

## Chapter 6

## A Spanish Passion for the Canadian Short Story: Reader Responses to Alice Munro's Fiction in Web 2.0

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### 1. Alice Munro, Readers' Emotions and Reader Response Theory

In 2010, the year of the 150th anniversary of Chekhov's birth, Alice Munro, "the Canadian Chekhov," entered the Spanish literary canon. Although various factors have contributed to this canonization, such as the support of Spanish publishers, professional writers and cultural institutions, it has ultimately been the passion and devotion of Spanish readers – both renowned and anonymous – which has elevated her to this special position on our literary altars. In this chapter I would like to delve into the reasons why many Spanish readers are currently approaching Munro's stories and commenting enthusiastically about them in numerous blogs and websites.

The Spanish writer Elvira Lindo,<sup>143</sup> who has contributed to Munro's Spanish consecration by including her in the reading list of a short story workshop she taught at the Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo in the summer of 2010,<sup>144</sup> has confessed that she is attracted to the way Munro's writing is full of emotions, a characteristic which, in her view, is not valued in the Spanish literary system: "Americans have been talking about their family conflicts forever, but here [in Spain] showing one's feelings in fiction has usually been considered a fault. Alice Munro's stories are filled with intimate feelings, but in Canada this is respected in a different way from here" (Castilla, 2010).

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**143** Elvira Lindo, writer, novelist and a regular contributor to *El País*, has worked as a script writer for radio, television and cinema and written award-winning novels. Ironically, she is often relegated to a second place in the Spanish literary hierarchy as the wife of the writer Antonio Muñoz Molina, Director of the Cervantes Institute of New York.

**144** The title of the course was "Short story workshop: Chekhov and company." With its main site in Santander (Spain) the Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, is one of the best-known European summer universities. Alice Munro was included in the reading list along with the Russian writer and the usual canonized authors from the US (Salinger, Cheever and Carver).

Notwithstanding whether Elvira Lindo is right or not in her generalization about the “absence of feelings” in Spanish fiction, reader response criticism seems an appropriate theoretical background for the analysis of the emotions which Spanish readers experience when they read the short stories of Alice Munro. Reader response theory started as a reaction to the Anglo-American New Criticism’s treatment of the literary text as an object that should be interpreted in dissociation from the emotional effects it might provoke in the reader. For my analysis of internet responses to Munro’s stories I shall draw on the work of theorists from the Constance School of the Aesthetics of Reception, Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser.

One important basis for these theorists is the philosophy of phenomenology, which refers to those things in the world which are perceived by human consciousness. It is well-known that this theory is usually associated with Husserl and his disciple Heidegger, but it was Hans-Georg Gadamer who, in *Truth and Method* (1975), applied Heidegger’s situational approach to literary theory. Gadamer argued that the meaning of a literary work depends on the historical situation of the interpreter, an idea which was followed and expanded by Jauss. In *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1982), Jauss suggests that differences in the reading of texts, not only between individuals but also across time, cannot be accounted for by differences in personality alone. In order to explain these differences, he provides the terms “paradigms” and “horizon of expectations.” A paradigm contains both implicit and explicit cultural assumptions, which are only relevant until changes cause them to shift. Each culture in each paradigm has a “horizon of expectations” –a set of assumptions which will contribute to the production of certain kinds of readings. According to Jauss (1982), the “horizon” is constructed in three ways: first, through familiar norms or the immanent poetics of the genre; second, through the implicit relationship with familiar works of the literary-historical surroundings, and third, through the opposition between fiction and reality, between the poetic and practical functions of language, which is always available to the reflective reader as a possibility of comparison.

Wolfgang Iser also draws on the phenomenology of Husserl to describe the individual act of reading as the concretization or realization of the text as a literary work. Because the literary work has no objective referent outside of itself, it must create its own object through the provision of numerous perspectives of that object (Shellenberg, 1995). These determinate perspectives are incomplete, however, leaving gaps that are filled during the act of reading. For Iser (1974), the subject who encounters the text is not a stable, unique “I,” but a stereotype constituted from various other textual codes: “one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities.” Gaps can occur at various levels of the text –

semantic, plot or narrative, for example – together with the indeterminacy which invites the reader's response. In fact, literary criticism of Alice Munro has explored how the Canadian author forces readers to pay attention to the gaps in her fiction and to the process of reading (McGill, 2002).

