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## taking issue

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### Interview with Margaret Atwood — Beryl Langer

*Margaret Atwood was writer-in-residence at Macquarie University in August 1987. Beryl Langer interviewed her in Sydney during this stay.*

**B.L.:** The first question I'd like to ask relates to apparent changes in the situation of Australian Canadian writers. It seems to have become increasingly possible to be a 'Canadian writer' or an 'Australian writer' in a way that it wasn't thirty years ago.

**M.A.:** Well, people did it, even though it was supposed not to be possible. What you mean is that it is now possible to be an internationally successful, accepted, and non-ludicrous 'Canadian' or 'Australian' writer.

**B.L.:** That's right. Now does this mean that we have an increase in something called 'cultural nationalism', or is it rather that we now have a global culture, where it doesn't really *matter* whether you're an Australian or a Canadian?

**M.A.:** It matters. There is no such thing as an international piece of art. Art grows from the ground up, not from the top down. There are pieces of art that can translate from one culture to another, but it is only a translation. You cannot live in a 747 jet all the time, you have to live somewhere more real. Possibly what we're talking about is English language culture, in the States, England, Australia, Africa, New Zealand, the West Indies, people from India who write in English. I don't think it's that it doesn't matter where you come from, because all writers write out of their own ground. They may expand the ground. You may have an Australian travelling in the United States and writing about that, but it will probably still be an *Australian* travelling in the United States. It's easier to switch gender as an author than it is to switch culture, strangely enough, although gender is prior to culture. It would be easier for you to write as an Australian man than it would be for you to write as an English man, and if you had to write as a southern-American man all you would produce is cliché. You would not have the nuance - of language, of feeling, of cultural experience - available to you at all. It just wouldn't be there. You'd come up with Colonel Sanders, something like that. And similarly, if I were attempting to write as an Australian woman, I simply wouldn't have the details available to men, even of language. What is the washroom called here? *Dunny*? How many years would I have to spend here for me to be able to learn those things which you would have automatically at your disposal? I don't think there is any international art - although there *are*

international artefacts like Coca Cola bottles. But their significance is different, depending on where you find them. Let me illustrate. What does a Coca Cola bottle mean to you?

**B.L.:** America.

**M.A.:** Right! To them it means something they drink. To us it means Coca Cola-nisation. Different. Same artefact, different meaning.

**B.L.:** What do you see as our chances of resisting Coca Cola-nisation?

**M.A.:** Better for you than for us, although you are less aware. The thing you may have to resist, more than we, is Toshiba-fication. You're going to be under more pressure from Japan in future years. Your governments, or some of them, seem hell-bent on selling you out just as fast as they can.

**B.L.:** To almost anybody who's prepared to pay!

**M.A.:** To almost anybody who's prepared to pay, and they (Japan) have the most money right now. We have a similar tradition. I think it runs in colonies, because the people who originally came there did not come there thinking of the place as a homeland that they had to protect, but as something to be exploited so that they could make a lot of money and go back and buy castles in Scotland, which is what many people who came to Canada did. Unfortunately both countries, although they have become more nationally aware in recent years, have yet to develop a ruling class which is devoted to their existence and essence. You still get among the upper echelons a certain contempt for the country that they are supposed to represent, a feeling that the real game is elsewhere, that they want to play with the big boys, and the big boys are not Australians. They want to play with people with lots *more* money, and be taken seriously by those people. It's a great disservice to the country. Unfortunately, if you start talking the other way, you come out sounding like some sort of throwback jingo, but surely there has to be a dialogue which will include respect for oneself without sounding like some sort of 'we are better than anybody' redneck.

**B.L.:** As ex-British colonies, there are obviously a lot of similarities between Australia and Canada. What do you see as the important differences?

