

Margaret Drabble

The Millstone

Margaret Drabble

The Millstone



Penguin Books

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street, New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1965

Published in Penguin Books 1968

Reprinted 1969 (twice), 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1976 (twice),

1977 (twice), 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982 (twice), 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986

Copyright © Margaret Drabble, 1965

All rights reserved

Made and Printed in Great Britain by

Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

Set in Intertype Times

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

Penguin Books
The Millstone

Margaret Drabble was born in Sheffield in 1939 and went to the Mount School, York, a Quaker boarding school. She won a Major Scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, where she read English and received a double first. She won a travel award in 1966 from the Society of Authors, received the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1973 and was awarded the C.B.E. in 1980.

She has written the following novels: *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965, filmed as *A Touch of Love* in 1969), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), *The Waterfall* (1969), *The Needle's Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977) and *The Middle Ground* (1980). (All of these are published in Penguin.) She has also published a short critical book on Wordsworth, a television play and various articles, as well as *London Consequences* (1972, edited with B. S. Johnson), *Arnold Bennett: a biography* (1974), *The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (edited, 1976) and *A Writer's Britain* (1980).

Margaret Drabble has three children.

Margaret Drabble

The Millstone



Penguin Books

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street, New York, New York 10010, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1965

Published in Penguin Books 1968

Reprinted 1969 (twice), 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1976 (twice),

1977 (twice), 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982 (twice), 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986

Copyright © Margaret Drabble, 1965

All rights reserved

Made and Printed in Great Britain by

Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

Set in Intertype Times

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

My career has always been marked by a strange mixture of confidence and cowardice: almost, one might say, made by it. Take, for instance, the first time I tried spending a night with a man in a hotel. I was nineteen at the time, an age appropriate for such adventures, and needless to say I was not married. I am still not married, a fact of some significance, but more of that later. The name of the boy, if I remember rightly, was Hamish. I do remember rightly. I really must try not to be deprecating. Confidence, not cowardice, is the part of myself which I admire, after all.

Hamish and I had just come down from Cambridge at the end of the Christmas term: we had conceived our plan well in advance, and had each informed our parents that term ended a day later than it actually did, knowing quite well that they would not be interested enough to check, nor sufficiently *au fait* to ascertain the value of their information if they did. So we arrived in London together in the late afternoon, and took a taxi from the station to our destined hotel. We had worked everything out, and had even booked our room, which would probably not have been necessary, as the hotel we had selected was one of those large central cheap-smart ones, specially designed for adventures such as ours. I was wearing a gold curtain ring on the relevant finger. We had decided to stick to Hamish's own name, which, being Andrews, was unmemorable enough, and less confusing than having to think up a pseudonym. We were well educated, the two of us, in the pitfalls of such occasions, having both of us read at one time in our lives a good deal of cheap fiction, and indeed we both carried ourselves with considerable aplomb. We arrived, unloaded our suitably-labelled suitcases, and called at the desk for our key.

It was here that I made my mistake. For some reason I was requested to sign the register: I now know that it is by no means customary for wives to sign hotel registers, and can only assume that I was made to do so because of the status of the hotel, or because I was hanging around guiltily waiting to be asked. Anyway, when I got to it, I signed it in my maiden name: Rosamund Stacey, I wrote, as large as can be, in my huge childish hand, underneath a neatly illegible Hamish Andrews. I did not even see what I had done until I handed it back to the girl, who looked at my signature, gave a sigh of irritation, and said, 'Now then, what do you mean by this?'

She did not say this with amusement, or with venom, or with reprobation: but with a weary crossness. I was making work for her, I could see that at a glance: I was stopping the machinery, because I had accidentally told the truth. I had meant to lie, and she had expected me to lie, but for some deeply rooted Freudian reason I had forgotten to do so. While she was drawing Hamish's attention to my error, I stood there overcome with a kind of bleak apologetic despair. I had not meant to make things difficult. Hamish got out of it as best he could, cracking a few jokes about the recentness of our wedding: she did not smile at them, but took them for what they were, and when he had finished she picked up the register and said,

'Oh well, I'll have to go and ask.'

Then she disappeared through a door at the back of her reception box, leaving Hamish and me side by side but not particularly looking at each other.

'Oh hell,' I said, after a while. 'I'm so sorry, dearest, I just wasn't thinking.'

'I don't suppose it matters,' he said.

