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Margaret Atwood: 09-12-1979

Margaret Atwood

Gregory Fitz Gerald

Katharyn Crabbe

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Atwood:

You begin.
You begin this way.
This is your hand.
This is your eye.
That is a fish, blue and flat on the paper, almost the shape of an eye.
This is your mouth.
This is an "O" or a moon, whichever you like.
This is yellow.
Outside the window is the rain, green because it is Summer, and beyond that the trees
and then the world, which is round and has only the colors of these nine Crayons.
This is the world, which is fuller and more difficult to learn than I have said.
You are right to smudge it that way with the red and then the orange.
The world burns.
Once you have learned these words, you will learn that there are more words than you can ever learn.
The word "hand" floats above your hand like a small cloud over a lake.
The word "hand" anchors your hand to this table.
Your hand is a warm stone I hold between two words.
This is your hand.
These are my hands.
This is the world, which is round, but not flat, and has more colors than we can see.
It begins.
It has an end.
This what you will come back to.
This is your hand.
[Music]

Narrator:

Brockport Writer's Forum in a continuing series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries presents a conversation with Margaret Atwood. A widely published poet, novelist, critic, and editor, whose works include a number of poetry collections and novels, including a new book, "Life Before Man."

Margaret Atwood has received several outstanding literary awards and honors and currently resides in Alliston, Ontario. Discussing Ms. Atwood's works are Katharyn Crabbebe, Assistant Professor of English at the State University of New York, College at Brockport, whose specialty includes children's literature.

And the host for today's Writer's Forum, Gregory Fitzgerald, Professor of English at the State University College of Brockport, and current Director of The Writer's Forum.

Fitzgerald:

Welcome to The Writer's Forum. Ms. Atwood, and welcome, Kathy. There's an interesting pattern of color imagery in that poem you just read. And I wonder if you would tell us something about your feelings about it.

Atwood:

Well, I hadn't really thought about it before you asked me, but then I took a quick peek, and what I see is that it starts off with quite a cool color. The colors are blue, yellow, and green, and then it builds up to very hot colors in the middle of the poem.

Fitzgerald:

Orange.

Atwood:

Orange and red. And that's the end. There are no more colors after that. The word color is mentioned, but not any specific color. So, I would say that the colors build up to a -- to the sort of midpoint of the poem, which is the most dangerous point in the poem. And then there's a diminuendo.

Crabbe:

The blue, the cool blueness that starts off that poem, with the blue fish, is familiar in your poems. You do a lot of things with blues and greens. And now to move away from color a little bit, with fish, as well. I wonder if you could comment a little bit on maybe the Canadian environment, and its relationship to those particular images.

Atwood:

Okay. Life begins with geology, as far as I'm concerned, geology and geography. And if you look at a map, you will see that Canada, in fact, is one of the most watery countries in the world. It has a lot of water. If you look at a map in which water is blue and land is green, you will see that a lot of Canada is blue. So, I suppose you would say that -- you might say that it's fairly natural for me to use those because that's what I'm surrounded by a lot of the time. That may give the impression that Canada is nothing but a big stretch of woods, which of course, isn't true. And my latest novel, for instance, is set entirely in the city, nobody goes out of it. And there's very little water, not much green, and not many fish in that boat.

Fitzgerald:

One of your critics, Linda Rodgers, has said that she finds it kind of chilling, your imagery.

Atwood:

You're thinking that funny article called, "Margaret the Magician?" Yes, I am. Well, come on, don't read silly criticism, please.

Fitzgerald:

[Laughter]

In other words, you're going to just dismiss it as completely false?

Atwood:

Well, I think that -- I mean she spent half the article analyzing my cover photos, right? Saying that I didn't smile in them. Well, at the time I read that, I went and counted out my cover photos and she had

missed quite a number of them. Some have smiles, some don't have smiles. But to base an analysis of a writer's work on whether the cover photos have smiles or not, seems to me pretty silly.

Fitzgerald:

In other words, you rechecked the idea that there is a chill?