**M.A.:** Canada is *colder*! Its bigger in population, although the operative English-speaking population of Canada is about the same size as that of Australia. Canada is one third French, and there are another three million people who don't speak either language. Canada is more ethnically diverse. Australia is an island continent and Canada is not. It's got the United States directly south of it, and the border between Canada and the United States is the longest undefended border in the world. We are much more subject to American influence than you are because we cannot cut it off. You can pick and choose which American things you will let in and which you will broadcast, but they come pouring across

our border whether we like it or not. We're probably under a lot more political pressure from them. We are also closer to England than you are, so we have been, traditionally, toad-in-the-middle between those two, and then France of course has been another player. I think we're alike in that we're both small countries who have been traditionally non-aggressive, as we are both quite outward-turning. We tune into the world a lot. I think you notice when you go to the States, in particular, that you start feeling very cut off from world news, probably because the States has been traditionally somewhat isolationist and self-centred. Even when it wasn't a world power, it was like that. If Canada and Australia had to wait for world news to concern Canadians and Australians, they would have to wait a long time, whereas in the States they mostly only deal with things that concern them.

**B.L.:** So you have a paradox, in that the ostensible provinces are actually less provincial?

**M.A.:** The provinces are in fact less provincial, to my way of thinking. Ninety-eight per cent of the films shown in the United States are made there. All of the books sold in the United States by American authors are published there, because it is illegal to publish as an American author outside the States and import the books. Did you know that? There's a law against it. They import books from other countries, but not much, and most of the foreign writers read in the United States are published there, partly because American book stores are reluctant to buy foreign-published books. They don't want to be bothered with the hassle.

**B.L.:** What's the American response to your work, insofar as one can generalise?

**M.A.:** The American response to *The Handmaid's Tale* is that it has now sold about 850,000 copies in paperback, and that was in June, so I imagine in North America it sold a million, if you include Canada. That's quite an amazing response, but in fact my books have been in print steadily ever since publication. They don't go out of print, they just keep going into other editions. This is the one that has sold the most initially, but the others have been selling, all that time.

**B.L.:** Even though your books tend to be fairly critical of the United States?

**M.A.:** A lot of people in the United States are critical of the United States! I've never met anybody that admits to having voted for Ronald Reagan, for instance. There are a lot of people in the United States who are perfectly wonderful people. That's not the problem. The problem is the foreign policy and the governmental structure, as with all countries. There are people in every country who are wonderful people. It's a question of the government, and what the government does. There's no point hating all the people in the United States. It's stupid to do that, particularly since some of them totally agree with everything you think.

**B.L.:** Do you experience Australia as a visibly more sexist society than

Canada? That's certainly the cliché.

**M.A.:** It is a society which has traditionally fostered a straight-from-the-shoulder 'I'm tough, I don't fool around, I don't bother with manners' approach, and that produces its female equivalent as well. For instance it was Carmen Callil, from Australia, who marched into the English old-boy publishing establishment and shook it up, with *Virago*, and one of the reasons she was able to do it was that she didn't play by the old-boy rules. Another person from the antipodes, not Australia but New Zealand, who is doing that is Liz Calder. People from the colonies are able to go in there and because they don't have English middle-class women's assumptions - that you have to be nice and polite at all times and play by the rules - they are able to do new things. On the other hand a lot of those clichés are true. When you watch advertising here you can certainly see a lot of them coming into play. I looked at an Australian Airlines ad, for example, which said 'We're Making it Together'. Every single one of those people making it together was a man. No women making it together!

**B.L.:** In terms of becoming established as a woman writer, do you think that your own career might have been rather more difficult in Australia?

**M.A.:** In Australia? I would have gone out, because I'm of that generation. Things here are now changing very quickly. I've noticed an amazing change since 1978, when I first came. I met with some feminists, about 10 of them, who were very, very mousy, and feeling very on the outs and very unrepresentative. They felt that people were just laughing at them. When I was back in '82, they were much more visible, and now I notice *serious* stuff in newspapers. It seems to have gained enough public awareness that it isn't just 'Ho, ho, ho - look at those crazy women being funny'. It has certainly gained a lot more grass roots acceptance, and it probably connects up with that rather tough, confident, Australian woman thing. I met with the *Portfolio* magazine people and they were not timid, mousy, oppressed women. So now may be the time when that breakthrough is going to be made. As the men become more civilised there's more room in their lives for more expansive relationships with women, but on the 'man in the street', working man level, I think it's still pretty much the same as it was. It's mateship, and anybody who's nice to women is a poof, and this kind of thing. I read *How to be normal in Australia*, and he certainly is endorsing all those myths. What you are seeing is the growth of a more cultured middle class, and therefore more women of achievement coming out of that middle class, and the men in that class being more accepting of that, and despite all the nasty things people say about the middle class, that's where a lot of the initial movement happens, in any society.

