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Writers on Mavis Gallant

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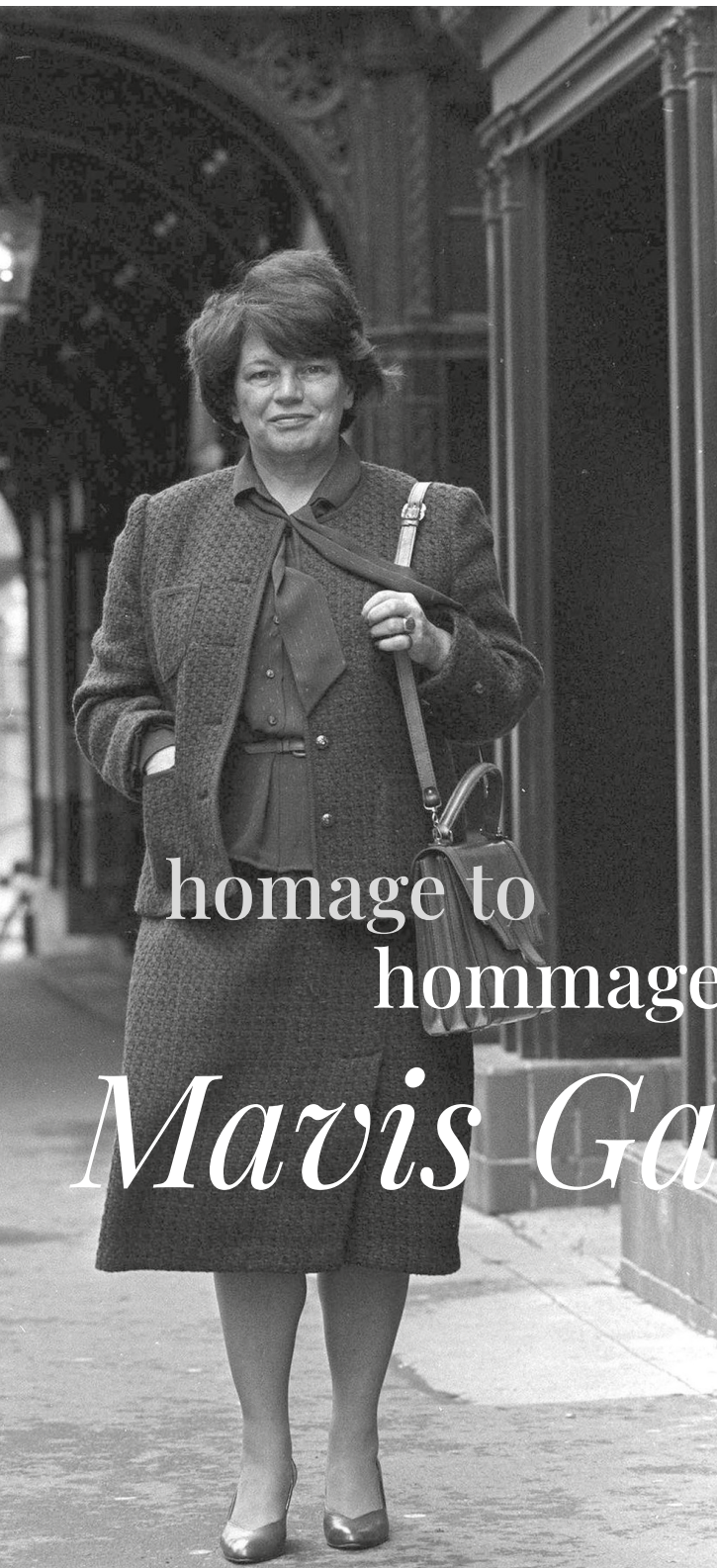
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homage to
hommage à
Marvis Gallant



Writers on Mavis Gallant

Écrivains sur Gallant

Angie Abdou

The magic of Mavis Gallant is in her ability to write about the ordinary in a way that's extraordinary. In "The Wedding Ring," Gallant tells a simple mother-daughter story that painfully captures the impossibility of truly knowing each other. More unsettling yet, the story suggests we can only know even ourselves in fleeting glimpses. A life story becomes no more than a series of brief and shifting moments of understanding, strung together in fractured and unreliable narratives heavily bolstered by fiction. A true master of the short story, Gallant accomplishes this devastating dismantling of truth and selfhood in just three pages.

Lisa Alward

In 1983, Mavis Gallant visited a creative writing class I was taking, clearly under some duress, as she sat with her coat on, purse in her lap, giving clipped and rather haughty answers to our no-doubt tiresome questions about expat writers and what we thought of then, with derision, as *New Yorker* style. Did she thank us afterwards for the lovely talk? I don't recall, but when I remember that evening, I always think of her delightfully arch "Thank You for the Lovely Tea," with its daggered good manners.

