



Varieties of Exile

Mavis Gallant , Russell Banks (Introduction)

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Mavis Gallant is the modern master of what Henry James called the international story, the fine-grained evocation of the quandaries of people who must make their way in the world without any place to call their own. The irreducible complexity of the very idea of home is especially at issue in the stories Gallant has written about Montreal, where she was born, although she had lived in Paris for more than half a century.

Varieties of Exile, Russell Banks's extensive new selection from Gallant's work, demonstrates anew the remarkable reach of this writer's singular art. Among its contents are three previously uncollected stories, as well as the celebrated semi-autobiographical sequence about Linnet Muir—stories that are wise, funny, and full of insight into the perils and promise of growing up and breaking loose.

Varieties of Exile Details

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From Reader Review *Varieties of Exile* for online ebook

Jim Rayder says

I read these stories this past April, after moving into a spacious but odd New England apartment: a garage below my living room, a too-low bathroom mirror lit by a kitschy pair of tulip-shaped lamps...a great environment in which to read this book. Mavis has a knack for funky details of working class pleasures: white suede pumps and bar-b-que chicken-in-basket, both featured in my favorite story "The Chosen Husband" which moves from acid disparagement toward the nerdy prospect for a marriage-of-convenience to a revelation of his essential goodness, uplifting in a real way. So rich in detail and interior monologue are many of the stories, Mavis comes off as a working-class Proust; in this way, her voice eludes the "kitchen sink" label. / She depicts life in the weirdly repressed and ludicrously coded Montreal of the late 1930s & early '40s, much of which revolves around the Catholic and Protestant churches and rootless or stateless second or first generation emigres: a weird, needlessly complicated, narrow, darkly funny background. It's crazy stuff, seems miles apart from your own weird background, until Mavis communicates very well the environment's universal pain, alienation and confusion. The sometime first-person narrators, the author's alter-egos, often openly disparage and ridicule relatives, co-workers, even lovers, and the bitterness recalls certain of Lawrence's stories./ I wasn't too keen on the last three stories, the protagonist the obviously invented Steve Burnet: too many chi chi stuff antiques, décor, etc. But even one of those ("The Concert Party") held the social comedy of a bunch of swells, or wanna-be swells, hanging out in a remote third-rate resort area.

Tom Wascoe says

Excellent collection of short stories-theme is Canada or Canadians. Some of the stories are semi-autobiographical. Superb characters, compelling stories, well-written.

Will says

Every year, some Somebody is blabbing about the "new Chekhov." Because, yes, there are so few touchstones for the dilettante. No living writer does short fiction like Mavis Gallant, and it's so obvious it feels cheap to point out.

Sasha Martinez says

In his introduction to Mavis Gallant's short story collection, *Varieties of Exile*, Russell Banks offers us a quote from the other herself—

"Stories are not chapters of novels. They should not be read one after another, as if they were meant to follow along. Read one. Shut the book. Read something else. Come back later. Stories can wait."

Banks, of course, offers the feeble, "But, trust me, these can't." As particular as the advice may come to

readers of short story collections—among them, the odd creatures like me who merely take deep breaths in the pause between stories—the quote Banks pulls feels out of place, given the collective nature he selected for this NYRB Classics edition: The Gallant stories here are linked, in one way or another.

There are three sets or sequences to the stories—the first, about the adventures of Linnet Muir, trying to make her way into the world, when her refugee state and her gender are already two strikes against her; the second, the sisters Carette, growing up, loving, forging different lives; the last, of a male narrator [Banks stresses that there is a need to disabuse the notion that Gallant is cruel to her male characters].

What these three grand narratives have in common? One, they're "Canadian stories," as Banks dubs them—a matter of the characters' nationality, we are informed, especially during a time when the very aspect of national identity for Canada was dubious. For another, their preoccupations: These are old-fashioned stories about people who were quite modern within the time they belonged. However, life seems to us pretty mundane and prosaic and seemingly trivial—but oh-so-oppressive in its politeness!—in Gallant's world, despite the heavy cloak of formality, which is no doubt brought on by her strident tone and formalistic language. [There are strains of this formality, this scope and sometimes-glib omniscience in the stories of Alice Munro and Carol Shields, who both wrote a generation or two after Gallant, whom I both love madly.]

Again, linked stories, a generous survey. After the first two stories where you recognize the main character, you know where this collection wishes to take you, and you tag along. You can't wait to see a life unfolding before you, told through stories [or installments] whose relevance was chosen with the author's discretion. Think of the collection as three different novellas, told in episodes. After a while, well, of course these stories can't wait—each of them is part of a specific arc!

