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# MOVING TARGETS

FICTION

- The Edible Woman* (1969)  
*Surfacing* (1972)  
*Lady Oracle* (1976)  
*Dancing Girls* (1977)  
*Life Before Man* (1979)  
*Bodily Harm* (1981)  
*Murder in the Dark* (1983)  
*Bluebeard's Egg* (1983)  
*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)  
*Cat's Eye* (1988)  
*Wilderness Tips* (1991)  
*Good Bones* (1992)  
*The Robber Bride* (1993)  
*Alias Grace* (1996)  
*The Blind Assassin* (2000)  
*Good Bones and Simple Murders* (2001)  
*Oryx and Crake* (2003)

NONFICTION

- Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972)  
*Days of the Rebels 1815–1840* (1977)  
*Second Words: Selected Critical Prose 1960–1982* (1982)  
*Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1996)  
*Two Solitudes: Conversations* [with Victor-Lévy Beaulieu] (1998)  
*Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002)

POETRY

- Double Persephone* (1961)  
*The Circle Game* (1966)  
*The Animals in That Country* (1968)

*The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970)*

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*Procedures for Underground (1970)*

*Power Politics (1971)*

*You Are Happy (1974)*

*Selected Poems (1976)*

*Two-Headed Poems (1978)*

*True Stories (1981)*

*Interlunar (1984)*

*Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New, 1976–1986 (1986)*

*Morning in the Burned House (1995)*

FOR CHILDREN

*Up in the Tree (1978)*

*Anna's Pet [with Joyce Barkhouse] (1980)*

*For the Birds (1990)*

*Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut (1995)*

*Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes (2003)*

*Bashful Bob and Doleful Dorinda (2004)*

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# MOVING TARGETS

WRITING WITH INTENT  
1982–2004

MARGARET ATWOOD



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## INTRODUCTION

MOVING TARGETS is a companion volume to *Second Words*, the selection of my essays and forays into journalism published in 1982. In 1982 I was forty-two; I thought of myself as quite elderly. It's now twenty-two years later and I still think that, though — paradoxically — less frequently. The big difference between past and present is that I now know more of the plot. I suspect how all this is going to turn out for me in the long run, but if time runs true to form there are still some surprises left.

Like *Second Words*, *Moving Targets* consists of occasional pieces; that is, pieces written for specific occasions. The occasions in *Second Words* ranged from the appearance of a book by someone else, germinating — on my part — a review, to a public gathering — thus giving rise to a speech — to an anthology or Festschrift, for which some sort of focused observation was requested. This pattern continues in *Moving Targets*. Occasionally these essays have been in-aid-of: they've been fundraisers, they've been worthy-cause bandages, they've been dragon-slayings or Blue Fairy wand-wavings. Having had my character ruined by the Brownies and the Girl Guides in my youth, I have a difficult time resisting such lend-a-hand appeals.

A Brownie always gives in to the older folk, a Brownie never gives in to herself; but inevitably there comes a day when you gaze into the magic mirror and realize that, *faute de mieux*, you are the older folk, since most of the legitimate claimants to that title have died off. It's no coincidence that there was only one obituary-like piece in *Second Words*, but there are — sadly — rather more of them in *Moving Targets*.

Being the older folks has its upside, however. You're no longer too anxious about ruining your reputation, because it's far too late for that. Nor do you worry much about antagonizing this or that reviewer: everything bad that can be said about you has already been said, more than once. You know that fame is a mixed blessing, because for every statue of a worthy notable such as you are said to have become, there are at least a hundred pigeons roosting on its head. You know, too, that from the point of view of the younger generations — and how many of these younger generations there seem to be! — you're sort of dead already, because isn't everyone whose work is studied in high school sort of dead?

But some latitude may be accorded you as well: the kind of thing that might have got you called mean, dangerous, radical redtoothed bitch when you were thirty may now be treated as the scatterbrained utterance of a cute old biddy. I'm not quite there yet, but I can see the turnoff.

What else has changed? When I began reviewing, it was 1960, I was still at university, and I wrote for the college magazine. I moved on to small literary reviews — I wrote a lot about poetry then — and eventually I found myself appearing in larger places such as the *Globe and Mail*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. This is where *Second Words* ended: it was 1982, the women's movement had run through its exciting but exhausting 1970s period and was taking a breather, Canadian cultural nationalism appeared to have achieved many of its goals, *post-modernism* and *deconstruction* were the critical catchphrases of the day, the era of dot-coms was almost upon us, few people as yet had either fax machines or personal computers, and there were no cellphones. I was the mother of a six-year-old with the laundry to show for it. I'd published five novels and a number of books of poetry, but was not exactly world-famous. I was however what Mordecai Richler used to call "world-famous in Canada," and that status, dubious though it was, attracted a certain amount of heat and lightning.