**B.L.:** Your mentioning class raises another issue. Your work is usually talked about in terms of the fact that you're a 'woman writer' or a 'Canadian writer', but do you think it contains a broader political critique?

**M.A.:** Totally. Of course. Yes. Except when you say 'broader political critique' you also have to be specific, because the way class operates in one country is

different from another. I don't think there are any classless societies, except possibly stone-age man. In that case it wasn't class, it was seniority, age and gender, but not whole groups of people banding together and getting more than other groups. I don't think there is any country that doesn't have a class structure, but the class structure is organised along different lines everywhere, and the signs and symptoms of it are different. It's totally erroneous, for instance, to say that the United States has no class structure. The ways of moving in it are different from the ways of moving in the English class structure, and there is a lot less class loyalty among the 'working class'. They want to get out and move up if they can.

**B.L.:** Would you see Canada as more like the United States in that regard?

**M.A.:** Yes. In England birth still counts for something, although not everything anymore. In Canada and the States, upward mobility is achieved by money and is faster than it is in England. In England it takes maybe two or three generations to make that transition - from despised grocer to acceptable person related to minor aristocracy. In Canada you can do that in one generation - the children of the first generation immigrants can do it. But since the structure itself is so much more invisible, and looser, you can have a very nice time, thank you very much, anyway. Whereas in England if you are born working class, have a working-class accent, it takes a lot of effort to get out of that, and a lot of people are just stuck in it, particularly now with Thatcherism and unemployment. That's where they are and that's where they're going to stay. There's no way out for them.

**B.L.:** You've written some fairly devastating satirical comments on middle-class radicals which in a way contrast with what you've just said about the middle class being where the movement is. What do you see as the problem with middle-class radicalism?

**M.A.:** Well, many of the professional radicals have traditionally been middle-class radicals. That's where they come from, because they're the ones with enough education to be able to deal with theory. There haven't been any successful revolutions without a bunch of middle-class radicals involved. Whatever you say about the spontaneous uprisings of the people, the people very rarely spontaneously arise, unless there is some fermentation going on. The American Revolution had a large middle-class component, so did the French, so did the Russian. On the other hand, middle-class radicals can have theories, but that won't get them anywhere unless they can tie into working-class resentment and inequality. So yes, I think middle-class are silly, or look silly, in situations in which most people are fairly content with their lot and they are not about to agitate.

**B.L.:** Even if perhaps they ought to?

**M.A.:** Well, what for? If they are getting decent wages and their little houses and cars and whatnot, what else do they want? In most cases, not bloody much!

And in a society like Canada which doesn't have that inescapable working-class thing, there isn't very much that you could mobilise them to rebel against or for, because what more could they get from it?

**B.L.:** How do you see your association with *This Magazine*, which has a 'left nationalist' orientation?

**M.A.:** It's not card-carrying anything. The reason I support it is that it will publish stuff that nobody else will publish. The Canadian press is quite nimity-pimity. They're not even the *Washington Post*. They're pretty centre of the road, middle line, timid, and they just won't break certain stories, or take on certain people, partly because they are those people, by and large. *This Magazine* will, and does. There are a lot of very smart people working for it, and if one believes in freedom of the press then one has to support alternative publications that will do stuff the other ones won't do. They're not weirdo Marxist-Leninist kooks, you know, they're not like that at all. As I say, they are not card carrying anything, they aren't ideologues of that toe-the-party-line-no-matter-what, ilk.

Canada has a viable left; the States does not. The remnants of it were snuffed out by McCarthyism and there hasn't really been a viable Left since that - hippie flower children notwithstanding, who were not anything you could call a viable Left, really. What the U.S. tends to throw up are things like the Weatherman, and the Symbionese Liberation Army, which nobody in their right mind is going to endorse because they are too weird. Canada, on the other hand, has a third party. It is the New Democratic Party. It is now top in the polls for the first time in history, as far as I can figure out. There is an alternative, which may be why our voting rate is eighty to ninety per cent and theirs is only fifty per cent in a good year. A lot of people in the States don't vote. They don't vote for anybody because they don't feel they have any choice. Republicans and Democrats are fairly indistinguishable to them.

