AUTHOR OF *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

MARGARET ATWOOD

Book of Lives

A Memoir of Sorts

ALSO BY MARGARET ATWOOD

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BOOK OF LIVES

✦

A MEMOIR OF SORTS

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MARGARET ATWOOD

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For my family, friends, and readers

And for Graeme, as always

You were such a sensitive child!

—MY MOTHER

But I'm quite flinty now.

—ME

Yes. You are.

—MY DAUGHTER

One of these days that smart mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble.

—MY FATHER, WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER

She would have made such a fine Victorianist.

—JERRY BUCKLEY, MY THESIS ADVISER

If she'd never met me, your mother would still have been a successful writer, but she wouldn't have had as much fun.

—GRAEME GIBSON, MY PARTNER, TO OUR DAUGHTER

Don't piss her off, or you will live forever.

—JULIAN PORTER, MY FRIEND

INTRODUCTION

I almost expected to see my doppelgänger sprinting across town pursued by a mob, but I guess things didn't work that way.

—RANSOM RIGGS, *MISS PEREGRINE'S HOME FOR PECULIAR CHILDREN*

Some years ago, I was asked to make a stunt appearance on a comedy show. The host, Rick Mercer, was doing a series in which people well known for one kind of accomplishment, such as writing, astonished viewers by doing something different and entirely unrelated, such as rolling a joint.

"I want you to be a hockey goalie," Rick said.

"Oh, I don't think so," I said. "Couldn't I just maybe bake a pie or something?"

"No. You gotta be a goalie."

"Why?"

"Because it'll be funny. Trust me."

So I was a goalie, in a full set of pads, with gloves and a stick. There I am on YouTube, still goalie-ing it up; and yes, it is kind of funny.

I wore my own little white figure skates with black socks over them to make them look like hockey skates. But you can't slide and stack the pads in figure skates, so those feats were performed by a body double—an accomplished women's hockey player. With her face mask on, you can't tell that it isn't me. It's the job of the body double to take the risks you yourself are too sedate or chicken or unaccomplished to take.

I wish I could have a body double in my real life, I thought. *It would come in so handy.*

Of course, I do have one. Every writer does. The body double appears as soon as you start writing. How can it be otherwise? There's the daily you, and then there's the other person who does the actual writing. They aren't the same.

But in my case, there are more than two. There are lots.

—

Some months after my sixth novel, *The Handmaid's Tale,* had been published, I was doing a book event to promote it. During audience question time—with open mics, which many folks present used to deliver sermons—a man gave his opinion.

"So, *The Handmaid's Tale* is autobiography," he said. It wasn't a question.

"No, it's not," I said.

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not. It's set in the future," I said.

"That's no excuse," he said.

He was wrong, needless to say. Within my own lived experience, I had not donned a red outfit and a white bonnet and been coerced into procreating for the top brass of a theological hierarchy. But in a very broad sense, he was right. Everything that gets into your writing has gone through your mind in some form. You may mix and match and create new chimeras, but the primary materials have to have travelled through your head. Is "autobiography" only a series of events that have happened to you in the physical world, or is it also a record of an inner journey? Is it like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (here's how I made my hut), or is it more like Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (here's why I changed my faith)?

When the idea of writing a "literary memoir" first sprang up (from whom? Memory shrugs, but it was someone in publishing), I replied to her, or him, or them: "That would be tedious. You've heard the bad joke about

the old East Coast fisherman counting fish? 'One fish, two fish, another fish, another fish, another fish…' So, my 'literary memoir' would go, 'I wrote a book, I wrote a second book, I wrote another book, I wrote another book…' Dead boring. Who wants to read about someone sitting at a desk messing up blank sheets of paper?"

"Oh, that's not what we meant!" they said. "We meant a memoir in, you know, a literary *style*!"

This was even more baffling. What would that be like? Eighteenth-century mock-heroic couplets?

> Lo, when Dawn's rosy fingers do the curtains part,
> Down sit I at my desk to labour at mine Art.

