This is the latest collection of short stories by Alice Munro, one of Canada's foremost writers. It was published in the fall of 2004, when it received exceptionally warm reviews from the main Canadian papers, or at least the ones I read during my visit there at the time (The Globe and Mail and The Montreal Gazette).

These stories are about people who live in small Canadian rural communities in Ontario and British Columbia. The people whose lives and loves and psyches are depicted in these stories are trying to come to terms with the vague state of emotional dissatisfaction that permeates their life experience. They do not have the sort of warm, open, happy relationships with their parents or children or friends or neighbors that are, or at least used to be (before Alice Munro?) considered to be normal or typical of middle-class North America. They are all (of course?) women. They are not particularly well-off or cultivated or well-travelled or dynamic or outgoing. They do not have adventurous or dramatic or exceptional lives. They are neither typical nor atypical - but they certainly are individuals with their distinct personalities and problems that the author calmly and surely presents to us in a smooth, elegant way that is the very essence of the art of story-telling.

I do not think that this is a book that will particularly help you to understand better the mentality of life in small-town modern Canada - that would be unfair to small-town Canada and Munro is not a sociologist with a message. This is not a book that you will be unable to put down until you have read it through to the end. This is not a book that will give you special insight into the condition humaine or into the condition féminine. These are not stories with special twists or surprises. There is an almost total lack of strife and confrontation, and there is practically no violence whatsoever to be found in these pages (this is not the USA!).

Things do happen, though, as life is like that. In the first, title story, a kindly neighbour helps the woman next door run away from her wife-beater of a husband, with boomerang results. In the next tale a young woman setting out on a transcontinental train ride rather abruptly brushes off a man who enters her carriage and somewhat awkwardly attempts to engage her in conversation, with catastrophic results. But we follow that young woman through three long phases of her life in that and the next two interlinked stories, all centered not on dramatic happenings of this sort but on her problematical relationships with her husband, with her parents and with her daughter.

That is the Munro way: writing about relationships with care and sensitivity that give us insights into the way others live and think. One needs to take the right amount of time with her books, to sort of sip them slowly and thoughtfully, to savour her calm, civilized, rather Canadian way of telling us about the people whose lives turn out, almost surprisingly, to be really quite interesting.

Yes, a writer of considerable stature and a book quite up to the level of Open Secrets, and that is high praise indeed.

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