

*The Fat Lady Dances:*

MARGARET ATWOOD'S

# LADY ORACLE

Margaret Atwood



# LADY ORACLE

*a novel*

*Margery Fee*

THE FAT LADY DANCES:  
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *LADY ORACLE*

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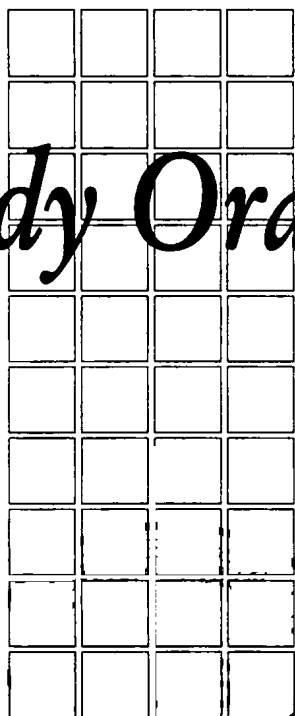
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*The Fat Lady Dances:*

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*Lady Oracle*



*Margery Fee*

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## *A Note on the Author*



Margery Fee was born in London, Ontario, and grew up in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke, where she was a Brownie. She earned all her degrees in Toronto: her B.A. in English and French at Glendon College, her M.A. at York University, and her Ph.D. at the University of Toronto. She also has a Diploma in Applied Linguistics from the University of Victoria. After working as a teaching fellow at University College, the University of Toronto, she taught at the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Victoria, and Queen's University, where she is currently a member of the Department of English and the Director of the Strathy Language Unit. The unit undertakes research into Canadian English and English usage. Her work on Canadian literature includes articles on Jeannette Armstrong, Ernest Buckler, Beatrice Culleton, Marian Engel, Howard O'Hagan, Lorne Pierce, and various aspects of literary nationalism. She has also published work on the New Zealand writer Keri Hulme and on Canadian English.

### NOTE ON EDITIONS AND REFERENCES

*Lady Oracle* was first published in Canada by Seal-McClelland and Stewart in 1976. The Seal-McClelland and Stewart-Bantam paperback edition was published in 1977, and all page references in this work are to this 1977 edition. *Lady Oracle* was also published in New York by Simon and Schuster in 1976, and in London by André Deutsch in 1977.

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*Lady Oracle*



# Chronology

- 1939 Margaret Atwood born 18 November in Ottawa, the second of three children. Her elder brother Harold was born in 1937. Her father is Carl Edmund Atwood, a forest entomologist, specializing in bees, the spruce budworm, and forest tent caterpillars. Her mother, Margaret Dorothy (Killam), is a graduate in home economics from the University of Toronto.
- 1939-45 Family lives in Ottawa in the winters and spends the rest of the year in northern Quebec and Ontario, where father conducts research.
- 1945-46 Family moves briefly to Sault Ste. Marie.
- 1946 Family settles in Toronto, where father teaches at University of Toronto.
- 1951 Younger sister, Ruth, is born.
- 1952-57 Studies at Leaside High School, Toronto; contributes prose and verse to school literary magazine.
- 1958 Works at Camp White Pine, Haliburton, in charge of the nature hut, where she meets Charles Pachter, in charge of arts and crafts.
- 1957-61 Honours English student at Victoria College, University of Toronto; studies with Northrop Frye, Jay Macpherson, Kathleen Coburn, Millar MacLure; submits literary work to college magazines, cowrites articles with Dennis Lee.
- 1961 *Double Persephone* (poetry) wins E.J. Pratt Medal. Wins Woodrow Wilson Fellowship on graduation.
- 1961-62 Graduate studies in English at Radcliffe College, Harvard

- University; studies Victorian literature under Jerome H. Buckley. Gains her M.A.
- 1962-63 Doctoral studies, Harvard University.
- 1963-64 Works for a market research company in Toronto; writes unpublished novel *Up in the Air So Blue*.
- 1964-65 Teaches English at the University of British Columbia.
- 1965-67 Continues doctoral studies at Harvard; completes all the requirements except for the dissertation, "The English Metaphysical Romance," focusing on novelist H. Rider Haggard.
- 1966 *The Circle Game* (poetry).
- 1967 Wins Governor-General's Award for *The Circle Game*. Marries James Polk, fellow graduate student and American novelist.
- 1967-68 Teaches English at Sir George Williams University (now part of Concordia University) in Montreal.
- 1968 *The Animals in That Country* (poetry); moves to Edmonton.
- 1969 *The Edible Woman* (novel).
- 1969-70 Teaches creative writing at the University of Alberta.
- 1970 *Procedures for Underground* (poetry); *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (poetry).
- 1970-71 Travels in England, France, and Italy.
- 1971 *Power Politics* (poetry); begins to serve as editor and member of the board of House of Anansi Press (continues until 1973).
- 1971-72 Teaches Canadian literature at York University, Toronto.
- 1972 *Surfacing* (novel); *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (literary criticism).
- 1972-73 Writer in residence at the University of Toronto.
- 1973 Divorces James Polk; moves to Alliston, Ontario, with Graeme Gibson, Canadian writer (*Five Legs* [1969]; *Communion* [1971]; *Perpetual Motion* [1982]). Awarded by Trent University the first of her many honorary degrees.
- 1974 *You Are Happy* (poetry).

