

## Question and Answer Session

*The following is a transcript of the talk given by Margaret Atwood at the May, 1995 gathering of the Toronto Council of Teachers of English, held at the University of Toronto's Women's Club. At Ms. Atwood's request, questions were submitted by TCTE members and placed into a hat beforehand.*

This afternoon is in honour of my high school English teacher, Miss Bessie Billings, from Leaside High School, who gave me some of my first encouragement as a writer. She read one of my first poems and said, "I can't understand this at all dear, so it must be good!"

So, let's see what we have here.

Do you feel being a professional writer has changed significantly in the last thirty or forty years and if so, how?

Since 1960 it's certainly changed a huge amount in this country. In 1960 there was not much of a Canadian audience for Canadian writers who published in Canada. If you want to research it, you can go back to the summer editions of the University of Toronto Quarterly where they reviewed all the books that had been published during the previous year. In 1960 there were five novels published by English Canadian writers in Canada and about twenty books of poetry; however, those twenty books of poetry included the stuff we were churning out in the cellar. Most people writing poetry at that time were either self-published or published by their friends. People would get together, make up a name, get hold of a flatbed press, or use a mimeograph machine – cold type was just coming in but computers were unheard of – and crank out maybe 200 copies, which they then sold for very low prices. That counted as a published book then, because there were so few others. All of that changed radically during the sixties; the watershed date is probably 1965, when Coach House Press was founded, or 1966, with the founding of The House of Anansi Press. These were writer-generated publishing houses, which believed, unlike the five established publishers in the country, that there was a market for new, experimental, and Canadian work.

The other reason things changed – and this will interest you – is that once upon a time there was a set curriculum for English in high school. For example, every year you would find either Hamlet or Macbeth on the final Grade Thirteen exam. People made a living generating these books, relying on the province-wide high-school market. But when that was abolished in the sixties, publishers had to become more adventurous, which contributed to the renaissance – or rather naissance – of Canadian writing.

In 1960 nobody in Canada would dream of ever being able to support themselves writing fiction or poetry. It was very hard to get a novel published in Canada if you did not have American or English publication as well. There is a paradox here, because on the one hand people would say there was no such thing as Canadian literature, or even Canadian identity, but then when you went looking for a foreign publisher you'd be told, "This is too Canadian"! All of this caused people to put a lot of work into creating publishing houses and building up audiences. The result of that work is that now, I would say, 10 percent of Canadian fiction writers make a living at their writing. It's 10 percent in the U.S. and probably a little less than 10 percent in the U.K. So we are now doing the same as those other folks.

Making a living from poetry is very hard, unless you can sing too ...! These days, and in the U.S. in particular, there are many creative writing programmes. In the early sixties there were almost no creative writing programmes in Canada at all. One exception was a programme at UBC, started by Earle Birney. Another was a course I took myself at U. of T. If you go back and look at a U. of T. calendar from those days, you'll find that in the Honours English programme (which has now been abolished – too bad, it was a good programme), by the time you got to fourth year, you could take something called English 400. Now English 400 was non-credit, but it was a creative writing course. The course consisted of four or five of us sitting around with the instructor and having tea. We would write our little things, bring them in and read them, and that was about the size of it.

The other thing is that when I started, nobody took Canadian writing seriously. It was assumed to be an oxymoron. But now that we've turned out so many internationally respected writers we don't get that knee-jerk response very often ... except of course at some Canadian universities!

How does the successful writer resist the temptation to be a literary snob?

Well, I could be very cheap and say that most of them don't. But that's in fact not true. The question is, what kind of successful writer: successful financially, or successful artistically? If we're talking successful artistically, I would say that unless you were somewhat of a literary snob to begin with, then you would not have developed your own taste and you probably would not have been able to forge a style. If on the other hand you mean the snobbery of people who are only interested in people who have reached the same level of success as themselves, then of course nobody should behave that way; anyway you would miss a lot of good reading by doing that.

If you read literary gossip about who was at what party and who was invited to what conference, of course you will find changing hierarchies, as in any other field.

