



Lives of Girls and Women

Alice Munro

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The only novel from Alice Munro -- award-winning author of *The Love of a Good Woman* -- is an insightful, honest book, "autobiographical in form but not in fact," that chronicles a young girl's growing up in rural Ontario in the 1940s.

Del Jordan lives out at the end of the Flats Road on her father's fox farm, where her most frequent companions are an eccentric bachelor family friend and her rough younger brother. When she begins spending more time in town, she is surrounded by women -- her mother, an agnostic, opinionated woman who sells encyclopedias to local farmers; her mother's boarder, the lusty Fern Dogherty; and her best friend, Naomi, with whom she shares the frustrations and unbridled glee of adolescence.

Through these unwitting mentors and in her own encounters with sex, birth, and death, Del explores the dark and bright sides of womanhood. All along she remains a wise, witty observer and recorder of truths in small-town life. The result is a powerful, moving, and humorous demonstration of Alice Munro's unparalleled awareness of the lives of girls and women.

Lives of Girls and Women Details

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From Reader Review Lives of Girls and Women for online ebook

Laysee says

Lives of Girls and Women: A Novel is the only novel by Canadian author, Alice Munro. It is an impressively clear-eyed portrayal of life in rural Ontario in the 1940s. The social complexities women encounter in that era are revealed with astounding literary and emotional depth. There are lines I read and re-read for their transparency in nailing a subtle emotion or distilling an epiphanic moment, marveling at how elegantly and perceptively Munro gave expression to the unutterable.

The story is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, Del Jordan, and traces her development from childhood to young adulthood. We first see her as an impish girl fishing at the Grenoch swamp with Owen, her little brother, and Uncle Benny, a socially awkward and lonely bachelor friend of the family. It is not an uncommon coming-of-age story of a girl navigating the academic and social demands of school, deciphering the undercurrents in domestic relations, defining her own spiritual beliefs, testing the boundaries of physical intimacy, seeking love, and finding her way in life.

What gives the story its strong flavor of verisimilitude is its nuanced rendering of the invisible forces that shape emotions and drive behavior. (view spoiler)

Read **Lives of Girls and Women: A Novel**. Munro's prose is impeccable; her insights rich and remarkable. This is my introduction to Alice Munro. Oh, why did I wait so long to get acquainted? I definitely want to read her short stories. Among the many literary accolades she has received are the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature for her work as "master of the contemporary short story" and the 2009 Man Booker International Prize for her lifetime body of work.

Cecily says

This is my favourite sort of novel: writing that is acute, astute, and beautiful, sugaring deeper questions and messages that take time to ferment and mature.

"All weekend thought of him stayed in my mind like a circus net spread underneath whatever I had to think about... I was constantly letting go and tumbling into it."

I felt similarly about Del Jordan, though for completely different reasons.

This is my first encounter with Munro, and it's her only novel. It is not far removed from short stories, with Del describing her childhood and adolescence in seven episodic, loosely-themed (death, God, friendships, sex, ambition etc), but chronological chapters, plus a short epilogue in different style. The prose is carefully crafted to seem simple, as are the brilliantly relatable insights and anxieties of an adolescent girl's life.

It's raw and realistic. It's subtly philosophical without ever being pretentious. And it exposes the hopes and fears of different and changing gender expectations, without ever being academic or preachy.

Universal

"Where she was going I did not want to go. But things were progressing for her..."

She had moved as far beyond me in... the real world, as I in all sorts or remote and useless and special knowledge... had moved beyond her."

Most of us don't question our gender, but I expect everyone has pondered aspects of the societal expectations that are based on it, especially in our teen years: whether girls can show cleverness, how to handle relationships with friends and potential partners as bodies change and hormones rage, what ambition girls can have beyond marriage, the meaning of death and life... You know; the little things. It's not an original concept for a novel, but Munro executes it exquisitely.

Del lives in the small Ontario town of Jubilee, during and after WW2. Her father raises silver foxes for fur. Her mother is eccentric (but with "odd little pockets of conventionality"), opinionated, and aspirational: an atheist who sells encyclopaedias. Her younger brother, Owen, is mostly in the margins, as little brothers often are.

It's a time of great change, especially for girls and women, and the most influential characters in her life are predominantly female: mother, aunts, friends, friends' mothers, and teachers.

She reminded me strongly of a cross between a Carson McCullers character and myself (despite differences of geography, decades, and reality). In particular, her tussles with God and religion: wanting to believe and to feel, to belong, yet not quite expecting it, maybe not wholeheartedly wanting it, were hallmarks of my adolescence too.

It's a small town, but it encompasses a range circumstances and beliefs, both between individuals, and within individuals over time: degrees of conformity, educated and not, rural and suburban, comfortable and poor, religious (different denominations) and not, single/chaste and married.

Nature, nurture, or both? Can we escape our past and our presumed destiny? Is Del made by Jubilee and the women in it, or does she make herself?

Tenses

"It was not the individual names that were important, but the whole solid, intricate structure of lives supporting us from the past."

Uncle Craig is devoted to genealogy (the past). Mother is devoted to knowledge (the past in service of the future). Others are devoted to God (present and future/eternal), and to romance, marriage, and sex (mostly in the present, but not necessarily in that order).

Teenagers try to wrestle free of the past, of their parents, as they try to forge their futures, and Del tries out different personae and priorities. I felt the gentle pain of small-town adolescence, where there is no anonymity, no privacy. The ambivalent, confused feelings of a child-adult, present and future, about her changing body, the bodies of others, and the implications and opportunities arising, is brilliantly, realistically, comically, and painfully portrayed.

