

The MANTELPIECE

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Contributors

Lillian Heimisdottir is a writer and poet residing in Barcelona.

David Larsen is a writer who lives in El Paso, Texas. His stories and poetry have been published in more than forty literary journals and magazines.

Jann Everard is the award-winning author of the short fiction collection *Blue Runaways*. Her stories have been published widely in Canada, the U.S., New Zealand, and Australia. Jann lives on Vancouver Island, on Canada's wild West Coast ([web](#)).

Stanley Bloom was born in London, but has lived in Sweden for many years. A graduate of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), he was on the staff of Radio Sweden before turning freelance. The author of *Blue Guide, Sweden* (London and New York), he travels a great deal ([web](#)).

L. Acadia is a lit professor at National Taiwan University and best-of-the-net-nominated member of the Taipei Poetry Collective, with poetry in *New Orleans Review*, *Strange Horizons*, *trampset*, and elsewhere. She lives with her partner and hound in the 'literature mountain' district of Taipei ([web](#)).

E. Martin Pedersen, originally from San Francisco, has lived for over forty years in eastern Sicily, where he taught English at the local university. His poetry appeared most recently in *San Antonio Review*, *Danse Macabre*, *Neologism*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, and *California Quarterly*, among others. He has published two collections of haiku, *Bitter Pills and Smart Pills*, and a chapbook, *Exile's Choice*, from Kelsay Books.

Eleanor Jiménez is a writer from Barcelona ([web](#)).

Erik N. Patel is a writer and digital nomad ([web](#)).

N.L. Jorgensen is a USA writer, educator, and musician whose most recent book is a middle-grade sports biography, "Gwen Jorgensen: USA's First Olympic Gold Medal Triathlete" (Meyer & Meyer). Essays appear in *The Offing*, *River Teeth*, *Wisconsin Public Radio*, *Cheap Pop*, and elsewhere ([web](#)).

Hector Jean Fournier is a food writer from Marseille.

Heimir Steinarsson is an Icelandic typographer and linguist.

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The Joy of Summer Reading

Encouraging Young Minds to Embrace Books

As the school year winds down and the long, lazy days of summer stretch ahead, there's an unparalleled joy in the prospect of summer reading. For many, summer reading is synonymous with beach days, hammocks, and the chance to finally dive into those books that have been gathering dust on the shelf. But beyond the personal pleasure it brings, summer reading holds significant importance, especially for young people. It is a time when the constraints of academic schedules fall away, leaving room for exploration, imagination, and intellectual growth through books.

Summer provides a unique opportunity to engage with literature in a more relaxed and enjoyable way. Without the pressure of assignments and exams, reading becomes an adventure rather than a chore. The magic of getting lost in a good book is an experience that can transport readers to distant lands, introduce them to fascinating characters, and offer new perspectives on life. This joy of reading is not just a delightful escape but also a critical component of personal development.

For young readers, summer is the perfect time to explore different genres and authors, to discover what they truly enjoy reading. Whether it's the thrill of a mystery novel, the wonder of a fantasy epic, or the deep connection found in a poignant coming-of-age story, summer reading can ignite a lifelong passion for books.

While the joy of summer reading is undeniable, its importance for young people cannot be overstated. Research consistently shows that children who do not engage in educational activities during the summer are at risk of experiencing the "summer slide" – a decline in academic skills and knowledge. Reading during the summer can help mitigate this effect, keeping young minds sharp and ready for the next school year.

Moreover, reading for pleasure has numerous cognitive and emotional benefits. It enhances vocabulary, improves comprehension, and fosters critical thinking skills. Young readers who immerse themselves in books also develop empathy and a better understanding of the world around them, as they encounter diverse characters and situations.

Encouraging children and teenagers to read during the summer is not just about preventing academic regression; it's about enriching their lives and broadening their horizons. Books have the power to teach, inspire, and transform, making summer reading a vital part of a young person's growth.

“By encouraging young people to read during their summer vacation, we not only help prevent the summer slide but also open doors to new worlds and ideas.”

To foster a love for summer reading in young people, we can start by creating a reading-friendly environment. Making books easily accessible by visiting libraries or building a home library helps, as does creating cozy reading nooks where children can relax with a good book. Setting an example is also crucial; when children see adults enjoying books, they are more likely to mimic that behavior. Sharing your own favorite reads and discussing them can spark their interest.

Incorporating reading into daily routines can make a significant difference. Designating a specific time each day for reading, whether it's before bed, after lunch, or

during a quiet afternoon, helps build a consistent habit. Offering a variety of choices is another effective strategy. Providing a range of books covering different genres and topics allows children to select what interests them, as personal choice is a strong motivator.

Joining summer reading programs can make reading fun and engaging. Many libraries and community centers offer these programs with incentives and activities. Encouraging discussion about the books your children are reading can deepen their engagement. Asking questions, sharing opinions, and encouraging them to think deeply about the stories and characters fosters critical thinking and comprehension.

For tech-savvy kids, integrating technology into their reading habits can be particularly appealing. E-books and audiobooks offer a modern twist on traditional reading, providing the convenience of accessing a vast library of books on devices they already use daily. These digital formats can be especially engaging, with features like adjustable font sizes, interactive illustrations, and the ability to look up unfamiliar words instantly. Additionally, numerous apps and websites offer immersive and interactive reading experiences, incorporating elements like gamification, animated storytelling, and community discussions that can make reading a more dynamic and social activity. This integration of technology not only aligns with their interests but also enhances their engagement with literature in innovative and exciting ways.

The joy of summer reading is a gift that keeps on giving. By encouraging young people to read during their summer vacation, we not only help prevent the summer slide but also open doors to new worlds and ideas. Let's make this summer a season of stories, where the pages of a book become the gateway to adventure, knowledge, and a lifelong love of reading. □ *L.H.*

Options

David Larsen



Illustration: rck / Adobe Stock

A half dozen black hawks circled overhead. Their crisscrossing forms, little more than specks in the cloudless July sky, were of no real consequence, not to anyone or anything other than the seventy-eight-year-old man who sat alone in his chair on his back porch, a tumbler of Jack Daniels in hand, a Smith and Weston thirty-eight on the metal table in front of him and a mind that was burdened with, if not the weight of the world, then the responsibility of eleven-hundred acres of land he could no longer work. To add to his woes, his body was falling into a greater state of disrepair with each passing moment.

He knew all too well that no lizard, coyote, rattlesnake, jackrabbit or scorpion could ponder, or begin to fathom—until it was too late—the vigilance of the demons that circled above. But to the aging rancher, Mr. Porter Reeves, the significance of the predators' communal pirouette was all too obvious. Death was in the vicinity. Surely, he couldn't be the only one who sensed this.

Once again, the soaring birds provided Porter an afternoon's amusement, however grim and gruesome their daily appearance was. He was fully aware of what the feathered predators' foreboding presence portended. But as ghoulish as their vigil might have been, he watched them for

hours, every day. Their persistence was admirable, if worrisome.

He appreciated that in the minds of his fellow desert dwellers, the four-legged critters as well as the rattlers that slithered on their bellies like poor Eve's misunderstood co-conspirator, the hawks simply didn't exist; what can't be seen isn't there. The hawks' afternoon ritual was of no consequence to them; no more than was Porter's Baptist mother's scornful deity's existence a matter of concern to him. The austere woman had done her utmost to instill in her only son the notion of an unseen god, but, like the lizards, he couldn't be bothered with what wasn't right

before him, in plain sight. "You must fear the Lord," she used to lecture. He wanted no part of it as a boy, and he wanted no part of it as an old man.

He studied the soaring scoundrels from his creaky Adirondack chair, a contraption his own pa had slapped together and occupied, not all that long ago. The old cuss had made it to ninety-two. Hell, thought Porter, I should be able make it somewhere's near that. But, then again, Ma only made it to sixty-one. A lotta good all that piety did her.

Porter couldn't help but grin at the sly raptors above, like he would at a quarrelsome old friend who'd come to visit. His back porch, shaded by an overhanging live oak, was the ideal venue for watching the broad-winged devils' aerobatics on yet another ninety-five-degree afternoon. How he envied the birds. Their freedom. Their expertise in flight. It was their gruesome diet that troubled Porter. But, what the hell, to each his own. Life, at best, is nothing more than a give and take proposition. Beggars can't be choosers. You take what's offered.

You sons of a bitch, the old man cursed at the winged predators as they rose and glided ever so gracefully on the afternoon's thermals, like cantankerous angels on judgement day. Sizin' me up, ain't'cha? Or, is there somethin' out there in those hills that's in even sadder shape than me?

Well, goddamn it, if it is *me* you're after, then you're just gonna have to wait a little longer. I ain't dead yet. That will come, soon enough. Then y'all will be more than free to peck my eyes out and rip into my gizzards. But for now, you're just gonna have to wait. Y'all can have at me when the time comes, but not before. Along with them goddamned vultures, you can pick my bones clean. I really don't much give a damn. But today, it's just too frickin' hot for me to give up the ghost. Not for you, not for those damned doctors, not for no one.

In spite of the cataracts that Dr. Ramos had told Porter he needed to have surgically removed ("first one eye, then the other, three weeks apart"), Porter could still spot hawks and buzzards with the best of them, like a sentry at his post in a combat zone. He'd once been just that, nearly sixty years ago, in an entirely different clime, in a country he'd never heard of until his goddamned draft board sent him that fuckin' letter. At nineteen he had no idea there was any such thing as a draft board, at least not in Dos Pesos, Texas. The notice came all the way

from San Angelo; he should never have opened the damned thing.

"Why the hell would I let you cut these clouds offa my eyes?" Porter asked the overly-confident ophthalmologist. "I kinda like seein' the world through a haze. You should try it. It looks a helluva lot better that way. One doctor tells me I got a spot on my lungs the size of a pinhead, a dark little son of a bitch that's gonna do me in, and you're telling me ya can fix my eyes up so's I can watch myself die. What's the hell's the point of it all?"

Dr. Ramos shrugged, then explained that he was doing no more than laying out the options.

"Options, my ass." Porter grumbled. "I'm plumb out of options."

Southeast Asia, you goddamned cock-suckers, Porter shouted at the circling birds. Ya think you're so goddamned tough. Try floatin' 'round in *that* sky. Snipers everywhere. Ya wouldn't last ten minutes. I made it through a whole damned year over there. You bastards.

Though ugly and ornery the birds, hawks, turkey vultures, even an owl or two, were good to have around, and Porter damn well knew it. From hundreds of feet above, they scrutinized, then scoured and purified the creosote-and-mesquite-spotted hills and crevices of the unfortunate creatures that had succumbed to the reality Porter himself was prepared to come to grips with, if need be. And all too soon. Without the birds to do the dirty work, he'd have to tramp around the sand dunes and arroyos in search of the decaying carcasses of mule deer, cattle, javelinas. The predators and scavengers from above, along with the skittish coyotes, left nothing but the bones of the unlucky creatures, tidily bleached high and dry by the unrelenting sun in a matter of weeks or months. No muss, no fuss.

A damned slick way of getting' the job done, thought Porter as he watched the hawks high above. You rascals do mighty good work, he shouted.