**B.L.:** In an interview you did in the 1970s with Graeme Gibson you talked about the importance of a third way, as opposed to either becoming a victim or becoming a killer, which were the two alternatives posed. Does the new Democratic party fit into that?

**M.A.:** Well that would mean that the Conservatives were killers and the Liberals were victims or something like that, whereas I think it is much more likely that both of them are fairly close and the New Democrats are a little bit different. Canada is a country in which you have to 'seize the extreme centre' in order to succeed politically, and if the New Democrats were too far left people wouldn't vote for them. As I say, why rebel, if mostly you've got what you want? Now, there is a growing class of poor people in Canada, as there is in every industrialised country, and I think the gap between the rich and the poor is widening again, and, as in the States, the middle class is under some pressure, although not as much as there, because we don't run to extremes quite the way they do. We have a lot more social welfare in Canada. We have medicare

systems they don't have, except for very poor people. People who get screwed in the States right now are middle-class people who get sick, because they can't get the 'poor people' aid and then their money gets all used up until they are bankrupt, then they can get the 'poor people' aid. If enough of that goes on they'll get mad enough to change the system. They're not mad enough yet, but if it happens enough then they will become so. But you don't have a radical left or theories that you want to put into practice unless you're motivated and things have to get unpleasant enough that you see some point to it before you will put the energy in.

**B.L.:** What sorts of things seem to you to be unpleasant enough for you to put the energy in?

**M.A.:** For me? For me personally things are very pleasant.

**B.L.:** Sure, but there's obviously a strong sense in your work that the world...

**M.A.:** That they could go unpleasant. Well, I think people tend to think that how they're living is how eternity is going to be, that things will always be like that. In fact a very small shift in, for instance, gross national product, or mean temperature, or a stock market collapse in Japan, or in the middle east - there are all kinds of things that aren't under your control whatsoever - can have drastic effects on the way you're able to conduct your daily life. What you have for breakfast, where you live, and whether you have a car or not. All those things can be altered by events not under your control, and if that happens to enough people, panic sets in, and they say, now is the time for a strong leader and maybe a military dictatorship to 'get things back into shape'. And that's when you have the danger of totalitarianism coming in. It's only when things are fairly pleasant for enough people that we can afford all this tolerance and kindness and alternative political thinking and liberation for women and so forth.

**B.L.:** So you see liberation for women as a precarious achievement?

**M.A.:** I see it as precarious and based on general prosperity, because you know who goes first in a crunch. You know that when all the men came back from the war the women got kicked out of their jobs to make room for them. Under pressure, you can't depend on human nature to remain the way you think it ought to be. Under pressure people do strange things. They hang people as witches, they riot, they toss out their democratic institutions and put in bad people that you and I don't like.

**B.L.:** So the Republic of Gilead is possibly something that we have to look forward to?

**M.A.:** Well, it's not out of the question. Possibly they won't bring in the clothing as I have described it, but some of the other things are things that a number of people with political power in the United States have said that they would like to do. When Hitler said those things people thought at first it was just

rhetoric, but I don't think you should ever suppose that what people say they want to do is just rhetoric. If the fundamentalist establishment in the States says that women's place is in the home and that homosexuals deserve death, I don't think that you should ignore that. There are various pressures, forces that will, possibly, come into play, not definitely, but possibly. I expect that Aids panic has already been used to put in mandatory testing. When people get scared enough they'll agree to all kinds of things they wouldn't agree to before.

**B.L.:** Well, do you see writers and intellectuals in general as having some special responsibility?

**M.A.:** Let's say that a very high proportion of them get shot and imprisoned around the world, so governments obviously think that they're in the front line. Why do governments think that? I have no idea. Maybe its because they run off at the mouth in their writerish way. But you can't tell writers that they *have* to have responsibility. As soon as you do that, as soon as you start dictating to them what they should write about, then you're just like the governments that are telling them what they should write about.

**B.L.:** Perhaps we could change tack. I was thinking about a comment that Tom Wolff made in *The Painted Word* about the relation between painting and art theory. and his sense that the relation between the two was somehow reversing, that painting was coming to be determined by theory rather than theory building on painting. Do you see the current directions of literary-theory possibly posing a similar problem for writers?