What hasn't changed? Looking back over this gathering of pages, I see that my interests have remained fairly constant, although I like to pretend their scope has broadened somewhat. Some of my earlier concerns — my environmental fretting, for example — were considered lunatic-fringe when I first voiced them, but have since moved to the centre of the stage. I dislike advocacy writing — it's not fun, because the issues that generate it are not fun — but I feel compelled to do a certain amount of it anyway. The effects are not always pleasant, since what may be common sense to one person is annoying polemic to another.

I still find it hard to make speeches; I still leave the writing of them to the last minute; I still feel I'm doing a grade two show-and-tell. I'm haunted by a metaphor from Edith Wharton's story "The Pelican," in which a public lecturer's talk is compared to the trick by which a magician produces reams and reams of blank white paper out of his mouth. I still find book reviewing a problem: it's so much like homework, and it forces me to have opinions instead of the Negative Capability that is so much more soothing to the digestion. I do it anyway, because those who are reviewed must review in their turn or the principle of reciprocity fails.

There's another reason, however: reviewing the work of others forces you to examine your own ethical and aesthetic tastes. What do we mean by "good" in a book? What qualities do we consider "bad," and why? Aren't there in fact two kinds of reviews, derived from two different ancestries? There's the newspaper review, which descends from gossip around the village well (loved her, hated him, she shouldn't wear red but what can you expect with a family like hers, and did you get a load on the shoes?). And then there's the "academic" review, which descends from Biblical exegesis and other traditions that went in for the minute examination of sacred texts. This sort of analysis still secretly believes that some texts are more sacred than others, and that the application of a magnifying glass or some lemon juice or flames will reveal hidden meanings. I've written both kinds.

I still won't review a book I don't like, although to do so would doubtless be amusing for the Ms Hyde side of me and entertaining for the more malicious class of reader. But either the book is really bad, in which case no one should review it, or it's good but not my cup of tea, in which case someone else should review it. It's a great luxury not to be a professional full-time reviewer: I'm at liberty to close books that don't seize hold of me. Over the years, history — military history included — has become more interesting to me; so has biography. As for fiction, some of my less highfalutin' reading preferences (crime writing, science fiction) have come out of the closet.

Speaking of these, it's as well to mention a pattern that recurs in these pages. As one reader of this manuscript has pointed out, I have a habit of kicking off my discussion of a book or author or group of books by saying that I read it (or him, or her, or them) in the cellar when I was growing up; or that I came across them in the bookcase at home; or that I found them at the cottage; or that I took them out from the library. If these statements were metaphors, I'd excise all of them except one; but they are simply snippets of my reading history. My justification for mentioning where and when I first read a book is that I think the impression a book makes on you is often tied to your age and circumstances at the time you read it, and your fondness for books you loved when young continues on with you through life.

*Second Words* was divided into three sections, and I've kept to the same chronological plan in *Moving Targets*. Part One covers the 1980s, during which I wrote and published *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel of mine that is most likely to turn up on freshman reading lists. This was the period during which I graduated from being world-famous in Canada to being world-famous, sort of, in the way that writers are. (We are not talking the Rolling Stones here.) It ends with 1989, the year the Berlin Wall came down. Part Two collects pieces from the 1990s, culminating in 2000, when the twenty-first

century began. Part Three runs from 2001 — the year of the notorious 9/11 disaster — to the present time. Not surprisingly, I found myself writing more about political issues during this last period than I had done for some time.

Why *Moving Targets*? As a title, that is. There are two meanings in the word *moving*, and one of them has to do with emotion: a moving target is one that moves you. Language cannot be separated from feeling, because language is itself a record of how we as human beings have responded to the world, not only intellectually but with what used to be called the heart. I can't write about subjects for which I feel nothing. Thus *moving*.

The second meaning is the more obvious one: moving targets move. These occasional pieces take aim, but the targets they're aiming at are far from stationary. Instead they're like the mechanical ducks in the amusement park, visible to the naked eye but often hard to hit. They're embedded in time: as they flow along with it, they're changed by it, and anything said about them — like anything said about the shape of an amoeba — can only be approximate. Looking back at some of these essays — *essay*, in the sense of *attempt* — I feel I might write them in another way if I were writing them today. But I would not of course be writing them today, because the targets now are different.

Think of the track in the air left by an arrow in flight. *Trajectory* is a word that might describe such a thing: “the path of any body moving under the action of given forces.”

Here, then, is *Moving Targets*: a collection of trajectories.

— Margaret Atwood 2004

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# PART I

## 1982–1989

### 1982–1989

THE EIGHT YEARS between 1982 and 1989 were energetic ones for me, and proved to be momentous for the world. At their beginning, the Soviet Union seemed firmly in place, due to last for a long while yet. But it had already been sucked into a costly and debilitating war in Afghanistan, and in 1989 the Berlin Wall would come tumbling down. It's amazing how quickly certain kinds of power structures crumble once the cornerstone falls out. But in 1982, nobody foresaw this outcome.

