

MARGARET ATWOOD

AN END TO AN AUDIENCE?

Margaret Atwood (1939-) was born in Ottawa, Canada. She earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto in 1961 and a master's degree from Radcliffe College in 1962. In the following decade she published a series of poetry collections, including *The Circle Game* (1964, winner of the Governor General's Award), *Talismans for Children* (1965), and *The Animals in That Country* (1968), as well as the novel *The Edible Woman* (1969). She became a full-time writer in 1972 and continued to publish poetry as well as the novels *Surfacing* (1973), *Lady Oracle* (1976), and *Life Before Man* (1980). The following excerpt is from a talk given at Dalhousie University in October 1980, which was published in the autumn 1980 issue and included in the collection *Second Words* (1982).

WRITER AND AUDIENCE ARE SIAMESE TWINS. Kill one and you run the risk of killing the other. Try to separate them, and you may simply have two dead half-people. By "audience," I don't necessarily mean a mass audience. People still write in Russia; many of them write the forbidden. It has always been one function of the artist to speak the forbidden, to speak out, especially in times of political repression. People risk imprisonment and torture because they know there are other people who are hungry for what they have to say. Inhabitants of concentration camps during the second world war jeopardized their already slim chances of survival by keeping diaries; why? Because there was a story that they felt impelled to tell, that they felt the rest of us *had* to know. Amnesty International today works the same way: all it does is tell stories. It makes *the story* known. Such stories have a moral force, a moral authority which is undeniable. The book of Job begins with a series of catastrophes, but for each there is a survivor. Storytelling at its most drastic is the story of the disaster which is the world; it is done by Job's messengers, whom God saved alive because someone had to tell

the story. *I only am escaped alone to tell thee*. When a story, “true” or not, begins like this, we must listen.

But such stories are being silenced all over the world. The countries with most writers in jail are Russia and Argentina. That doesn’t mean that these countries treat writers the worst. At least the writers are in jail. In some other countries they are merely dead. El Salvador no longer possesses any poets not in exile. The rest have been murdered.

In any totalitarian takeover, whether from the left or the right, writers, singers, and journalists are the first to be suppressed. After that come the union leaders and the lawyers and judges. The aim of all such suppression is to silence *the voice*, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power; that’s why so much trouble is taken to silence it.

Nothing to worry about here, you say. We live in a free society. Anyone can say anything. The word is not an issue here; you don’t get killed for social and political criticism, and anyway novels and poetry are just a few artists *expressing themselves*. Nobody takes them seriously. It won’t happen here.

Well, perhaps. But there’s more than one way to skin a cat. Let us take a brief look at what is happening to publishing in this country, in fact in the entire Western world, at this very moment.

First, we are witnessing a fragmentation of the audience on an unprecedented scale. The fragmentation of the audience has to do partly with changes in publishing. Huge popular bestsellers are being bought for enormous sums, and the paperback rights sold for even more enormous sums. This means that vast amounts of money are invested in such books, and vast amounts must be used to promote them; otherwise the investors will not make their money back. Less money is available for other purposes, and the middle-range serious work of fiction is being squeezed right out of the market. Difficult and “experimental” works have already found a place with small literary presses; but the readership for such books is tiny.

In addition, chain bookstores are controlling more and more of the book business. In the States it’s forty percent, in Canada I believe it approaches sixty. If the trend continues, the smaller independent bookstores, who have traditionally supported serious fiction and poetry, are going to go belly-up in increasing numbers. The result will be that the chains will have a virtual monopoly on what gets published. In fact, it’s likely that publishers

will have to have a guarantee from the chains that they'll carry a book before even agreeing to publish it. What that means for prospective authors is that they'll either have to write *Jaws* or it'll be back to the mimeo machine in the cellar, which is where we all started out in this country twenty years ago.

