and in the back of my head continued to worry about the day when all of the students and professors of English would simultaneously vanish, until I came across books like Yann Martel's *Life of Pi,* William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, and Alice Munro's *Open Secrets*. These books all feature fiction within fiction, events or stories made up by the characters. In *Life of Pi,* Pi tells the story of his odyssey at sea when he is trapped on a lifeboat with several wild animals, including a Bengal tiger—it amounts to an amazing and inspiring story of survival. However, at the end of the novel we learn it was all an allegory:

there was no Bengal tiger but an incredibly violent and cruel man, and the other animals were representative of other humans on the boat who were violently killed. The end of the novel reveals that the interviewers from the maritime department and the ministry of travel, to whom Pi tells both versions of the story, ultimately prefer the fictional version of events as a way of getting at the true meaning of Pi's story. *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, though not as violent, makes a similar case for the importance of fiction: a man is able to reconstruct evens from his childhood by speculating about them, by looking up facts and dates and filling in the empty spots with his imagination—and this, he finds, comforts him. These books, as well as Alice Munro's *Open Secrets,* use fiction within fiction to show the importance of fiction. They are a sort of *fiction-affirming fiction*—stories that show us why stories are important to real people in real life. These novels argue that yes, literature does matter. Similar to *Life of Pi* and *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, in *Open Secrets* Munro's characters often create fiction which allows Munro, like Martel and Maxwell, to argue the importance of fiction.

As Robert Lecker argues, Munro's work is, "preoccupied with the ways in which reading and writing are historically conditioned acts that influence how people define themselves in relation to their community and their present." Munro's characters tell stories, they speculate, and one even writes a film. The stories take place in a character's imagination as often as they take place in the real world. Often, it is up to the reader to decide what *really* happened. Munro works to blur the line between fact and fiction, an act which suggests that the difference is unimportant and that for these characters to truly understand their lives and make sense of the world the facts alone are not enough; they must explore every unlived possibility, if only in their imaginations, to live fully, to live comfortably, to understand their world and themselves. This use of fiction within fiction unifies the collection and lets Munro explore the idea of an *open secret.* Ultimately, this technique of using fiction within fiction allows Munro, in *Open Secrets* and in her other work, to make an argument for the importance of fiction, and its role in society. In *The Reflexive Novel* Michael Boyd states, "If artists wish to speak of the process of artistic creation or of the relationship between art and life, they may express their ideas discursively…Or they may express their ideas directly in their creative work" (15). Indeed Munro chooses the latter, expressing the relationship between art and life—in her case the role of fiction in society—directly in her creative work, creating fiction which shows the validity of fiction—*fiction-affirming fiction*. In *Open Secrets* Munro's characters' lives are enhanced by the various types of fiction they add to them, reminding the reader that fiction is necessary.

Munro's fiction within fiction is similar to—but not the same as—metafiction. Used loosely, the term may apply but, the strictest sense of metafiction as, "Fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions" (OED) does not apply to Munro's work. Munro does not parody or depart from novelistic conventions, traits which are characteristic of works like John Fowl's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Rather, Munro's work is simply fiction which contains characters who, in many different ways, produce fiction themselves. Her characters, unlike common characters in metafictional works, rarely write. Munro's characters create their fictions with their stories, their lies, and their imaginations.

In *Open Secrets* Munro uses fiction within fiction and fact within fiction; really, it is all fiction. For the sake of this argument, *fiction* is anything in the story which does not conform to the facts known to be true within the world of the story, like a dead character sitting down for a conversation, as we will see in Munro's "Carried Away." *Fiction* can also be speculation; Munro's characters and narrators often speculate on events which have not happened, events that are contrary to what has happened, or events that the narrator could not possibly remember. Take, for example, William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, a novel in which a narrator recounts a story he could not possibly know from his childhood. The narrator remembers almost nothing, but builds a coherent narrative from a few specific memories, circumstantial evidence, and much speculation. *Fiction* may also refer to events that the reader knows can not happen in the natural world, as we are not dealing with magical realism. Anything that is *real* is something that is true in the world of the story, and conforms to the reader's perception of what is possible in the natural world.