**M.A.:** No, no, and I don't even see that painting theory poses that kind of problem for painters, because most of it is so impenetrable and stupid that nobody would really pay any attention to it, if they had any brains or talent.

**B.L.:** That deals with that one!

**M.A.:** I'm not saying that all literary criticism is like that, in fact I think it has a valid place, but writers who determine their writing because of it are simply lacking other ideas. They're timid and they want to get a badge. They want to have someone saying they're doing 'the right thing', so they try to write something that fits that fashion, but that's true mostly of writers who have some connection with academia, and move in those circles. There are a lot of writers who don't, and who would you rather read?

**B.L.:** So I take it you're not overly-sympathetic to the theories about the death of the author, and to post-structuralist criticism and so on?

**M.A.:** I think it amuses them. If they enjoy doing it that's their business. I'm not dead. Neither is any other living author I know of. A lot of it just seems to me a way of saying in other words what everybody knows already. Any author worth their salt knows that what you give the reader is only what is on the page. We all know that. That's what you say in every creative writing class. So what? It

doesn't mean you're dead. I think it's also a way of giving critics more importance - as much importance as they themselves would like to have. But if they become too impenetrable nobody will read them anyway. Nobody expect the military reads documents about anti-personnel weapons - the English itself has been rendered so meaningless - why would you do it for pleasure?

**B.L.:** The other stream of criticism I'd like you to comment on is in feminist critical theory - *l'écriture féminine* and the notion of 'writing the difference'.

**M.A.:** I don't know much about it. Writers don't need to know that stuff. Critics need to know it. It's their business. They play games with one another and give papers and go to conferences. That's what they do. But writers don't need to know any of that at all. Any more than children with crayons need to know about painting theory. They draw anyway. Who cares what these other people think about what they draw? They still do it. And in fact if you tell them too much about what they're doing it tends to turn them off and they go and play some other game where people leave them alone.

**B.L.:** How do you regard the establishment of what is in fact a women's sector in the academy, Women's Studies?

**M.A.:** Well, there are pluses and minuses. I shouldn't have been quite so dismissive about feminist critical theory because a lot of it is very interesting, but there again it is interesting in itself, it is not interesting as something that should dictate to writers, if you get the difference. Frogs are interesting in themselves. Scientists can say things about frogs, but the frog exists prior to what the scientist says about it. Writing - the text that the writer produces - exists prior to anything a critic can say about it. No egg, no chicken. Or as one critic, speaking 'of the death of the author' said to me this was real and he wasn't making a joke - 'You've written enough already. You've written enough to keep us busy for a long time - you don't need to write any more.'

**B.L.:** That must have made you feel good!

**M.A.:** Well, I thought it was quite cheerful. You know, he certainly had a feeling about what my purpose in life was. It was to provide fodder for him. Unfortunately that isn't who I write for. Whoever else I write for it isn't just for that, and I think once you start writing just for that your work becomes very sterile very quickly.

**B.L.:** Who do you see yourself as writing for?

**M.A.:** The ideal reader who lives in the sky. But the ideal *reader*, not the ideal critic.

**B.L.:** Do you think that women writers face problems that are different from male writers, or is writing itself such a problematic activity that it doesn't make much difference?

**M.A.:** Of course women face problems that are different from the ones faced

by male writers, because women are different from men. It embarrasses me to say anything so crashingly obvious, but it's true. Women are different from men! We don't know exactly how, apart from the very obvious biological difference. It's interesting to speculate on how much of our behaviour is determined by socialisation and how much by biology. We don't know. Nobody knows, that's why it's interesting. But, even apart from those kinds of questions, the way women are treated in society is different and therefore their life experience is different. And therefore the material available to the writer is different and the problems are different, and the way women are viewed critically is different. Their level of acceptance is different and their readership is different. All of those things are different. The way a man reads a woman's text is different from the way a woman reads a woman's text. It has to be. The way a woman reads a man's text is different from the way a man reads a man's text. So of course the problems are different.

