

Introduction to *Away from Her*

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Introduction to the screening of the film Away From Her, directed by Sarah Polley, and based on Alice Munro's short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain"

I am deeply grateful to Marijke Boucherie for having introduced me to the world of Alice Munro, as well as for the gift of Sarah Polley's film. Not only has the film touched me, but it has touched both medical and arts students to whom I have showed it over the last couple of years and who have been asked to engage with the issues addressed in it. And yet, it is not an easy film to watch, since it faces us with our deepest fears, indeed so deep that they tend to remain inarticulate. Perhaps that is where the delicately compelling quality of the film lies: in its ability to bring us face to face with the black hole, or the white blankness, that we dread but nonetheless carry within us.

This is an all-Canadian film, bringing together the vision and talent of two of Canada's most accomplished creators in their respective areas and generations: short-story writer Alice Munro, born at Wingham, Ontario, in 1931, whose work has earned her the appreciation of readers, writers, and critics alike. Her attention to "the way everything happens" may not make for comfortable reading, but may instead astonish and unsettle her readers, as Laura Bulger argues in this journal, and as indeed happened with the younger Canadian woman in this partnership, actress and film director Sarah Polley, born in Toronto, Ontario, in 1979. Known to Canadians first as a child actress when she performed Sara Stanley on the popular CBC television series *Road to Avonlea*, Polley later worked as an actress with such highly regarded film directors as David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan, Hal Hartley and Michael Winterbottom. *Away from Her*

was her first experience both as film director and screenwriter, and brings together a remarkable cast which includes Julie Christie, Gordon Pinsent, Olympia Dukakis, and Michael Murphy. As Julie Christie notes, for all her youth, Polley directed the film “with the confidence, surety and security of an ancient old pro, a John Ford” (Christie 2007). In fact, *Away from Her* earned Polley nominations and awards as director and screenwriter: she was nominated for the Academy Awards 2008 in the category of Best Adapted Screenplay, and as Best Director by the Director’s Guild of Canada in 2007; she won the Director’s Guild of Canada 2007 award for Best Feature Film and the Genie Awards 2008 both as Best Director and for Best Adapted Screenplay.

As Polley candidly explains in her 2007 Preface to Alice Munro’s story “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” adapting the text into film was itself the fruit of a long and deep personal involvement with a story that “seemed to enter [her] like a bullet” (Polley viii-ix). Having lost her mother to cancer at the age of eleven, in her twenties Polley was facing the imminent death of her maternal grandmother, who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, like Fiona in the story. Polley was also entangled in what she describes as a series of “unstable, destructive relationship[s]” (Polley ix), yet remained too addicted to the “initial insanity” of love affairs to accept the “unromantic” (Polley xi) notion of love as “endurance” that her would-be husband David had to offer.

What then attracted and intrigued the young and restless Sarah Polley in Alice Munro’s story, which she first read when it was published in *The New Yorker* (27 Dec. 1999)? What made Polley describe the story as “perhaps not the greatest love story I’d read, but the *only* love story I’d read” (Polley xii)?

The story is about Fiona and Grant, who married in their youth because he “never wanted to be away from her”; they had no children, endured some betrayals, and now face Fiona’s rapid degeneration due to Alzheimer’s. Whereas Fiona is aware that this is an irretrievable process and wants to move to a nursing home so that Grant is spared the task of becoming her caregiver and of “presiding over her degeneration,” as caregivers must, he is reluctant to accept such a hopeless prognosis and finds himself struggling with past guilt and present challenges: how can he not “be away” from Fiona when her mind and body are going away from him

and from her own past self? What is left of her when her memory deserts her? How can he stay close to her when she “is going” to an inscrutable somewhere? After struggling through anger, guilt and perplexity, Grant learns to share in her present life by “giving her space,” while remaining present in that space. In the nursing home every resident is eventually submerged by the forgetfulness that anticipates the final dissolution of death. Yet, as a persistent presence in her everyday routine, Grant becomes a witness to Fiona’s past *and* present life, an embodied reminder to her and to everybody else that her life includes, but is not confined to, her terminal disease.