Margaret Atwood

The Linnet Muir stories ... refer readers to *The New Yorker* and me reading one of them. They are complex stories about her own very peculiar childhood ... many layered and quirky (like Mavis).

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-podcast-margaret-atwood-reads-mavis-gallant>



Tamas Dobozy

Hard to pick a favourite. The one I keep coming back to again and again, though, is “The Latehomecomer,” particularly the ending, where the narrator reveals his psychology and his plans for the “old men” of Germany. The fusion of melancholy and seething rage is pure magic. Plus I loved how she breaks the rule on exposition at the end and just directly reveals what the story is about. I also had the joy of seeing Gallant read, in Paris, back in . . . oh, boy, sometime in the mid-oughts. I can’t remember who she was up on stage with, but I do remember she blew them both away, reading a Grippes and Poche story that was unpublished at the time, and probably still is, unfortunately. It was as good as anything she’s ever written, and funny as hell. She was happy to hear from me afterwards that I was teaching a course devoted to her. I wish she’d won the Nobel; she certainly deserves it, with her blend of artistry, intellect and wide-ranging history; there’s nothing “local” about her work, it spreads right across the Continent, the Atlantic, and then another continent.

Jamie Dopp

My favourite is “Varieties of Exile.” I loved its portrait of a young woman at the time of World War Two who sees various traps for herself as a woman – and as an aspiring writer – in this time period. The story is sad and hilarious at the same time. The image of the women who become Red Queens upon having children is so comic and painful, as is the extended description of “remittance men.” This story is a great example of the razor sharp perceptions and wry humour that so distinguish Gallant’s writing.

Steven Hayward

The first time I almost saw Mavis Gallant was in the early 1990s when I was working at the old Abbey Bookshop on Harbord Street. I was shelving books and the store’s owner Brian Spence was behind the cash register, pencilling in prices on the upper right-hand corners of flyleaves, pausing every so often to stare out the window. “There’s Mavis Gallant,” he said, waving to her out on the street, but by the time I got there it was too late. The next time was in Montreal, and it was my friend Norm who saw her. I don’t remember where we were, only that he was pretty sure. When I asked him why he hadn’t said anything, he replied, “I did.” But again, it was too late.

It’s the same when one tries to say something about Gallant’s craft, that feeling of not being able to open one’s eyes exactly wide enough. At the beginning of her late story “1933” there’s the sentence: “On moving day, soft snow, like greying lace, fell.” The rest of the story is right there – the trauma of eviction, the marauding



sadness of diminished expectations, the indignity of Mme. Carette having to work as a seamstress – though you find that out later. As Berthe watches her mother cry near the end of the story she wonders “how tears can flow in so many directions at once.” Gallant’s sentences are like that, splintering into complexity in ways that are, like her, easy to miss.

Michael Helm

“Baum, Gabriel, 1935–()” presents us one of Gallant’s memorable post-war characters, eddying after the flood, historically minor, recovered from time by a prose act of comic grace. The story relates five events in Gabriel’s adult life in which he’s unregarded or misread. Types (an uncle is described as “a tight, unyielding remainder of the European shipwreck”) collapse into singularities of comment and gesture (the uncle studies Gabriel at dinner to see “whether he broke his bread or cut it, with what degree of confidence he approached his asparagus”). I’ve heard it said that nobody writes like Gallant any more, but no one ever wrote like her.

Clarissa Hurley

In the title story of Mavis Gallant’s 1993 collection *Across the Bridge*, young Sylvie Castelli breaks her engagement to the kindly but lacklustre Arnaud Pons, a rash decision she soon regrets. At the heart of the post-war Paris coming-of-age tale is the symbiotic bond of the precocious-naïve Sylvie and her enigmatic girl-woman mother, who seems at once vacuous and a strategic genius. The characters’ contradictions unfold in Gallant’s inimitable sentences that begin with spare precision only to startle us by the end.

In the fall of 1993, I found myself facing Mavis at Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre. As she signed my copy of *Across the Bridge*, I told her, “My mother and I love your stories because they make us laugh.” Her face lit up. “How lovely to hear! I think my stories are funny, but everyone always thinks they are so serious.” I still have the book, signed to my late mother: “To Kate, with kind regards, Mavis Gallant.”