Or something more in the Gothic flamboyant style of, for instance, Poe?

> A thousand brightly hued images whirled within my dizzied brain, and menacing phantoms thronged the shadowy corners of my tapestried chamber. In a frenzy I seized my enchanted quill, and ignoring the large blot of ink now taking demonic shape on the dazzling sheet of snowy parchment before me, I…

No, it would not do.

One of the first interviews I ever did with a newspaper reporter was in 1967. I had—much to my surprise, as well as everyone else's—just won the only major literary prize in Canada at that time, the Governor General's Award, for my first collection of poetry, *The Circle Game.* I was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, studying for my Ph.D. at Harvard. A Canadian newspaper decided it had better acknowledge my prize-winning, and had directed a war reporter on his way back from Vietnam to do an interview with me. I expect his friends made relentless fun of him. *Interviewed any more girl poets lately?*

I had on a red minidress and fishnet stockings. The reporter wasn't wearing a flak jacket, but he might as well have been. We sat in a café. He

looked at me. I looked at him. We were both at a loss.

Finally, he said, “Say something interesting. Say you write all your poetry on drugs.”

Is this the kind of thing that would be expected of me in a literary memoir? Alcoholism, debauched parties, drug-taking, flagrant sexual transgressions, with the writing itself treated as a by-product that had oozed or sprouted from the compost heap of my outrageous behaviour? But that wasn’t how I’d spent my time, or most of it.

“I think maybe not,” I said to those who’d made the literary memoir suggestion. Or did I say it to myself? In any case, the important word was *not.*

—

Time passed, however, and the idea of a memoir acquired a lurid phosphorescent glow. Wasn’t there something appealing in the idea? my sinister alter ego whispered. I could depict myself in a flattering light, casting a gauzy haze over my stupider or wickeder actions while blaming them on others. At the same time, I could thank my benefactors, reward my friends, trash my enemies, and pay off scores long forgotten by everyone but me. I could spill some beans, I could dish some tea.

After he’d published *Fifth Business* in 1970, when he was almost sixty, the novelist Robertson Davies was asked why he’d waited so long to resume novel-writing after his early comic successes. His answer was two words: “People…died.”

It’s true. People die, and after they do, things may be said about them that might have been held back before. But—I told myself—I wouldn’t have to confine myself to this kind of squalid moral bookkeeping. I could embark on a journey in search of my own authentic inner self, supposing there is such a thing. At the very least, I could examine the many images of myself that have materialized and then vanished over the years, a few concocted by me, but many—less positive and sometimes downright frightening—projected onto me by others. I have been asked some very

strange questions. “Why is your mouth so small?” one letter-writer queried. “Why are there so many bottles in your work?” I was asked at a reading, “Is your hair really like that, or do you get it done?” One of my favourite questions, posed in a gymnasium after a reading in a small town in the Ottawa Valley, where no living writer had ever been before.

In some variants of myself, I terrify interviewers; in others, I cause pathetic whining in politicians. One glance from my baleful eyes and strong men weep, clutching their groins, lest I freeze their gonads to stone with my Medusa eyes.

My Medusa eyes go with my Medusa hair, which used to be referenced in book reviews, back when invective was more uninhibited and body-shaming was the norm, especially when men were reviewing women. A scary thing, curly and/or frizzy and/or Pre-Raphaelite hair; and if you wore it down, how unruly and indeed demented you must be—a descendant of all those nineteenth-century female literary creations who wandered the countryside or jumped off castle roofs, or earlier ones like Ophelia who floated down rivers, crazy as bedbugs, tresses rippling. No wonder female writers of earlier generations went in for tight buns and—later—carefully varnished cold waves.