Atwood:

There's a chill in some of them and not a chill in others. I mean, if you read any writer who is worthwhile at all, I mean name one serious modern writer who is all sweetness and light. I can't.

Fitzgerald:

True.

Atwood:

And I think that certainly reflects, you know, not one's personality or predilections, but what goes on around one. As far as I'm concerned, a writer is a focus for what is coming in from outside. And looking around you, do you see much that would cause any writer, with any seriousness, to ignore completely the darker side of life.

Fitzgerald:

I don't see how one can myself.

Atwood:

No. I think her point was that I exert a kind of hypnotic, mesmerizing influence on the reader, presumably through the cover photos. And what can I say?

Crabbe:

You might counter by saying something about the effect of the language. And when I listen to you read, I hear a great deal of consciousness of the rhythm of the language. That rhythm certainly is paramount in the language in the poems. But even when you're reading your prose, there seems to be a strong awareness of that. I wonder then there's also a great deal of attention to how the poem looks on the page. It appears to me you're very careful lineator. I wonder if you could start us off by saying whether you think of a poem more as an oral experience or as a visual experience for the reader? Is it something you hear --

Atwood:

I think it's an oral experience.

Crabbe:

-- or something you see?

Atwood:

And the visual experience is a notation. But there again, this is not an eccentricity of mine. A lot of poets think that way. And any poet who is not conscious of rhythm, probably wouldn't be a very good poet.

Crabbe:

Do you work from a principle in lineation?

Atwood:

From a principle? No. I mean, do I have a theory? I think I probably once did, and it tends to change about depending on what I'm doing at the moment. But I think it tends to be -- no, I don't have a theory anymore. All I can say is that sometimes the lines get longer, and sometimes they get shorter. I'll go through a period when I'm using apparently long lines and maybe writing quite a few prose poems. And then, for instance, power politics is very aphoristic. Its poems are very short, condensed. But if you write that way for too long, you get into a corner that you can't get out of. And then end result of that would be silence.

Fitzgerald:

It reminds me of a book called, "The Literature Silence." That's, obviously, a rhythmical factor too. But let me ask you, when we're -- since we're on the subject of rhythm. I have become aware, recently, of a resurgence in interest in metrics among poets, as opposed to free verse. I wanted to hear your reaction to that. Do you agree with that? And if so, how does it relate to your work?

Atwood:

Okay. I've never quite understood what free verse was. It doesn't seem to me that any verse is entirely free. Do you mean rhyming?

Fitzgerald:

No. I mean metrics.

Atwood:

I am [inaudible] --

Fitzgerald:

Yes. That sort of thing. I have noticed, for instance, this poem, this largely iambic that you read for us.

Atwood:

It may sound that way. It has -- I think if you counted it out it probably wouldn't be. I think that there's a tendency of, for instance, very young poets, who think that they were writing in free verse. To slip into iambs because -

Fitzgerald:

Yes. That's true.

Atwood:

-- because they've had so much Shakespeare at school.

Fitzgerald:

Yes.

Atwood:

And they'll do an iambic line without even knowing that it is an iambic line.

Fitzgerald:

Correct.

Atwood:

I did a lot of formal pattern writing when I was quite young. And I consider that training. I think everybody should have to do it because then it makes you aware of such things when they occur. I think a lot of people, sort of, see modern poetry and think that, therefore, there is no structure.

Fitzgerald:

Yes.

Atwood:

You know, they are not taught to look for a structure. Therefore, they think it doesn't have to have any structure whatsoever. And they either then write iambics, but they don't recognize it as iambics or they slip into a kind of [inaudible] writing or they merely imitate. That's the kind of thing I said before that. But I don't think formal training hurts anybody at all. I think everybody should have to write a sonnet once in their life just to see what it is.

Fitzgerald:

There are more sonnets appearing that I see now [inaudible].

Atwood:

Well, okay, let me go back and say that I think they should all have to write sonnets at some time in their life. But I must also say that to write a good sonnet today, is very difficult because the sonnet form has been used, and used, and used. It's like trying to paint a good landscape, you know, what can you say about a landscape that hasn't already been said?