Christmas baubles on a summer sponge cake

Munro has a knack for dropping an unexpected word in an otherwise ordinary phrase - the most outstanding aspect of this novel for me. Most are not quite oxymorons, but they startle, and make me refocus my mind to see things in a new way. We are all a strange and sometimes uncomfortable mix of characters and emotions, regardless of the masks we wear:

- "A delicate predatory face"

- "Horrible playfulness" of hyperbolic crimes
- "Prosaic as a hiccup" (parents downstairs when children in bed)
- "Heartless applause"
- "Fierce but somehow helpless expressions"
- "Authoritative typing"
- "Nimble malice that danced under their courtesies"
- "Putting her rouge on at the dark mirror"
- "Relatives... looking benevolent, but voluntarily apart"
- "My mother's voice... unwillingly deferential."
- "Their artificiality bloomed naturally" (women in the presence of a man)
- "I felt my anonymity like a decoration"
- "Nosing along, almost silently, like an impudent fish" (a big American car)
- "Pure-hearted indifference" (brother Owen's attitude to God)
- "His grinning pessimism, his mournful satisfied predictions"
- "A foreboding, yet oddly permissive, tone of voice" (about sex)
- "Windy yellow evening" (Spring)
- "The landscape was postcoital, distant and meaningless."
- "A worried jovial face"
- "His face contained... fierceness and sweetness"
- "His dark, amiable but secretive face"

The final chapter is another unexpected contrast. It's almost from another book, another writer. It's shorter than the others, and Del reflects on the motives and meaning of fictionalising real life, with a slight magical-realist aspect, infused with the wisdom of one who was presumed a fool.

Other Quotes

- "The deep, deep, layered clutter and dirt of the place swallowed light."
- "The Irish gift for rampaging mockery, embroidered with deference."
- "Knowledge. A chilly commodity that most people, grown up, can agree to do without."
- Soldiers' uniforms "had an aura of anonymous brutality like the smell of burning."
- "A dome of light, a bubble radiant and indisputable... He would flower suddenly as a bank of day lilies." How Del hopes God might reveal himself.
- "Rituals which in other circumstances might have seemed wholly artificial, had here [church] a kind of last-ditch dignity."
- "I was happy in the library. Walls of printed pages, evidence of so many created worlds."
- "We knew too much about each other to ever stop being friends."
- "It's the girl who is responsible because our sex organs are on the inside and theirs are on the outside and we can control our urges better" - a friend quoting her mother, who is a nurse!
- Del's first sight of a penis: "It looked blunt and stupid, compared, say, to fingers and toes... It did not seem frightening... Raw and blunt, ugly-colored as a wound, it looked to me vulnerable, playful and naive... It did not seem to have anything to do with me."

- “She sent those [school] operettas up like bubbles, shaped with quivering, exhausting effort, then almost casually set free, to fade and fade but hold trapped forever our transformed childish selves.”
- Meeting the parents: “Each of us was suspected of carrying the seeds of contamination... atheism... [and] sexual preoccupation.”
- “It was that stage of transition, bridge between what was possible, known and normal behaviour, and the magical, bestial act, that I could not imagine.”
- “No foul shimmer of corruption... the skin of everyday appearances stretched over such shamelessness” - a prostitute is disappointingly ordinary.
- “I knew I was altered by his presence.”
- “Love is not for the undepilated.”
- “I would try to recreate the exact texture of his skin, touching my own, try to remember accurately the varying texture of his fingers.”
- “Sex seemed to me all surrender - not the woman’s to the man but the person’s to the body, a act of pure faith, freedom in humility.”
- “We were close enough to childhood to believe in the absolute seriousness and finality of some fights.”

Postscript

After reading the book and writing this review, I pondered McCullers some more. I had assumed there might not be enough of an age gap for much influence, but then I found this (undated) interview here, including this question and answer:

What writers have most influenced you and who do you like to read?

"When I was young it was Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, James Agee. Then Updike, Cheever, Joyce Carol Oates, Peter Taylor, and especially and forever, William Maxwell. Also William Trevor, Edna O'Brien, Richard Ford. These I would say are influences. There are dozens of others I just like to read. My latest discovery is a Dutch writer, Cees Nooteboom."

Candi says

"What was a normal life? It was the life of the girls in the creamery office, it was showers, linen and pots and pans and silverware, that complicated feminine order; then, turning it over, it was the life of the Gay-la Dance Hall, driving drunk at night along the black roads, listening to men's jokes, putting up with and warily fighting with men and getting hold of them, getting hold – one side of that life could not exist without the other, and by undertaking and getting used to them both a girl was putting herself on the road to marriage. There was no other way. And I was not going to be able to do it."

Del Jordan, growing up in rural Ontario, Canada during the 1940s and 1950s, relates in her own voice what it is like to be a young, bright and inquisitive girl struggling against the current of expectations. The characterizations of every single person in this novel are simply brilliant and fully authentic. I am confident that any reader could recognize and relate to at least one character between these pages. Del's mother, who

sells encyclopedias door-to-door and *"could not bear drunkenness, no, and she could not bear sexual looseness, dirty language, haphazard lives, contented ignorance,"* is often a source of embarrassment to Del. Del's father is not a constant presence in her life as he chooses to remain on the outskirts of town while Del and her mother live in town. Living at the end of Flats Road on his fox farm, *"he felt comfortable here, while with men from town, with any man who wore a shirt and tie to work, he could not help being wary, a little proud and apprehensive of insult, with that delicate, special readiness to scent pretension that is some country people's talent."* Del spends part of her summer with her unmarried aunts. I think we all have an Aunt Elspeth or Auntie Grace in our lives – joking yet judgmental, flourishing their outworn views of a woman's place in the world. *"Their house had a chiming clock, which delicately marked the quarter hours; also watered ferns, African violets, crocheted runners, fringed blinds, and over everything the clean, reproachful smell of wax and lemons."*