Moving on. In theory, at least, I should have enjoyed Gallant. I'm certainly in awe of her—she is accomplished, this Grand Dame of Short Fiction. [Banks, too, addresses this, as Gallant "has mostly been viewed as a 'writers' writer": "For what is a writers' writer, anyhow? Merely one who honors in every sentence she writes the deepest, most time-honored principles of composition: honesty, clarity, and concision. So, yes, in that sense she is a writers' writer. But only in that sense."] So, yes, all that. Oh, I have admiration in buckets. But this reader didn't have enough room to move, despite the expansiveness in the stories and the genius Gallant so clearly has—this reader just couldn't feel it and fall in love and fall quiet.

Rossella DB says

Stile impeccabile sebbene è impossibile negare la presenza di un "io narrante, odiosamente ironico e onnisciente, mai identificabile con uno dei personaggi, gronda distacco e superiorità" (citando un'altra recensione).

Non concordo con chi, però, afferma che manca sentimento.

L'anima sta nella costruzione dei racconti. Impareggiabile! Essa rendere reale il realismo. Rende in parole la percezione quotidiana della vita.

L'intreccio de "Il bambino dei Fenton" mi ha catturato. Non è da thriller: è da scrittrici navigate che lavorano come artigiane a quello che vogliono raccontare. L'ho riletto appena letto.

Alastair says

Gorgeous interlocking stories about French- and English-speaking Montreal through most of the 20th century. Reminded me a great deal of Brodkey, whose stories I'd just discovered, because of the way in which Gallant tells & re-tells the same person's life at different points and from different places. Also, because of the way in which childhood memory is so sensual. I found that in reading about her characters' childhoods, I could remember more of my own. Which of course made me suspicious.

Cumulatively, the elegiac tone and the continuities of these stories mean they're best read interspersed with other things, like a few novels. I also would avoid (hell, I did avoid) reading them in order.

Wooky says

I first read the collection "Paris Stories" and thought perhaps I was a wee-bit in love with Mavis Gallant because of the Paris backdrop of her stories. But no. Paris, Quebec, Florida, she can take me wherever, and I am just as enthralled.

CaitlynK says

Somehow even better than *Paris Stories*.

Theresa says

Masterful short stories capturing the Canadian consciousness. A precursor to voicey fiction. On my bookshelf, I would put this beside Lucia Berlin more so than Alice Munro.

David says

Everyone else seems to think this book deserves a minimum of 4 stars, and maybe it does. Maybe it's some kind of highbrow chicklit. No matter. I disliked it thoroughly -- I found these stories almost unreadable.

The marketing hook for this collection (in the jacket blurb and the worshipful introduction by Russell Banks) is a biographical one. Gallant was born in Montreal to English-speaking, Protestant parents, an only child who was shipped off to a French Catholic boarding school at age four. Her father died early, her mother remarried, but from an early age, in Gallant's own words, she was "set afloat". Russell Banks assures us that this background, the experience of being forced at a very early age to navigate the straits dividing Catholic/Protestant, franco/anglophone, children/adults, men/women, of being, as he puts it "situated simultaneously inside and outside her given worlds", places Gallant at *the Borderlands*, the ideal site for a writer of short stories*.

The stories in this particular collection are undeniably somewhat autobiographic, and are firmly situated in

the Quebec of Gallant's youth. That doesn't necessarily make them interesting, or good. I found them dull, and ultimately claustrophobic. After the sixth or seventh exploration of the stultifyingly provincial concerns of the singularly joyless Quebecois that populate these stories, I'd had enough. I'm happy for Mavis Gallant that she managed to escape, and to live in Paris for the last 50 years. I can understand why she might feel impelled to pick at the scabs of her childhood. But I don't want to watch. Most of the characters in these stories live lives that are circumscribed or emotionally stunted. It's entirely possible to write gracefully about the way cultural pressures or tribal differences can limit or distort people's emotional well-being -- William Trevor has been doing it his whole life. But there's a humor and affection for his characters that rescue Trevor's stories from total bleakness. There's not much affection in Gallant's representation of the milieu she grew up in - the stories read more like the work of someone who is settling scores, or still trying to work through the legacy of her own idiosyncratic childhood (the prevailing narrative voice is that of an adult reinterpreting earlier events from childhood).

Even though Gallant is adept at characterization, you get the feeling that she never warms up towards her own characters. She definitely failed to make me care about them. Giving myself permission not to read the remaining six or seven stories was a great relief.

* the common fallacy of confusing an eventful biography with good writing; clearly, an eventful life is not necessary to be a good writer (Flannery O' Connor, Emily Dickinson, the Brontes), neither is it sufficient.

Angie says

This book took me forever to finish. Even now, I feel like I haven't truly read this book, despite taking my time on each individual story. As Gallant herself says, "Stories are not chapters of novels. They should not be read one after another, as if they were meant to follow along. Read one. Shut the book. Read something else. Come back later. Stories can wait."

However, this collection really should be read cover-to-cover, as many of the stories follow after one another: 3 stories focus on Linnet Muir, 3 on the Carette sisters, and 3 by a man who sometimes goes by "Burney."