I began the period quietly enough. I was trying, unsuccessfully and for the second time, to write the book that was — much later — to become *Cat's Eye*, and I was ruminating about *The Handmaid's Tale*, although I was avoiding this second book as much as possible: it seemed too hopeless a task, and too deeply weird a concept.

Our family was living in Toronto's Chinatown, in a row house that had been modernized by the removal of many of its inner doors. I couldn't write there because it was too noisy, so I would bicycle westward to the Portuguese district, where I wrote on the third floor of another row house. I'd just finished editing *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, which had been spread out all over the same third floor. That had been a retrospective activity, and so was the first piece in *Moving Targets*. It's a Festschrift tribute to Dennis Lee, whom I'd first met and collaborated with at the beginning of my writing life.

In the autumn of 1983 I went with my immediate family to England, where we rented a Norfolk manse said to be haunted by nuns in the parlour, a jolly cavalier in the dining room, and a headless woman in the kitchen. None of these was seen by us, though a jolly cavalier did stray in from the neighbouring pub, looking for the washroom. The phone was a pay phone outside the house, in a boot also used for storing potatoes, and I would clamber over and through them to deal with the editing of — for instance — the Updike review that appears here.

I wrote in a separate space — a fisherman's cottage turned vacation home — where I struggled with the Aga heater as well as with the novel I'd started. I got my first case of chilblains doing this, but had to give up on the novel when I found myself snarled up in the time sequence, with no way out.

Right after that we went to West Berlin, where, in 1984, I began *The Handmaid's Tale*. We made some side visits, to Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia, which doubtless contributed to the atmosphere of the book: totalitarian dictatorships, however different the costumes, share the same climate of fear and silence.

I finished the book in the spring of 1985, where I was Visiting Chair at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. It was the last book I wrote on an electric typewriter. I faxed the chapters as they were finished to my typist in Toronto, to be retyped properly, and I recall being amazed by the magic of instant transmission. The book came out in Canada in 1985 and in England and the United States in 1986, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, among other forms of uproar. I bought a black outfit for the dinner.

We spent part of 1987 in Australia, where I was finally able to come to grips with *Cat's Eye*. The snowiest scenes in the book were written during balmy spring days in Sydney, with cuckaburras yelling for hamburger on the back porch. The book was published in 1988 in Canada and the United States and in England in 1989, where it too was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. I had to buy another black outfit. Shortly afterwards, the fatwa was proclaimed against Salman Rushdie. Who knew that this was the first straw in what was to become not only a wind, but a hurricane?

All this time *The Handmaid's Tale* had been making its progress through the intestinal workings of the film industry. It finally emerged in finished form, scripted by Harold Pinter and directed by Volker Schlöndorff. The film premiered in the two Berlins in 1989, just as the Wall had fallen: you could buy pieces of it, with the coloured ones being more expensive. I attended the film festivities. There were the same kinds of East German border guards who had been so cold in 1984, but now they were grinning and exchanging cigars with tourists. The East Berlin audience was the more receptive to the film. "This was our life," one woman told me quietly.

How euphoric we felt, for a short time, in 1989. How dazed by the spectacle of the impossible made real. How wrong we were about the brave new world we were about to enter.

**DENNIS REVISITED**

WHEN I WAS ASKED to write a small piece on Dennis Lee, I began by counting up the number of years I've known him. It came as a slight shock to discover that it was over twenty. I first met him, ludicrously enough, at a Freshman Mixer at Victoria College, University of Toronto, in the fall of 1957. I was somewhat in awe of him, since, like everyone else, I knew he'd won the Prince of Wales Scholarship for the highest grade thirteen marks in the province of Ontario; but nevertheless there I was, shuffling around the floor with him, while he explained that he was going to be a United Church minister. I, on the other hand, was already doggedly set on being a writer, though I had scant ideas about how this was to be accomplished. At that time I thought, in my intolerant undergraduate way, that poetry and religion — especially the religion of the United Church — did not mix, which brought us to the end of the dance.

Then there was a gap, as Dennis was in mainstream English and I had digressed into Philosophy and English, foolishly thinking that my mind would thereby be broadened. But logic and poetry did not mix either, and in second year I switched back, having missed Bibliography forever. Some time later, Dennis and I became friends and collaborators. I suppose it was inevitable. Art of any kind, in the late 1950s, in Toronto, at Victoria College, was not exactly a hot topic, and those of us who dared to risk incurring the pejorative label “arty” practised herding and defensive dressing. We worked on *Acta Victoriana*, the literary magazine; we wrote on, and acted in, the yearly satirical revue. At one point, Dennis and I invented a pseudonym for literary parodies, which combined both our names and which lingered on after our respective departures: Shakesbeat Latweed. “Shakesbeat,” because the first thing we wrote was a poem called “Sprattire,” variations on the first four lines of “Jack Spratt,” as if by various luminaries, from Shakespeare to a Beat poet. According to my mother, we laughed a lot while writing it. Dennis, then as now, had a faintly outrageous sense of humour concealed beneath his habitually worried look.

