MODERN NOVELISTS

General Editor: Norman Page

MODERN NOVELISTS

Published titles

MARGARET ATWOOD Coral Ann Howells
SAUL BELLOW Peter Hyland
ALBERT CAMUS Philip Thody
FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY Peter Conradi
GEORGE ELIOT Alan W. Bellringer
WILLIAM FAULKNER David Dowling
GUSTAVE FLAUBERT David Roe
E. M. FORSTER Norman Page
ANDRÉ GIDE David Walker
WILLIAM GOLDING James Gindin
GRAHAM GREENE Neil McEwan
ERNEST HEMINGWAY Peter Messent
CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD Stephen Wade
HENRY JAMES Alan W. Bellringer
JAMES JOYCE Richard Brown
D. H. LAWRENCE G. M. Hyde
ROSAMOND LEHMANN Judy Simons
DORIS LESSING Ruth Whittaker
MALCOLM LOWRY Tony Bareham
NORMAN MAILER Michael K. Glenday
THOMAS MANN Martin Travers
GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ Michael Bell
TONI MORRISON Linden Peach
IRIS MURDOCH Hilda D. Spear
VLADIMIR NABOKOV David Rampton
V. S. NAIPAUL Bruce King
GEORGE ORWELL Valerie Meyers
ANTHONY POWELL Neil McEwan
MARCEL PROUST Philip Thody
BARBARA PYM Michael Costell
JEAN-PAUL SARTRE Philip Thody
MURIEL SPARK Norman Page
JOHN UPDIKE Judie Newman
EVELYN WAUGH Jacqueline McDonnell
H. G. WELLS Michael Draper
PATRICK WHITE Mark Williams
VIRGINIA WOOLF Edward Bishop
SIX WOMEN NOVELISTS Merryn Williams

Forthcoming titles

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR Terry Keefe
IVY COMPTON-BURNETT Janet Godden
JOSEPH CONRAD Owen Knowles
JOHN FOWLES James Acheson
FRANZ KAFKA Ronald Speirs and Beatrice Sandberg
SALMAN RUSHDIE D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke
MARK TWAIN Peter Messent
ALICE WALKER Maria Lauret

MODERN NOVELISTS

MARGARET ATWOOD

Coral Ann Howells

Macmillan Education

ISBN 978-0-333-51916-5 ISBN 978-1-349-24265-8 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-24265-8

MARGARET ATWOOD

Copyright © 1996 by Coral Ann Howells

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1996

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced
in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the
case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

For information, address:

St. Martin's Press, Scholarly and Reference Division,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

First published in the United States of America in 1996

ISBN 978-0-312-12891-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Howells, Coral Ann.

Margaret Atwood / Coral Ann Howells.

p. cm.—(Modern novelists)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-312-12891-3

1. Atwood, Margaret Eleanor, 1939— —Criticism and interpretation.

2. Women and literature—Canada—History—20th century. 3. Canada—
—in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PR9199.3.A8Z695 1996

818'.5409—dc20

95-24442

CIP

First edition 1996

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Robin, Phoebe and Miranda

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	x
1 Fact File and Significant Characteristics	1
2 Atwood's Canadian Signature: From <i>Surfacing</i> and <i>Survival to Wilderness Tips</i>	20
3 'Feminine, Female, Feminist': From <i>The Edible Woman</i> to 'The Female Body'	38
4 Atwoodian Gothic: From <i>Lady Oracle</i> to <i>The Robber Bride</i>	62
5 Lost Worlds: <i>Life Before Man</i>	86
6 Power Politics: <i>Bodily Harm</i>	105
7 Science Fiction in the Feminine: <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	126
8 Atwood's Retrospective Art: <i>Cat's Eye</i>	148
<i>Conclusion</i>	161
<i>Notes</i>	169
<i>Bibliography</i>	179
<i>Index</i>	183

Acknowledgements

This book is the product of my sustained attention to Margaret Atwood's fiction since the early 1980s and of my attempts to understand the dynamics which underlie all her writing. During that period I have given many lectures and conference papers and have written many essays on her work, with the result that several of the chapters in this book are, inevitably, the reworkings of earlier versions (some published, some unpublished) where I hope I have clarified my understanding of crucial issues. My admiration for Atwood's total achievement has continued to grow, together with my urgent curiosity to know what she will write next. This experience of 'growing into an Atwood reader' is one that I know is shared by an increasing number both in Canada and internationally, and it is for such readers that I have written this book.

To keep the record straight, my thanks are due to the following: to the *British Journal of Canadian Studies* and to Anansi Press for permission to include materials on the theme of 'Wilderness' that appear in different versions in *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 9:2 (1994) and in *Various Atwoods* (1995); to Longman York Press for allowing me to incorporate some of the material in my York Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale* (1993); to Macmillan for permission to reproduce with slight modifications my essay on *Cat's Eye* which appeared in *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity* (1994). I am particularly grateful to Margaret Atwood for permission to quote from her manuscript materials in the Margaret Atwood Papers, Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, and to the library staff there who were extraordinarily helpful to me. I am also grateful to the Foundation for Canadian Studies in the United Kingdom and to the University of Reading Research Board for travel assistance on my frequent visits to Canada, and to the Department of English at Reading for an alleviated term's teaching so that I could complete the writing of a substantial part of this book.

Many friends and colleagues have encouraged and listened to me and have offered invaluable critical advice. My special thanks are due to members of the Literature Group of the British Association for Canadian Studies, in particular Lynette Hunter and Shirley Chew, and to Colin Nicholson, John Thieme, Annis May Timpson, W. J. Keith and Jay Macpherson. I would also like to thank the students in my undergraduate classes on Canadian women's writing at the University of Reading, and also at the Magistero, University of Messina in Sicily and at SNDT Women's University in Bombay. For generous hospitality in Canada once again I thank Paula Bourne in Toronto and Linda Marshall in Guelph. I am also very grateful to Maisie Collard who typed this book so impeccably from my almost indecipherable script; to Vivien Hughes, Michael Regan and Elizabeth Richie of the Canadian High Commission in London for their assistance in selecting the cover picture; and to Margaret Bartley my editor, for her enthusiasm and patience. Finally, my best thanks as always to my husband and daughters, Robin, Phoebe and Miranda.

The author and publishers wish to thank the following for permission to use copyright-material:

Random House UK Ltd, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, and Phoebe Larmore on behalf of the author, for the extracts from Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Jonathan Cape, 1983) and Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (Jonathan Cape, 1982);

Times Newspapers Ltd, for the extracts from a review by Philip Howard, *The Times*, 14 March 1980; copyright © Times Supplements Ltd, 1980;

Virago Press Ltd and Phoebe Larmore on behalf of the author, for the extracts from Earl E. Ingersoll (ed.), *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* (1992).

Every effort has been made to trace all the copyright-holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangement at the first opportunity.

General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the origins of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid- and late twentieth century have emerged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers, refuse to heed national frontiers – 'English' literature lays claim to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but geniuses such as Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *œuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and the non-fictional writings, public and private, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

NORMAN PAGE