And of course it did not matter: after a couple of minutes the girl returned, expressionless as ever, without the register, and said that that was all right, and gave us our key. I suppose my name is still there. And its inscription there in all that suspect company is as misleading and hypocritical as everything else about me and my situation, for Hamish and I were not even sleeping together, though every day for a year or so

we thought we might be about to. We took rooms in hotels and spent nights in each other's colleges, partly for fun and partly because we liked each other's company. In those days, at that age, such things seemed possible and permissible: and as I did them, I thought that I was creating love and the terms of love in my own way and in my own time. I did not realize the dreadful facts of life. I did not know that a pattern forms before we are aware of it, and that what we think we make becomes a rigid prison making us. In ignorance and innocence I built my own confines, and by the time I was old enough to know what I had done, there was no longer time to undo it.

When Hamish and I loved each other for a whole year without making love, I did not realize that I had set the mould of my whole life. One could find endless reasons for our abstinence – fear, virtue, ignorance, perversion – but the fact remains that the Hamish pattern was to be endlessly repeated, and with increasing velocity and lack of depth, so that eventually the idea of love ended in me almost the day that it began. Nothing succeeds, they say, like success, and certainly nothing fails like failure. I was successful in my work, so I suppose other successes were too much to hope for. I can remember Hamish well enough: though I cannot now quite recollect the events of our parting. It happened, that is all. Anyway, it is of no interest, except as an example of my incompetence, both practical and emotional. My attempts at anything other than my work have always been abortive. My attempt at abortion, for instance, must be a quite classic illustration of something: of myself, if of nothing else.

When, some years after the Hamish episode, I found that I was pregnant, I went through slightly more than the usual degrees of incredulity and shock, for reasons which I doubtless shall be unable to restrain myself from recounting: there was nobody to tell, nobody to ask, so I was obliged once more to fall back on the dimly reported experiences of friends and information I had gleaned through the years from cheap fiction. I never at any point had any intention of going to a doctor: I had not been ill for so many years that I was unaware even of the procedure for visiting one, and felt that

even if I did get round to it I would be reprimanded like a schoolchild for my state. I did not feel much in the mood for reproof. So I kept it to myself, and thought that I would try at least to deal with it by myself. It took me some time to summon up the courage: I sat for a whole day in the British Museum, damp with fear, staring blankly at the open pages of Samuel Daniel, and thinking about gin. I knew vaguely about gin, that it was supposed to do something or other to the womb, quinine or something I believe, and that combined with a hot bath it sometimes works, so I decided that other girls had gone through with it, so why not me. One might be lucky. I had no idea how much gin one was supposed to consume, but I had a nasty feeling that it was a whole bottle: the prospect of this upset me both physically and financially. I grudged the thought of two pounds on a bottle of gin, just to make myself ill. However, I couldn't pretend that I couldn't afford it, and it was relatively cheap compared with other methods, so I grimly turned the pages of Daniel and decided that I would give it a try. As I turned the pages, a very handy image, thesis-wise, caught my attention, and I noted it down. Lucky in work, unlucky in love. Love is of man's life a thing apart, 'tis woman's whole existence, as Byron mistakenly remarked.

On the way home I called in at Unwin's and bought a bottle of gin. As the man handed it to me over the counter, wrapped in its white tissue paper, I wished that I were purchasing it for some more festive reason. I walked down Marylebone High Street with it, looking in the shop windows and feeling rather as though I were looking my last on the expensive vegetables and the chocolate rabbits and the cosy antiques. I would not have minded looking my last on the maternity clothes: it was unfortunate, in view of subsequent events, that the region I then inhabited was positively crammed with maternity shops and boutiques for babies, so that I could not walk down the street without being confronted by the reproachful image of a well-dressed, flat-bellied model standing and displaying with studied grace and white glass hair some chic and classy garment. The sight of them that night made

me clutch the neck of my gin bottle all the more tightly, and I turned off towards the street I lived in with determination in my heart.

I was living at that time in a flat that belonged to my parents, which dangerously misrepresented my status. My parents were in Africa for a couple of years; my father had gone to a new University as Professor of Economics, to put them on the right track. He was on the right track himself, or he would not have been invited. They had their flat on a fifteen year lease, and they said that while they were away I could have it, which was kind of them as they could have let it for a lot of money. They disapproved very strongly, however, of the property situation, and were unwilling to become involved in it except on a suffering and sacrificial basis: so their attitude was not pure kindness, but partly at least a selfish abstinence from guilt. I profited, anyway: it was a nice flat, on the fourth floor of a large block of an early twentieth-century building, and in very easy reach of Regent's Park, Oxford Circus, Marylebone High Street, Harley Street, and anywhere else useful that one can think of. The only disadvantage was that people would insist on assuming that because I lived there I was rather rich: which by any human standards I was, having about five hundred a year in various research grants and endowments: but this, of course, was not at all rich in the eyes of the people who habitually made such assumptions. In fact, had they known the truth they would have classed me on the starvation line, and would have ceased to make remarks about the extreme oldness of my shoes. My parents did not support me at all, beyond the rent-free accommodation, though they could have afforded to do so: but they believed in independence. They had drummed the idea of self-reliance into me so thoroughly that I believed dependence to be a fatal sin. Emancipated woman, this was me: gin bottle in hand, opening my own door with my own latchkey.