But I think we could probably rephrase the question: "How do you maintain a sense of proportion" or "How do you keep your values straight?" In that case I can say it certainly helps to be Canadian; we don't put up with people who get too high and mighty. Start flinging it about and we get out our pins! I think it's always a mistake to believe your own billboards.

What are the disadvantages of being a professional novelist or poet?

I guess the key word here is professional. No disadvantages that I can see. Let's put it this way: if I weren't one, I'd be teaching university English. And I've done that. It was really hard. I took up smoking when I got to the part where I had to mark the papers. I had to do something, I wasn't going to get through it otherwise. You know, your sense of language starts to slip. (Gee, maybe it really is reoccur!?) So I took up smoking, although it didn't last very long. I coughed a lot at six cigarettes a day, so I figured that smoking and I were not meant for each other and I had better give up teaching.

My first teaching position was teaching grammar to Engineering students at 8:30 in the morning in a Quonset hut on the campus of the University of British Columbia. It was 1964; they were still using these Quonset huts left over from the war. I remember two things about those days: one was that we were all asleep, and the other was that I made them do these short little imitations of Kafka. So they obviously had to read Kafka first, which I'm sure helped them no end in their chosen profession!

Some part of me thought that I would always be teaching grammar to Engineering students at 8:30 in the morning. Forever. And don't think I didn't think of running away to be a waitress. I tried that and got very thin, because you're basically cleaning up other people's mashed-up dinners. This does not build up your appetite. Also, if you're a waitress rather than a waiter, people take a Mommy view of you, so you find yourself going, "Aw, weren't your mashed potatoes good? Maybe you would like some different ones?" If you're a waiter of course, you just sneer. But then, that's changed too. Now you have to say, "Hello, my name is Bob. I'm your waitperson for today." Miss Manners doesn't approve of this. She doesn't think that the waitperson should have to establish a first-name relationship with a customer. I'm with Miss Manners, who I feel is the reincarnation of Jane Austen.

One thing I mean by professional is that you make your living from it; another is that you take a more or less professional view of what you are doing. And this to me means, among other things, that I do not phone up my publishers at four in the morning and scream at them. I do that at four in the afternoon when they're in the office, but tales told of other writers indicate that some do not draw the line in quite the same place.

How important do you think it is for us to teach the conventions of good writing to our students? I'm thinking especially about punctuation.

I think you should teach the conventions. Punctuation was invented in the 19th century, as far as I can tell. That is, regularized punctuation which – like regularized all kinds of things! – came in during the age when Scrooges multiplied, and Cratchits were required. Many people were sent to school and they were trained to be Bob Cratchit – that is, to sit at a desk, be underpaid, add up figures, and punctuate. So there had to be a system that everybody agreed upon. You see the same kind of systematization going on now in the wonderful world of computerland. You start off with all kinds of different systems, and then you realize that these things are not going to be able to communicate with each other unless you have one system that everybody agrees on – that this means that.

Originally however punctuation was more like musical notation. If you look at Roman texts, at the way they're actually written, there isn't any punctuation at all. There's the occasional period once in a while, but no commas or semicolons or anything like that. The meaning is contained in the inflections of the language itself. So, it's a lately-come system; and like all lately-come systems, it amounted to a bunch of people sitting around and deciding what the right way was going to be. The same thing happened with spelling which was very variable before about 1850 (and even for some time after that, judging from my students' papers).

Before the 19th century, I think that punctuation was geared to the ear. The sermons of John Donne, for instance, were orations and meant to be spoken out loud. The 19th century was the age when silent reading really took over, although it didn't take over completely. If you read histories or novels of the time, or even Isabella Beaton's *Book of Household Management*, you will hear that in the evening the ladies should be doing needlework while somebody else reads an instructive book out loud to them, explaining the difficult parts. A friend of mine has just finished a history of reading, and it turns out that in the days of monasteries and illuminated manuscripts, reading was done out loud and in groups. If you were found reading silently it was assumed that the devil had your ear. You were making your own interpretation. Very bad idea.

