"The Writer, the Reader, and the Book": Margaret Atwood on Reviewing in Conversation with Reingard M. Nischik

This interview was conducted in the afternoon of a mild early fall day in a hotel near Regent’s Park in London, UK, on October 2, 2014. Like the weather outside, the atmospheric conditions of our exchange on reviewing were just right: we were focused on serious matter, yet with a dose of humor. The outcome is a veritably “Atwoodian” interview, insightful and with lots of friendly laughter.

Reingard M. Nischik: First of all, thank you so much, Margaret, for taking the time for this interview. We are sitting here in London on the occasion of the appearance of your new collection of short fiction. If I counted correctly, it’s your eighth collection of short fiction, though I know they’re all different in form. Stone Mattress, it is called. So first of all, congratulations! There should always be time for that. [laughs]

Margaret Atwood: Thank you. [laughs]

RN: You know that I would like to talk with you about reviewing. So my first question is: Roughly how many reviews of this new book, which was just published last month, have you either read or at least glanced at?

MA: Let’s see. So we have three countries involved: Britain, the US, and Canada. A lot of British ones have come across my desk, because the British edition was the first out, so those reviews were published first. The US publication, I think, was on 16 September, and the Canadian one was on the 8th, by which time I was already in Europe. So I
haven’t looked at so many of those; they haven’t been sent my way as much, because they’ll probably be there when I get back.

RN: Okay, so your office collects them for you and then…

MA: Yes, the office collects them. The British ones I got pretty much right away, because they were so enthusiastic and they were all pretty good reviews. For some reason, the British like stories about nutty old Canadians and blizzards. [both laugh]

RN: With the amount of reviews you get, it must be very difficult to keep track.

MA: Well, I don’t really read a lot of them while I’m promoting a book because, number one, I don’t have time, but number two, that’s not the point of promoting a book. You’re not there to read the reviews, you’re there to do events. So as long as the publishers are happy…As you know, a good review is always ascribed to the excellent presentation of the publisher, whereas a bad review is always the author’s fault.

RN: [laughs] That’s an interesting point, yes… ascribed to the publisher because then they did good advertising and presented the book well?

MA: I don’t know, I mean, they all just take… “Look at the good review we got!” Whereas the bad ones, “Look at the bad review she got!” [both laugh]

RN: In general, when you do have the time to look at a few of them, maybe after the book tour, could you say that you are generally more interested in the Canadian ones or in the international ones [MA laughs] or do you take them as they come?

MA: By the time a book has been published, it’s too late to do anything about it. [RN laughs] They’re not of any use to you. They’re really of use to the publishers, they’re of use to the readers, they’re of use to, I suppose, the magazines and newspapers in which they appear, but they’re not of any help to the writer, because you’ve already finished the book. You can’t say, “Oh! Well, maybe I should’ve… This reviewer says I should have done the story differently, I’ll go back and change it.” You actually can’t do that. So, I think they probably are more interesting to people doing the sociology of reviewing, but they’re not of much help to the writer for that book.

RN: No, not for that book, but I was wondering whether reviews you got at whatever stage of your career ever made you reconsider certain aspects of your writing for later books?

MA: Not the newspaper reviews so much, because newspaper and magazine reviews have a different line of descent from academic reviews. Academic reviews are descended from biblical exegesis: close commentary on texts, finding mysterious meanings. Whereas newspaper and magazine reviews are descended from gossip at the village well. “Did you see that? Loved the dress, hated the shoes.” They’re commentaries on taste and comportment and behavior, but not on deep