

IT'S ALL ABOUT HAPPINESS

AUTHOR: ALICE MUNRO

REVIEWED BY DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I hope by now my readers in Bangladesh and around the globe have become familiar with the name of the beloved and admired Canadian short story writer Alice Munro, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. Thanks to my mother's younger sister, Prof. Salma Choudhury of Eden College, I became familiar with short stories, particularly those written by Guy De Maupassant during my high school years. Short stories have since then been on my reading list, and while I missed out on some good works of fiction during the days of my graduate school and struggles in my early career, subsequently I was fortunate to have had the privilege of coming across world-class short story writers courtesy of The New Yorker magazine. Alice Munro was one of them and whenever I see one of her books on the library shelf, I can't wait to get my hands on them.

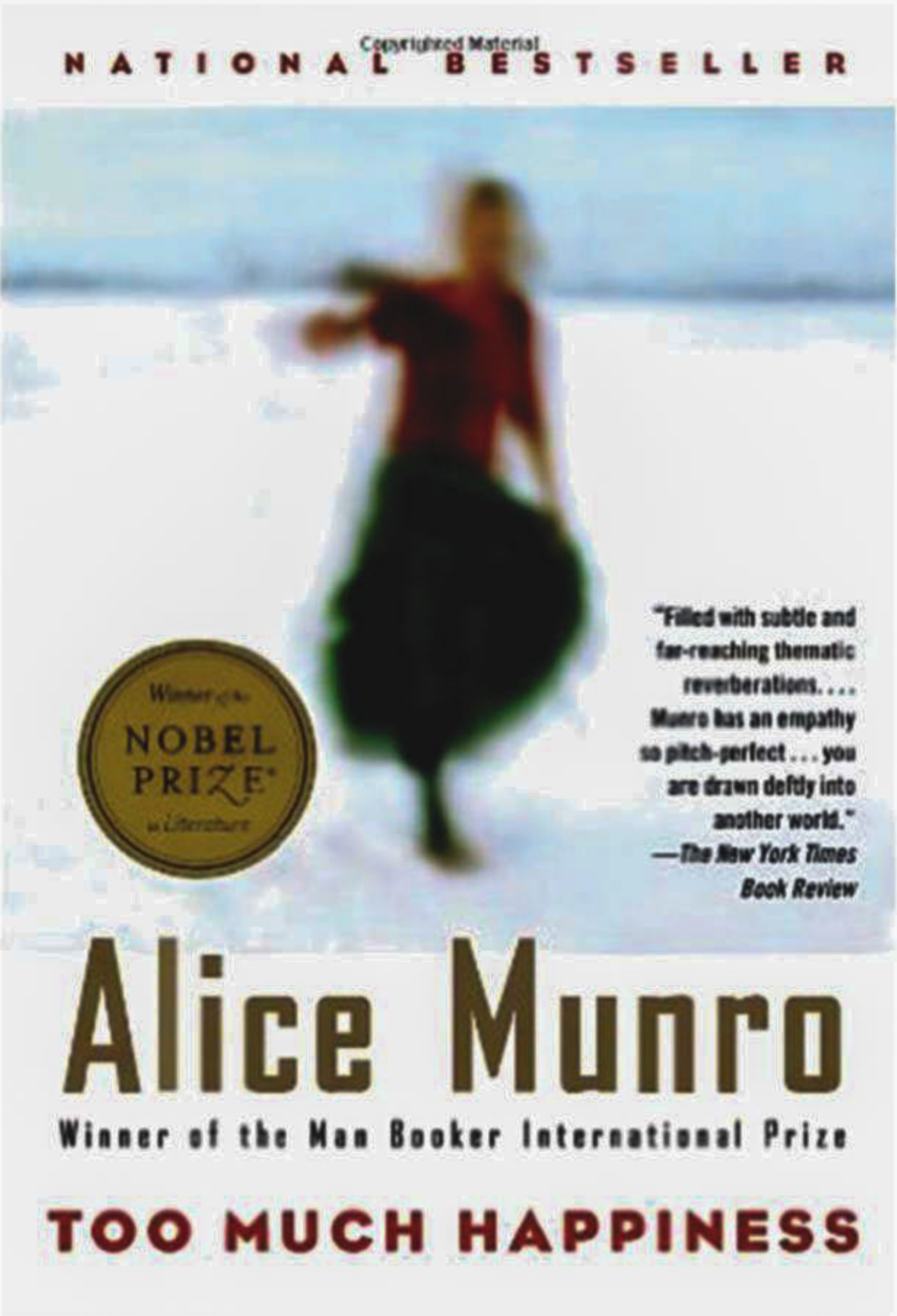
"Too Much Happiness" is a collection of ten short stories and the title comes from the last story based on the life and work of Russian novelist and mathematician Sophia Kovalevsky. The title story is a departure from Munro's style but the other nine are based on fictional characters, mostly women, who struggle with love, family, husbands, careers, and their environment. Included in this collection are two of the rare stories she's written from a male point of view, "Wood," and "Face".

