

# *The Ancient Mariner Experience: An Interview with Margaret Atwood*

*James McElroy*

*Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, in 1939. Since her graduation from the University of Toronto in 1962, Atwood has established herself as one of Canada's literary ambassadors, with *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* in 1982 and *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (with Robert Weaver) in 1987. In addition, her own best-known fiction—*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1989), and *Bluebeard's Egg* (1986)—have all contributed to her reputation as an internationally acclaimed novelist, whose most recent work, *The Robber Bride* (1993) was hailed in the *New York Times* as Atwood's "funniest and most companionable book in years." (Atwood refused to disclose the title of this forthcoming novel when we sat down to do this interview. Indeed she almost seemed to relish the idea—for her a working superstition—that no novel should be named before its time.)*

*I met with Margaret Atwood when she came to the University of California, Davis, as Regent's Lecturer in February 1993. As part of her schedule, Atwood gave a public lecture, participated in several academic sessions at the request of the English Department and Women's Studies, and agreed to do this interview.*

**WOE:** Did you, yourself, ever take courses in writing?

**ATWOOD:** No, not exactly. But I did take (if that's the word) something called English 400. It wasn't a writing course in any known sense of the word. It was just about five people who sat around with a professor/poet and talked about each other's work.

**WOE:** Who was the poet?

**ATWOOD:** Jay MacPherson.

**WOE:** Did you talk exclusively about poetry?

**ATWOOD:** No, we discussed everything. But mostly people talked about poetry because we had time to write poetry between essays for

final-year English. But the idea that you could grade it, that you could put a value on a certain piece, would have seemed odd. What would you give Keats for “Ode to a Nightingale”? Would it get an “A”? Or what would you give *A Tale of Two Cities*? A “B+” on the grounds that it’s too long?

**WOE:** Your introduction to “The Edible Woman” mentions that you taught freshman composition for at least a year at one point.

**ATWOOD:** Yes. My first teaching job was at the University of British Columbia, where I taught freshman composition to engineering students at eight-thirty in the morning in a Quonset hut—huts named, one presumes, after Mr. Quonset. Anyway, when World War II ended, the Canadian government granted its soldiers free entrance to universities. As a result of the large enrollment, the authorities used a load of Quonsets as teaching facilities for things that weren’t deemed especially important—for one thing, teaching composition to engineers.

**WOE:** What approach did you use with your engineers?

**ATWOOD:** No approach. I just used Kafka.

**WOE:** Kafka?

**ATWOOD:** Yes. I gave the students short pieces from Kafka, and I got them to write parables.

**WOE:** And how did Kafka work out?

**ATWOOD:** Oh, it wasn’t so bad. We knew we were in it together. They had to take it. I had to teach it.

**WOE:** Did you ever do “technical” stuff with them?

**ATWOOD:** No. I just wanted them to be able to write a coherent sentence with a subject, a verb, and an object. And that’s the level we were at. I mean the whole point of the course (as I saw it) wasn’t so much for them to express their thoughts; rather, I wanted them to have some thoughts to express. The idea was to get them to write something that would hold their reader’s attention for a page or more. So, in the end, I decided to start off with parables. After all, it’s a form people understand—short, condensed narratives with a message, or, in Kafka’s hands, short, condensed narratives with a message in waiting.

**WOE:** Have you taught any composition courses since UBC?

**ATWOOD:** No, not really. But I did teach creative writing a few times; I’ve taught it in both structured and open environments.

**WOE:** “Structured”? “Open”?

**ATWOOD:** In a structured class I would give assignments and students would produce work according to assignment outlines—we would concentrate on technical skills. An open class, on the other hand, was where people brought their work, handed it out, and sat around a table as the conversation went: “I don’t know, Mel. This works for me,” or, “I don’t know, Susan. This just doesn’t work for me.” It is the approach that I have found least useful even though there are some useful things you can do with it. But usually they are things that you do yourself and the students listen because they don’t know how to edit; they sit and watch you edit other people’s bad poems.

**WOE:** In one of your critical articles (“An End to Audience?”) you refer to a U.S. university where the creative writing program left a lot to be desired. Here’s the passage: “One was not, it appears, supposed to question the *raison d’être* of such classes. One was not supposed to discourage the students. One was supposed to radiate the air of genteel encouragement appropriate to, say, physiotherapists, or people who teach recreational ceramics. The role of the poet in society ... was not to be examined. The goal of the class was to keep its enrolled and fee-paying students from quitting in despair, to give them all passing grades so as not to discourage next year’s crop, and, with luck, to teach the students to turn out poems publishable in the kinds of little magazines favoured by the instructor. None of this was said. It was all implicit.” Would it be reasonable to view this as an indictment of creative writing programs?

