

Conversation

with Margaret Atwood

The first lady of CanLit, Margaret Atwood, appeared at York Tuesday, as guest of the York Women's Centre, to give a reading from her newest novel, *Life Before Man*, on behalf of the True Davidson Collection Fund. Atwood agreed to fit in an impromptu interview with Excalibur's Lydia Pawlenko, while signing copies of her books at the York bookstore.

What do you remember about your year of teaching at York in 1971?

Cold. There wasn't any tunnel. But let's see, I met a couple of people I liked a lot - one of them was Don Cole. Basically, I froze a lot.

You taught a humanities course at York, dealing with Canadian culture. It wasn't such a popular subject at the time. Do you think this attitude has changed?

Well, it was teaching that class that gave me the base for writing *Survival*. It helped me put it together so that I was able to write it with great speed. A lot of material in *Survival* was material I was putting together for my lectures.

Your books *Surfacing* and *Survival* were used as a basis in first year humanities course dealing with Canadian culture. It really affected a lot of people, including me. How do you react to the fact that so many young people are influenced by your work? We've really become an "Atwood generation."

Yeah, possibly. Ah, I don't know. There are lots of other writers around besides me. I wrote *Survival* because nobody else had written it. I guess I'm flattered, partly, but that wasn't the effect I had intended. I don't think you should read just my book on the subject. I wrote my book because there wasn't a book like that, and there needed to be one. Now there are other books which have other points of view. One thing my book did was it generated a lot of controversy, and what that indicated to me was that Canadians were interested. Nobody had written to those people before. They had written to other academics. A lot of the work that has come out since has been written to academics, although it usually starts off by attacking me. Most of those books begin with, 'as Margaret Atwood failed to mention,' or 'here are the distortions of Margaret Atwood which I will now correct.' My book deals with Classic Canadian literature, and that's anything written before 1972 when I wrote *Survival*.

What do you think about the Canlit boom?

I think that a view of Canadian literature has to be balanced by a view of other literature, which I have made fairly clear in my book. I don't think people should just read Canadian literature. I think it would be false any more than reading only English literature or American literature. That becomes a kind of chauvinism that one really does not wish to deal with. But before I wrote *Survival* it was very much the other way. The reaction of the academics was very odd, it was sort of like - you've invaded my pumpkin patch and stolen my pumpkin. You ought to be just writing novels or poetry or whatever it is. That was the general tone of the academic reaction, I think.

Why is it that you, like so many other writers, have chosen a rural setting to work in?

For me it was an accident. Now that I'm there I don't want to move. But I've written everywhere, on buses, on planes, in train stations. I don't need a specific place to write. Some places are better than others because there are few interruptions. But if you're a writer you'll write. In other words, don't keep waiting for the perfect situation because it will never come. You've just got to do it anyway.

Tillie Olson's book *Silences* links the relatively limited number of women writers to the general oppression of women in society. Yet in Canada, there seem to be so many prominent women writers - Margaret Laurence, Jane Rule, Marie-Claire Blais, Marian Engel, Constance Beresford-Howe. Doesn't this contradict Olson's thesis?

I think that the fact that some of us are prominent, may give you a wrong idea. Usually when people say why are there so many famous Canadian women writers, they really mean, why are there some? If you count up the numbers of people in the Writers' Union and people in the League of Poets, it's about a third women in both cases, nowhere near half. In a way, it's a distortion to look at five or six women writers and say why are there so many women writers in Canada. You should probably be asking, why are there only a third.



Why did you choose to be a contributing editor of *This* magazine?

I feel it's one of the few publications that are not controlled by large business interests and, therefore, have to censor what they print in advance. And it's one of the few places where you can read a certain kind of article in this country which would not make its way into *Maclean's* or *Saturday Night* or *The Canadian* magazine. They deal with material which I think is important. I think it was important to know how many Chilean refugees did not get into this country, whereas everybody is making such a big fuss about the boat people. There were a lot of people who were not let in and nobody made a big human cry about them at all. Things like that are important. There are a lot of money interests in the big papers, whereas we, on the contrary, are always broke.

What seems to come more naturally for you, writing poetry or fiction - or does it all come in the same way?

Well, it doesn't all come in the same way. Writing a novel has to be an act of will. In other words, you can get the idea for it, but following through on that idea takes a lot of time. You gotta go into that room and slave away at it.