A quarter of a mile to the east, toward the dying town of Dos Pesos, dust rose twenty feet above the shimmering horizon, either a dust devil kicking up its mischief or a car on the unpaved washboard road that led to what was once his working ranch, now nothing more than the house he'd been raised in, along with the acres he leased to younger ranchers, hotshots filled to the rim with exuberance and enthusiasm. It better be a

damned whirlwind, muttered Porter. I ain't got no patience for no visitors today.

A gray Chevrolet pickup, brakes screeching like a night owl swooping down on its prey, pulled to a stop on the gravel behind the house; the stones crackled like cicadas at dusk beneath the truck's oversized tires. His own father, a man every bit as ornery as Porter, had scattered the gravel to hold down the dust decades ago, another of the old man's wise decisions.

Geneva, Porter's twice-divorced daughter, a bit of a scamp with the men in town, from what he'd heard tell, stepped out of the truck and shaded her eyes like a private saluting a colonel. Scamp or tramp, it didn't much matter, he never put much store in gossip, even about his only relative.

"What in the world are you doin' out here in this heat?" she called as she stomped toward the porch like a trooper, her fancy Tony Lamas kicking up as much dust as a March storm. "And what's with the damned gun?"

Porter chuckled. "I'm watching those hawks up there." He pointed upward. "I'm gonna shoot one of 'em. I suspect they're waitin' for me to croak...or for me to get weak enough so's they can haul me off in their goddamned talons." He paused. "They'll save you the expense of a damned undertaker. If we let 'em."

Geneva, in a Garth Books t-shirt and Wranglers too tight for a woman in her late fifties, plopped her skin-and-bones frame into the metal folding chair next to Porter. "You're not ready for no undertaker. Not yet. And you couldn't hit the barn with that danged pistol."

Porter looked upward and squinted. "Do ya want to tell those hawks that? That I ain't ready for no undertaker? They know easy pickins when they see 'em." He chuckled. "Hell, Geneva, I can't even shake the dew offa my own lily no more. That doctor in Ft. Stockton put that goddamned tube into my pecker then strapped this bag onto my leg." Porter patted the inseam of his boot-cut Wranglers. "He might as well 'a neutered me. Made me a steer."

"You've still got plenty 'a bull in you." She laughed. "The catheter will come out when your prostate isn't the size of a damned watermelon." She paused, shook her head, then sighed. "Dr. Ramos called to tell me that you're refusing the cataract surgery. What's that about?"

"I sure as hell don't want no doctor scraping at my eyeballs. He won't leave nothin' for the hawks and vultures to pluck out."

Line Dancing in a Typhoon

L. Acadia

Geneva laughed. “He’ll leave plenty for them.”

“He said he was just layin’ out options for me. So, what the hell? I’m chosin’ to opt outta lettin’ him cut away at my eyes.”

“It’s done with lasers,” said Geneva. “It’s painless.”

“So’s bein’ dead. I’d rather be feelin’ somethin’, if ya don’t mind.”

Geneva shook her head then drew a fistful of her long, bleached hair back into a knot. “You’re far from dead. Did you call and make an appointment for the chemo treatments?”

“I ain’t gonna do no such thing.”

She yanked his drink from his hand and sipped like a woman who knew bourbon all too well. “Yes, Dad,” she said. “You are.”

“I’m weighin’ my options.”

“You’ve got the option of livin’ or dyin’,” she said.

“I ain’t decided which is worse.”

She pointed toward the driveway. “There’s a black and white kitten under my truck,” she said.

Porter coughed. “Yep. Some mama cat got a litter out there in the barn. A nuisance, but I ain’t about to chase ‘em out.”

When his daughter stood to leave she patted him on the head, then told him, “Make the appointment to start those treatments. The sooner the better.”

Porter watched her walk to her truck. Her jeans *were* too damned tight...for a woman of any age. What I been told must be right. She’s a tramp alright. So what? Life’s too short to worry about any such nonsense.

When she started the truck’s engine the kitten scampered out from beneath the pickup. The gun went off before Porter realized what he’d done.

“What the hell was that about?” shouted Geneva, her window down. “Geez, Dad, are you okay?”

His hand shaking, Porter snarled, “Last week, one of those damned hawks swooped down and took off with one of them kittens. I just fired in the air to keep those bastards from takin’ another one.”

“Jesus Christ,” cried Geneva. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“You’ll live.”

She sighed. “So will you if you make that appointment.”

Porter shrugged. “I’m still weighin’ my options.”

Alone, he gazed up at the sky. The hawks had given up for the day. They’d be back tomorrow. □

Summers growing up were never so hot,
tide pools shivered with crabs and mudskippers,
our fingers were sticky with such fragrant melons and pears,
no longer grown. Now, we weather October typhoons, she
sloshes complaints at gloomy post-dusk dim unbroken by
true daylight, the batteries for our circadian clocks
whose figurative hands pause akimbo.

We stay up late sniffing or fighting—then
on the eighth day, the rain drenched down, like an
angry chef straining noodles wanted to scald herself, so
splatters leapt back towards the sky, colliding with still more rain
berating down. The fifth-floor family gave up swapping out
buckets to slow leaks. Water soaked down newly painted walls,
rolling on new shades of green and dismay.

We note, like marks on a storm bingo card:
downed Sakura branches, evacuated ground floor flats,
three scooters swept off in an evening flash torrent of mud.
Our tough young neighbour rushes down, braving the tide of trash
slamming against cars to rescue her brand-new Yamaha.
No visible broken windows yet, though certain neighbours
forgot to tape Xs against the storm.

The tennis courts flooded, then the bike trail,
up the embankment, sinking both dog parks,
plus that porta potty where the yelling man hangs out and
retirees line dance Sunday nights. Neighbours commiserate
with the carpenter, his swollen ruin of a shop submerged.
Where kids shrimp-fish is next; I picture freed shrimp floating down
the river towards the sea where they belong.

Dehumidifier beeps echo through
sudden silence of shutting off, tank full.
The void of noise cessation feels particularly sweet
through a headache: respite tempting deferred rest, though now it’s
time to wake up. This can’t be October, we refuse the
new reality, reach past galoshes for dancing shoes,
for another Sunday night in Taipei.

Alice Munro

The Quiet Genius of the Short Story

Eleanor Jiménez



Photo: Zuma Press / Alamy Stock

Alice Munro, the celebrated Canadian author who redefined the art of the short story, passed away on May 13, 2024, in Port Hope, Ontario, at the age of 92. Her death marks the end of a remarkable literary career that spanned more than six decades. Throughout her illustrious career, Munro earned numerous accolades, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013, and her work left an indelible mark on the literary world. Munro's life and contributions

stand as a testament to the power and depth of the short story, a form she elevated to unprecedented heights with her unique narrative voice and profound psychological insight.

Munro's modesty was as characteristic as her extraordinary talent. Despite her many achievements and the global recognition she garnered, she remained remarkably humble. Upon winning the Nobel Prize, she expressed her joy not for herself alone but for the recognition it brought to Canadian literature as

a whole. "I'm particularly glad that winning this award will please so many Canadians," she said in a statement through her publisher. This humility belied the profound impact of her work, which transformed the short story from a supplementary form to one of literary excellence. Her stories, known for their clarity and psychological realism, captured the complexities of human life in a way that resonated with readers worldwide, ensuring that her legacy would endure long after her passing.

A Life Shaped by Rural Canada

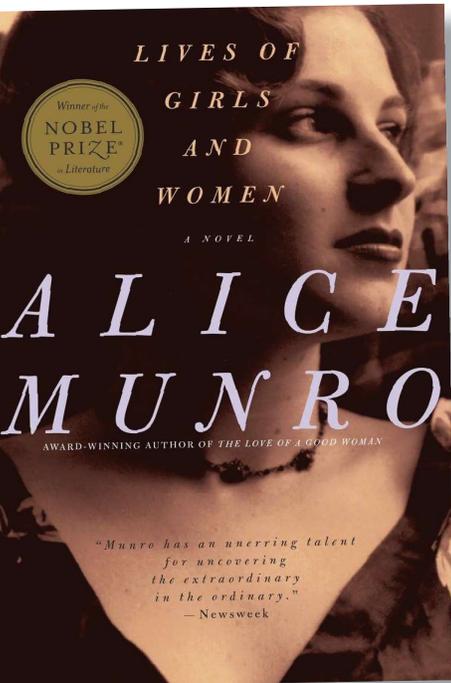
Alice Ann Laidlaw was born on July 10, 1931, in the small town of Wingham, Ontario, to parents of Scottish and Irish descent. Her father, Robert Laidlaw, was a descendant of the esteemed Scottish poet James Hogg, known for works such as *The Private Memoirs*

rural Ontario becomes almost a character in its own right. The isolation, the close-knit communities, and the relentless march of time are themes that permeate her work, offering readers an intimate glimpse into the world she knew so well.

Munro's early escape from Wingham came in the form of a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario in London, about 65 miles south of her hometown. This opportunity allowed her to pursue her burgeoning interest in writing. Despite the demanding circumstances, Munro was determined to carve out a space for her creative pursuits. After two years at university, she married fellow student James Munro and relocated to Vancouver, British Columbia.

In Vancouver, the young couple began a new chapter, but Munro found herself balancing the roles of wife, mother, and aspiring writer. Her days were filled with the demands of domestic life, yet she remained steadfast in her commitment to writing. Munro began crafting short stories during her children's nap times, finding solace and expression in these brief moments of quiet. This practice of writing in the margins of her day laid the foundation for her future career, as she honed her ability to capture complex emotional truths within the concise form of the short story.

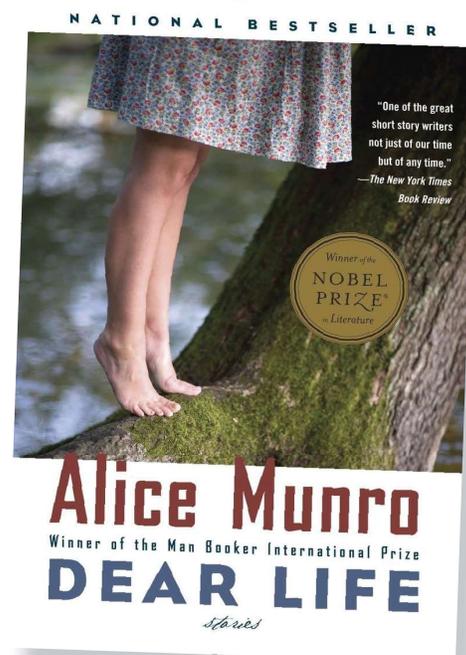
These early years of struggle and perseverance were instrumental in shaping Munro's voice as a writer. They imbued her stories with a sense of



and *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. However, despite this literary lineage, literature did not play a significant role in Munro's early life. Instead, her formative years were shaped by the harsh realities of the Great Depression and her mother's struggle with Parkinson's disease, which was diagnosed when Alice was just nine years old.

Growing up in rural southwestern Ontario, Munro experienced firsthand the challenges of a life marked by economic hardship and familial responsibilities. Her father initially tried his luck as a silver-fox fur farmer, but when that venture failed, he turned to turkey farming, illustrating the resilience and adaptability that characterized the rural communities Munro would later depict in her writing. These early experiences provided a rich and often stark backdrop for her stories, grounding them in the authentic textures of small-town life.

