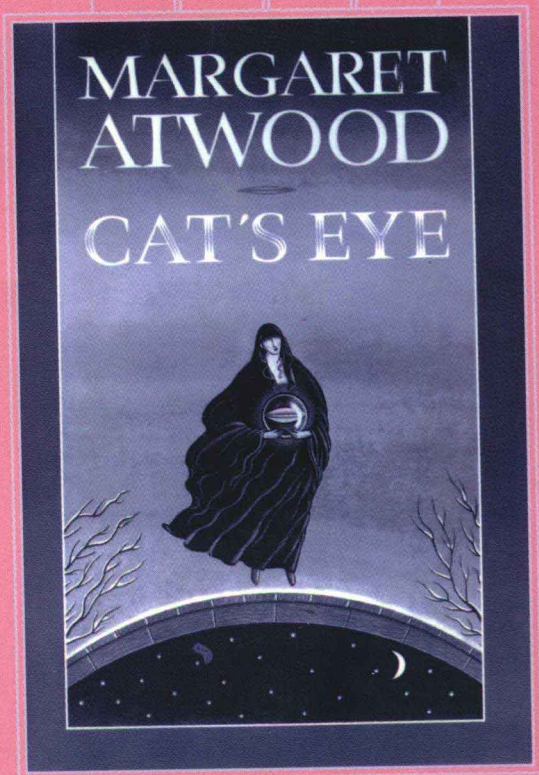


Seeing in the Dark:

MARGARET ATWOOD'S

CAT'S EYE



Arnold E. Davidson

SEEING IN THE DARK:
MARGARET ATWOOD'S CAT'S EYE

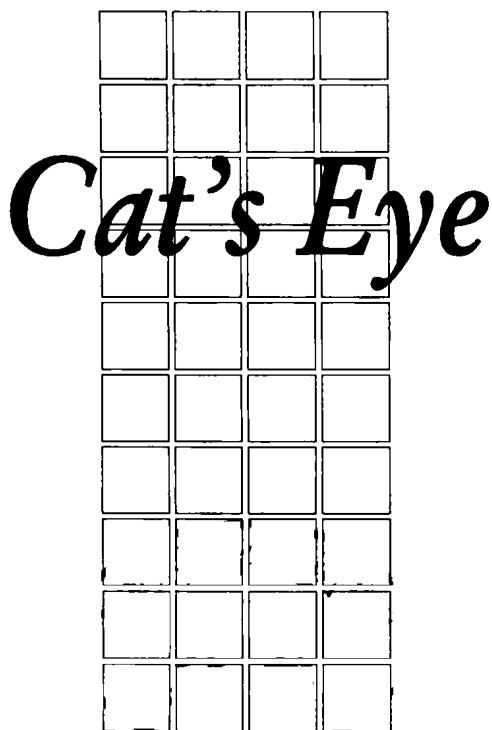
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Seeing in the Dark:
MARGARET ATWOOD'S



Arnold E. Davidson

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A Note on the Author

Arnold E. Davidson was born in Cardston, Alberta, and grew up on a small ranch just outside of Waterton Lakes National Park. He attended the University of Chicago from which he received a BA in Anthropology and an MA in English. He received his PhD, also in English, from the State University of New York at Binghamton, where he wrote a dissertation on Joseph Conrad directed by Robert Kroetsch. That process directed him back to Canadian literature, and he soon began publishing primarily on contemporary Canadian writers, particularly Robert Kroetsch and Margaret Atwood. He is one of the founding co-presidents of the Margaret Atwood Society and has coedited *The Art of Margaret Atwood*, a collection of essays on her poetry and fiction. He has edited *Studies on Canadian Literature: Introductory and Critical Essays* for the Modern Language Association and has published books on Joseph Conrad, Jean Rhys, Mordecai Richler, and Joy Kogawa. His most recent book, *Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West* (published by Duke University Press in 1994), won the Association of Canadian Studies in the United States Publication Award. He is also the author of some eighty academic articles, most of them on Canadian literature. After teaching, first, at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois, and then in the English Department and the Canadian Studies Program at Michigan State University, he is now a Research Professor of Canadian Studies at Duke University.

REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All page references to *Cat's Eye* are given parenthetically in the text and are to the original hardcover edition published in Toronto by McClelland and Stewart in 1988.

I would like to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for awarding me a Bellagio Research Fellowship which allowed me to begin working out my reading of the novel. I am grateful, too, to Duke University and the Canadian Studies Center at Duke for unstinting financial and intellectual support, and I would particularly like to thank two colleagues, Professors George Elliott Clarke and Sylvia Ross, for their careful and constructive reading of the manuscript. I am also indebted to two of my research assistants, Heather Rogers and Madeleine Vala, for their work on this project and doubly so to Heather Rogers in that she also served as an exemplary typist. I would here also thank Robert Lecker for his patience and support.