Fitzgerald:

Or write some good lines of dramatic [inaudible].

Atwood:

That also would be very difficult.

Fitzgerald:

Right.

Atwood:

I think what happened in the 20th Century, was that the Victorians were great experimenters with formal patterns, and they used everything up. I mean, they did it so much that it became very difficult for the generation immediately after that to do anything in the same vein. And I think that shoved people into free verse. And now it may be that free verse has been used, and used, and used so much that people are now looking for some other source of energy.

Fitzgerald:

Well, they try syllabics a lot, but it appears to me that syllabics don't really work very well in English unless they combine with, you know, the [inaudible].

Atwood:

Something else. Yeah. I've never found -- because, in fact, English is not that kind of language. It's still based on heavy Anglo-Saxon stress. And unless you have a language in which all stresses are more or less -- unless, all syllables can get an equal stress, such as French, it doesn't really work.

Fitzgerald:

Right.

Crabbe:

You have [inaudible] academic training --

Atwood:

A long time ago.

Crabbe:

A long time ago. Right.

Atwood:

I'm older than you think.

Crabbe:

But --

Atwood:

I'm older than I think.

Crabbe:

But I wonder who among the poets you studied has been influential for you?

Atwood:

Among the ones I studied, okay, I kept pretty strictly away from the 20th Century to avoid that very problem. My field of study in graduate school was the 19th Century.

And I studied Tennyson, which, again, won't hurt anybody, et cetera, et cetera. But I didn't want to do 20th Century literature. I didn't want to feel that something that was so close to what -- to me was something that I had to do in the academic marketplace, so I stayed away from it. And my readings of modern poetry were done on my own time, as it were. I read a lot of Canadian poetry at a quite formative stage in my life. And I could name several Canadian poets that I think were influential. One of them is Margaret Avison. One of them is P.K. Page. They are probably people you have never heard of, but they're well known up there. And I was coming along at a time of considerable artistic ferment, so I made contact with a number of my contemporaries, as well. One of them being Gwendolyn MacEwen, Michael Endochy as well was coming along at that time. And other people of my own generation such as George Bowering. Anyway, there's a lot of those. But I think essentially you don't get very influenced after your first ten years or so of writing. After that, you're presumably developing things of your own.

Crabbe:

Of course. When you were reading Tennyson, and studying Tennyson, you would have been studying poetry, which pays a good deal of attention to sound and --

Atwood:

a great mellifluous, yes, and murmurings of [inaudible].

Crabbe:

And to metrics, classical metrics as well.

Atwood:

Exactly.

Crabbe:

And do you see that as detrimental --

Atwood:

No. No.

Crabbe:

Or helpful to you?

Atwood:

Well, yes and no. From the poets I know, it doesn't seem to make much difference to a poet, whether they've been to university or not, that is some have, and are good poets, others haven't and are good poets. I think about the only difference it makes, and I'm not even too sure about this, is that if you have been you're perhaps more critical about what you publish. In other words, there are a lot of natural poets who will publish anything they write. And don't have the critical ability to weed out the duds from the good ones. They think that everything they write is good.

But it doesn't make any difference as to whether a person can write good ones or not. It seems to not have anything to do with that at all. I think poets are really largely self-taught. But then if you have -- if

you are conscious of the existence of quality in other people's work, if you can tell a good Tennyson poem from a real horrible one, of which there are a number, then possibly you apply some of that to your own work. I'm fairly stiffly self-editing. I write maybe twice as much as I publish.

Fitzgerald:

That suggests that you do considerable revision.

Atwood:

Not necessarily. If a poem is going the way I wanted it, it will sometimes stay exactly the way I wrote it. For instance, the one I just read to you was just about straight onto the page. But it does mean that I throw out a lot.

Fitzgerald:

I see.

Atwood:

Or that if I have a poem that I'm revising and revising, it doesn't work, I'll lay it aside.

Fitzgerald:

Do you feel there is any danger in over revision?

