

## INTERVIEW

## Margaret Atwood: Giantess of the literary world

Atwood has had a busy year. The furor following the publication of her fall 2000 novel, *The Blind Assassin*, has been intense. A bestseller in many countries almost before it hit the stores, international reviews for *The Blind Assassin* were almost unanimously fawning. A week before our interview, the novel won England's Booker Prize, one of the most coveted literary prizes in the world and an award for which three of Atwood's previous novels had been nominated: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* and *Alias Grace*.

Confident and beautiful at 61, Atwood meets our camera head on. "Enough of that," she says to our photographer cheerfully, after too long in one pose. "Now we're going to try this," and she curls her legs under her lithely and elegantly and smiles for the camera.

those years of original storytelling in all of the mediums that Atwood has chosen: fiction, non-fiction, literary essay and review and, of course, poetry, for which she is also renowned. *The Blind Assassin* is a multilayered mosaic of a novel that reaches epic proportions in its dealings with human relationships and understanding. The main narrator in *The Blind Assassin* is Iris Chase Griffen, a woman near the end of her life madly trying to capture her own story before it's too late.

We met with Atwood in her hotel suite in Vancouver where she was in town doing a special event for the Vancouver Writer's Festival. She was keen to talk about her muse, her craft and the road that has led her to become one of the most celebrated and admired authors in the world. Interviewed by Linda Richards



Finally, with the motor drive is still pounding away, she turns, smiles brightly and says, "Ta da!" which the photographer understands to mean, "We have completed this portion of our program." She has said it lightly, as though making a happy remark, but she's also sprung to her feet and refocused her attention on me. Gentle, yet firm and sure. No feelings are hurt, but she has achieved what she desired. Confident and assured: Atwood at her very best and, in many ways, just the Atwood we've come to love through her work.

"Are you finished with the interview?" asks her assistant. And while I'm about to answer in the affirmative, Atwood interjects. "No. We're going to talk a bit longer." And what interviewer would argue with that?

She tells me that she feels we haven't talked enough about the current book. "Everyone has been talking about the book," I tell her. "I wanted to talk about you."

So she tells me a story about the book. The sort of story that won't have gotten lots of ink yet, because it happened late in *The Blind Assassin's* publishing history. Something that is useful to me because no one has said much about it yet and it's different and interesting and it makes a good story. And if there's one thing Atwood understands, it's the making of a good story.

Sometimes it's hard to imagine a literary world without Margaret Atwood in it. Sometimes it's difficult to think of a time when her name was not only a household word, but also one that was shrouded in the exotic mystery that goes with something absolutely new and therefore somewhat dangerous. From the time of the publication of her first novel, *The Edible Woman* in 1969, Atwood's voice was strong, clear and different.

She had invented herself not only as a writer, but as a writer that wanted to tell her stories in her own way. There was really little choice. As she says now, when she first got the idea she wanted to be a writer "there were no living role models," for a young Canadian woman. In many ways, *The Blind Assassin* feels like the culmination of all of

Linda Richards: I didn't realize until recently that you were a Radcliffe girl.

Margaret Atwood: Well, sort of. Not really. Here's what happened. I went to graduate school at Harvard in 1961. At that point in time the Radcliffe graduate school was still separate from the Harvard graduate school, although the classes were all the same. That very year they amalgamated so, technically, I have my A.M. from Radcliffe but it was the same as Harvard and the next year it become officially Harvard. Then I went to Harvard for three more years. Radcliffe remained the women's undergraduate college, but the graduate schools amalgamated. So, technically, that's true. But in actual fact, there wasn't any difference.

You've been very fortunate and this has been a wonderful year, but seeing your CV made me think about something I always say: 90 per cent of good luck or good fortune is hard work. And you've really done the work in so many ways. That's part of it. It seems as though you really were setting up for this amazing career.

[Laughs] I think the hardest work as a student that I ever did was writing the grade 13 exams in Ontario in 1957. I don't think it's the same anymore, but at that time they were province-wide exams. They were marked blind. Nothing you had done during the year counted. It was just make or break: one exam. And they were all held within a period of about two weeks in the high school gym which had no air conditioning and it was just unbelievably. On that depended whether you went to university, what university you went to: all of these things. I was so pressured. I kept a jar of Noxema in the freezer. I used to come home and take it out and rub this frozen Noxema all over my face to clear my mind and then get hard at it studying again. I wrote two more exams than the number actually needed because I didn't think my Latin marks were going to be that good. Latin too?