And indeed, in "Carried Away," the story that opens Munro's collection, something that must be described as *fiction* occurs. Jack Agnew, decapitated thirty years earlier, sits down beside Louisa at a bus stop for a chat about their personal lives. Jack, for obvious reasons, has not had one. This, however, does not stop him from telling Louisa all about his wife and daughter—things that Louisa knows are not true. Agnew says that Grace, his wife, "is not so well. She had some arthritis. Her weight doesn't help it. Lillian is all right. She's married but still teaches high school. Mathematics. Not too usual for a woman" (*Open Secrets* 46). Louisa knows this is not true, she knows Grace has remarried, and that Lillian never finished high school so could not possibly be a high school teacher. These revelations represent what might possibly have happened if Jack lived. Everything Jack mentions seems realistic; that his wife gained weight and his daughter became a teacher is not much of a stretch. This fiction, however, helps Lousia explore her and Jack's place in the world, and their place in relation to each other.

The logic of Jack's appearance is left ambiguous—we do not know if he is a product of Louisa's imagination, a ghost or a dream.

It is possible that Louisa is having a stroke, and some suggest that it is actually Jim Frarey who is sitting beside Louisa while she has what is possibly a hallucination. There is also a chance that Louisa could be making it up; she admits that she speaks to her late husband in her head, "but hardly in a mystical way" (49), and the conversation about the mundane details of Jack's life is hardly mystical. There is even one line which hints that Jack may have faked his own death: in an attempt to apologize for not saying goodbye to Louisa he says, "the opportunity to leave came up so suddenly" (47). However, as we read on these ambiguities are less troubling and Jack's appearance seems almost organic to the plot.

Jack's presence and Jack's words represent an alternate reality. Branko Gorjup, reviewer for *World Literature Today,* states that, in Munro's stories "every stone that overturned along the road will reveal another life." This scene answers the question of what was likely to have happened if Jack had not been killed, what another life might have been like. Jack would not have left Grace for Louisa; perhaps Grace and Lillian's lives would have been different, but he would not have come into Louisa's life. Answering this *what if* allows Louisa to understand Jack's role in her life, to understand how his accident affected her life and the world. Ultimately, Jack would have been an unimportant person in her life had he lived. However, by dying he brought Louisa and Arthur Doud together (as Doud met Louisa while returning Jack's stolen books), and became an important person in her life only when he died.

In "A Real Life" Munro once again tries to answer a *what if* question. Millicent sees to it that her eccentric friend Dorrie is married off to a wealthy man in order to have "a real life" (75). However, once she is gone and Millicent is left behind she speculates on how Dorrie's life would have turned out, had she not convinced Dorrie to marry. Millicent thinks about how Dorrie collected walnuts from the grass and she probably, "expected to keep it up until she died." Millicent speculates on Dorrie's possible future, not out of pleasure, but because she is unable to avoid it, "at the time of the year when the walnuts would be lying on the long grass." Millicent misses Dorrie, and imaging the details of the life they could have lived as neighbors helps her recover from the upsetting image of the dilapidated house Dorrie once rented from Millicent. By speculating on mundane details about Dorrie's life, that, "probably she would have got another dog" (80), Millicent can more easily come to terms with losing her friend. Gorjup, suggests that Millicent is trying to exorcise her guilt for having doubted "the possibility of love and happiness" for Dorrie. Perhaps, she is also feeling guilty for changing Dorrie, who was "remarkable for her integrity and innocence, the genuineness of her interests, and the dignity and worth of her unpretentious and often socially despised avocations" (Martin and Ober 42).

Most importantly, Millicent misses her friend. This speculation is a way for Millicent to keep in touch with Dorrie. After Dorrie got married they did not stay in touch except for a few brief exchanges. These speculations are a way for Millicent to keep the old Dorrie alive and near by—even if she is unwilling to admit it to herself, saying, as she looks at the remains of what was once Dorrie's home, "I ought to knock that down and sell the bricks" (80). "A Real Life," like "Carried Away," gives us two different outcomes, one *fictitious* outcome—an alternate reality—where Dorrie lives her life in the cottage in Millicent's back yard, and the *real* outcome, where Dorrie is married to a wealthy man and travels the world. In this story it seems like reality and fantasy are switched; from Millicent's perspective it had a fairy-tale type ending where the poor girl marries the prince.

