

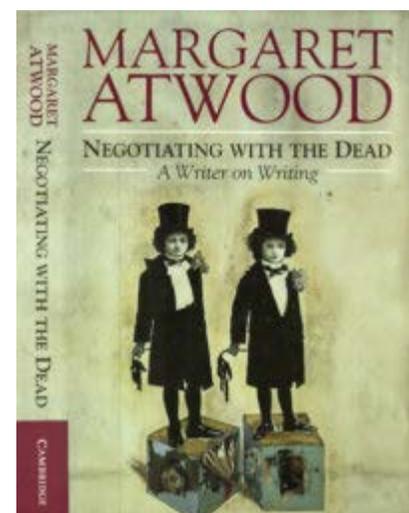
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*A READER'S JOURNAL*

**Negotiating with the Dead**  
by  
**Margaret Atwood**

A Writer on Writing  
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2002



The blurb on the book jacket sums it up:

"What is the role of the writer? Prophet? High Priest of Art? Court Jester? Or witness to the real world?" In the title to Chapter 1, Atwood asks, "Who Do You Think You Are?" This question spoken colloquially means "stop being so pretentious" — an epithet that could easily be thrown at any writer I can think of. One is not a writer unless one pretends to have something important to say and puts one's words before the world for it to decide whether that is the case or not. Basically a writer works for oneself, is both the employer and the employee, and as such, must write their own job description.

**[page xvi] The broad subject proposed was, more or less, Writing, or Being a Writer, and since I've done that and been one, you'd think I'd have something to say. I thought so too; what I had in mind was a grand scheme in which I would examine the various self-images — the job descriptions, if you like — that writers have constructed for themselves over the years.**

On pages xx through xxii of her Introduction she gives a long list of motives from "To record the world as it is" to "To give back something of what has been given to me." I read through all of those and didn't find one that suited me, so I added my entry to the end of her list, "Because I like to write."

**[page xxiv] Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light. This book is about that kind of darkness, and that kind of desire.**

So, "into the darkness we write" in the words of Nancy Mairs in [Voice Lessons](#). At the head of Chapter 1, Atwood asks if "the writing life" is not an oxymoron. In other words, "I have no life — I'm a writer." Samuel Johnson, who gave his own job description as follows: "a harmless drudge," knew the paradox of the writing life. In a story she tells us later on page 101, the Devil comes to a writer and says, "I will make you the best, most famous writer of your time. You will be influential and your fame and glory will last for all time. All you have to do is sell me your grandmother, your mother, your wife, your kids, your dog, and your soul." The writer quickly reaches for the pen begins to sign the contract, and suddenly he pauses and looks up and asks, "Wait a minute, what's the catch?"

Maybe it takes a writer to understand what makes this funny. I say this because several people I told the story to laughed, but upon questioning did not really understand what was going on. If the writers among

you will bear with me, I'll give a quick explanation for the non-writers who may be puzzled. To work as a writer, one usually has already given up one's family, one's dog, and one's soul, basically all the things the Devil was asking him to sell away. Put another way, the challenge of any writer is to ply one's trade without having to give up all the other things besides writing that goes into what is called living.

Who does a writer write for? What is a book's function? Where is the writer when the reader is reading? These questions comprise the theme of Chapter 5 "Communion — Nobody to Nobody." The third question she answers this way:

**[page 126] If you really are in the habit of reading other people's letters and diaries, you'll know the answer to that one straightaway: when you are reading, the writer is *not* in the same room. If he were, either you'd be talking together, or he'd catch you in the act.**

And, if a writer is writing in a diary, for whom is the writing intended? Does one communicate with the future? She notes what Winston Smith in Orwell's *1984* said on the subject.

**[page 128] How could you communicate with the future? It was of its nature impossible. Either the future would resemble the present, in which case it would not listen to him: or it would be different from it, and his predicament would be meaningless.**

Ah, I thought as I read his words, but the present, pithily captured on paper, will offer a view of the past that will be unique in itself and entrancing, such as the presents captured by Samuel Pepys or Anne Frank.

There is a paradox of being a successful writer — the very things that you did that brought you success are undermined by the things that success brings you. One cannot write during a grueling 37 city book signing tour, for example. Cyril Connolly said, as she points out on page 136, "Of all the enemies of literature, success is the most insidious." Why that's foolishness, some of you may be thinking, good writers grind out one book right after another. Indeed they do, but are we talking about books or literature? Connolly goes on to quote Trollope as saying (page 136) "Success is a poison that should be only taken late in life, then only in small doses." One can avoid the "poison of success" if one is successful at avoiding success as a writer while one is yet writing.

**[page 55] What is the nature of the crucial moment — the moment in which the writing takes place? If we could ever catch them in the act, we might have a clearer answer. But we never can. Even if we are writers ourselves, it is very hard for us to watch ourselves in mid-write, as it were: our attention must be focused then on what we are doing, not on ourselves.**

In a new work titled "Yes, and Even More," I tackled this question by keeping track of what was happening while I was writing the poemlets that comprise the book. The notes began as a record of where I was, what I was doing, watching, etc., as I was inspired to write a certain poemlet. At times the notes began to dominate the piece they were supposed to be meta-comments about, even including poems in the notes. Fun with form is what I thought at the time.