Finally, I would like to dedicate the book to Charles and Susan and to Judy and to thank the three of them for providing the two tables on which much of the final draft was completed.

Seeing in the Dark:
Margaret Atwood's
Cat's Eye

Chronology

- 1939 Margaret Eleanor Atwood, the second of three children, is born November 18 in Ottawa to Margaret Dorothy (née Killam) Atwood and Carl Edmund Atwood. Her brother, Harold, is born in 1937, and her sister, Ruth, in 1951.
- 1939–45 The family spends winters in Ottawa but lives the rest of the year in northern Ontario and Quebec where her father works as a forest entomologist.
- 1945 Family moves to Sault Ste. Marie.
- 1951 Family moves to Toronto, where her father accepts a teaching position at the University of Toronto, but continues to live much of each year in the north woods, where her father conducts his research when he isn't teaching.
- 1952–57 Attends Leaside High School in Toronto and writes prose and verse for the school literary magazine.
- 1957–61 Attends Victoria College of the University of Toronto and graduates with an Honours BA in English. Publishes prose and poems in college magazines and also publishes poems in national journals such as *Canadian Forum* and *Tamarack Review*.
- 1961 Publishes a first book of poetry, *Double Persephone*, which wins the E.J. Pratt Medal.
- 1961–62 Attends Radcliffe College in Cambridge, MA, on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and receives an MA in English.
- 1963 Works as a market researcher in Toronto and completes her first novel, *Up in the Air So Blue*, which remains unpublished.

- 1964-65 Teaches English at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.
- 1965-67 Begins a PhD in English at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA, but does not complete the degree.
- 1966 Publishes *The Circle Game* (poetry), which wins the Governor General's Award.
- 1967 Marries James Polk and moves to Montreal, Quebec, where she teaches English at Sir George Williams College (now part of Concordia University).
- 1968 Publishes *The Animals in That Country* (poetry), which wins the Centennial Commission Poetry Competition.
- 1969 Publishes *The Edible Woman* (novel). Wins Union Poetry Prize awarded by *Poetry* (Chicago).
- 1969-70 Teaches creative writing at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.
- 1970 Publishes *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (poetry) and *Procedures for Underground* (poetry).
- 1971 Publishes *Power Politics* (poetry). Joins editorial board of House of Anansi Press.
- 1971-72 Teaches Canadian literature at York University, Toronto.
- 1972 Publishes *Surfacing* (novel) and *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (literary criticism).
- 1972-73 Serves as writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto.
- 1973 Divorces James Polk and moves to Alliston, Ontario, with novelist Graeme Gibson. Receives honorary degree from Trent University (many more are subsequently awarded by other universities). Joins the board of directors of the Canadian Civil Liberties Union.
- 1974 Publishes *You Are Happy* (poetry).
- 1976 Publishes *Lady Oracle* (novel) and *Selected Poems*. She and Graeme Gibson have a daughter, Eleanor Jess Atwood Gibson.
- 1977 Publishes *Dancing Girls* (short stories), which wins the City of Toronto Book Award, the Canadian Booksellers' Association Award, and the Periodical Distributors of Canada Short Fiction Award. Also publishes *Days of*

- the Rebels: 1815-1840* (history).
- 1978 Publishes *Two-Headed Poems* (poetry) and *Up in the Tree* (children's literature).
- 1979 Publishes *Life Before Man* (novel).
- 1980 Publishes, with Joyce Barkhouse, *Anna's Pet* (children's literature). Elected vice-president of the Writers' Union of Canada and moves, with her family, to Toronto.
- 1981 Publishes *True Stories* (poetry) and *Bodily Harm* (novel). Receives Molson Award and Guggenheim Fellowship and is named Companion of the Order of Canada. Elected president of the Writers' Union of Canada for a one-year term.
- 1982 Publishes *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* and edits *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*. Awarded the Welsh Arts Council International Writer's Prize.
- 1983 Publishes *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems* and *Bluebeard's Egg* (short stories), which wins the Periodical Distributors of Canada Short Fiction Award and the Foundation for the Advancement of Canadian Letters Book of the Year Award.
- 1984 Publishes *Interlunar* (poetry). Elected president of P.E.N. International, Canadian Centre (English Speaking), for a two-year term.
- 1985 Publishes *The Handmaid's Tale* (novel), which wins the Governor General's Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction, the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Award, and the Commonwealth Literary Regional Prize. Serves as MFA Honorary (Visiting) Chair in creative writing at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, AL.
- 1986 Publishes *Selected Poems II* and coedits, with Robert Weaver, *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*. Appointed Berg (Visiting) Chair at New York University in New York, NY, and is named Woman of the Year by *Ms.* magazine.
- 1987 Publishes *The Canlit Foodbook*. Elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and is named Humanist of the Year by the American Humanist Society. Serves as