We see the most willful act of creating fiction in the third story, "The Albanian Virgin." Charlotte tells the narrator a story which she plans to write out as a movie script. "The Albanian Virgin" actually starts with Charlotte's story, rather than the frame story of the narrator and her relationship with Charlotte, in such a way that the reader is not immediately aware that it is fiction within fiction. Later, once Charlotte has finished telling her fictional story, we learn more about her personal life. We learn that she reads and has a vivid imagination, but we also learn that the events from her story may mirror her real life. Her husband is not Canadian, and seems like he could possibly be the Franciscan priest from the story she tells. Furthermore, we are never given the name of the heroine for Charlotte's story, only the mispronunciation on her name: Lottar. It is likely that Lottar is a mispronunciation of Charlotte; they share four of the same letters, in the same order. Here Charlotte is most likely telling a dramatized version of her life story to give meaning to her life at what might be the end of it, as she is in the hospital for a serious illness. The narrator suspects the story may be true, and hints at it, saying, "I never knew why people told me things, or what they meant me to believe" (85). We do not know to what degree the story is fictionalized—Munro leaves this unclear, which says that the truth is negligible, that what is important are the emotions involved in this story, and the relationship between Charlotte and her husband.

The end of "The Albanian Virgin" mirrors the end of Charlotte's story, with Charlotte and her husband running away from the hospital as Charlotte's characters run away from the jungle. Perhaps Charlotte's fiction is imitating her life, or perhaps Charlotte's life is imitating her fiction, the end is unclear, once again affirming that the truth is negligible, and the story is more important.

Storytelling takes a different form in the next short story, the story from which the collection takes its title, "Open Secrets." In this story some of the characters gossip and some of the characters tell a fictional story through a children's song. When Heather

Bell disappears the town is unable to talk about anything else. The disappearance is speculated upon on the radio, in the paper, and at the kitchen table of Frances Wall and Maureen Stephens. Some of the possible explanations include that Heather was picked up by a boyfriend, or was murdered by Mr. Siddicup, Theo Hubbert, or Lawyer Stephens, though the possibility of the latter two is never discussed by the characters in the story. Frances and Maureen continue to discuss these issues because it helps them simplify their world. If they can believe that Heather ran away, or was murdered by Mr. Siddicup, who is now in prison, they can be free from worry. However, if they cannot believe this speculation they will be forced to believe that their lives are in danger, as Theo Hubbert is a free man, and Maureen and Frances live with Lawyer Stephens, for whom there is evidence that he may have been involved in the murder; Maureen herself believes this to some extent, indicated by, among other things, the cryptic line, "[Maureen] was anxious to get him into the bedroom as soon as possible, afraid that he might misbehave elsewhere" (155).

Maureen has a stronger suspicion about Theo Hubbert, which comes to her by an inexplicable vision. Maureen sees Theo, who suffers from an unexplained mental deficiency and is often treated like a child, "punished" by his wife, Marian. Maureen sees Theo's hand (which she identifies by the color of the sleeve of the jacket he was wearing), "pressed down, unresistingly, but by somebody else's will—it is pressed down on the open burner of the stove… just long enough to scorch the flesh…in silence this is done, and by agreement" (158). This, however, is a vision and cannot be counted as evidence against Theo—we do not even know if his hand is actually burned, Maureen does not notice a mark on his hand when he is in her home. This vision, like Maureen's other visions, seem to constitute an alternate reality. Munro writes,

> Sometimes when she is just going to sleep but not quite asleep, not dreaming yet, she has caught something. Or even in the daytime during what she thinks of as her normal life. She might catch herself sitting on stone steps eating cherries and watching a man coming up the steps carrying a parcel. She has never seen those steps or that man, but for an instant they seem to be part of another life that she is leading, a life just as long and complicated and strange and dull as this one. And she isn't surprised. (158)

Maureen's visions constitute the possibility of an alternate reality, like the alternate realities in "Carried Away," in which Jack is not killed, and "A Real Life" in which Dorrie does not move away. Maureen's alternate reality is vaguer, as she just has short glimpses into another life, of other paths she could have taken. Borges' "The Garden of the Forking Paths" seems to explain these glimpses into an alternate reality and the function of Alice Munro's fiction within fiction better than her critics.

Jorge Luis Borges' short stories, similar to Munro's, often contain a story within a story. In the frequently anthologized "The Shape of the Sword" the story is told by an anonymous narrator, who heard it from a man, who heard it from Vincent Moon—the man who originally tells the story. "The Garden of the Forking Paths" is also a story within a story; the narrator remains unnamed, anonymous, and the body of the text is dictated by another character. "The Garden of the Forking Paths" is the story of an English professor, Dr. Yu Tsen, who is being pursued for treason and, in the mean time, meets a man named Albert, who explains to him the rationale behind a seemingly incoherent novel written by Dr. Yu Tsen's ancestor, Tsu Pen. Dr. Yu Tsen calls the book, "an indeterminate heap of contradictory drafts" (24). Indeed, much of Alice Munro's work seems contradictory; in "Carried Away" a man is beheaded and then decades later appears at a bus stop and carries on a conversation as if he had been alive all the years he had been missing. In "The Garden of the Forking Paths" Albert explains, "in all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Tsu Pen, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them." Indeed, Alice Munro chooses several outcomes simultaneously, like Dorrie's two lives, or Maureen's glimpses into another dimension. Borges continues, "In the work of Tsu Pen all possible outcomes occur" (Borges 26), as we could say, in the work of Alice Munro several, but not *all,* different outcomes occur.