Atwood:

Well, here again, there aren't any rules. It's not like working on an assembly line and putting together a car, you know, if you leave out the motor it doesn't go, and things like that. There are no rules that you can make about it. You can only look at the result. Now there are some schools of writing that concentrate very largely on process and say that, you know, if your heart is in the right place, if your process is in the right place then the result sort of has to be approved of. I'm not a member of that school.

Fitzgerald:

I see. There's something else I wanted to ask, too. You talked earlier about Tennyson, which isn't really in the mainstream. But there are other distinguishable elements of the English poetry, for example, the Celtic influence. And then the influence of the Anglo-Saxon poetry, which is somewhat integrated in the mainstream, but not totally. And we see it in the poet like Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example. Now, is that counter-tendency of any importance as an influence in your work? That of Hopkins or Thomas, for instance, Dylan Thomas?

Atwood:

Thomas probably not. A lot of the sort of thrust or impetus of my work came out of the situation that was around me in my "formative years", from maybe the age of 16 to the age of 26, about 10 years. And what poets of my generation were really searching for was an indigenous mode of expression, and indigenous subject matter, if you like. Also, we were heavily involved in developing our own indigenous publishing houses, as it were.

When I was, say 1960, there were maybe five literary magazines in the whole of Canada. There were maybe three publishers. You could read, maybe, five novels a year by Canadians published in Canada. Books of poetry maybe 20. And that included everything including mimeograph pamphlets and stuff that we did ourselves. And all of the poets of my generation pretty much, we all published our own work first. I mean, I set to type for my own first book because there wasn't anything else. There was a kind of real vacuum and that's the activity that I think of when people say influence, you know, what were you reading? What were you doing? That's what I was doing. And those other things were interesting, yes. But one of the things we were discovering was the fact of our own existence. And we weren't too eager to imitate English models anymore because Canadians before us had done that a lot.

Fitzgerald:

I see.

Atwood:

I would say mine was the first generation that had enough poets write before it to start that chain reaction.

Fitzgerald:

There's a question or two I'd like to ask you about fiction because you do write novels, of course, and short stories as well.

Atwood:

You sound disapproving.

Fitzgerald:

Not necessarily. I'm a fiction writer myself, so I don't think I could be reasonably disapproving. But I'm wondering if you could tell us how, in your mind, the distinction is in the creative act is applied to poetry that is applied to fiction?

Atwood:

Okay. Poems have immediate satisfactions to offer. That is, you can finish one fairly quickly, finish it or get to the point where you throw it out fairly quickly. A novel, you may have the idea for it, or the kicker if you like, or the first scene, or whatever it is you start within about the same amount of time or even just in an instant. But then you have to spend a lot of time, and a lot of hard work, actually getting the thing onto paper, and a lot of working out. So I would say the operative element is willpower, aside from the differences in form and the differences in what you can express with the two different things. Differences in structure and what the basic unit is. The thing that makes me finish a novel has to be a lot more dogged than whatever it is that makes you finish a poem.

Fitzgerald:

What do you think about those writers who attempt to combine the forms and write poetic novels or prose poems?

Atwood:

Well, I write prose cons myself and to me they're poems. They're not prose. They may look like prose, but in fact, the basic unit is the syllable, as it is in poetry, or shall we say the stress, the stress unit. And in a novel, the basic unit is something much larger. It's blocks of, if you like, blocks of an imagery that connect with other blocks, character plot. For me, the novel operates much more solidly in relationship to the society, if you like. Poetic novels, I'm not sure what those are. You sometimes get stuck with a label because you write poetry. But, for me, if a novel doesn't work as a novel, then it's probably bad.

Fitzgerald:

Well, I was thinking particularly of Joyce in that respect, and many people.

Atwood:

Do they think of him as poetic?

Fitzgerald:

Yes, certainly. For instance, in that marvelous Molly Bloom soliloquy, that comes at the end [inaudible].

Atwood:

But that's like a sermon. I mean, it's definitely prose.

Fitzgerald:

Well --

Atwood:

It has rhythms, yes. But they're prose rhythms for me.

