

The Tremendous Importance of Ordinary Events

*An interview with Alice
Munro about two versions
of “Wood”*

Lisa Dickler Awano

Alice Munro's story "Wood" originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1980. Nearly thirty years later, the author, nearing her eightieth birthday, rewrote it, and included the new version (reprinted in this issue of *New Haven Review*) in her 2009 collection of stories, *Too Much Happiness*.

In both renderings of "Wood," Munro investigates issues central to her canon, such as the process of writing fiction. In her second version, Munro also develops a love story, and probes themes raised in *Too Much Happiness*, which explores ways people do or don't go on with their lives when they have lost the person or situation they thought they couldn't live without. I interviewed Munro about this collection and reviewed it in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, in October 2010, then interviewed her specifically about "Wood."

Why did I single out "Wood" for further study? First, its lyricism, characterizations and subject matter particularly stirred me—more than I can explain. "Wood" also exemplifies Munro's use of the specific geography of Southwest Ontario to write about universal human experiences. Finally, readers can easily access the earlier *New Yorker* version of "Wood," and can, by placing the two incarnations of the story side by side, experience the sense of recrafting the piece alongside Alice Munro.

For instance, we can witness what expansive change Munro achieved with relative economy. We can also observe Munro—poet and perfectionist—in action as she alters small details of the first version when writing the second, making sure every word in the story works for her: whether she is tightening an already powerful sentence; or trading in one adjective for another more precise one; or altering the rhythm of a line by tweaking it almost imperceptibly.

Equally important, we can see what parts of the first version Munro retained when she rewrote. For example, in an extended passage in both renditions of "Wood," Munro catalogues the kinds of

trees that Roy, the protagonist, encounters in the bush. At first, this may seem a digression, but in fact it is essential to the story.

While being interviewed, Munro, as in her writing, is highly conscious of both the importance of staying on task and of the need for spontaneity, which can lead to epiphany. One learns to trust her instincts, which sometimes appear at first to lead to a discussion slightly off topic, but invariably go to the heart of the literary matter.

The first time I interviewed Alice Munro, our talk immediately veered where I hadn't expected it to, and I thought we had better take up a topic I hadn't planned to get to until much later. My prepared pages went flying as I searched through my notes for the idea.

"All of my questions have gone out of order!" I confessed.

"That's probably a good sign!" Alice Munro replied.

I laid my notes aside.

—Lisa Dickler Awano

LDA: "Wood" was published in 1980 in *The New Yorker*, and according to your biographer, Robert Thacker, you were planning to include it in your collection, *The Moons of Jupiter*, which was published by Knopf in 1983.

AM: I was. And I decided it had not enough weight as a story. I thought that it was ... not minor, but it just didn't have enough layers to be interesting to *me*. And that's what has to happen—I have to be interested. I never think at all about the audience, which I think is probably true of most writers. We think of ourselves, and what interests *us* first.

When I wrote the first version, it was something that I was taking from life. I knew the people in the story. And I didn't want to probe much deeper with them, because all I got from them, in fact, is what is in the story—which is more or less a trick story—you know, about how it's himself that Roy is chasing after. But I didn't see any.... Believe me, I never do things like that because I think they

have deep meanings. I just think, *Well, he's chasing after himself, or ha, ha*. I don't think, *Oh ... my!*

LDA: Is that self-protective? Do you avoid thinking about the complexity of what you are aiming to do, so that you won't become intimidated by the enormity of it?

AM: Not really. It's because my mind doesn't work that way. I'm not an abstract thinker. I think in terms of just what you see and hear and what you do. And that interests me often quite enough. Well, it did in the first version of that story. Then I realized, when I read it over, that it really wasn't very interesting. I had given the story over at one time; I thought, *It's a good but old-fashioned story in which the plot runs pretty much without any particular surprises*.

And when I read it over, I felt something more in it; I felt it was *about* something that I hadn't realized before. That's what accounts for the changes. I could see what happened to Roy in the second [version of the] story happening to him, and more than that, I could see Lea, the woman. The major change [in the second version] is that Lea, Roy's wife, is suffering a depression, which began to interest me a lot. How did I come by this? I didn't think, *I need something more interesting....* It's never that easy. It's just that I began to think about the characters and think about what it's like for both of them, and they both began to go a lot deeper. Then I came up with the second version.