At the heart of this book are Del and her relationships with these individuals and others – her best friend Naomi, her teachers, her mother's boarder Fern Dogherty, her brainy classmate Jerry, and even God. Her life is molded not so much by the views of these people around her as by her own opposition to those views. I loved her search for faith and an understanding of the various branches of religion within her hometown – with an exquisite sense of yearning she carries out this quest by going from church to church. Her journey is not preachy but down-to-earth and often quite funny. *"On wet windy Sundays, snowy Sundays, sore-throat Sundays, I came and sat in the United Church full of this unspeakable hope; that God would display Himself, to me at least, like a dome of light, a bubble radiant and indisputable above the modern pews; that He would flower suddenly as a bank of day lilies below the organ pipes. I felt I must rigidly contain this hope; to reveal it, in fervor of tone or word or gesture, would have been inappropriate as farting."* Del also explores the mystifying world of relationships and sexuality, she experiments with alcohol, and continues to aspire towards a life different from the one expected of a girl living in this place of strict boundaries and a time of conformity.

I found myself wholly captivated by the superb writing of Alice Munro. She drew me into Del's life; I recognized and empathized with many of Del's feelings as a young girl. Her curiosity and confusion are a distant yet piercing memory. I admired her strength and her resilience. This is not a young adult novel by any means, despite the age of the protagonist. I highly recommend this book to those that may identify with the struggle of a young person trying to find his or her own place in the world and those that appreciate an excellent literary piece of work. This author is a new favorite and I can't wait to immerse myself in more of her writing!

Caterina says

Alice Munro: Subversive Autobiographer of Everywoman

People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing, and unfathomable – deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum.

In my review of *Runaway* I wrote *Alice Munro has such uncanny insight into people's interior lives and subtle interpersonal dynamics, it's almost indecent.* This, my third by Munro, seemed at first different, gentler. But no. Just, maybe, stealthier. Like one of those wasps that lays its eggs inside another creature. Although the details of my life and personality are not (I think) very much like those of Munro's protagonists, by touching some deep commonalities, Munro somehow makes her characters' experiences *happen to me* — right here, right now. I'm reading along calmly, and suddenly it hits, full intensity.

My initial discomfort gives way to a sense of wonder and amazement at the nearness to life of these

unvarnished experiences of girls and women during a time — in history and in a girl's individual life — when limitation is just opening out to possibility. Set in the post-World War II years, published in 1971, this book is still fresh.

Munro has described this book as “autobiographical in form but not in fact.” It feels autobiographical and intimate. Although described as Munro's only novel, it is really a collection of sequential short stories, each of which could stand alone, all narrated in the first person by the same character, a girl growing up in small-town Ontario, Canada. This structure makes the book tighter and more consistently engaging than a novel. Del Jordan navigates friendships, family, encounters with the world of boys and men, flirtations with some of the town's religious offerings — and discovers a desire to live uncircumscribed by limitations placed on girls. She considers her mother's word of warning:

... I felt that it was not so different from all the other advice handed out to women, to girls, advice that assumed being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same.

Seemingly, thankfully, the time has come when this can happen. Yet always complex, Munro (without explicitly pointing out the irony) later brings Del into contact with a young man who *has* ruined his life — not by sex, as a girl might have, but by violence — and is now seeking his own second chance. Yet can unwanted experience so easily be shucked off? And in another, chilling story, we glimpse the consequences of experience and responsibility shucked off in an extreme way.

Though at least two of the seven stories have deeply tragic elements, most are lightened and embellished with subtle humor. Del's mother, an earnest, self-styled missionary of secular enlightenment who tries to sell the local farming families encyclopedias, amusingly clashes with Del's father's independent yet passive-aggressive maiden farmer sisters. Munro seems to celebrate both -- and Del's personality takes from both.

My mother went along straight lines. Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace wove in and out around her . . . They had the Irish gift for rampaging mockery embroidered with deference.

If I had to compare Munro's writing to another's, it would be Eudora Welty's — and maybe Flannery O'Connor's — both of whom she claimed as inspirations. Like Welty, she has a social subtlety, an emotional intelligence that is beyond my ken. Like both, she's a conjurer of place, the suffocations and sensualities of small town and rural environment, and her turns of phrase are fresh and original without showing off. But Munro is modern. More than any other writer I've encountered she conjures the realities and the inner movements of sexual attraction and relationships between women and men -- from the women's perspective. While Del's best friend Naomi joins the town's cohort of working women — living independently and taking fiancés who become lovers while they prepare for traditional marriage, Del navigates a sometimes hilarious boy-girl friendship with Jerry Storey, the town's only intellectual boy in her age range. But their semi-chaste semi-sexual overtures, motivated to some degree by "scientific curiosity," are overthrown by the magnetic pull of pure attraction between Del and an earnest young country man named Garnet French.

Nothing that could be said by us would bring us together; words were our enemies. What we knew about each other was only going to be confused by them. This was the knowledge that is spoken of as “only sex,” or “physical attraction.” I was surprised, when I thought about it—am still surprised—at the light, even disparaging tone that is taken as if this was something that could be found easily, every day. . . . seeing the world dense and uncomplicated but appallingly unsecretive; the world I saw with Garnet was something not far from what I thought animals must see, the world without names.

These scenes, these chapters are stunning. And on reflection, it seems to me that this was the way that many

people once found their husband or wife, in societies where individual choice rather than parental arrangement holds sway. (And probably still is.) I had to wonder whether Del's mismatched parents had come together this way, as they managed the post-passion years of their marriage by living essentially separate lives.

Munro brought out in the open all sorts of unspoken things that happen to girls and women. In one especially uncomfortable story from the perspective of 2018, the young teen Del goes along with and rebelliously encourages a seduction by one of her teachers -- one of those teachers about whom my classmates and I would whisper the word "pervert" in morbid fascination.

He had a fine professional voice, welcome as dark chocolate flowing in and out of the organ music on the Sunday afternoon program In Memoriam, sponsored by a local funeral parlor.

