An interview with Margaret Atwood

Catherine Sheldrick Ross and Cory Bieman Davies

The interview that follows took place on January 20, 1983, at the University of Western Ontario.

ROSS: We know that there is more than one Margaret Atwood. The Margaret Atwood that we'd like to interview is Margaret Atwood, the children's author. Could we start with your own reading as a child?

ATWOOD: What I read? Beatrix Potter, very early on. A.A. Milne. These are books that were read to me. *Winnie the Pooh, Alice in Wonderland, Alice through the looking glass* — children's classics, in other words, of those times. When I started to read myself, I remember being heavily into E. Nesbitt and Edgar Allen Poe that some fool had put in the children's library. I terrified myself in grade six with Poe. *Grimm's fairy tales* I had very early — the unexpurgated complete version which my parents bought by mistake, not realizing that it was full of people being put into barrels full of nails and rolled down the hill into the sea.

ROSS: Not to mention incest, illegitimate babies, and so on.

ATWOOD: Well, those things didn't really bother me at all. In fact, none of it bothered me at all. I found it quite fascinating. But my younger sister, who is twelve years younger than me, didn't like that at all. So for some children it would have been too much. I have only the vaguest of memories of Dick, Jane, Spot, and Puff. I know we had them at school, but they didn't leave much of an impression. There were a lot of collections of fairy tales — *The yellow fairy book,* all the Andrew Lang books. I read all the ones I could get my hands on, that they had in the school library. I probably read books that were somewhat too old for me at the time. I remember reading *Moby Dick* early on, not really understanding it that well but finding it quite fascinating. Things like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's travels,* which were originally written for adults but people put them in children's libraries because they don't have any sex in them. Fenimore Cooper, of course — I read some of those. Mark Twain I liked a lot — *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn.* Again, *Huckleberry Finn* is an adult's book; it's very scary in parts. And I read comic books. I read a lot of comic books. It was the comic book generation. My brother collected them so we had a huge number, somewhat disapproved of, but our parents knew we read other things too, so it wasn't a problem. People traded them a lot. Saturday afternoons we sat around and traded comic books and read them.

ROSS: This would be Marvel comics and *Superman*?
ATWOOD: The Marvel group was a bit later — that was *The Hulk* and *The fantastic four;* they came later. I read *Batman, Superman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, Little Lulu.* All of that I read, and Archie and Veronica and Betty, *Caspar the friendly ghost.* He was actually a bit later than our generation. Then there were some crime comics that were kind of bloody and there were horror comics. But I think my favorite was Plastic Man who could transform himself into anything, but you could always tell because it was red and blue.
ROSS: So, in fact, a lot of fairy tales and romance.
ATWOOD: Yes, a lot of fairy tales and romance. I was never big on *The little engine that could* and that kind of morally encouraging tale about machinery.
ROSS: Stories about staying on track and moving in the right direction.
ATWOOD: Protestant ethic, goal-oriented books I wasn't so keen on. I was much more keen on dragons and magic and those things. And some of the comic book stuff fed right into that, because that's exactly what it is.
ROSS: And then there are origin stories. . .
ATWOOD: Yes. Rudyard Kipling for sure I read, and that kind of origin story. The Bible I was familiar with because of Sunday school, translated into cute little fables — people in bedsheets. Remember the coloured pictures that they used to give you? That was quite useful in later life, although I didn't think so at the time. I read the *Boys own annual,* with all those stories; old, old copies of it are in my grandfather's attic. About the turn of the century they had all those stories of adventures in caves and recovering lost treasures — the Rider Haggard, Alan Quartermain, *King Solomon's Mines* kinds of boys' adventure stories, really. Nobody ever told me they were supposed to be for boys only. So I read them. I read some Ernest Thompson Seton and animal stories — Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, *Wild animals I have known, Kings in exile.* They were quite sad. The animals always died. They were quite depressing. I used to cry over them — it was terrible. I read *Little women* at one stage. And Arthur Conan Doyle; at about age ten or eleven I devoured all of Sherlock Holmes and some of his other knights-in-armour fraudulent historical romances. I also read a lot of "classical Victorian fiction." I read *Pride and prejudice* at an early age. I read *Wuthering Heights,* of course. And I read Dickens. I read some things that were too old for me that I didn't really understand and that depressed and upset me. Victor Hugo was too depressing. What else?
DAVIES: Did you read *Anne of Green Gables*?
ATWOOD: Yes, I read *Anne of Green Gables.* I like it. I didn't read all of the sequels *Anne of Green Gables* is the only really interesting one, I think. The others are about when she's grown up, and for kids that's just not as interesting.
ROSS: The only things that are Canadian in your list are the animal stories and *Anne of Green Gables.*
ATWOOD: Those were the only Canadian things around.

