

hermitage island which the famous writer loved. Deep-Valleyed Desmond. He knows that he could be there with them, through this day and this night, celebrating something he'd come here to find; but he acknowledges, too, the other. That words, too, were invented perhaps to do the things that stones can do. And he has come here, after all, to build his walls.

1981

Margaret Atwood

b. 1939

Since winning a Governor General's Award at twenty-seven (for *The Circle Game*, her first full-length book), Margaret Atwood has created a substantial body of writing—poetry, short stories, novels, and criticism—that has gained her an international reputation. She has also been active in the publishing and writing community: in her early role as an editor for the House of Anansi Press she was, with Dennis Lee, David Godfrey, Graham Gibson, and others, part of the energetic small press scene that emerged at the end of the 1960s and that played a vital role in the vigorous growth of Canadian literature. A member of Anansi's board in the 1970s, Atwood—who also served as the president of the Writers' Union in 1982–3, the editor of *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1982) and of *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories* (with Robert Weaver; 1986)—has been a tireless promoter of Canadian literary culture, lecturing about Canadian writers as well as reading from her own work in Canada, in the US, in the UK and the rest of Europe, in Russia, and in Australia.

Born in Ottawa, Atwood grew up there, in Sault Ste Marie, and in Toronto. As a result of her father's entomological research, she spent extended periods of her childhood with her family in the northern Ontario and Quebec bush and did not attend a full year of formal school until grade eight. In 1957 she entered

Victoria College, University of Toronto, where her teachers included Northrop Frye and the poet Jay Macpherson, with whom she became friends. She completed her BA in 1961, publishing a slim book of poems, *Double Persephone*, that year. Enrolling in graduate studies at Harvard, she took a master's degree in 1962 and began a doctoral thesis on 'the English metaphysical romances' of George MacDonald and H. Rider Haggard. She worked briefly as a market researcher in Toronto; then, between 1964 and 1973, she taught English or was writer-in-residence at Sir George Williams University (now part of Concordia) in Montreal (1967–8), at the University of Alberta (1969–70), at York University (1971–2), and at the University of Toronto (1972–3). Since then she has accepted occasional residencies but has chiefly been a full-time writer, living first on a farm near Alliston, Ont., and, since 1980, in Toronto. She continues to travel widely, and has spent extended periods in France, Italy, Germany, the US, and Australia.

Atwood's writing can be separated into two main periods. The poems collected in *The Circle Game* (1966), *The Animals in That Country* (1968), *Procedures for Underground* (1970), and *You Are Happy* (1974)—as well as those in the book-length sequences *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) and *Power Politics* (1973)—share the tone and themes of her novels

of this period: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), and *Lady Oracle* (1976). Utilizing a stark and unemotional style, this is writing that can startle readers out of conventional expectations and into new ways of perceiving—as in the very short poem that opens *Power Politics*:

*You fit into me
like a hook into an eye*

*a fish hook
an open eye.*

Frequently told from the point of view of alienated individuals (sometimes on the verge of breakdown), her poetry and fiction express a distrust of the everyday world, finding it a place of deceptive appearances and emotional shallowness—in part because contemporary society is driven by commercial interests and dominated by mass media and consumerism. To this world and its concerns Atwood opposes the claims made by dreams, hallucinations, and visions, showing her readers that it is through descents into the psyche and the rediscovery of the primitive and mythic dimensions of both mind and world that one can experience wholeness. (Her interest in myth runs through the body of her work and reappears in her current project, a libretto for an opera called 'Inanna's Journey', based on a Sumerian tale that predates *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Canadian Opera Company expects to mount the finished work in the 2005–6 season.)