Fitzgerald:

And then the portrait of the artist at the end. I mean, that section create the -- the uncreated [inaudible], and the [inaudible]. So how does that "go?"

Atwood:

Well, it's a metaphor.

Fitzgerald:

Yeah.

Atwood:

But metaphors are not meant [inaudible] in novels. I hope because I use them.

Fitzgerald:

And then also Hemmingway has a passage that's very poetic in --

Atwood:

What do we mean by poetic? Do we mean that it rolls out or do we mean that it -- what, what?

Fitzgerald:

It has a distinct, which is no longer prose rhythm. It has a compressed [inaudible] pattern. And in those two respects, at least, we see [inaudible].

Atwood:

What about Moby Dick?

Fitzgerald:

Moby Dick, the same thing could be said of passages.

Atwood:

Yeah. Well, I'm certainly not against that. I mean, a good -- I don't know. I mean, people tend to be very kind of compartmentalized in a -- somebody said to me last night, "Well, my thesis advisor won't let me work on you because he says, 'well she writes novels.'" I said, "What do you mean by that?" "What does he mean by that?" She said, "Well, apparently people are so specialized these days that they deal either with poetry or with fiction."

Fitzgerald:

I wouldn't agree with that, of course.

Atwood:

No. She seems to be having difficulty that way. She finds people disapproving of me because I do both.

Fitzgerald:

I can't credit that. It's like turning off Hardy, you know.

Atwood:

I said -- I said Hardy immediately. I pulled Hardy out of the hat.

Crabbe:

I have a question about your [inaudible]. It seems to me that your poetry, I don't want to use one of Rodger's terms, but to use maybe Northrop Frye's terms, it takes a more ironic world view than your fiction, which seems to me to have an essentially comic view. Not to say that the poems do not contain witty passages as well. But that the resolutions tend to be more --

Atwood:

They're not [inaudible] I presume, right?

Crabbe:

Right. The resolutions of the novels are much brighter, it seems to me than the tone of the poems.

Atwood:

Yeah. I'm not too sure about that.

The first novel, for instance, I would consider as a circular structure. I think that the person at the end of it and the [inaudible] is much -- is more or less, back where she started, in the sense that she's been around once surfacing, I would say, as a spiral that's one notch up. But I wouldn't call it an exactly bright ending. And Lady Oracle, again, I would say is probably circular. She's back where she started, but knowing more. And this one here, I -- "Life Before Man" is so recent for me that I haven't really thought about it too much. I think it's a different thing altogether. I think that the first three novels comprise a kind of unit, if you like, and that this latest one that I finished is the first in another unit, another unit of three.

Crabbe:

But do you see something in that -- in the very form of the poem and the form of novel that means you can do different kinds of things with them? That you can --

Atwood:

I think you can do very different kinds of things with them.

Crabbe:

I guess the question is really must you do very different kinds of things with them?

Atwood:

I must. I don't know about other people. I think they work in quite different ways. Novels are big for one thing. It's simply a matter of size. It takes a long time to read a novel compared to the amount of time that it takes to read a poem unless it's a long, narrative poem, and that gets us back, of course, to the prose argument, about the lyric poem versus sort of the "Paradise Lost." He was after the immediate kind of evocative, hair rising on the back of the neck, kind of thing that you can get from a very condensed lyric poem. And not from a narrative poem because there are too many passages of, well, the stuff that's in novel's characters, setting, development up to that moment. I think you can have those moments in novels, but I think the buildup is a lot more complex. But, really for me, it boils down to the fact that in a poem, you're working with syllables and rhythms in quite a different way than you're working with them in prose.

Crabbe:

Earlier you said something about that the novel being more tied to the society.

