



**Margaret Atwood**  
**Transcript of *The Book Show* (January 11, 1994)**

**Smith:** Welcome to The Book Show. I'm your host Tom Smith of the New York State Writers Institute which is located at the University at Albany and is part of the State University of New York system. My guest today is the internationally renowned Canadian fiction writer, Margaret Atwood. Margaret Atwood is a prize-winning poet as well as a celebrated novelist. Among her many literary works are the much-acclaimed novels, *Surfacing* which was published in 1973, *Lady Oracle* which appeared in 1976, *The Handmaid's Tale* which came out in 1985, and *Cat's Eye* in 1988. Her new book recently published by Nan Talese-Doubleday is a delightful and delicious, wise and compelling novel entitled *The Robber Bride* which is already a best seller like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye* were. Margaret Atwood, welcome to The Book Show.

**Atwood:** Thank you.

**Smith:** And congratulations. The story is very funny and at the same time it's strangely moving and like the villainess of the piece, Zenia, it's quite beguiling. Let me ask you right off the bat, your title, *The Robber Bride* refers or alludes to the Grimm Fairy Tale, *The Robber Bridegroom* about a maiden-devouring monster. Is that how this fable, this contemporary fable began, with the gender reversal of that fairy tale?

**Atwood:** Well, no it didn't actually begin that way, but that got into it fairly early on. One of the reasons it's called *The Robber Bride* is that one of the three women from whose point of view we hear the story has twin daughters and when they are about five they decide that all of the characters in all of the stories that they are hearing have to be female. So, of course, if all of the characters are female then you're inevitably going to have a female villain as well.

**Smith:** Well, Zenia is not only a man-eater, but it seems to me she eats just about everybody.

**Atwood:** She's very hungry.

**Smith:** I want to ask you certain things about the development of this story. But Zenia, she's been a destructive presence in the lives of very different middle-aged Toronto women, Tony, Charis, and Roz. Is Zenia something of archetypal trickster because she seems to appear and disappear and reappear and takes many forms and guises in their lives? They met in college in the early 60s and then in the successive decades she does a number on each one of them. She seems to be a magical archetypal trickster figure.

**Atwood:** Well, she is certainly a slight-of-hand artist and let me just say that in the early 70s I worked for a small literary publishing company in Toronto that was named the House of Anansi. It was named that after the African trickster god because one of the founders had worked in Africa and knew about this trickster figure. There is an organization in Canada called the Committee to Re-establish the Trickster. One of the guiding geniuses behind it is Thompson Highway who is a native Canadian playwright and the trickster appears as a sexually ambivalent figure in one of his plays. Although Mr. Jung more or less dismissed trickster figures as not being important in his pantheon of archetypal figures, in fact, every culture seems to have had such a figure or god. There is no particular reason why such a person cannot be female since such characters usually shift their shape.

**Smith:** Zenia not only appears and disappears and reappears in their lives--I mean as people do--but she literally appears. I think she comes in Tony's window one night. And she just sort of appears in that magical way--unannounced.

**Atwood:** Well, there is a fire escape and a tree involved. She doesn't just fly.

**Smith:** I don't want to suggest that there is anything implausible about *The Robber Bride* but she is quite a force--Zenia. Now you once said that your novels, all your novels begin with a scene or image, in the gestation and evolution of the writing of the story. This one too? *The Robber Bride* too?

**Atwood:** Yes, this one too. But the scene went through some transformation. *The Handmaid's Tale* began with the hanging scene and then that scene migrated to the back of the book. A very similar thing happened here because at the back of the book there is a scene involving a very artsy craftsy ceramic urn in which Zenia's ashes at that time are placed. That urn started out as an ashtray, and then it turned into an urn and moved to the back of the book. It started out at the front of the book. So you see how things get moved around in the process of writing. But I had also been thinking of writing a female military historian for some time.

**Smith:** You have a poem do you not?

**Atwood:** Yes, it precedes the novel and it is the voice of a military historian who is female so it has been an interest of mine for a number of years. The question was what kind of a book would she appear in.

**Smith:** I was wondering about the scene which is toward the beginning of the book in the Toxique Restaurant in Toronto. The historical flashbacks of the three characters are sort of framed by the lunches in the Toxique Restaurant. I wondered if that scene, where Tony and Charis and Roz see Zenia once again, five years after she's suppose to have been blown up in Beirut, was the germination of the story.

**Atwood:** Well, it got written fairly early. But as you can see it got written three times from three different points of view because in the beginning of the book each of the three characters gets up, has breakfast, goes to work, and then meets the other two for lunch. So we get all three of them seeing the entrance of Zenia and each one of them has a different reaction. Charis, for instance, who doesn't really believe in death, thinks that Zenia is in fact dead and is just making a re-entrance as a spirit. Then after a while she figures out that this person actually has a body. But that is not Tony's first thought at all. Nor is it the thought of Roz. So each one of them sees her walk in, but each one of them has a different reaction and each one of them very selflessly decides that in order to protect the other two she alone will take Zenia on.