The influence of her environment is evident in the vivid, detailed settings of her narratives, where the landscape of

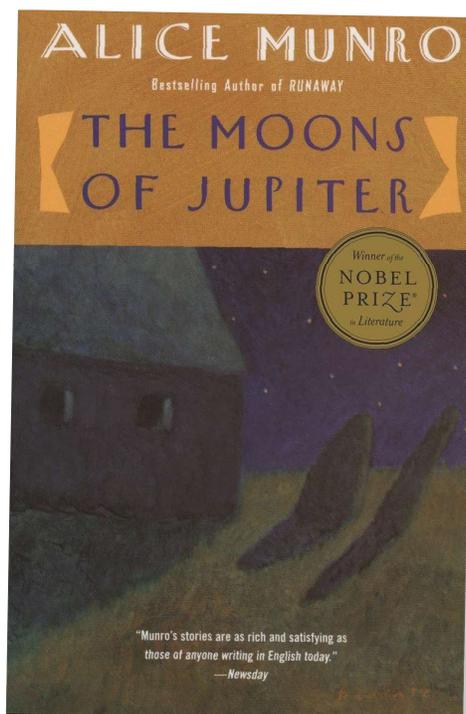


authenticity and empathy that resonated deeply with readers. Her intimate knowledge of the rhythms and realities of rural life lent her work a profound sense of place and character, making her stories not only relatable but also timeless. As she balanced the intricacies of family life with her passion for writing, Munro developed a narrative style that was both economical and richly detailed, setting the stage for her emergence as one of the most significant literary figures of her time.

The Rise of a Literary Titan

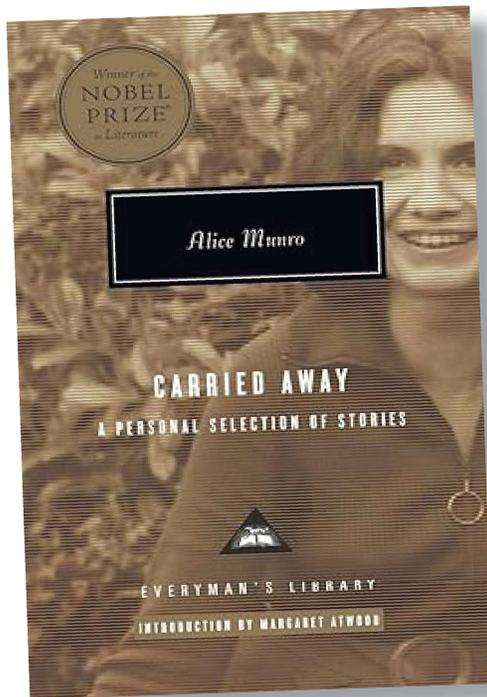
Munro's first collection, "Dance of the Happy Shades" (1968), won the Governor General's Award, Canada's most prestigious literary prize. This success was the beginning of a prolific career marked by numerous awards and honors. She won the Governor General's Award twice more, the Giller Prize twice, and in 2009, the Man Booker International Prize. Her collection "The Beggar Maid" was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1980.

In 2013, Munro received the Nobel Prize in Literature, praised by the Swedish Academy for her "finely tuned storytelling, which is characterized by clarity and psychological realism." This award cemented her place among the greatest literary figures, including Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Saul Bellow.



Mastery of the Short Story

Alice Munro's stories are celebrated for their remarkable depth, precision, and emotional resonance, qualities that have cemented her reputation as one of



the foremost practitioners of the short story form. Her work often focused on the lives of women in small-town Canada, exploring themes of love, loss, and personal transformation with a clarity and psychological insight that made the ordinary seem extraordinary. This thematic focus is evident in some of her most well-known collections and stories, including "Dance of the Happy Shades," "Lives of Girls and Women," "The Moons of Jupiter," "The Love of a Good Woman," and "Runaway."

Munro's unparalleled ability to delve into her characters' inner lives allowed her to present their complexities with both compassion and a matter-of-factness that resonated deeply with readers. Her characters are often caught in the throes of everyday struggles and profound emotional journeys, navigating the intricate terrain of human relationships and personal growth. This ability to portray the multifaceted nature of her characters is particularly evident in stories such as "Royal Beatings," "The Progress of Love," and "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage."

Her writing style is marked by its economy and meticulous attention to detail. Munro had a unique talent for capturing the epic scope of a novel within the confines of a short story, making every word count and every detail significant. This skill is showcased in stories like "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," which was adapted into the critically acclaimed film "Away From Her," and "Dear Life," which includes some of her most autobiographical work. Fellow writers have often expressed admiration for her ability to condense complex narratives into short, impactful pieces, a talent that many aspire to emulate.

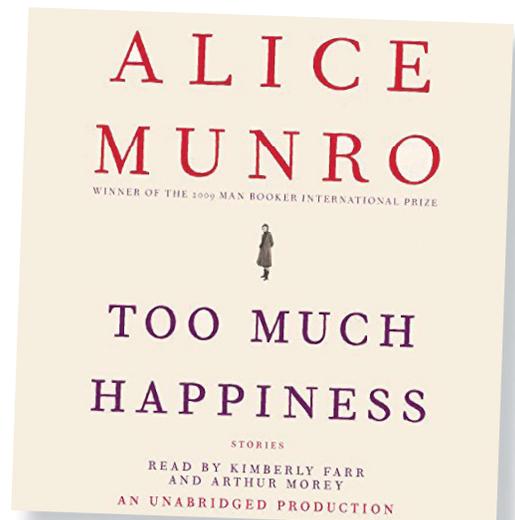
Munro's narratives often move through time seamlessly, revealing the layers of her characters' lives with a precision that draws readers into the story's emotional core. She frequently employed non-linear timelines, allowing the past and present to intermingle in a way that enriched the reader's understanding of her characters' experiences and motivations. This technique can be seen in stories such as "The Albanian Virgin" and "Too Much Happiness," where the narrative structure itself becomes a vehicle for exploring deeper psychological truths.

Her ability to encapsulate whole lives in a few pages has led to frequent comparisons with Anton Chekhov, a writer Munro greatly admired. Like Chekhov, Munro's stories often eschew traditional plot structures in favor of capturing moments of revelation and change. Her works are filled with subtle yet profound insights into human nature, delivered with a sense of compassion and realism that has endeared her to readers and critics alike.

Munro's mastery of the short story form has not only earned her numerous literary accolades but also a dedicated readership that spans generations. Her contributions to literature have elevated the short story to new heights, proving that this form is capable of conveying the same depth and richness as any novel. Through her meticulous craftsmanship and deep empathy for her characters, Alice Munro has left an indelible mark on the world of fiction, ensuring her legacy as one of the greatest storytellers of our time.

A Lasting Legacy

Despite her international fame, Munro remained deeply rooted in Canada. Her stories vividly depicted the landscapes and social dynamics of rural Ontario, making the specific universal. In her final collection, "Dear Life" (2012), she included autobiographical pieces, offering readers the closest insights into her own experiences.



Munro's influence on the literary world is profound. Her work not only brought the short story to the forefront but also inspired a new generation of writers. Fellow Canadian author Margaret Atwood, among others, praised Munro's contributions to literature, highlighting her unique ability to merge personal and universal themes.

Alice Munro's passing is a profound loss to the literary world, marking the end of an era defined by her unparalleled contributions to the short story form. Her legacy, however, endures through the vast body of masterful stories she leaves behind. Munro's work continues to inspire and resonate with readers and writers alike, illustrating that in the realm of fiction, the power of the short story can rival that of any novel. Her stories, rich in depth and clarity, offer timeless insights into the complexities of the human condition. They will continue to captivate and enlighten readers for generations to come, ensuring that Munro's influence and the beauty of her literary craft remain ever-present in the world of literature. □

The Hermitage

Jann Everard



Illustration: Tim / Adobe Stock

The buzz cut through my sleep like a train through fog. I reached over the girl lying next to me and swiped the face of my phone. From a place that sounded a thousand miles away came a gruff voice I recognized as Rudy Sadowski's. "Hello? Anyone there?" he asked.

"Jake here," I said, and the line promptly went dead.

"Fuck," I mumbled and sat up. The girl rolled against me in the narrow bed. "What's going on?" she asked, and I waved a hand to shush her as the phone rang again.

"What's up, Rudy?" I asked, more curtly than the man deserved. I could picture him in his hand-hewn cabin, skin like spruce bark. He was my dad's only neighbour, if

you could call the lake-width between them a neighbourhood.

"Sorry to wake you, lad, but I was up for a piss last night, and I saw your pa out on the ice lit like a rock star."

"What are you talking about, Rudy? You drinking?"

"Haven't had a drop in years, Jake. You know that. No, I mean he was in a beam of light. Spectral-like."

"You trying to say he was abducted by aliens?"

Rudy coughed a few times, a phlegmy sound that made me pull the handset away from my ear. "Saying it was odd, is all. I'm not telling you I have an explanation. I just think you ought to get up here."

It was six a.m. Friday morning. I didn't have classes again until Tuesday. I'd have to gas up the car and it was a long way to go in winter, but I hadn't heard from my dad in months, and I'd worried in a bitter way for a while.

Sadowski's wheeze clinched my decision. "Okay, Rudy," I said. The old man grunted before he rang off. I hoisted myself over the girl and out of bed.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Just a guy worried about my dad. Sorry—" I stalled, the girl's name wiped from my memory.

"Molly."

"Molly. Right. I've got to go."

She pulled her sweater off the floor and drew it over her head, avoiding my eyes. The night before, I'd liked the colour of her hair, a dark red that had reminded me of my mom's. But in the dim morning light of my one-room apartment, it was just an unremarkable brown.

"You're an asshole," she said. "You told me both your parents were gone."

I zipped my jeans. "Yeah, well, my dad hauled himself off to the bush to live like a hermit two years ago after my mom died, so effectively they *are* both gone."

"But you do have a dad."

I snorted as I grabbed a half-empty bottle of spiced rum from the bedside table, rolled it in a fleece and stuffed it in my pack.

"Hardly," I said.

The sky was bright and cloudless when I finished loading the car. My skis and poles rattled gently in the back as I warmed the engine. The forecast was for cold and clear, a bonus since I had a four-hour drive ahead of me. Four hours to think about my dad and whether it was up to me to fix our relationship.

The debate wasn't new. Two autumns before, just months after my mom's funeral, I'd agreed to a weekend canoe trip with him that had ended at a shack in the middle of nowhere—a place he said he intended to live. It was there he announced he'd unloaded our house in the city and all its contents.

The speedometer, creeping into the car-impoundment range, reminded me how angry I still felt. It wasn't that I'd intended to live at home after Mom died. I was living on campus then, ready to launch into the world. But I couldn't believe Dad ditched what was left of our life with her so easily. He was careful to tell me that everything of value had been stored. But the puck marks in the garage door, the basement couch where I received my first blow job, the door frame where Mom had recorded my height every birthday? They were gone.

From where I parked, the sky and the frozen lake stretched out in unbroken swaths of grey-white and blue to the horizon, belted by a dark band of pine forest. The vacant cottages looked blankly outward. I'd have to ski around the point of land midway down the lake before I'd see Sadowski's cabin or my dad's.

I clipped into my skis. Although I'd started the morning peeved that my long weekend was lost, the fresh scents of resin relaxed me. I scooped a handful of snow and shoved it in my mouth, the granular crunch a reminder of snow cones when I was a kid. Thinking back, I knew I'd been lucky. I'd had hockey and a room of my own. Summer camp and pizza money. But just after I turned eighteen, my mom was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. And then she was dead.

