

Questions about Alice Munro's "Pictures of the Ice"

1. This story seems to be about how we save one another, and in unexpected ways. Who is saved in this story, and who does the saving? And...is that the right way to ask the question?
2. This also seems to be a story about suicide—or, maybe that's not the right way to see it—maybe this is a story about losing your life so you can find it again. Maybe it's a story about both. Who loses, or ends, or gives up their life in this story, and why? And, do you think this is a reasonable question to ask of the story?
3. Austin and Karin share a special understanding of one another. (With that word "special" I am being intentionally vague.) What constitutes their bond? How do they "know" one another? And, what is it of Austin's life and soul that has been transmitted to Karin by the end of the story?
4. This is a story whose deepest mystery is communicated visually (as opposed to linguistically.) What do the "pictures of the ice" have to say that words never could?
5. This is an impressionistic question that may be of no use: To me there is a vast wintry loneliness in this story that cannot be reckoned with or reasoned away. Do you feel it too? Do you think Austin and Karin feel it? If so, how do they abide it? It seems that the way each abides it could serve as definitions of their respective characters, or souls.
6. Where is God in this story?

Questions about John Updike's "Made in Heaven"

1. We have talked a little in our book group about "point of view" in fiction, meaning, the consciousness from which a story is told—and we have said that an

author's decision as to whose consciousness to tell her story from is probably the most important decision she makes. In "Made in Heaven," Updike chooses to tell the story from Brad's point of view. Why *must* the story be told from Brad's point of view (as opposed to Jeannette's)?

2. There are two images that bookend the story, meaning that each appears just at the beginning of the story, and just at its end. The first one is the "garish" (to Brad) contrast of the red of Jeannette's cheeks and the blue of her eyes. The first time you see this "garish" contrast is on p. 345, when Brad and Jeannette meet, and the second time is on p. 355, when they're in the hospital room (this is the last time we see them together.) And the second image is the "golden" "rectangular" light of windows or street lamps across the way from where Jeannette and Brad are talking (and having conversations of enormous consequence.) The first time we see that "golden" "rectangular" light is on p. 344, again when Brad and Jeanette are first meeting, and the last time is on p. 355, again, in the hospital room. Why do you think Updike repeats these images? The effect created is of time *not* having passed. Why would Updike want that effect?
3. Every time I read this story, I always find myself surprised to learn of Freddy's death. Viewed objectively, the death is a terrible tragedy, obviously; and yet somehow it doesn't bear the weight we think it should. Do you agree? Disagree? What do you think is the function of Freddy's death in this story, and why do you think Updike has elected not to explore, at any great length, the meanings of Freddy's death for his parents?
4. I think we could safely say that Brad's love for his wife, Jeannette, is "immature." The word carries negative connotations. When we hear that someone is "immature," we think "wrong," or "incomplete," or "unseeing." But maybe for Brad, immaturity enables him to connect to his life—and to Jeannette—as a more seeing and mature posture might not. Does this question make sense? Or am I being immature?
5. To me, the most remarkable moment in this story comes at the very end, with the sentence, "There was nothing." (See page 356). It's almost like the whole story pivots or turns on this one very troubling proposal. How is it possible that there could be "nothing" for Brad? And, where have you seen intimations of that possibility earlier in the story?

6. Where is God in this story?