When I found myself alone in the flat, I began to feel really frightened. It seemed a violent and alarming thing to do, almost as violent and alarming as the act which had engendered

this necessity, and, moreover, this time I had no company. This time I was on my own. In a way that made it better: at least nobody could see. I put the bottle on the kitchen dresser with the other bottles, most of which were empty except for half an inch or so, and looked at my watch. It was half past six. I did not feel that I ought to start at half past six, and yet there did not seem to be anything else to do: I could not see myself settling down to a couple of hours' work. Nor did I think I should have anything to eat, though I was rather hungry. So I walked up and down the hall corridor for a while, and was just going into the bedroom to get undressed when the doorbell rang. I started nervously, as though caught out in an act of crime, and yet with a reprieved relief, anything being slightly better than what I was contemplating: and the people I found at the door were really quite a lot better. As soon as I saw them, I knew how very pleased I was to see them, and asked them in with cheerful goodwill.

'You weren't just about to go out, were you, Rosamund?' said Dick, walking into the kitchen and sitting on the table. 'One never can tell with you. You lead such a secret life. We thought we might take you to see the new Fellini. But you probably saw it weeks ago.'

'What a kind thought,' I said.

'Have you seen it?' asked Lydia. 'If you have, don't say a word, as I feel I want to like it, and I shan't like it if you didn't. Or if you did, come to that. So express no opinions, please.'

'I haven't seen it,' I said. 'Where's it on?'

'At the Cameo-Poly. Regent Street.'

'Oh,' I said. 'No, I'm not going there. I don't go down Regent Street any more.'

'Why ever not?'

'I just don't, that's all,' I said. It was the truth, too, and it gave me some comfort to tell them so, when they could not know the reason, or care for it had they known it.

'More of your secret life,' said Dick. 'Won't you really come, then?'

'No, I really won't. I've got some work to do this evening.'

'Seen Mike lately?' said Dick quickly, who was always afraid, quite without precedent or reason, that I was about to lecture him on the Elizabethan sonnet sequences.

'Not for weeks,' I said.

Alex, who had hitherto been silently pulling bits off a loaf of bread he was carrying, suddenly remarked,

'Why don't we all go out and have a drink?'

I was well brought up. Immediately, without a second thought, I said 'Oh no, why don't you have a drink here?' and as Dick, Lydia and Alex all fitted into the category of those who overrated my means, they all accepted instantly. As soon as I had said the words, I realized that they had had their eyes on my bottle of gin anyway: they had probably followed me from the shop. I poured them a glass each, and then decided that there was no point in abstaining myself, and poured another for me. Then we all went and sat down in the sitting-room and talked. Dick talked about a parcel he had tried to post earlier that day, and how first the post office had said it was too heavy, and then they said the string was wrong, and then they had gone and shut while he was straightening out the string. We said what was in the parcel, and he said some bricks for his nephew's birthday. Then Lydia told us about how when she had sent off her first novel to her first publisher's she had handed it into the post office and said politely, in her would-be modest, middle class voice, Could I register this, please, expecting the answer Yes certainly, Ma'am: but the man had said, quite simply, No. This, too, had turned out to be a question of sealing wax and string, but she had taken it for some more prophetic assessment of her packet's worth, and had indeed been so shaken by its unexpected rejection that she had taken it back home with her and put it in a drawer for another three months. 'Then,' she said, 'when I finally did post it off, the letter inside was three months old, so by the time they got round to reading it, it was six months old, so when I rang up after three months and told them they'd had it six months they believed me. If you see what I mean.'