**B.L.:** When you talk about level of acceptance...

**M.A.:** You have to be better. It's like women dentists used to be. You have to be better to get level of acceptance A. You have to be better as a mediocre writer to get level of acceptance B. In fact one of the funnier things that emerged from this whole debate in Canada was that one of the spokespeople for 'Life is Bad to Female Writers', was saying: 'We don't have enough mediocre female writers'. I said, wait a minute! That's when things get lost sight of, that's when things get really strange. Surely the point ought to be that everybody ought to be trying to be as good as they can, and yes, it's true that Shakespeare rested on the backs of a whole bunch of mediocre Elizabethan playwrights so I suppose the more people playing chess the better the game will get. But, nevertheless, it sounds awfully funny to be caught saying we need more mediocre female writers. One of the social differences is that male writers tend to run in packs, more than female writers have traditionally done. Particularly poets. Men edit the magazines, not because someone is keeping the women out, but because the women don't do it. They've got other things to do in their lives, and they don't traditionally push to be the editor of a poetry magazine and they don't traditionally start them, although I now know some who have and in those magazines the ratio of women to men is much more fifty-fifty.

**B.L.:** So patronage networks do operate?

**M.A.:** Old boys. You know - you're my pay, let's gang up on him...

**B.L.:** Or her?

**M.A.:** Well, not usually her. It tends to be a football mentality more than anything. It's the opposite *male* team that you're playing. The women are the cheerleaders and mascots. You let some of them into your magazine to show that you're a good fellow, and that somebody is waving the pompoms, but you are not playing the female team, because girls don't play boy's games. Boys play

boys games.

**B.L.:** And you think that's still the same, even after 15 years of feminist intervention?

**M.A.:** No it's not the *same*. It's a lot more open. But it's still *there*, and you can't disregard that kind of factor. Now, people like me who are 'big' girls are not seen as part of the girls' team. They're seen more like the home room teacher. You put some of her in because it's a sort of senior writer... But as I say, you have to be better to get there. And then the girl's team calls you a token woman.

**B.L.:** That's what I was going to ask. Does that kind of success, and being a public personage, set up problems in relation to other women?

**M.A.:** Some problems, yes. People like myself and Alice Munro vastly object to being called token women, because the implication is that they needed one, and therefore they just took any old jellybean out of the bag. So, we don't like that. The other thing about being in that position is that the first people who get attacked when people are attacking women writers are the visible ones, so we get the flack, too.

**B.L.:** The last chapter, or epilogue, in *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to me to be a fairly devastating comment on the academic enterprise, and the way it defuses the impact of accounts of human suffering.

**M.A.:** It's just human nature! You cannot be present in the life experience of someone who lived 250 years ago the way that person is. You can try a bit harder than my academic did, but it is a very hard thing to do. This was brought home to me just this weekend. We were in Tasmania and we went to the Port Arthur penal colony, and that thing is now a tourists attraction. You know, *the* tourist attraction of Tasmania is the Port Arthur Penal Colony, and I thought, these guys must be rolling in their graves. We are coming and strolling around and saying, 'oh wow, look at this, isn't that amazing, and look what they did here, and isn't that astonishing and gosh I never knew that'. And it was their lives. It's not our lives. We are after the fact.

**B.L.:** So if it was happening now, it would be a political outrage and an atrocity, but if it happened in the past it's acceptable.

**M.A.:** It is happening now. It is happening now. Somewhere else. Worse. But we think, in our comforting way, well that was one hundred and fifty years ago. We don't really have to worry about that in our lives now.

**B.L.:** But nonetheless it is there.

**M.A.:** It's there. It *was* there for them, it is there now elsewhere in the world, but for us it's a tourist attraction. Do you see what I mean? A good historian will try to put you there, try and make you be present at that time. My man is a somewhat different kind of historian. He is the kind who is working on the textual



level, trying to recreate the text. So he has recreated the text. They have put together the text, and now he is commenting on the next that he has put together and named.

**B.L.:** So the relation of the text to life, you think, is an important thing to keep hold of?

**M.A.:** There are no texts without life. Of course language has ambiguities to it, we all know that, its part of one of its pleasures, and of course there are subjective readings of texts and what you bring to a text is you and your training and your associations. Of course. But that does not mean that the text has no meaning in itself.