Preface

A work of extensive scholarship ... is a labour of love. It is conceived in a spirit of passionate admiration and interest, propelled by a profound intellectual and emotional engagement ... “Love” is not too strong a word to describe the impulse that inspires a scholar to devote many years of research to the work ... of an author.

JoAnn McCaig, *Reading In*, xvi

Love, in the sense that McCaig gives it, is a form of identification with the “soul” of the text, or in other words, with its particular way of confronting the abyss at the heart of being. This book was born of two such loves, first for the stories of Alice Munro, and second for the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan. My conviction, in bringing them into dialogue, is that they approach the enigmas of human existence in different but mutually illuminating ways.

Alice Munro’s stories entered my world in the late 1970s when I discovered her early collections; with the publication of each subsequent volume, I experienced anew the shock and pleasure of recognition that accompanies the reading of Munro. Her writing teases out the intricate, half-acknowledged complexities and emotional contradictions of human existence in such a way that they are unapologetically laid bare, to be acknowledged in their truth value, and as likely to be tinged with shame as jubilation.

Jacques Lacan’s work belongs to another sphere entirely. I was introduced to his work by way of the well-known articles from his collected *Ecrits*; this was in the 1990s when I was working on a master’s dissertation on Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*. Lacan’s writing and teaching revisits Freud’s work in the light of twentieth-century theoretical developments. My interest in Lacan then remained dormant for some
time, until around 2005 when I discovered the wealth of contemporary criticism being done on the basis of his theoretical insights. In my own terms, I became a Lacanian and, in the process, found a way to revisit the stories of Alice Munro, whose enigmatic configurations create a space of identification but so often seem to resist analytic criticism.

Munro’s stories trace the contours of the opaque place beyond the pleasure principle, the place where *jouissance* infuses the text. Lacan’s theory helps us recognize that place when we encounter it.