Munro was writing this intimate, close-to-life autobiographical fiction two generations before contemporary Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard (whose work I like very much) — but unlike Knausgaard — at least in this book — Munro does not truck in guilt or shame. I wondered about this — it doesn't need to be neurotic like Knausgaard's, but something human seems missing when it doesn't come up at all. On the other hand, Munro nails those times when we are just not sorry. Del, and maybe Munro, consciously rebelled against society's subtle and unsubtle shaming of girls and women. This attitude sharpens the edge of these well-honed stories.

The book ends with an epilogue where the mature Del looks back on her journey learning to craft fiction. At first, she turns the lives of her fellow townspeople into amusingly grotesque and macabre tales — until, perhaps, she realizes, that their ordinary, linoleum-paved lives are far deeper and more fascinating.

Joe Valdez says

My introduction to Alice Munro is *Lives of Girls and Women* and what a sensory feast this is. Published in 1971, it could qualify as a short story collection for some, a novel for others; the seven titled chapters capable of being read out of order and standing alone as short stories, but all narrated by the same character, teenager Del Jordan as she grows up in the (fictional) southern Ontario town of Jubilee in the 1940s. Under the supervision of her mother Ada, Del determines whether her ideal is a life spent in service of a husband, or dictated by her own choices somewhere else. Of the many approaches to this story, Munro's is marvelously detailed, with a warm touch and unmistakable humanity.

From The Flats Road: The Flats Road was not part of town but it was not part of the country either. The curve of the river, and the Grenoch Swamp, cut it off from the rest of the township, to which it nominally belonged. There were no real farms. There were Uncle Benny's and Potters' places, fifteen and twenty acres, Uncle Benny's going back to bush. The Potter boys raised sheep. We had nine acres and raised foxes. Most people had one or two acres and a bit of livestock, usually a cow and chickens and sometimes something more bizarre that would not be found on an ordinary farm. The Potter boys owned a family of goats, which they turned loose to graze along the road. Sandy Stevenson, a bachelor, kept a little gray donkey, like the illustration to a Bible story, pasturing in the stony corner of a field. My father's enterprise was not out of the way here.

In Heirs of the Living Body: Heart attack. It sounded like an explosion, like fireworks going off, shooting sticks of light in all directions, shooting a little ball of light--that was Uncle Craig's heart, or his soul--high into the air, where it tumbled and went out. Did he jump up, throw his arms out, yell? How long did it take, did his eyes close, did he know what was happening? My mother's usual positiveness seemed clouded over; my cold appetite for details irritated her. I followed her around the house, scowling, persistent, repeating my

questions. I wanted to know. There is no protection, unless it is in knowing. I wanted death pinned down and isolated behind a wall of particular facts and circumstances, not floating around loose, ignored but powerful, waiting to get in anywhere.

From Princess Ida: The war was still on then. Farmers were making money at last, making it out of pigs or sugar beets or corn. Possibly they did not mean to spend it on encyclopedias. They had their minds set on refrigerators, cars. But these things were not to be had, and in the meantime there was my mother, gamely lugging her case of books, gaining entry to their kitchens, their cold funeral-smelling front rooms, cautiously but optimistically opening fire on behalf of Knowledge. A chilly commodity that most people, grown up, can agree to do without. But nobody will deny that it is a fine thing for children. My mother was banking on that.

In Age of Faith: "Christ died for our sins," said my mother, jumping up. In the hall mirror she peered aggressively at her own dim face. "Well, well, well. Redeemed by the blood. That is a lovely notion. You might as well take the Aztecs cutting out live hearts because they thought the sun wouldn't rise and set if they didn't. Christianity is no better. What do you think of a God who asks for blood? Blood, blood, blood. Listen to their hymns, that's all they're ever about. What about a God who isn't satisfied until he has got somebody hanging on a cross for six hours, nine hours, whatever it was? If I was God I wouldn't be so bloodthirsty. Ordinary people wouldn't be so bloodthirsty. I don't count Hitler. At one time maybe they would be but not now. Do you know what I'm saying, do you know what I'm leading up to?"

"No," I said honestly.

From Changes and Ceremonies: After this, we talked all the time about these two boys. We called them F.A.'s. It stood for Fatal Attraction.

"There goes your F.A. Try not to faint."

"Why don't you get your F.A. some Noxema for his boils, ugh?"

"I think your F.A. was looking at you but it's hard to tell with his cross-eyes."

We developed a code system of raised eyebrows, fingers fluttered on the chest, mouthed words such as Pang, oh, Pang (for when we stood near them on stage). Fury, double Fury (for when Dale McLaughlin talked to Alma Cody and snapped his fingers against her neck) and Rapture (for when he tickled Naomi under the arm and said, "Out of my way, butterball!")

In Lives of Girls and Women: My mother spoke to me in her grave, hopeful, lecturing voice.

"There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals. He shall hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel force, a little closer than his dog, a little dearer than his horse. Tennyson wrote that. It's true. Was true. You will want to have children, though."

That was how much she knew me.

"But I hope you will--use your brains. Use your brains. Don't be distracted. Once you make that mistake, of being--distracted, over a man, your life will never be your own. You will get the burden, a woman always does."

"There is birth control nowadays," I reminded her, and she looked at me startled, though it was herself who had publicly embarrassed our family, writing to the Jubilee Herald-Advance that "prophylactic devices

should be distributed to all women on public relief in Wawanash County, to help them prevent any further increase in their families." Boys at school had yelled at me, "Hey, when is your momma giving out the proplastic devices?"