**ATWOOD:** No, it wouldn’t. It would be reasonable, however, to view it as an indictment of that specific program because it created a situation in which people were sucked in and kept on; the program left the people who taught it with a bunch of students who shouldn’t have been there because they didn’t want to be. I mean, they didn’t want to be writers. Instead, they viewed the course as part of a basket-weaving phase (circa 1969) in which all you had to do was be in the course if you wanted to pass. For the one or two people who were really serious about it, maybe it was nice. But the others were just passing time. They were churning out third-rate poems because that’s what was expected of them. There was no idea that writing had to be something you couldn’t avoid; instead, it was regarded as something you turned out to meet a course requirement.

**WOE:** I take it, then, that you are not a devotee of the “open” approach?

**ATWOOD:** Actually, I wouldn’t come down on either side. I think it’s like anything else—it depends on the teacher, and also on what your

criteria are for the students and how motivated they are. I mean, it's like saying something positive or negative about dental school. There are, however, some criteria for dental school. For example, if you drill a hole in somebody's face, you fail. In writing, however, the criteria are less clear. People often make a blithe assumption that we ought to make things easier for people so they'll feel good. Well, I don't think writing is about "feeling good." And I don't think encouragement means anything if you're encouraging everybody as if they're equals. "That's nice, dear" — Is that what you'd want as criticism? Not if you're serious.

I was just in Clarence Major's class. I told his students that writing should be an Ancient Mariner experience for both the writer and the reader. In other words, you're going about your business and something grabs you and says, "There was a ship." You say, "But, but I have to go to a wedding." And then they say, "No, this is more important. There was a ship." It has to be like that—otherwise, it's just connecting the dots. You know, it's paint by numbers. It's just doodling.

**WOE:** But don't we all, in some sense, have to "paint by numbers"?

**ATWOOD:** I suppose so, if by that you mean practice. But we also have to go beyond that.

**WOE:** Has the Ancient Mariner experience now taken over your life?

**ATWOOD:** No. It hasn't. It's just taken over the part of me that writes.

**WOE:** Could you take a month and never put pen to paper?

**ATWOOD:** Yes, I've done that. The truth is that I'm happy to sit and paint. However, the desire to paint is often pushed aside because of an Ancient Mariner experience of some kind. For example, quite often when I say, "I'm going to sit down and paint," something else says, "Just a minute, this is more important."

**WOE:** So, how do you go about your business?

**ATWOOD:** A day in the life? Well, I'm inherently lazy, but I'm also inherently puritanical. So it's frequently a contest between a laziness which says, "Goof off," and a puritanism which says, "You must put in five hours of work." It's like swimming. There's that moment where you think: "Do I really want to do this today? The water's too cold." And the other part of you that says: "It will be good for you. You'll enjoy it once you're in. Get in there."

**WOE:** Has it gotten any easier?

**ATWOOD:** No, it never gets easier. You have to work at it. For example, when I was younger I spent the day having anxiety attacks, sharpening

pencils, getting up, sitting down, filling coffee cups, going to lunch, phoning friends — all the things you do to avoid writing. Then, once I had a young family, I couldn't write until two in the morning any more, so I quickly cut the anxiety attacks down to about five minutes of screaming paranoia and moved my writing to an earlier and less frantic point in the day. By now I've grown used to earlier starts. If I'm good, I get to go out for lunch.

**WOE:** Where do you work most of the time?

**ATWOOD:** At home. It's a large house where I have two offices, one for me, and one for my assistant, who does all the "other" things. She does the bookkeeping. She files the contracts. She does the banking. She answers the telephone. When you've got almost thirty books in twenty-five countries to keep track of, it's a lot. I just couldn't do it by myself.

**WOE:** You, yourself, have asked students why they want to write; asked them if the desire for revenge (or envy) played a part in their desire to be writers. So how, for the record, would you answer your own question?

**ATWOOD:** Well, both can enter into it.

**WOE:** You've felt...

**ATWOOD:** I've felt both.

**WOE:** And revenge? What does "revenge" look like?

**ATWOOD:** Charles Dickens and the blacking factory where he was forced to work as a child. He never got the blacking factory out of his head. I think every writer has some form of the blacking factory. However, the blacking factory can be a motivation. I suppose if we were being psychoanalytic we'd say that writers make an effort to "work it all out."

**WOE:** And the "envy" part. Is there a specific author you envy? Is there a poem or a book about which you've said, "God, I wish I had written that; wish I could write like *that*."

**ATWOOD:** I suppose, in a sense, all the books I admire. But, then, that's not real envy, is it? For example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I couldn't have written that book because I wouldn't have had the material for it. But that has more to do with admiration. Perhaps "envy," much like "revenge," is an inadequate term for something that runs much deeper.