If, as Margaret Atwood claimed in 1972, “survival” is the “central symbol for Canada” (Atwood 32), then Alice Munro’s story and Sarah Polley’s film set before us the challenge of facing what happens when survival is no longer possible. This is a story of survival and endurance, including endurance in the face of one’s imminent death, and survival in the face of a loved one’s death. Yet both require the acceptance of death, for it is only by accepting the inevitable that Fiona follows her way, just as it is only by ultimately accepting that Fiona’s condition is irreversible that Grant can find a way to become part of her present. It is also this acceptance that forges new complicities and opens up unexpected bonds.

Fiona’s story is set against the white wintry Canadian landscape, which is as luring as it is harsh. Glimpses of other seasons remain in the past: Fiona’s long-term memory retains visions of Grant’s summery affairs, and her short-term memory recalls a spring walk with Grant. Yet if nature can regenerate winter into spring, as signalled by the flowers that Grant brings to Fiona, the story depicts how irretrievable winter is in human life. As Fiona tells Grant when she decides to go to the nursing home, “I don’t think we should be looking for something we like. I don’t think we’ll ever find that. I think what we can aspire to in this situation is a little bit of grace.”

Whatever “little bit of grace” they find testifies to the power, the need and the trials of interpersonal bonds in various shapes and forms. In characteristic Alice Munro fashion, no bond is exempt from tensions and contradictions: this applies to conjugal relations despite the hurt and disappointments of marriage; to intergenerational bonds despite the discomfort experienced by the young in the face of their dying elders; to

the bonds between those affected by illness, and to those developed among the caregivers. Yet, it is precisely the ability to steer through these tensions that strengthens the bonds and honours the complexities that mark the human condition. Perhaps it is precisely this sharp insight into human relations that made Alice Munro's story so compelling to Sarah Polley, and makes her writing compelling to her "astonished" readers.

Let us then watch Polley's fine rendering of Munro's story of love, death and endurance.

Works Cited

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ABSTRACT

Brief introduction to the screening of Sarah Polley's award-winning film *Away from Her* (2007), an adaptation of Alice Munro's short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain", originally published in *The New Yorker* (27 Dec. 1999). Described by Sarah Polley as "perhaps not the greatest love story I'd read, but the *only* love story I'd read," Munro's story focuses on Grant and Fiona, who married in their youth because he "never wanted to be away from her", had no children, endured some betrayals, and now face Fiona's rapid degeneration due to Alzheimer's. Aware that this is an irretrievable process, Fiona chooses to move to a nursing home, while both story and film ask Grant and us to contemplate the multiple implications of "being away" from someone, and present us with the ultimate challenge of honouring life in the face of death, our own or another's.

KEYWORDS

Sarah Polley, *Away from Her*, Alice Munro, Canadian cinema, Alzheimer's disease.

RESUMO

Breve apresentação do filme *Away from Her* [*Longe Dela*], de 2007, da realizadora canadiana Sarah Polley, que adapta ao cinema o conto de Alice Munro "The Bear Came Over the Mountain", publicado pela primeira vez na revista *New Yorker* (27 Dez. 1999). Descrito por Polley como "porventura não a melhor história de amor, mas a *única* história de amor que alguma vez li", o conto de Munro centra-se na relação entre Grant e Fiona, que casaram na juventude porque ele "não queria estar longe dela", não tiveram filhos, enfrentaram traições e deparam-se agora a debilidade progressiva de Fiona, que sofre da doença de Alzheimer. Ciente de que se trata de um processo irreversível, Fiona decide mudar-se para um lar. É aí que, tal como Grant no conto e no filme, também nós somos confrontados com as múltiplas implicações de "estar longe" de alguém e com o desafio de honrar a vida ao mesmo tempo que encaramos a morte, a nossa ou a de outrem.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Sarah Polley, *Longe Dela*, Alice Munro, cinema canadiano, doença de Alzheimer.
