

BY MARGARET ATWOOD

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)
Bones & Murder (1995)
Alias Grace (1996)
The Blind Assassin (2000)
Oryx and Crake (2003)
The Penelopiad (2005)
The Tent (2006)
Moral Disorder (2006)
The Year of the Flood (2009)
MaddAddam (2013)
Stone Mattress (2014)
The Heart Goes Last (2015)
Hag-Seed (2016)

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)

NON-FICTION

*Survival: A Thematic Guide to
Canadian Literature* (1972)
Days of the Rebels 1815–1840
(1977)
Second Words (1982)
*Strange Things: The Malevolent
North in Canadian Literature* (1996)
*Two Solitudes: Conversations
[with Victor-Lévy Beaulieu]*
(1998)
On Writers and Writing (2002)
Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing
(2005)
*Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side
of Wealth* (2008)
*In Other Worlds: SF and the
Human Imagination* (2011)

POETRY

Double Persephone (1961)
The Circle Game (1966)
The Animals in That Country
(1968)
The Journals of Susanna Moodie
(1970)
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)
*Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965–
1995* (1986)
The Door (2007)

MARGARET ATWOOD

THE EDIBLE WOMAN



virago

I had returned from lunch and was licking and stamping envelopes for the coast-to-coast instant pudding-sauce study, behind schedule because someone in mimeo had run one of the question sheets backwards, when Mrs. Bogue came out of her cubicle.

'Marian,' she said with a sigh of resignation, 'I'm afraid Mrs. Dodge in Kamloops will have to be removed. She's pregnant.' Mrs. Bogue frowned slightly: she regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the company.

'That's too bad,' I said. The huge wall-map of the country, sprinkled with red thumbtacks like measles, is directly above my desk, which means that the subtraction and addition of interviewers seems to have become part of my job. I climbed up on the desk, located Kamloops, and took out the thumbtack with the paper flag marked DODGE.

'While you're up there,' Mrs. Bogue said, 'could you just take off Mrs. Ellis in Blind River? I hope it's only temporary, she's always done good work, but she writes that some lady chased her out of the house with a meat cleaver and she fell on the steps and broke her leg. Oh, and add this new one – a Mrs Gauthier in Charlottetown. I certainly hope she's better than the last one there; Charlottetown is always so difficult.'

When I had climbed down she smiled at me pleasantly, which put me on guard. Mrs. Bogue has a friendly, almost cosy manner that equips her perfectly for dealing with the interviewers, and she is at her most genial when she wants

something. 'Marian,' she said, 'we have a little problem. We're running a beer study next week – you know which one, it's the telephone-thing one – and they've decided upstairs that we need to do a pre-test this weekend. They're worried about the questionnaire. Now, we could get Mrs. Pilcher, she's a dependable interviewer, but it is the long weekend and we don't like to ask her. You're going to be in town, aren't you?'

'Does it have to be this weekend?' I asked, somewhat pointlessly.

'Well, we absolutely have to have the results Tuesday. You only need to get seven or eight men.'

My lateness that morning had given her leverage. 'Fine,' I said, 'I'll do them tomorrow.'

'You'll get overtime, of course,' Mrs. Bogue said as she walked away, leaving me wondering whether that had been a snide remark. Her voice is always so bland it's hard to tell.

I finished licking the envelopes, then got the beer questionnaires from Millie and went through the questions, looking for trouble spots. The initial selection questions were standard enough. After that, the questions were designed to test listener response to a radio jingle, part of the advertising campaign for a new brand of beer one of the large companies was about to launch on the market. At a certain point the interviewer had to ask the respondent to pick up the telephone and dial a given number, whereupon the jingle would play itself to him over the phone. Then there were a number of questions asking the man how he liked the commercial, whether he thought it might influence his buying habits, and so on.

I dialled the phone number. Since the survey wasn't actually being conducted till the next week, someone might have forgotten to hook up the record, and I didn't want to make an idiot of myself.