A lot of your writing seems very depressing or painful. What is it like putting pain on paper?

Fun. It's just as much fun as putting anything down on paper. Keats once said, "Shakespeare took as much delight in creating an Iago as he did in creating an Imogene." The pleasure or the exhilaration is in doing the actual writing and in feeling that you're getting it right. I don't know exactly what the sensation is, but obviously it's a very powerful one because it keeps writers writing. You might call it word addiction. The bad part of writing is when you're not doing it, or when you're not doing it right.

If you're writing something that is in fact painful to contemplate, the experience of doing that is exhilarating. It's not a painful experience. It may cause you to cry or whatever. If writers were total masochists and felt pain every time they wrote about a particular subject it might answer your question. But they're not. They don't write to make themselves suffer.

The dialogue between characters in your new book *Life Before Man* is skillfully banal. Why?

That's how people talk. Or haven't you noticed? Try it in an elevator sometime or in a restaurant. Try eavesdropping. In fact, it's a good exercise. Just take your tape recorder with you, record conversations and write it all down, and see if it makes good fictional dialogue. Well, I can tell you right now that it does not. Prose is much more condensed.

How are your books accepted in the States?

Pretty well. Canadian Studies, interestingly enough, is a booming academic business in the States. There is considerable interest in it, if only for people wanting to save their academic skins by whipping out an M.A. on the subject so they can get a job.

When I lived there, which was in the early sixties, people were so naive about Canada that they would really ask me, and this is no joke, whether my father had a team of Huskies. I would lie to them and say yes, not only that, but we live in an igloo in the winter. They would believe it. It was quite wicked of me.

Now that you have a massive following, does the powerful influence you have ever frighten you?

Power is starting a war. Power is causing 20 million people to behave in a certain way. Let me put it this way, if I died a lot of people would come to my funeral, but if I said, now everybody vote NDP, nobody more would vote NDP than always had. I don't really have political, external power.

But what about your power as a writer?

That's very, very hard to measure, that kind of power. And it has no direct connection with me. I don't feel the effects of it very often. I write books, I do the best I can. The books go out there - maybe they change people, maybe they don't. I never get to see whether they do or not. It's largely an unknown quantity. There's no way of measuring that.

I think if you run out on the street and ask the people you meet if they have ever heard of Margaret Atwood, probably 75 per cent of them would say no. Well, it depends what street you're standing on. Now, it's true that for this country I have a very high per capita readership. But it's really minute when you consider the total population.

What advice would you give to beginning writers?

Well first of all, the people who think they want to write, but are not writing at the moment, are probably wrong. The only way you can really learn it is by doing it. You're only a writer when you're writing. I would say start reading as much as possible. Then, unless you're one of these closet writers who says 'I only write for myself,' which usually means you're afraid to put it out there where everybody can see it, you should start thinking of publishing. You might as well try. All it will cost you is a stamp.

What do you think is the advantage of taking creative writing courses?

I don't think it'll kill you, and it could give you some short cuts, but it's not necessary. You don't have to take a creative writing class in order to be a writer, otherwise I wouldn't be here. It's a way of getting university credits doing something you like.

How do you come up with such realistic characters in your novels?

I project myself into the character and then imagine what the character would do, how the character would behave. Anybody can do it except that they don't usually practice much.

I think basically all failures are basically failures of the imagination, especially war. In other words, if you could imagine what it would be like to have a bomb dropped on you, you would never drop a bomb on anybody.

When you were a student writer in university, did you foresee yourself as a famous writer?

Of course not. When I was going to university starting in 1957, there were no visible Canadian writers. E.J. Pratt was about the closest you could come. I think I studied two Canadian poems in the whole time I went to high school. If you count John Buckin's *Thirty Nine Steps*, I studied one Canadian novel. There were no role models for being a writer in Canada.

When did it dawn on you that you were a writer?

A big thumb came down out of the sky when I was about sixteen and said "YOU."

Do you discipline yourself to regular hours of writing every day?

I write from 1 to 6 o'clock, roughly. I have to write so many hours per day because I have a young child, and with a young child you have to compartmentalize your time.

Do you ever reach points where you just can't write?

I reach points where I don't write, when I'm doing stuff like this.