



*Dancing Girls*, a volume of short stories and True Stories a volume of poetry, are published in Britain by Jonathan Cape, price £3.95 and £7.95 respectively. *Bodily Harm* is also published by Cape and a number of Margaret Atwood's novels are available in paperback from Virago.

detail, perhaps the oddest aspect of *Surfacing*, with its minute descriptions, is that it was written in London, France and Italy, the bulk of it composed in St Dionis Road in Parson's Green. 'I have very exact recall of just about everything,' says Margaret Atwood.

The issues that she tackles in her books, however obliquely, are central ones. In *Surfacing* it isn't just spiritual health and the one-ness of personality and its origins in nature but the exploitation of the environment as well and the question of small countries over-shadowed by more powerful neighbours, of one person over-shadowed by another, of male versus female.

*The Edible Woman*, written in 1965 and her first published novel, is a comical but finally disturbing book about a young woman struggling to be 'normal' to meet the expectations of her 'normal' fiancé—with the result that her body rebels and she can no longer eat, a case of anorexia some while before it began to appear in newspapers. But the story also works, if one chooses to read it so, as a commentary on the difficulties of young women anywhere. And in *Bodily Harm* the central themes are political and sexual violence, this time presented head-on as fundamental elements of the contemporary world.

So where does the boldness of subject matter come from, the reaching for all the universality she can manage? Her family spent winters mainly in Ottawa or Toronto and half the year, often more than half, in their fastness in the woods. Northern Quebec, the country of *Surfacing*, is 'rock, rock with pine trees and real Indians. That's where the glaciers came down and scraped off all the soil and dumped it into the southern part of Canada and the United States.'

When she was five the lake in the far north gave way to Lake Superior and though the family moved back again to Quebec some years later the first house-move was a great grief, the biggest of her childhood. *Snow White* was another key experience; quite seriously, it seems.

'Okay,' says Margaret Atwood, 'Here's my trauma. I was freaked out by *Snow White* at an early age. It's the first film I ever saw. I remember it vividly. The transformation scene where she eats an apple and turns from the queen into this horrible-looking green witch just scared the bejesus out of me. My parents bought Grimm's Fairy Tales thinking they would be nice children's stories but it was the unexpurgated version. They decided their darling children would be frightened by the grisly things in it. They weren't. We devoured it. But *Snow White* really scared me. Film images are more frightening to children than stories are, they seem real, they seem right there. And my mother thought I was being so quiet because I enjoyed it so much. Actually, I was rigid with fear.

'I'm sure it's all there somewhere in the writing. Anyone doing a Freudian analysis, if such they wished to do, I'm sure could hang a lot on that. But I think that once the literary imagination gets going it's not so much being dropped on your head at the age of two that feeds it. It's everything you read and experience.'

From the first, great powers were evident in the poetry, as also two dominant voices, one private and one public. The private voice is strange and sometimes

surreal, full of metamorphoses and quicksilver imagery; the public voice is often overtly political, hammering away with blunter and more explicit passion than is usually permitted to show itself in the novels.

After taking her first degree at the University of Toronto she moved on to graduate school at Harvard. Signing up for a course on early American literature she found that she was being invited, in the absence of any early literature of merit, to study the equivalent of Shakespeare's laundry lists, 'from 1650 on and, hell, it doesn't get good till 1830.' Well, she thought, if we can study these texts of sermons at Harvard, which considers itself the belly button of the universe, why can't we study Canadian literature at Canadian universities?

The result was an enormous read-in and a book of criticism called *Survival*, published in 1972. This became an instant phenomenon.

'That book has sold something like 85,000 copies in Canada which for a work of literary criticism is astronomical. The response to it was really instructive and quite overwhelming. It made Canadian literature something to be discussed and studied if only to see where attitudes had come from. Some people thought *Survival* had come down from the mountain, second only to Moses. Others thought it was the work of the devil. But argument raged. People then wrote books about it, beginning with a refutation of mine. That goes on to this day.'

*Survival* perhaps helped strengthen Canadian self-esteem. It also described a literature which was gentler than the American, with key characters portrayed as victims, not expansionists. The novel *Surfacing* is also full of what is, prima facie, pro-Canadian sentiment, the heroine associating all kinds of unpleasant things—materialism, spiritual vacuity, the urge to kill—with 'the Americans.' 'The Americans,' she once said to an audience in Wales, 'think Canada is where the weather comes from. But we (with low-pitched emphasis) we live there,' a thought from which her audience drew a ready parallel.

Her resentment of cultural encroachment, a hostility to 'anybody doing it to anybody,' and her speaking-up for minority cultures have given her books an extra edge for Welsh and Scottish readers and it is no accident that she is in Wales at present [October 1982] to receive the Welsh Arts Council's International Writer's Prize, though this, it should be said, is awarded in recognition of the whole of her work so far.

When her first marriage ended in 1972 she began to live with Graeme Gibson, a Canadian and already a published novelist. Graeme considers they are married to each other. She 'guesses she supposes she considers so' as well. They have a daughter, Jess, now six years old; and apart from a year in Scotland where Graeme was on a writer's exchange they have mostly lived on a 100 acre farm outside Toronto. Two years ago, when Margaret was chairman of the Writers' Union, they moved back into the city, into a house now overflowing with books. 'One of my projects is to clean it up,' she says.

Apart from her divorce, the externals of Margaret Atwood's private life seem rather more placid than those of many of her characters who live with alcohol and pot and numerous entanglements. She herself is