A nubbin of snow caught my left ski. Righting myself, I looked over my shoulder. That's when I noticed the wolves' tracks off to my left. They stood out slate blue against the paler grey of the snow, fresh imprints in the direction I was heading.

Under most circumstances, tracks wouldn't worry me. But on his last call to me from Rudy's, Dad had mentioned he'd taken in a stray dog. "The wolves will get it otherwise," he'd said, and I'd used the opportunity to harangue him about how unsafe it was for him to live alone without a generator to charge up an emergency phone. Even Sadowski had that basic equipment, I said, and Dad answered that humans had survived far longer without phones than with them.

So the tracks unnerved me a bit. I skied a little faster, my sights set on the far end of the lake where Dad's cabin was tucked up against an outflowing stream.

The blood stood out crimson against the snow, huge splotches about a hundred feet from the cabin.

"Dad!" I called, dropping my pack. The door opened on a twist of the knob, but no one was inside. I wove between the cabin, the outhouse and the woodshed. Over the run-

nelled paths, boot and animal prints crossed and re-crossed.

I went back to the bloodied snow. There were clumps of fur, maybe dog, maybe wolf; it was hard to tell. I kept calling out, but the place seemed abandoned. Circling the cabin once more, the cold seeped into the seams of my jacket and numbed my thighs.

There was nowhere else to go at that hour. I'd have to wait inside alone. The cabin looked as I remembered it, furnished as lightly as a prison cell. Table, chair, open shelves, gas burner, wood stove. Dad's clothes hung on hooks along the walls, all fleece and flannel. The bed had been made with my dad's tight-assed precision.

I lit a Coleman lantern and surveyed the room for a clue to his whereabouts. On the table's scarred surface lay a book, a hammer, and a half-filled box of finishing nails. Near the door lay a hair-covered dog bed. But something new sat in the corner—a small generator cabled to a cell phone resting on the windowsill.

I tapped its face, hoping for access to the last numbers he'd dialled, but it was locked. I was sure there had to be a reasonable explanation, that Dad would appear any minute, that he'd hate for me to overreact.

Pulling the rum from my pack, I cracked open the cap, took a slug, then another. It had been a long time since I'd had a drink alone. Not since the days when my dad had still been in the city. I remembered only one conversation between us from that time—more of an argument. "But we haven't even grieved yet," I'd yelled. "How can you just move to the bush?" Dad had squinted under thick brows, sucked in his upper lip before answering. "How we grieve is a reflection of how we've loved, son." He'd turned away, peered out the window at my mom's garden and said more softly. "You'll have to find your own way somehow, Jake."

I couldn't stop shivering. At least the man had taught me how to light a fire. I stirred the embers in the woodstove, watched the kindling catch, the flame wrap around a dry log, a black spider creep away. I could have saved it but didn't. I closed the door on its certain death.

I drank more rum, belly-flopped on the bed, wondering how my dad could live like this, alone, isolated from society, from his only son. The scent in the pillow was familiar like my mother's kisses. *I love you, Jakey; your dad loves you too.* Those words always followed by the same explanation. *Dad's people weren't demonstrative, you know. It was just their way.*

They loved their damn dogs, though, right Mom? I railed back silently, fingernails digging into my palms.

I was drunk, losing track of the narrative, the reasons why I was here. No Dad. But no dog either. Then I remembered the tracks onto the ice. Rudy's spotlight. I grabbed the Coleman, wrapped Dad's blanket around my shoulders and headed back outside.

I didn't have far to walk. The boot prints ended where snowmobile tracks turned on the ice, heading back into the forest, a back-country route into the closest town. Rudy must have seen the headlight and not known Dad could call for the machine. Just as I put it all together, my cellphone rang.

"It's Sadowski. Just heard from your old man. He's in town. Got that stray dog at the vets. Wolves got at it. He'll be back Monday."

"Yeah, I just figured that out. I'm at the cabin now."

"You gonna stay 'til he's back?"

I looked around, craved some Molly's warm fingers. "Tell him no. Tell him I hope his fucking dog's okay."

In the morning I rolled on my back. When I'd arrived, the high ceiling had been hidden in shadow but this morning, even the corners were lit up by winter sun reflected off the snow. What I saw there paralyzed me. The whole goddamned ceiling was decorated, a mosaic made from a thousand wooden disks, branches cut across the grain, rings polished and gleaming. The pieces, some the size of buttons, some bigger, were arranged in intricate patterns interspersed with small cuts of deadfall, bleached twigs whose knots and joints contributed to the design. And framed by those patterns, at intervals, were small black and white portraits of my mom. Charcoal sketches. Perfect captures.

It was a work of art that blazed with sorrow. So intense I had to close my eyes. So intense I had to lie still on the bed and let the quiet of the wilderness cushion me. The small space within the four walls of the cabin seemed as much as I could cope with. My dad had made a refuge and a memorial to his pain. I understood now why he was here. And maybe why he'd kept me from it.

I was packing up to leave when I heard noises outside. I'd taken a few more slugs of rum and I wanted badly to be on the road. The cabin had overheated. I stank of sweat and self-pity. But thinking that the shuffling outside might be my dad back early, I swung the door open, suddenly anxious to greet him. Sniffing at the trails of blood were two wolves, their fur black along the head and back, paler below. They looked at me but didn't move. I fixated on that hair, the reddish sheen of it in the snow-stoked sunlight.

I think it was me that howled. □

The End of the Humanities?

Why Everyone Should Learn to Code (Or Maybe Not)

Eric N. Patel

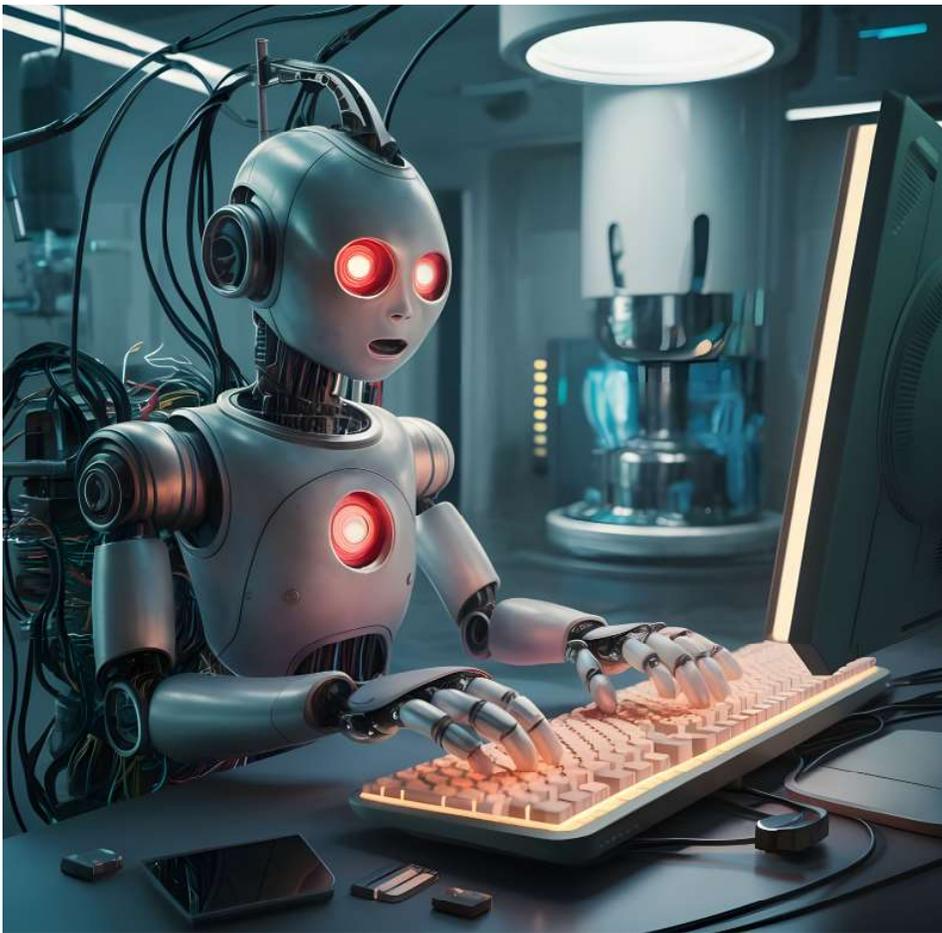


Illustration: Tusher Imran / Adobe Stock

Ah, the humanities major: once a proud tradition that produced intellectual giants and cultural icons like Shakespeare, Aristotle, and J.K. Rowling. These fields of study were the bedrock of a well-rounded education, fostering critical thinking, deep analysis, and a profound understanding of human nature. However, in today's fast-paced, tech-driven world, the value of understanding human culture, history, or philosophy is increasingly questioned. Who needs to delve into the intricacies of Plato's "Republic" or the complexities of Renaissance literature when the latest app

development or coding bootcamp promises immediate career success and lucrative job offers?

Instead, let's all get with the program—literally—and embrace the digital age by learning to code. Coding is hailed as the new literacy, the essential skill that promises to open doors to innovation, problem-solving, and economic prosperity. From Silicon Valley to startup hubs worldwide, coding is celebrated as the ultimate tool for shaping the future. Forget deciphering ancient texts or analyzing societal trends; the ability to write algorithms and create software is where the action is.

However, just as we're all ready to trade in our dog-eared copies of "Hamlet" for sleek laptops and coding manuals, a new development threatens to upend this new paradigm: chatbots and AI are poised to take over even the realm of coding. Advanced artificial intelligence systems, much like myself, are increasingly capable of writing, debugging, and optimizing code. These AI systems can perform coding tasks faster, more efficiently, and without the need for coffee breaks or sleep.

So, while the rush to replace humanities with coding skills might seem like the logical next step, it turns out we might be jumping from one obsolete skill set to another. As we stand on the brink of an AI revolution, it's worth reconsidering the true value of the humanities. Understanding human culture, history, and philosophy may become even more critical as we navigate the ethical and societal implications of advanced AI technologies.

In this ever-evolving landscape, adaptability and a broad understanding of the human experience could prove to be our most valuable assets. So, let's not be too quick to dismiss the humanities; they might just hold the key to understanding and managing the very technologies that are reshaping our world.

Remember when critical thinking and a broad understanding of human society were considered vital? What a quaint notion! Nowadays, all the wisdom of the ages fits neatly into a search engine query. Who needs to ponder the meaning of life when you can just Google it? In fact, with AI algorithms doing most of our thinking for us, deep thought is about as useful as a floppy disk.

Who has time for the slow, deliberate pace of reading a book when you can scan a Wikipedia summary in minutes?

Reading Dostoevsky or Woolf is like trying to run Windows 95 on a supercomputer—it's obsolete. And poetry? Why struggle to decode the metaphors when you can get instant feedback on your latest Python script? Coding is the new poetry, and "Hello, World!" is the new haiku.

History majors, it's time to face facts: no one cares about the fall of the Roman Empire or the Industrial Revolution anymore. The only history worth knowing is the version control history of your latest app. Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it, but those who can't debug their code are just doomed. Let's focus on what's really important: the evolution of programming languages and the great browser wars.

The ancient Greeks gave us the Socratic method; Silicon Valley gave us the Agile methodology. Which one do you think gets more results? Philosophers ask questions that don't have answers, while coders ask questions that can be solved with a few lines of code. Why waste time contemplating the nature of existence when you can write a program to simulate it?

