INTERVIEW WITH: **Alice Munro**

DATE: **June 4, 1991**

AW Just set it going.

AM Okay.

AW And I'll turn it up here. Okay. Alright, Alice. The first question I do want to ask you is do you recall when you first heard of Margaret Lawrence?

AM Yes, very well because I first read a story in Tamarac Review. And I can't remember what it was called. It was one of her African stories. And I thought it was just wonderful. And I guess I saw it from the notes that she was living in Vancouver. And then I asked .... And I was living in Vancouver. And I asked Bob Weaver about her. And then we had mutual friends, she and I. A guy named Gordon Woodward. I don't know if his name has come up at all. And a woman named Margaret Hutchinson. You should know about them. There'd surely be letters to them. They were friends of hers. And they were both writers. They had been married and they found being married too difficult so they had divorced, but they still went around together. And they knew Margaret. And I guess I met her somewhere at a conference, or something that was going on in the Vancouver library. And she asked me to a party, a small party at her house. She was living up in the Dunbar district. She was living, of course, with Jack, then. And Jocelyn and David. It is David?

AW Yeah.

AM I didn't meet the kids. But she and I both had kids, small kids, about the same age. And so I sort of got to know her then and we talked. And then I think fairly soon after that, her life was in considerable upheaval then and she must have left for England.

AW Okay, let me take you back a minute. You said that your response to that first story was wonderful and although you can't recall the title and so on, do you remember in general terms what it was about the story that you responded to? 'Cause you were obviously reading a lot in those days.

AM Yes. There was a dwarf in the story. Do you not recognize which one it would be?

AW Yeah, but I can't recall the title either. It's been a long time since I read the Tomorrow Tamer.

AM It's a marvellous story. Then I think there was another story that I read, too. But it was this one, this first one, that ... and I still think Margaret's stories are terrifically good. And I was very ... very struck by it. At that time, she hadn't published any novels. When I think ... yes, I think when I first met her was when she published This Side of Jordan. And there was some kind of party for that.

AW '62.

AM Yeah. Yeah.

AW Do you remember your first impressions of her?

AM Yeah. I thought she was ... I was intimidated. I'm still intimidated very easily by writers. And generally don't want to meet them. And she was, of course, as anyone will tell you, extremely easy, funny, forthright, lively, good company. Great person to meet.

AW Was she aware that you were writing at this time?

AM She must have been. I mean, why else would I have been there. I guess it was a party for writers but I hadn't published anything much.

AW Okay. Did you ... at that time in Vancouver, did ... I mean, you mentioned the kids, you both had the kids. Did you talk at all about the roles and ....

AM Yes. We talked ... when I went to her house, I remember talking about kids, housework, writing, all those things you talked about as soon as you met another woman who was trying to write. And there was immediate rapport that way. Because everybody had the same problems. I remember her telling me she ironed all her husband's shirts. And I said, "You mustn't do that. You must find some other way." So, I do remember that. I have the impression of someone who was trying terribly hard to do everything. I mean, she was trying to be a good housewife, and mother, and she was trying very hard to write. She was very serious about her writing. But she was also very serious about the whole thing that the culture demanded of us at that time. And so was I. So, we became very friendly almost immediately. But not close friends in the sense that we tried to see more of each other a lot. Because I think we were both desperate for time.

AW Uh huh. And maybe reflected one another too, in ways.

AM In many ....

AW Maybe reflected one another's lives in ways, in that sense of trying to be the artist and the mother and ...

AM Yes, yes.

AW ... the wife. Did you get a sense that she ever questioned those ... the clashing of those different roles in her life? Or was it something she just simply wanted to work out, or have work?

AM At that time, we didn't say that we questioned them. We talked about how difficult it was and we made jokes and ... I mean, when she said, "I iron all Jack's shirts," I said, "Oh, for God's sake." And she said, "I know. What a fool I am." You know, that kind of thing. So recognized the whole problem. But ... not to an extent of sort of being openly rebellious about it at all. But just the fact that you could talk about this. I mean, a whole lot was understood. It was understood that you were nearly going crazy trying to do all this stuff. But we were young, relatively young, and I think we thought we were going to manage.

AW So then she left.

AM Yeah.

AW And went to England where she started to write that extraordinary cycle of novels. Do you remember when you first read, let's say, The Stone Angel, which I imagine must have been the first one. Or was it the first one?

AM No, I read A Jest of God first, I'm sure.

AW Alright.

AM I read them all since they came out. But was The Stone Angel before A Jest of God?

AW '64. Yeah. And then A Jest of God was '66.

AM Well ... I must have read The Stone Angel first then. I can remember her joking. She was writing it in Vancouver and she said, "Who wants to read a book about an old woman, anyway?" And my friend Margaret Hutchinson was also writing a book about an old woman and they ... this was the first time they had recognized this fact, that they were not pursuing anything terribly saleable.

AW Alright. But given your having read the African short stories, and to come across The Stone Angel and A Jest of God. Did the Canadian aspect of this material strike you? Particularly ... I mean, had heard ... had the shift that she had made from ....