Atwood:

Yeah. Novels have people in them, at least it's very unusual to find one that doesn't. Sometimes they have -- I mean, I know somebody has written one called, "The Last of the Curlews" that has a bird in it. But the bird is, you know, dramatized and developed as a character. And poems have a voice. You can have a narrative poem that has persons and characters in it, true, but people that write those too much anymore. Even when they're writing a narrative structure, you will find that it usually breaks down into short lyric poems these days. And you will notice, also, then when we're analyzing paradise lost, we usually analyze it the same way we analyze a novel. You know, what was motivating Adam, Eve's character, et cetera. So, to me, it's just -- novels have people in them. People exist in the social

[inaudible] as social, political, cultural [inaudible], and all those things then get into the novel. You can put those things in poems as well if you like, but it's so much more condensed.

Crabbe:

Does that fact that a novel has all these other things in it make you think differently about the same issue in a novel from the way you would in a poem?

Atwood:

Okay. That gets into the whole area of the relationship between the writer and the audience. And in a poem, you're taking a lot more for granted about the listener, shall we say. In a novel, you're also addressing yourself to a readership and you assume certain things about that readership, but you're liable to fill in a lot more, give a lot more data, if you like, a lot more information about the kinds of lives your characters lead.

Crabbe:

I see.

Fitzgerald:

Let me shift a little bit. What is your reaction to those critics who hint that you're a political writer?

Atwood:

I am a political writer.

Fitzgerald:

Okay. Can you enlarge on that a little bit more? I mean, what kind of a political writer are you?

Atwood:

Well, the easy way out is, everything is political, right? The easy out is, you know, everything is cultural.

Everything is --

Fitzgerald:

Argumentative?

Atwood:

-- verbal.

Fitzgerald:

Yeah. Right.

Atwood:

I mean, you can analyze any -- you can take any sort of piece of writing and look at it from about 50 different ways, and one of them is political. So that's the easy way of answering that question. But you really wanted to know is the real answer.

Fitzgerald:

Right.

Atwood:

It would be impossible to be a Canadian of my generation, growing up the way I did and with the kinds of involvements I had. It would be impossible for such a person not to have developed a political consciousness. Because even though we started out just wanting to be writers, you know, I want to be a writer. We found that access to our own audience was denied us by the fact that the publishing houses were controlled by foreigners, or else were very timid about publishing Canadians because they thought that Canadians weren't reading Canadians. In other words, we were up against something that we call a "colonial mentality." The mentality believes that the great good place is somewhere else. The great good place is New York or the great good place is London. So, we all developed that. I certainly wasn't born with it. And I think my predilection is not to be political. You know, I would all those problems to be solved so I wouldn't have to deal with them, and I could go make mud pies in my backyard. But those problems do exist and we have to confront them merely to keep ourselves viable as writers. We have to deal with the fact that at any moment all our publishing houses may go broke. You have to cope with that.

Fitzgerald:

Are you suggesting that Canadian writers feel that they're under the influence of American cultural imperialism?

Atwood:

Not under the influence. They have to contend with it.

Fitzgerald:

What is the nature of that contention?

Atwood:

The nature of that -- well, the nature of the contention is many. Number one, we set up publishing houses, which worked and are still with us. That's in the kind of simplest form, you know, if you can't get into the ones that already exist, you start others. We set up magazines, which still exist. We set up a writer's union, which still exists. There's a writer's union for prose. [inaudible] for poets, league for poets. There's a playwrights union and there are a number of others. There's one for magazine and periodical writers. But just let me give you an example. You see, it's not the big bad wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood", okay. It's not all the bad guys against all the good guys. Because one of the functions of colonial mentality is that you get sold out by your own people. There's a chain in Canada called Kohls. Kohls developed a -- discovered a loophole in a copy write law that allowed it to buy out remainder copies of books by Canadians in the states, bring them across the border, sell them at prices that undercut the Canadian book, which would still be on sale and selling, make a profit, not pay the author any royalty, and not pay the publisher anything. So that's a Canadian firm using a loophole in the law to make a profit for itself and also a profit for the Americans. And we had to stop that because we were getting into a situation where a Canadian, somebody like Kohls could go to the American publisher and

say, "Print 20,000 more copies than you think you're going to sell and we guarantee to buy them, you know, at cost." That's what would have happened. It would have put Canadian publishers out of business and, ultimately, Canadian writers, they would have been right back where we were in 1960. So that's the kind of political action we find ourselves having to take. I mean, can you imagine anything so absurd 20 writers sitting around in Ottawa lobbying the government? The difference between our country and yours is that they let us in.