## 2. The Spanish Revival of the Short Story and Alice Munro's Rising Value

Munro's success is parallel to a "rebirth," which some call a flourishing, of the short story in Spain. A genre with an important tradition in nineteenth-century Spanish literature - especially in its fantastic and realist variants - but neglected for a long time, the short story has recently been rediscovered because authors no longer have prejudices about it, "like considering it the 'poor brother of the novel' or an exercise of style" (Manrique Sabogal, 2009). Fernando Valls (quoted in Rodríguez Marcos, 2010), a professor at the University of Barcelona and one of the most relevant Spanish critics of the genre, has spoken about the continuous trajectory in the last forty years of a genre which has appeared and disappeared on the Spanish literary scene." For Juan Casamayor (quoted in Rodríguez Marcos, 2010), director of Páginas de Espuma - a Spanish press which specializes in short stories - what the short story is currently going through is a sustained growth rather than a boom. By founding his press ten years ago, <sup>145</sup> Casamayor challenged one of the major clichés of the Spanish publishing scene (that the short story does not sell) and succeeded, as proved by his catalogue which includes 170 printed titles, twenty e-books and a four-volume anthology of the short story in Spanish titled *Pequeñas resistencias/ Small Resistances*.

In addition to the creation of specialized presses, three other factors, relevant for the inquiry into Munro's Spanish success, have promoted the vitality of the short story in Spain. First, literary workshops, like the one run by Elvira Lindo, which not only use short stories as teaching material, but have also been attended by authors who now teach in them. The second factor is the internet, a critical and creative refuge for a genre neglected by traditional means of dissemination. In recent years, we have seen the upsurge of numerous blogs dedicated to the short story, like *El síndrome Chéjov / The*

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**145** Eloy Tizón (quoted in Rodríguez Marcos' article) comments on the important role that the appearance of specialized presses have had in the consolidation of a genre which never enjoyed in Spain the prestige it had in Latin America and in the United States.

*Chekhov Syndrome*, led by Miguel Ángel Muñoz; *La luz tenue / The Faint Light* by José Manuel Martín Peña and *La nave de los locos / The Ship of Fools*, run by Fernando Valls. Finally, the genre has received steady support from the media (especially daily newspapers and the cultural supplements) in the form of a series of articles or special issues dedicated to the genre, which have appeared frequently over the last two years. To give an example of the rising importance attributed to the genre in newspapers, it will suffice to see the evolution from the headline of an article published in the online edition of *El Mundo* in 2008, announcing that "The short story finds its way in the book industry" (Lifona, 2008), to that of the special issue dedicated to the short story in its literary supplement in 2010 - "Las letras españolas viven del cuento" / "The Spanish letters live on the short story" (Bonilla, 2010).<sup>146</sup> *El Mundo's* rival newspaper *El País* has not fallen behind and has dedicated two issues of *Babelia* to the short story in only two years. The first one ("Vivir del cuento") was published on 24 January 2009, coinciding with the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Edgar Allan Poe. The second one was released in 2010 for the occasion of Chekhov's 150 anniversary ("El siglo de los cuentos"/"The century of short stories").

Despite this media attention, the short story is not fully established in Spain yet and still needs to be defended. From an open session in her short story workshop in July 2010, Elvira Lindo complained about the little appreciation that the short story still receives in Spain and mentioned its scarce presence in periodical publications and newspapers as one of the reasons (Hidalgo, 2009). Elena Ramírez, editorial director of Seix Barral acknowledges that they publish few short story collections because it is a genre "with difficult commercial possibilities" (Bonilla, 2010). In the meaningfully titled article "Praise of the Short Story," Alberto Manguel (2009) replies to this remark: "For absurd commercial reasons, publishers have decreed that the short story does not sell. [The writers that do not sell] include Poe, Kipling, O. Henry, Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, John Cheever, Borges, Silvina Ocampo, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant."

Before going on to the analysis of Spanish readers' responses to Alice Munro in blogs and websites, a few words about the history of her translations in Spain and the more conventional channels of reception (reviews in print editions of newspapers) are in order. Alice Munro's books started to be published in Spain in the 1990's, shortly after Margaret Atwood's first books. As I already mentioned

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**146** There is a pun in the Spanish phrase *vivir del cuento* ("To live on the short story"), as it also means "to live without working." The pun is used in several titles of the reportages dedicated to the short story in Spanish literary supplements.

in the previous chapter of this collection, comparisons between Atwood and Munro have been inevitable, owing to their condition as established Canadian female authors. The question of whether Munro's excellent reputation in Spain can be considered, as von Flotow (2008) suggests for Germany, "a result of Atwood's success" is debatable, because as many Spanish reviewers and readers that I will quote in the next section of this chapter have noted, Munro is a writer with clearly idiosyncratic characteristics.