ROSS: George Woodcock has said that it doesn't matter what kids read up to the age of twelve — that Canadian kids have imported books but that that doesn't matter. After the age of twelve, he says, it becomes important for us to have our own writers. I wonder how you feel about this?
ATWOOD: I don't really know how I feel. I've talked to a lot of people about it hither and thither about the globe. I know that West Indian people feel that having children's books that are produced in England is confusing to their children, because they say "A is the apple" and the West Indians don't have apples. Apple to them means something else. They see a picture of a thing that to them isn't an apple and they've never seen it before and it's called an apple. And what they call an apple doesn't look like that. I think on that level — on the level of what is observed reality — it is helpful to have some things that name your own reality. If we had to read all books in which there was never any snow, the kids would find it very confusing. Now, English literature is close enough to Canadian in climate and language and so on that there isn't a huge gap in understanding, although some of the things are obviously English and kids know when things are foreign. It is just that if your own reality is never named, then it leaves you with a curious feeling of non-existence. It's not that foreign books should be excluded; by no means. They feed the imagination and I think a literature that confined itself to nothing but *The little engine that could* and Dick and Spot and Puff and Jane, in the Canadian equivalent, would be very boring. I want books with dragons in them, even though I've never seen a dragon. So I thing a judicious mix...
ROSS: Was it having a child and wanting that child to have Canadian books that got you into writing children's books?
ATWOOD: No, my writing children's books wasn't politically motivated. *Up in the tree* was one of about six rather nonsensical books that I wrote in fairly quick succession during a period when I was feeling quite dippy. I didn't have a child at the time. I was just writing them. I do write rhymed Christmas cards for people, rhymed birthday cards, rhymed satirical verse, and that kind of thing. So writing children's books was not completely out of the question. The other book, *Anna's pet,* which was prose, I was approached to write and I wrote it along with my aunt, who had been one of the first people to encourage my writing. So I thought it would be fun to do a book with her. She had the knowledge of how to write with a limited vocabulary for kids because she writes children's books.
ROSS: And you were given a limited vocabulary?
ATWOOD: Well, they gave us a grade level, and she was used to writing for grade levels, so we worked it out together. She said, "You can use this word; you can't use that one; we can use this tense of these words but not those tenses" and all that, which I knew nothing about.

The story itself has an interesting history. It's based on a little story that she had written many years ago in phonetics because someone had asked her

to do that. And she has based the story on my brother, who did take worms to bed and who hid snakes under his pillow and things like that. She had been visiting us at the time when my brother had taken a snake to bed and it had gone away, unknown to my mother. It had crawled into the wood stove to be where it was warm; so that when my mother opened the stove to light the fire in the morning, there was the snake. She said, "I think the snake would be happier outside."

DAVIES: What made you change the boy to a girl in the story?

ATWOOD: It didn't really matter whether it was a boy or a girl. Obviously I thought it would be more interesting to have a little girl who dug up worms than to have a little boy who dug up worms. I dug up worms. Lots of kids dig up worms. It is stereotypical to have little boys who dig up worms, but little girls do it too and I saw no reason why not.

DAVIES: You mentioned that you wrote *Up in the tree* along with five other nonsensical books. Does the genre of children's literature allow you a particular perspective on the world that you want at the time that you are writing?

