

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

TOO MUCH HAPPINESS: Stories by Alice Munro

The New York Times wrote that the book “yields all the elements of pulp fiction: violence, adultery, extreme cruelty, duplicity, theft, suicide, murder ... [but] here the nominally momentous event is little more than an anteroom to an echo chamber filled with subtle and far-reaching thematic reverberations.” Do you agree that the violent acts weren't the point? And if they weren't, what was the point?

This collection takes its name from its final story. How does each title relate to its respective story? Do you think the title *Too Much Happiness* relates to any of the other stories? Why would it have been chosen as title of the collection?

In “Fiction,” the protagonist is disappointed to read a collection of short stories because “it seems to diminish the book's authority.” How do you feel about reading short stories—both this book in particular and collections in general? Would you have preferred any of Munro's stories to have been full-length novels instead? Would you have reacted to them differently if you had read them individually, in the magazines where they were originally published, rather than all together?

Also in “Fiction,” Munro writes how the unhappiness of one person plays a part in the happiness of another. How is this theme expressed throughout the book?

In the introduction to her 1996 volume of “Selected Stories,” Munro reveals “I don't always, or even usually, read stories from beginning to end. I start anywhere and proceed in either direction.” Can you see how this propensity affects her writing?

Many of the stories have rather abrupt endings, with things summed up in just a few words. What do you think of the way Munro concludes her tales?

What commonalities do the stories share?

In many of the stories, a crude second character eclipses a complex or introspective first character. Why do you think this is a recurring theme with Munro?

Did you find any great difference in the two stories told from male perspectives? Which story or stories did you enjoy the most? The least? What made them successful or unsuccessful ?

What did you think of Munro's writing style?

In awarding the Man Booker International Prize, judge Jane Smiley said, “Readers pick up an Alice Munro story and react with a kind of galvanized self-recognition.” Did you recognize yourself or anyone else in any of the stories?

Dimensions

Why does Doree visit her husband in jail? Does his notion that he has seen the children in another "dimension" (page 29) bring a kind of comfort to Doree?



Skokie Public Library

5215 Oakton Street
Skokie, Illinois 60077
847.673.7774 / 847.673.7797 fax
www.skokielineary.info

Skokie Public Library Trustees: Diana Hunter, President;
John Graham, Vice President/President Emeritus; Zelda Rich, Secretary;
Richard Basofin; Susan Greer; Eva Weiner; Karen Parrilli; John M. Wozniak
Director: Carolyn A. Anthony

When she is on her way to the prison once again, Doree miraculously resuscitates a young man: how does this act connect to the title, and what does the final scene suggest about her future?

Fiction

How might it be possible for Jon to prefer Edie to Joyce?

In part two, how does Joyce feel when she reads about herself in Christie's story?

Is it fitting that Christie doesn't remember Joyce?

Wenlock Edge

Hearing Nina's life story, the narrator says, "Her life made me feel like a simpleton" (page 72). Does this explain the narrator's willingness to comply with Mr. Purvis's requests?

Why does she send Ernie's address to Mr. Purvis, and what does she gain by doing so?

Deep-Holes

Why does Kent leave home and refuse contact with his family?

What effect does her meeting with Kent have upon Sally (pages 116–17)? What does the story's title signify?

Free Radicals

Why does Nita invent a story about a murder? What effect does this have on the young man, and on her?

(pg. 124) Nita says that fiction isn't an escape—real life is. What do you think that meant?

Face

The narrator decides to settle in his childhood home because "in your life there are a few places, or maybe only the one place, where something happened, and then there are all the other places" (page 164). Why is this insight so profound?

He goes on to suggest that the past is irreversible; do you agree or disagree?

Some Women

What did the narrator learn that summer that has to do with the fact of her own old age? What prompts her memory?

Child's Play

Were you surprised to learn that Marlene and Charlene drowned Verna?

Charlene obviously felt guilt for her actions. Do you think Marlene felt anything?

Wood

Did you find his wife's transformation believable?