Mark Anthony Jarman

Mavis Gallant’s “Hunger Diaries” from Franco’s Spain in 1952. I love her fierce eye and brain in these early entries, not cruel, but unafraid of offending, refusing to be charmed by cow-like locals who let a blind man walk into a wall. Gallant is starving, pawning her clothes, her clock, even her typewriter; she complains of urine running everywhere in the cafes and she is very afraid she has made a mistake in choosing



a writing life overseas. But her writing and wit is fantastic, her random hungry entries better than someone imposing structure or an arc on a fictional version of such events. She needs no structure, her postwar world described in these diaries is puzzling, bleak, and hilarious. And it is a shared joy when she finally receives payment for a story sold to *The New Yorker*, I think her first, and can buy a meal.

Alexander MacLeod

I can give you tons of other Gallant options. “Varieties of Exile,” like “The Moslem Wife,” is just a story that is often anthologized over here, so it gets used a lot for teaching.

I’ll go with “Florida” instead. It has sisters, fur coats, Florida motels, useless sons, money, “wives,” and lots of shocking static electricity.

A tight little miracle.

Karen Mulhallen

Thanks for inviting me. I am pretty overwhelmed right now and have no space to meditate. Certainly *From the Fifteenth District* is my favourite of Mavis’s books and not only because of ghosts as haunters; “I have just eaten my way into heaven” says a character who is eating ice cream, putting it [“The Four Seasons”] up there with all the other stories.

Michael Ondaatje

Mavis is one of our most essential writers. (Personal e-mail sent to Marta Dvořák)

She catches the behaviour of the out-of-place citizen, who carries a single-minded bundle of craft and belief. What she gives us, in fact, is an underground map of Europe in the twentieth century, and what feels like a set of dangerous unauthorized portraits. Even ghosts have their say in “From the Fifteenth District,” that sly story of complaint. (From his introduction to Gallant’s *Paris Stories*)

Francine Prose

Far and away my favourite Mavis Gallant story is “The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street,” partly because of the sly way the story develops and because it has among the most beautiful and astonishing endings in all of literature.



Bill Richardson

On the one occasion I met Mavis Gallant I asked her if she was interested to know which of her stories readers would name as such, i.e. their favourites. She said she was and I told her mine was “The Moslem Wife.” She answered, “Oh, yes. That’s what men always say.” I thought to myself that there are probably all kinds of things men always say but “‘The Moslem Wife’ is my favourite short story” is not likely to be one of them. Anyway, that was so then – more than 30 years ago – and, with a gun to my head, I think I’d answer the same now, about a favourite. It comes as close to perfection as any work of art, in any medium, I can name. Why? What she says and how she says it. How men and women are differently positioned vis a vis memory is an abiding sub-theme in her fiction, but it’s most clearly and eloquently and poignantly stated in “The Moslem Wife.” She’s a writer at the peak of her powers and all her talents and interests and preoccupations are on display. It’s comic, it’s poignant, it’s rich in history and personal observation, it’s tender, it’s satirical. Every time I read it I find something new, which may be a reflection of my inattentiveness as a reader, or a symptom of my own memory’s inadequacies, but I prefer to think that it has more to do with her genius as a writer, especially in this form, her remarkable way of loading the deck so that every time the cards are dealt the fortune they tell is different.

Cora Siré

I do love “Speck’s Idea” in which a pompous art gallery owner in Paris is outsmarted by a Canadian woman from Saskatchewan. The story resonates with acerbic wit, incisive social/political commentary, and masterful storytelling. But my favourite is “Varieties of Exile” because it evokes the arrival of war refugees to Montreal, like my parents who came from Estonia to settle in what was then known as “the Lakeshore.” Gallant accurately describes the area as “a string of verdant towns with next to no traffic. Dandelions grew in the pavement cracks.” I was one of those dandelions.

Jane Urquhart

I find that each Gallant story becomes my all-time favourite whenever I reread it. But one of the most intriguing, to my mind, is “Voices Lost in Snow.” With its reflectiveness of tone, and its sense of personal loss, it is not a typical Gallant story (if there is such a thing). I think of it as liminal, inhabiting a space that is difficult to touch or define. And it has this beautiful line embedded in it: “‘Frôler’ was the charmed word in that winter’s story; it was a hand brushing the edge of folded silk, a leaf escaping a spiderweb.” And “frôler,” of course means a gentle, tentative touch, or, on the other hand, “brushing by.”



Yara Zgheib

“Questions and Answers” is the truest and most despairingly beautiful piece of writing I have ever read:

“Marie,” Amalia would like to say, “will you admit that working and getting older and dying matter, and can’t be countered by the first hyacinth of the year?” But Marie went on packing. Amalia consoled herself: Marie’s mind had slipped. She was mad.

The scene where Marie is arrested by the police, then, “released in the evening, having been jeered at, sequestered, certainly insulted, she crossed the street and began to admire the flower market. She bought a bunch of ragged pink asters ...”