Should this happen, the concept of "authorship" as we've come to know it may very well become obsolete. Already, south of the border, books are increasingly thought of, not as books, but as "entertainment packages." Someone gets an idea and a team is hired to put it together: movie, paperback, foreign sales, t-shirts, the works. The author is not called an author but an "element." Well, what's so bad about that, you may ask? Isn't that how the medieval mystery plays were written, and won't such team-created articles give us a more typical, a truer version of society than one made by just a single writer? Isn't that maybe more *collective*?

After all, the individual "author" has been with us only for a few hundred years. Before that, art was always made by the community. Maybe we should view these entertainment packages, in which the writer is only "an element," as sort of like primitive folk art? Maybe, but in the days of the oral tradition, poetry and storytelling was used not only for entertainment. They were used to preserve the history of the tribe, to impart wisdom, to summon and propitiate the gods. I am not sure that *Princess Daisy* does very many of those things.

Then there's the problem of distribution. The serious reading audience may still exist, though if it can't get the kind of books it wants it may simply fade out as we enter the post-literate age. In the competition for larger and larger amounts of money, the literate audience too will suffer.

This aspect of the problem has special application to Canada, for the following reason. Much bookstore ordering is now done through computer terminals, all of which are located in the United States. It takes eight weeks for a store in the Canadian West to receive an ordered book through the current, non-computerized Canadian system. It takes a few days to get one by computer. If you were a bookstore owner, wouldn't you opt for a high turnover of easily-ordered books, rather than going to a lot of trouble for Canadian books that arrive well after the time you could have used them? Unless Canadians find a way of keying into or circumventing this system, *all* Canadian books will soon be back in the cellar with the mimeo machine. The only way you'll be able to buy them is by mail order.

And even then, you may find them limited in scope. I've implied that the

writer functions in his or her society as a kind of soothsayer, a truth teller; that writing is not mere self-expression but a view of society and the world at large, and that the novel is a moral instrument. *Moral* implies political, and traditionally the novel has been used not only as a vehicle for social commentary but as a vehicle for political commentary as well. The novelist, at any rate, still sees a connection between politics and the moral sense, even if politicians gave that up some time ago. By “political” I mean having to do with power: who’s got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who’s allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how.

But we’re facing these days an increasing pressure on the novel. I’ll be careful when I use the word “censorship,” because real censorship stops a book before it’s even been published. Let us say “suppression.” The suppression is of two kinds. One has to do with the yanking of books out of schools and libraries, and is usually motivated by religious objections to depictions of sexual activity. I happen to find this stance pornographic, for the following reason. Pornography is a presentation of sex in isolation from the matrix which surrounds it in real life; it is therefore exaggerated, distorted, and untrue. To select the sexual bits from a novel like *The Diviners* and to discard the rest is simply to duplicate what pornographers themselves are doing. It would take a very salacious mind indeed to find *The Diviners*, or indeed the works by Alice Munro, myself, and others that have been put through this particular centrifuge, unduly arousing. You have to wade through too much other stuff. Literary writers are easy targets; they don’t shoot off your kneecaps. It’s a lot safer to villify them than it is to take on the real pornographers. . . .

The other kind of suppression is semi-political and is, in my view, more dangerous. There are two cases before the courts right now on which I can’t comment. Suffice it to say that if the plaintiffs win them the effect will be to scare publishers away from anything with serious political comment. In fact these cases, although they have not yet been decided, are already having this effect. The novel takes as its province the whole of life. Removal of the right to comment on politics will gut it.

If you think Canada is really a country dedicated to democracy and the principle of free speech, remember the War Measures Act. Remember the letters to the editor. Remember how few people spoke out. We are a timorous country, and we do tend to believe that what those in authority do

must, somehow, be justified.