[Laughter]

Crabbe:

Can you imagine 20 writers going to Washington and demanding a meeting with secretary of state?

Fitzgerald:

I'm afraid that it would be the cause of laughter.

Atwood:

Yeah. Well, that's [inaudible] because they listened to us. The reason they listen to us is because we've got just about every writer in the country in the union.

Fitzgerald:

Well, I think I'd like to --

Atwood:

It takes them a long time, but they do listen.

Fitzgerald:

I'd like to focus on that a little bit more. One of your critics seems to find in your work a dichotomy between Americanization and Canadianization, if I can use that term, where the Americanization image seems to be that of dehumanization of excessive technology. And the Canadian image is that of the nature, the land, and open spaces.

Atwood:

Well, sure but in "Surfacing" there's a scene where all these images are going strong and people think that, you know, group X or Americans, and they apply all these images to them. And then they actually meet them and find out they're Canadians. You have to watch that.

Fitzgerald:

I see.

Atwood:

As I say, it's not a question of the big, bad wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood." And for us, that's a normal kind of image to use. I think for a Scottish person the same sight of images can be applied to the English, right. If you are a black in the American south you would apply all those to the white man. If you were

an Indian in the Canadian north, you would apply it to the white man whether Canadian American or whatever. If you were in Quebec, you would apply it to the English, the Anglos.

Fitzgerald:

Okay.

Atwood:

It's just whoever you're up against. If you were a woman, you would apply it to men. Now, there's always a danger in that kind of thing, in that you confuse individual members of that group with the group as a whole. You may say, "I don't like you because you're an American and therefore you're some kind of tin woodsman with a little motor inside." And, of course, that's a naughty thing to do. But you have to face facts. We are dominated by the Americans. They do do these things. They do use Canada as a branch plant economy. Our workers are laid off before yours. We are dominated by American unions. It wasn't me who invented that. It's part of my society I live in.

Fitzgerald:

So you feel you're just describing your reality, right, without taking a position?

Atwood:

Yeah. Absolutely. Well, of course, I'm taking a position in that I choose to describe that reality rather than some other kind of reality. There are other realities around to describe. But I didn't invent it and I can't make it go away.

Crabbe:

You're a person with a variety of audiences, a Canadian audience, and an American audience, a British audience. How does that affect you as an artist? Do you feel that there's a different relationship between you and your Canadian audience than between you and your American audience?

Atwood:

Yeah. I could put it very -- in a very few words by telling about another writer, whose name is Margaret Lawrence. She wrote a book called, "The Stone Angel", which was published in all three of those countries. And she got a reader's reaction from all three countries. She said the English readers thought the book was -- it was about an old woman. She said the English readers thought it was about old age. The American readers thought it was about a certain kind of old woman that they could identify. And the Canadian readers thought it was about their grandmother. So, it's just a closeness. My Canadian audience is less far away from me than my other audiences. But I feel that if you're writing with sufficient fullness, even though people may not know the restaurant you describe, they may not have been there, they can pick up on what kind of restaurant it is. Just as when I read Faulkner, although I've never been to Oxford, Mississippi, if he tells me enough, I can imagine that place. I won't be able to imagine it in as great detail as someone who lives there, but I can imagine it sufficiently.

Crabbe:

We've been really dwelling on the question of what it is to be a Canadian artist.

Atwood:

Well, some of the problems, you know, nobody really knows what it is, but we all know that we have certain problems that we encounter.

Crabbe:

To just shift the focus a little bit, not only are you a Canadian artist, but according to a number of your critics, you're a feminist poet. Would you agree with that description?

