



Writer in residence Daphne Marlatt

Photo: Tim Hellum

## Imagine: a town

Imagine a town running  
 (smoothly?)  
 a town running before a fire  
 canneries burning  
 (do you see the shadow of charred stilts  
 on cool water? do you see enigmatic chance standing  
 just under the beam?  
 He said they were playing cards in the  
 Chinese mess hall, he said it was dark ( a hall? a shack.  
 they were all, crowded together on top of each other.  
 He said somebody accidentally knocked the oil lamp over, off  
 the edge  
 where stilts are standing, Over the edge of the  
 dyke a river pours, uncalled for, unending:  
 where chance lurks  
 fishlike, shadows the underside of pilings, calling up his hall  
 the bodies of men & fish corpse piled on top of each other (residue  
 time is, the delta) rot, an endless waste the trucks of production  
 grind to juice, driving thru  
 smears, blood smears in the dark  
 dirt) this marshland silt no graveyard  
 can exist in but water swills,  
 endlessly out of itself to the mouth  
 ringed with residue, where  
 chance flicks his tail & swims, thru

Daphne Marlatt  
Steveston

## by Gilbert Bouchard

There was also a remarkable and various amount of linguistic experiment in the sixties. On the West Coast, a group of young poets — which included George Bowering, Frank Davey, and Daphne Marlatt — crystallized around the teacher Warren Tallman and the magazine *Tish*. At that time they were interested, as many such groups before them in stripping poetry of what they saw as conventional rhetoric and getting down to the real image. They have since gone in many directions, but their interest in language remains.

Margaret Atwood  
Introduction to *The New  
Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*

For many poets experimentation is a thing of their writing youth, and they generally fossilize into a set form or style that they adhere to for the rest of their careers. But not so for Daphne Marlatt, the U of A's writer in residence for the 1985-86 academic year.

The experimentation she began in the 1960s alongside her *Tish* comrades continues to this day as she pushes the limits of poetics in works like *Steveston* and *Touch to My Tongue*.

"I've come out of the projective verse, or breathline tradition," said Marlatt. "The breathline tradition, which has had a tremendous influence on Canadian poetry, is an open verse that uses the breath and movements of the body to score the words on the page. I've moved away from that form of poetry and have become more interested in syntax and the ongoing sentence. In *Steveston* — a poetic sequence about a Japanese-Canadian fishing community on the Fraser river — what I did was to try and develop a syntactical movement that would parallel the ongoing movement of the river on to the sea."

The result is, according to Marlatt, "very long lines that look like prose but are actually extended lines."

"I've been moving more and more into prose," said Marlatt. "I'm very interested in that area where prose and poetry blur into each other."

Evidence of this attraction to prose-like poetry is in her latest work *Touch to My Tongue* where long elegant lines stretch across the page making her poems resemble blocks of print rather than the thin columns of words that most of us are indoctrinated to believe poetry should look like. *Touch* is also witness to Marlatt's commitment to the feminist rehabilitation of poetry.

Particularly interesting is Marlatt's use of feminine images, feminine myths, borrowing of foreign words, and the examinations of the roots of English words to try and convey the feminine experience.

"It's a very important time for women writing poetry," said Marlatt. "What's exciting about women and poetry now is that there is a great examination of the language. Women are realizing that they've inherited a language with a patriarchal bias that is often inadequate to convey their own experiences, particularly their physical experiences. It isn't adequate to express who they are in the world."

"Women are breaking old conventions and actually speaking in a new way and with a new language — a new way of approaching the language — lots of playing with that language, double meanings, puns," said Marlatt. "There's a call for a whole new consciousness that deconstructs the patriarchal consciousness with its hierarchical thought and its push towards the unified one — the one right word, the one right thought — to a new kind of consciousness, one that is much more multifaceted."

Marlatt adds that while she's deeply interested in feminist thought and feminist expression "I'm also interested in men's writing as well, I'm not just interested in women's writing." Marlatt would like any U of A poet, male or female to feel free to bring their poetry to her for analysis and discussion.

Other interests of Marlatt include a love for the music of the spoken word. "Other people's dialects fascinate me. There are often chunks of other people's speech in my poetry and I have written two oral history books and have listened to lots of different voices."

Marlatt is also working on a novel that she started in 1978 and is desperate to finish. "The book features two women characters separated by a hundred years, and has a lot of historical material on the early days of Vancouver. The book takes a look at the sanctions — both internal and external — that affect women," she said.

## Marlatt still experimenting

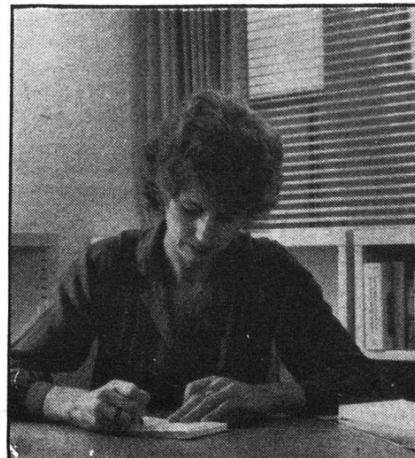
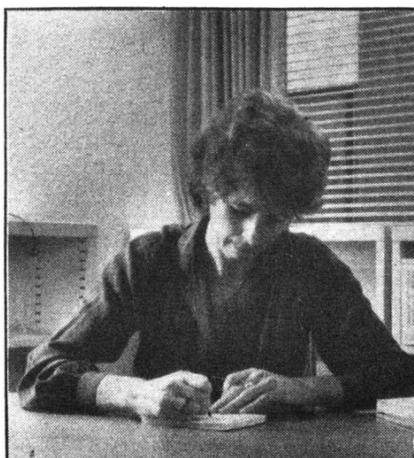


Photo: Tim Hellum