

## **Room to Read Book group - report by Kate Bailey**

### **Runaway by Alice Monro**

This month we read a volume of short stories by Alice Monro, a Canadian author who died this year after writing and publishing collections of stories since her teenage years. She won the Man Booker International Prize for her life's work in 2009 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. Her books are often recommended by reviewers so the group decided to try short form fiction as an experiment - we mostly read modern and contemporary novels.

The response to this book was generally negative. The interlinked stories in 'Runaway' were considered to be well written, worthy examinations of intimate relationships. They contain an accumulation of details of intense emotions around unspoken family secrets, but with sparse story lines that seem to meander rather than become resolved. Characters cycle and recycle through different stories and periods of their lives; Monro returns to locations and people she'd written about before, constantly revising and updating earlier stories. There are no happy endings, as though the author doesn't much like her characters and is punishing them for their foolishness.

Some of the stories in 'Runaway' explore bleak moments of realisation when a passive wife learns that her marriage is never going to be the fairy tale she believed was possible. At their worst, these stories describe wretched relationships that conceal the distress experienced by female members of a family containing an abuser. One reader was left with a feeling of acute frustration by the depressing accounts of wasted lives, grim, painful relationships and distressed women. For example, it's hard to engage with a mother who fails to respond when her daughter goes missing, or a miserable wife who protects a controlling man who has done something unforgivable.

We also considered our personal responses to recent news about the sexual abuse of Monro's young daughter by her second husband, with whom Monro had decided to remain. Does this change our view of Monro's much-applauded literary output? And to what extent does knowledge of the life of any author or artist colour our appreciation of the work itself? These challenging questions generated a lively discussion and are likely to be raised again in future meetings ...

As for reading more short stories, the group agreed we will probably stick to novels ... the scores for 'Runaway' were 2.5 out of 5 for a recommendation to a book group and 1.5 for a recommendation to a friend.