I think it was because during that time I had gotten older, and I began to see what happens often: The female character is someone who's led a practical, successful, unassuming life. Then she goes into a deep depression and it looks like nobody can help her. I was beginning to see in my real life that that could happen to people. That it isn't always intellectuals or people who are fond of the arts who get very depressed! And that, often, it's just a mystery why they are depressed—and sometimes a mystery how they get out of it. With Lea,

it's only partly a mystery, because she gets out of it to some degree by being concerned about somebody else, and knowing how to help him. But I think it isn't completely that by any means. I think it's a mystery: how do we feel bad and feel good? Of course, I'm not talking much about the various chemicals we can take. I had her taking chemicals and they weren't doing all that much.

LDA: She was trying everything.

AM: Probably, the lift that comes as she begins to get better is [from] being essential, being useful. I think that will continue; she'll get back to her old nature somehow.

LDA: What brought you back to "Wood" thirty years after you had published the first version?

AM: Total accident. I was looking for something else, and I came to that story and I didn't mean to start reading it but I did, and I could hardly remember it. As I read it, I began to be drawn to doing a second story. What captured me ... obviously I wanted to know what this did for the woman. I wanted also to make it stronger about the man, about his plight. And that's all, really. And as I rewrote the second version, I didn't ever look back at the other version. One terrible thing that can happen to a writer is you can find that the first version is better. So I never trust looking back.

LDA: Your collection, *The Moons of Jupiter*, was published when you were in your early fifties, and as you are now, you were moving from one stage of life into another. Many of the stories in that volume are about a person becoming middle-aged, and relationships changing or ending. The title story takes place as the protagonist's father is dying, and in that story the protagonist contemplates her relationships with her children, remembering them at all different ages. The protagonist thinks about difficulties that the children, now

grown, face as young adults, and the difficulties she herself has in communicating with them.

AM: Yes.

LDA: We have talked about the strong relationship among all your volumes of stories. Isn't there a particularly strong relationship between *The Moons of Jupiter* and *Too Much Happiness*?

AM: I wonder ... I hadn't thought of that. *The Moons of Jupiter* was the one where I really first got started on complicated, imperfect relations of adults.

LDA: It was a huge turning point.

AM: It was, wasn't it? From then on, I suppose, this is what I was interested in for a long time.

LDA: In *Too Much Happiness*, you're writing about how people do or don't go on with their lives when they have lost the person or situation they thought they couldn't live without.

AM: That's very astute of you. I hadn't thought of that, but that's true. People have to. And I suspect I will find more and more truth of this in older age: the things you can't bear to lose, you have to lose.

LDA: Because this connection exists between *The Moons of Jupiter* and *Too Much Happiness*, I find it especially exciting that "Wood," which almost but did not quite find its home in *The Moons of Jupiter*, should have beckoned to you to revisit and reimagine it now that you are again at a transitional time of life. When Roy, the protagonist of "Wood," realizes at the end of the first version of the story that he hasn't lost the job that he thought had been taken away from him, he allows himself a comforting delusion. Your last word in the

story is Roy's thought, "Safe." But your readers know that neither anyone nor anything is ever really "safe" in an Alice Munro story.

AM: I do think that adult life—I don't know when it starts, but it does start being a series of problems of that sort. At first you can pretty well deal with them. Well, you can deal with them some of the time. But they'll come back.

LDA: What kinds of problems return? Problems of loss?

AM: Yes, or of what kind of person you are, what you can do, just not necessarily all things you do yourself, but what happens with other people and so on. This doesn't sound like a book that anyone would want to read, does it?

LDA: During the course of the story, Roy hears a rumor from a squatter named Percy that he interprets to mean that a job of wood-cutting promised to him has instead been given to a corporate firm. I wondered whether Roy so readily believes the rumor because he suffers from self-doubt: he has trouble believing that he would be chosen to be the wood-gatherer.