Both a nationalist and a feminist, Atwood finds the problem of inauthenticity—a concern for many contemporary writers—especially associated with women, as in *Power Politics* and *The Edible Woman*, and with Canadians, as in *Surfacing* and *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. In the afterword to that sequence of poems, she wrote:

If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia. Mrs Moodie is divided down the middle: she praises the Canadian landscape but accuses it of destroying her; she dislikes the people already in Canada but finds in people her only refuge from the land itself; she preaches progress

and the march of civilization while brooding elegiacally upon the destruction of the wilderness. . . . She claims to be an ardent Canadian patriot while all the time she is standing back from the country and criticizing it as though she were a detached observer, a stranger. Perhaps that is the way we still live. We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something that must be chosen—it is so easy to leave—and if we do choose it we are still choosing a violent duality.

Atwood has written on the dangers of a colonial mentality, and the consequent lack of Canadian identity, not only in her poetry and her fiction but also in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). Atwood built this polemical work of literary criticism, which both came out of and helped fuel the cultural nationalism of its day, on Northrop Frye's 'garrison' thesis. Accepting Frye's idea that, in contrast to the powerful vitalizing effect of the frontier in American history, Canadian development was given its shape by an early settlement that took the form of isolated garrisons constructed as a defence against a difficult or hostile environment, Atwood argued that Canadian literature was a record of a people who were alienated from their environment and who, having existed in a colonial relationship first to England and then to America, had come to think of themselves as powerless victims. Although her reading of the Canadian literary tradition has been criticized as one-sided and subjective, this study proved popular and stimulated a valuable debate, in part because it seemed to many to reveal a previously unrecognized coherence in Canadian culture.

Survival also sheds light on Atwood's own work: her early fiction and poetry develop out of the tradition she describes and are intended as a corrective to it. ('This above all, to refuse to be a victim' is the final lesson learned by the protagonist of *Surfacing*.) In 1982 Atwood published *Second Words*, a large selection of reviews, lectures, and essays, some of which complement or comment on *Survival*. In moving towards the post-colonial society that Atwood desires, she assigns to the writer a special function:

*Frye's push towards naming, towards an intercon-
nected system, seems to me a Canadian reaction to
a Canadian situation. Stranded in the midst of a
vast space which nobody has made sense out of for
you, you settle down to map-making, charting the
territory, the discovery of where things are in rela-
tion to each other, the extraction of meaning.*
(‘Northrop Frye Observed’)

The publication in 1976 and 1977 of two compilations of earlier work, *Selected Poems* and *Dancing Girls* (her first collection of short stories), marked the end of a phase in Atwood's writing career. In her work since the late seventies—the poetry of *Two-Headed Poems* (1978), *True Stories* (1981), *Interlunar* (1984), and *Morning in the Burned House* (1995); the stories in *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) and *Wilderness Tips* (1991); and the novels *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000), which won the Booker Prize—Atwood does not abandon the concerns of her earlier writing, but she does employ a greater range of style and topics. She is by turns more lyrical and personal, and more satirical and political. For the first time, she portrays her family relationships in her poems (as in ‘Spelling’, or in the elegiac series of meditations on the death of her father in *Morning in the Burned House*), and she now finds comfort rather than conflict in human relationships. The characters in her novels are more fully drawn and more varied (in *Life Before Man* she uses a male viewpoint for the first time), while in a poem such as ‘Variation on the Word *Sleep*’ she can write without irony of a woman's love for a man.

At the same time politics assumes a new importance, one that allows her to engage in matters more specific than her previous large concerns about imperialism. *Two-Headed Poems* takes its title from a sequence about Canada's division between two cultures. (The title also recalls the preoccupation with doubleness and duality that runs through Atwood's work.) Elsewhere in that book, as well as the sequence in *True Stories* called ‘Notes Towards a Poem That Cannot Be Written’, Atwood, protesting against torture as an instrument of political repression, adopts a global perspective that

reflects her association with Amnesty International. The sense that Canada must now look beyond its own borders is also evident in *Bodily Harm*, a tale of a Canadian travel writer's naive involvement in a political coup in the Caribbean, and in *The Handmaid's Tale*, a futuristic dystopian fable about a repressive American society governed by right-wing religious fundamentalists. *The Handmaid's Tale* won Atwood a second Governor General's Award.