The first translations of Alice Munro's books in Spain were introduced by small publishing houses: Versal published *The Moons of Jupiter / Las lunas de Júpiter* in 1990 and *Friend of my Youth/ Amistad de juventud* in 1990. Debate, a progressive press specializing in non-fiction which is currently an imprint of Random House Mondadori, published *The Progress of Love* in 1991 with the financial aid of the Canadian Council International Translation Programme, and later *Open Secrets* in 1996. However, most of Munro's titles since the turn of the century (with the exception of *The Love of a Good Woman*) have been published by RBA, a Barcelona-based press specializing in collectibles. RBA's editorial literary director Anik Lapointe bought Munro's backlist in 2007, which allowed the press to release *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2003), *Runaway* (2005) and *The View from Castle Rock* (2008). The last of these titles occupied the seventh position in a list of the best books of that year published by *Babelia* in December 2008. Once again, some commentators will probably have interpreted Munro's popularity as a side effect of Atwood's winning the Asturias Award that year. However, only one year later, Munro started to shine in Spain as a prize-winning author herself, as she was honoured in 2009 with the Man International Booker Prize, by then well-known to the Spanish public despite its English-speaking affiliation. This news provoked the publication of various articles about her in the Spanish press and the reprinting of most of her back list. In 2010, the publishing corporation Random House Mondadori acquired Alice Munro's rights, an operation which has so far allowed them to publish in their imprint Lumen her latest short story collections *Too Much Happiness/ Demasiada Felicidad* (2010) and *Dear Life/ Mi vida querida* (2013), as well as to recover one title from her back-list, *Lives of Girls and Women/La vida de las mujeres* (2011). In 2010 and 2011 Munro was nominee for the Prince of Asturias Award, won in 2011 by another Canadian writer, Leonard Cohen ("El Príncipe de Asturias," 2011). A last example of the high esteem the Canadian short story author enjoys in the Spanish literary system is that three of her books were mentioned as fundamental titles of the twenty-first century in a survey among Spanish writers undertaken by the cultural supplement of *ABC* in its twentieth anniversary : Ignacio Martínez de Pisón chose *The View from Castle Rock* (number 3 out of 5), Javier Marías opted for *Too Much Happiness* (the third in a list of 4) and Soledad Puértolas selected *Runaway* (number 5 on a list of 5 books) (Torres, 2012).

Going from the hands of the “lowerbrow” oriented RBA to the cosmopolitan Lumen undoubtedly confirms Munro’s Spanish canonization. However, Alice Munro did not always receive the enthusiastic critical response she now enjoys. In one of the first reviews of her books, José Antonio Gurpegui (1990) describes her as a conservative and naïve writer, without any sense of irony, adding that “the simplistic ideas of her characters beg to question the need to translate and publish everything that comes from the other side of the sea.” Less than ten years after that, the same reviewer was referring to her as “one of the great contemporary Canadian narrators.” In the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, we have seen how praise for Alice Munro and her works in the Spanish press has increased in a geometrical progression, parallel to the aforementioned recovery of the genre in the Spanish literary system. Articles acclaiming her work and her presence and comparing her to the masters of the short story (Chekhov, Henry James, Eudora Welty) are just too numerous to quote. Often called the best contemporary writer of short stories (Monmany, 2007) she is metonymically identified with the genre itself and praised for her portraits of “passionate” women, as the following text from *La Vanguardia* illustrates: “Alice Munro is one of the great masters of the short story. Her subtle portraits of women, often shut down in grey everyday lives but trying to recover the passion they once knew, are hard to forget. If the Munro genre existed, it would certainly be going through its peak of success in Spain” (Ayén, 2009).<sup>147</sup>

The parallelism between the revival of the short story in Spain and the rising value of Alice Munro’s fiction in Spain is not coincidental. The Spanish literary system is currently looking for new cosmopolitan models for the short story and has found a significant one in the Canadian writer. Munro’s reputation as an international prize-winning short story writer - currently on the verge of obtaining the Asturias Award obtained by Margaret Atwood in 2008 - does not fall far behind Atwood’s own consecration. They both have had prestigious supporters (writers Elvira Lindo and Antonio Muñoz Molina can be counted among Munro’s), but as I shall demonstrate in the next section of this chapter, the vagaries of their Spanish reception have been different. Munro seems to have reached a larger number of readers who share their responses thanks to the interactivational nature of web 2.0.