AM: I didn't think of that. A fact that I've found, living in areas like this, is that money, far from being unimportant, is *tremendously* important—it's mythical. People who have it; people who don't have it; people who might get it—I don't think this is as true now as when I [first] wrote that story. Although maybe it's getting truer again, because we [in Canada] are in a period when our economy has not sunk as badly as yours in the United States has, but it has sunk some. Maybe we're going back to this. It used to be there was a whole sub-class of people like Percy who lived in a kind of mythology; and the mythology was mostly around money. Which I think would surprise people who think this is a country character.

LDA: Is it because he would have been born around the time of the Depression?

AM: I don't know. I suspect that it's a mythology that's gone on for centuries, but usually wasn't noted or written about. People are really interested about other people and one of the things they're interested in is sex and another is money.

LDA: Why, do you think?

AM: I don't know, but sex is far more respectable. I mean no, the other way round ... was that a Freudian slip? The way around is ... money. People were always able to talk about money.

LDA: As I write about "Wood," it dawns on me that what drew me to your writing in the first place is that I identified strongly with many of your protagonists' feelings of self-doubt.

AM: It's there, and it's kind of out in the open, isn't it? I've never minded writing about it at all; I never found it a thing that I was embarrassed by. I found it more a thing that I was kind of surprised by, but interested in.

LDA: In many of your stories that are inspired by your father and his side of the family, the male protagonist sees himself as someone who can't do things that others can.

AM: The world I grew up in ... you could as soon fly to the moon as become a writer. I immediately thought that I would be a writer. But I didn't get that from anybody I knew or could think of knowing. I guess it's just egotism.

LDA: Your father earned his living through manual labor, whether

he was trapping or fishing in the bush, fur farming, working in a foundry, or raising turkeys. Then he published a book of historical fiction, late in his life, *The McGregors*. Do you think his confidence to do this came from observing your success?

AM: Yes, oh yes.... If Alice can do this....

LDA: In your new stories “Corrie” and “Axis,” recently published in *The New Yorker*, the male characters had that kind of self-doubt.

AM: Why do I think that men have self-doubt? I don’t know really. Because maybe my father had so much self-doubt? Certainly I’ve known people who haven’t self-doubt. I’m thinking of self-doubt in terms of everybody in the town that I grew up in. Mostly in the people that I know now too. I was thinking about this before we talked.... Most of the people around here think I’m nuts. They don’t think I’m nuts—they know I’m nice, they like me—but they can’t read the books and they can’t figure them out, and I think maybe the books *are* too difficult.... I was reading some of the old stuff a couple of days ago, and I thought, really this is very complicated. The language isn’t complicated, but the plots are. And they don’t give people the usual rewards. So that’s probably why in a way I can live so comfortably here, because nobody takes it seriously.

LDA: You have talked about the great value placed on “usefulness” in the Protestant culture of Sowesto. You say that the feeling of being needed by another human being is part of what brings Lea, Roy’s wife in the second version of “Wood,” out of her depression. There are other stories in *Too Much Happiness* in which the protagonists are helped by sensing that they can be useful; for example, “Dimensions” and “Deep Holes.” Do you ever feel that through writing about those who experience self-doubt, you’re able to help others?

AM: Oh, I don’t know. What I feel is simply that I bless the fact that

I was born in a time when you could get away from the society you were born into. Before, you had to have money, and for a woman, you had to have enormous confidence. I just happened to come at the time at the end of the war when they had scholarships that lasted two years at the university, but two years was enough for me to feel enormous self-confidence. I didn't act enormously self-confident—and [I felt confident] just about my writing, not about *anything* else....

LDA: Where did the confidence come from?

AM: From going to college and seeing there were people who really valued writing. There were people who really read and who knew that it was important. I have friends who found out the same thing about music—when they had been totally isolated at home, they suddenly found out that they weren't crazy.

LDA: There's a strong relationship between "Wood" and "Images," a coming-of-age story that you published in your first volume of short fiction, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in 1968.

AM: Yeah ... yeah! I hadn't thought of that.... I really don't go back that far in my thinking.

