

LETTER FROM BOSTON

Alice Munro and her short stories

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THIS year's Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Alice Munro, a Canadian who writes almost exclusively short stories. Referred to as "our Chekhov" by writer Cynthia Ozick, she has 13 books of short stories to her credit, touching upon the life and cultural milieu of her native rural southwestern Ontario. I rejoiced when I heard of the award from the news radio station I listen to when I am driving to work very early in the morning, and gave out a big shout out. My excitement came about for many reasons. I was thrilled about the choice that the Nobel Committee had made, even though I was sorry that some of my other favorites in the short list did not make it, for three reasons: she is a Canadian, a woman, and a short story writer, all of which are remarkable for the outlier she is in the Pantheon of Nobel Laureates in her category. I also felt elated because soon I heard Alice Munro will write again, and temporarily put on hold her plan to retire.

I don't remember exactly when I first came across Alice Munro and her short stories; maybe in the anthology my wife was assigned when she was in college twenty years ago, maybe later when I began reading *New Yorker* magazine to which she is a regular contributor, or when I first started exploring this genre of writing. But I definitely knew she was one of the finest practitioners of the art of story-telling, and why the Nobel Committee considered Munro "master of the contemporary short story". I was drawn to her artistry with words, her narrative style, and deep understanding of human relationships. Of the 14 books she has written, 13 are collections of short stories, many of which are based on life in rural Canada. She paints with sensitivity and finesse the plight of women, often bumping against the confines of their life, according to Lynn Neary of National Public Radio



Anton Chekhov



Alice Munro

(NPR). "In a really short space of time, she can provide a fully realized story that provides remarkable insight into human beings, their shortcomings, their complexities, their loves, their lives."

In "The Bear Came Over the Mountain", she paints the touching story of a man who, in spite of his wayward ways, was going to extraordinary lengths to please his wife, who is losing all her memories as she is ravaged by fast-onset dementia. Her other short stories often defy the cookie-cutter approach to short stories, where there is a well-defined punch line or "anti-climax" as my literature professor in Dhaka College used to characterize it. In her recent short story "Axis", Munro takes us through the journey of two college friends and the different paths of life they have pursued. At first there appears to be no punch line, but after you sit down to reflect on the plot and connect the dots, the "moral of the story" emerges. And sometimes there are more than one interpretations of the finale in her stories.

While it is tempting to identify one or two books that represent Alice Munro's forty-five year career as an author, this would be an exercise in futility since some of her trademark empathy for the characters, portrayal of human responses to diverse situations, and the ability to take readers by the hand, are evident in all her narratives. But for the beginner, I would recommend *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *Runaway*.

In recent years Munro has spoken of the possibility of retirement. She turned 82 this year, and in July had indicated that she would likely give up writing: "Not that I didn't love writing, but I think you do get to a stage where you sort of think about your life in a different way. And perhaps, when you're my age, you don't wish to be alone as much as a writer has to be." A Canadian Broadcasting Company reporter asked her, in an early morning interview, if her Nobel win altered that decision. "No, I don't think so," Munro said. "I am getting rather old." Later in the day, however, in an interview with NobelPrize.org's Adam Smith, Munro indicated a possible shift: "This may change my mind," she said.

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI LIVES AND WORKS IN BOSTON

REPORT

Muhammad Zafar Iqbal

His art, his science

NAHID KHAN

MELBOURNE'S literature loving group, Bangla Sahitya Sansad (BSS), was very fortunate to have Muhammad Zafar Iqbal with his wife Yasmeen Hoque as invitee writer for this year. All in all they only stayed in Melbourne for four days and we made the most of it.

Somehow the smiles on their faces remained at all times, never ceased to shine no matter how sleep-deprived they were. Zafar Iqbal talked tirelessly on any topic we demanded with equal enthusiasm as if a diligent teacher were answering questions of all sorts. Yasmeen was more so as a real entertainer, a story (non-fiction) teller with such charisma that it never felt that this was our first encounter with the couple. In fact, it felt as if we are friends from some ancient time, had just lost touch for a while, who can carry on in an 'adda' where we had left off in some timeless era.

He is a scientist by profession, a computer science educator and as much as he would like to be known as a science academic, his other part, that of a literary being, very humbly displays the arts in him. With humble dignity Zafar Iqbal admits children love him because he writes science fiction for them. He is reluctant to admit that there are reasons for adults to be fond of him.