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**147** As I am working on the last version of this chapter (March 2013), Alice Munro has made it to the cover page of *El Cultural*, just as her countrywoman Margaret Atwood did in 2008. The literary supplement has just published a summary of her recent interview with *The New Yorker* (Azancot, 2013a) for the occasion of the translation of her short story collection *Dear Life* into Spanish.

### 3. Readers' Responses to Alice Munro in Spanish Literary Blogs

In the third section of this chapter I propose to analyse a selection of Spanish readers' responses to Alice Munro's stories collected from weblogs, popularly also called „blogs.“<sup>148</sup> The blogger or book club member has been recently added to the reviewing scene, which used to be made up exclusively of professional critics and academics. In Linda Hutcheon's words (2009), with the appearance of blogs and websites expertise has been democratized – or made irrelevant, perhaps. Reviews published on the internet versions of conventional newspapers open up a space for average readers to express their reactions to the reviewed book or to the review itself. To mention but one example, this is one response elicited by an interview with Alice Munro published in *La Vanguardia* on May 27, 2009, posted by a blogger named "ilip" on February 17, 2010: " Alice Munro makes me more attentive to women's affections. The stories she tells are universal and intimate, and, most of the times, heartbreaking. I like to read Alice Munro because her gaze rescues feelings of great depth and her writing denounces the abuses of any power" (Libendinsky, 2009). This response presents a good example of the rhetoric of affection and the feeling of emotional solidarity between women which characterizes many of the blog entries about the Canadian writer by Spanish female readers.

Blogs, a new internet genre which has emerged in the era of Web 2.0, allow for new possibilities of interaction with readers. Weblogs have become extremely popular in the last years as blogging is fairly simple and inexpensive. The result is a running commentary, flooding into the World Wide Web, offering insights and information to curious readers. Weblogs are also public diaries, and personalized media outlets - the best ones lead readers to places they might not have found for themselves (*the complete review*, 2002). The analysis of these online notebooks, which offer fascinating perceptive insights about literary work beyond the traditional explication of literary criticism, confirms David Bleich's view (1975) that reading is a subjective process and that the perception of a literary work is entirely a function of the reader's personality. Furthermore, online blogs are different from a conventional review in that they are interactive; someone writes something on her blog and can get the reactions of readers, whose language is more informal and emotional than that of a conventional review. A blog creates

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**148** I do not include in the study any of the blogs run by Spanish publishers.

a community of readers who share their reading experiences, often aimed at orienting other readers in their selection of books, or advising beginning writers about which writer to choose as a model. As Linda Hutcheon (2009) rightly points out, because of our school training it feels natural to want to talk about books with others in groups: hence the popularity of the virtual reading community created by blogs.

They resemble traditional reviews, however, in that they are often as much about the person who publishes the review online – who stresses their own autonomy to choose and value a particular writer – as about the writer they are reviewing, in this case, Alice Munro. Voluntarily or not, these bloggers become arbiters of taste in the industry of taste acquisition. In accordance with Wolfgang Iser's view (1978) that the critic's task is not the text as an object but rather its effects on the reader, I shall be using reader-response theories as the basis of the analysis of the blogs on Munro.

Out of the great variety of blogs which contain allusions to Alice Munro and/or her works, I am going to select three main categories, from more to less "official." First, blogs affiliated with a media group; second, blogs maintained by individual writers or cultural celebrities – be they beginners or more or less professional writers, often practitioners themselves of the short story; third, blogs of literary workshops or resources for literary writers. In the first category we find one of the most important literary blogs in Spanish, *El Boomerang-blog literario en español*, belonging to the Editorial Santillana of the PRISA media group which includes a selection of blogs by writers and critics (Edmundo Paz Soldán, Javier Fernández de Castro, Vicente Verdú, Rafael Argullol and others). These "sub-blogs" contain reviews of books and other cultural events to which readers can respond.

The most recent material on Alice Munro published in *El Boomerang-blog* is a review of her latest book *Too Much Happiness* (2009), appearing before it had been translated into Spanish. The title of the review by the Bolivian writer Edmundo Paz Soldán (2009) is "The inevitable stories of Alice Munro." Paz Soldán's text, characterised by a highly rhetorical style, praises Munro's book. He describes the Canadian writer's prose as "sublime and full of details that evoke subtle emotions." He then identifies the "inevitability" alluded to in the title of his review as one of the central characteristics of Munro's fiction. By "inevitable" he means that "things could only have happened in the way in which Munro narrates them" (Paz Soldán, 2009); he finds this inevitability in *Runaway* but not in *Too Much Happiness*. In addition, following the tendency of most Spanish reviews in which Canadian writers are inevitably compared to everyone else except other Canadians, he evokes Joyce Carol Oates as Munro's referent, claiming, however, that Munro lacks "Oates' Gothic fever." Paz Soldán's review is a clear case of how a critic approaches a text with a certain "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1982) in mind. First, he fails to see

the distinction between fiction and reality, because nothing is inevitable in fiction. Secondly, his horizon of expectation emerges through the implicit relationship to a writer (Joyce Carol Oates) with whom he identifies.<sup>149</sup>

