

Margaret Atwood

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Margaret Atwood has achieved a worldwide reputation as a novelist, poet and critic. She is the author of seven collections of poetry, four novels and Survival, a thematic study of Canadian literature. Her novels, described by George Woodcock as 'tight and sinewy studies of neurotic frontiers' represent some of the best of a new wave of highly imaginative and experimental prose fiction which has emerged in Canada in the past decade. The poetry, of which Selected Poems (1976) is the most substantial selection, combines a restrained, secretive nature with a razor sharpness that cuts to the bone exposing at various levels the contradictions inherent in human nature. Her major work of criticism, Survival, sparked an explosion of interest in and discussion of Canadian literature that continues to this day.

This interview was conducted by Adam Hopkins during a visit by Ms Atwood to England and Wales in October 1982 and first appeared, in a slightly longer version, in Guardian Weekend. We are grateful to the author and to the Guardian for permission to reproduce the article in Canada Today.

Conversations with Margaret Atwood, author of *Surfacing*, *The Edible Woman* and a string of other novels and books of poetry that establish her as one of the 'big' writers of our day, may not be entirely agreeable unless one enjoys the free play of intellect. To put it plainly: this early champion of the cause of women and creator of a shimmering imaginative world is liable to be a great deal cleverer than those she is talking to.

And everything one has half imagined, half assumed from the backs of her books—and indeed from their insides—turns out to be true. Margaret Atwood, one of the most sophisticated novelists around, really did spend half her childhood in a cabin by a lake in the northern wilderness of Canada and here she and her brother began to write, as quite small children, for one another's entertainment. Her mother really did scare off a bear by shouting at it; her brother really did fall in the lake and almost drown and was only rescued because the mother heard air bubbles.

Margaret Atwood is an expert canoeist. She came to the city more fearful of it than of the wilderness and she still believes the woods are safer than the streets. And yes, everything she writes is true in that all the details, however rearranged, are taken from real life.

Her latest novel *Bodily Harm*, with its plots and counter-plots on a Caribbean island, is a compilation of precise details from three islands in the Grenadines. In

Surfacing, a novel of spiritual quest and the book that established her at home as a major writer of prose (her earliest successes had come in poetry) the heroine returns to the lake and log-cabin of her childhood to look for her father who has vanished.

She goes there with three companions, her lover Joe and a married couple. All squabble and work up grievances while the nameless heroine, increasingly alienated, commits herself more and more deeply to the search for her father who must be either mad or dead. Eventually she experiences, in the woods and lake, a regression to the primeval, an identification with all that preceded her existence, merging at last purified and ready to return to society. The last scenes are described in heightened language that can only be described as visionary.

Margaret Atwood agrees that the lake and log cabin of the book are the lake and a mixture of the various cabins of her own childhood, 'accurate down to the minutest detail, including the house made of bottles which can still be seen.

'The lake is much as described, in fact, it is exactly (with suppressed laughter to acknowledge the flicker of evasiveness) it is exactly as described. It has a thousand miles of shoreline and it's thirty miles long, and it's a very, uh, mysterious environment. *Surfacing* of course is a ghost story and it's the perfect setting for a ghost story, a very ghostly kind of place, it's a very echoing, reflecting sort of place.'

But what about the human side, the scientist father who has drowned, just as we feared, and who may be partly responsible for the quest in the first place because he has failed to present the mysteries to his daughter? Well, yes, the Atwood father was indeed a scientist, a 'forest entomologist,' 'a very woody man' who built the houses that they lived in, 'having grown up in the backwoods of Nova Scotia where if your house burned down you built another.'

But are the characters of the parents in the book, who seem rather stiff and disagreeable, taken from real life?

'No,' she replies. '*Surfacing* is obviously not my story. I think the only way of connecting it with me is to say it's a way of dealing with death in advance, both my parents being alive and very lively.' Both are dead in the book.

'My big problem as a writer is that I have very nice parents and writers are supposed to have horrible parents so they can write about them and make them the background for the miseries of their characters.' Her own father is 'very explanatory and he likes little children, we went on a lot of collecting with him'. Her brother also became a scientist. 'So I have to use other people's parents, collective, not individual.'

She is not, she says, a very deliberate writer in terms of themes or meanings and she allies herself with the tradition of English realism. She admires Dickens, for example, because he 'used to get out and walk round and look at things and my feeling is that he built the work up from details rather than down from theories. I feel that if you get the things right, and the arrangement of things, the meaning is going to emerge from that, rather than paint-by-numbers where you outline the theory and colour it in.'

Given the importance she attaches to exactitude of