Oh, you had to have Latin to get into Honors English then. That was just as well because my science marks were actually very good. [Laughs]

The top of all of my marks were in botany and zoology. And in those days they took marks off for spelling. They took half a mark off for each spelling mistake and I was always a speller by ear.

So you're a good speller or you're not a good speller?

I was not a good speller. I'm a better speller now, but I'm still [shrugs]. A lot of writers are like that. They hear words but they don't necessarily see them. I wasn't an atrocious speller, but I made enough mistakes that it took my mark down.

It's funny, though, because people associate the whole spelling thing with writing so much. When I was a kid, my mom would say: How can you be a writer if your spelling is so bad? And she didn't really understand that the two weren't related.

My mother said: If you want to be a writer, maybe you should learn to spell. [Laughs] And I said: Others will do that for me. And they do. Either it's the real person editor, or it's the little man hiding in the computer who comes out and waves his hands at you and underlines your things with squiggly lines.

Did you always know you wanted to be a writer? No, I didn't. I knew from the age of 16, but before that, no. I did write the way most children write. As quite a young child I wrote. But then I didn't. For years. I had no interest in it. I read a lot, but I never thought I would be a writer. From about the ages of, say, seven to 16. I had other interests. At 16 I just started writing. Don't ask me why. I don't know. Looking back, you could say I always read. I always read a lot. I read voraciously. But I did not in my mind translate that voracious reading into writing.

And you were attacked by the muse at 16?

[Laughs] My own version is that a big thumb came out of the sky and said: You. And everybody at that time, which was 1956 in Toronto, Ontario — which was not the multicultural metropolis that it is today, but was a rather provincial limited town. And I was at what was as the most boring high school in the city. Although it was quite a good high school, but it was not pulsating with creative energy of that kind. Everyone thought I was a bit crazy.

For wanting to be a writer?

Well, apparently I was rash enough to actually say, in the high school cafeteria to my group of friends, that I was going to be a writer. Says one of my high school friends who told me this. I don't remember, but she said that we were all eating our little bag lunches with our packed sandwiches and apples and apparently I said this.

They all pictured you in a beret and...

They all thought I was completely berserk. It wasn't even berets: nobody had a clue. We only took dead people. And usually dead English people. A few dead American people. So as far as anybody knew, there only was one Canadian writer and that was Stephen Leacock. And I still don't know why I did that.

And then you aligned your life for that.

Then I aligned my life to it. Once I was converted, once I'd had this conversion experience in the football field — there wasn't a game going on at the time. [Laughs] It was just the way I used to walk home. Once that had happened, I did try to arrange my life to make that possible.

And you did.

And I did. But it wasn't always terrifically easy, because there was no obvious thing to do. There were no creative writing schools that I knew about at that time. It was very early days.

And role models?

Well, there were no living role models. Luckily, we did study the English curriculum and therefore I knew there were such people as Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot. Then I got hold of modern short stories and there was Katherine Anne Porter. There were people and there were female poets that I We took Elizabeth Barrett Browning for instance. None of them were contemporary, but that was the way of the school curriculum most of the time.

Is that something you have an awareness of now?

That there was such a dearth of role models then and the fact that you are a role model for many young writers now.

Yeah. It's a bit heavy. [Laughs] I never wanted to be a role model because role models, when I went to this very Radcliffe/Harvard of which you speak, that term had just come in. And what it really meant was that you had to dress in suits, with a little feminine touch [indicates perhaps a scarf at the throat] to show that you were a girl. You had to have nice manners and you had to have a service mentality. I mean, they're all very good things, but not very useful from writers, if you see what I mean.

Not very useful for living, maybe.

Well, I think they're fine for living if you wanted to be a dean in a university and be an example to young people. I didn't see what I was doing as necessarily what other people ought to do in order to live a proper sort of life.

And now?

I wouldn't necessarily tell people that they should pursue a career in writing if they want a pension

and a guaranteed income. It's a risk. It's a risk for anybody who takes it up. It's not a job with a pension plan, a boss and a guaranteed income and raises. It doesn't go like that.

And your "overnight success" has come with considerable hard work.