From *Baptizing*: *This was the first summer my mother and I had stayed in Jubilee, instead of going out on the Flats Road. My mother said she was not equal to it and anyway they were happy as they were, my father and Owen and Uncle Benny. Sometimes I walked out to see them. They drank beer at the kitchen table and cleaned eggs with steel wool. The fox-farming business was finished, because the price of pelts had fallen so low after the war. The foxes were gone, the pens were pulled down, my father was switching over to poultry. I sat and tried to clean eggs too. Owen had half a bottle of beer. When I asked for some my father said, "No, your mother wouldn't like it." Uncle Benny said, "No good ever come of any girl that drunk beer."*

That was what I had heard Garnet say, the same words.

Two qualities of *Lives of Girls and Women* that are noticeable are Alice Munro's taste and her potent descriptive talent. As a storyteller first and foremost, she rejects screeds and dodges political activism. Her stories are calibrated toward Del's self-discovery, where bitterness is smartly balanced against sweetness and sourness. Along with these sensory explorations, Munro has the abilities of a missionary when it comes to recording a Canadian town in the mid-twentieth century. She has John Steinbeck's gift of watching human beings gripped in sloth, envy, lust and other sins and bringing them to life with a splash of wit. It's glorious work.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

The GR members who have shelved this as "coming of age" knew more about this novel than did I and it is a perfect description. I don't usually like such stories - are they usually about boys? This is the story of a girl, about 10 or so when the story opens. In high school, she is nerdy and awkward. She longs to know about boys, to know what it is to be admired, to know about sex.

Del's mother, for the times especially (by now post-war), is an enlightened woman.

*"There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals. *He shall hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel force, a little closer than his dog, a little dearer than his horse.* Tennyson wrote that. It's true. *Was true.* You will want to have children, though."*

Alice Munro has such powers of observation. In this, she gives Del those powers, and we see the world around her. She tells us of her maiden great aunts, of her mother, of a teacher, of her best friend. Stories in the first person can certainly have unreliable narrators, and I had occasional misgivings. The novel is primarily a characterization of Del, and sometimes we don't know - and can't tell - the truth about ourselves. Perhaps not all of Del's observations are accurate, but for the most part they felt true.

This is said to be "autobiographical in form but not in fact." This, her only novel, helps us see the well from which she finds her stories. It's hard not to like Alice Munro - another 5-stars.

Jeanette says

Superlative. And her only novel? As much as I loved her short stories, and I've read about 1/2, this novel is BETTER. Magnificent. Do not read this review if you want no spoilers. The book is marvelous for Del in girlhood but it is BETTER for her last years of high school. And it is too central to more than a glancing review here not to climb the pinnacles of this 1971 written work. Most seemed to have ignored some of its crux. Core crux.

It's more than just a coming of age story, it's the story of the girl toward full womanhood in that societal changing period 1940-1960. Majority consistently in all forms of record categorizes the 1960's and the Boomer generation as the pivots of vast change, especially sexual and job changes for women. Vast disruption of traditional roles and also in behaviors and attitudes to former "village" family structures. But the true North on any magnet was, IMHO, the "eyes" caused by WWII and its decade of aftermath. Automation in the home with appliances, economic reversals after the war when the women "lost" their jobs to returning men- and media lens to urban / "other" place possibilities. And birth control. Not access (travel difficulty or physical placement aspects) to birth control as people assume in this century. It was difficult to even approach by mental decisiveness. It took some getting, usually travel of course, too. But birth control as approachable for women's POSSIBILITY if you were bold enough and ventured within your own value mindset to recognize your own need for it. Before then, that was a connotation (self determined in majority of the women's populations) that the road to a woman controlling the birth control was "too brazen" of a "think" to put upon yourself by yourself. Many, no majority, of all women declined to put themselves into that sexual, physical animal based category because of their home, family, society "eyes" they held that taught them to believe that they were NOT. You had to "pre-think" sex! Only terrible and very bad women did that. I myself knew many women who could never do that then, not even IN the 1960's or 1970's.

It was different definitions for nearly all parts of your own young life too. The people who are young now and most of the books written in the last 20 or 25 years! They never "get" that aspect of self-identity each woman held then and it was strongly learned and central to their own entire mindset of how the world worked. Del has it here. Even in "The Group" (Mary McCarthy book that rocked this scenario in movie too to vast audience) deciding upon getting and venturing to actual do it (get a diaphragm) was self daunting. HUGELY. Like calling yourself a bad girl and leaving much of your own altruism and warmheartedness behind. Loose, slutty. Here Del didn't proceed to any dependable protections that she herself controlled. No one who reviews this book seems to get the eventual slant. Del's "giving up" her scholarship push/ drive, maximum ambitions and melting to nothing other than Garnet- it wasn't just timing. It was a preconditioned surety to happen because of her formation years. Thousands of judgments and reactions of those around here. With far more being in that mix than just her own parents. Her Jubilee, it was dozens of adults. And after Garnet and her ability to refuse that force of control (his/masculine centered) over her spiritual beliefs and other goals she "should" ignore in order to be with him? Still, at the end- and I read the last 2 pages 3 times- it was predetermined that she'd end up with some dominance and also with any commonality, motherhood too. Even with the will, there is next to nothing in way. Higher education or not.

Excellent , excellent book. It's head and shoulders above her short stories, IMHO. It's autobiographical, of course. Unselfish too in the ultimate sharing and non-apologies.

In her youth, where she was and with her parents' people being so unlike each other. That was typical too then. Especially in the Northern parts of the continent where "new" people had arrived because of the 1930's dire situations. And many DID return to the country from larger towns that were busy during the war years and then "not so much" after. And the father's extended family- their "attitude" about self-promotion, ambition, or "bragging". That was IMMENSE then, my Dad's family, the absolute same. And trying to learn another language or going "beyond" your place for a hobby or some other "different" training? That was not only vilified for girls, for boys too. My siblings and I were never "allowed" because that would make us unAmerican, or give us an accent. My parents and grandparents were horrified if I tried to speak German or Italian when they did. Very much like Del's dad's family. You were deemed pretentious if you even dared.