Witches, of course, unbound their hair in order to cast spells, unleash tornados, and seduce men: perhaps some of these beliefs lingered among male cultural commentators of the mid-twentieth century, and contributed to my witchy reputation. Or the connection may be left over from the 1950s and early 1960s, a time when a female person who wrote anything but the ladies’ pages was considered not only unnaturally powerful but a borderline lunatic. Or maybe it comes from the early 1970s, in which energetic language from females was equated with bra-burning, man-knackering, and other unfeminine pursuits. The novelist Margaret Laurence—from an earlier generation—used to complain that because she had children, she wasn’t treated as a serious writer but as an inoffensive cookie-baking mum: “just a housewife.” I, on the other hand, found myself making the opposite protest: when I wasn’t flying through the air in the shape of a bat, I would declare that I could turn out a decent Christmas cake and knit a few

sweaters while I was at it. This is a very old dichotomy: on the one hand, a woman doing woman stuff; on the other hand, a serious writer with a knife up her sleeve.

"She writes like a man," a fellow poet said of me in the early 1970s, intending a compliment.

"You forgot the punctuation," I told him. "What you meant was, 'She writes. Like a man.' " Ripostes of this kind came in handy at the time.

If I embarked on this memoir venture, I mused, I could scrutinize these various images, plus a few others not usually considered. Am I at heart the ringleted, tap-dancing moppet of 1945? The crinolined, saddle-shoed rock 'n' roller of 1955? The studious budding poet and short-story writer of 1965? The alarming female published novelist and part-time farm-runner of 1975? Or the version possibly most well known: the bad typist beginning *The Handmaid's Tale* in Berlin, finishing it in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and then publishing it, to mixed reviews, in 1985?

Other renditions of me have followed. As the years pass, I have waxed and waned in the public view, though growing inevitably older. I have dimmed and flickered, I have blazed and shot out sparks, I have acquired saintly haloes and infernal horns. Who would not wish to explore these funhouse mirrors?

Perhaps I am a liminal being, partaker of two natures, guardian of thresholds, shapeshifting almost at will; a sort of Baba Yaga, sometimes benevolent, sometimes punitive, dwelling in a woodland hut that runs around on chicken legs, propelling my way in a mortar with a pestle for an oar, humming a cheerful though somehow menacing tune.

In my case the tune is most likely the dwarfs-marching-to-work song from the Disney film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,* which traumatized me as a child. It's sacred to short workaholics, of which I am one, but the trauma came from elsewhere: I was petrified at the age of six by the transformation scene, in which the good-looking queen drinks a magic potion, turns green, and morphs into a warty old hag. How horrifying, yet how essential! The pretty, tuneful Snow White is acted upon, but she doesn't act; it's the wicked queen who has the best scenes. Every writer

knows this is the truth. And every writer also knows that without the wicked queen, or her avatars—the alien invasion, the hurricane, the marriage-breaker, the sinister assassin, the snakes on a plane, the killer in the country house—there is no plot.

—

Every writer is at least two beings: the one who lives, and the one who writes. Every question-and-answer session at a book event is an illusion; it's the one doing the living, not the one doing the writing, who is present on such occasions. How could the writer be there, since no writing is being done at that moment? Like Jekyll and Hyde, the two share a memory and even a wardrobe. Though everything written must have passed through their minds, or mind, they are not the same.

The one doing the writing has access to everything in the memory bank. The one doing the living might have some idea of what the writing self has been up to, but less than you'd think. While you're writing, you aren't observing yourself doing it, because if you start studying your so-called process while in full flight, you'll freeze.

Is writing a trance state, as Coleridge's story about his writing of "Kubla Khan" might suggest? Not quite: you can break off, go for a coffee, answer the phone, show every sign of normality. Or I can. Yet the sensation of something else taking over can't be ignored; too many writers have testified to it. Flow state, inspiration, characters seizing the initiative from their authors, dream visions, out-of-body experiences—these kinds of testimonies are too numerous to be dismissed.