LDA: In "Images," a young protagonist encounters terrifying experiences while in the bush with her father, including a surprise meeting with a disturbed, ax-wielding recluse. As she and her father walk home, he instructs her not to mention the hatchet to her adult family members. The protagonist tells us that:

Like the children in fairy stories...who have discovered that our fears are based on nothing but the truth, but who come back fresh from marvellous escapes and take up their knives and forks, with humility and good manners, prepared to live happily ever after—like them,

dazed and powerful with secrets, I never said a word.

In “Wood,” Roy is also confronted by dangerous, unexpected meetings with outsiders in the bush; both literally—when he happens upon the rumor-spreading squatter, Percy—and figuratively, when he is wounded by the ax-wielding recluse within himself. And when, in the second version, Lea surprises Roy by driving the truck and rescuing him (when Roy asks her how she got to him, she replies, “Well, I didn’t fly”), they drive away, similarly “dazed and powerful with secrets,” “like the children in fairy stories,” from the “ominous,” “indifferent,” “transform[ed]” “forest”—a formal word that Roy “would usually back away from.”

You sometimes write stories about the act of writing itself. Could “Wood” be read as a story about writing?

AM: That’s very interesting, and I don’t mind the idea at all. I don’t write that way, but ...

LDA: But you read that way.

AM: And I *do* write as if clearly ordinary events are tremendously important, because that’s the way they seem to me.

LDA: When you write, it seems to me that you include everything you’ve ever read.

AM: Yes, there’s a lot there.

LDA: Are you subconsciously drawing on literature that has stayed with you for many years, such as Bible stories?

AM: These are great stories. I got the traditional Protestant Sunday School upbringing, and those stories are among the earliest that you get in your head. It’s like the story that I always talk about as my

“errrr” story, “The Little Mermaid.” And the religious stories stay with me sort of like that, though not quite so importantly. I don’t think much about biblical stuff. But if I do go back to reading the Bible, I’m always just stunned by how good it is, in a totally different way from the way it’s been interpreted.

LDA: It seemed to me that in “Wood,” there were many stories within that story that I recognized, the Jacob story among them—where Jacob wrestles with an angel. And the angel, seeing that it is not winning, hurts Jacob and he develops a limp.

AM: Oh, no. I think it’s important to recognize that I never write in that way. I do find it really interesting sometimes ... people who do. But I am in no way ... I don’t consciously ever graft onto other stories or search through ... you know what I mean. The story is the story. The story is about a guy who injures himself in a totally unexpected way, has a helluva time doing what would have been a perfectly ordinary thing to save himself, then finds it has saved his wife. And that’s about what it is—with other things—but I would never have thought of—no, I did not think of any biblical terms, or any other terms than the stories’ terms, that seem to me about something very important in themselves, which is the sudden loss of strength ... the sudden change of your meaning in the world. Of your importance in the world. From becoming someone who’s tramping around the bush deciding to cut down the trees to somebody who’s wondering whether they’ll make it to the road or freeze there.

LDA: You are regarded as being among our most important writers of psychological fiction in the English language. Did you read a lot about psychology?

AM: No. I was always afraid of it. I’m so single-minded with my writing, but I really wanted it more than anything else. So when I married my first husband and we went out to live in Vancouver, we

met people our own age who were American draft-dodgers from the Korean War. I worked in the library and I made friends with another girl who worked there and she was married to one of them. I got to know people who knew all about ... they were very well educated, they were very sharp—they knew everything. And you know one of the things they believed? That women trying to achieve and accomplish were misfits—this is from Freud. And when I learned this, from people who were far better educated than I was, I thought—you know, I can't go too far into this—it's not going to be good for me! I think probably after the war, and in the fifties, there was a great feeling of women being ... it wasn't just that they were unnecessarily competitive, it was that they were looking for happiness in the wrong place; the happiness being home and children, and service to your husband. And boy, they believed this. And because I had grown up in the country, without any education to speak of, I had not run into such a notion before.

LDA: And yet the women's roles, as we see in "Corrie" and "Axis," were so prescribed.