Javier Fernández de Castro also constructs his own horizon of expectations through establishing "a relationship to familiar works of the literary historical surroundings" (Jauss, 1982). In his review of *The Progress of Love* in the blog *El Boomerang*, he names Balzac himself as a referent for Munro, in spite of the geographical, cultural, and chronological distance between the two writers, and recommends reading Munro's collections one after another in order to evoke a twentieth-century *Human Comedy* set in Canada between Ontario and Vancouver (Fernández de Castro, 2010). Next to Fernández de Castro's comparison, we can read the spontaneous comment of one reader, Anna, who responds to this review by describing how she allows herself to be seduced by the title of a story by Alice Munro as she is cooking dinner. Another reader (inmaculada postigo) responds to the same review by saying that running into *The Love of a Good Woman* and *The Perfection* (sic) of *Love* while browsing through the showcase counters of a bookstore had been like having a wish come true. According to inmaculada, there is no writer like Munro because other women writers are either too "hard" or too "soft." Unlike Fernández de Castro, who, acting like a professional critic, offers objective literary referents for Munro's fiction, these spontaneous bloggers are avid readers who are liberated from the protocols that bind and guide reviewers (Hutcheon, 2009). They relate their reading experiences solely to their personal lives and use impressionistic terms when describing their reactions to Munro's fiction.

In the second category of blogs, those undertaken by writers which also resemble professional reviewing, the blog of the Spanish writer Javier Marías<sup>150</sup> deserves a special mention. In August 2005 he included in his blog a review of *The Love of a Good Woman* which had originally been published in *El País* by the writer Antonio Muñoz Molina (2005). The review was intended as celebration of Munro's having been awarded the Premio Reino de Redonda - an award promoted by Marías himself to distinguish a foreign writer - for that

**149** His own novel *Los vivos y los muertos* (2009), advertised on the same webpage as the review, is a high-school thriller.

**150** Javier Marías, co-candidate with Alice Munro to the 2009 Prince of Asturias Award for Letters, is one of the most prestigious and translated Spanish writers.

book in 2005.<sup>151</sup> The prize includes a small monetary sum and the awarding of a symbolic and honorific title, which in the case of Alice Munro was “Duchess of Ontario.” Mariás’ appreciation of Munro’s literary qualities was one of the first explicit attributions of symbolic value coming from renowned Spanish writers. According to the information in his blog, Munro was awarded the prize for “her perfect mastery of the genre of the short story, her extraordinary capacity for the observation of everyday life and its paradoxes, and her magnificent recreation of women characters, who are apparently ordinary but really have a great depth; often in the rural or semi-rural setting of her native region, Ontario, to which she has managed to give a literary dimension equivalent to those of William Faulkner (Yoknapatawpha) and Thomas Hardy (Wessex) (Mariás, 2005). Mariás’ symbolic honorific title and his description of Munro as a new female Faulkner or Hardy who creates psychologically deep characters and immortalizes her regional setting just as they did, enshrines her Canadian identity.

Run by Miguel Ángel Muñoz and named after a book of his by the same title, *El Síndrome Chéjov* is one of the most active and interesting literary blogs in Spain. As a blog which consists of interviews with Spanish short story writers, and notes and reviews on short story collections, it is clearly oriented to providing a marketing outlet for the work of the writers it deals with, or for literary events recommended by Muñoz, including, unsurprisingly, those he participates in. The blog contains six references to Alice Munro, all found in interviews with Spanish writers. In one of the entries from 2010 (“Vila-Matas, Enrique”), the Catalan writer Enrique Vila-Matas, who published his own personal rewriting of James Joyce’s *Dubliners* titled *Dublinesca*, acknowledges Alice Munro as an influence but includes her as the odd Canadian name out in a list of international short story writers: Borges, Kafka, Hemingway, Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Poe, Cheever, Alice Munro, and the Joyce of *Dubliners*, of course. Similarly, in an earlier entry, Pepe Cervera admits, in an interview with the author of the blog, his penchant for North American writers and mentions the following: O. Henry, Hawthorne, Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, Salinger, Cheever, Alice Munro, Annie Proulx, Carver, Tobias Wolff, Richard Bausch, Richard Ford, Thom Jones (Muñoz, 2009). If we recall that in Spain what is generally understood for “North American” is “US” and that all the writers in the list with the exception of Munro are in fact from the US, we see another instance of how Munro’s Canadianness