On top of that, perhaps there are (at least) two models of writer: devotees of the lyre-strumming Apollo, highly conscious of structure and harmony, with his bevy of Muses; and those who call instead upon Hermes, god of tricks and jokes and messages, concealer and revealer of secrets, patron of travellers and thieves, conductor of souls to the Underworld. If you're doing a revision of a draft, you need Apollo; if you're stuck mid-plot, you might invoke Hermes, opener of doors, though there is no guarantee about what

might lie behind that door. That the two gods are joined at the hip is evident in their mythic origin stories: it was Hermes who made Apollo's lyre in the first place. Most cultures have a version of this duality, since both form and energy are needed for any work of art.

To this we might add Bacchus, god of wine, proponent of divine intoxication, dissolver of inhibitions. Quite a few writers have written while under the influence of something or other. In my case it was caffeine.

—

Some writers are fond of talking about their "material." Marian Engel, author of the novel *Bear,* was telling me about her damaging experiences as a young child, when she and her twin were put up for adoption: they'd been separated because her twin was violently attacking her. Then she said, "Copyright." Meaning: that was *her* material, not mine. She was writing about these early experiences of hers when she died.

But where does all the assorted "material" come from? It comes from what is loosely known as your life and times. Things happen to you, or you hear about them. Big things and small things. Some of them impact you, or stick to you. You can't avoid the time-space you're living in. Nobody can. Your writing will always be done in it and will be connected to it, even if your book is set on another planet or in another century. It cannot be otherwise.

So, inescapably, I'll have to describe the features of my own time-spaces if I wish to cast any light on this writing thing. Be prepared for descriptions of outmoded technologies, such as ice houses and milk cupboards, and for explanations of archaic social rituals, such as sock hops and going steady. Also for thumbnail sketches of fashions of the time, such as pantsuits, miniskirts, A-line dresses, and the Ethnic Look.

I move through time, and, when I write, time moves through me. It's the same for everyone. You can't stop time, nor can you seize it; it slips away, like the Liffey River in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake.* Memories can be vivid

though unreliable; diaries can distort. Nevertheless, each life has its own particular flavours and textures, and I will attempt to evoke those of mine.

Because memoirs need to have photos, I've been going through the horde: my mother's and father's early twentieth-century albums, with the black-and-white snapshots stuck in it with the little corners—grandparents, great-aunts, vintage automobiles that were brand new then, horses, covered bridges. Then the 1930s and 1940s: I appear, I roll around on the floor, I stand up, I grow hair, I sprout teeth. At age eight I receive a Kodak Brownie and take pictures of my cat wearing a bonnet, my brother wielding snowballs and making faces, anomalous trees, unidentifiable children. Other albums provide shots of high-school formals, graduations, amateur theatricals. My first poetry readings.

Then book-cover photos. More of those. Now things are getting literary. Next come the newspaper and magazine shots, some grainy, others glossy; in the latter I'm frequently not wearing my own clothes, since wardrobe stylists had now been invented. I treasure the memory of one photo shoot in which I was asked to take off all my black clothing and put on other black clothing in which I looked exactly the same. Then there was the time I went to Finland and found myself sitting in the makeup room of a television station. Quick as a wink, my hair was being set in hot rollers in an attempt to flatten it out: the Finns were not used to my kind of hair. They must have been trying to keep me from embarrassing myself in public. (They weren't the first or last to make this attempt. Few have succeeded.) In more personal layers of pictures, there's my own family, at many ages and stages.

It's overwhelming, sorting out the blizzard of images. Whatever are we to do with it, this accumulation? I've managed to weed out the shots I inadvertently took of the floor, my feet, the inside of my purse, but the others…They hover in the air, fading but still visible, small flickers of what was once lived. How cold was it that day, what did we have for lunch, were we happy?

As I revisit my writing past, I've been having strange dreams. I've been conversing with the dead: the benevolent dead, mostly. I've been unearthing my early and luckily unpublished writings, and mortifying myself by

reading them. I've been trying to recapture my state of mind at the time. Wrong turnings, crinolines, abandoned plots, nylons with seams, canoes, lost loves. It's all material. What will I make of it?