Atwood:

Well, we're great categorizers and pigeonholers in this society. And one of the reasons for doing that is so that you can put the person safely into the pigeonhole and then dismiss them, thinking you, thereby, sum them up. Feminism, to me, is an adjective. Feminist is an adjective, which does not enclose one. You know, it's not enough to say somebody is a feminist, you've got to then go on and say more than that. I think some people choose to define themselves as feminist writers. I don't think I would deny the adjective, but I would say that it's not inclusive. There are a lot of other things as well that are interests of mine. And people who understand that position tend to be women from Scotland, or say black women from the United States, who say, "Okay. Feminist as discussed in the United States of America is usually white, middle-class women, American women saying woman, capital W, and thinking that means that all women are them." You know. And I get arguments from feminists from the states saying, "Why do you bother with this nationalism stuff, you know, those patriarchal male dominated boys' games? Why don't you just play girl's games?" And, you know, somebody who would understand that would probably be somebody from a peripheral culture, such as my own, somebody from Scotland, somebody from the West Indies, black feminists in the states. I read a piece by Alice Walker, which said a lot to me.

Crabbe:

What can it mean to be a feminist poet, though? Is it -- if you will accept that, is it something a matter of subject matter?

Atwood:

Well, you have to listen to what I said. What it means to certain American feminist poets is probably be something different from what it means to me. Okay. Because we're from different cultures. I can see that because I'm on the outside looking in. They often can't see that because they're on the inside looking in. They can see each other. When they see me, they think I'm one of them, which, okay, sex does cut across national boundaries. It is important. Feminism is, in some sense, international. But it can only be international in the way that anything else can be international if you want it to work. It's a meeting of nationalities, not the submergence of one in another. So, I would say that you cannot be a sort of Canadian feminist exclusive writer in the same way that you can be an American feminist exclusive writer. The country is too small, we have too many problems just as Canadians. We have to work with men.

[Laughter] We have to work with men.

Crabbe:

Yes. So you would say that you're a Canadian artist first and then --

Atwood:

No. I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't say that. I would say that all of these things connect with each other. Canadian nationalism is just another forum, if you like, of general human rights interests. In this country, I probably would also be called a sort of pinko socialist as well. Canada, of course, is a much more socialist country than the states because it's had to be. It's had to be just in order to survive.

Fitzgerald:

Tell me, is there much support for artists who work in Canada as much as there is in the United States or more?

Atwood:

Well, Canada is a lot poorer than the United States, number one. Number two, it's got a lot fewer people. I would say what support there is tends to be more public. You've got a lot of things, like the Guggenheim, and a lot of privately funded grants giving organizations. We just don't have those. So the support for artists tends to come from something called the Canada Council. And some of the provincial governments have their own grant giving outfits. And people often worry about this. They say well, what about government control? What about censorship? You know, what about the Soviet Union of writers, which have just a kind of [inaudible] with the government. And so far we haven't run into those difficulties. Our artists sit on the boards that give out the loot.

Fitzgerald:

Is there as much politics about literary grantsmanship in Canada you think, as you may have heard about being true here?

Atwood:

You mean Mr. X gives it to Mr. Y because it's his friend?

Fitzgerald:

Yes.

Atwood:

Well, again, because the United States is so large, it seems to be to divide up into a number of sort of areas or [inaudible] or regions or whatever you want to call them. In Canada, you can get all the writers in the country who have published books into one room. The Writer's Union has something like 350 people in it. So, it's more functional. I mean, it's more -- it's less likely to split up into little, you know, my little area and your little area. And I'll give it to my friends and exclude your friends. Also, because it's a small country, word gets around.

Fitzgerald:

I see.

Atwood:

It's a lot harder to operate that way than it is in the states, which has a real power structure, and real hierarchy and real regional groups that seems to be writers. I know little about it, actually. You would be able to tell me more about that than I can tell you.

Fitzgerald:

Well, I'm afraid we won't be able to because we have run out of time. So, I want to thank you very much, Margaret Atwood, for being our guest on The Writer's Forum today.

And thank you, Kathy Crabbe, for being a participant and an interviewer.

Crabbe:

Thank you.

Thank you.

[Music]

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