**Smith:** Incidentally, does the Toxique Restaurant exist in Toronto? If it doesn't, it should.

**Atwood:** Well, that's what I think. The most amazing things happened. It doesn't actually exist yet, but I keep saying it will, it will. Restaurants like it exist. It's kind of a blend of several of them. I got a letter from England saying, oh, we're so excited. Did you name the Toxique after our restaurant which has the very same name? Somewhere in Somerset or Kent and I'm invited for a free meal if I happen to be in the region. So, this restaurant exists in England.

**Smith:** Well, I'm sure that there'll be one in Toronto.

**Atwood:** It's also the name of a novel by Françoise Sagan, believe it or not.

**Smith:** You mean the Toxique Restaurant. Is that right?

**Atwood:** She wrote a novel a long time ago called *Toxique* which is the French word for toxic. And I think of it as a blend of toxic and boutique. It's in the boutique area of Toronto.

**Smith:** Now among other things *The Robber Bride* is a war story. I mean it begins in time present at the brink of the Gulf War, October 23 1990. The principle characters are all three, I must say all four although Zenia's something else again, war babies. They were born during the war and their lives have been lonely and orphaned and in some way abandoned by their mothers. Tony is a military historian as you said and, of course, there's the battle of the gender wars, the battle of the sexes in which Zenia is a double-agent. I was fascinated by the whole notion of this as a war novel, but a guerrilla war. Tony is saying, Zenia had been in her life, she had also been at war and then she goes on to say, "an unofficial war, a guerrilla war, a war she may not have known she was waging but a war nevertheless. Who was the enemy? What past wrong was she seeking to avenge? Where was her battlefield?" I've been haunted since I read the book about this notion of this on-going guerrilla war that seems to be deeper or longer than simply the gender wars or the battle of the sexes and I just wanted to ask you about that.

**Atwood:** Well, if you think of all of the four characters, Tony, Charis, and Roz are all hooked into the fabric of society although tenuously as you say. They were war babies. The missing father is a factor in all of their lives. Two of the fathers come back altered by the war. The third one never comes back, and in fact, the war never ended it just moved around and it is still going on. We are still living the effects of the Second World War. Look at Yugoslavia. It shifted around. And the guru of war these days is John Keegan who says that in the future wars are much more likely to be guerrilla wars than they are to be the kind of everybody in, huge conflict that we had last in the forties. So all of the characters are hooked into society, each one of them inherits. Tony inherits from her parents. Charis inherits from her grandmother. And Roz inherits from her father. So they all have a hook into society. But Zenia doesn't. Zenia is in a way in complete free fall. As far as we know, she has no family. She doesn't have any financial fallback of that kind. She is in the Robin Hood position. I mean she is essentially an outlaw.

**Smith:** And she robs the rich.

**Atwood:** She robs the rich and doesn't give to the poor.

**Smith:** She robs the three women not only of their men, although one of them alas comes back, and she robs them of money among other things. Now I must say there is a wonderful footnote to the war story part of this because time present is on the brink of the Gulf War. But the epilogue, the outcome, the second funeral of Zenia which takes place in Lake Ontario is November 11, which is November 11, 1991, which is of course what we used to call Armistice Day down here. It's now Veteran's Day but the day that the first World War ended. I thought that was a great touch.

**Atwood:** We have an even better name for it. We call it Remembrance Day.

**Smith:** Yeah, Remembrance Day that's a better name.

**Atwood:** So much can fit into that idea of Remembrance Day. I mean what exactly are we going to remember. Well, it doesn't say so we could remember anything at all.

**Smith:** Is Zenia a projection of the inner life, the dark side, the repressed fears and desires of the three women because there are all kinds of signs to that? I think Tony says once, I'm paraphrasing, I shuddered because it was too close to what I thought. Is she some kind of shadow of each one of them?

**Atwood:** Well, she gets the shadows of each one of them. In other words they project on to her a good deal of their psychic material, but we do that in our lives, too, primarily on to two kinds of people. We'll leave the political leaders out of it for the moment and the movie stars. But we project on to people our psychic contents, number one, when we fall in love and suddenly those people that we are falling in love with become much bigger than life, and more charismatic and more wonderful and they glow with a soft inner light and, number two, people that we hate. They become much bigger and much more threatening and more evil than they probably are in real life. So Zenia, presenting a more or less blank screen, and then helping people along with her suggestions about herself is like a great big movie screen for the psychic lives of the other characters.

**Smith:** She's like a mirror? I think the mirror figure is what one of the characters refers to, what is she doing on this side of the mirror, something like that, and it seems that Zenia certainly is this for Tony, Charis, and Roz. This kind of character presents the mask that we want, tells us what we want to hear and that's why she's such a chameleon.