ATWOOD: You can only have that optimistic, happy-ending perspective on the world in children's literature. It doesn't ring true in serious adult literature because we know the world isn't entirely like that. We know that we would like the world to be like that, but we know that there is a gap; whereas in children's literature you can wholeheartedly endorse that optimistic perspective because you are dealing with wish-fulfillment. You can give full play to your wish-fulfillment and have everything turn out absolutely right and nobody's ever going to die, there's never going to be any tragedy, the princess will be rescued, and the prince will be restored to his right mind. Have you ever noticed how often the princes go out of their minds in *Grimms' fairy tales*? But it will all be set right and that's very reassuring. I think that it's reassuring for kids to be read that kind of book, because, Lord knows, they'll have the other stuff soon enough. So better they should have a foundation of happy endings in childhood so that they can have some kind of feeling of cessation of anxiety and of expectations fulfilled which will carry them on through later life when things don't always work out that neatly.

DAVIES: So it permits you to use comic structure or romance structure?

ATWOOD: That's right, without any qualms. I use comic structure and romance structure anyway, but very, very modified.

DAVIES: More ironically?

ATWOOD: Yes. And with not quite so exultant rewards at the end of the book, shall we say, to put it mildly.

DAVIES: In "Production problems" [*Canadian literature*, 78 (Aut. 78), 13-15], you say that you can do things in writing children's books that the age denies you when writing adult fiction and poetry. What else can you do in children's books — can you use words differently?

ATWOOD: You can be definitely sillier. There's more room for play. I play

around quite a lot anyway. But you can do it in a more overt and simple-minded way, I think. At least I can. We're talking as if I write a lot of this and in fact I don't. There's a certain delight in complicated triple-syllable rhymed endings. There's a delight in doing those kinds of things with words. Kids have that delight and they will do it themselves.
DAVIES: Almost like sheer celebration.
ATWOOD: Word play and experimentation and fun and enjoyment, really.
DAVIES: And nonsense?
ATWOOD: A certain amount of nonsense, although there's no such thing as real nonsense, of course.
ROSS: Do you want to elaborate on that?
ATWOOD: Every word has a meaning. You can't make up a word that doesn't convey something to the listener. It may not be a set meaning, but it has a meaning. The human mind makes meanings out of what it perceives. You can't make something with no meaning. Even if the meaning is "this doesn't have a meaning," that in itself is a statement and has meaning.
DAVIES: To get back to "Production Problems," in that article you talk about the economics of publishing children's literature in Canada.
ATWOOD: Yes. When I published *Up in the tree,* which was a while ago, I certainly ran into the fact that we couldn't have full-colour illustrations, because if we did it would make the book too expensive and so on. What you're up against is the fact that Puffins and kids' books produced in large countries can be produced for a price that is going to undercut most Canadian children's books, unless they're published abroad. So you run into things like *Bonny McSmithers* being in black and white drawing. I like *Bonny McSmithers,* by the way. Kids like it. In *Up in the tree,* I lettered the whole book. It wasn't even typeset and I used two colours, red and blue. We were able to get a third kind of weird colour by overlapping the other two, but essentially it's two colours.
ROSS: This constraint reminds me of the narrator's situation in *Surfacing* when she is illustrating Quebec folk tales. She wants to use red because red is a sacred colour, but she has to use yellow to suit the publisher and extra colours aren't allowed, to keep the costs down. Did this situation come out of your own experience?
ATWOOD: No. I wrote *Surfacing* long before I wrote *Up in the tree,* I think. No, just a minute now. I wrote *Surfacing* before I was aware of that problem, but I think I wrote *Up in the tree* about the same time as I was writing *Surfacing.* I wrote it in England, I remember that. Then somebody twisted my arm to actually publish it later on.
ROSS: So the production problems came later when you were illustrating the book for publication?
ATWOOD: Yes, I illustrated it later. Laying it out determined how many lines got put on the pages. Some of the pages have only two lines on them, others have four, so that the thirty-two page book effect could be achieved by arranging