Dennis took fourth year off and went to Germany, thus enabling me to get a Woodrow Wilson fellowship (if he'd been there, *he'd* have got it). After that I was away from Toronto for the next ten years. So it must have been by letter, or during one of my infrequent visits back (I seem to remember Hart House theatre, at intermission; but intermission of what?) that he contacted me about the House of Anansi Press. Some people were starting a publishing house, he said, and they wanted to reprint my book of poems, *The Circle Game*, which had won the Governor General's Award that year but was out of print. He said they wanted to do two thousand copies. I thought they were crazy. I also thought the idea of a publishing house was a little crazy too; it was still only 1967. But by this time both Dennis and I were cultural nationalists of a sort, though we'd come to it separately. We were both aware that the established publishing houses had been timorous about new writing, particularly in prose fiction, though also to a certain extent in poetry. The dreaded “colonial mentality” was not yet a catchphrase but it was on its way. The first four Anansi authors got small grants from the Canada Council, most of which we bumped back into the company. It amazes me now to realize how little money it took to start Anansi. But it took a lot more blood and guts, much of both Dennis's.

During the late 1960s — the period of Anansi's rapid growth and the establishment of Dennis's reputation as an editor — I was in Boston, then Montreal, then Edmonton, so was in touch only by

letter. I worked in various ways on three Anansi books with Dennis: George Bowering's *The Gangs of Kosmos*, Bill Bissett's *nobody owns the earth*, and, less intensively, Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. When my own book, *Power Politics*, was ready to be seen, I felt it was an Anansi book and took it to Dennis. I returned from England in 1971, joined Anansi's board, and worked with various writers (sometimes with Dennis, sometimes alone), including Paulette Jiles, Eli Mandel, Terrence Heath, P. K. Page, John Thompson, and Patrick Lane; and Dennis himself, with whom I edited the second edition of *Civil Elegies*. Our most engrossing collaboration at that time, however, was his editing of my critical work *Survival*. Dennis was indispensable for the book, and in top editorial form: fast, incisive, full of helpful suggestions, and, by the end, just as exhausted as I was.

Small publishing is an energy drainer, as anyone who has done it will testify. By 1973 Dennis was withdrawing more and more from Anansi, and shortly thereafter so was I.

I think it was in the summer of 1974 that Dennis read the first draft of *Lady Oracle* for me, with the usual helpful results. The editorial conference took place on the top of a rail fence, which was typical of Dennis as an editor. The process was never what you would call formal. Given the choice of a dining-room table or a kitchen full of dirty dishes and chicken carcasses and cat litter boxes, Dennis would go for the kitchen every time.

This is as good a place as any to throw in my two cents' worth about Dennis-as-editor. The reputation is entirely deserved. When he's "on," he can give another writer not only generous moral support but also an insightful, clear view of where a given book is trying to go. This is usually conveyed not in conversation alone but in pages and pages of single-spaced, detailed, and amended notes. I have never worked with an editor who delivers so much in such a condensed mode. His willingness to enter so fully into a book's sources of energy make him more than usually vulnerable to invasion by the author's psyche and to the demands of the author's clamorous ego. At one stage of his life he was acting not only as surrogate midwife but as surrogate shrink and confessor to far too many people. It's no wonder that he's fled from the editing process from time to time. It's no wonder too that he's sometimes become bored or impatient with the Super-editor uniform. He is also a writer, and both his own time and the attention and acclaim of others has often gone to the editing when it could or should have gone to the writing. It's his writing that's of primary importance for Dennis. It's also, I think, the hardest thing to talk to him about and the hardest thing for him to do.

When I try to picture Dennis to myself, it's the anxious wrinkles on his forehead that appear first, like the Cheshire Cat's grin. Next comes the pipe, eternally puffing, or sometimes a cigar. Then the rest of him appears, on the run, rumpled, harassed by invisible demons, replete with subterranean energy, slightly abstracted, sometimes perplexed, in spite of it all well-meaning, kindly in an embarrassed and hesitant way; and, when he's talking to you about something important, working very hard not only at but towards saying exactly what he wants to say, which is usually complex. Sometimes Dennis is less complex when he's had a few drinks and is playing the piano, for instance, or when he's making a terrible pun. This maniacal side of Dennis is most visible in *Alligator Pie* and its sequels, and probably keeps him sane; but friendly old Uncle Dennis is of course not the whole story.