In *Surfacing* the punctuation is obviously used to indicate a state of mind; thoughts run into other thoughts. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is kind of a sampler of different types of punctuation and prose style. The person at the publishing company who was given the page proofs of

Surfacing to correct had never edited a work of fiction before, only history texts. As a result this person went through the entire 300 pages and turned all of the commas into periods or semicolons. And I then had to go through it again – with a magnifying glass, because the type was quite small – and change it all back. I then wrote a dignified but pointed letter indicating why I had done this.

Writers fight all the time when we're editing novels. Who do I fight with? I fight with my editor. And sometimes I trade off a semicolon here, a comma there. I'll give her this one if she'll give me that one!

Why wouldn't she just defer to your reputation?

Because she's a good editor. It's a hazard that if you get to a certain level of success people tend to let you do whatever you want. This would be very bad news for you as a writer. My editor has to bring these things up. She has to say, "You realize that this is not the orthodox way."

"Yes I do," say I, "but I'm doing it for the following reasons."

"Well, to me it looks odd," says she.

"Try reading it out loud," say I.

"But it looks very funny on the page ..." says she.

And so it goes.

I've noticed a strange thing creeping into American written prose recently – they put a colon at the end of a clause and then they begin the next part of the sentence with a capital letter. [Hoots from the audience.] Do I hear retching noises from the back of the room? Well they are doing it, and I would like to know who made that up, and why, because to me it doesn't make any sense whatsoever. If you're going to have a capital letter, you might as well have a period. You can go to war over that one, I'll be on your side. I've recently taken up a new device, which is the set of dashes. Some people overuse this quite a lot – everything is a set of dashes – but in prose I'm tending to prefer it to parentheses. In prose fiction a lot is associative – one idea suggests another – which can lead to an interposition in the middle of a sentence. The question is, how do you set that off? Sometimes you can do it with parentheses, but sets of dashes are often quite useful. As for the semicolon, it's a pause in thought; but then the thought continues on. One last question.

Do you like the comma inside the quotation marks or outside? I'm sorry, I know I'm being hopelessly pedantic but ...

Well, it depends on what is in the sentence and what the quotation marks are enclosing, as it were. And for this you'd have to use concrete examples.

At the beginning you said we should keep teaching the conventions of punctuation, and so I wouldn't mind if you said a little more about why, because that's what we get asked all the time.

[Pretending she's speaking to a student]

You should learn punctuation, my dear, for the very same reason that everyone should know how a table is set. One day – you may not believe this now – but one day you will be at a formal dinner party, and if you do not know which spoon to use, you will be very, very embarrassed when you realize that everybody else is using a different spoon. So I'm merely trying to save you embarrassment in later life. That is why. It is a social convention, and you have to know social conventions. You may choose to violate them by shaving off all your hair or putting a ring in your eyebrow, but you do need to know what the convention is that you are violating.

To what extent are *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* based on actual acquaintances and experiences?

Each one of them is God's own truth! No, they're fiction, as is obvious. I once had a man in a group who was absolutely convinced that *The Handmaid's Tale* was autobiographical. I said, "But it's about the future." "That doesn't matter. It has to be autobiographical because you could not have written about this unless something like it had happened to you." But actually, you know, it is fiction. Things like this have happened to other people. You can read about them in history. But they have not happened to me, except insofar as I have read about them and they have gone through my brain, and in that way they have happened to me. But he remained convinced that I was hiding something, that I was concealing something about my life. One thing I take very seriously when writing fiction is the accuracy of the physical details. I will take a building and move it to some other location and put other, different people in it, but I like it to be the kind of building that would exist at that time. I like the clothes and the food to be accurate, and I like to be clear about all kinds of other little things – to the point of doing obsessive research on things such as the date plastic garbage bags were invented. Do you know? You've forgotten. Well, this is the kind of thing you forget, because when things are used so much you take them for granted. But when you're writing you have to put yourself in the position of an archaeologist, say three hundred years from now, doing research on the latter part of the 20th century. Before green plastic garbage bags we rolled up refuse in the newspaper and tied it with bits of string. Yuck! Or take refrigerators for example. Once upon a time all refrigerators were white. Then, in the fifties, they became aqua and pink, which did not catch on at all. It was not until the sixties that they became the colours we're more familiar with: avocado or gold or that ivory wheat colour. The big source for stuff like this is old magazines. Go back and read the ads; you will find out all kinds of amazing things you'd forgotten about. Your whole childhood will be recreated in front of your very eyes.