We didn't, quite, but we laughed, and had some more gin, and told some more stories, this time about the literary achievements of our various acquaintances. This proved a fruitful topic, as all of us there had some pretensions to writing of one kind or another, though Lydia was the only one who would have considered herself a creative artist. I myself was wholly uncreative, and spent my life on thorough and tedious collating of certain sixteenth-century poetic data, a task which enthralled me, but which was generally considered to be useless. However, I was also acknowledged to have a good critical mind in other spheres, and did from time to time a little reviewing and a good deal of reading of friends' plays and poems and novels and correspondence. Dick, for example, had entrusted to me one or two of his works, hitherto unpublished and, in my opinion, unpublishable. One was a novel, of great incidental charm and talent, but totally defective in plot and, even worse, in time scheme: I do not care very much for plots myself, but I do like to have a sequence of events. His characters had no relationship with time at all: it was impossible to tell what event preceded what, and whether a particular scene lasted for hours or days, or whether it occurred hours, days or years later than the preceding scene - or indeed perhaps before it, one simply could not tell. I pointed this out to Dick and he was startled and alarmed because he could not see what I meant, which implied that the defect must have been integral and not technical. He earned his living by writing something or other for a television company, but he was not wholly committed to his work. Alex, on the other hand, was as committed as I was: he was working for an advertising agency, writing copy, and was thoroughly enraptured by his job. He was at heart rather a serious puritanical young man, and I think it gave him great pleasure to live in such a wicked warm atmosphere, all jokes and deceitfulness, prostituting his talent. He had a great flair for copy, too, and was forever reading aloud his better 'flogans from stray magazines and papers. He wrote poetry on the quiet, and actually published a piece or two once every two years. Lydia was the only one who had really made it: she had pub-

lished a couple of novels, but had now for some time been mooching around London moaning that she had nothing else to say. Nobody sympathized with her at all, understandably: she was only twenty-six, so what had she to worry about?

In view of her state, she seized with delight upon any stories of the atrocity of other people's latest books, of which we managed to offer a kindly few.

'It's no good, anyway,' said Dick, after dismissing Joe Hurt's latest with a derisive sneer, 'churning them out like that, one a year. Mechanical, that's what it is.'

'A bit more mechanism wouldn't hurt you,' I said gaily. I was on my second large gin.

Lydia, who had hitherto been accepting our devious comfort, suddenly turned on us with a wail of despondency.

'I don't care *what* you say,' she said, 'it's better to write bad books than no books, it really is. Writing nothing is - is nothing, just nothing. It's wonderful to turn out one a year, I think Joe Hurt is wonderful, I admire it, I admire that kind of thing.'

'You haven't read it,' said Dick.

'That's not the point,' said Lydia, 'it's the effort, that's the point.'

'Why don't you write a bad book then?' I asked. 'I bet you could write a bad book if you wanted to. Couldn't you?'

'Not if I *knew* it was bad while I was writing it. I couldn't do it. I couldn't get it done.'

'What a romantic view of literary creation,' said Dick.

'Speak for yourself,' said Lydia crossly. 'Get yours published, and then start calling me romantic. Pass the gin, Rosie, there's a darling.'

'Anyway,' said Alex, who had by now eaten half his loaf, 'if you ask me, Joe Hurt knew quite well how bad his book was while he was writing it. It reeks of conscious badness on every page. Don't you think so, Rosie?'

'I haven't read it,' I said. 'But you know what Joe always says. Nobody ever wrote a masterpiece before the age of thirty-five, Joe says, so that gives me another six years, says Joe.'

'Still going out with Joe, Rosie?'

'I'm still seeing him. Do stop calling me Rosie, who gave you that idea?'

'Lydia. She called you Rosie just now.'

'She likes diminishing people. It makes her feel better, doesn't it, Lyd?'

At this we all laughed loudly, and I reached for the gin and noticed with horror and dismay that it was half gone, more than half gone. Sudden pressing memories of what I had never quite forgotten came upon me, and I looked at my watch and said that wasn't it time they all went off to see their Fellini film. They were not at all easy to dislodge, having sunk down very thoroughly and chattily into my parents' extra-comfortable old deep chairs, where they had an air of being held like animals in the warmth of the central heating: they waved their arms and said they would rather stay and talk, and I almost hoped they might, and might indeed have sunk back into my chair myself, taking as ever the short-term view, the easy quiet way, when Alex suddenly had a thought. I knew what it was as soon as he sat upright and looked worried and uneasy: he thought that I had been hurt by what they had said about Hurt, as I well might have been, though in fact was not. I knew, however, as soon as I saw the reflection of this possibility upon his face, that they would go: and go they did, scrupulous as ever about personal relationships, just as they were unscrupulous about gin. I kept them talking for five minutes on the threshold, gazing anxiously from one to the other; pretty, tendril-haired Dick; hatchet-headed Alex with his stooping stork shoulders; and pale, cross, nail-chewing, eye-twitching, beautiful Lydia Reynolds, in her dirty Aquascutum macintosh. I wondered if I could ask any of them to stay and share my ordeal, and it crossed my mind later that they would actually have enjoyed such a request, all three of them together: they would have leaped with alacrity at the prospect of such a sordid, stirring, copy-providing evening. But then, my thoughts obscured by need, I did not see it that way, and I let them go and see Fellini without me.

When they had gone I wandered back into the sitting-room