I don't have the whole story, and it's clear to me after twenty-odd years that I'm not likely ever to have it. Dennis isn't what you'd call an easily accessible person. In any case, the whole story isn't finished yet. There's more to come.

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**WONDERING WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A WOMAN**
**THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK**  
**BY JOHN UPDIKE**

THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK is John Updike's first novel since the much-celebrated *Rabbit Is Rich*, and a strange and marvellous organism it proves to be. Like his third novel, *The Centaur*, it is a departure from baroque realism. This time, too, Mr. Updike transposes mythology into the minor keys of small town America, but this time he pulls it off, possibly because, like Shakespeare and Robert Louis Stevenson before him, he finds wickedness and mischief more engrossing as subjects than goodness and wisdom.

Mr. Updike's titles are often quite literal, and *The Witches of Eastwick* is just what it says. It's indeed about witches, real ones, who can fly through the air, levitate, hex people, and make love charms that work, and they live in a town called Eastwick. It's Eastwick rather than Westwick, since, as we all know, it's the east wind that blows no good. Eastwick purports to be in Rhode Island because, as the book itself points out, Rhode Island was the place of exile for Anne Hutchinson, the Puritan foremother who was kicked out of the Massachusetts Bay colony by the forefathers for female insubordination, a quality these witches have in surplus.

These are not 1980s Womanpower witches. They aren't at all interested in healing the earth, communing with the Great Goddess, or gaining Power-within (as opposed to Power-over). These are *bad* witches, and Power-within, as far as they are concerned, is no good at all unless you can zap somebody with it. They are spiritual descendants of the seventeenth-century New England strain and go in for sabbats, sticking pins in wax images, kissing the Devil's backside, and phallus worship; this latter though — since it is Updike — is qualified worship. The Great Goddess is present only in the form of Nature itself, or, in this book, Nature herself, with which they, both as women and as witches are supposed to have special affinities. Nature, however, is far from Wordsworth's big motherly breast. She, or it, is red in tooth, claw, and cancer cell, at best lovely and cruel, at worse merely cruel. "Nature kills constantly, and we call her beautiful."

How did these middle-class, small-town, otherwise ordinary women get their witchy powers? Simple. They became husbandless. All three are divorcées and embodiments of what American small town society tends to think about divorcées. Whether you leave your husband or are left "doesn't make any difference," which will be news to many abandoned women stuck with full child support. Divorced then, and, with the images of their former husbands shrunk and dried and stored away in their minds and kitchens and cellars, they are free to be themselves, an activity Mr. Updike regards with some misgivings, as he regards most catchwords and psychofads.

Being yourself involves artistic activity, albeit of minor kinds. Lexa makes ceramic earthmother which are sold in the local crafts store, Jane plays the cello, and Sukie writes, badly, a gossip column for the weekly paper, her participles dangling like earrings. All three are dabblers, but their "creativity" is seen in the same light as that of other, more accomplished female artists. The

townspeople of Eastwick, who act as a collective chorus, credit them with “a certain distinction, an inner boiling such as had in other cloistral towns produced Emily Dickinson’s verses and Emily Brontë’s inspired novel.” It’s doubtful, however, that either of the Emilys went in for the sexual loop-the-loops indulged in by these three weird sisters. Sisters in more senses than one because the novel is cunningly set at a precise moment in America’s recent history. The women’s movement has been around just long enough for some of its phrases to have seeped from New York to the outer darkness of provincial towns like Eastwick, and the witches toss around words like “chauvinist” in light social repartee. In the public, male world, which is offstage, the Vietnam War goes on, watched by the witches’ children on their television sets, and the antiwar activists are making bombs in cellars.

The witches don’t busy themselves with “causes,” however. At first, they are merely restless and bored; they amuse themselves with spiteful gossip, playing mischievous tricks and seducing unhappy married men, which Eastwick supplies in strength; for if the witches are bad, the wives are worse, and the men are eviscerated. “Marriage,” one of the husbands thinks, “is like two people locked up with one lesson to read, over and over, until the words become madness.”

But enter the Devil, the world’s best remedy for women’s boredom, in the form of the dark, not very handsome but definitely mysterious stranger Darryl Van Horne, who collects pop art and has an obvious name. Now mischief turns to *maleficio*, real evil occurs and people die, because Van Horne’s horn becomes a bone of contention — nothing like not enough men to go around to get the witches’ cauldrons bubbling. And when Van Horne is snatched into marriage by a newcomer witchlet, the eye of newt comes out in earnest.

This may sound like an unpromising framework for a serious novelist. Has Mr. Updike entered second childhood and reverted to Rosemary’s babyland? I don’t think so. For one thing, *The Witches of Eastwick* is too well done. Like Van Horne, Mr. Updike has always wondered what it would be like to be a woman, and his witches give him a lot of scope for this fantasy. Lexa in particular, who is the oldest, the plumpest, the kindest, and the closest to Nature, is a fitting vehicle for some of his most breathtaking similes. In line of descent, he is perhaps closer than any other living American writer to the Puritan view of Nature as a lexicon written by God, but in hieroglyphs, so that unending translation is needed. Mr. Updike’s prose, here more than ever, is a welter of suggestive metaphors and cross-references, which constantly point toward a meaning constantly evasive.