For most of his writing career Muhammed Zafar Iqbal has focused on science. But to give expression to his discoveries he has taken refuge in the arts, the vast precinct of arts, namely literature. Science needs proof and the arts need imagination. Since he possesses both, the next step of creativity only comes very easily and naturally to him. Added to all that virtues is the great desire that made him today's MZI. He is children's, youngsters', students' and many adults' most beloved writer. There are different reasons why people like to read his books. For some it's the thrill of scientific exploration, for some it could be the power of imagination, for others the fantastic creation of stories, or the realisation of the true meaning of the great Liberation War or for some the simple expression of subtle characters. But no matter what, it is a daunting job to contest the other electronic gadget, the rich entertainment world of the 21st century. That job is done very eloquently in MZI's books that show up among the crowds of fans, wherever he goes, for an apparently priceless autograph. Yet MZI will sign his full longish name with much care for each of the hundreds of fans in one sitting. That is the person separate from the famous writer's entity.

Zafar Iqbal mentioned in his speech that there was nothing grey between truth and untruth, just as there was nothing grey between striving and not striving for a trial of the war criminals. Having experienced the atrocities of 1971 firsthand, there is no place left in any corner of his heart to be soft and with his scientific intuitiveness he first saw the fundamental flaw in the Pakistani flag --- that the star cannot be inside the crescent. The clear message he sends out



with zeal --- that he belongs to only one sect that solemnly stands by the scruples of the independence war. One great thing he has ever done is that he has sown the seeds of history into children's hearts. Stories like *amar bandhu rashed*, *rasha*, *muktijuddher itihash* and others are oxygen that will ignite liberation aspirations in future generations. The great war, the sacrifices, the achievements will never be forgotten, nor should be forgotten. Disseminating this patriotism has never been easy, especially among children. Zafar Iqbal won those little hearts by writing in their language, charmed them with his science stories, enrooting trust in their beliefs, so that they are made aware of the history of this country of ours with passion and with determination to safeguard the motherland in every possible way.

Writing must be an art in order to connect with children. Children can see war in their video games, even take part in the fighting. Usually these things excite them, however temporarily. But competing with that visual caricature in the entertainment world, writing to impress young minds that will have a long lasting impact, indeed form their mindsets in relation to history is a hard task by any measure. But that is the art of Zafar Iqbal's writing. He didn't use or invent the most ridiculous characters in a wizard school and made millions. He used simple facts of science and small events to make up the stories and they are hooked. Thanks to Zafar Iqbal, we didn't lose our children, our young adults for that matter, to those evil electronic giants. He said, 'I have to write for them as they put an embargo on me, never to write for adults', and then he added with the nicest smile, 'otherwise these kids will eat me up raw!' They do have that hold on their beloved writer, they regularly write to him, acknowledging how nice a book was. Even how bad a book was that, 'what did you write, feels like vomiting'. The good writer takes all that criticism rather affectionately, thinking, 'That's how I learn what to write, how to write'.

No matter how big a scientist he is, whenever he talks the audience enjoys every bit of it because of the simplistic nature of his narration. And that is the art of his conversation. He has science in his head but art in his heart. His speech amused a hall full of people for three continuous hours and continued even more with taking photos, autographs, casual talk until we started packing up, folding away the chairs, taking down the decorations. Ever since the program was held on 14 September, everyone I met said something unique about him, but they all agreed on how lucky they were that they could come to the program, hear him talk.

As all good things have to end at one stage, sadly, our very short lived festival ended. They had to go back to bigger and better responsibilities. Rather helplessly, I said, 'It feels so bad that you are going', to which the writer replied, 'I am not going, we will all be in our places'. Phew, that was a relief!

NAHID KHAN IS AN ACADEMIC AND TEACHES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

NON-FICTION

Holy Phantasm

SHAHID ALAM

I was walking down a road in a district in northern Bangladesh one late afternoon in early autumn this year. Very few people were about, just two persons immediately ahead of me, and we all strolled along at a leisurely pace. The road was approximately three meters wide, and the other side was also cheated of sporting a deserted appearance by a handful of pedestrians. At one point, a group of four hove into view from that side, and as they came almost parallel to me, I looked across at them. Three were having too much of an animated conversation among themselves to bother looking away from each other, but one, lagging just a foot behind them, was looking in my direction. The others, and indeed, those who were about, were in trousers or pajamas, but he was in a white dhoti and yellowish punjabi. That dhoti arrested my attention. Hardly anyone of the Hindu faith wears one in public these days, for whatever reason(s). Yet, even three or so decades back, it was quite a common sight in this country, and even more so before that.