What we're facing, then, is a literary world split between huge entertainment-package blockbusters written by "elements" and deemed both money-making and politically innocuous by the powers that be, and a kind of publishing underground to which the rest of us will be banished. The literary audience, which has never been a mass one, will either content itself with the literary equivalent of Muzak—writing to suck your thumb by—or it will stop reading altogether. Some bright soul will put together a mail-order operation, perhaps. As for the writers, they will either become "elements" or they will fulfill my nightmares about the creative writing students. They will stop writing for readers *out there* and write only for readers *in here*, cozy members of an in-group composed largely of other writers and split into factions or "schools" depending on who your friends are and whether you spell I with a capital I or a small one. This tendency will merely support the average serious reader's impression that such writing has nothing to say to *him*. This is already happening to poetry, though in Canada, which as we all know is a cultural backwater, it hasn't happened quite as thoroughly yet.

You may have thought I was going to say something about Canadian novels, and how we all ought to read them because, although nasty-tasting, they are good for us because they tell us about ourselves. I didn't do that because I think the problem is far larger than Canada; although the trends I've outlined will be reflected in Canada too, if they continue unchecked. Of course in entertainment packages it doesn't matter a hoot whether the "element" is Canadian or not, and the citizenship of great white sharks is irrelevant. But in serious literature there is always a voice, and there is no such thing as a voice without a language and without an accent. All true namings have an accent, and accents are local. This does not make their naming of the world less true, however, but more true. Those who have maintained over the years that "Canadian" and "universal" are mutually exclusive may soon find themselves proved right, because the only universal things around are going to be entertainment packages, and you can bet your bottom dollar they won't be Canadian.

If you doubt what I say, take a look at the current state of criticism, both in this country and elsewhere in the Western world. The critic is that curious creature, a reader-writer, and he reflects trends even more accurately than *Toronto Life*. In his popular form he's supposed to function as a kind of stand-in for the average, intelligent reader, or so I was told at school.

He's supposed to keep us informed about what's going on in writing, what writers are producing, and what effect these productions had on him as a reasonably experienced reader. Once upon a time in Canada, criticism was either non-existent or serious, because there were very few Canadian books and very few people read them, and those who did and cared enough to take the time to write about them were dedicated souls. In fact, twenty years ago it would not have been an exaggeration to say that the level of criticism was quite far above what was being criticized. Now we have both popular and academic critics. Popular book criticism takes place in the back rows of something called the entertainment section. Too frequently, entertainment editors try to match books up with reviewers who are guaranteed to hate them, because a peevish view filled with witticisms at the writers' expense is thought to amuse the readership and increase circulation. Snide gossip and tittle-tattle have become regular features of such entertainment sections. As for the academic community, that segment of it that concerns itself with Canadian writing, it's heavily into metonymy and synecdoche, but they don't have a lot to do with what writing is about, unless you stop at the craft and don't bother at all with the vocation or the art.

A country or a community which does not take serious literature seriously will lose it. So what? say the Members of Parliament, the same ones who object to the creeps in long underwear. *All we want is a good read. A murder mystery, a spy thriller, something that keeps you turning the pages. I don't have the time to read anyway.*

Well, try this. It could well be argued that the advent of the printed word coincided with the advent of democracy as we know it; that the book is the only form that allows the reader not only to participate but to review, to re-view what's being presented. With a book, you can turn back the pages. You can't do that with a television set. Can democracy function at all without a literate public, one with a moral sense and well-developed critical faculties? Can democracy run on entertainment packages alone?

And in whose interest is it that participatory democracy continue to function anyway, even in the imperfect way that it does? Not that of governments, which would like to see a combination of bureaucracy and oligarchy, with the emphasis on the bureaucracy. Not that of big business, which would like a quiescent labour market stuffed to senility with entertainment packages. Canada could easily pass legislation that would protect the book industry we now so tenuously have. Quotas on paperback racks, like the

radio quotas that have done so well for the record industry; a system of accredited bookstores, like the ones in, dare I mention it, Quebec. It wouldn't be difficult, but who cares enough to make it happen?

I will leave such questions with you, since you are, after all, the audience. It will not be by the writers, who are too few in number to have any influence at the polls, but by the audience itself that such questions will ultimately be answered.