

Margaret Drabble

By Lynn Veach Sadler

Methodist College

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MARGARET DRABBLE.
*Photograph by Mark Gerson
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About the Author

Mary Lynn Veach Sadler was graduated from Duke University *magna cum laude*. She received an M.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois. She has held a postdoctoral research grant from the Clark Library and UCLA for work on Milton, has a certificate in administration from Bryn Mawr College and Higher Education Resource Services, and has studied at Oxford.

Dr. Sadler has taught at Agnes Scott College, Drake University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and Bennett College, where she was chair of the Department of Communications and director of the Division of Humanities. She is now the vice president for academic affairs at Methodist College in Fayetteville, North Carolina. She received an award for "Extraordinary Undergraduate Teaching" from Drake University.

Her publications include books on Bunyan, Carew, and Milton. In the summer of 1984 she directed a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar for college professors on "The Novel of Slave Unrest." Additional interests are creative writing and educational computing.

Preface

Margaret Drabble exasperates and delights me. I had difficulty not slamming *The Waterfall* on the floor. I do not want women to be like turn-her-face-to-the-wall Jane or stiff-upper-lip Rosamund or Bible-in-the-mind-toting Rose. I wish Drabble had not given so many interviews; I seldom agree with her views of her characters. She apologizes for the earliest novels; I find *A Summer Bird-Cage* one of the most refreshing books in years. I understand why Clara Maugham is as she is; I wish Drabble would stop criticizing her. I tire a bit of the "Drabble woman," *au fait*, "the real thing," "cultivating one's garden," aureate imagery, inconclusiveness, cuteness of style, emphasis on the past, succoring the unlovely, solipsism, privilege, grace, fate, chance, and luck.

I am embarrassed that Drabble still gets proclaimed the queen of motherhood and children, but she ought not to be appropriated by the feminists either. She refutes their claims to her—while publicly wanting England to establish a Woman's Union and denying androgyny but insisting that one of her favorites, Angus Wilson, is as nearly androgynous as a writer can be. I like most of her men.

I also like Frances wearing Karel's teeth in her brassiere and all the other such little gems of humor and wildness in Drabble's novels. I like her liking John Milton, John Bunyan, and William Wordsworth and making literature and literary influence legitimate in the contemporary novel. Although I think the first novels worthy and larger than they look, I applauded when she expanded her range to men, novels of manners, and finally to global concerns. When others began to call her "trendy," I reveled in how much she knew about the world. I found her references to "yellow ribbons" in *The Ice Age* almost mystical; we were involved in the Iranian debacle when I read it. The woman herself is the kind I admire: she feels quite ordinary but is remarkable.

I wanted my grouping of the novels and short stories to let the reader find Drabble's growth, really the intensification of her themes. Since she is so pursued by the "woman question," I meant to see if she really did nothing with men until driven to in *The Needle's*

Eye, nothing global until *The Ice Age*. To those ends, I have tried to read Drabble's text and let my audience do so.

My ordering has caused some wrenching chronologically, since I have placed Clara, of the fourth novel, with Sarah, of the first, as "young women." Similarly, I delayed the second novel, *The Garrick Year*, until chapter 6 to set the stage for a discussion of Drabble on marriage.

The chapter titles are not limited, as they suggest, to women. Independence (chapter 3) moves beyond Rosamund in *The Millstone* to relate men and women and early and late works. The same is true of "helplessness" in chapter 4, though the focus is on Jane in *The Waterfall*, a book that analysis has taught me to like. The principal "helpless independent" (chapter 5) is Rose of *The Needle's Eye*, but she quickly took me to the general Drabble theme of inequality and, though I present some of them earlier, to Drabble's males, for she shares the role of protagonist with Simon Camish. In chapter 7, middle age links the last three novels and males as well as females. Since Drabble has largely aged with her characters, her achievement as set out in chapter 8 seemed apt as well as obligatory.