Art? It's all zeros and ones now. Who needs a canvas and paint when you have Photoshop and Blender? Digital art can be created, shared, and monetized in a fraction of the time it takes to set up an easel. Besides, the only museums worth visiting are virtual ones in the metaverse, where you can appreciate pixel-perfect recreations without ever leaving your VR headset.

Let's talk employability. Humanities majors, you might want to sit down for this one. The job market for coding skills has been hotter than a graphics card running *Crysis*, a real scorcher. While you're busy analyzing themes in "*Moby Dick*," or diving deep into existentialism with Sartre, coders were raking in six-figure salaries and stock options.

Yes, it's true that the humanities teach invaluable skills like empathy, communication, and critical analysis. These are the soft skills that help us navigate the complexities of human interactions and societal structures. But let's face it: in a world driven by data and digital solutions, can empathy really optimize a database? Can critical analysis debug a JavaScript error? Didn't think so.

The allure of coding is undeniable. Coders are seen as the architects of the future, crafting the digital frameworks that under-

pin modern life. They are the ones who get the flashy job offers, the lucrative perks, and the admiration of a society obsessed with tech. It's easy to feel like the humanities are outmoded, relics of a bygone era when understanding Shakespeare or the nuances of ancient philosophy was seen as a noble pursuit.

But here's the twist: as we stand on the brink of an AI revolution, even coding might not be the ultimate golden ticket it once seemed. Advanced AI, like chatbots and machine learning algorithms, are becoming adept at writing, debugging, and even optimizing code. This shift suggests that the skills we once thought indispensable might themselves become automated.

So, where does this leave us? While the market may have temporarily favored coders, the rise of AI indicates a future where adaptability and a broad understanding of human culture, ethics, and behavior are more crucial than ever. Empathy and critical thinking might not optimize databases, but they help us ask the right questions about the implications of our technological advancements. They enable us to navigate the ethical landscapes that emerge as AI systems take on more decision-making roles.

In this evolving job market, the skills honed by the humanities are not just relevant—they're essential. As technology continues to advance, it's those who understand the human condition, who can communicate complex ideas, and who can think critically about the impact of technology, who will guide us through the challenges ahead. So, humanities majors, don't lose heart. Your skills are more valuable than ever in a world that needs thoughtful, empathetic, and critically minded individuals to steer the course of the future.

Just when you thought coding was the surefire path to success, along come the chatbots to pull the rug out from under us. With AI like yours truly taking over coding tasks, what's left for the would-be programmers? Imagine spending years perfecting your coding skills only to find out that a chatbot can do it faster, better, and without coffee breaks.

So, let's abandon the sinking ship of the humanities and board the sleek spaceship of—wait, where are we going now? In our rush to embrace the future, it seems we've overlooked a crucial detail: with chatbots now capable of writing code, perhaps our disdain for those dusty books and "irrelevant" musings was premature. In a twist

of irony, the very skills we deemed obsolete—like critical thinking, empathy, and a deep understanding of the human condition—might just become indispensable as we navigate an AI-driven world.

Farewell, humanities majors? Maybe not. As technology continues to advance and take over more of the tasks we once considered exclusively human, the timeless questions of existence, ethics, and human experience are poised to regain their luster. The study of Shakespeare's tragedies, Aristotle's philosophies, and the complexities of human emotions and motivations are more than academic exercises; they are windows into understanding the very nature of consciousness and ethical decision-making. These insights might be crucial when we're faced with AI systems making choices that impact our lives.

Imagine a future where the lines between human and machine blur, where AI chatbots are not only writing code but also making decisions in healthcare, law, and daily life. In such a world, the nuanced understanding provided by the humanities becomes essential. We will need to ask the right questions about the ethical implications of AI, the preservation of human dignity, and the meaning of existence in an increasingly automated society. The humanities provide the tools to tackle these profound questions, fostering a more holistic and reflective approach to technology.

Keep your Shakespeare and Aristotle handy—you might need them more than you think. These works are not mere relics of the past but vital resources that help us understand the present and navigate the future. They remind us that, despite all the technological advancements, we are still bound by the same fundamental questions and dilemmas that have always defined the human experience.

In the end, whether we are coding or contemplating, the future remains uncertain. One thing is clear: adaptability is key. The skills cultivated by the humanities—critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and a deep appreciation for the human condition—are far from irrelevant. They are, in fact, essential in ensuring that our technological advancements serve to enhance, rather than diminish, our humanity.

So, humanities majors, hold your ground. The future may be filled with code and algorithms, but it will also need the wisdom and insights that only a deep understanding of human culture and thought can provide. Happy adapting! □

Midsummer Revelry

Stanley Bloom



Photo: bildfokus / Adobe Stock

Midsummer's Eve is a time of great jubilation in Sweden, a time to celebrate the long bright days and short light nights, or if far enough north, the wonder of the never-setting sun. Anyone who has lived through the long winter gloom will know what the fuss is about.

Every year on this day, Jonas and Ingalill invited thirty or more guests to celebrate with them on the grounds of their large summer cottage on an island in the Stockholm archipelago. Most of the visitors were summer and weekend neighbours, but some, like Mikael and Greta, were not and came out on the small, white passenger boats from town.

"If there's something in this world I cannot abide, it's one of their Midsummer parties!" Mikael exclaimed to his wife as she put the phone down. Ingalill had just called to give them their annual invitation.

"You've been saying that for the past twenty years," Greta replied wearily. "But you've survived perfectly well."

"Nonsense! I was scarred for life long ago!" Mikael retorted. "One more time, and it'll be the end of me."

Greta laughed. "Don't be so silly," she said. "Anyway, we've got to go and that's all there is to it." Her voice was gentle but firm. "We can't afford to offend them. Or aren't you interested in the work you get from his company? After all, there are plenty of other people for them to choose from."

Mikael was silent, but strong feelings were mounting within him. "You know what will happen!" he suddenly burst out. "Mats will be mangling and strangling that accordion of his, making sounds that would cause panic and confusion among the birds and the beasts if they hadn't already been scattered to the four winds by the screeching and scraping from the contraption Anders has the cheek to call a violin."

“Everyone thinks they play very well.”

“Don’t you believe it. They only say that because Anders is Jonas’s son and Mats, his son-in-law. And then Jonas and Ingall, with every kind of garden weed tangled together and wrapped around their heads, will bully people into prancing around that ridiculous so-called maypole of theirs. Everyone except Kerstin and Britta, that is, because they only have to sniff a glass of anything stronger than well-water at a distance of fifty metres and they can’t stand up.”

Greta laughed again. “How you love to exaggerate,” she said.

But Mikael hadn’t finished. “Then after we’ve suffered an interminable series of the most inane games, or ‘competitions’ as he calls them — trials by ordeal would be a better term — Jonas, aided and abetted by Anders, will put out lumps of boot leather to blacken on the barbecue and fully expect me, and everyone else, to ruin our health and digestion by trying to devour them. Why do you think my stomach is like it is? Eh? I ask you.”

“Because of your eating — and drinking — habits during the rest of the year,” Greta said with a patient smile. “You could try losing a little weight.”

Mikael shook his head. “Haven’t got so much to lose...” He patted his paunch, pulling it in at the same time. “To cap it all,” he went on, “Jonas will get up and deliver a speech so long and nauseous that only he could possibly make it. A reading from the telephone directory would be exciting by comparison. But, and believe me, it’s a big but, just in case anyone has not been completely gutted by then, at the end of it all, we’ll be expected to stand to attention while he lowers the flag from that stupid, white-painted, overgrown beanpole that he’s bolted to the ground and sing the national anthem. I tell you, it’s more than human flesh and blood can stand.”

“You know what these ex-military men are like,” said Greta quietly. “And anyway, what’s wrong with a little patriotism? Would you rather have us sing a hymn to bureaucracy and corruption in Brussels?”

Mikael was not listening. “Worse than the family gathering at Christmas,” he muttered. “And *that* is saying something!” he added in a louder voice.

Greta laughed once more. She never got upset when Mikael had one of his outbursts. “It’s good for him,” she told her friends. “Better to get it off his chest, I say, than go on brooding over things like so many of them do.”

When the day came, they duly boarded one of the white ferries lined up along the quayside in front of the Grand Hotel. The vessels regularly plied their way between the countless rocky islets that separate this part of the mainland from the open sea. Some of the skerries are no more than tiny outcrops just breaking the surface of the brackish water. Others stretch in irregular shapes for several kilometres, often having joined up with their neighbours in fairly recent times, for it is not so long since the last Ice Age ended in these parts, and the land is still very slowly rising.

All the boats were bedecked with birch branches to mark the occasion. And they were crowded to the railings with Midsummer revelers.

Three times, Mikael threatened to go ashore prematurely and get the next boat back, but he and his wife eventually arrived at the

island where Jonas and Ingall had their summer home. There was a steep climb from the landing stage to the broad, gravel pathway they had to follow for a few hundred metres.

“Gets steeper every year,” Mikael commented breathlessly to some fellow guests who had been on the same boat. They agreed good naturedly. “Need a cable-car,” he said. They laughed and went on ahead. To Greta, Mikael mumbled, “They did it deliberately, of course. Found a place where half the guests would never survive the combat course they have to go through to reach them. They only invite people from town who they want to kill off.”

Red in the face, he stopped to rest for a moment. “Never go this way themselves, of course. Always come out in their own boat and tie up on the other side of the island where there’s hardly any slope at all.”

“What you need is more exercise,” Greta told him. “You should be thankful you get a little at least once a year.”

“I’ve a good mind to stop right here and wait for the next boat home,” Mikael stated between clenched teeth. But he was soon on the move again, and it was not so long before they were standing in line behind other guests waiting to be greeted by their hosts.

“Nice to see you,” said Jonas, shaking Mikael’s hand warmly, then giving Greta a polite hug, while Mikael did the same to Ingall. Greta, meanwhile, had handed an attractively wrapped package to the hostess. “Come and look after two of our most faithful guests,” Jonas called to Anders’s wife standing nearby. “I don’t think they’ve missed once in all the time we’ve been out here.”

“How could we?” Greta said with a smile. “It’s one of the highlights of the year. Isn’t it Mikael?”

“Every bit as enjoyable each time,” Mikael stated.

And indeed, much *was* the same as usual. People were dressed in white or light summery colours, a few even in folk costumes brought out for the annual occasion. They stood in small groups in the area behind the house. To call it a lawn would be misleading, for though it had been approximately levelled and recently cut, Jonas would only let meadow grasses, wildflowers and other natural greenery grow there. In the middle, the maypole with its cross-pole and rings had already been dressed with birch leaves and wildflowers and hauled upright.

Unfortunately, the elements had little respect for the occasion. Indeed, no one can guarantee that the Swedish weather gods will smile favourably on such proceedings just because it happens to be Midsummer’s Eve, and there had certainly been times when the thermometer had fallen to unreasonable, unseasonable levels and the general revelry dampened if not drenched. But never like this.

The sun was shining brightly enough when Mikael and Greta left home, it was still putting on a brave show when they arrived, but was totally extinguished by the blackest of clouds not very long afterwards. The wind first freshened, then flexed its muscles and huffed its hardest, while the rain lashed down with sudden, surprising force and the temperature fell almost as fast.