While the thought about the dhoti held my initial attention, it was soon replaced by the gaze of that man who had the appearance of an emblematic Bengali schoolteacher. That look was intense, or so I imagined, from behind black-rimmed glasses. But something else was bothering me, and as the group passed me by, I realized what it was. "I've seen that face before," flashed across my mind. I did, just yesterday afternoon, only that it was not quite like that. I quickly turned around to look at the receding group. There were just three. I was not hallucinating. There were the three, still engaged in animated conversation, but the dhoti-clad schoolmaster-type was not with them. I looked back towards my direction, and only saw three or four people ambling along. No schoolteacher-type there. Yet, hardly fifteen to twenty seconds had elapsed between the time I saw him gazing in my direction and my turning around to look at the group going away from me. He seems to have vanished into the clichéd thin air! I stopped and thought for a few moments. Then I believed I had an answer, and it had its antecedent in my visit the previous afternoon to the ashram.

The ashram. I had heard about it, and requested a local friend to take me there. Only a short walking distance from my friend's place, we reached the place in early afternoon. The monastery was meant primarily for Hindu sadhus and devotees, but visitors professing other faiths were not barred from entering the compound. I had already heard a few grim stories in connection with the place, which made me want to visit it. As soon as I entered through the large outer gate, I was immediately struck by the silence hanging over and around the place, of an air of peace and tranquility surrounding it and, then, once I had taken in the surroundings, of its cleanliness, and of the garden a little bit away to my left, although half of it was hidden from view by the outer building. That structure enveloped the ashram proper, the oldest part of the complex, the place where the sadhus held their rituals. One of these, as I heard from my friend, was to have a sadhu buried up to his neck in a deep hole dug in the floor of the ashram and then cover the head for a short while with a large earthen bowl. The domed construction was always lifted before the sadhu suffocated to death. One can only imagine the tremendous willpower that the sadhu had to generate in order to come out of such a terrifying ordeal, and to consequently develop the faculty of having control of the mind over matter.

I saw the place, surrounded by iron bars, from the outside, and noted the fresh branches of multi-coloured leaves and flowers, undoubtedly gathered from the well-cared-for large garden full of indigenous plants and trees. But I took in all of that later, after having a singular experience at the large building that anyone entering the inner compound would first face. The structure was relatively new with a long wide built-up verandah jutting out from the two-story building surrounded by large trees. The verandah was covered by mosaic tiles, and was obviously meticulously maintained as the highly polished surface eloquently testified. The first person we encountered was a man cutting the grass of the adjoining spacious lawn. After a brief greeting we went up to the verandah, which appeared to be some 30 meters in length and 10 in width, and stood near, but away from, it. I saw the statue placed on the right side of the verandah as I stood facing it, but still at some distance away from me. I was staring at it until I was distracted by a dark brown robe-clad sadhu coming out from the left corner side (from my viewpoint) of the two-story building, and walking briskly a few paces until he came parallel to the statue. He then turned towards it, and prostrated himself before what turned out to be the statue's full profile, appeared to say some words (almost certainly, prayers), stood up, and walked towards us.

He was youngish, a bit plump, with a shaven head that was already sprouting a few days' growth of hair. He had patterns of sandalwood paste marking his face, his robe had saffron-coloured borders, and he greeted us before going on his way. I turned back to look at the statue. It looked so real --- in the sense of a living man sitting on a

chair, with hands clasped together in a gesture of supplication. It was the figure of an elderly man, who was dressed up in the same coloured dress as the young sadhu who had just prostrated himself towards it. The hands were covered in what appeared to be white stockings. The figure was spare, and matched the angular thinness of the face. That face! It looked like that of a living man! It was bony, dark brown in colour, with a head of dark hair neatly parted on one side and carefully combed. Or, so it appeared from a distance. The hair appeared real, and the entire figure not the creation of some skilled sculptor.

The eyes were framed by a pair of black-rimmed glasses, and gave the figure a studious look, more of a schoolteacher than a sadhu. The most arresting feature of that whole body was the area around the eyes and cheeks. They were covered with wrinkles, those which appear and gain prominence with old age. They were so lifelike that I blurted out to my friend: "This is no statue. I think it's a man's mummified figure!"

"No, it is a wooden sculpture of the senior-most sadhu who was killed by the Pakistan army in 1971."

Maybe, but I was not at all convinced that it was a wooden sculpture. Not even Michelangelo could have carved out the details as fine and as well as those on the face, I thought. How I wished I could have gone right up to it, examined it minutely, and even touched it. None of these wishes could be fulfilled, I held back from looking for the young sadhu and telling him my own feelings, and left the premises.