- writer-in-residence at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.
- 1988 Publishes *Cat's Eye* (novel), which wins the City of Toronto Book Award, the Coles Book of the Year Award, the Canadian Booksellers' Association Award, and the Foundation for the Advancement of Canadian Letters Book of the Year Award. Elected Foreign Honorary Member in Literature by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and receives YWCA Woman of Distinction Award.
- 1989 Coedits, with Shannon Ravenel, *The Best American Short Stories 1989*. Serves as writer-in-residence at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX.
- 1990 Publishes *For the Birds* (children's literature). Becomes member of the Order of Ontario and receives Harvard Centennial Medal.
- 1991 Publishes *Wilderness Tips* (short stories), which wins the Trillium Book Award and the Periodical Marketers of Canada Book of the Year Award.
- 1992 Publishes *Good Bones* (short fictions and prose poems).
- 1993 Publishes *The Robber Bride* (novel), which wins the Trillium Book Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Canadian and Caribbean Region Prize, and the Canadian Authors' Association Novel of the Year Award. Also publishes *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (a combination of *Good Bones* and *Murder in the Dark* with one new piece added) and coedits, with Barry Callaghan, *The Poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen, Volume One: The Early Years*.
- 1994 Named Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government. Coedits, with Barry Callaghan, *The Poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen, Volume Two: The Later Years*.
- 1995 Publishes *Morning in the Burned House* (poetry), *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (literary criticism), and *Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut* (children's literature). Coedits, with Robert Weaver, *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*.
- 1996 Publishes *Alias Grace* (novel).

The Importance of the Work

The six novels that Margaret Atwood published before *Cat's Eye*, not to mention her numerous other books of short stories and poetry, had already established her as a major contemporary writer, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the immediately preceding novel, had especially done so. Far more people, particularly outside of Canada, were reading her fiction and more critics were praising her work. To be both commercially successful and critically acclaimed is a dual accomplishment achieved by few authors. By the time *Cat's Eye* appeared, any new Atwood novel would be important simply because there was now another work in which to appreciate her dry wit and sharp intelligence, another book in which to weigh her ongoing critique of contemporary Canada and the world, and in which to see her give new twists to her basic feminist concerns — surfacing, power politics, circle games, bodily harm (to borrow from just a few earlier titles).

But *Cat's Eye*, like all of Atwood's novels, is not just another Atwood novel. One of her strengths as a writer is the way she reworks material from her earlier books but does not simply rewrite them. Central concerns inform all her fictions; fictional formulas do not. *Cat's Eye*, for example, partly evokes all of Atwood's previous novels — *The Edible Woman's* critique of consumerism and the commodification of women, *Surfacing's* interrogation of female identity, *Lady Oracle's* protagonist both victimized as a girl by other little girls and transmuting childhood suffering into art, the vast deployment of time implicit in *Life Before Man*, *Bodily Harm's* poetics of pain, the therapeutic telling of a painful personal story in *The Handmaid's Tale*. But it evokes them with a difference, and Elaine Risley, the protagonist of *Cat's Eye*, does not particularly resemble any of Atwood's earlier female protagonists, even though

her story closely parallels the unnamed narrator's account, in *Surfacing*, of her early family life in the woods during World War II and her subsequent affair with her art teacher, as well as Joan's telling, in *Lady Oracle*, of her childhood traumas in Toronto's ravines. My own sense is that these similarities are roughly analogous to the connections between Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. All writers have their subjects, but sometimes an older writer pointedly returns to a topic treated earlier to do it fuller justice, to portray it with a more developed art and vision. So Dickens in *Great Expectations* rewrites the story of the orphan boy with larger implications and deeper resonances than he achieved in *Oliver Twist* or *David Copperfield*, and Atwood in *Cat's Eye* similarly writes of young girls at play and war in a time of war far more persuasively than she did in *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*.

Cat's Eye is in some ways the most personal of Atwood's novels. Clearly, she has borrowed substantially from her own life in giving Elaine that girlhood split between Toronto and the north woods, and in giving her, too, a successful career as a woman artist. Atwood, we know, has long been interested in the visual arts, and at one point in her childhood she "wanted to be a painter" (Ingersoll, *Conversations* 60). She has done the illustrations for a number of her book covers — *Power Politics*, *True Stories*, and *Interlunar*, for example — and has also published cartoons and comic strips such as *Kanadian Kultchur Komix* (featuring "Survivalwoman") which appeared in *This Magazine*. But much of *Cat's Eye* is self-evidently not autobiographical. Atwood is an author, not a painter. She does not live in Vancouver. She does not have two daughters and is not married to the owner of a travel agency. Her brother was not killed in a plane hijacking. The book is a novel, not a fictionalized autobiography. It is, however, a novel that might be termed "meta-autobiographical" in that it is about narrating an account of a life, and that accounting also involves the author.¹ Atwood, pushing fifty, portrays a painter of approximately the same age who relates the tribulations of her early life and subsequent successful career. The novel, as a portrait of the artist as a no-longer-young woman, partly superimposes the figure of the author onto the figure of the protagonist, and does so most obviously with respect to key questions: What are the pluses and the minuses of success and aging for a woman (a summing up also central to Atwood's "Aging Female Poet . . ." poems in her