**WOE:** Somewhere in your review of *Midnight Birds* (short fiction by Black American women writers), you write, "If you were to ask a white

American male writer who he's writing for, you would probably get a somewhat abstract answer, unless he's a member of an ethnic minority. But the writers in *Midnight Birds* know exactly who they're writing for. They're writing for other Black American women, and they believe in the power of their words. They see themselves as giving a voice to the voiceless." My question is, then, who do *you* write for?

**ATWOOD:** I think that's changed over the years. My ideal reader has aged somewhat. I don't ascribe gender to this reader, although a lot of people do. I assume that the responses to some of the things I put on the page will be different according to who's reading it, but you really can't concern yourself a whole bunch with that or you start to get paranoid. What you have to do is to make your writing the best it can be, and then you just have to have faith. You just have to throw your writing away and assume that whoever picks it up will be the right person. I'm therefore not sure *who* exactly I write for. All I am sure of is that people have always told stories and passed them on. At the same time, though, I'm quite sure that writing—who, what, why—is more than just a sociological exercise. It's not, "This is moral behavior that you are witnessing here and nobody ever does anything wrong." It's not, "Everybody in this book must be politically correct." And it's certainly not all those worthy things we so often expect from our society. Because *if* that's all it ever came to, we would certainly never have inherited Shakespeare's tragedies. I mean, what does the spectacle of Iago do for us? What *good* does it do?

**WOE:** Would you like to name the "good" in question?

**ATWOOD:** No, I'm not a theorist of that kind. Whenever you try to pin something down, the thing itself evades you; once you start to formulate a definition of what writing should *be*, someone comes along and contradicts you. After all, art has to do partly with the violation of conventions. Which means, I suppose, that there have to be conventions to violate: a convention is violated, new conventions are set up, masterpieces are produced, and then conventions are violated all over again.

**WOE:** And what about women poets? You mentioned, for example, that Canada had a strong tradition of ...

**ATWOOD:** Canada had—*has had*—a British tradition. I mean, Canada was, until quite recently, just not visible in a literary sense. For decades you could have sailed through life without giving Canada (or its women writers) a second thought, even if you lived in it. That was not true for me, however, because I was interested in becoming a writer: I sought out writers who had published because I wanted to know how

to do it. As a result, I soon realized that a number of women had published in the fifties, and that some of the best poets of the generation preceding mine were women—among them, P. K. Page, Margaret Avison, and Jay MacPherson. The fact that women had published in Canada meant that I had something to work with: the *idea* that women were publishable.

**WOE:** And what about women in the United States?

**ATWOOD:** Well, there weren't a lot then. You know, there really weren't. I guess we all stumbled on Sylvia Plath in the sixties. At least she's the one I remember.

**WOE:** And Rich?

**ATWOOD:** Well, Adrienne Rich's earlier work was quite unlike her later poems. In fact, if you go back and look at it, you'll see that her first pieces were rather disguised, quite formalistic. She didn't hit her stride until much later on. But, yes, I loved "Diving Into the Wreck" when it came out. However, you asked about influence. And I was too old for Rich to be a real influence.

**WOE:** And Harvard? What influence did your studies at Harvard have on you?

**ATWOOD:** When I first went to Harvard, I discovered that the university kept its modern verse in the Lamont (i.e., NO WOMEN ALLOWED) Library. And this left me, for the most part, to browse through the Widener stacks where some eccentric had compiled a Canadian collection—underneath Witchcraft and Demonology.

**WOE:** Thus your line that Canadian literature is "insecure"?

**ATWOOD:** In part. But later experience taught me that Canada's *insecureness* was a very colonial affair: people who couldn't get a job at Oxford came to Canada and got a position in a Canadian university, and the British academics who came to Canada felt it was their duty, if not their right, to civilize the natives; once Canada had been told its literature was barbaric, it became clear that Canadian literature would first have to become *British* if it ever wanted to be taken seriously. And then came the U.S. threat—a wave of American academics who offered us much the same advice that the Brits had: "This isn't a real culture. You're barbarians and now we're going to civilize you." So, you see, we had to carve out a space for *ourselves* amidst the same people who said that real literature was Faulkner—the same academics who insisted that English Literature (capital "L") was the measure of all things.

**WOE:** What would you like to do that you haven't? What about drama?

**ATWOOD:** Well, it's not that drama doesn't interest me. But as a form it's quite specialized. It's difficult to write well without a certain amount of devotion and vocation—without an Ancient Mariner experience.

**WOE:** And speaking of Ancient Mariner experiences, what about your current novel?

**ATWOOD:** It's almost finished.

**WOE:** And the title is?

**ATWOOD:** Not telling.

**WOE:** *Not Telling?*

**ATWOOD:** No. That's not the title. The fact is that I'm superstitious. And until the final dot is in place, I'm not telling a soul.



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