I am grateful to Miss Drabble for providing her photograph. I owe thanks also to the following publishers for permission to quote her works: A. D. Peters and Macmillan for "The Gifts of War," "Hassan's Tower," and "The Reunion"; Literistic for "Crossing the Alps" and "A Voyage to Cythera"; Ms. for "A Success Story"; Weidenfeld and Nicolson and William Morrow for *A Summer Bird-Cage* and *Jerusalem the Golden*; Random House and Alfred A. Knopf for *The Garrick Year*, *The Ice Age*, *The Needle's Eye*, *The Waterfall*, *The Middle Ground*, *The Realms of Gold*, and *A Writer's Britain*; Weidenfeld and Nicolson for the Longman edition of *The Millstone*, *The Genius of Thomas Hardy*, and *Arnold Bennett: A Biography*; G. P. Putnam's Sons for "A Day in the Life of a Smiling Woman"; and the *Ontario Review* for "Homework." My thanks, too, to the editors of *Critique* for permission to use my article, "The Society We Have": The Search for Meaning in Drabble's *The Middle Ground*" (23 [1982]:83-93).

Lynn Veach Sadler

Chronology

- 1939 Margaret Drabble born 5 June in Sheffield, Yorkshire.
- 1960 Graduated from Cambridge with double starred first in English. Marries Clive Walter Swift.
- 1963 *A Summer Bird-Cage*.
- 1964 *The Garrick Year* and "Les Liaisons Dangereuses." Laura produced.
- 1965 *The Millstone*.
- 1966 "Hassan's Tower" and *Wordsworth*. Rhys Memorial Prize.
- 1967 *Jerusalem the Golden* and "A Voyage to Cythera."
- 1968 "The Reunion" and a shortened version called "Faithful Lovers." "A Pyrrhic Victory." Black Memorial Prize.
- 1969 *The Waterfall* and "Crossing the Alps." *A Touch of Love*, film version of *The Millstone*. *Bird of Paradise* produced.
- 1970 "The Gifts of War."
- 1972 *The Needle's Eye* and "A Success Story." Edits *London Consequences* with B. S. Johnson.
- 1973 "A Day in the Life of a Smiling Woman" and *Virginia Woolf: A Personal Debt*. E. M. Forster Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 1974 *Arnold Bennett: A Biography*. Edits *Lady Susan*, *The Watsons*, *Sanditon*, by Jane Austen.
- 1975 *The Realms of Gold*. Marriage dissolved.
- 1976 Edits *The Genius of Thomas Hardy*. Coeditor of *New Stories* 1.
- 1977 *The Ice Age*.
- 1977-1978 "Homework."

MARGARET DRABBLE

- 1979 *For Queen and Country: Britain in the Victorian Age and
A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature.*
- 1980 *The Middle Ground.*

Contents

About the Author

Preface

Chronology

Chapter One

Margaret Drabble and the "Writer's Work" 1

Chapter Two

Young Women 9

Chapter Three

Independent Women 25

Chapter Four

Helpless Women 41

Chapter Five

The Helpless Independent 53

Chapter Six

Marriage 73

Chapter Seven

△ Middle Age 89

Chapter Eight

Drabble's Reputation 130

Notes and References 135

Selected Bibliography 141

Index 150

Chapter One

Margaret Drabble and the "Writer's Work"

As a result of the many interviews she has given, we know Margaret Drabble perhaps as well as any novelist. She appears a genuinely good human being, one almost too good to be true: never snide, superior, or pretentious; always caring about others. She has been unusually open about her own attitudes and their influence on her work, and a great consonance exists between her life and her writings. She is morally committed to the betterment of the world and its people, yet believes that fate or chance finally determines who is privileged in this life and who is not. Her characters are honest enough, nonetheless, to revel in their privilege. She feels that her own luck is almost uncanny but is simultaneously aware of how hard she works. That kind of paradox laces life as she interprets it and presents it in her novels. It accounts in large measure for their contradictions. Her biography is a veritable women's liberationist exemplum, but she antedates the women's movement and depicts females who are, at worst, stereotypically inept and, at best, flawed in typically human ways. Serious-minded, Drabble seems unable to take herself seriously and frequently escapes into the humorous and the bizarre. Accordingly, the narrator intrudes in the novels to effect a breaking of tone that can be disruptive or refreshing. At the same time, Drabble has spent much of her career consciously trying to atone for having been an initial success by writing about the problems of the college graduate and the backstage wife.

Background, Family, and Early Education

Drabble, known as "Maggie" to her friends, was born on 5 June 1939 in the northern industrial city of Sheffield. Though her family moved about, the area has continued to exert its influence; it provides a link with Arnold Bennett, the novelist and (possibly) distant relative whose biography she has published, and illuminates the

personalities of many of her characters. Accepting one's past is a major theme in the novels.