The characters are either inventions or pastiches, which is the way it is with most people who write fiction, unless they're writing a roman à clef and they wish the people in their novel to be identified. I do not wish the people in my novels to be identified but some of them are anyway, although they are rarely the people that other people think they are. Let us say that fiction uses a certain amount of character conventions, and so does real life. What happens when a character in fiction gets identified as somebody real is that one of the stock characters life keeps throwing up gets identified with one of the stock characters fiction keeps throwing up. As for the plots, they are by and large fictional, but they are the kind of thing that does happen, can happen or might happen. It's the business of the fiction writer to be plausible. That's another way of saying it's the business of the fiction writer to tell you lies you will believe! That is why, when people say to me, "Which of the characters in *The Robber Bride* do you identify with most closely?" I say, "I identify with Zenia. She is the professional liar, and what else do fiction writers do but create lies that other people will believe?" That takes them aback somewhat; they thought I would say Tony; but no, it is Zenia. She's the liar.

The difference between what Zenia does and what fiction writers do is that at the front of the work of fiction it always says, "This is fiction." It's like a cigarette package warning. But then everyone immediately disbelieves that and starts identifying all the characters. Whereas if you write an autobiography the first thing they do is say, "Of course she distorted the truth, and she's lying ... and she's left things out ..."

Is it true that the gymnasium in the Handmaid's Tale represents Leaside High's gymnasium?

I don't know whether represents is the right word. Let us say was inspired by. But strange to say, both of them have a balcony around the top, which in my day was used for watching basketball games, and in The Handmaid's Tale was used for patrol. I think it would be fair to say that certain things in real life suggest things that get into fiction. Far be it for me to say that it was not the Leaside gymnasium! (Perhaps we could get one of those little oval plaques and engrave on it, "This is the gymnasium"! ) Somebody who went to graduate school with me, at Harvard, said, "Hasn't anybody figured out that this whole book is about the Harvard English Department?"

Was there any reaction from the American religious right to The Handmaid's Tale ?

Oh, banned in high schools, death threats at the time of the movie. Apart from that, less than you'd think. I've got terrible, terrible news for you: most of these people don't read. They don't even read the Bible, certainly not all the way through. When I was in Alabama, writing The Handmaid's Tale, there was a conference of southwestern feminists, at the campus of the University of Alabama, that included a contingent of lesbian nuns and just about everything else you would wish to have at such a conference. I said to these people, "This happens to be the capital of the Ku Klux Klan, this very city. Aren't you kind of worried?" Their reply: "News travels slowly in the South." I think the novel, in the same way, just went right past a lot of those sorts of people.

But even if you were part of the religious right, you wouldn't want to admit that this is what you really had in mind. I mean you would not wish anyone to hear you saying, "Why are you attacking these nice people, who are setting up this very commendable tyranny, which we all approve of?"

I'd like to know more about the genesis of The Handmaid's Tale. It's clear that it has political origins but I would like you to say something about your sense of the characters before you actually started to write the novel.

As does every novel or poem, The Handmaid's Tale has a couple of rules implicit in it. Just like every piece of music does; excuse me, just as every piece of music does! (That's another thing I really hate: the misuse of like. I see it's taking over. No vomiting sounds now ...!) One of the tasks I set myself when writing the novel was to avoid including any practices that had not already happened somewhere, at some time. One of the functions of the afterword is to indicate the origins of some of the practices described in the novel. But it is critical to understand that every single one of the practices described in the novel is drawn from the historical record.