The first half of the book was a 5 star, but the second half was a 6. Women still want the role that their heart and body most connotes and often logic or avocation/job or best choice for self expression are put second to it. And that does not happen as much with men. We ARE different.

My era was very close to this one, in the first half I could have BEEN Del. Just in a different place, with relatives in 3 flats on different floors. But still the Aunts and Uncles of daily intersect and just as individual to each other. And lots of hours of life lived "outside" and with crossings to view adults and others in their real work. What a LESSON! And the disdainful factors of those adults too. To slackers or other adult behaviors which didn't "fit". Or to ones who didn't "act" as their gender or age or faith predisposed that they SHOULD. It had consequence for those that did not. Quick and mostly obvious consequence.

Look how Owen ended up- living with his Dad and Uncle Benny in that kind of shambles!

Great record of exactly how things were then. Her quest for religious ritual I also felt was beyond outstanding. Rarely, rarely visited in literature any longer. And it happens to many in college years too. NOW it does! I saw seekers continually on my job. Looking for structure and TRADITION! Tradition in form and ceremony, undervalued and a precious gift that is overlooked in this century. Anger, depression, despair- much less of those then within far more dire circumstances- because some "same" could be counted upon as visibly existing.

She's 86 now. This was her best work. Absolutely.

Dolors says

Straddling two genres, "Lives of Girls and Women" features eight seemingly disjointed snapshots of daily life in Jubilee, a rural town in Ontario, seen through the eyes of Del Jordan, a feisty girl on the threshold of adolescence, that build on the common theme of women swimming against the backdraught of societal indoctrination towards rightful emancipation.

Munro's prose is spare but not scanty. She skips major episodes in Del's life in favor of extended descriptions of the details that really count, details that flood the unadorned first-person narration with fierce authenticity. Del's psyche is exposed, devoid of the glorified tint of nostalgia. It is also painstakingly shaped by the external occurrences in a community ruled by the tight grip of a suffocating religious dogma that shears the futures of those who dare to challenge its traditional heritage. Employing the intricate map of Christian sects; Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and Union Church that coexist in town as a menacing background combined with a good share of disabled characters and some doses of mordant humor -highly reminiscent of *Flannery O'Connor's* style-, Munro delineates Del's personal growth on the choices she makes along the road to adulthood.

Ignoring her unconventional mother, an agnostic amidst an ocean of fervent believers, Del experiments with faith as she does with sexuality or with premature first love, with rigorous self-determination, always remaining the mistress of her actions. She needs to discover her wishes, construct her ambitions on her own terms and so she dismisses preconceived ideas, even from her best friend Naomi who aspires to secure a good marriage or from her modern mother who covets a college education for her. Her mistakes, disappointments and frustrations teach her the most constructive lessons and set the founding pillars of her path to mental and physical independence.

These thematic lines have been addressed, exploited and scrutinized before, but, in my opinion, what distinguishes Munro from other writers is her ability to construct a multi-dimensional world –domestic, personal and equally subversive– that moves dexterously from introspective narration, minimalistic dialogue

and objective narration to sketch flesh and bone characters whose inner struggles make the reading painful at times for the pangs of recognition it provokes in the reader. Munro is unapologetic and so are her characters, which become afire with life through her economical yet incisive prose.

Also, on this occasion, the reader is not only rewarded by the deft unfolding pathos of a classical *bildungsroman*, but also by the processes that take place in the making of an artist. Del Jordan discovers that her literary vocation will transform her words into powerful weapons that will provide a voice to those silenced by decades of sustained social injustice.

My first Munro, but certainly not my last.

Núria says

Se ve que 'La vida de las mujeres' es la única novela que ha escrito Alice Munro. La escribió a los cuarenta años y tiene mucho de autobiográfico. Siempre podrá salir algún criticón y decir que no es una novela sino una serie de relatos con los mismos personajes, pero, por más que los capítulos estén claramente diferenciados, tienen un hilo conductor claro que es el de una niña que se hace mayor en un pueblo rural de Canadá. Tengo que confesar que los libros sobre niñas que crecen son una de mis grandes debilidades. Hay muchos libros sobre niños que se hacen mayores y estos siempre me acaban cansando, pero no hay tantos sobre niñas y, quizás sea por esto, pero estos casi siempre me acaban enamorando.

Parece que para Alice Munro hacerse mayor es ir acumulando decepciones. Aún así, 'La vida de las mujeres' no es un libro triste. Quizás sea melancólico pero no triste. Munro describe a la perfección el ambiente de un pueblo pequeño, encerrado en sí mismo y sin prácticamente oportunidades. Y aún así, nunca hay amargura. En la novela, la protagonista y narradora, Del Jordan, poco a poco, empieza a intuir que quiere algo más que la vida que llevan las mujeres de su alrededor y también que su pueblo no le podrá ofrecer todo lo que ella desea. A pesar de todo, sabe que ella también es parte de ese pueblo, nunca reniega de él y, en el fondo, lo describe con amor y dulzura.

Hay toda una serie de personajes secundarios, la mayoría mujeres, que llevan una vida más o menos gris y mediocre, pero Munro nunca se ensaña con ellas, todo lo contrario; las describe con afecto, resaltando sus cualidades pero sin no olvidar nunca sus defectos. Alice Munro es muy buena; sabe ser dulce pero sin dejar nunca de ser ecuánime y, sobre todo, sincera. Es arriesgado y quizás incluso ridículo decir que una obra de ficción es "sincera", pero para mí 'La vida de las mujeres' lo es; me es tan fácil entrar en el mundo que describe e identificarme con lo que le pasa a la protagonista.