The stand-out stories for me were: "Let It Pass," "In Youth is Pleasure," and "Between Zero and One." Still, I could take weeks reading these stories, distracted by the amazing tidbits of information and sentence structures. The book just feels so dense; it's as if the characters themselves walk around with their entire lives hanging over their head, and many of them do just that.

I was sent this book because a friend who traveled with me to India had read another story of Gallant and thought I would find inspiration in a traveling female writer. In a way, Gallant lives a life I could only dream of, having abandoned everything to go and live in France for the sole purpose of writing fiction. And yet, after seeing her in a video interview, I wonder how she can be so fragile, so humorous herself, with all these deep and interesting characters plaguing her through the years. And what of the fact that she's a "writer's writer" who's sold over 100 stories to *The New Yorker*, yet still overshadowed by most of her peers?

I identified so much with Linnet, even in her less desirable traits. I don't think I've ever read a character who sounded so much like me. The lines within her stories could have been taken from my own writing; at times

they read like poetry, each story an innovative quilt Gallant has painstakingly sewn together by hand with golden thread, bits of hard-working flannel there, laughing pink tulle here.

Moral of the story: Gallant is hard to read. There is a reason for this. She's a genius.

charta says

Quattro racconti di media lunghezza che parlano di separazioni per abbandono o rimozione. Di solitudine. Di incomunicabilità. E, soprattutto, del fare e dell'essere per l'utile.

Quattro storie come tante, nascono nella banalità e in essa si sviluppano e concludono.

L'io narrante, odiosamente ironico e onnisciente, mai identificabile con uno dei personaggi, gronda distacco e superiorità. Lo sguardo è gelido, manca del tutto un barlume d'afflato umano, un'ombra di dolore nel rappresentare pochezze e miserie altrui. Lo stile rispecchia l'assenza di sentimento: è freddo e asettico come il bisturi di un rinomato chirurgo mentre esegue un'incisione.

Al termine della lettura degli abitanti di Montreal, pateticamente contrapposti tra anglofoni e francofoni, non importa granché. Si rimane con un profondo senso di insoddisfazione e la convinzione che per sapere delle meschinerie dell'uomo basta leggere un articolo di cronaca.

Gallant con la grandiosa Munro condivide solo la nazionalità, non il talento.

Jennifer says

Mavis Gallant grew up in and around Montreal, but has been living in Paris for the last half century. She's published mainly short stories (her stories have appeared in the New Yorker since the 1950s. The backdrop of this particular collection of short stories is Canada. Her upbringing, as the lone Protestant/English child that went through the conservative school system of the French Catholic church) in pre-post war Montreal is mirrored in many of these stories. Her writing captures the duality of her life experiences (French vs. English speaking Quebec as a child; Canadian exile living in Paris).

Frank says

A very strong collection, and maybe an ideal introduction to Gallant's work. It contains three groups of connected stories, and three stories that stand alone: 'The Fenton Child', 'The End of the World' and 'New Year's Eve'. All are among her best, and all are dealing with Canadians, mostly still living in Canada and some (notably in 'New Year's Eve') living abroad (or dying abroad, as in 'The End of the World'). These standalone stories had already been published in book form in previous collections, as had the two groups of connected stories about Linnet Muir and the Carette sisters. The latter two series of tales are also implicitly connected in that Linnet Muir's nurse is called Olivia Carette, and may hence be plausibly taken to be the mother of the Carette sisters in that group of stories.

In addition, the collection contains a group of three long stories that had never been collected before: 'Let it Pass', 'In a War' and 'The Concert Party'. In these late stories from 1988/89, Gallant is really at the top of her game. Like the Linnet Muir and Carette sisters stories, like all the other stories in this collection in fact, they have a mellower tone than some of Gallant's more acerbic work from the 70s and 80s. And they are also

interesting because, as Russell Banks notes in his brief introduction, they are ‘narrated by a man, *un homme d’un certain âge*, whose life’s story and sad fate ought forever to disabuse any critic of suggesting that Gallant is hard on her male characters. Ironic, perhaps, but always sweetly forgiving.’

So, a good introduction to Gallant for novices, and a must for any Gallant fan, since these three stories, with a total length of more than 110 pages amounting to a short novella, aren’t available elsewhere. (They were originally published in the *New Yorker*, but even in the *New Yorker* archive they can’t be read completely: something seems to have gone wrong with the digitalization, resulting in part of the text of ‘In a War’ being missing from both the online archive and the ‘Complete *New Yorker*’ on dvd brought out ten years ago.)

Jeremy Allan says

There were points where I was sick of the characters (as this collection has several groupings of stories where the characters are carried over) but I was almost never sick of Gallant. She is conspicuously good. I will most definitely be seeking out more of her work.