His version of witchcraft is closely tied to both carnality and mortality. Magic is hope in the face of inevitable decay. The houses and the furniture moulder, and so do the people. The portrait of Felice Gabriel, victim wife and degenerate after-image of the onetime “peppy” American cheerleading sweetheart, is gruesomely convincing. Bodies are described in loving detail, down to the last tuft, wart, wrinkle, and bit of food stuck in the teeth. No one is better than Mr. Updike at conveying the sadness of the sexual, the melancholy of motel affairs — “amiable human awkwardness,” Lexa calls it. This is a book that redefines magic realism.

There’s room too for bravura writing. The widdershins dance, portrayed as a tennis game in which the ball turns into a bat, followed by the sabbat as a hot-tub-and-pot session, is particularly fetching. Students of traditional Devil-lore will have as much fun with these transpositions as Mr. Updike had. Van Horne, for instance, is part Mephistopheles, offering Faustian pacts and lusting for souls, part alchemist-chemist, and part Miltonic Satan, hollow at the core; but he’s also a shambling klutz whose favourite comic book is — what else? — *Captain Marvel*.

Much of *The Witches of Eastwick* is satire, some of it literary playfulness and some plain bitchery. It could be that any attempt to analyze further would be like taking an elephant gun to a puff pastry: An Updike should not mean but be. But again, I don’t think so. What a culture has to say about

witchcraft, whether in jest or in earnest, has a lot to do with its views of sexuality and power, and especially with the apportioning of powers between the sexes. The witches were burned not because they were pitied but because they were feared.

Cotton Mather and Nathaniel Hawthorne aside, the great American witchcraft classic is *The Wizard of Oz*, and Mr. Updike's book reads like a rewrite. In the original, a good little girl and her familiar, accompanied by three amputated males, one sans brain, one sans heart, and one sans guts, go seeking a wizard who turns out to be a charlatan. The witches in Oz really have superhuman powers, but the male figures do not. Mr. Updike's Land of Oz is the real America, but the men in it need a lot more than self-confidence; there's no Glinda the Good, and the Dorothy-like ingenue is a "wimp" who gets her comeuppance. It's the three witches of Eastwick who go back, in the end, to the equivalent of Kansas — marriage, flat and grey maybe, but at least known.

*The Witches of Eastwick* could be and probably will be interpreted as just another episode in the long-running American serial called "Blaming Mom." The Woman-as-Nature-as-magic-as-powerful-as-bad-Mom package has gone the rounds before, sometimes accompanied by the smell of burning. If the prattle of witchcraft is heard in the land, can the hunt be far behind? Mr. Updike provides no blameless way of being female. Hackles will rise, the word "backlash" will be spoken; but anyone speaking it should look at the men in this book, who, while proclaiming their individual emptiness, are collectively, offstage, blowing up Vietnam. That's *male* magic. Men, say the witches, more than once are full of rage because they can't make babies, and even male babies have at their centre "that aggressive vacuum." Shazam indeed!

A Martian might wonder at the American propensity for tossing the power football. Each sex hurls it at the other with amazing regularity, each crediting the other with more power than the other thinks it has, and the characters in this book join in the game with glee. The aim seems to be the avoidance of responsibility, the reversion to a childlike state of Huckleberry Finn-like "freedom." What the witches want from the Devil is to play without consequences. But all the Devil can really offer is temptation; hot-tubbery has its price, and the Devil must have his due; with the act of creation comes irreversibility, and guilt.

Mr. Updike takes "sisterhood is powerful" at its word and imagines it literally. What if sisterhood really is powerful? What will the sisters use their "powers" for? And — given human nature, of which Mr. Updike takes not too bright a view — what then? Luckily these witches are only interested in the "personal," rather than the "political"; otherwise they might have done something unfrivolous, like inventing the hydrogen bomb.

*The Witches of Eastwick* is an excursion rather than a destination. Like its characters, it indulges in metamorphoses, reading at one moment like Kierkegaard, at the next like Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, and at the next like Archie comics, with some John Keats thrown in. This quirkiness is part of its charm, for, despite everything, charming it is. As for the witches themselves, there's a strong suggestion that they are products of Eastwick's — read America's — own fantasy life. If so, it's as well to know about it. That's the serious reason for reading this book.

The other reasons have to do with the skill and inventiveness of the writing, the accuracy of the detail, the sheer energy of the witches, and, above all, the practicality of the charms. The ones for getting suitable husbands are particularly useful. You want a rich one, for a change? First you sprinkle a tuxedo with your perfume and your precious bodily fluids, and then. . . .