**151** The Reino de Redonda is an imaginary literary kingdom set on an island near Antigua. Alice Munro’s predecessors in obtaining the prize had been J.M Coetzee (2001), John H. Elliott (2002), Claudio Magris, (2003) Éric Rohmer (2004). Ray Bradbury (2006), George Steiner (2007), Umberto Eco (2008), Marc Fumaroli (2009), and Milan Kundera (2010) have obtained it after her, each with his own literary title. Munro is the only woman to have received the prize so far.

is often erased in Spanish reviews.<sup>152</sup> Gonzalo Calcedo also proposes his own list which features writers of very different themes and nationality, including two Spaniards: Graham Greene, Conrad, Stevenson, London, Melville, Salinger, Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Philip K. Dick, Horace McCoy, Chandler, the two MacDonalds, Paul Theroux, Aldecoa, Richard Ford, Stephen Crane, Lorrie Moore, Sender, Alice Munro, Capote (Muñoz, 2007). The other writer who is interviewed in *El Síndrome Chéjov* and refers to Munro is Eduardo Jordá (Muñoz, 2009) and he has something more original to say about her. He tells about his preference for the longer short story format (20-30 pages) practised by Munro which, unlike the short-short fiction form imported from Latin America and currently so popular in Spain, allows him to expand the family histories of the characters in their stories.

The extent to which writers like Pepe Cervera value Alice Munro as a short story writer is illustrated by the following entry of his blog *El tacto de un billete falso* ("The Feel of a Counterfeit Bill"), which displays a sizable photograph of Alice Munro and the heading: "Quote by Alice Munro" (Cervera, 2011). The quote is from her short story "Fiction" in her collection *Too Much Happiness*, and ironically alludes to the minor status of short stories in a literary system. Cervera cites Munro as an authority to vindicate the genre of the short story. Out of the four references to Alice Munro that we find in Cervera's blog, his review of Alice Munro's *The View from Castle Rock* is the most important (2011). Cervera's text differs from conventional reviews found in the press or in other literary blogs in that it begins with a personal experience: a description by the author of the area in the South of Scotland where Munro's book is set. The review also contains descriptions of the Scottish landscape, which are accompanied by photographs. Featuring a detailed account of the structural and thematic concerns of the story which would be suited to a professional review, the blogger moves on to compare each of the stories "with one of those photographs one keeps inside a shoe box in a closet" (Cervera, 2011). Cervera sees his own desire of finding out where he comes from, of honouring the memories of his dead ancestors reflected in *The View from Castle Rock*, thus projecting his own horizons of expectations onto Munro's short story collection. He concludes the review by recommending the book, "because it is just a short story book, a beautiful and affectionate (*entrañable*) short

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**152** As Coral Ann Howells (1998) notes, Munro is a writer who has experimented within the short story form and within small-town fiction, both of which are marks of her distinctive Canadian inheritance linking her in a tradition that goes back to twentieth century writers like Sara Jeannette Duncan and through into the twentieth-century with Stephen Leacock, Margaret Laurence, Robertson Davies and Isabel Huggan, for example. Incidentally, all the writers mentioned by Howells have been translated into Spanish, except Sara Jeanette Duncan.

story book" (Cervera, 2011). It should be noted that the word *entrañable* is normally used in Spanish for someone one is close to – not for books. Cervera's enthusiasm for Munro's book sounds so direct and spontaneous that the two readers who react to his review confess that they feel enticed to go out and buy the book immediately. Because of its affective nature, Cervera's response stands between a professional review and the reaction of a fan.

Moving to an even more emotional response to Alice Munro's fiction, José Luís Martín Peña (2009) published in his blog *La luz tenue* a short-short story ("Ayer,"/"Yesterday") about his response to Alice Munro's story "Miles City Montana," which I reproduce here:

Sunday, 13 December 2009

"Yesterday"

Yesterday it was cold and cloudy when the sun rose.

Yesterday I thought, once again, that Christmas was drawing near.

Yesterday I did not shave. I looked at myself in the mirror.

Yesterday I covered the birds' cage with a cotton rag because they say it will freeze in the upcoming nights.