Her father, John Frederick Drabble, is a barrister, a county court judge, and a novelist. She responded to *Who's Who* only because her entry would appear next to his.¹ He and his wife were the first of their families to be graduated from college, and they simply assumed that women should be educated and have jobs (Rozencwajg, 339). Margaret Bloor Drabble was always "convinced" that her daughter would "be something wonderful" and does not believe that she has ever been "fully stretched" (Poland, 26-61). She helps to explain Drabble's empathy with the plight of women. To care for her children, she stopped teaching, except briefly while her husband was away in the Royal Air Force, and has suffered from depression for many years. While Drabble has "never been very good at . . . creating 'good' mothers," she describes her own as "good enough" (Milton, 55-56) and finds her "terribly noble" for not resenting her daughter's "freedom" (Rozencwajg, 339). Mrs. Bennett in *A Summer Bird-Cage* is most like her.

Although the family is Anglican, Drabble and her sisters were sent to a Quaker boarding school for girls, the Mount School in York, and she shows the impact of the Quaker doctrines of the presence of God in every individual (Hardin, 286) and of the equality of all men and women. Her serious approach to literature may stem from this source. She is concerned with the soul, the less fortunate, the interplay of fate and chance, the nature of wisdom, redemption, and the importance of being in touch with one's depths and of doing right rather than seeking enjoyment (Cooper-Clark, 70). Not a churchgoer and never comfortable saying the Creed, she yet believes in loving one's neighbor, enduring unlovely people, and not being solipsistic (Preussner, 575), and so assesses her characters.

An unusual feature in Drabble's novels is their exploration of the world's privileged and lucky, who are different because they have talent, looks, intelligence, health, esteem, and money and, feeling guilty, must prove worth by living difficult, complicated lives. In her view, they have a social conscience and are beset by the Puritan work ethic. She finds them deserving their luck because they worry about whether they deserve the "magnificent hand of cards" "fate" has given them (Hardin, 289) and about those who lack choice and grace. Drabble's interviews reveal the same concerns about her own success and "luck."

The lucky get grace by accepting their privileged lot in life and not fighting their fate. In a prominent image, it "descends like a kind of bird from the sky" (Hardin, 284). But, another paradox, luck is also made by hard work, and Drabble "cannot really believe" in Calvinist election (Hardin, 286). We may be governed by accident and fate, but we must not feel that there is nothing we can do about our lives (Cooper-Clark, 73). We must persist and endure.

Literature has special efficacy for Drabble, who believes that it should always teach about living and values. Ironically, her mother became an atheist by reading George Bernard Shaw (Hardin, 277). Literary allusions abound in her works because, in unprecedented situations, we must ask how a particular author or character would solve a problem (Cooper-Clark, 71).² She links her own family to a great literary one: like the Brontës, the Drabble children wrote and performed plays and participated in elaborate games.³

Drabble acknowledges writing repeatedly about relations with sisters and parents (Milton, 54), though we learn little about her younger brother and sister. She accepts the influence of her idolized older sister Antonia ("A. S. Byatt"), a scholar and novelist, for both her sibling rivalries and sisterlike soulmates, for example, Clara and Clelia in *Jerusalem the Golden*. This duality helps explain the ambiguity in her novels and her belief that life is contradictory and is constantly shifting from one such extreme to another (Cooper-Clark, 74).

Children and Childhood

Drabble is saccharine when she talks about children. They give her "the greatest pleasure in her life" and have helped to "discipline and organize" her, whereas the childless become "lazier and lazier" (Foland, 257-58). Parental love is an image of God's love and a very pure form of loving that avoids the problems of sexual relationships (Cooper-Clark, 74). A baby makes it impossible to ignore reality and gives one access to the "enormous common store of otherness about other people" (Preussner, 575), themes in *The Millstone* and *The Waterfall*. Contrastingly, as in *The Needle's Eye*, children can limit the lives of their mothers and make them deny themselves. But parents can paralyze their young, too, and, while being a daughter is not much fun, being a mother is "wonderful" (Cooper-Clark, 74). When Drabble interviewed Jane Fonda, they discussed not only

the absence of positive female role models but the problems of being working mothers.⁴

Drabble has vivid memories of a rather lonely childhood. She stuttered (does so occasionally now), and her bad chest kept her ill. She hated games, though she liked swimming and riding and was "absolutely fascinated" (Milton, 53) by the creatures in Sheffield's ditches, a love she and Frances of *The Realms of Gold* share. One of her childhood idols, Boadicea, the British queen who led a revolt against the Romans, is also shared with Frances. Only when being intelligent was acceptable, at about age thirteen or fourteen, did she have many friends.