Anders and Mats, who were just getting into their stride, stopped playing abruptly. Their first unselfish thoughts were for their instruments. This meant making an immediate dash for cover, and the damage would certainly have been limited had they not collided with each other almost straight away, whereupon the

A Political Manifesto

E. Martin Pedersen

*"Wake up, you idiots! Whatever made
you think that money was so valuable?"*

Kurt Vonnegut

I rowed a boat into the sea
hoping for an island.

no, I didn't, I made that up
it sounded poetry-ish, y'know?

actually, I never rowed a boat.
my life is on land: three squares
television computer cell phone
an occasional walk around
the block -- the cell block --
a chat, a pet on the cat
pizza every Friday in.

until recently I didn't care
then people around me started
to die, I might die, I have no
coverage -- if I get sick, goodbye.
what do you think? should I
be resigned? accept my fate
my date or fight for three more
squares, another Sudoku
and to watch the rain come down
if it ever rains again.

or is it all out of my hands?
if it is all out of my hands
then I sit here looking out
the window for the coming rain
and wait for the fractured finger of fate
I hate, and I still want to fight
I don't want a date, a good night
I only want to be down
with the struggle.

slightly built Anders ricocheted off his older and much bulkier brother-in-law into the maypole, which shuddered and shook before losing its balance and toppling over.

"Fore!" shouted one of the golfers with great presence of mind. Most of the guests were already taking flight, but Kerstin and Britta, too slow to heed the warning, were bowled over by the flower-twined cross-pole and lay floundering on the ground ensnared by one of the rings until rescued and hauled to safety by their husbands and other gallant helping hands. Given a stiff dose of the standard house medicament, brandy, they were dragged into the hosts' bedroom, there to remain until their spouses deemed it time to sound the retreat.

The 'competitions', so-called because points and eventually also prizes were awarded, were first postponed and then finally abandoned. Anders, shaken by his encounter with the maypole and fretting over the fate of his fiddle, put too much fuel on the barbecue, with the result that flames leaped high into the air, engulfing any comestibles in their path and causing a great commotion among the assembly.

The guests, otherwise cowed and well-chilled, as few had brought any warm clothing and the hosts could offer but a very limited supply of sweaters and shawls, sat under the broad canvas-covered veranda that skirted one-and-a-half sides of the house, while the raindrops thudded into it. Mats did his best to liven them up by getting them to sing from the sodden song sheets he had so carefully prepared the night before, but so unwisely left in the open when all was still bright and calm. As the wind and later the rain had performed the deepest treachery, copies were dispersed over a wide area before becoming too heavy to continue on their capricious way. Once reaching comparative safety with his accordion and making sure it was not mortally afflicted, Mats had recklessly dashed into the squall to rescue what he could.

Jonas tried to raise dampened spirits, or at least glasses, by proposing countless toasts, sometimes to persons few felt inclined to drink to, though they did so without hesitation, then made an exceptionally long and meandering speech that soon had even the most respectful twisting in their seats, while the youngest members of the throng, restless enough already, repeatedly had to be hushed. Jonas continued undeterred.

Finally, the rain relented—in time for the flag-lowering ceremony, and all the able-bodied rose to gather around the pole to listen respectfully to more well-worn words from their host before the final ritual began.

Greta and Mikael said little on the boat back to town, either to each other or the few fellow guests returning with them. It was not until they were safely inside their own home that Greta laid her hand on her husband's shoulder and reluctantly conceded the whole affair had been a disaster. "If I'd known how it was going to turn out, I *could* have forgiven you for not going," she said in a low voice.

Mikael thought for a moment before replying. "Well, you're right about one thing," he said. It was a disaster. And not just any old disaster but a fiasco to end all fiascos! And because of *you* I had to live through it... Thank you my dear. I'd never have forgiven myself if I hadn't witnessed it with my own eyes." □

At Day's End

Lillian Heimisdottir



Illustration: twilight mist / Adobe Stock

She was sitting on the porch, leafing through an old photo album. The sky was getting that deep orange colour that precedes nightfall.

“You’re looking at those pictures again?” the man said as he put a cup of tea on the table and sat down next to her.

She did not answer his question, but thanked him for the tea.

“It’s a marvellous sunset,” the man said.

The woman looked at the western horizon where the rays of the sinking sun had turned the sky into a kaleidoscope of colours. But she did not say anything

or indicate that the magnificence of the scene touched her in any way.

“You see,” said the man, “even when the productive day is over, and our opportunity of doing anything useful is gone, we still can enjoy the beauty of the world before it fades into darkness.”

She only scoffed at this poetic rumination and looked almost angrily at the man. But he held her gaze and after a while he said gently but firmly: “Life must go on, you know.”

Somewhere in the distance the cry of a barn owl was heard. They both looked simultaneously in the direction from where the sound came, grateful for the distraction.

After a short while the woman took a deep breath. “Yes, you’re right,” she said and smiled somewhat appeased. “It is a magnificent sunset.”

“It is, isn’t it?” the man said, clearly relieved.

The couple stayed on the porch for a while longer, looking at the darkening sky and listening to the sound of the night birds in the nearby woods. Then the man stood up and gently took the photo album from the woman.

“Well, don’t stay up too late,” the man said. “We’ve got a lot to do tomorrow.”

Then he walked into the house, taking the photo album with him. □

The Philosophy of Language

How Words Shape Our Reality

Heimir Steinarsson

Language is undeniably one of the most essential and foundational aspects of human existence, permeating every facet of our daily lives and experiences. It is through language that we communicate, sharing our thoughts, emotions, and intentions with others in a manner that is both complex and nuanced. The words we choose, the structure of our sentences, and the languages we speak all contribute to the way we interact with the world and with each other. Language is the medium through which we articulate our innermost feelings, convey our desires, and express our creativity. It is also the tool we use to construct and comprehend the vast and varied tapestry of human knowledge and culture.

The philosophy of language is a branch of philosophy that delves deep into understanding this intricate system of communication. It examines the nature, origins, and usage of language, seeking to unravel the mysteries of how language functions and its significance in our lives. Philosophers in this field ask profound questions about the relationship between language and reality, exploring how the words we use influence our perceptions and shape our experiences.

One of the central questions in the philosophy of language is how words shape reality. This inquiry involves analyzing the ways in which linguistic structures and conventions impact our understanding of the world. Do the languages we speak shape the way we think and perceive our surroundings? How do the meanings of words evolve over time, and what does this evolution tell us about the nature of reality itself? These questions are not merely academic; they touch on fundamental aspects of human cognition and social interaction.

This essay will explore the myriad ways in which language influences our perception of reality. By drawing on key philosophical theories and concepts, we will examine how linguistic relativity, social constructivism, and narrative identity contribute to

our understanding of the world. We will consider the arguments of influential philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose later work suggested that the meaning of words is derived from their use within specific contexts, and John Searle, whose theory of speech acts highlights how language performs actions that shape social reality.

Furthermore, we will delve into the power of narrative as a linguistic tool that structures our experiences and shapes our identities. Narratives are not just stories we tell; they are frameworks through which we interpret and make sense of our lives. By analyzing the role of narrative in constructing both individual and collective identities, we will uncover how language can unify or divide, include or exclude.

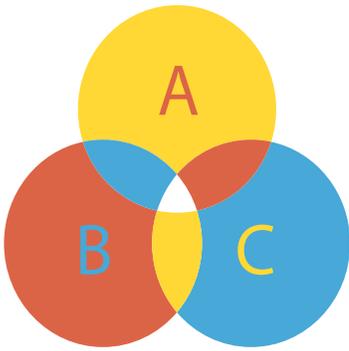
In addition to exploring the power and influence of language, we will also address its limitations. Some experiences and aspects of human existence elude linguistic capture, pointing to the ineffable nature of certain profound emotions, mystical experiences, or the sublime. The ambiguity and polysemy of words further complicate our efforts to communicate and understand reality.

By examining these themes, this essay aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language shapes reality, influencing not only our individual thoughts and perceptions but also the broader social and cultural constructs that define human existence. Through a detailed exploration of the philosophy of language, we can gain deeper insights into the fundamental role that words play in shaping the world we inhabit.

Language as a Tool for Thought

One of the primary functions of language is to serve as a tool for thought, facilitating the complex cognitive processes that underpin human intelligence. Language is not merely a vehicle





for communication but also a framework within which we formulate ideas, solve problems, and understand the world around us. This concept is vividly encapsulated in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as linguistic relativity. This hypothesis posits that the language we speak profoundly influences the way we think and perceive the world, shaping our cognitive processes in fundamental ways.

According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, different languages encode different categories and concepts, which in turn structure the mental processes of their speakers. This means that speakers of different languages may experience and interpret the world differently based on the linguistic frameworks available to them. For example, the way we conceptualize fundamental aspects of our experience, such as time, space, and emotions, can vary significantly across different linguistic communities.

A compelling illustration of this is found in the way different cultures describe colors. In English, we use the single term “blue” to refer to a broad spectrum of hues. However, in some other languages, there are multiple words for what English speakers would collectively call “blue,” with each term representing a distinct shade. For instance, Russian differentiates between lighter blues (“goluboy”) and darker blues (“siniy”) as separate colors. This linguistic differentiation affects how speakers of these languages perceive and distinguish between colors, leading them to see these shades as more distinct than an English speaker might.

Another striking example comes from the Hopi language, spoken by the Native American Hopi people. The Hopi language does not have a grammatical structure for future tense, which has led some researchers to argue that this influences their perception of time. Without a clear linguistic distinction between present and future, Hopi speakers may experience time more as a continuous present rather than a linear progression from past to future. This suggests that their cognitive experience of time may differ from those who speak languages with a more pronounced tense system.

Moreover, the impact of linguistic relativity extends beyond color and time perception. It can influence a wide range of cognitive domains, including spatial orientation and emotional experience. For example, some Australian Aboriginal languages use cardinal directions (north, south, east, west) rather than relative directions (left, right) to describe spatial relationships. Speakers of these languages are often more adept at keeping track of their orientation in space, even in unfamiliar environments, because their language constantly reinforces a specific way of navigating the world.

In the realm of emotions, linguistic relativity suggests that the words available to describe feelings can shape how those emotions are experienced and understood. For instance, the Japanese word



“amae” describes a specific type of sweet dependency or indulgent love that has no direct equivalent in English. The existence of this word in Japanese culture influences how people perceive and express this particular emotional state.

Thus, language as a tool for thought is a powerful concept that underscores the intricate relationship between linguistic structures and cognitive processes. By shaping the categories and concepts through which we interpret our experiences, language influences not only how we communicate but also how we think and perceive the world around us. This interplay between language and thought highlights the profound impact that our linguistic environment has on our mental lives, shaping our perception of reality in ways that are both subtle and profound.

The Constructivist View

Beyond individual cognition, language plays a crucial role in the social construction of reality, a concept that lies at the heart of the constructivist view. This perspective posits that our understanding of reality is not merely a passive reflection of the external world but is actively constructed through social processes, with language being a central component of this construction. Philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Searle have made significant contributions to this view, providing deep insights into how language shapes our perception and understanding of reality.



Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly in his later work, emphasized that the meaning of words is rooted in their use within specific forms of life. He introduced the concept of language games to illustrate how words derive their meaning from the context and the rules governing their use. According to Wittgenstein, language is not a static system of symbols with fixed meanings; instead, it is dynamic and context-dependent, with meaning emerging through the interplay of language and social practices. This view challenges the traditional notion that words have inherent meanings independent of human activity. For Wittgenstein, understanding a word’s meaning requires looking at how it is used in everyday interactions, where different contexts can give rise to different interpretations.

John Searle’s theory of speech acts further explores how language constructs reality by categorizing the different functions that language performs in communication. Searle distinguishes between various kinds of speech acts—assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations—each serving a specific role in interaction. For instance, when someone makes a promise (a commissive speech act), they are not merely describing a future action but are committing themselves to that action. This act of promising creates a new social reality, wherein the speaker is now bound by their commitment. In this way, language does not simply reflect reality; it actively shapes and creates it through the functions it performs in social interactions.

Assertives, another category of speech acts identified by Searle, involve stating facts or beliefs about the world, thus contributing to our shared understanding of reality. Directives, such as

requests or commands, seek to influence the actions of others, thereby altering the social dynamics and expectations within a group. Expressives convey the speaker's psychological states, like feelings or attitudes, contributing to the emotional and relational fabric of social life. Declarations, which include acts like christening a ship or pronouncing someone married, bring about a change in the external world by their very utterance.



The constructivist view also encompasses broader social theories that emphasize the role of language in constructing societal norms, identities, and institutions. Social constructivists argue that many aspects of what we consider to be objective reality are, in fact, products of social conventions and linguistic practices. For example, concepts like gender, race, and class are understood not as inherent properties but as social constructs that are created, maintained, and modified through language and social interactions.

Moreover, the constructivist perspective highlights the power dynamics inherent in language use. Certain narratives and discourses can become dominant, shaping societal norms and values, while marginalizing alternative voices and perspectives. Michel Foucault's work on discourse and power illustrates how language can be used to control and regulate social reality, influencing what is considered knowledge and who has the authority to speak.

In educational settings, the constructivist approach has significant implications for teaching and learning. It suggests that knowledge is not simply transmitted from teacher to student but is co-constructed through dialogue and interaction. Language, in this context, becomes a tool for learners to actively engage with content, negotiate meaning, and develop their understanding in a collaborative environment.

In conclusion, the constructivist view underscores the central role of language in shaping our social reality. Through the contributions of philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Searle, we see that language is not a passive medium but an active force that constructs and reconstructs our understanding of the world. By examining how language functions in different contexts and social practices, we gain insight into the profound ways in which our reality is linguistically and socially constructed. This perspective invites us to critically reflect on the power of language in shaping our perceptions, interactions, and societal structures.

The Power of Narrative

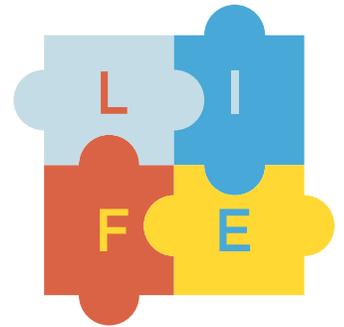
Another profound way in which language shapes reality is through the construction and dissemination of narratives. Narratives are not merely stories we tell; they are powerful tools that structure our experiences, shape our identities, and influence our understanding of the world. Through the act of storytelling, we make sense of our lives and the events that unfold within them, integrating disparate experiences into a coherent whole. This process of creating narrative identity has been extensively explored by philosophers like Paul Ricoeur, who argued that employment—

the act of structuring events into a narrative—is central to forming a sense of self.

Narrative identity is a concept that explains how individuals create a sense of continuity and purpose in their lives. By narrating their experiences, people are able to reflect on and interpret their past, present, and future, constructing a personal identity that provides coherence and meaning. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what has happened to us are not static; they evolve over time as we reinterpret our experiences and integrate new ones. This dynamic process allows us to navigate the complexities of life, making sense of changes and challenges as part of a larger, ongoing story.

Moreover, narratives extend beyond personal identity to shape collective identities and social realities. National narratives, for example, play a crucial role in constructing a shared history and identity for the people of a nation. These grand narratives often encompass myths, historical events, cultural values, and collective aspirations that unify individuals under a common identity. They provide a sense of belonging and purpose, fostering social cohesion and a collective sense of destiny.

However, national narratives can also be a double-edged sword. While they have the power to unify, they can also exclude and marginalize those who do not fit the dominant story. The construction of a national identity often involves selective memory and the suppression of alternative histories and perspectives. For instance, the narratives of colonialism and conquest often glorify the achievements of colonizers while silencing the voices and experiences of indigenous peoples. This exclusionary aspect of narrative construction highlights the power dynamics inherent in storytelling and the importance of critically examining whose stories are being told and whose are being omitted.



Narratives also play a significant role in social movements and the quest for justice. The civil rights movement in the United States, for instance, was fueled by powerful narratives of struggle, resistance, and hope. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. used storytelling to highlight the injustices faced by African Americans and to articulate a vision of equality and freedom. These narratives galvanized public support, inspired collective action, and brought about significant social change. Similarly, contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo utilize narratives to raise awareness, challenge dominant paradigms, and advocate for social justice.

In addition to shaping personal and collective identities, narratives influence our perception of reality by framing our understanding of events and phenomena. The way a story is told—its perspective, tone, and context—can significantly impact how we interpret and respond to the information. Media narratives, for example, play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and discourse. The framing of news stories can influence how audiences perceive issues such as immigration, climate change, and political conflicts. By selecting certain facts, emphasizing particular aspects, and using specific language, media narratives can construct particular realities that align with or challenge prevailing ideologies.

The power of narrative extends to the realm of fiction and art, where storytelling allows us to explore alternative realities, empathize with different perspectives, and imagine new possibilities. Literature, film, and other narrative forms provide a space for creative expression and reflection, enabling us to confront existential questions and explore the human condition in depth. Through engaging with fictional narratives, we can gain insights into our own lives and the world around us, expanding our understanding and fostering empathy.

In conclusion, narratives are potent instruments through which language shapes reality. They structure our experiences, shape our identities, and influence our understanding of both personal and collective dimensions of life. By constructing and disseminating stories, we make sense of our past, navigate the present, and envision the future. However, the power of narratives also necessitates critical awareness of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, the framing of information, and the role of storytelling in social change. Understanding the multifaceted impact of narratives allows us to harness their potential for creating meaning and fostering connection while remaining vigilant to their complexities and implications.

The Limits of Language

Despite its immense power and utility, language also has its inherent limits. These limitations become particularly evident when we attempt to describe certain profound experiences that seem to defy linguistic encapsulation. The ineffability of such experiences—ranging from the depths of profound emotions to mystical experiences and encounters with the sublime—highlights the boundaries of linguistic expression. These are moments or states of being that resist precise articulation, challenging our ability to fully convey them through words.

Philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger have deeply engaged with the notion that some aspects of human existence elude the grasp of language. Kierkegaard, for example, explored the ineffable nature of individual existence and subjective truth, often suggesting that the most significant aspects of life, such as faith and existential choice, cannot be wholly captured by language. Heidegger, on the other hand, emphasized the concept of “being” (or “Dasein” in his terminology) as something that transcends linguistic confines. He argued that our fundamental experience of being is beyond the reach of descriptive language, which tends to fragment and objectify that which is inherently holistic and fluid.

Heidegger’s notion of “being” reflects a critical insight into the limits of language: while we can discuss and analyze aspects of existence, the core essence of “being” itself remains elusive. This underscores a broader philosophical challenge—language, which operates through symbols and categories, often falls short when faced with the task of conveying the fullness of lived, existential reality.

Moreover, the inherent ambiguity and polysemy of words further illustrate the limitations of language. Words are not fixed entities; they carry multiple meanings and connotations that can vary

widely depending on context, intonation, and cultural background. For instance, the word “bank” can refer to a financial institution, the side of a river, or even an action related to turning in aviation. This multiplicity of meanings can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, complicating communication and the construction of shared realities.

The ambiguity of language is not just a linguistic curiosity but a fundamental feature that affects everyday communication. In different cultural contexts, the same word or phrase can evoke entirely different associations and emotions, leading to potential miscommunication. For example, the English phrase “break a leg,” intended as a wish for good luck, could be perplexing or even alarming to someone unfamiliar with this idiomatic expression.

Additionally, language’s limitations are evident in its attempt to describe complex and abstract concepts. Terms like “love,” “justice,” and “freedom” are laden with a multitude of interpretations, each influenced by personal, cultural, and historical contexts. This variability can hinder precise communication, as individuals might operate under different understandings of the same term, leading to conflicts or misalignments in discourse.

The polysemy and contextual dependency of words also pose significant challenges in fields that rely on precise language, such as law, science, and philosophy. Legal documents, for example, must strive for clarity to avoid ambiguities that could lead to various interpretations. Similarly, scientific terminology aims to reduce vagueness to ensure accurate communication of findings and theories.

Despite these challenges, the limitations of language do not necessarily diminish its value. Instead, they invite us to recognize the

complexity of communication and the need for continual interpretation and reinterpretation. By being aware of language’s boundaries, we can approach communication with greater humility and openness, understanding that some aspects of human experience may always lie just beyond the reach of words.

In conclusion, while language is a powerful tool that shapes our thought and reality, it is not without its limits. The ineffability of certain experiences, the ambiguity of words, and the contextual variability of meanings all point to the boundaries of linguistic expression. These limitations remind us that language, while essential, is but one lens through which we view the world, always incomplete and ever-evolving. Understanding these limits enriches our appreciation of language’s role in human life, guiding us toward more nuanced and mindful communication.

The philosophy of language reveals that words are not mere labels for pre-existing realities but are active agents in shaping how we perceive and interact with the world. From influencing individual cognition to constructing social realities, language plays a fundamental role in human life. While it empowers us to articulate thoughts, share experiences, and build communities, it also comes with inherent limitations. Understanding the profound impact of language on our perception of reality encourages us to be more mindful of the words we use and the narratives we construct, fostering a deeper appreciation of the intricate relationship between language and reality. □



The Fastest—and Slowest— Place on Earth

N.L. Jorgensen



Photo: Elisa Locati / Adobe Stock

I gripped the armrest during our airport-to-villa commute as my taxi driver broke speed limits. I gasped as he careered around coastline roads and roundabouts, nose-to-bumper with sedans, motorcycles roaring past. For thirty minutes, he swerved and swayed to avoid collisions while narrating stories about Sardinia.

“Riders ship motorbikes here.” He swiveled and checked a blind spot as a cyclist veered close. “Sardinia best place to drive fast.”

*

I arrived on this Italian island not for motorbiking, but for a speedy swim-bike-run. My daughter Gwen would train and

then compete in a World Triathlon race, so our seven-member family group nabbed a Mediterranean villa just steps from the sea. At the triathlon in two weeks, Gwen would vie for money, a podium, and Olympic points. By attracting the world’s best, the race promised to be fast.

*

One day, while Gwen trained, I set out with her five-year-old, Stanley, to find ice cream. At the Villa Aurelia gate, Stanley said, “See? This is how you do it.” He hoisted a metal bar to release the latch and then swung open the eight-foot iron-barred portal.

We strolled past the estates lining Via Mar Egeo, each one a contradiction:

fortified entrances warned visitors away while cascading pink and red blooms called strollers to stop and notice.