My overnight success did not come over night! [Laughs] I wrote for 16 years before I could make a living out of it. So, day jobs and being a student and getting scholarships and being the cashier behind the coffee shop soda counter.

And university appointments. I know you had some of those.

Yes. That was a bit later. My first academic job was in Vancouver [1964-65]. I was pretty low down on the totem pole. I taught those courses that higher up people didn't want to teach, such as grammar to engineering students at 8:30 in the morning. [Laughs] We got on fine. We were all quite asleep. And Chaucer to T.S. Eliot courses and then I went back for a couple more years of Harvard, finished all my course requirements and did my orals and then I taught at Sir George Williams [University] which was then in Montreal and I taught my two academic specialties which were Victorian Literature and American Romantics. That was fun: I enjoyed that year. And I lost a lot of weight: why was that? I basically wasn't eating very much because I was teaching these two courses in the daytime and then I was teaching them again at night. To young people in the day and to returning students in the evenings. At the same time I was revising *The Edible Woman* for publication and putting together *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and doing both the cooking and shopping, because by that time I was married. So I was drinking too much coffee. I got quite thin. I went down to a sort of Twiggy shape: around 102 [pounds] which was not much. Don't worry, I was not an anorexic.

I wasn't even thinking that. I know about being busy and forgetting to eat.

I didn't forget about it. [Laughs] I didn't have time. I was burning more calories than I was taking in. That will always cause you to lose weight.

When was that?

That would have been 1967-8.

And your last teaching appointment was in Texas?

In 1989? Texas? Oh, those are little writer-in-residence things that you go for maybe a couple of weeks. Just for fun.

But my last full-time teaching appointment was 1971 at York University and since that time I've not done a full-time teaching appointment.

When I looked over your bio and it mentioned that [Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas] was in 1989 and I realized that you produced a tremendous amount of work in the 1990s. 1995 in particular.

What did I do then? The children's book, *Princess Prunella* and the *Purple Peanut*... But that had basically been written before. But a lot of stuff came out in 1995. And *Alias Grace* came out in 1996. And *Strange Things*... Was a book of lectures I had done at Oxford. And *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories* in English...

But that's not something you write. It's something you put together.

But there's still work involved. It's work, yeah.

The 1990s just seemed like you had so much going on.

I had a lot going on, but I always seem to me to have a lot going on. It wasn't more. I think probably it was harder when I was either a full-time student and writing or had a full-time job and was writing. Now that's busy. I had a market research job, I wrote my first novel and it didn't get published. That would be 1963. I was very busy then.

Kids in there someplace too.

1976: that was much later. Anyway, my CV is very tangled and hard to follow because I moved so much and had so many different jobs and worked in so many different cities. And that was just availability of work, it wasn't because I thought: Oh, now I'll go to Montreal, now I'll go to Edmonton. That's where the jobs were.

Which is what CVs are like though, isn't it?

Because you look at them and go: Oh, it was all well thought out and she was making all of these plans.

Anyway, that's what it was like. Hither and yon. And then in 1972 I was writer-in-residence at U of T [the University of Toronto] and it was at the end of that year that I moved to the country and from that time on I made a living from writing. One way or another.

[Laughs] The one way was doing the writing and the other ways were doing a lot of little readings here and there — for which I did not get paid as much as I would get paid for an event nowadays — and writing television scripts and writing scripts for films that never got produced and doing those sorts of things. So it was writing and then it was job work.

Are you working on anything now?

Yes. In April/May of this year — which is the year 2000 — I gave a series of six lectures at Cambridge University in England. They were the William Empson Lectures, named after the man

who wrote *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. While he was writing *Seven Types of Ambiguity* he got expelled from Cambridge University for being found to have contraceptives in his room. So I was happy to give the William Empson Lectures in honor of this man who had been so thoughtful and filled with foresight. Because nowadays you'd be kicked out for not having contraceptives in your room. [Laughs]

He was a man of the future. I gave the six lectures and then part of it is that you turn them into a book and Cambridge University Press publishes it. That sort of book: non-fiction, non-poetry.

And what is its title? Its title is *Negotiating With the Dead*. And what is its theme? Its theme is writing. Not how to write, not my writing, but what are writers doing? How is what they do unlike painting, dancing, singing, being in movies, all of those things? What is it that all writers, no matter what they write, have in common? Simply as writers. And you'll find these answers when this book appears. [Laughs]

Oh come on. Tell me one thing.