Marriage

Drabble attended Newnham College, Cambridge, and, although she received double honors (a "starred first") in English, she describes her college life as "one long party" (Poland, 257) during which she did a great deal of very successful acting with her future husband. She married Clive Walter Swift in June 1960, during graduation week, and they joined the Royal Shakespeare Company. Everybody was "very nice" to her, but wives were like "stage furniture." She understudied Vanessa Redgrave but resented her career going nowhere (Coleman, 23).

Isolated in Stratford, pregnant, bored, and frustrated, Drabble elected the easiest career for her circumstances—writing. *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963) was a success with readers and critics. She wrote her first three novels while pregnant with Adam Richard George, Rebecca Margaret, and Joseph (named for the son in *The Garrick Year*), making them cover the time span of the actual writing, nine to twelve months. Because she either had to take the children to the theater or stay at home, she at length felt unable to keep "everything going" and left the stage to write.

When school time arrived, Drabble gradually stayed more often in London with the children. "Never particularly practical," Clive left her most of the family duties. She gave up a job writing television reviews for the *Daily Mail* because he feared she would hurt friends' feelings (Rozencajg, 346). The hiatus came when Drabble received an English Society of Authors scholarship for travel abroad. Despite the difficulties of mothering three children from one to six years in age and having Clive refuse to go to Paris with them because he

was working in a Chichester theater, she was "damned" if she would turn it down (Rozencwajg, 345). They were eventually divorced in 1975, and when he first left, she did not know if she would be able to write again. Later, she nearly sued a magazine that had her say women could write because they could live on their husbands' incomes (Poland, 259). Her novels teem with unhappy marriages and not particularly salutary portraits of the theatrical world. On the other hand, Drabble remained "enchanted" by Clive's family, "so unlike" her own (Hardin, 277).

The Writer at Home and at Work

Drabble lives in a red brick terrace house in Hampstead, North London, close enough in to bicycle to the British Museum to do research. Her living room is bright red, a color that recurs in the interiors described in her works. Her garden abuts the back wall of John Keats's house. She has rarely worked at home because of her children but went to an office in Bloomsbury three days a week except during school holidays.

A "natural" writer, part of her luck, Drabble does not usually revise and finds composition easy—the sentences "pour out." Typically, she begins writing at quarter of ten and works until lunch, occasionally later. She becomes irritable when the writing does not go well (Milton, 51) and wants to entertain and be lucid and readable. She is often cited as summing up the English attitude toward the experimental novel: she will not write one and prefers to be at the end of a dying tradition she admires than at the beginning of one she deplores.⁵

Drabble is modest but self-possessed enough to wear a floppy hat and carry a briefcase and to wonder why critics do not see the humor in her novels. Her interviews reveal her as extraordinarily busy and energetic and as accomplishing an amazing amount while feeling very ordinary: "There must be a lot of people like me" (the title of the Poland interview). If she had not been "lucky" enough to get a publisher forthwith, she would have kept on writing. She contributes regularly to British literary journals, periodicals, and papers; reviews books; writes and broadcasts for the BBC; and conducts interviews with such notables as Doris Lessing. Her reviews appear frequently in the *Listener*, whose literary editor knows what Drabble fancies (e.g., Horace Walpole's correspondence), but she is too hon-

orable to review fiction, a "sort of backbiting territory" (Rozencwajg, 347). She is a joint editor of the *New Stories* series and, with B. S. Johnson, has edited a group novel, *London Consequences* (1972). Her concern that literature be a serious illustration of ways of coping with life is present whether she is reviewing Virginia Woolf's letters, Doris Lessing's stories, or a biography of Frieda Lawrence or telling how Katherine Mansfield's short story "Miss Brill" affected her.

Drabble has written no poetry since the age of fifteen, but she has authored the plays *Laura*, produced by Granada Television in 1964, and *Bird of Paradise*, performed in London in 1969, and has written the screenplay *A Touch of Love* (1969) for the movie of *The Millstone*. She also has taught a course once a week at Morley College in London and included women novelists. All the while, she continues to read and reread literature with avidity and is revising the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*.