AM: Oh, very. But it was not made sanctified by Freud, or any other important leader. In fact, you can count on the fingers of one hand anyone I've ever met here who had heard of Freud.

LDA: Is having a sense of one's own behavioral process similar to having a sense of one's own writing process?

AM: Yes, only it's much more. I think you actually can use the sense of having one's own behavioral stuff, but often I don't think you need that in your writing. I mean, you are following ... you have a nice reliable instinct in your writing I think, much more reliable than in your nature. I think you learn to write, you learn what is useful to you, you learn what is truthful and what's exciting, and maybe it's that, in

your writing, *you want the best*. You don't necessarily want to grind any ax; if you do want to grind an ax, the writing suffers. But you want to find out as much as you can, and know as much as you can, and all this involves putting the self aside. Whereas in our normal lives, the self runs all over the place. You can get to be a better and better writer but you don't necessarily get to be a better person because of it. That's my belief. I mean you *can*—you can certainly get to be a better person. But you have to work at that as a separate thing.

LDA: How could that be, particularly if you're writing psychological fiction?

AM: Well, you still fall into your old ruts, which are yours, not your fictional characters'. And I've found, as you probably have, too, that you do things almost without knowing that you're starting to do them, in your thinking about your life and people and so on. So that's a sort of separate job, which I think is worth doing.

LDA: You have told me in the past that when you were very young, your feelings for Romantic poetry, and Wordsworth's poetry in particular, really replaced religion for you.

AM: Yes.

LDA: Is writing a way to explore the kinds of things that people who don't write may connect with through religion?

AM: It is. And it's a very strong way to replace things and I think probably is always with you. There again, I think if you live to be, say in your eighties, that changes a bit. I mean, it finally dawns on you that the most successful book probably has a life of ... ten years? But that doesn't matter, really, you still want to do the same things. I'm so lucky, because I have been received by people and read. There

are other people who write, and maybe write very well, and that just doesn't happen. So, I can't recommend this as being a sure-fire thing.

LDA: Especially in our technological age—we don't hold on to things.

AM: I can hardly get my mind around that. And of course I feel ... not really frightened for myself, but it isn't something I would welcome at all.

LDA: What do you think will keep people writing? What keeps you writing in this era?

AM: Oh, just getting an idea and wanting to get it down. Wanting to tell a story. The story of course has a lot of properties that are not maybe story-like, but anyway I want to do it.

LDA: Not only in "Wood," but in many of your stories, you describe ordinary tasks in great detail. In "The Turkey Season" (1980), we see the characters gutting turkeys; and in a new story, "Axis," we observe the characters making strawberry jam. These practical activities take on more complex meanings in the course of the stories.

AM: This is my background—doing things all the time. So I wouldn't even think about that. I wouldn't think about why I put it into the story. It's just part of what I think about, I guess. Because mind you, I don't do much of [that kind of work] anymore.

LDA: There's a creativity to these chores.

AM: There is. And actually the female members of my family, some of them especially, my grandmother, went in for this. They didn't just do it well, they did it better than well. And there were women in my generation too who did that.

LDA: You have spoken to me before about the comfort of routine. Is there a relationship for you between that and the process of writing?

AM: I'm not quite sure what I have meant.... It may just mean that being a woman of my generation, part of my life has always been doing jobs. Looking after the house, making some kind of meal, doing the laundry, and so on. Though now it's much diminished, I still do all those things, and in a way I think it's very important to me. Not to do them excellently or anything, but just to have something I do every day. Because you know, you get dry spells, and if you're a male, a very successful male, sitting in your studio, supposed to be writing, and you're actually drawing squiggles on a piece of paper because you think you'll never get another idea, that's horrible, I should imagine. And I think that women have this great advantage that nobody ... maybe with some women there's a feeling that everyone's hanging on your next novel or something, but you have to be a huge success for that to happen. But men can get this quite easily and enjoy it—the parts of it that are agreeable—like lots of friends, lots of women, lots of drinks, and so on; but the bad part is worse for them. Mind you, I've never experienced this.