Selected Poems II)? How does one's childhood continue to shape one's adult life? How do we come to terms with who we are and with the world in which we live?

These are questions that we all face in some form, and that, too, is part of the power and effect of *Cat's Eye*. More particularly, we all carry a legacy of childhood pain — memories of both injuries done to us and of injuries we inflicted on others. On a personal note, I cannot read *Cat's Eye* without vividly recalling one of the most shameful episodes from my own childhood. In a small, poor community, and attending a four-room rural school, we early picked out one grade-one girl as the disgusting embodiment of all we didn't want to be, and teased, tormented, and ostracized her all through grade school. I was particularly assiduous in doing so because I deeply suspected that if it wasn't her it would be me. As Atwood well knows, we can all too easily inflict harm on others, and children do not have to be left alone on a tropical island, as in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, to do what even little girls can do perfectly "naturally."

That "naturally" is in quotation marks because the human "natural" is always substantially socially constructed. From her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, to her most recent, *Alias Grace*, Atwood has again and again assessed the mechanics of the social construction of the female individual in a patriarchal society. The doubleness and dividedness that her female protagonists experience — the hints of a missing twin, the suggestions of a second identity, the doppelgängers and secret sharers they so regularly encounter — attest to their sense of not belonging in the world in which they find themselves and their feeling that some crucial aspects of the self have been lost or repressed. How devastatingly extensive this loss can be and how programmatically it can be inflicted is powerfully portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*, with its account of how Gilead forces women into rigorously defined roles and even state-sanctioned prostitution (the Handmaids as well as the Jezebels) that is also rape in that the consequence for women who refuse to have sex with various members of the ruling male elite is death. We don't, however, live in Gilead, and, despite Atwood's careful grounding of the details of Gilead in the real world, the book is a dystopia. Furthermore, suffering and loss can take place without being officially sanctioned or imposed by society. *Cat's Eye* charts such suffering in a fully rendered present and immediate past — particularly the forties,

fifties, and sixties — not in a projected future. A seventies slogan asserted that “the personal is the political.” In *Cat’s Eye*, however, Atwood conversely reads the political back into the personal. We see how Cordelia can pass her father’s disapproval of his daughter onto Elaine and how Elaine can later pass it back; we see, too, how deep the shared pain of both of them goes and how it is partly transcended, becoming for Elaine an impetus to art, but how it also remains a permanent burden, with the middle-aged Elaine still haunted by her childhood, and Cordelia pushed to mental collapse and perhaps even suicide.

Power, however privately it is applied, always has a social context and dimension. *Cat’s Eye* foregrounds three such contexts — patriarchy, war (particularly World War II), and imperialism (with its attendant racism). Patriarchy is the most basic and obvious of these groundings. As a child, Elaine notes that Cordelia’s father conveys the sense that his judgement of you is absolute and correct whereas yours of him, if you dared hazard one, would be wrong and irrelevant. The privilege of patriarchy, moreover, works on both a familial and social level, and on both levels women are seen as not measuring up to the standards that men set. Consumer society, we see again and again in the novel, sells female anxiety, the sense of female “imperfections,” and both men and capitalism profit from the selling. Patriarchal-like claims of the rightness of one group and the wrongness of another also underlie both war and empire. The parallel between war and sexism is particularly suggested in the novel by the way the children play at war, for with Stephen’s early directives — “lie down, you’re dead” — his little sister Elaine is learning to be both female and victim. Imperialism similarly entails modes of deeming others inferior and “natural” victims. Miss Lumley, the worst teacher Elaine encounters in primary school, is a proponent of and apologist for the British Empire and advocates ideas of British superiority, ideas Elaine early questions: “Wolfe’s name sounds like something you’d call a dog, but he conquered the French. This is puzzling, because I’ve seen French people, there are lots of them up north, so he couldn’t have conquered all of them” (80). Also significant in this context are the three muses of one of Elaine’s later paintings, Mr. Banerji, Mrs. Finestein, and Miss Stuart, all of whom, as adults, endured pain analogous to that which Elaine suffered as a child. Mr. Banerji, one of her father’s students from India, was not