The visit stayed on my mind, until it was temporarily banished by a call from another friend to have afternoon tea led me to hit the road where I was subjected to an intense scrutiny by a man who was supposed to be a wood carving in a tranquil ashram. That evening I related the entire incident to a group of elderly relatives of my friend, not forgetting to mention that I strongly believed that the figure in the ashram was actually the skeleton of the man fitted with his own skin and appropriately bolstered inside with rubber fillings. The black-rimmed glasses were added to portray the man as he was in life.

"It certainly is no wooden sculpture," I defiantly blurted out.

"It isn't," an elderly lady quietly asserted.

"It's a mummy," a man of advanced years enlightened. I was elated. And got the story from that collective group.

The figure was the head sadhu of the ashram. He held a Master's degree and used to read a lot. He was reputed to be a profound scholar on various subjects. In conjunction with a serious demeanour and black-rimmed glasses, and a spare frame, that would explain his stereotypical appearance to be that of a pedant, I thought. The ashram thrived under his guidance, with numerous sadhus making full use of its facilities in their quest to find inner peace and harmony. Then 1971 visited the ashram, and the old order was given a rude awakening. The Pakistan army found its way inside the premises, and, in a cruel twist of irony, subjected the sadhus to the same rigorous test of being buried up to their necks and having large earthen bowls placed over their heads until the time came to remove them. Only this time, the army kept the bowls on, until all the sadhus died of suffocation. Including the scholarly schoolteacher-looking bespectacled head sadhu. Now I could understand the fresh leafy branches and flowers being placed on the hole from which protruded the sadhus' necks.

The dead bodies were all dumped in a nearby well, to be dug up after Bangladesh's liberation. Almost all had turned into skeletons, while a very small number were a few days away from getting there. And, then, there was one. Miraculously, the body of the head sadhu had survived intact, with not a hint of decomposition. Later on, his body was treated by other sadhus, and essentially turned into a mummy, which is usually kept inside the two-story building. It is brought out occasionally to the place where I saw him. I guess it was my lucky day! Body preservation is as old as recorded history. The Egyptian mummies are well known. We also know about the preserved bodies of Mao Zedong, Vladimir Lenin, and Joseph Stalin, achieved courtesy of modern science.

However, natural mummification is also known. Preserved bodies of dead sailors in the polar regions, the celebrated Ice Man of the Alps, preserved bodies found in pit bogs, bodies of fallen warriors in desert sands, and the body of St. Francis Xavier, who died in China over four hundred and fifty years back and is still in a state of fine preservation in Goa, India, are some examples of the phenomenon of natural preservation. Explanations abound regarding the reasons for their preservation, from the purely scientific to the purely spiritual. I am not going to go into any of that. I only know that the elderly sadhu has been preserved in death for some to worship, and others to see and marvel. What I have not been able to fathom is why his shade chose to manifest itself to me that afternoon. I stayed for a few more days at my friend's place, but did not see him again.

SHAHID ALAM IS AN ACTOR AND EDUCATIONIST

POETRY

In remembrance

--- Ainon N.

I sat by you head bowed in silent prayer  
Here and now is mine, not to share  
Others can wait to set you at liberty  
Before I let go, this moment belongs to me  
I hold your hand for warmth  
I touch your feet for blessings  
I feel your face for assurance  
I hold you long to my heart's content  
... You will always be my luminary

Far away I see the morning sky's hue  
I spread my wings to memories due  
With unconditional love our fellowship began  
To trust the first step you held my hand  
The few words I said you marvelled at all  
The breeze now trembles with prayer call

You led me to the path of courage  
Taught me the spirits of truth  
Said grieve when you must  
But to live life, to healing do entrust  
You led me to the road of wisdom  
Offered me the understanding of creation  
Taught me to read the words of quiet way

Bestowed me strength to make tomorrow a better day

As with time I came to being  
I offered my child for you to hold  
I saw your tears of joy unfold  
And thus from you to me the journey began  
I took the notes of life you sang  
And braided a string of beautiful faith  
Learned to smile when I heard young laughter  
Listened to the silence of my child's pain  
Caring, gently I wiped the tears with precious love  
Your teachings I pass to my children for another day  
To be bold to truth that will come their way

I look at your being with a smile  
Between you and me this moment is mine  
I seal our end with a kiss on your forehead  
Embracing you I feel your heart  
The beat of life is never again to start  
Thus I engrave your face in my memory  
In meditation I pray sleep in eternal peace  
The path for you may have come to an end  
But your life's scroll remains a living presence...