From the multiple viewpoints of *The Robber Bride* to the layered narrative structure of *The Blind Assassin*—which features excerpts from a work of science fiction within a novella within the novel—to the historical setting of *Alias Grace*, about the mid-nineteenth-century murder case of Grace Marks, Atwood's most recent novels demonstrate a wide range of concerns and narrative techniques, often coupled with greater movement across eras. In ‘The Age of Lead’, for example, she presents a complex ecological fable through elaborate counterpoint between the narrator's developing understanding of the past, which comes to her in the form of a television show about fate of the last Franklin Expedition (for details, see the headnote for John Franklin and Dr John Richardson), and her own social relationships. The explorations led by Franklin seem to the narrator to correspond to a larger drive in the Canadian psyche to go North, to find ‘somewhere, somewhere mapless, off into the unknown’, but the mapless future she finds herself venturing into holds unexpected terrors, because in it: ‘People were dying. They were dying too early.’

Until 1984, Atwood remained equally divided between her roles as poet and fiction writer. Since the 1986 publication of *Selected Poems II*, a volume that drew together poems from the previous ten years and new work, she has published only one further collection of poems. About an eighth of that 1986 book is made up of prose poetry (‘Strawberries’, below, is an example), an indication of Atwood's growing interest in this form—which abandons the poetic line while maintaining other qualities of the lyric poem. Her earlier collection, *Murder in the Dark* (1983), made up entirely of short prose pieces, was identified in its subtitle as ‘short fictions and prose poems’. Atwood's use of such ‘short fictions’ can be associated with

contemporary 'minimalist' writing, which seeks to reduce narrative to a few essentials. (*Murder in the Dark* was later published together with *Good Bones*, 1992—ironic recastings of traditional forms such as the parable, the monologue, and the fairy tale—as *Good Bones and Simple Murders*, 2001).

Atwood's most recent book, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), a moving set of meditations about the role of the writer, is based on the Empson Lectures she delivered at the University of Cambridge in 2000. From *Lady Oracle* to *The Blind Assassin*, writers have figured largely in her fiction, which often engages in metafictional and self-reflexive mirroring. In all her work—whether fiction,

non-fiction, or poetry—Atwood takes very seriously the writer's duty to society and the power of the written word. As a passage in *Murder in the Dark* suggests, writing is an act of great consequence, and so, therefore, is reading:

. . . Beneath the page is a story. Beneath the page is everything that has ever happened, most of which you would rather not hear about.

Touch the page at your peril: it is you who are blank and innocent, not the page. Nevertheless you want to know, nothing will stop you. You touch the page, it's as if you've drawn a knife across it, the page has been hurt now, a sinuous wound opens, a thin incision. Darkness wells through. ('The Page')

This is a Photograph of Me

It was taken some time ago.

At first it seems to be

a smeared

print: blurred lines and grey flecks

blended with the paper;

then, as you scan

it, you see in the left-hand corner

a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree

(balsam or spruce) emerging

and, to the right, halfway up

what ought to be a gentle

slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,

and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken

the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center

of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where

precisely, or to say

how large or small I am:
 the effect of water
 on light is a distortion
 but if you look long enough,
 eventually
 you will be able to see me.)

1966

Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer

i

He stood, a point
 on a sheet of green paper
 proclaiming himself the centre,

with no walls, no borders
 anywhere; the sky no height
 above him, totally un-
 enclosed
 and shouted:

Let me out!

ii

He dug the soil in rows,
 imposed himself with shovels.
 He asserted
 into the furrows, I
 am not random.

The ground
 replied with aphorisms:

a tree-sprout, a nameless
 weed, words
 he couldn't understand.

10

iii

The house pitched
the plot staked
in the middle of nowhere

20

At night the mind
inside, in the middle
of nowhere

The idea of an animal
patters across the roof.

In the darkness the fields
defend themselves with fences
in vain:

30

everything
is getting in.

iv

By daylight he resisted.
He said, disgusted
with the swamp's clamourings and the outbursts
of rocks.