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**THE SORCERER AS APPRENTICE**
**DIFFICULT LOVES**  
**BY ITALO CALVINO**

*DIFFICULT LOVES* is a beautifully translated collection of early stories by the highly regarded Italian writer, Italo Calvino. Mr. Calvino is perhaps best known in North America for his antinovel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, his pseudo-geography, *Invisible Cities*, and for *Italian Folk Tales*, which really are. What you think of the fictions of the mature Calvino will depend partly on whether you consider flirtation a delightful way of passing the time or a boring waste of it, and whether, after a magic show, you feel charmed or had. It's possible to get the sense you're being toyed with, that Mr. Calvino is fiddling with you and doesn't much care whether Rome is burning or not; that "reality" and "truth" are, for him, categories irrelevant to the hermetic world of art. There's something to be said for this stance: why should a rose, or Isak Dinesen for that matter, have to demonstrate social relevance? Still, if you go too far into the palace of artifice you can turn into a rococo clock, a fate Mr. Calvino has so far been adroit enough to avoid.

All the more interesting then to open *Difficult Loves*, expecting tricks with string, and to realize that instead you are watching a writer in the process of getting where he later got. These are very early stories indeed: the earliest were written in 1945, when Mr. Calvino was a damp-eared twenty-two, and the latest date from the 1950s, when he was in his early thirties.

Of the four sections in the book, the first, "Riviera Stories," is the most realistic in its inclinations. The stories are hardly stories at all but studies, carefully observed and detailed sketches of people in certain landscapes, social situations, and postures. Already Mr. Calvino is displaying a sensual delight in description, a painterliness if you like, but these pieces are for the most part fragmentary, like Leonardo's studies of hands. Among them, two — "A Goatherd at Luncheon" and "Man in the Wasteland" — are less embryonic, but it is not until the second section, "Wartime Stories," that the fingerprints of a major talent begin to be visible. From the subject matter — peasants and partisans versus German soldiers and Italian Fascists — you might expect shrapnel and gore, death and squalor, and some is in fact provided. But the surprise is the freshness, the sweetness even, that is present despite it. "Animal Woods," about a German soldier lost in a forest in which the peasants have hidden their animals, has the clear charm of a fairy tale, and "One of the Three Is Still Alive" manages to turn another German, a naked, harried one this time, into a sort of momentary Adam.

In the third section, "Postwar Stories," we find ourselves in an urban landscape reminiscent of early Fellini films and populated with waifs and strays, eccentrics, fat and/or distorted prostitutes, and men given to bizarre excesses. The baroque blends with the grotesque in the sensuous gluttony of "Theft in a Pastry Shop." And "Desire in November" is every fur fetishist's dream come true.

Finally, in the fourth section, "Stories of Love and Loneliness," Mr. Calvino hits what was to become increasingly his stride. Of the eight stories in this section, five explore the borderline that

divides (or does it?) illusion from reality, the imagination from the outside world, art from its subject matter. The photographer who ends by being unable to photograph anything but other photographs and destroys his love affair in the process, the man who can't enjoy a real woman because he's too involved in reading about an imaginary one, the nearsighted man who must choose between seeing and being seen and the poet for whom woman, nature, silence, and serenity form one set, while men, civilization, words, and suffocation form another — these are early articulations of the illusionist's dilemma, of the complex relationship of the artist to a world he can't quite believe in as long as he views it as material for an art which is not quite believable either. It is the artist's love for the "real" world that drives him to transform it into an artifact, and, paradoxically — according to logic — to deny it. As the photographer says, "The minute you start saying of something, 'Ah, how beautiful! We must photograph it!' you are already close to the view of the person who thinks that everything that is not photographed is lost, as if it had never existed."

*Difficult Loves* has some of the fascination of a photo album (the author at twenty-two, the author at twenty-six, the author at thirty), but it has a lot more to offer than that. The quirkiness and grace of the writing, the originality of the imagination at work, the occasional incandescence of vision, and a certain lovable nuttiness make this collection well worth reading, and for more than archaeological reasons.

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**MARGARET ATWOOD REMEMBERS MARIAN ENGEL**

*He speaks in his own voice. She sat up and said that out loud.*

—MARIAN ENGEL, *Bear*

We're all wrecks when it comes to it, but some of us have written books and I think we should be given credit for that.

—MARIAN ENGEL, IN A LETTER

She understood that he would never be with her more than at the present moment. The surprise to come was that he wouldn't be with her less.