On May 13, 2002 at 8:13 AM, as I was reading the above Atwood quote from page 55, I was writing down a note for the above paragraph about "Yes, and Even More" in the margins of the book as I was driving west on Interstate 20, going uphill and down, crossing 241, Exit Loop 170 nearing Abilene, Texas, smelling a dead skunk in the middle of a bumpy road. The day was cool and clear. With all this documentation, you can check for yourself with maps and weather reports whether these notes are fictional or an actual representation of a real event. You'll have to take my word about the dead skunk.

"Where is the writer when the reader is reading?" Remember that question? If we can hear the writer's voice inside of our self as we read the writer's words, we might say that the writer's inside of us talking.

**[page 148] As the Russian writer Abram Tertz says in his story "The Icicle," "Look, I'm smiling at you. I'm smiling in you, I'm smiling through you. How can I be dead if I breathe in every quiver of your hand?"**

This idea of a voice of the writer in our head as we read it registered in me in a new way when I got to meet in person a man that I had emailed for some seven years. The voice I heard in my head when I read his words turned out to be very different from the voice of the man himself. His face and body were also different. Only his words were true to him, everything else was an illusion that I had built up inside of myself in the process of understanding his words. So here I am, one writer, and every one of you readers out there are hearing a different voice in your head and seeing a different me. How can a writer ever have control over the voices and faces that anonymous readers will conjure up some distant time and place in the future?

**[page 157] Despite all the remarks about enduring fame and leaving a name behind them that are strewn about in the letters and poems of writers, I had not thought much about writing *per se* as being a reaction to the fear of death - but once you've got hold of an idea, the proofs of it tend to proliferate(1).**

The writer's concern with death brings with it an "intimation of transience, of evanescence, and thus of mortality, coupled with the urge to indite." As I read these words, I ponder on the process of reincarnation where one spends the time between death and a new birth in the spiritual world preparing for one's next lifetime. No where are we more sure of the transience of life than in our time between death and a new birth. Thus we form the impulse to write ("the urge to indite") and carry this with us into our life on Earth. Where does the urge or impulse come from? In the time between our previous death and our birth into this life, we planned out our present life: chose our parents, our life's circumstances, etc. Once we arrived on Earth all our plans for the karmic working out of our lifetime are only perceptible to us while in the sleeping state. Here's how Rudolf Steiner says it *The Mystery of the Trinity and the Mission of the Spirit*:

**[page 132] All human beings perceive their karma, but only in the sleeping state. The afterimage or afterglow of this perception slips into our waking state through our feelings.**

Thus the urge, the impulse comes from karmic plans we made long before this lifetime on Earth, during a time when we were certainly aware of the "transience of life" and the short time we will have on Earth to accomplish our lifetime's karmic goals. We can no more explain why we feel the impulse to write than we can recover the karmic plans that we are aware of during deep, dreamless sleep. Yet, the impulse, the urge bleeds through as an afterglow of our sleeping-time awareness and prods us on. Atwood asks:

**[page 158] Why should it be that writing, over and beyond any other art or medium, that should be linked so closely with anxiety about one's own personal final extinction?**

I thought as I read those words that she was asking the wrong question, but then I thought, "What is the right question to be asking?" Perhaps for Atwood writing seems set apart from the other arts because she is a writer? I think I will hold that as an unanswered question for now. Here's her attempt at answering her own question:

**[page 158] Surely that's partly because of the nature of writing — its apparent permanence, and the fact that it survives its own performance — unlike, for instance, a dance recital. If the act of writing charts the process of thought, it's a process that leaves a trail, like a series of fossilized footprints. Other art forms can last and last — painting, sculpture, music — but they do not survive as *voice*. And as I've said, writing is writing down, and what is written down is a score for voice, and what the voice most often does . . . is tell a story. Something unfurls, something reveals itself. The crooked is made straight, or, the age being what it is, possibly more crooked; at any rate there's a path.**

**There's a beginning, there's an end, not necessarily in that order; but however you tell it, there's a plot. The voice moves through time, from one event to another, or from one perception to another, and things change, whether in the mind alone or in the outside world. Events take place, in relation to other events. That's what time is. It's one damn thing after another, and the important word in that sentence is *after*.**

Some stories have sad endings and some have happy endings, but the ending of the story itself is a sad event as anyone who has ever read a wonderful story knows: one does not want the story to end. Like when I reached the end of Atwood's book: I wanted more and there was only blank end pages left. Here is her thoughts on this subject:

**[page 173] And so it is with all happy endings of all books, when you come to think about it. you can't go home again, said Thomas Wolfe; but you can, sort of, when you write about it. But then you reach the last page. A book is another country. You enter it, but then you must leave: like the Underworld, you can't live there.**

You, as a living writer, may not be able to live there, but certainly your words can live there and find new voices with every generation.

~~~~~ footnotes ~~~~~

**Footnote 1.** See Lynn Segal's Book [Dream of Reality](#) for an epistemological basis for Atwood's statement that "once you've got hold of an idea, the proofs of it tend to proliferate." Here's the pertinent quote from Segal:

**"Once a concept is constructed, it is immediately externalized so that it appears to the subject as a perceptually given property of the object and independent of the subject's own mental activity. The tendency for mental activities to become automatized and for their results to be perceived as external to the subject is what leads to the conviction that there is a reality independent of thought."**

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