This is not order
but the absence
of order

He was wrong, the unanswering
forest implied:

40

It was
an ordered absence

v

For many years
he fished for a great vision,
dangling the hooks of sown
roots under the surface
of the shallow earth.

It was like
enticing whales with a bent
pin. Besides he thought

50

in that country
only the worms were biting.

vi

If he had known unstructured
space is a deluge
and stocked his log house-
boat with all the animals

even the wolves,

he might have floated.

But obstinate he
stated, The land is solid
and stamped,

60

watching his foot sink
down through stone
up to the knee.

vii

Things
refused to name themselves; refused
to let him name them.

The wolves hunted
outside.

70

On his beaches, his clearings,
by the surf of under-
growth breaking
at his feet, he foresaw
disintegration
and in the end
through eyes

made ragged by his
 effort, the tension
 between subject and object,

80

the green
 vision, the unnamed
 whale invaded.

1968

From *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*¹

FROM JOURNAL 1, 1832-1840

Disembarking at Quebec

Is it my clothes, my way of walking,
 the things I carry in my hand
 —a book, a bag with knitting—
 the incongruous pink of my shawl

this space cannot hear

or is it my own lack
 of conviction which makes
 these vistas of desolation,
 long hills, the swamps, the barren sand, the glare
 of sun on the bone-white
 driftlogs, omens of winter,
 the moon alien in day-
 time a thin refusal

10

The others leap, shout

Freedom!²

¹ In this book Atwood uses the historical Susanna Moodie (1803-85) as the speaker in poems inspired by her two narratives of settlement, *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings* (1853). Most of the people and events alluded to in the poems reprinted here may be found in the selections from *Roughing It in the Bush*, pp. 94-122.

² In Chapter 2 of *Roughing It*, Moodie says she was 'not a little amused at the extravagant expectations entertained by some of our steerage passengers. . . . In spite of the remonstrances of the captain and the dread of the cholera, they all rushed on shore to inspect the land of Goshen, and to endeavour to realize their absurd anticipations.'

The moving water will not show me
my reflection.

The rocks ignore.

I am a word
in a foreign language.

20

Further Arrivals

After we had crossed the long illness
that was the ocean, we sailed up-river

On the first island
the immigrants threw off their clothes
and danced like sandflies¹

We left behind one by one
the cities rotting with cholera,
one by one our civilized
distinctions

and entered a large darkness.

10

It was our own
ignorance we entered.

I have not come out yet

My brain gropes nervous
tentacles in the night, sends out
fears hairy as bears,
demands lamps; or waiting

1 In the first chapter of *Roughing It* the Moodies visited Grosse Isle for an afternoon while their ship stood off shore following an inspection by health officers (Quebec was then experiencing a cholera epidemic): 'Never shall I forget the extraordinary spectacle that met our sight. . . . A crowd of many hundred Irish emigrants had been landed . . . and all this motley crew—men, women, and children— . . . were employed in washing clothes. . . . The men and boys were in the water, while the women, with their scanty garments tucked above their knees, were tramping their bedding in tubs or in holes in the rocks. Those [not washing] were running to and fro, screaming and scolding in no measured terms . . . all accompanying their vociferations with violent and extraordinary gestures, quite incomprehensible to the uninitiated.'

for my shadowy husband, hears
malice in the trees' whispers.

I need wolf's eyes to see
the truth.

I refuse to look in a mirror.

Whether the wilderness is
real or not
depends on who lives there.

20

FROM JOURNAL II, 1840-1871

Death of a Young Son by Drowning

He, who navigated with success
the dangerous river of his own birth
once more set forth

on a voyage of discovery
into the land I floated on
but could not touch to claim.

His feet slid on the bank,
the currents took him;
he swirled with ice and trees in the swollen water

and plunged into distant regions,
his head a bathysphere;
through his eyes' thin glass bubbles

10

he looked out, reckless adventurer
on a landscape stranger than Uranus
we have all been to and some remember.

There was an accident; the air locked,
he was hung in the river like a heart.
They retrieved the swamped body,

cairn of my plans and future charts,
with poles and hooks
from among the nudging logs.

