

Atwood reads Bodily Harm

by M.L. Hendry

I first saw Margaret Atwood in 1975 in Yellowknife, N.W.T. An avid fan of *The Edible Woman*, which at 17 I thought hilarious, and unsettled by *Surfacing*, I found the author herself charming.

That night she read the first few chapters of her third novel, *Lady Oracle*.

I waited a year for Lady Oracle to appear in the library, and when I finally got to read the book, I didn't like it.

Atwood's characters seem to float in an emotional vacuum. Their stories are tragic, but there is no sense of suffering. She creates a world which, lacking pathos, is merely bizarre.

This spring I started to read *Life Before Man*. I didn't finish it. (I have been known to stay up all night to finish a book I like.)

Nevertheless, learning that Atwood was coming here rekindled my early interest: I decided to attend the reading and get an impression of Margaret Atwood as author in 1981.

Atwood's appearance in the Canadian Book Information Centre at Dalhousie was one stop on a frenetic promotion tour which has left the author visibly tired.

Her fifth novel, *Bodily Harm*, has just been released, and the author read us Chapter One, wherein we are introduced to Rennie, a young woman from the proverbial Canadian small-town of Griswold, now living alone in Toronto.

Rennie arrives home from work from work one day (she is a 'lifestyles journalist') to be

greeted by two policemen who tell her that in her absence a man has broken into her apartment and sat waiting for her with a rope. The intruder has meanwhile fled, but the rope is ominously coiled on our heroine's bed.



I am immediately on my guard: Atwood is leading me into another horror story and I am reluctant to follow.

We are also introduced to Jake, Rennie's estranged man-friend with the off-beat sense of humour (one can't help wondering if it is Jake who has returned or a genuine sexual deviant who is stalking Rennie), and to Jocasta, a woman who makes a living selling Punk Junk.

Rennie also visits her gynecologist and learns that she has cancer.

The story actually takes place in a Caribbean prison, Atwood tells us, and reads a passage towards the end of the book in which we find Rennie in a cell with the badly-battered, possibly dead, body of another

woman.

There are ample contemporary landmarks in *Bodily Harm*: green-haired, safety-pinned punks, pot-smoking policemen, post-Women's Liberation male identity crises, cancer, foreign jails.

Also in evidence is Atwood's wit. We are entertained by "how many people from Griswold does it take" lightbulb jokes, Rennie's irreverent "lifestyles", fabrications, a modern-day romance in which the man asks the woman to stay the night, then hops into bed, turns his back on her and goes to sleep.

I laugh, but feel on the whole a sense of foreboding.

This introduction to *Bodily Harm* reaffirms my complaint with Atwood's writing: There is some essential sensitivity lacking. I am left feeling cold, unsatisfied as to Atwood's stand on whether or not, as Franz Kafka once said, "a book must be like an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us".

It is now 1981, and I, for one, am weary of repeated assaults. Everything Atwood writes about is undeniably real, but we are not all frozen inside.

I crave balance in the books I read, an assertion that there is something worth preserving in a world suffering not only from widespread ugliness and evil, but from writers who offer us only more of the same.

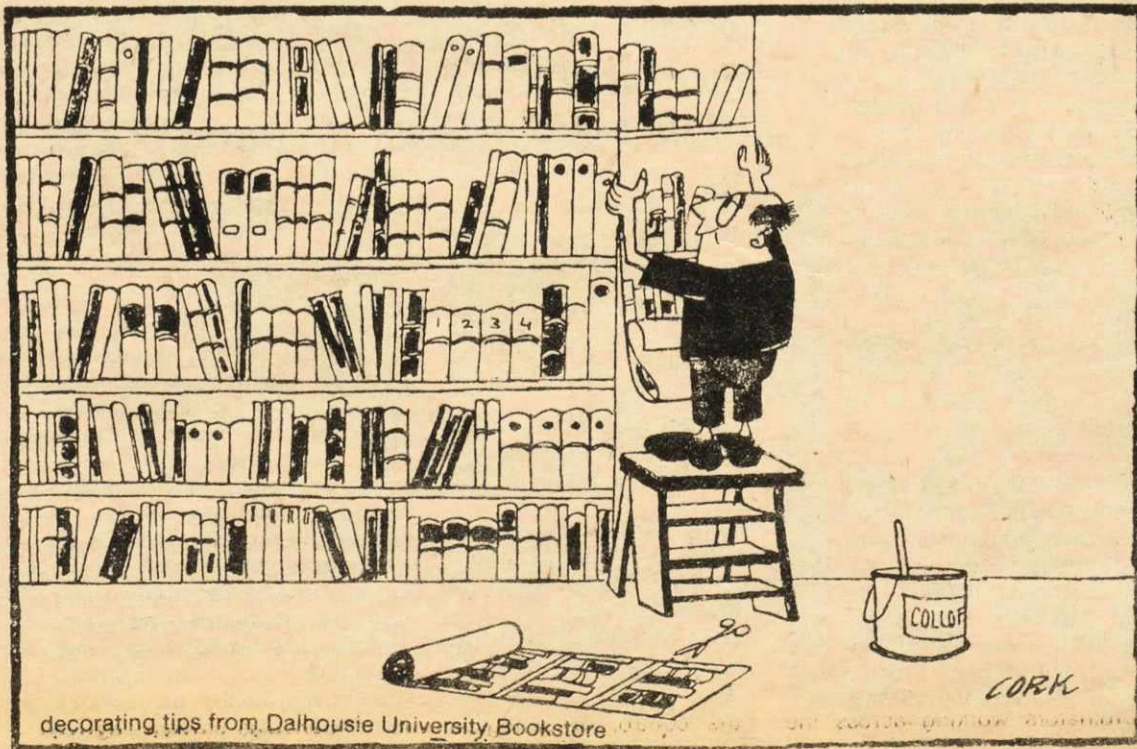
We are in need of a healing touch. Tenderness does exist, but if Atwood is aware of this she chooses not to include any in her novels, which in my opinion is truly unfortunate.

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