Another fictional rendering of the disappearance of Heather Bell in "Open Secrets" is offered in the form of the song sung by Heather's peers. They sing:

> And maybe some man did meet her there
> That was carrying a gun or a knife
> He met her there and he didn't care
> He took that young girl's life
> But some will say it wasn't that way
> That she met a stranger or a friend
> In a big black car she was carried far
> And nobody knows the end (140)

In the first verse of this song the singers speculate about the chances of Heather being murdered, but then as if to undercut that indication, or soften it, the next verse goes on to speculate that the girl actually ran away of her own free choice. This is how the other children are dealing with this disappearance. If they believed she was murdered, they would be terrified to go off alone. However, if they can convince themselves she ran away, they are still safe. Their perception of the world remains undisturbed.

The title of this story and the collection as a whole, *Open Secrets,* can serve as a definition for this kind of fiction: rather than the truth no one talks about, it is the truth everyone knows, but does not want to believe; a secret that, if kept, allows the keepers to continue their lives unchanged. The *open secret* is a truth that no one wants to believe.

In "A Wilderness Station" Annie Herron tries to convince her brother-in-law, George, to live with an *open secret*: that he had killed his brother in anger. Or, at least that is one version of the story. In "A Wilderness Station" we are given three different stories of the same event: the death of Simon Herron. First, we are told that he was killed by a falling tree limb, and then Annie claims to have killed him with a large rock. Then, in the story that seems the most plausible, we learn that George killed Simon by hitting him with an axe on the back of his head. This most plausible story begins to lose its credibility, however, when we learn about Annie's dreams about George trying to kill her, which cause us to question her sanity. The end of the story actually suggests that it may have all been a dream. Annie tells Christina a story of a woman who has a premature stillborn baby whose life is saved by being put in the oven and "puffed up to the right size and baked to a good color." Christina tells her, "that wasn't possible, it must have been a dream" to which Annie responds, "Maybe so…I did used to have the terriblest dreams" (225), suggesting that Annie can no longer tell her dreams from reality. Annie's unreliability is further exposed when we learn that she often lies, for no apparent reason, to the children of the family for whom she works as a seamstress, many years later.

In this case, these ambiguities and alternate possibilities are for the reader, rather than the characters. The epistolary mode puts the reader in the position to decide what is true, the same position the protagonists and narrators are in, in the other stories; the character who may be referred to as the interloper in a detective novel has been removed. The end of the story, in which George and Annie attempt to have a conversation, decades later, gives us no hints about the murder, and it is unclear whether they actually exchanged any words at all.

In every story in *Open Secrets* the characters create fiction, and ultimately this is something that unifies the whole collection into a composite novel. In "The Jack Randa Hotel" Gail assumes a fake identity, and writes fictional letters as the old woman whose identity she has assumed. In "Spaceships Have Landed" Eunie's alien abduction is another instance of a character blurring the line between fact and fiction. We learn, earlier in the story, that Eunie did not differentiate between fictitious radio plays and the news she heard on the radio, and possibly not between real life and dreams. Finally, in "Vandals," there is another *open secret*: Liza's sexual assault. As she destroys Bea's home, it seems her husband does not know about the reason for the destruction; he believes Bea simply helped Liza pay for college. At the very least, Liza had fictionalized her childhood to her husband. Though some of these stories are considered fringe stories, every story in *Open Secrets* contains some act of fiction making.

This technique of using fiction within fiction, featured prominently in *Open Secrets*, is also seen throughout Alice Munro's work, most notably in "The Progress of Love," in which a young woman has a memory of her parents that never happened, and "Meneseteung," in which a writer explores the life of a poet she never met, through fiction.

In "The Progress of Love" the narrator tells a story about her parents when they were younger. She recalls a scene when her mother inherited a large sum of money from her father, the narrator's grandfather, when he died. The narrator's mother hated her father, so when she received the life-changing sum of money she burned it all in the kitchen stove. Whenever the narrator thinks of this, she thinks of her father sitting with her mother and watching her put the money in the stove and burning it: "my father stood and watched her and he never protested. If anybody tried to stop her he would have protected her. I consider that love" (*Selected Stories* 346).

