

# Progress good on a second read

**The Progress of Love**  
Alice Munro  
McClelland and Stewart

review by Michelle Kirsch

After an initial reading, this reviewer found herself terribly disappointed in Alice Munro's *The Progress of Love*. How could she have produced something like this — the author of *The Moons of Jupiter* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* This new book appeared to be no more

ambitious than a series of sketches concerning a boring, well-worn theme: Love. And furthermore, it seemed to deal with nothing better than broken characters leading screwed-up lives.

*Progress* — so the reviewer thought — portrayed Canada as a nation of destitute neurotic people. The sun doesn't rise here and the sound of fury rings constant.

Another prairie-maritime lament. Yawn. But . . . Alice Munro! I mean, this is a lady who has published story after book after story. She's published in the *New Yorker* and the *Paris Review*. She's got to be good, right?

So, back over the book this dedicated reviewer went. And, you know, in the right frame of mind this book turned out to be pretty good.

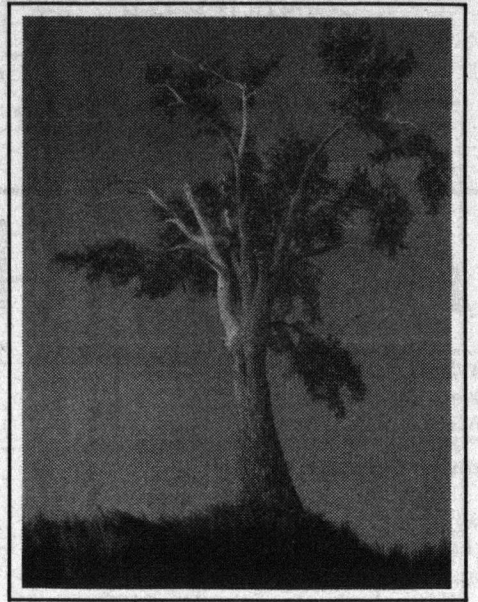
The eleven stories Munro has woven together in *Progress* do not conclude with "happily ever after" Hollywood endings. Why? Simple, because "life's not like that". Sorry.

*Progress* is a quest to mirror the 'real' Canadian experience. In small town settings, the story of love begins with death, touches upon sex, and then concentrates on intricate patterns, and variations within the theme. To 'take-for-granted' inherently means loss.

Munro seems to be using *Progress* as an experiment to define — as completely as possible — one of life's most confusing emotions. Love is not obvious or easy. Time hides it and makes it harder to find. One must read carefully between the lines to see that the characters are only too aware of love — of the painful kind.

Munro's settings are places where Canadians exist. Where little kids grow up and old men die. Where women run away from and men remain. Where you go back to, and wonder why you bothered. The call to go home translates into the need to be where love was a 'given'. In other words, this is no Harlequin Romance.

The characters are real people — sisters, mothers, fathers, brothers. These characters have a tendency to lose touch, either with



the past or present. But Munro's statement is made through these people.

The present is a culmination of history — hence, the present is the past. As love progresses, lost touch may be restored more easily — the historical self is irrelevant for the presence of love.

The ultimate question to be asked is almost a moot point: "What does it take for people to surrender and allow love to take its course?" Death and loss are too often the answers.

## The more things change...

Nineteen eighty-six will surely be remembered in the annals of popular music as the year of the remake. A steady stream of cover versions hit the pop charts, along with some re-released originals such as the Beatles' "Twist and Shout" (itself a cover) and Ben E. King's "Stand By Me." There is a precedent for all this nostalgia, though. In the mid-1970's, just before punk attempted to wreak

havoc on the complacent establishment and soul music went mainstream in its manifestation as disco, a strong '50's revival also occurred, bolstered by movies such as *American Graffiti*.

I'm not sure how far back this pattern could be traced, but it is also interesting that rock itself began, or at least was identified and labelled as such, in the mid-fifties. A new generation took over in the mid-sixties, as pop music gained a social conscience and musical aspirations beyond the prevalent two to three minute single format.

Thus it would appear that every ten years or so popular music goes full circle. Stagnation leads to backwards-glancing and, ultimately, change. So what we are seeing now is actually the fourth re-generation of pop music, or at least rock in particular. And it is a commonly accepted fact that commercial radio has wimped itself into a corner once again.

But where does the current crop of cover versions fit in to all this? Well, they've always been around and have served a variety of purposes from the inspired to the mundane. On the high road, these include paying tribute to a respected artist or recording a crea-

tive, original interpretation of a song. More cynically, they can also act as filler or provide an easy opportunity for gold-digging (both literally and metaphorically in this context), as too many of the one's released today do.

Of course, in the fifties and sixties, it was not uncommon for two, three or even more versions of a song to become hits within a very short time period. This was at least partly because white performers commonly recorded "acceptable" versions of songs by black artists, which white radio stations would not play (also known as apartheid in America).

Encouragingly, a certain amount of integration has occurred in the mainstream, but in other areas the gap between black and white music has actually widened, making cover versions unnecessary on the one hand and unlikely on the other. Run D.M.C.'s revival of Aerosmith's "Walk This Way" is an interesting reverse exception. The point here is that white artists used to use black material because they liked it, but many of today's cover versions are not similarly inspired.

Let's look at a few of the songs which were re-popularized through cover versions over the last year, concentrating this time on pre-releases material:

Bananarama's high-tech version of "Venus", originally done much, much better by the Shocking Blue, proved that it is almost impossible to destroy a good song, at least in the eyes of the general public. With flat, unemotional vocals and a complete lack of musical dynamics, their version failed to capture the tension of the original. Yet it became one of the radio and dance floor staples of 1986.

Doctor and the Medics' faithful rendition of Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky" added only updated production to the original. They thus, ironically, maintained some integrity in their music while allowing themselves to be packaged in a manner that will almost certainly spell overnight obscurity for the band — another bad piece of British hype.

Our own Corey Hart's reading of Elvis' (Presley, not Costello) "Can't Help Falling In Love", while competent and harmless enough, proves once again that yes, the guy can sing, but there are certain songs for which definitive readings exist that should be left alone. Ditto for the Fine Young Cannibals' confused-sounding version of Elvis' "Suspicious Minds."

Next week: Concluding thoughts on cover versions and more.



Mike Spindloe

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## Staff meeting

Today at 4:30 p.m. in Room 282 SUB



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London SWAP Coordinator

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