One thing. Well, let's see now. OK, I'll tell you one thing that I put in the book which is: I went around asking writers the following question — and these were mostly novelists. What is it like when you go into a novel? And nobody said: What do you mean, go into a novel? They all said: It's dark. It's like a dark room. It's like a dark room full of furniture I can't see. It's like a tunnel. It's like a cave. It's like going downstairs into a dark place. It's like wading through a river. It's like entering a labyrinth. Isn't that interesting?

Yes!

Nobody said: It's like skippy-hopping around on the clouds. Nobody said that.

Do you concur? Is it like that?

Yeah. It's dark. What I'm reminded of is my friend Henry Singer who was a medical student and who I knew in the late 1950s. And he said: The thing about being a doctor, he said, it's dark in there. [Laughs] Well that's the same thing about being a writer. It's dark in there.

I saw a sign once that sort of summed up life in general. It said: This is a dark ride.

Yes, but with writing it's not a ride. You're on foot.

[Laughs] I think it was Virginia Woolf who said: Writing a novel is like walking through a dark room with a lamp and the light from the lamp illuminates all of the things that were always there already. She said something like that, I'd have to look up the exact quote.

I love the title: *Negotiating With the Dead*. Great title.

I thought so. And why is it *Negotiating With the Dead*? Well, because it's the last chapter, so I won't tell you. But it has to do with the fact that it's dark in there.

I thought the influence of dead writers.

Well, that too. But also, what do writers do? How does that make them different from singers and dancers? Well, one thing is that by the time the reader is reading, the writer is nowhere. The



writer isn't actually there. Only the book is there. Whereas with a singer or a dancer, the audience is present. With a traditional storyteller, the audience is present.

Somebody speaks the story. The audience is right there listening. But if you write the story a whole different relationship is established. However, I'm not going to do that book for you right here, there's no point to that. People can't read it yet. Writing is obviously something you've thought about a lot. And it comes up in your work. Well, in *The Blind Assassin*, Iris is a writer...

Yes, in several ways, but we're not going to talk about the end. But she begins by writing the story of her life. She has a few things to get out of her steamer trunk. Or people say: Get out your chest.

When in fact they should say: Get out of your chest, because they're usually things that are packed away. We say: *Baggage*. [Laughs] So, she has some of that to unpack and she is in a race against time as to whether she will actually work her way around to telling what she did and not before she tumbles over. Unpacking her bags, yeah. Well, there's that steamer trunk sitting in her kitchen.

Congratulations on the Booker!

Thank you.

Let me be among the first thousand people to congratulate you. And I think your country is proud of you, as well.

Well, I think my country was somewhat relieved. So they wouldn't have to go through this again. [Laughs] I think most of my country was pleased or else relieved. And about three people in my country were very pissed off.

You said you have an interesting story about the cover of *The Blind Assassin*.

Well, the cover: We were looking and looking for art deco images and stuff like that. We couldn't find anything that wasn't a bas relief or something that really wouldn't have worked too well. [My assistant] Sara said: Look at ads. So the English asking writers the following question — and these were mostly novelists. What is it like when you go into a novel? And nobody said: What do you mean, go into a novel? They all said: It's dark. It's like a dark room. It's like a dark room full of furniture I can't see. It's like a tunnel. It's like a cave. It's like going downstairs into a dark place. It's like wading through a river. It's like entering a labyrinth. Isn't that interesting?

Yes!

Nobody said: It's like skippy-hopping around on the clouds. Nobody said that.

Do you imagine her surprise!

She was thrilled. Really. She said: Now my mother is eternal. It was very sweet. There's a Web site for the novel itself in which you can see all of the different international covers. All of which use that image, but they all use a different design for it. The Latvian isn't like that, but the others all use that image. I loved *The Blind Assassin*. And I loved the four stories that are actually one story. I couldn't even contemplate the logistics of writing this book.

There's so much that you had to make work together.

That's true. On the other hand, step back from it and it's really quite simple. All of the stories rotate around the same central story. And they all unwrap to reveal their contents, as it were.

It worked very well. And it struck me as your most mature work to date. Not to say that any of your work has been immature, but it struck me as an evolution of your work.