I cannot do justice to the wide array of emotions and complexity of feelings that Munro incorporates in her narratives in this short essay but for the benefit of the beginner, let me start

learning that Alice Munro was awarded the Nobel, observed that a "very Munro-ish element is the formal freedom of the story, which compacts a lot of life into a short space, and moves backwards and forwards over a great deal of terrain." Her style and her work is "described as having revolutionized the architecture of short stories" and the accolades keep on piling on for her work, the individual stories, and her life-long focus on women's lives and minds. In her stories there is no glamorizing, just a melodic rendition of ordinary but exemplary people, their struggles, love and pain. She was aptly enthroned as "One of the grandees of English-language short fiction" (Saturday Guardian) and the awards she has received include the 2009 Man Booker International Prize, Canada's Governor General's Literary Award, England's WH Smith Literary Award, and United States' National Book Critics Circle Award.

While I've read some of these stories before, Alice Munro's short stories are never too old, and the second reading is sometimes as much of a joy, if not a more thrilling experience, than the first. The stories in this collection cover some unusual themes including children strangled by a father ("Dimensions"), two girls conspiring to drown another ("Child's Play"), young women seduced to sit naked on a chair by an older man ("Wenlock Edge"), and the tantalizing possibility that "a dead husband and a poisoned mistress could have been avoided if the main characters in the stories had chosen and acted differently" ("Free Radicals").

"Fiction" is a touching account of two couples, Jon and Joyce on one



their mother had walked out on them". Suddenly the bus stops, the passengers get down, and find a young man lifeless on the ground, seriously wounded due to an accident. The woman nurses the victim and he starts to breathe again.

In the next two stories, "Deep Holes" and "Free Radicals" the readers becomes aware of Munro's ability to bring in references to geology and physics to enhance the meaning of her stories. In "Deep Holes", we are introduced to Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie, a German scientific journal for geologists, dolostone, and caves (or Deep-Holes) created by water seeping through dolostone and shale.

In "Free Radicals", Nita encounters with a man who shows up at her door. She learns that he is attempting to run away after killing his family. Nita in turn also confides how she had killed her husband's girlfriend. How is the plot related to the title? "A free radical is an atom or group of atoms that has an unpaired electron and is therefore, unstable and highly reactive. An atom's chemical behavior is determined by the number of electrons in its outermost shell. When the outermost shell is full, the atom is stable and tends not to engage in chemical reactions."

The title story is a case study on Munro's skills in casting a biography in a fictional mold. It relates to the amazing life of a late-19th century Russian female mathematician (and novelist) Sophia Kovalevsky, which in turn sent me looking for more information about her. It's easy to see why Munro indicates that Kovalevsky "immediately caught my attention, and I began to read everything about her I could find." Munro is courageous to attempt putting Kovalevsky's work and journey in the format of a short story, as she did, since the latter's life could easily take up the length of a novel.

The trademark of a great writer like Munro is that her words never get old. While I have read many of the short stories of this collection, and immediately recognized many of the titles, and as I kept on reading these many of the characters, names, and plots seemed familiar, I can't say I felt bored or had the urge to skip a line or two as I had done earlier. Alice Munro's literary technique and narrative style is so captivating that for me, both as a writer as well as a longtime Alice Munro devotee, I clung to every word in the stories. I also realized how much of the love, creativity, and fascinating twists and turns in each story I missed in my first reading.

The reviewer lives and works in Boston and recently published a collection of short stories, entitled "A Chance Encounter".

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with a statement from the master herself. In the introduction to her 1996 volume of "Selected Stories," Munro reveals an element of her style. "I don't always, or even usually, read stories from beginning to end. I start anywhere and proceed in either direction," she said. Harvard University's James Wood, while writing in The New Yorker on

hand, and Matt and Joyce on the other. The story soon pans in, and weaves a yarn surrounding the life of Matt and Joyce in Vancouver. And, with the lucidity of spring water, Munro narrates Joyce's love for the daughter of a woman who steals her husband. The daughter Christie O' Dell, whom Joyce taught how to play the violin, emerges

in Vancouver as a writer.