**Atwood:** And that's why she's so successful as a con artist. Because that is essentially what con artists do whatever form their con takes. They're offering you something that you want and the difference between that and a legitimate transaction is that they aren't really going to give it to you. They are going to take the money and run. But you have to want it first or you wouldn't let them in the door. You know if you're not in the market for a refrigerator, you'll just say, no, thank you very much I already have one.

**Smith:** And that's absolutely true with her. After the three historical remembrances of their past, their girlhood's etc. their traumatic experiences with Zenia, then you come back to time present October 23, 1990 and those encounters are absolutely shocking and staggering because Zenia has the truth. I mean she has given you the illusion . . .

**Atwood:** Hang on a second here. Can you believe somebody who has lied so much?

**Smith:** Mmmhmm

**Atwood:** They don't know whether to believe her or not.

**Smith:** Yeah, you're right.

**Atwood:** They don't know.

**Smith:** Well, isn't it Tony who says a little later on, Zenia is history. And, of course, what you can believe of history is the question that she hasn't solved and perhaps none of us has. In that sense the revelations that Zenia gives to them staggers them, particularly the details about their sexual egos and vanities and all of that. I felt there was something cathartic about that. . . I mean I was absolutely horrified, but I said, you know every once in a while when something involuntarily shocks

your worst fears, your worst images of yourself out, why there's something truly cathartic about it. I felt that that was true of that last part of the book.

**Atwood:** Well, it is true as Lewis Clyde says, we'll get back to your trickster idea. But the trickster is also the messenger of the gods as Mercury, in the Olympian pantheon who is, number one, the god of thieves, number two, the god of money, number three, the god of communications, and number four, because he's the god of communications it is he who brings the messages. I remember Mercury because he used to be on the front of our telephone book in the early 50s. There was Mercury with his wings and his staff and wound around his middle and coyly concealing his private portions was a great big telephone cable. Did you have a telephone book like that?

**Smith:** I remember that some years ago. I was always fascinated by Mercury, especially all the cables strangulating the messenger. And I always wondered how to read that.

**Atwood:** Well, there he was flying through the air.

**Smith:** The three heroines or principle victims of Zenia's seduction are wonderfully developed as characters in they're own right. Now Tony, tiny Tony, a military historian--talk about against type--she who can read like a historian should, she who can read backwards as well as forwards and who has a relief map of Europe in her basement. Then there's the spiritual Charis--now that character could be a trendy new age joke. She works in a boutique, I think it's called Radiance and yet her story I found genuinely tragic. And Roz, overweight Roz from the high-powered money world is absolutely delightful especially with her twin daughters and her son Larry. How could you resist not writing whole novels about each one of them because I was very taken with each one of them?

**Atwood:** Well this novel is perfect for recessional times because it does have three for the price of one. You get each of those stories and three whole different life stories.

**Smith:** And of course Zenia gives each one of them the past that is her alleged past that they want. She has three different passports to the Second World War and beyond.

**Atwood:** That's right.

**Smith:** For each one of them. Now on the other hand, the male characters don't figure as prominently and they seem marginal. Are they symbolic?

**Atwood:** The men are the loot.

**Smith:** They're really objects?

**Atwood:** Well, usually in a real war what gets killed is the men and what gets stolen are the women--in wars as we have known them over the past 2000 years. But because this is one in which we reverse the genders, the men get to be the loot. You know that there are a lot of men who will enhance their own notions of their own sexual prowess by stealing their friends' girlfriends. Well, there are women who do that too. It's a form of power to make off with somebody that one person of your same sex values.

**Smith:** The men are objects or loot as you say and they really don't stand a chance. On the other hand I found them differentiated. For the benefit of the people who have not yet read *The Robber Bride* I must say this is not a man-trashing book at all. But the vision of men that you have throughout is really very interesting.

**Atwood:** The female characters indulge these men and make up excuses for them because if you love somebody and value them and want them back you can't believe it was them who did it. Right? You have to believe that it was this other person who came and stole them rather than that they walked off willingly with the third person. So the women, in fact, take a quite indulgent view of these men and see them as putty in Zenia's hands and Zenia finally says to them, look these guys made choices of their own.

**Smith:** Absolutely true. It's like the three women really are not only protecting them but in some way like a mother buffers them from reality, from history not just from some of the truths that Zenia really catalyzes in this way.

**Atwood:** Well, the women quite frequently--this is true of women in real life situations--think that men have all of this power. But when it comes down to a particular man they happen to be involved with they're quite likely to feel that this person is more fragile than they are and that they have to therefore indulge this person and cover up and rearrange reality a bit to make it easier for him. You find all of these women doing this. Sound familiar any female listeners?

**Smith:** Well, let me say to all readers who like not only very beautifully written books but also very thoughtful and haunting books that *The Robber Bride*, recently published by Doubleday, will be a really great delight. And Margaret Atwood, thank you so much for joining us. We'll look for more magical and meaningful stories from you in the future.

**Atwood:** Well, Thank you.

**Smith:** This is Tom Smith saying so long until next time on The Book Show.