That is in fact what a number of people have said, so that is very nice to hear. And it is also the only book I've written in which the narrator dies at the end.

You've given it away!

No, but it's true. It's the only one about sisters and it's the only one in which the narrator is no longer with us at the end.

In a way, that's not the biggest surprise at the end. She's old and she's moving towards that.

[Nods] You can see it coming.

But, is it significant that she's the only dead narrator?

I think it's significant to me.

Why is that?

Well, you could say that you're not at the end but you can see the end up ahead. The end is in view.

Iris is looking at it through most of the book.

No, I mean it's significant to me because at the age I am now the end is not yet, but you can see the end.

You can see that there will be an end.

See, I missed that entirely, because I wouldn't have thought of you that way at all. You're 60?

Sixty-one on November 18th. I was born in 1939, in November. Which means that I'm always the age of the last two digits of the year, until November, when I change to the next digit. And then I'm that digit, all the way around until the next November. Usually people think I'm a year older than I am. So: 1939 and they count and they think I'm already 61. So I always know how old I am because I just think: What year are we in?

So you feel like you're dealing with not always being around?

Well, mortality is creeping up little by little. And I must say I don't really wish to live to be 100. Unless I was in tip-top health. If I was in tip-top health it wouldn't be so bad but, even so, all of your friends would be dead. Not a lot of fun. Iris [in *The Blind Assassin*] is her own heap of rubble. [Laughs]

And she's a writer.

Yeah. That's true. Gives you a little shiver up your spine, doesn't it?

Linda Richards is editor of January Magazine.

## POEMS

## Poems of Shamsur Rahman

## As I Cannot Forget

As I cannot forget I visit the same place again and again and I spread there a few pollens of my heart.

Particles of memory fly hither and thither  
I remember, I told her five years back  
Just here, in the same place in an anxious voice I have crossed the vast barren fields  
And reached this landing for you only.  
Right now the sun will cease to shine as old age bloats life.  
Birds returning to nests form a grey necklace and remind me many times from the smoked sky  
"You have very little of your time."  
I look at the eventide with my indifferent eyes  
you are quickly declining as the dusk declines  
you are absorbed in a game with soul,  
I know you will come out of this illusion in no time.

I dreamt of a unique landing, but now I am sitting on an odd one  
Nightmares encircle me from all around.

Someone weeps not too far from here and  
wall that his entire paddy has been burnt  
One moonstruck poet reproaches me saying that  
I worshipped her with flowers five years ago  
and later on got withdrawn to remain busy in meetings and processions.

Does it really suit a poet?  
  
I reply, I am not very far away, only a little apart.  
I have vested my poems with the rights to squeeze  
my bones and marrow everyday and  
bestow all glories on her.

## In the Land of Sub-consciousness

Are the clusters of flowers in full bloom  
in his land of sub-consciousness?  
The man cannot make out at all when evening falls upon the land.  
Complexities grow and he roams in darkness like a blind man  
sometimes to his right and sometimes to his left.

A bison of fear chases him from his right  
he does not understand.

When dark cloud gathers in the sky  
and when there is a report of slaughter  
in the street in the broad daylight  
or when there is a disorder he takes himself to be the offender and  
falls prey to a disease that he caters in mind.  
Especially the night appears putting on a face of danger  
walls around him advance and grin their sharpened teeth  
and claws aimed at him.  
Hours of sleeplessness suffocate him and  
he finds death to be a great ally.  
Sometimes there appears under the shadow of sub-consciousness  
a garden that enchants him.  
Illusive hands approach him with incomparable entwining fingers.

The sun bites and inflicts pain on him  
An ointment of moonshine takes the burning away  
When he lies down on the grasses

to watch the conference of stars.  
Stories of olden days come out in bubbles  
to mingle into the grey storehouse of engrossed memories.

Dusts fly around for a while and an outline of face  
comes out a hundred faces and  
gets thickened to grow into his own heart.  
In the moment next, an uncontrollable mongoose  
starts agitation in his mind.  
The man gets terribly scared and covers his face  
Sometimes he looks through his fingers, fear trembles,  
many scary things may appear right now.  
Suddenly he eyes on an unfortunate dead body  
Floating in the pale light of the moon.  
Whose corpse is this?  
He imagines the unfortunate man  
whose name will never be known.  
Or is it his own dead body?

Translated by Andalib Rashdie