"Wood" is the story of a craftsman and his wife, who is bed-ridden afflicted with unknown diseases. At the beginning of the short story the reader learns that Roy, a hardworking upholsterer and refinisher of furniture, is taking care of his wife, Lea, and working hard to make ends meet. He decides to branch out into wood-cutting to make some extra money. Lea, it appears has come down with some rare illness and has stopped driving or even watching television, and is leading a vegetative life. Then, one day the tide turns. Roy goes to the forest to chop trees, but is injured and helpless. Lea appears from nowhere (almost out of heaven) to the area of the forest where he was struggling to get back to seek care.

"Face" is the story told by a man who was born with a birthmark covering the entire side of his face. He became friends with a girl, Nancy, who is their neighbor. One day, during play,

Nancy attempts to befriend him by painting her face red. He reacted to this act in a negative fashion, and considers Nancy's paint an insult, a leering joke. His mother banished Nancy from his life, but she was not entirely gone. The ending of the story is so magical and breath-taking that if there is one story that my readers should read, I recommend this one.

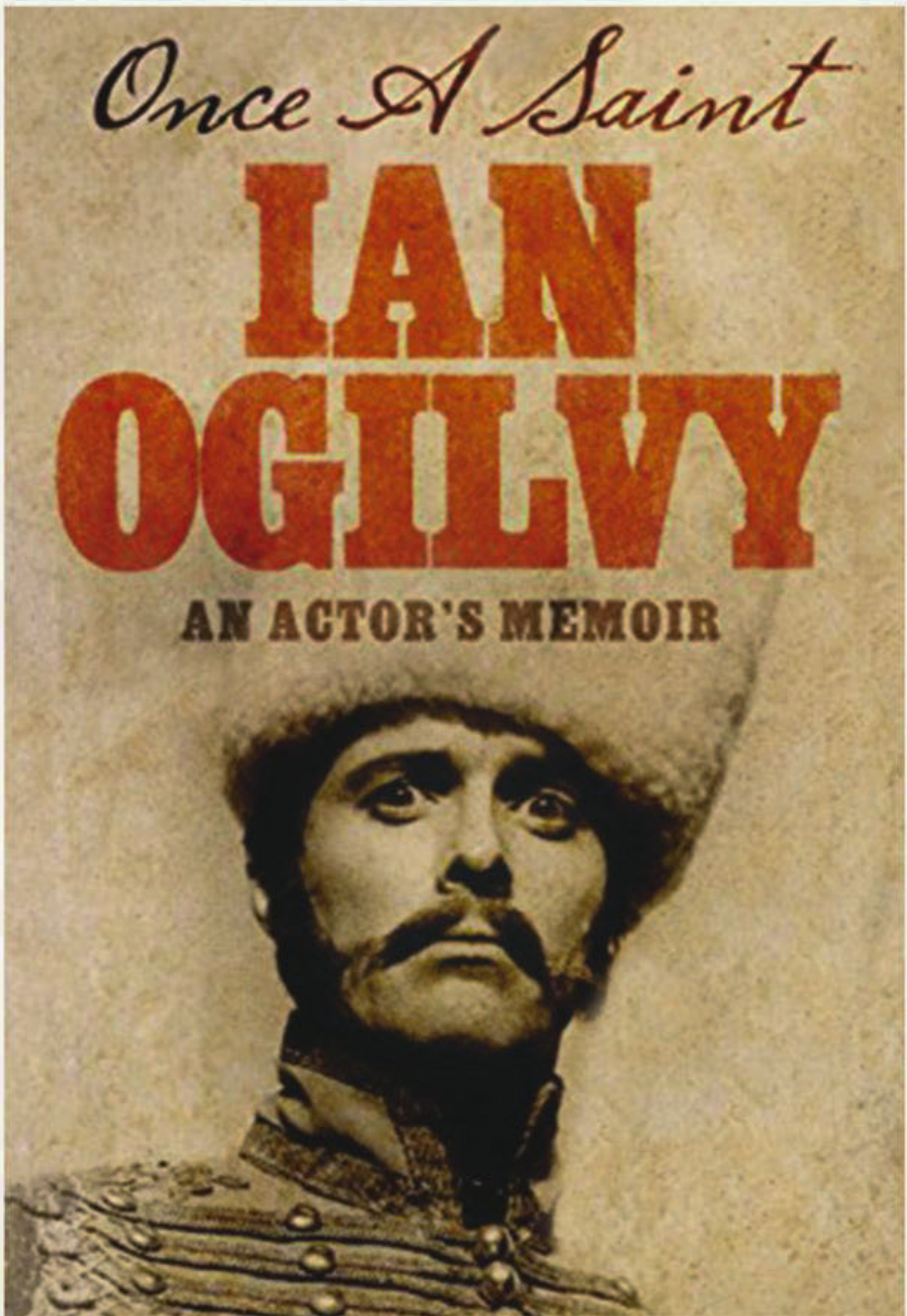
"Dimensions" is one of the saddest but Munro ends it in a positive note. A young woman goes to visit her husband, the father of her three dead children in jail. It's a long bus ride and she reflects on how she found herself in the current situation. Her husband, in a fit of rage, and to punish her, kills the children while she was out visiting a friend after a minor quarrel with him. He tries, in many ways, to put the guilt on her for storming out of the house in the midst of his verbal abuse, with utterances like "you brought it all on yourself", and "I did it to save them the misery. The misery of knowing that

Sometimes the sinner, always a saint!