the pages.
DAVIES: The production of *Anna's pet* must have been a different sort of thing.
ATWOOD: I had nothing to do with production. I had a word length, but I didn't have to worry about layout or illustrations. My aunt and I collaborated on the text together. We did it by mail, back and forth in successive drafts, with different suggestions added in by other people and by each other. It was a very easy process. We said, "Let's do this," "That's a good idea" and so we did it. She's really quite wonderful and a very nice person, easy to get along with. And so am I, of course.
DAVIES: Can we talk about the illustrations? Ann Blades did the watercolours for *Anna's pet.* Did you have an idea in mind beforehand of what kind of illustrations you wanted?
ATWOOD: I knew her work. I knew the way she illustrates things and she was proposed to us. We accepted her because we knew her work already, and we were very pleased that she did it.
DAVIES: I talked to her last November about illustrating *Anna's pet.* She said she enjoyed doing the book but that she had troubles with the tadpole, trying to give it personality. Were you pleased with the illustrations?
ATWOOD: Oh yes. Let me have another look. [Looks at illus. 9 of *Anna's pet*] I think the illustrations are quite charming. She gets very serene expressions on the faces of the characters. Did you know that *Anna's pet* has been turned into a puppet show? I haven't seen it yet, but my aunt has and she says it's a smash.
DAVIES: Who's doing the puppetry?
ATWOOD: Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia, who work with people and puppets. They do children's theatre with puppets essentially. [Looks at illus. 4 of *Anna's pet*] I think that's charming. That's the worm. Anna looks so entranced by it, which is the proper way to look when you look at a worm. That's my mother and the stove, [illus. 7] and that's exactly the kind of thing that my mother would do, as my aunt well knows. So there is a kind of family background to the story.
DAVIES: Since Ann Blades hadn't talked to you before she did the illustrations, the text must have inspired her to come up with a visual reproduction of your feeling of the book, which is splendid really.
ATWOOD: It is. It's a different kind of house than any that I've ever lived in, but it looks a lot like the architecture of my grandparents' house in Nova Scotia — that white frame kind of building [illus. 8].
DAVIES: Before we end the interview, can we talk about the choice of animals in your books? In *Anna's pet,* the animals are not cuddly.
ATWOOD: It depends upon your point of view. They are, however, animals that you would be able to come across quite easily at a farm. Nor would it take any great skill for a child to be able to apprehend them. Whereas, if she had

to chase a rabbit all over the place, she never would have caught it.
ROSS: You're stuck with realism and plausibility in *Anna's pet.*
ATWOOD: I'm stuck with realism and plausibility wherever I go.
DAVIES: In *Up in the tree,* you have the beavers...
ATWOOD: Those are porcupines.
DAVIES: Porcupines?
ATWOOD: I think they are porcupines. Let me see the book. They're porcupines. Look, they don't have beaver tails. Porcupines are the things that come and chew off your axe handles and eat your toilet seat. Beavers mostly cut down trees; they're not interested in ladders. Porcupines are, alas. Anything with sweat on it they will eat.
DAVIES: Why did you choose these particular animals — the porcupines, the snail, the lizard, and the bat?
ATWOOD: I draw them quite well. Part of the explanation for choosing those animals is really quite ordinary, like what you can draw. I have spent a lot of time with snails in my life. Snails, lizards, frogs and toads, snakes, worms, and all those kinds of things. I, in fact, was the nature counselor at Camp White Pine, where the sun will always shine in beautiful Haliburton. I spent a lot of time with those creatures because the kids would catch them and they would come up to me and say, "Look what I caught" and there it would be, all over their hand. I spent a lot of time rescuing creatures from kids who clutched them too tightly.
ROSS: A few final questions. Do you see any patterns in writing for children in Canada?
ATWOOD: I don't know enough about it. I can say that it was the Canadians who invented the real life stories about animals, from the animal's point of view. Those were invented here, as far as I can make out.
ROSS: Roberts and Seton?
ATWOOD: Yes. When the English put animals in books before that time the animals were usually dressed up Englishmen in furs. Even in the Mowgli books, the animals have military rank. Or in the English books, like *Wind in the willows* or *Alice in Wonderland,* the animals have social status. Human beings cannot write about animals without anthropomorphizing them a little bit, or else projecting their own fears and fantasies onto them. It's no accident that Greenpeace is Canadian. Save the whales; save the seals — it's a very Canadian thing to do. *Never cry wolf* is a very Canadian book. *A whale for the killing* is classical. An American story about animals is much more likely to be about killing them, catching them and killing them.
ROSS: Do you have any plans for other children's books?
ATWOOD: Not at the moment, but you never know. I don't consider myself a professional children's book writer. If I do it, it will come out of left field, the same way that it did before.

DAVIES: We hope to see something more from that field soon. Thank you.
ROSS: Thank you for talking to us.

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Margaret Atwood