Si esta novela me parece sincera es porque no idealiza la infancia, sino que es capaz de retratarla con la mezquindad que conlleva. Por supuesto que habla del descubrimiento del sexo, pero lo hace casi con crudeza. Además, la protagonista se va alejando de todas las personas que le rodean: sus tías, su madre, su mejor amiga, su mejor amigo, su primer amante. Es como si hacerse mayor fuera también alejarse de los que hemos querido, como si para construirnos como personas tuviésemos que cortar lo que nos mantiene unidos a los seres que queremos, pero que a la vez nos limitan como personas. Puede que haya un punto de crueldad en todo esto, pero no deja de ser real. Y probablemente el mayor mérito de Alice Munro sea el de ser dulce y cruel al mismo tiempo.

Carmo says

3.5*

As dores de crescimento de uma rapariga numa pequena cidade do Canadá, mas que bem podia ser em qualquer outra cidade, em qualquer outra parte do mundo, o factor geográfico pouca relevância tem para o caso.

Numa narrativa direta e rica, a autora expõe sem papas na língua, o percurso de descoberta e afirmação pessoal de uma jovem semelhante a qualquer uma de nós.

Num universo muito feminino e exposta às personalidades das mulheres que a rodeiam, também ela vai trilhar o seu caminho de descoberta inspirando-se ou questionando as diversas influências.

Uma história que não tem nada de complexo ou original e onde as personagens não encarnam atitudes heróicas. São mulheres aprisionadas num ambiente rural, sem grandes sonhos ou ambições, contentando-se em repetir o que se espera delas geração após geração, e que não vai muito além de casar e parir filhos. Esta simplicidade é contudo descrita com grande humanidade, e é aí que se encontra a mestria da autora; em estabelecer proximidade com o leitor, quer por empatia quer por identificação.

Apesar de não ser grande fã do conceito de escrita feminina ou masculina, neste caso, acho que é mesmo um livro de uma mulher, para outras mulheres.

Não significa que escape à perspicácia masculina, mas creio que as mulheres o irão acolher em maior sintonia.

Cynthia Paschen says

Where to start. Munro had me hooked in the first paragraph: "We spent days along the Wawanash River, helping Uncle Benny fish...."

He was not our uncle, or anybody's."

"He was not our uncle, or anybody's." That line is so short and so brilliant--can't you just picture Uncle Benny in your head right now? Munro does not mock the characters in this small-town story the way Flannery O'Connor might.

Indeed Del Jordan, our young narrator, has never really left the town of Jubilee and a part of her never will. She loves the town and its people. Though she is smarter than most of Jubilee's residents, she does not resent their lack of motivation or intellect.

Much of "Lives of Girls and Women" concerns disappointment. Early on, Del is disappointed to learn more about sex, childbirth and female trouble. Listen to her description of Aunt Moira (page 40)

"...it seemed to me the gloom spreading out from Aunt Moira had a gynecological odor, like that of the fuzzy, rubberized bandages on her legs. She was a woman I would recognize now as a likely sufferer from varicose veins, hemorrhoids, a dropped womb, cysted ovaries, inflammations, discharges, lumps and stones in various places, one of those heavy, cautiously moving, wrecked survivors of the female life, with stories to tell...Even getting up or sitting down, or moving in the rocker, Aunt Moira gave off rumbles of complaint, involuntary and eloquent as noises of digestion or wind.

Del, and most all of us, have an Aunt Moira in our lives. What is terrifying is to be young like Del and wonder, will I be just like Aunt Moira some day?

Garima says

Thousands of questions which rise at different stages of life need not find answers but they give birth to a colorful diorama which has its share of black and white shades too. I have little to say here but for the past few days I was thinking about this book and the lives it depicted. Lives of Girls, lives of Women, lives which are similar and different than ours. Alice Munro doesn't glorify anything and at the same time she brings out the essence of reality in a glorious way. She writes with a sublime understanding of a born writer which in turn reveals the human emotions in the best and simple way which subtly testifies the power of literature.

People's lives, in Jubilee as elsewhere, were dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum.

She acquaint us with her quotidian town with regular folks which gradually makes several train of thoughts run through our protagonist's mind that carry her from a diffident childhood to curious adolescence and finally to the dynamic years of youth where the confrontation with numerous choices, magnanimous ambitions and prophetic quotes helps in delineating a life which was all set to make a deep impact with her words.

There is still time for me to get the Nobel Prize...(But)You know I'm kidding. We could not get away from the Jubilee belief that there are great, supernatural dangers attached to boasting, or having high hopes of yourself. Yet what really drew and kept us together were these hopes, both denied and admitted, both ridiculed and respected in each other.

I smiled amidst tears and rejoiced at finding a book which gave me much more than I'm being able to express.

Highly recommended, of course.

cristina c says

Un racconto di formazione - autobiografico nella forma ma non nella sostanza come precisa la Munro stessa, anche se le analogie con la sua storia personale sono molte - scandito attraverso le tappe dell'infanzia e adolescenza.

La vita in famiglia, la scuola, i misticismi della preadolescente, la prima vera amica, la scoperta del sesso, le ambizioni e le delusioni prima di entrare nella età adulta e l'avvio verso la passione della scrittura.

È una delle prime prove della Munro, il primo e unico romanzo pubblicato nel 1971 quando aveva all'attivo solo una raccolta di racconti e quando il Nobel era ancora inimmaginabile - sarebbe arrivato più di 40 anni e molti racconti dopo.

Ma niente tentennamenti o incertezze qui, il talento e la padronanza della scrittura ci sono già tutti; quella sua apparente semplicità la sua "prosa piana che nasconde segreti" come la definisce la sua eccellente traduttrice di sempre Susanna Basso, e che riesce a definire con esattezza ogni sfumatura dei sentimenti e delle relazioni.

Un certo grado di reticenza che attiva l'immaginazione e la deduzione del lettore facendogli scoprire gradualmente personaggi e situazioni. La capacità di scovare angoli memorabili nelle pieghe di esistenze a prima vista opache.