LDA: But you write from the perspective of a man—not that infrequently.

AM: I like doing that too. But I do think in some ways men have a harder role sometimes if they're successful in this particular thing. But also women have a much harder role in getting to be successful at all.

LDA: Where did you learn so much about woodcutting?

AM: My father, I suppose; it was part of my youth. But actually, I must say, my husband. When we moved here, we had a wood-burning stove, and he and a friend decided to go out and cut wood because

they weren't getting enough exercise, or to keep them very fit, and also because they enjoyed it as a switch from mental work. And so I learned a lot from him. It's great really to have another adult around the house; one who does not object to your work, because you can call on them if two brains are better than one for something *specific*.

LDA: When Roy leaves the forest, he doesn't have the wood in hand.

AM: No he doesn't. He couldn't carry it, no.

LDA: He couldn't even cut down a tree.

AM: He doesn't have his ax in hand, either. He had to let go of it. It's just himself. And you don't even know what he's going to do about that. He's going to go back and get his ax, but it's all ceased to matter, for the time being anyway.

LDA: Not without regret.

AM: Not without some regret. But I want him to.... After all, if he's getting his wife back—of course he doesn't know yet for how long, or whatever—but I think everything has changed for him a little bit. The way if you've ever been in hospital, really, really seriously ill, things change. Things that you thought were very important ... it's almost a happy state, in a vague way, for a while. I guess it's what the abandonment of ambition might be, but you can never count on that lasting.

LDA: And yet, in many of the stories in *Too Much Happiness*, one thing that the protagonists fear is the loss of their drive.

AM: People like me can't imagine how you deal with it. There again, I think this is something that comes with maybe serious, serious illness or age.

LDA: Roy and Lea seem to have a good marriage. The narrator points out that they accept one another as they are.

AM: I think that should be our goal, if we can manage it. That is always a good idea.

LDA: Lea develops a depression. This once “jok[ey],” “energetic” woman becomes “grave” and “listless,” and she “sometimes waves her hand in front of her face as if she is bothered by cobwebs or has got stuck in a nest of brambles.” Why does she leave Roy in this way? Is she seeking attention from him?

AM: I’m not sure, because there I’m very careful. It’s one story in which I’m using people and always thinking of what I know of people of their education and ideas. And that wouldn’t occur to her, I don’t think. They don’t think so much in abstractions, and that’s why sometimes, when a depression like this happens, it’s so hard to deal with. I mean it’s almost better if you can say, “I feel this way because of this, this, and this.” But I don’t think she thinks about it. It’s just something that has come down on her; it’s not anticipated, she’s not that kind of person. I think in that class there isn’t any feeling that your husband owes you attention. So there would never be any accusation of him for not producing it. Her social life would be expected to be what it is: she has family; she has a job, where she’s useful; and I don’t think that she would see herself as being deprived. One thing I liked about—or what I wanted to do in that story—is to think of what depression is like as a lid, rather than as something that you can think your way out of. Because I still think it is; no matter how you can think your way out of it, there’s something about it that’s very hard to deal with.

LDA: Something that comes out of nowhere?

AM: In a way, yes. You might go to a psychiatrist and he might say,

“Well this comes out of this—this happened to you twenty-five years ago”—and that might be a comfort, because you would think of something. But I’m not sure that’s always so.

LDA: Do you think she could have a chemical imbalance? But she takes pills and such, and nothing seems to help much.

AM: I haven’t had too much experience with it. I’ve known people.... You know, sometimes they do work, and sometimes, maybe not as well as you expected, or whatever. And anyway, aren’t they getting a lot less popular now? So that’s the gift that turns out to have another side. You get something that’s going to be wonderful, that’s going to solve the problem. And not just of each single person, but in general. And then it’s so discouraging when—this isn’t in any of my writing—when people hope there is something and it turns out that ... all this.