Yesterday I read Miles City Montana, a short story by Alice Munro and I was moved.

This woman's writing resembles the rain when it falls on the sea.

This text which exists on a border-line between the genres of the short-short story, poetic prose, and diary entry, is representative of the kind of material found on Martín Peña's blog, which resembles a diary about his everyday experiences. The blogger finds in Munro's story the appropriate voicing of the oppression and dullness of everyday life and the upcoming winter. As David Bleich (1975) would have it, Martín Peña's perception of Alice Munro's story "Miles City Montana" is its symbolization in a new literary text. The effect of this creative type of reviewing is, just as in the earlier blog entries, to motivate his audience to read Munro's fiction by appealing to their emotions.<sup>153</sup>

Not a creative writer himself but a literature professor and critic, Fernando Valls runs the blog *La nave de los locos* with the subtitle "Literature and more..." indicating from the outset his intention of dealing with extra-literary topics as well. As mentioned earlier, from his privileged position as an academic and critic,

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**153** Antonio Muñoz Molina's article "Too Much Happiness," with the title of Munro's collection, uses a similar strategy, producing an autobiographical text with a final paragraph in which Munro's collection is suddenly related to the writer's feelings (Muñoz Molina, 2009).

Valls is an indefatigable promoter of the genre and someone the new generation of Spanish short story writers consider a mentor. He has co-edited, with Gemma Pellicer, an anthology of the new names of the contemporary Spanish short story titled *Siglo XXI* ("Twenty-First Century") in which stories of two of the writers I have referred to earlier – José Luis Muñoz and Pepe Cervera – are included. At the introduction of the anthology titled "Stories for a new century," Pellicer and Valls refer to Munro as one of the preferred writers of these new narrators (2010).

*La nave de los locos* openly demonstrates Valls' preference for Munro. In an article whose title can be translated as "The Halfwits," he argues that the 2011 Prince of Asturias Award should have gone to Munro, and not to Leonard Cohen, as this prize is meant "for another kind of artists – writers, not singers" (Valls, 2011). Like other bloggers I have mentioned in this chapter, he also includes her in a list of favourite short story writers, next to the likes of authors like Poe, Chekhov, Joyce, Isak Dinesen, Dorothy Parker, Borges, Cortázar, Carver, Lorrie Moore. The list is shortened to a triad (Alice Munro, Quim Monzó and Lorrie Moore) in an earlier article of the blog which reproduces an interview of his, published on December 2009 in the books magazine *Mercurio* (Valls, 2010a). The fact that a prestigious critic like Valls endorses Munro as a model for short-story writing – again in a list of international names – transfers much symbolic capital to Alice Munro.

To end this section, I will briefly discuss the presence of Alice Munro in blogs used by creative writing workshops through the example of the one run by writer Clara Obligado.<sup>154</sup> As a special celebration for the Day of the Book, the participants had to read Munro's short stories and say which their favourite was. The survey produced 35 responses which cannot be analyzed in detail but offer fascinating insights into how the Canadian writer is read by a sector of the Spanish population who is highly motivated to read literature. Many of the participants (most of them are women) evinced the kind of spontaneous and emotional reactions which are typical of blogs. *Runaway* was the bloggers' favourite. Carmen, for example, transmits her personal involvement with the story "Runaway," as she shared with the protagonist of the story the same need to escape from certain situations in her life in which she has finally been trapped. Pandora sees the protagonist's runaway and her indecisions as her own. Nuria Sierra prefers "Carried Away" because of the condensation of the life of the protagonist in so few pages. Munro's presence as a writer leads her to spontaneously exclaim "What a great lady!" Another frequent comment among

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**154** Clara Obligado is an Argentinian fiction writer and a defender and practitioner of the short-short story who has lived in Madrid since 1976. She has organized creative writing workshops for several institutions and now runs her own (Obligado, 2010).

the participants of this blog is how Munro's style is complex and natural at the same time, and how she includes the reader in the stories without her noticing how the Canadian writer does it. María Pilar's involvement with Munro's stories is so intense that she exclaims that "since I started reading Munro I'm unfaithful to my husband." Clara Obligado, director of the creative writing workshop summarizes the responses concluding how the participants of the workshop "all seem to be in love with Alice Munro." It would be difficult to say what the outcome of this activity proposed by Clara Obligado in her workshop would have been, beyond the emotional and uncritical endorsement of Munro. It is impossible to be sure whether the bloggers were – or were not - influenced by the "complex but natural" style of Munro's fiction. However, readers of their online exchange who did not know Munro were likely to have been enticed to investigate the stories of the Canadian writer.