AUTHOR: IAN OGILVY

REVIEWED BY TOWHEED FEROZE

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It takes one TV series to make a cult hero out of someone; well, if you doubt it then ask Ian Ogilvy. Ian who? Right, for many reading this, the name is totally unknown and, honestly, I do not blame you. But if you call yourself a cult TV fanatic and happened to be an avid TV watcher in the late 70's, like this reviewer, then, this book is like a manna from heaven.

For us, the quintessential late 70's TV adventure came in this format: tweed jacket wearing agile man with a steely resolve, driving a white Jaguar XJS and delivering that famous line, perhaps not with a raised eyebrow but with his own inimitable style: Simon Templar.

No, this is not Roger Moore though as a cult TV aficionado, I agree that if it hadn't been for good old Roger, Templar would just have remained an obscure late 1920's gentleman adventurer locked within the pages of crime fiction.

Nope, Saint has transgressed boundaries and those who acted as Simon Templar found that life after playing the suave slightly infamous hero would never ever be the same.

Ogilvy understands this and aptly calls his memoir, Once a Saint!

But the book is not just about being the Saint; in fact it's about the life of a man whose entry into adulthood was marked by an adventure which would only be right for someone who would eventually go on to play the slightly unorthodox Simon Templar.

As a young lad, growing up in an upper middle class British home, Ogilvy's father was instrumental in introducing the young man to the pleasures of the skin. It was of course a very elegant affair as the actor describes.

One fine evening, his dad took him to an upmarket club and introduced Ian to a lovely lady. But apart from the father son mischief regarding growing

up, what strikes the most is the very liberal social outlook in late 50's England when mixing with people from racially mixed backgrounds was frowned upon.

Ogilvy describes the first woman, possibly from an African or West Indian background, as perfect with the complexion of 'Starbuck Latte'. The rise of Ogilvy as an actor is

riveting as we find the variety of roles he played before getting the ultimate part of the Saint.

In fact, some of his other films, The Sorcerers, Witch-finder General are also much appreciated among recherche film connoisseurs as lost gems from the sixties.

If Ogilvy to you means only one character then find these two movies, available free on YouTube.

Interestingly, when the offer for Saint came to him as a new series to be called Return of the Saint, he took it without any negotiation, as a result of which, in the end, he only got about sixty to seventy thousand Pounds for the entire twenty five episodes, twenty four hundred for each episode.

But Ian has no regrets because as Saint he got as close to, as one could get, working for the small screen to experiencing the champagne, honey, exotic adventures typical of 007.

After all, Templar was none other than Bond for the TV screen.

Who knows what would have happened if someone in the late sixties decided to go into full length Saint films, supported by high budgets.

In the memoir we find that on one occasion, Roger Moore dropped over at the set, had a whole night drinking session leaving all others completely zonked the following morning while he (Moore) moved about cheerfully as if he had a long night's quiet sleep.

The character that would define this actor may not have made him rich, but according to Ian, it gave him the chance to live the actor's Shangri La, with shooting taking place in spectacular locations.

Lest we forget, just like 007, Templar also had a new love interest in each episode, meaning Ian was in dream land.

A compelling read, the book should

have included more chapters on intriguing experiences during the filming of Return of the Saint.

After all, no matter what Ian Ogilvy did later in life, for millions across the world, he remains the notorious Simon Templar.

The ending of the book is especially thrilling with a touch of royalty thrown in. But for us, Simon Templar fans, it's only appropriate that the queen should meet not just one who has set the template of the British hero on the big screen but also the other who added

...the book is not just about being the Saint; in fact it's about the life of a man whose entry into adulthood was marked by an adventure which would only be right for

that touch of English class on TV, topped with a delicious vice.

By the way, form the day when Ian's father took him to the swanky night club till a long period into adult life, women of all types managed to entice a saint, some for short others for longer periods.

But despite being a married man now, somehow I feel, Ian Ogilvy can only pretend to be tamed.....after all, if you have been Simon Templar, you will be a thrill seeker till God summons back his Saint....

The reviewer is an avid reader and occasional reviewer.