LDA: Tell me about the character in “Wood” who is named Karen in the first version of the story and Diane in the second. She is Lila/Lea’s niece. In the first version, this niece lived with Roy and Lila between the ages of eight and seventeen, had a talent for drawing, and helped Roy in his sign-painting business. Suddenly, at seventeen, she quit school to marry a truck driver, had five children, began to take low-paying service jobs, and let her health and looks go. You scaled back the character in the second version while you developed the character of Lea. In the second version, the niece—Diane—doesn’t seem to have lived with the couple when she was a child. But she did help Roy with jobs in his upholstery and furniture refinishing business until her husband put an end to it, because he thought, “it was[n’t] the right kind of work for a woman.” Now she works in the kitchen of an “old people’s home” to help support her family of four children.

In the first version of “Wood,” the narrator tells us that “Lila never seems to think that anything much has gone wrong with

this girl's life.... It is Roy who thinks Karen has wasted herself, and wishes there were something he could do for her.”

AM: Lila doesn't spend a lot of time [worrying], because in that world she lives in, her niece is not doing badly. Roy hoped for [his niece] to be different and help him. So [the niece] is married, the marriage isn't too great; in the society where she lives, which is the society where I live, it's not seen as a failure. And she seems pleased enough with herself. I think in the society I'm used to—and I don't know about this too much for the last maybe ten years—just fulfilling the role is a great comfort. Like, “Now I'm married.” “Now I have children.” “Now we....” You wouldn't even have to have a very fancy house.... It's not even money so much; it's just a kind of comfort and importance, terrific importance about being a mom, you know, what we call a hockey mom, and many people are quite satisfied with it. There are problems that will be financial, but their problems don't seem to be about “What are they doing with their life.” Because when they were about age fourteen, this is what they decided to do.

LDA: You've told me in an interview that “everyone gets sick of their mother's generation.” I suppose Karen/Diane's children will look at her life and say,

AM: *“Oh, for God's sake!”*

LDA: At the end of the second version of “Wood,” Lea appears on the track in the bush, driving the truck toward Roy to save him. She has emerged from her depression, and Roy seems to feel somewhat guilty, “[b]ecause he knows that he isn't feeling quite the way he thought he would if her vitality came back to her.” He thinks to himself that “even if it is for good, even if it's all good there's something more. Some loss fogging up this gain. Some loss he'd be ashamed to admit to, if he had the energy.” As he looks at the bush from the

outside now, “when the dark shuts down in early winter,” it seems “tangled up in itself ... dense and secret.”

AM: Yes. He’s not going to go back, probably, to the life he had before. I mean, she—and he too—are probably going to decide that he can’t be out in the bush by himself. And gradually I think he’s going to be leading a different life. I think he knows that. But he knows it in a vague way. This is a situation he’s never been in before; injured, and on the way to the hospital, and his wife driving him there. On the other hand, he’s pretty glad.

LDA: As you said earlier, when you have a serious illness it reprioritizes ...

AM: It simplifies things enormously.

LDA: Roy loses his ability to drive at the end of the story, and Lea not only regains hers but also drives the truck for the first time with “remarkable” skill. You and I have spoken before about our own issues with driving.

AM: I don’t drive.

LDA: Your daughter Sheila has said in her memoir that you don’t “like doing anything that require[s] manual dexterity or hand-eye coordination ... as if [you don’t] quite trust [yourself] in the physical world.”

AM: To me, the various things on a car don’t connect in any way and if I try to back up, and it really starts backing up, I’m astounded and I stop. I think I’ve told you about male writers I know who couldn’t drive—and this is really astonishing—I mean, who couldn’t drive at all. Whose wives, or partners, had to do all the driving. So there may

be something in writers' way of looking at things, or dealing with things....

LDA: When I read your stories, I immediately contemplate twelve different ways to think about them. I wonder if part of the problem is ...

AM: Maybe that's it.... "I could do this, or I could do that...." But with me it's just sort of an *amazement* that I have any relationship with this machine at all. And that makes me stop and think, *I mustn't push my luck*. But the men I know who didn't drive, I've never talked to them about it, but with both of them, it meant that they couldn't live where they wanted to live in the country and had to move to the city, just to manage things, so that [their partners] weren't on the road all the time.

LDA: So you think this could be occupational.

AM: Yes, I really have discovered this.