



Photo: Graceme Gibson

abstemious. Alcohol doesn't agree with her and she drinks little. She runs, she walks, she swims, she skates. Her domestic life sounds orderly. But what, I ask, of *Power Politics*? A marvellous but troubled book of love poems, or anti-love poems, perhaps, published in 1971. They don't sound at all domestic unless they record the break-up of her marriage.

'Oh no, she replies, 'I don't think I would have married anybody like that.'

Later she adds: 'People shouldn't talk too much with authors or they destroy their image of the writing. I think works really ought to have their own integrity. I'm never too communicative about what went into my books because that in a way is not the point. The point is the relationship between the work and the reader. By the time you come to publishing it, that's what matters, not the relationship between the writer and the work'. Margaret Atwood is chary of 'messages.' She employs a glinting symbolism capable at best of bearing a number of meanings and creating a now-you-see-me-now-you-don't effect. Even so, she is generally reckoned to have adopted a feminist stance. By her account, though, it is feminism that has appropriated her in what she calls 'the butterfly net syndrome.' And she is grateful, even if bitterly criticised by some for not

going far enough, for not, as she puts it, 'pushing all men off a cliff.'

'I know I get a lot of support from women and I would never repudiate that. I think that every woman who can read and write is a feminist by inheritance. People have fought to obtain that right for you and you shouldn't take it for granted. For every person in a labour union there's a long bloody history. People died to get the rights others now have. So I don't agree with the kind of women who say "I'm successful therefore any woman should be able to be successful and what are they whining about." That seems to me a very selfish attitude, a position for the very unaware and the very historically uninformed.'

I quote a remark from the Welsh poet Gillian Clarke who admires the Atwood novels because 'her feminism is not like racism, identifying the enemy by physical characteristics and hating the lot of them. It's a determined beavering forward and an absolute confidence that women are worth all the things that human beings are worth.'

Margaret Atwood accepts the comment. She adds that being pro-women doesn't necessarily mean being anti-men. In any case, she had begun writing on these matters at high school, a time when any woman growing up in North America with any idea of doing other than follow the normal course—'Which was seen as being married at quite an early age'—simply had to develop something that was later called feminism in order to go on doing what she wanted to. 'I can't recall having any particular theories about it. But then when the feminist movement came along, I said, "I'm glad to see you. Where have you been all my life?"'

I asked again about her attitude to men. In my opinion, by no means shared with every reader, Margaret Atwood is generally fair to men as individuals. But there is a passage in *Bodily Harm* where Rennie, the heroine, after great efforts to stay open-minded, decides that 'she's afraid of men, it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening.' Is that a change of heart on Margaret Atwood's part, a conclusion that all men are rapists, or potentially so?

'No, of course not,' she replies. 'But we can say that most wars we know about have been conducted by men. The women's movement most often sees violence as being done by men to women, but if you actually do a head-count worldwide and throughout history, you'll see that most violence has been done by men to men.' Her conclusion is that men are more violent than women. 'Now, they may be more violent because they have more power or they may have more power because they are more violent. To me, this is an important field of investigation and if I were a scientist that's what I would be studying.'

If Margaret Atwood seems sometimes confident to a fault this is because she is trying to say the things she thinks important. 'Presumably one of one's purposes in life is to try to understand one's own environment,' she has observed at an earlier point in our conversation and this is what she struggles, with all her intelligence, to do.

Here is a novelist and poet of great gifts writing at the heights of her powers. She addresses herself to central matters and if that means she considers the undertaking significant for herself, so be it. It could turn out significant for us as well.

This article may only be reproduced with permission of Guardian Weekend.