"Dear Life," Alice Munro's 12th collection of short stories, is permeated with a Great Depression-World War II sensibility. Coming of age in the countryside and towns near Lake Huron, Canada, in the 1930s and '40s, the (mostly female) fictional characters and Munro herself (who ends the book with four essays intended to be "autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact") read "A Tale of Two Cities" in school and "Anne of Green Gables" on their own. They get married and have babies, "in that order or the other," organize their lives around their man, disapprove of a minister's daughter who smokes cigarettes, believe that the wages of sin is death, and are afraid to say the words "sex" or "cancer." As adults, they are not at all sure that taking a razor strap or a belt to a "mouthy child" isn't just as good as making an appointment to see a psychiatrist.

The people and plots in "Dear Life" are not quite as compelling as those in "Runaway," "Too Much Happiness," and "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage." The themes, however, are the same, and as she enters her ninth decade, Munro remains a masterful storyteller, able to extract meaning from seemingly ordinary events. For many of her characters, who want something "so badly," there is "always one morning when you realize that the birds have all gone." They may or may not, like the narrator of "Gravel," be suspicious of advice to lighten tragedy by accepting whatever happens, regardless of the circumstances, because it constitutes an evasion of personal responsibility. But as "To Reach Japan" and "Train" (the longest and best story in the collection) demonstrate, people act, or don't, with forethought or on impulse, and their lives change, or they don't, in predictable and unpredictable ways.

Munro manages, somehow, to be tough-minded without being judgmental. In "Dolly" she helps us understand why an elderly spouse might sign on to the joint suicide pact proposed by her husband, a poet (who assumed that nothing more would happen in their lives), and then want to "pound him to pieces" when he reconnects with a woman who gave him a magic tooth to keep him safe during World War II.

After all, Munro reminds us, as she reflects on her own life experiences, "We say of some things that they can't be
forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do -- we do it all the time."

-- Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University

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