- 1973-75 Member of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association.
- 1975 Begins to contribute a comic strip called *Kanadian Kultchur Komix* featuring "Survivalwoman" to the left-wing nationalist *This Magazine*, under the name Bart Gerrard.
- 1976 *Lady Oracle* (novel; winner of the City of Toronto Book Award [1977] and the Canadian Booksellers Association Award [1977]); *Selected Poems*; daughter Jess (Eleanor Jess Atwood Gibson) is born.
- 1977 *Dancing Girls* (short stories; which receives St. Lawrence Award for Fiction and the Periodical Distributors of Canada Award for Short Fiction); *Days of the Rebels, 1815-1840* (history).
- 1978 Visits Australia for Writers' Week; *Two-Headed Poems; Up in the Tree* (children's book); becomes a contributing editor to *This Magazine*.
- 1978-79 Lives in Scotland while Gibson teaches at the University of Edinburgh.
- 1979 *Life Before Man* (novel).
- 1980 Family moves to Toronto; *Anna's Pet* (children's story; with Joyce Barkhouse; adapted for stage in 1986).
- 1980-81 Vice-chair of Writers' Union of Canada.
- 1981 *True Stories* (poetry); *Bodily Harm* (novel).
- 1982 *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*. Edits *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*.
- 1982-83 President of Writers' Union of Canada.
- 1983 *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems; Bluebeard's Egg* (short stories).
- 1983-84 Travels and works in England and Germany.
- 1984 *Interlunar* (poetry).
- 1984-85 President of P.E.N. International's Anglo-Canadian branch; P.E.N. promotes friendship among writers, supports freedom of expression, and pressures for the release of writers who are political prisoners.
- 1985 *The Handmaid's Tale* (novel; winner, in 1986, of both the Governor-General's Award and the Los Angeles *Times*

- Award); MFA Chair, Creative Writing, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.
- 1986 Coeditor with Robert Weaver of *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*. Berg Chair, Creative Writing, New York University. *Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New, 1976–1986*; *The Festival of Missed Crass* (children's musical); writer in residence, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.
- 1988 *Cat's Eye* (novel), wins City of Toronto Book Award.
- 1991 *Wilderness Tips* (short stories), wins Trillium Award.
- 1992 *Good Bones* (short fictions and prose poems).

# The Importance of the Work

After *Surfacing* (1972), Atwood's gloomy and gripping second novel, *Lady Oracle* (1976), her third, may seem at first glance simply a piece of comic relief. *Surfacing* is narrated by a severely depressed woman who struggles to come to terms with her abortion and the deaths of her parents. The story is set in a wilderness threatened by pollution in a Canada that is rapidly selling out to the highest bidder. *Lady Oracle* seems to have more in common with Atwood's comic first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), where Marian McAlpin, like Joan Foster, somewhat ineptly frees herself from an unsatisfactory relationship with the ambiguous assistance of some eccentric friends.

The reader can understand both these heroines' problems fairly well, and certainly sees long before either Marian or Joan does that they will have to disentangle themselves from the men who are central to their lives. Unfortunately, the distance between what the reader understands and the understanding of these characters is so great that it is tempting to dismiss them as airheads. Instead of identifying with their difficulties in finding interesting occupations and interested partners, the reader may well feel that any idiot could manage better than these two, who ricochet from crisis to crisis on some kind of intuition-driven automatic pilot. If this is our only reaction, these novels may well delight us without teaching us, and good novels are supposed to do both.

But these overtly comic novels do have a serious side. Atwood seems to be examining how women can be trapped by upbringing, education, and social expectations in relationships where they give up thinking about their own needs completely. (Perhaps airheads are made rather than born?) All that saves Marian and Joan in the end (if they are saved) is a kind of emotional or physiological reflex. (Marian knows she's in trouble when she can no longer eat, Joan, when she

has hallucinations of her mother.) The importance of both these novels comes not just from their comic surface, then, but also from their rather darker underside. This dark side is clearly represented in *Lady Oracle* by Joan's occupation as a writer of Gothic romances filled with terrified young women. By making Joan a writer of popular Gothic romances and looking at the influence that fairy tales, movies, women's magazines, and a wide range of popular cultural forms have on her attitudes, Atwood opens up the issue of how our beliefs are structured by popular media.