The book is a dystopia – a negative utopia – and it belongs to the tradition of negative utopias, which in turn belongs to the tradition of utopias. This tradition goes back to Plato and the Book of Revelations and follows up through people like Jonathan Swift and Anatole France and William Morris and many, many other works, including some that are so obscure that nobody's

ever heard of them, such as W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age*. In that novel everybody in the future is neuter, except for the big Mommy and the big Daddy, which cuts down on the population something fierce! They all live in a country house and do William Morris weaving. Somebody from our time gets into that future by tripping over a tree root, one of the fastest time transitions in science fiction: he falls down, and when he gets up again it's five hundred years later. He however is not neuter, and this causes him many difficulties. He keeps falling in love with these people who don't know what he's talking about. That's one of the weirder utopias, but there are lots of them.

One of the big problems in writing a book like this is that you tend to wander off into the sewage system. You're going along all right with the plot, and then the person says, "Oh, in your day you had those messy underground pipes, but we have solved that and we now have ..." And then you have to go and see what they now have. Sometimes there are a few too many of those kinds of details.

The problem for my central character is that her knowledge is limited because she is not free to move around. When we combine this with controlled television and a controlled press, she has no way of finding out what's really going on in the larger world. Sometimes I get cheerful young people saying, "Oh why didn't she just do X?" And you point out that if she had just done X she probably would have been shot. People who have either not done their reading or have never been in a totalitarian society have trouble taking this part seriously. At this point you tell them to get out a movie called *The White Rose*, which depicts the student resistance movement in Nazi Germany. All participants in the movement were eventually shot.

I did not want the central character to be a hero. It was O.K. for Moira to be a hero, but for the central character to be a hero would have made it into a different story. I wanted an ordinary person, for the simple reason that most people subjected to these conditions are ordinary people.

It's almost an axiom that when societies fall into chaos and a tyranny emerges, it is always based on something that was present in the society before. In China, Mao recreated the bureaucracy of the previous ruling class. The Russians recreated the Czar's secret service, although they turned it into something much more extensive and much more severe. Now, *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in Massachusetts; let us recall that the United States began – at least that part of it did – not with the 18th but the 17th century, and with what was essentially a theocracy. These people hanged Quakers, and quite a few other people. They were not interested in dissent. They did not come to the New World in search of religious tolerance; there you're thinking of William Penn and his followers, a different set of folks. The Puritans we're talking about left England to set up what they thought was going to be God's kingdom on earth. American presidents are still quoting them. They may not be aware of the context, but they are still saying, "A city upon a hill, a light to all nations." Therefore, if you were American and your country were in a state of chaos and you wanted to take it over, you would probably say you were doing God's will. What you would probably not say is, "Hi, my name's Bob. I'm a liberal-democratic kind of person so vote for me." You might get the votes, but you wouldn't get the tyranny, because it would be such a contradiction in terms.

As you speak, I'm realizing what it is about so many of your novels that strikes me: your books always seem to reflect something of my own thinking back to me. For example, just as feminism was cresting – I should probably say early feminism – *The Edible Woman* came out. I'm curious as to whether there's any consciousness there, whether you're choosing your time ...

Uncanny, isn't it? [Laughter] Actually, the timing of *The Edible Woman* was kind of an accident. I actually wrote it in '64-'65 and Jack McClelland lost the manuscript, although that's not his story. He said somebody else lost it. It wasn't around for a while, let's put it that way. I was so busy passing my orals that I didn't have a lot of time to think about it. So it actually came out in 69 – and it was strange timing. It was right on the edge, so much so that there were basically two kinds of reviews. The ones that didn't know feminism had arrived said, "This is a novel by a very young writer, but she will become more mature and take a more balanced view of things later"! The critics that did know about feminism responded accordingly. It was quite an interesting experience being there at that time, because you got all the hysterical reactions to feminism dumped right on you – or, to be more accurate, I got them dumped on me. For example the stringer from *Time* was asking questions like, "Do men like you?" My response: "Well honey, it depends which men, doesn't it?" Sometimes they asked, "Do you like men?" Same answer. Thank you very much for your attention, and do carry on. I believe you're doing very essential work.

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