## 4. A Spanish Passion for the Short Story

The title of this chapter was inspired by that of a review of *Open Secrets* titled "The Passion for the Short Story" by María José Obiol (1996c), who writes: "*Open Secrets* has the virtue of a great passion." In a country one of whose national attributes is passion, the presence of this word in a literary review speaks, once again, of horizons of expectation. The genre itself triggers certain expectations as well. María Jesús Hernández Lerena (1998) observes that when looking at the short story, both readers and critics assume that this genre can often offer us a valid interpretation of our emotional life. In this chapter I have shown that the word "passion," (or similarly related and emotionally loaded terms), appear recurrently in Spanish blogs and websites about Alice Munro. Reviews and commentaries on Munro's texts in blogs are often linked to the real life everyday experiences of her readers, like travelling, cooking, illicit love affairs, aspects which are often motifs of the Canadian writer's fiction itself. However, as Linda Hutcheon (2009) reminds us, we expect a review to be fair, impartial, responsible, open and objective, characteristics which are often absent from the reviews of average readers and/or bloggers.

The blogging responses I have analyzed can be classified in a continuum between the professional review and the mere comment of a fan. Some of the reviewers abide by most of the rules of the professional review (Paz Soldán, Fernández de Castro, Marías); others are imbued with the subjectivity of the reviewer but still maintain the appearance of a serious review (Pepe Cervera), while still others openly come from Munro's fans and are meant to recruit more supporters (see statements by anonymous bloggers ilip, Anna, immaculada postigo and the participants of Clara Obligado's creative writing workshop).

What are the effects of this new and spontaneous type of reviewing? Some guidance is certainly needed in the jungle of the vast Spanish book market and many readers, especially younger ones, turn to these online sources rather than the print media for information and to develop their taste. Since the tastes of the readers will only take the lead via blogs and publishers seem to dictate the trends according to commercial interests, it seems likely that blogs will soon begin to influence the publishers. In fact, some of these blogs (*El Boomerang*) are openly linked to publishing corporations and others (those of individual writers) also have vested promotion interests, albeit in a much smaller dimension than those of the media groups. Most important Spanish presses now have links to the main social networks (Facebook and Twitter) where, as Linda Hutcheon (2009) has noted, non-expert guidance is posted for free, and even if they do not pay their readers for their posted reviews, these responses contribute to their earning power.

The immediacy and accessibility of the internet as a medium in general – and that of blogs in particular – provides an appropriate channel to register the spontaneous responses of readers of different cultural levels and social status. In addition, blogs offer a fascinating insight into how different communities of Spanish readers respond to Munro's stories in a virtual environment which is radically different from that of the conventional literary review. The examples I have analyzed illustrate that, because of their immediacy, blogs are an excellent medium to show how the mental images received by readers in the act of reading are inevitably coloured by the reader's existing stock of experiences (Iser, 1978). Last but not least, the iterative nature of the multimodal and shifting text of blogs, never static or settled, provides an appropriate way of reviewing Munro's fiction, which often functions in an iterative mode (Hernández Larena, 1998), like a hypertext in which one link leads to another.

Voices from different sectors of the Spanish cultural elite continue to rave about Alice Munro. In the blog he kept while shooting his film *Los abrazos rotos* (*Broken Embraces*), the Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar has often declared that he considers Alice Munro one of his favourite short story writers and he was one of the members of the Jury who named the Canadian writer "Duchess of Ontario." He acknowledged Munro's collections *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* and *Runaway* as "being in the shadow" of his film (Almodóvar, 2011). More recently, Munro's short story collection *Runaway* appears prominently in Almodóvar's latest film *La piel que habito*/*The Skin I Live in* (2011) as one of the books which the protagonist reads (Belátégui, 2012). From the Spanish literary system, Irene Jiménez - one of the new writers of the short story published in Pellicer and Valls' anthology - confesses that Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro are "more important living influences" than some canonical Spanish writers from an earlier generation (González, 2011). In a video published on the web site of *El cultural*, Elvira Lindo ("Elvira Lindo peina," 2010)

avows that she has been reading Munro “obsessively” because she considers the Canadian writer as “the portrait artist of feminine complicity... who has best portrayed the feminine soul.” But perhaps the clue to understanding Munro’s peculiar Spanish canonization - a canonization of a kind that Atwood has not enjoyed in Spain yet - is that she provokes a passion for her short stories, not only among academics and established writers and critics, but also among numerous anonymous readers who see their experiences and emotions translated by the Canadian writer’s precise prose.