—ALICE MUNRO, *Who Do You Think You Are?*

I FIRST SAW MARIAN on a book, hers. It was called *No Clouds of Glory*, and on the front there was a coffee-cup ring you thought was real until you tried to wipe it off. The back showed the author, a tomboyish but pretty young woman with a gamine haircut, her top buttons undone, holding a cigarette and caught in the act of inhaling, looking sideways at the viewer with a grin that was amused, mischievous, even, you might say, provocative. Marian didn't like that picture, for some reason. (Also she didn't like the title, which wasn't hers. As soon as she got the chance, with the paperback, she put her own back on: *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*.)

I didn't know that at the time. I thought it was a good picture. I was a young author myself, and conscious of others, especially women. I read the book, looked at the picture, thought: *She'd be too much for me*. As it turned out, Marian thought the same thing about me; so after we'd gone through that, we could become friends.

The last picture I saw of her she did like. It's the one on *Room of One's Own*, Engel issue, summer of '84. There was some doubt as to whether she'd be alive to see it but she was. Those were the months when she waxed and waned. ("Very complimentary," she said. "Probably because of the state I'm in.") She was pleased, but nothing escaped her. However, she did not say *dying*.)

In the picture, she's sitting in a chair in her living room, looking good enough. You can't tell she could hardly walk. She showed me the picture and then turned the magazine over. On the back was the rest of the picture: books piled up and spilling over, a table heaped with objects. "The usual chaos," she said. She liked having it in the picture, because it was true, not airbrushed, not artist-as-icon. None of her heroines are bodiless wisps, and several are downright sloppy, a condition she was, as a writer, excellent at describing.

Alice Munro, writer: "When I was young, in the 1950s, I used to sit around in kitchens with my married girlfriends; there would be exchanges, revelations, a kind of desperate honesty, a subversive wit. When I first read Marian's books — particularly *The Honeyman Festival* — I had the same sense of release and exhilaration. She'd caught something that was like the tone of those early conversations; it wasn't just an extension, it was a *vindication* of all that talk. It was the way she

wrote. That sort of material wasn't commonly used; domestic material was either sentimentalized and sugared over, or it was turned back on itself, filled with irony and self-deprecation. She used it as straight literary material, and she made me see that it was possible to use it."

She thought she was untidier than that mythical beast, "other people." She had some ideal of perfection she felt others embodied but she fell short of. Maybe this came from her shattering early childhood, maybe it was part of that cleanliness-oriented, small-town, Ontario, Protestant upbringing provided by her adoptive parents. Whatever it was, it was always getting her into trouble with interviewers. She felt a need to be forthright with them, to show herself to them as fully human, dirty dishes, empty bottles, and all; or maybe she was in the grip of that modest self-disparagement small towns require. So she would tell stories on herself, times when she'd done things she regretted or made a fool of herself, and of course the interviewers would print these stories and present them as the whole truth and then she'd get mad, at herself as much as anyone. She was no saint, nor in her opinion was anybody — saintliness irritated her — but this other thing wasn't the real picture either, and she knew it. She had, among other things, a sense of decorum, and it was hard for her not to let that stifle her as a writer.

Timothy Findley, writer: "She used to pull her head in like a turtle when she laughed, because laughing out loud wasn't something one did, not according to her upbringing and mine as well. Once when I was chairman of the Writers' Union I was getting an ovation for something or other, and Marian was sitting in the front row. She pointed her finger at me and said, 'Look at you!' Because we both knew this was something that wasn't done.

"There was always that conflict — the 'lady' she'd been taught to be, and the bohemian thing. As a student she was defiant about which boys she'd go out with — she'd choose the offbeat ones on purpose; but the 'lady,' the inhibiting background, was never stamped out. Writing *Bear* nearly killed her; she was astonished by her own daring. 'I put that *word* on the page,' she'd say to me."

She knew why the dishes were dirty: she was a professional writer, not a professional housekeeper, and few can afford to be both. She thought of writing as an honourable profession. But she felt that Canada didn't really have a language for that yet. During her years in France, she met a man who asked her what she did. She told him. "*C'est un bon métier*," he said. It was one of the stories from her past that she liked, especially the word *métier*. Such a word released the writer from the ranks of jugglers and personalities, those who made faces for a living, and instead took writing seriously.

Along with this professionalism (for although the dishes may have been undone the deadlines were met) went her obsession with supporting herself, difficult though this habitually was.

"Don't tell anyone I've got cancer," she said to me early on.

"Why not?" I said. She was nearly broke, as often; I could see some advantages, and anyway it was the truth.

"I might not be able to get another job."

She didn't want perks, special treatment. Also she didn't want deathbed condolences. A dying person can be thought of as dying or as living. Marian thought of herself as living.

She did not deny what was happening to her. She just didn't want it to interfere with her enjoyment of life, which, at its height, was vast. So when we did talk about her illness, we talked practical arrangements: reclining beds, tilting tables you could screw a typewriter onto. Damned if she'd give up writing. Nor did she.

Two months before she did die, she planned to go to Paris, with her two teenaged children and a

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