In addition to her writing, Drabble participates in worthy causes, including an annual lecture tour for the British Arts Council during which she lets children know they do not have to be ashamed of writing poetry. She served the Home Office in Whitehall Palace as a panelist examining the British right to privacy laws. Striking a decidedly women's liberationist note, she says that, when she arrived "worn out" from all she had already done that day, her colleagues were still quite fresh (Poland, 260). She has also been in demonstrations, including one for Dr. Benjamin Spock and one against the government's Rhodesia policies. When asked if demonstrating were not the "fashionable," "woman's page thing to do," she responded, with her usual grace and humor (and contradictoriness), that she is "very much a woman's page writer" (Coleman, 23). Elsewhere, she admits with the same drollery that she belongs to "the 'nose-in-the-washing-machine' school of fiction."⁶

The Drabble Canon

Passionately resisting solipsism, Drabble has moved from the semiautobiographical to a wider and wider canvas. Yet, although she claims some embarrassment for the early novels, they too were larger than self. In *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), Sarah is struggling with privilege as well as identity and is far more palatable, if no more believable, than Anne, her youngest heroine, in "A Pyrrhic

Victory" (1968). Emma (*The Garrick Year*, 1964) accommodates to marriage because of her children and an emergent understanding of limitation generally. In *The Millstone* (1965), independent Rosamund becomes less self-involved through Octavia but remains flawed. [Clara of *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) is the negative role model of acquisitiveness, though her shortcomings are lessened by her youth and background.] Another negative exemplar is Jane in *The Waterfall* (1969): talented but helpless, she is "lucky" enough to experience a classic love affair.

Critics often see Drabble's artistic and thematic breakthrough as *The Needle's Eye* (1972). It is a long novel of social concern that ends in compromise with the human situation as Rose, independent but helpless before the odds, denies the pull of the ascetic life she has carved and restores the family as family. The inclusion of a male protagonist is generally viewed as Drabble's declaration that she is not merely a "woman's writer."

But Drabble had already given a superb view from inside Gabriel's head in *Jerusalem the Golden* and sympathetic men in "Hassan's Tower" (1966), "A Voyage to Cythera" (1967), and "Crossing the Alps" (1969). While David causes trouble in *The Realms of Gold* (1975), Anthony becomes the main character in *The Ice Age* (1977). We quickly find that the human perspective, rather than the male or female, is uppermost in the novels. There are awful males (the husband in "A Day in the Life of a Smiling Woman," 1973) and awful females (Meg in "Homework," 1977-78). If no male is ever the equal of Drabble's "golden girl," Frances (*The Realms of Gold*), even she has very human problems, one of which, middle age, she shares with Anthony of *The Ice Age* and Kate of *The Middle Ground* (1980). Male and female are flawed in "The Reunion" (1968), and Kathie, of "A Success Story" (1972), is as "unsuccessful" as Jenny in "A Day in the Life of a Smiling Woman." *The Needle's Eye* in fact has much more in common with "The Gifts of War" (1970), another exploration of inequality and privilege. They forecast Drabble's maturing interest in human and near-cosmic concerns as finally blazoned forth in *The Ice Age*, the culmination of her worries about such matters as education and India, Africa, and Vietnam (Poland, 264). Afterward she perhaps felt entitled to return to a woman approximately her own age⁷ with Kate in *The Middle Ground*.

The critical works reveal similar commitments. Her monograph on Wordsworth (1966) presents that poet's concern for the "unlovely

people" of the world, for the diminution of one's powers with age, and for moments of integration, all of which are echoed throughout Drabble's works. Indeed, he, along with John Bunyan, has probably most influenced her thinking. Her biography of Arnold Bennett (1974) shows respect for ordinary people and the reconciliation with one's origins and past that is a constant Drabble theme. In the introduction to *The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (1976), which she edited, Drabble emphasizes universality achieved by focusing on the temporal and ordinary, a fair rendering of her own method. *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* (1979) is also an apt statement of her aims in its delineation of "every writer's work" as "a record both of himself and of the age in which he lives, as well as of the particular places he describes."⁸ As a writer, Margaret Drabble remains true to herself and her experiences and yet remarkably true to the human spirit and condition.