E poi la memoria; il raccontare di Munro è sempre un ricordare facendo collegamenti col passato e tendendo immaginari fili fra avvenimenti lontani nel tempo e anche questo romanzo con la sua forma più o meno fedele di biografia è un viaggiare nel tempo.

Eppure lei stessa dichiara tutto il suo scetticismo sulla affidabilità della memoria sostenendo che una delle occupazioni più interessanti della vita è guardare come la memoria ci inganna quando cerchiamo di raccontare la nostra storia e come noi afferriamo solo dei pezzi di quella " misteriosa entità che è la verità ". Ma forse è proprio da questa possibilità di infinite versioni che un autore trae nutrimento e noi lettori con lui; a proposito del confronto fra i ricordi di persone che hanno condiviso la stessa esperienza, Munro afferma: " più sconcertanti sono le differenze fra le diverse versioni , più lo scrittore che è in me sente una strana euforia".

Alice Munro ha dichiarato che non scriverà più, è anziana e vuole dedicare il tempo che le rimane alle persone care; questo era l'ultimo suo scritto ancora inedito in Italia. Uno scrittore non ci lascia mai del tutto e ci si può perdere per mesi fra i suoi numerosi racconti, eppure so che mi mancherà.

Bonnie says

I love everything Alice Munro writes, but this one has to be one of my favourites.

kate says

this was the first book i've read by alice munro, so obviously i've never read her short stories. i enjoyed it to an extent, but at times found it plodding and slow. there were certain things in her descriptions of del's feelings that i could really relate to. all in all i'd probably give it 3.5 stars, but i'm not really all that interested in reading more of her work after reading this. totally mixed feelings.

Donna says

I am in Ontario for 2 weeks, but not in the part Alice Munro set this book. However, I cannot get CBC today. It sounds out of range which is impossible. I might as well be in Munro country where people don't ever want to appear to be showing off. And this is a tough mission. A lot of things count as showing off in Ontario. I'm from Montreal which means I'm not from Ontario. That's showing off. Though for some reason, being from Toronto would be even worse.

Alice Munro never shows off. She never showed off all the way to a Nobel Prize for Literature. She no longer lives in Ontario and that's probably a good thing. I don't know where the Nobel Prize is on the Ontario showing off scale. I'm sure she found out.

This is a wonderful book. It really is about girls and women. No candy coating. No last minute wisdom about the situation saves it.

Nobody gets pregnant. Nobody dies. But the end of the story is still unendurable.

notgettingenough says

A goodreads statistic. Exactly one of my friends on that site has made a comment about this book - and she hasn't read it yet.

Alice Munro is a Nobel Prize winner.

She is no Chekhov.

Despite that, I think her books will stand the test of time, but they are not easy things to review. There is nothing to pillory. There is no technique to make her temporarily modern. I don't spot anything in her style that will prematurely date her, in the way I feel Welty's does to hers. And she has that sameness about her, in style, in ambition, in content, in method, which means to review one book is to judge them all.

Nonetheless, one could argue this book, *Lives of Girls and Women*, does - just - the teensiest bit break the mould. Which is because although one could quibble about calling it Munro's 'novel', as there is little to distinguish it from some of her collections of stories - a chapter title instead of a story title, to be sure - it does have a cohesiveness that elevates it. One can imagine that Munro worked so very hard on this that she said never again. However much of a slog short stories might be, this must have been on another level again.

This absolutely captures the loneliness of being a rebellious independent thinking youngster in an unsympathetic environment. Specifically one growing up in poverty in the Canadian rural backblocks. Specifically one assumes a good deal of Alice Munro to be found in it. But the awkward bright girl trying to survive the best she can resonates with anybody, I imagine, who hasn't been Naomi, her some-time friend who abandons her for the allure of baby showers and the other trappings enforced (if by themselves) on females.

Rest here:

[https://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpre...](https://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpress...)

Josu Grilli says

Increíble novela sobre el papel de la mujer en una época complicada, sobre la sexualidad, los tabúes y el querer ir a contracorriente.

Lo más destacable de *La vida de las mujeres* es sin duda la magistral manera en la que Alice Munro expresa sus ideas. Toda la historia está increíblemente bien narrada, plasmando perfectamente situaciones que consiguen conectar con el lector, y sobre todo, convirtiendo la vida de la protagonista en algo íntimo a la par que público.

No esperaba que la historia ahondase en temas de un modo tan explícito, pero es más que interesante ver cómo florece la sexualidad de Del, y de cómo tiene que luchar contra lo que la sociedad le dicta. El mensaje que la novela transmite es un mensaje de fuerza, de lucha y sobre todo, de crítica al patriarcado.

De verdad, me ha gustado **muchísimo**. Se tocan tantos temas y de un modo tan magistral que me es imposible hablar de la novela en unas pocas líneas. Ha sido una lectura increíble, me ha ayudado a descubrir una autora que sé que me va a gustar en otras novelas (su estilo es impecable, en serio), y por supuesto me ha

dejado con un buen sabor de boca. No todos los días se leen novelas tan buenas.

Mary says

“There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals. *He shall hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel force, a little closer than his dog, a little dearer than his horse.* Tennyson wrote that. It’s true. *Was true.* You will want to have children, though.”
That’s how much she knew me.

Hugh says

I was a little surprised by the claim on the blurb of this book that this is Munro's only novel, if only because to me its structure is very similar to that of the only other Munro book I have read, *The Beggar Maid*. In both cases a story is told in episodes each of which could work as a short story or novella, but the whole adds up to something more like a novel.

Once again Munro writes beautifully and perceptively about fairly humdrum subjects, this time the childhood and rites of passage of a girl, Del, growing up in a small town in rural Ontario. A pleasure to read.
