

An Interview with...

Marian Engel: Writer-In-Residence

For the third consecutive year the U of A English department has secured a prominent Canadian author for the position of writer-in-residence. This year's occupant is Marian Engel, well-known novelist and winner of the Governor General's award for her controversial and most recent work, **Bear**.

Marian Engel was born in 1933 in Toronto and grew up in Galt, Hamilton and Sarnia. She received her higher education at McMaster and McGill universities and taught at Montana State for a year. Ms. Engel, a mother two, claims she has been writing since she was ten and describes getting published as "an incredibly slow process". Her earlier fictional works include **Sarah Bastard's Notebook**, **One Way Street**, and **Joanne**.

Engel's novel **Bear** concerns a female bibliographer who, on assignment from an historical institute, spends a summer on an isolated island in northern Ontario. There she becomes the guardian of a rather domesticated bear with whom she eventually falls in love and with which, after a fashion, she makes love. Too often billed as a sensationalistic novel, **Bear** is more accurately an exploration of one woman's profound loneliness and the means she uses to cope with it.

Marian Engel will be writer-in-residence for the 1977-78 academic year. She was interviewed this week by the Gateway's Brian Bergman.

I wanted to talk about **Bear** since it's the novel which has won you the widest recognition and, of course, the Governor General's award. How did you get the idea for **Bear**?

The idea just walked in. I was working on something, setting up a sort of Gothic situation, and I thought well, what do we do here? Put a lady in a castle and some strange lover has to walk in. And I closed my eyes — and in walked a bear.

I didn't know whether I should pursue it or not and a friend of mine said you'll never turn it into a novel. Then I started to do research about bears in myths and legends and discovered that I wasn't the only person who had thought about bears in that sort of way. I talked to a lot of friends, a lot of writers, and heard incredibly good things about the idea. And I thought if the response is like that — I mean, the idea just seemed to make people go all smiley — then maybe I should do it. But it took a long time to work it out properly into a story.

How have you found the response since publishing it?

Oh, it's been enormously successful. I don't know what the hard-bound sales have been but the critical response has been very good. I had steered myself for a very negative response because it's a fairly raunchy book for one thing. I mean, it could be taken the wrong way. You have to be very careful about that sort of thing.

As a result of this, have you had any strange personal reactions from people?

No, not really. I've had a couple of people send me pornographic photographs in the mail, but those you just throw in the garbage and ignore.

Were you surprised to receive the Governor General's award for **Bear**?

No I wasn't, really. John Robert Colombo told me I was going to get it. He wasn't even on the committee but he's a very shrewd literary politician; I've never known him to be wrong about that sort of thing. So I wasn't as surprised as perhaps I should have been, but I was terribly pleased.

How do you feel about the Governor General's award as a literary award?

Well, it comes with \$5000 — now how would you feel about that?

Good.



Novelist Marian Engel

It's the only one we have, after all. Once upon a time it used to be a sort of tin medal. There's an awfully funny story about when Emily Carr received it. She was ill in a nursing home, you see, and so her publisher, Irwin Clark, took it to her. When Clark gave it to Emily she grabbed it and bit it. She said, "It's not even real bronze." Then she told Clark, "See that dead sparrow out on the eavesdrop. That's bothering me. Just shine that medal out there and knock sparrow off — it'll be of some use then."

The award used to be a pretty hollow thing when it was a free trip. But once the Canada Council attached some money to it — well all writers can use money. It's a lovely thing.

That leads to another question. Do you feel that the government in this country is giving adequate support to the Arts?

Yes, I think so. The writing division of the Canada Council doesn't get as much as the other Arts do; of course writing isn't one of the more expensive Arts, is it? I guess that's why there's so many women writers — the equipment doesn't cost so much. But even so, if you try to make a decent living writing books in Canada you have to be a tremendous success.

Is it possible to do that in Canada now? For anyone besides, say, a Margaret Atwood?

Yes, Atwood does it. And Margaret Laurence does it. But they both, when the kettle needs something to keep it boiling, go out on speaking tours ... and promotional tours. I can do it if I do short stories and articles, and an awful lot of public speaking. But I find that leaves me no energy for any serious long-form writing.

How do you feel about combining the academic life with creative writing?

Well, I would hate to spend my whole life doing it. I wouldn't like to go from university to university. But I thought it was a grand opportunity to come here.

I was thinking more in terms of teaching.

I haven't taught at the university level for a long time ... I don't know what that would do to my head, if I was going to teach seriously. I've found my energies are limited. I've two kids to raise, after all, and that plus writing — I find teaching enormously energy-draining, as well. It depends on your personality, really, and how much time you give to your private life.

How do you see your role as writer-in-residence at the U of A?

Oh, the definition is very loose — fortunately. I wanted to come out here; I wanted a change from Toronto. I don't hate Toronto but I've found it an increasingly demanding city. It's getting big and full and noisy. I thought it would be nice to be in a smaller place for a while.

I just intend to make myself available to the students and see what happens. People are already bringing their work to me, setting up appointments to talk. You see, people who are university students and want to write usually want to talk about writing. The more people share writing experiences the better off they'll be. Paranoia is the writer's occupational disease and it grows best in isolation.

Now for the standard question. What sort of writers do you read and who would you count as influences?

When you've read as widely as I have it's hard to distinguish influences; you don't know what you've picked up from others ... you go through stages. I think Hugh McLellan definitely influenced me. I studied under him many years ago and was very impressed. He wouldn't tolerate sloppy writing and that was very important for me at the time.

I also wanted desperately, once, to be a journalist. But I found I was too shy. I hated going into people's homes and asking them questions.

What are you working on now?

I've got to get back to a new novel I'm working on which is nearly — well, I keep saying it's nearly finished. The Toronto parts need working on.

One thing I wanted to ask you about **Bear** and about Canadian literature in general: it seems to me there's almost a motif developing in our literature about the wilderness — about people going to the wilderness and discovering things about themselves. Was this struck particularly with the similarity between **Bear** and Atwood's **Surfacing**?

People often remark on that similarity ... though I think both Peggy and I would deny it because formally they're not the same story. The general Canadian theme seems to be that the wilderness is our imaginative territory and yet very few of us live there. We really need more good urban novels. There are quite a few Toronto novels coming out this spring but really they read like Saul Bellow: that territory has been covered before.

Do you think that Canadian authors have become too perhaps too self-conscious about writing about Canadian themes; writing the 'great Canadian novel'?

I think we're past that stage. I think most of us are realizing that this is a good country to be writing in at this time because it's not all used up. There was so little writing happening before that all the stories aren't told.

I guess what I'm objecting to is when literature becomes too nationalistic.

Well, we have been pushing it in the last few years trying to get a market going. If the time comes when the country is sufficiently stable and we can just relax and be ourselves, that'll be great.