20

It was spring, the sun kept shining, the new grass
lept to solidity;
my hands glistened with details.

After the long trip I was tired of waves.
My foot hit rock. The dreamed sails
collapsed, ragged.

I planted him in this country
like a flag.

Dream 2: Brian the Still-Hunter¹

The man I saw in the forest
used to come to our house
every morning, never said anything;
I learned from the neighbours later
he once tried to cut his throat.

I found him at the end of the path
sitting on a fallen tree
cleaning his gun.

There was no wind;
around us the leaves rustled.

10

He said to me:
I kill because I have to

but every time I aim, I feel
my skin grow fur
my head heavy with antlers
and during the stretched instant
the bullet glides on its thread of speed
my soul runs innocent as hooves.

1 A 'still-hunter' is one who hunts stealthily on foot. In Chapter 10 of *Roughing It* Moodie describes her friendship with Brian, a man once subject to such fits of depression that he had tried to commit suicide. Brian tells her a vivid story of watching a 'noble deer' pulled down by a pack of wolves, concluding:

At that moment he seemed more unfortunate even than myself, for I could not see in what manner he had deserved his fate. All his speed and energy, his courage and fortitude, had been exerted in vain. I had tried to destroy myself; but he, with every effort vigorously made for self-preservation, was doomed to meet the fate he dreaded! Is God just to his creatures?

Moodie ends the chapter by saying:

We parted with the hunter as an old friend; and we never met again. His fate was a sad one. After we left that part of the country, he fell into a moping melancholy, which ended in self-destruction.

Is God just to his creatures?

I die more often than many.

20

He looked up and I saw
the white scar made by the hunting knife
around his neck.

When I woke
I remembered: he has been gone
twenty years and not heard from.

FROM JOURNAL III, 1871-1969

Thoughts from Underground¹

When I first reached this country
I hated it
and I hated it more each year:

in summer the light a
violent blur, the heat
thick as a swamp,
the green things fiercely
shoving themselves upwards, the
eyelids bitten by insects

In winter our teeth were brittle
with cold. We fed on squirrels.
At night the house cracked.
In the mornings, we thawed
the bad bread over the stove.

10

Then we were made successful
and I felt I ought to love
this country.

I said I loved it
and my mind saw double.

¹ This poem is spoken by Moodie after her death.

I began to forget myself
in the middle
of sentences. Events
were split apart

I fought. I constructed
desperate paragraphs of praise, everyone
ought to love it because

and set them up at intervals

due to natural resources, native industry, superior
penitentiaries
we will all be rich and powerful

30

flat as highway billboards

who can doubt it, look how
fast Belleville is growing

(though it is still no place for an english gentleman)

1970

Tricks with Mirrors

i

It's no coincidence
this is a used
furniture warehouse.

I enter with you
and become a mirror.

Mirrors
are the perfect lovers,

that's it, carry me up the stairs
by the edges, don't drop me,

A New Anthology of

Canadian Literature

in English

Edited by

Donna Bennett

Russell Brown

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

70 Wynford Drive, Don Mills, Ontario M3C 1J9
www.oup.com/ca

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in Canada
by Oxford University Press

Copyright © Oxford University Press Canada 2002

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2002

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,
Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Since this page cannot accommodate all the copyright notices, pages ii71-5
constitute an extension of the copyright page.

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

A new anthology of Canadian literature in English / Donna Bennett, Russell Brown, editors

Previous eds published under title: An anthology of Canadian literature in English.

Includes index.

ISBN-10: 0-19-541687-2 ISBN-13: 978-0-19-541687-9

1. Canadian literature (English). I. Bennett, Donna, 1945- II. Brown, Russell, 1942-

III. Title: An anthology of Canadian literature in English.

PS8233.N48 2002 C810.8 C2002-901471-9

PR9194.4.N48 2002

Cover and text design: Brett Miller

8 9 10 11 — 10 09 08 07

This book is printed on permanent (acid-free) paper ♻.

Printed in Canada