After a preliminary ringing, buzzing and clicking a deep

bass voice, accompanied by what sounded like an electric guitar, sang:

*Moose, Moose,
From the land of pine and spruce,
Tingly, heady, rough-and-ready . . .*

Then a speaking voice, almost as deep as the singer's, intoned persuasively to background music,

Any real man, on a real man's holiday – hunting, fishing, or just plain old-fashioned relaxing – needs a beer with a healthy, hearty taste, a deep-down manly flavour. The first long cool swallow will tell you that Moose Beer is just what you've always wanted for true beer enjoyment. Put the tang of the wilderness in YOUR life today with a big satisfying glass of sturdy Moose Beer.

The singer resumed:

*Tingly, heady,
Rough-and-ready,
Moose, Moose, Moose, Moose, BEER!!!*

and after a climax of sound the record clicked off. It was in satisfactory working order.

I remembered the sketches I'd seen of the visual presentation, scheduled to appear in magazines and on posters: the label was to have a pair of antlers with a gun and a fishing-rod crossed beneath them. The singing commercial was a reinforcement of this theme; I didn't think it was very original but I admired the subtlety of 'just plain old-fashioned relaxing.' That was so the average beer-drinker, the slope-shouldered pot-bellied kind, would be able to feel a mystical identity with the plaid-jacketed

sportsman shown in the pictures with his foot on a deer or scooping a trout into his net.

I had got to the last page when the telephone rang. It was Peter. I could tell from the sound of his voice that something was wrong.

'Listen, Marian, I can't make it for dinner tonight.'

'Oh?' I said, wanting further explanation. I was disappointed, I had been looking forward to dinner with Peter to cheer me up. Also I was hungry again. I had been eating in bits and pieces all day and I had been counting on something nourishing and substantial. This meant another of the TV dinners Ainsley and I kept for emergencies. 'Has something happened?'

'I know you'll understand. Trigger' – his voice choked – 'Trigger's getting married.'

'Oh,' I said. I thought of saying 'That's too bad,' but it didn't seem adequate. There was no use in sympathizing as though for a minor mishap when it was really a national disaster. 'Would you like me to come with you?' I asked, offering support.

'God no,' he said, 'that would be even worse. I'll see you tomorrow. Okay?'

When he had hung up I reflected upon the consequences. The most obvious one was that Peter would need careful handling the next evening. Trigger was one of Peter's oldest friends; in fact, he had been the last of Peter's group of oldest friends still left unmarried. It had been like an epidemic. Just before I'd met him two had succumbed, and in the four months since that another two had gone under without much warning. He and Trigger had found themselves more and more alone on their bachelor drinking sessions during the summer, and when the others did take an evening off from their wives to go along, I gathered from Peter's gloomy accounts that the flavour of the evening was a synthetic substitute for the irresponsible gaiety of the past. He and Trigger had clutched each

other like drowning men, each trying to make the other the reassuring reflection of himself that he needed. Now Trigger had sunk and the mirror would be empty. There were the other law students of course, but most of them were married too. Besides, they belonged to Peter's post-university silver age rather than to his earlier golden one.

I felt sorry for him, but I knew I would have to be wary. If the other two marriages had been any indication, he'd start seeing me after two or three drinks as a version of the designing siren who had carried off Trigger. I didn't dare ask how she had done it: he might think I was getting ideas. The best plan would be to distract him.

While I was meditating Lucy came over to my desk. 'Do you think you can write a letter to this lady for me?' she asked. 'I'm getting a splitting headache and I really can't think of a thing to say.' She pressed one elegant hand to her forehead; with the other she handed me a note writtten in pencil on a piece of cardboard. I read it:

Dear Sir, The cereal was fine but I found this in with the raisins.

Yours Truly, (Mrs.) Ramona Baldwin.

A squashed housefly was scotch-taped to the bottom of the letter.