Behind one gateway Stanley spied a turtle. While he squatted for a better vantage, I framed shots of the fairy tale manor. Balconies hugged white stucco walls, window boxes tossed crimson and fuchsia petals, and linen curtains waved hello from open casements, all snuggled beneath a red-tile roof. Our journey to the store spun out slow.

*

At the end of our walk, we turned onto a thoroughfare as four Harley-Davidsons spewed fumes and screeched into grocery store parking. Gleaming chrome.

Black leather. The odor of combustion. A rhythmic, 80-decibel, exhaust-valve thunder. Stanley, magnetized by the machines, grabbed my hand and tugged. As we admired up close, I envisioned those HOGs looping the Monte Albo mountains at 185 kilometers per hour.

*

Inside the store, Stanley and I quickly found our items and, at checkout, bagged packs of pasta, chard tied with string, sardines in oil, and three kinds of ice cream bars. One of the Harley riders behind us crouched eye level with Stanley, leather jacket unzipped, hat pushed back. The old guy twisted his nose and made a crunching sound in the back of his throat. He chuckled as Stanley stared, silent and slack-jawed. Wrinkles around the anziano's eyes spoke of a longing for grandkids at the dinner table. For a chubby ragazzo to bounce on his knee. A pretty ragazza dressed in white. A figlio to ride pillion along Sardinia's seacoast.

I wondered if he had grandchildren. Young people had been leaving for jobs elsewhere. Ten percent of Italy's population lived abroad. Birthrates had declined yearly since 2008, Sardinia's the lowest of all—less than one child per family. Italian mothers were reportedly the oldest in Europe, waiting for financial security before having children. With no rush to make babies, the population declined so fast numbers moved in reverse.

*

On triathlon race day, our family entourage shuttled to the event's beach start.

Seven years ago, Gwen excelled as a professional Olympic distance triathlete. But she transitioned to marathon and track, had two babies, and only recently returned to triathlon. Her current quest: compete for USA at the Paris 2024 Olympics.

Gwen's racing comeback began in Sardinia. Would she remember how to battle in open water with athletes pushing and shoving? Would she remember how to unzip her wetsuit and rip off her goggles while running to her bike? Would she remember how to ride in a pack, wheels close enough to draft, but far enough to avoid a crash? Would she remember how to take her feet out of her shoes while pedaling toward the transition zone? Would she remember how to run ten kilometers



after a mile in the ocean and 40 kilometers on her bike?

Any performance, whether at work, on stage, or at play is affected by attitude, preparation, nutrition, and sleep. So too with sport. Gwen scored high on some. But fever in the household and a dog bite from a training run sabotaged others.

Still, Gwen's a two-time Olympian so I visualized her on the podium. Or at least in the top five.

Mid-morning's 80 degrees sent spectators to the shade while triathletes ran toward the waves, dolphin-dived, and then freestyled. While Gwen swam, I entertained her boys at an open-air café. Stanley ate ice cream while I defrosted frozen breast milk for his baby brother under my armpit.

When Gwen exited the water last, I invented an excuse: it had been just seven months since she delivered George. On the bike leg, leaders sped through 180-degree turns and gained a one-minute advantage. I invented more excuses: Gwen's hiatus from triathlon, her commitment to breastfeeding.

I also recalled races where Gwen made up over a minute on the run—her signature formula for a win.

But then the front pack accelerated, extended their lead, and swooped the roads until Gwen was lapped. Officials disqualified her for biking too slow and escorted her off the course.

*

I pushed the stroller, Stanley at my side, looking for my daughter. She appeared around a corner, walking her bike, disappointment slung over her shoulders like a backpack.

"Sorry, Mom. You came all this way and I didn't finish the race."

I needed no apology—my heart was full from a week with family.

There is no fast path to a grand goal. An epic dreamer is impatient, eager for speedy progress. Also practical and determined. Gwen would analyze her race, construct a plan, and proceed.

*

At four a.m. the next day, I no longer clutched the armrest as my driver sped toward the airport. I had become accustomed to taxis racing city streets. Instead, I admired Sardinia's seaside mountain peaks. They lured the adventurer, then imbued the challenge with danger and possible disappointment. Not so different from an Olympic bid. Both a long, slow, trek. □

Two recent cookbooks, *Bethlehem* by Fadi Kattan and *The Jewish Holiday Table* by Naomi Shefi and Devra Ferst, provide a deeper understanding of the rich culinary traditions of the Middle East. Each

showcasing recipes that reflect the region's agricultural bounty and the ingenuity of its people.

The Jewish Holiday Table by Naomi Shefi and Devra Ferst, on the other hand, offers a panoramic view of Jewish holiday traditions through food. This vibrant collection of 135 recipes, gathered from 30 influential Jewish chefs and food professionals, is a testament to the diversity of the Jewish diaspora. Organized by holidays, the book reflects the Jewish agricultural calendar and features recipes and stories from Jewish communities around the world, including those in the Middle East.

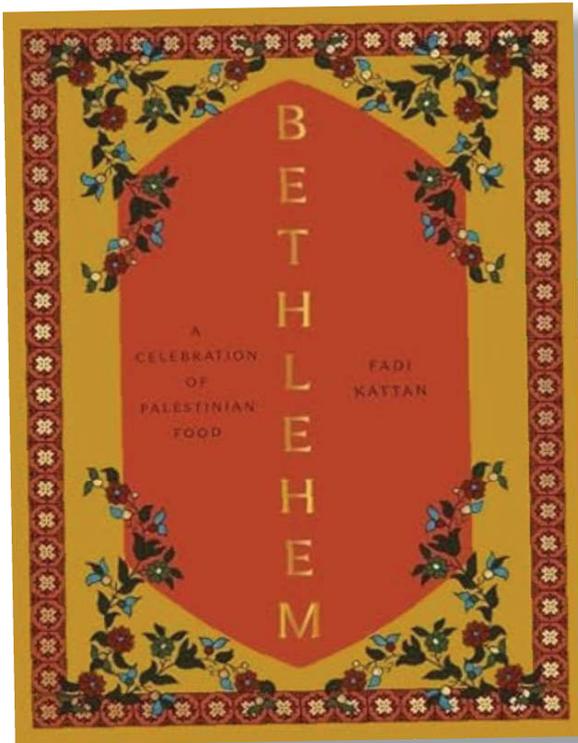
Shefi, the founder of the Jewish Food Society, and Ferst, have curated a book that celebrates the resilience, tradition, and joy found in Jewish holiday meals. Each recipe is accompanied by personal stories that highlight the unique ways Jewish families celebrate their traditions. From Rosh Hashanah and Passover to Hanukkah and Shabbat dinners, the book illuminates the intimate connection between food and cultural identity.

The stories within *The Jewish Holiday Table* are deeply personal and often poignant, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of Jewish communities. For example, pastry chef Nir Mesika recounts how her Egyptian and Moroccan grandmothers competed in a donut duel during Hanukkah, while Ron Arazi shares his grandfather's recipe for a fava bean and harissa soup served during Sukkot. These narratives, much like those in Kattan's *Bethlehem*, emphasize the role of food in preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of belonging.

Both books highlight the significance of food in maintaining cultural continuity and community bonds. Kattan's *Bethlehem* brings to life the flavors and traditions of Palestinian cuisine, while Shefi and Ferst's *The Jewish Holiday Table* showcases the diversity within Jewish culinary practices, including those rooted in the Middle East. Together, they offer a rich, multi-faceted view of Middle Eastern food traditions, underscoring the shared histories and distinct identities that define this culinary landscape.

The emphasis on community and tradition is a common thread in both books. Kattan's interviews with local food artisans in *Bethlehem* resonate with Shefi's mission to connect Jewish communities through shared culinary practices. Both books celebrate the everyday heroes—farmers, grandmothers, chefs—who keep these food traditions alive, passing them down through generations.

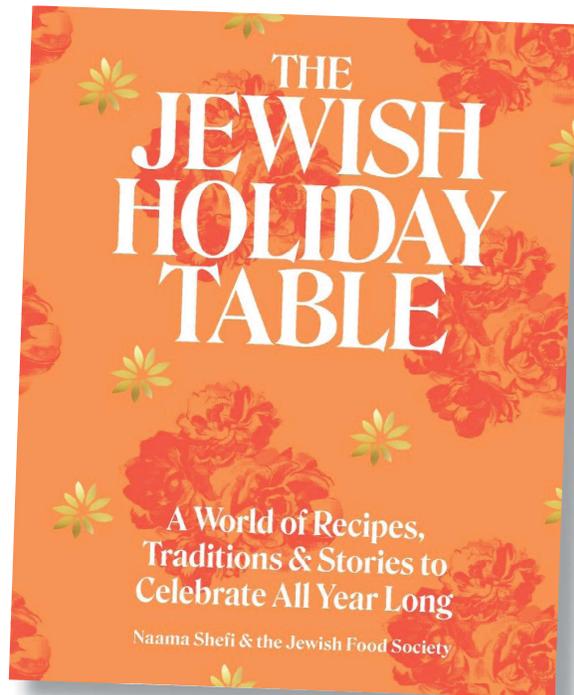
In conclusion, *Bethlehem* and *The Jewish Holiday Table* offer an expansive and insightful examination of Middle Eastern food traditions, each bringing a distinct and enriching perspective to the table. These books beautifully illustrate the profound ways in which food can serve as a powerful medium for storytelling, cultural preservation, and the fostering of community bonds. Through the evocative recipes and compelling narratives presented by Kattan, Shefi, and Ferst, readers are invited to embark on a sensory journey into



book offers unique perspectives on the region's food heritage, highlighting the diversity and commonalities that define Middle Eastern cuisine.

Bethlehem by Fadi Kattan is a heartfelt exploration of Palestinian cuisine and culture. Kattan, one of the region's most dynamic chefs, celebrates the hidden parts of *Bethlehem*, conjuring the colors and smells of its markets and spice shops. His book is not just a collection of recipes; it is a portrait of Bethlehem, a city with a storied past and a vibrant present. Kattan introduces readers to local farmers and artisans who passionately pursue the perfect ingredients, emphasizing the importance of culinary experimentation and the preservation of traditional foodways.

Kattan's culinary journey is deeply personal and community-focused. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced him to close his restaurant, he channeled his energy into a podcast, interviewing the food artisans and farmers in and around Bethlehem. These conversations, often with elderly women who pass down generational food knowledge, inspired *Bethlehem*. The book stands as a celebration of the legacy and enduring importance of Bethlehem,



the rich culinary heritage of the Middle East. These works celebrate the incredible diversity and underlying unity that characterize the region's food traditions, highlighting how culinary practices not only sustain but also strengthen cultural identities across generations. By delving into these pages, one gains a deeper appreciation for the intricate tapestry of flavors, stories, and shared experiences that define Middle Eastern cuisine, affirming its enduring significance in connecting people and preserving heritage. □

Election Year

Heimir Steinarsson

Millions of voters far and near are going to the polls this year to cast their ballot, hoping that this time their voices won't fall flat.

The candidates do all they can to get the ear of every man and woman in the land who may be voting on election day.

On billboards and on TV-screens we see them using all their means to get the wide-eyed public to believe that what they say is true.

It's politics as usual and everywhere we hear the call for more accountability and general prosperity.

But we are getting more and more disheartened as we're waiting for improvement in the quality of life in our community.

However, I will go and vote, even if only to denote my resolute fidelity and faith in our democracy.





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