However, near the end of the story the narrator realizes, "My father did not stand in the kitchen watching my mother feed the money into the flames. It would not appear so. He did not know about it." The narrator, however, held on to her idea of what happened, down to the smallest detail, "I see my father standing by the table in the middle of the room…and there is the box of money on the table. My mother is carefully dropping bills into the fire" (349). Upon facing the truth the narrator still has trouble letting go of the scene she sees in her mind: "How hard it is for me to believe that I made that up. It seems so much the truth that it is the truth; it's what I believe about them" (350). Ultimately this fiction within fiction affirms the power of fiction: the scene in the kitchen may have never actually happened but it tells us something about the narrator's father's personality. From the story we know that he was a sympathetic, resolute and loving man, and we would not understand this as clearly without the story.

In "Meneseteung" the narrator tells the story of the life of an author, Almeda Roth, with many details, including her courtship with a local man, the route she walked home from the local shops, and the story of a day when she made grape jelly. In the end of the story, however, we learn that all of the details have been a product of the narrator's imagination; she admits, "I may have got it all wrong." And concludes, "I don't know if she ever made grape jelly" (497). Even though this story was not the complete truth we know something about Roth; the fiction allows us to

understand women from her time, and what her life was probably like. Though the details could not be entirely accurate we have a richer understanding of the woman than we would have without the narrative.

Chris Bachelder, author of an article concerning literary realism for *The Believer* says it best: “the narrator has become the novelist, building a coherent and dramatic story from the available scraps of evidence” (40). In an example like “Meneseteung” the author is working with little more than newspaper clippings and a brief biography from the back of a book of poetry. Bachelder says that this type of story is, “antirealist…this strand of realism uses realist premise, plot, and technique to suggest the unknowability of the world, the lack of correspondence between narrative and reality.” He continues,

> For several decades now, this anxiety about
> telling stories has been trickling down into our stories…the distrust of authority and knowledge—the anxiety about the reportorial and representational functions of the novel—has created new kinds of stories, new narrative strategies and structures… What the characters and narrators of some contemporary novels come to know is that they don’t know. And can’t. (37)

Munro’s narrators often don’t know what really went on—and can’t possibly know—and are forced to speculate to fill the gaps in their knowledge. They speculate to make their lives make sense, and they speculate to make their lives comfortable. Ultimately, this shows us the role of fiction in all our lives and, as a result, makes a case for the role of literary fiction in society.

As Robert Lecker states, “reading and writing are historically conditioned acts that influence how people define themselves in relation to their community and their present.” We understand our lives through narratives. Munro’s fiction within fiction shows us the relevance of fiction in our lives today—that we need more than facts and details, we need a coherent—if not true—narrative. Jonathan Culler, professor at Cornell University, states, “there is a basic human drive to hear stories” (83). He says, “Stories…are the way we make sense of things” (82). Throughout her work, Munro tells us that we don’t need the truth, we just need something we can believe in that can explain life: the parent’s love in “The Progress of Love,” or the personality of the writer in “Meneseteung.” What we *believe* is often more important and more real that what is actually *real*. Munro’s technique of using fiction within fiction shows this by giving us characters whose lives are completed by the fiction they add to their lives, like the narrator from “The Progress of Love,” or Charlotte from “The Albanian Virgin” or Maureen Stephens from “Open Secrets.” Munro shows us how fiction is important in people’s lives by showing us numerous examples of characters, for the most part normal people like ourselves, whose lives are made more complete, whose lives make more sense, whose lives have more meaning, by speculating on events which have not actually happened.

Munro’s characters use fiction to make their lives comfortable, to give their lives meaning, and to gain a deeper understanding into who they are. Ultimately, Munro’s work, like *Life of Pi* and *So Long, See You Tomorrow,* makes an argument for the importance of fiction and shows us, the role of fiction in our lives. Lecker goes as far as to say that for Munro, “there is no self beyond the story.” Munro’s use of fiction within fiction allows her to explore the complexities of life, and the concept of the *open secret*: a lie, told to one’s self, for comfort and peace of mind. For Alice Munro reality is inexorably linked with fiction; real life is colored by imagination. Her stories show us how normal lives are influenced, enhanced and completed by fiction. Munro’s work shows us that, yes, fiction does matter.

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