We are born into a language and culture that structures us far more than we structure it. Although we are taught to believe that we are free to choose as individuals what is best for us, in fact the possibilities are stringently limited, not only by our talents and tastes, but also by our class, our race, and our gender. This point is driven home metaphorically when Joan is prevented from dancing as a butterfly in a ballet recital. Joan cannot be a ballet dancer, even though she knows her part perfectly, because who ever heard of a fat ballet dancer? This is the first of a long series of lessons about what a woman, fat or thin, can or cannot do. But in her fantasy life, Joan continues to try to find a role she *can* perform in public, like Chairman Mao who "was fat but successful and . . . didn't take any shit about it" (168). For a while she thinks of being an opera singer, and she toys with being a medium, like Leda Sprott, but then her Fat Lady fantasies take over. Apart from the role of opera singer, in fact, fat women are offered no roles to play in our society that provide both respect and a good income. As Joan discovers, they are either invisible or far too obvious because they are not sexually attractive to men, and this makes it painfully clear that women's main social function, still, is to be attractive to men. Whatever else women might do is judged as secondary. Even when Joan is slender, she keeps her "performing" — her novel writing — private because she's afraid her husband Arthur might disapprove of what she does for a living. His approval matters more to her than her own belief that she writes good romances (and although reading nothing but romances may be destructive, good ones are certainly not easy to write).

The rigid exclusion of certain people from certain roles hurts everyone. Although Joan's desire to be a fat ballet dancer is perhaps a comic example, female police chiefs, Inuit lawyers, black neurosurgeons, blind concert pianists, and wheelchair-bound computer

operators are all scarce because of social restrictions, not because of ability. And even when a minority member does succeed, discrimination persists. As Atwood notes of women writers, no matter how successful, they "are like other women: subject to the same discriminatory laws, encountering the same demeaning attitudes, burdened with the same good reasons for not walking through the park alone after dark" (*Second* 194).

(Atwood's interest in how particular cultures form people is found in all her novels, and links her nationalist and her feminist themes.) This social moulding may lead to positive or negative effects for individuals, but ultimately it is unavoidable. The narrator of *Cat's Eye* comments:

The past isn't quaint while you're in it. Only at a safe distance, later, when you can see it as décor, not as the shape your life's been squeezed into. They have Elvis Presley zucchini moulds now: you clamp them around your zucchini while it's young, and as it grows, it's deformed into the shape of Elvis Presley's head. (363-64).

*Lady Oracle* deals with this issue in a far more complex way than either of the two novels that precede it, grounding Joan's behaviour in her childhood and showing her in a series of relationships that allow a pattern to emerge. Interestingly, Joan's image of her national attachments is of an irrevocable operation or something out of her control:

I was here, in a beautiful southern landscape, with breezes and old-world charm, but all the time my own country was embedded in my brain, like a metal plate left over from an operation; or rather, like one of those pellets you drop into bowls of water, which expand and turn into garish mineral flowers. If I let it get out of control it would take over my head. There was no sense trying to get away . . . (311-12)

Canada haunts her just as her mother does, not to mention her fat, and it thus becomes one of the things that she has to deal with, a given, not something that can be avoided or escaped. *there*

What this novel has to teach us then, is not only how our culture makes us, but also how we can come to some understanding of this,

and ultimately struggle against those parts of our social moulding that, having been internalized, serve to oppress us) As in all her novels, Atwood is concerned with how we can, like the narrator of *Surfacing*, determine “to refuse to be a victim . . . give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone” (191). Despite her profound awareness of the odds against anyone’s achievement of this goal, Atwood shows us women who do take small, but significant steps towards understanding and taking responsibility for their lives. Atwood’s own comment on the difficulty of this refusal on the part of the narrator of *Surfacing* is, “It’s nice that she doesn’t want to be a victim, but if you examine her situation and her society in the cold light of reason, how is she going to avoid it?” (“Interview” [Sandler] 12). Thus it is important that Atwood’s heroines are not depicted as unusual or exemplary, simply because the unusual woman is quite often able to succeed, to become the exception that proves the rule. But Atwood wants the rule changed for ordinary women, too (even airheads!), something that will only happen when women confront the existence of these rules in their own lives, and then move to change them for both themselves and other women. Her attempt to show how the struggle is carried on makes this novel an important one.

When Atwood states, “I believe that fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community” (*Second* 346), however, she is not saying that fiction writing must convey a clear-cut and serious political message. In fact, she would maintain that this is what political writing should do: “The aim of propaganda is to convince, and to spur people to action; the aim of writing is to create a plausible and moving imaginative world . . .” (*Second* 203). Although many critics have interpreted Atwood’s work from a feminist perspective, it can hardly be argued that *Lady Oracle* conveys a feminist message in any direct way, or indeed that only feminists might find it interesting. Rather, by depicting the life of one woman, even in a comically exaggerated way, it makes some feminist positions comprehensible, although Joan herself probably would find a group of feminists as threatening as she comes to find her Brownie pack (“Ever since Brownies I’d been wary of any group composed entirely of women . . .” [85]).

Although *Lady Oracle* is based on popular romance, it does not, as Joan herself fears her romances might, “exploit the masses, corrupt