AM Oh, I think maybe I knew she was making it. So I wasn't surprised. I liked what she was doing very much. In a way, it was not as ... the first sort of hit had been made by the short stories. So I was more or less prepared for the novels to be very accomplished, as they were. As they were. And I suppose it was ... it was not a sort of message to me that you can use Canadian material, 'cause I'd always figured you could use Canadian material. I was kind of surprised that anyone thought you couldn't. But I was very glad that she was doing it. And I was glad that she was getting such a tremendous response.

AW Now, what about her use of the voice of women in these books? I mean, that was important to you. You were using female protagonists.

AM Um hum.

AW Do you remember how you responded to that?

AM Well, I remember thinking it was very good in Stone Angel, quite good in Jest of God, and didn't work in The Fire Dwellers. I thought when I read The Fire Dwellers that there were dangers in this directness of voice. Or even what can be a very authentic voice has a lot of problems in fiction. I wasn't surprised that she was doing it, no. I beg... I was sore that the mainstream of literature, that a lot of things that everyone took for granted, I didn't know. I didn't know that you couldn't ... I didn't know that the short story was dead. I didn't know that Canadian subject matter was a mistake. I didn't know that to have female protagonists was wrong. So it didn't at all surprise me. I just thought from the first time I read her that this is an enormously able writer and so I was not surprised that she went on to show that. And ... I liked A Jest of God just as well as The Stone Angel because I thought it was a little bit riskier.

AW How do you mean?

AM Well, a dying protagonist is just so inherently dramatic and important and doesn't run the ... you know, when you ... one of the things you take risks with in fiction is always with finality. When you're handling ... adventures that don't have quite so great a resonance, or something, you can get ... you're running bigger risks. I thought she was dealing with more commonplace and more, in a way, perhaps more complicated things in A Jest of God. But I felt they were both extremely successful books. And I liked what she was trying to do in The Fire Dwellers too. I thought it should have been retracted and done some other way. But then I figure every good writer has some bombs. And ... in fact, she was such a good writer that I didn't think ... you know, everything she did was interesting. You get attached to a writer and then they're just like an explorer to you. It's not the finished thing. You don't make judgments in the same way, you just like to see everything they're doing.

AW I want to ask you about women's voice. It wasn't just the fact that she was using female protagonists and having them express themselves, but in those two novels you mentioned, in particular, A Jest of God and The Fire Dwellers, women are questioning — strongly questioning — their sexual roles and a patriarchal sexual mores that exist around them and so on. And it seems to me that she was examining ... Lawrence was examining that and pushing it, questioning it, pushing it, in ways that had not been done by ... well, perhaps by one or two other female writers in this country, but not certainly with the same ... to the same degree ...

AM But you were always reading not only writers in this country. I mean, if you read the Martha Quest novels that Doris Lessing earlier, this was not the surprise. Or Emma Deedon Gordimer's The Lying Days about a young girl's teenage years. I mean, this was going on through the world. It was going on for a very long time before it was reflected in women's social ... I mean, women would be reading these books and they would be living lies that were extremely conformist at the same time. So, I just would have to say that that never struck me about those novels. That there was question of the females roles. Because I thought that any novel you wrote about a woman would have that.

AW I may be wrong, but I think fewer women would read Doris Lessing than ended up reading Margaret Lawrence. I mean, proportionally.

AM In our country?

AW In our country, yes. And not just because Lawrence was ....

AM No. But I didn't know that when I first read ....

AW I see. Yeah.

AM I mean ....

AW In other words, there was a kind of .... I mean, Lessing is a very intellectual writer, to me.

AM Not in the Martha Quest books, I don't think.

AW Okay. Lawrence is not an intellectual.

AM No.

AW I mean, there's an extraordinary openness to her and, as you say, dealing with ordinary people and ordinary experience and so on.

AM Yeah. But I mean I was also reading Edna O'Brien at that time.

AW Oh, yes.

AM All this is coming in at the same time. And I didn't make a distinction. Again, because of being so out of the mainstream. I wasn't making any distinctions thinking this is a Canadian book. It's just a book. A good ... this is a good book. So, I didn't ... I didn't sort of think about things. But ... I didn't ... I suppose like many woman and I didn't connect books to life in the way that I thought ... you read this, you think it's not fair. There's going to be some changes made. I always thought you read this. You think it's not fair. What else is news. You know. So, this was pre-feminist. Pre-consciousness raising. 'Cause after all, you couldn't read George Elliot. You know, "It's not fair." Do you know something? Well, no, this doesn't have anything to do with what we're saying. But I looked up to get some biographical details on George Elliot in the Encyclopedia Britannica the other night and she is described — if this is mid-20th century — as having a masculine understanding. Yeah, yeah. And that it the way we grew up. And we knew that things like that were wrong, that they were crazy. But it was just as if ... there was this double-think all the time.

AW My wife's writing a book on Elizabeth Barret Browning and you should hear the things about Barret Browning ?? ?? were said.

AM Yeah, yeah. But the fact is you'd read those things and you'd know it was nonsense. But you didn't think this is ever got to change. It's ... I guess it's like being a subject race.

AW Yeah. Have you read Bonics Possession?

AM Yes.

AW An extraordinary novel.

AM Isn't it? Yeah.

AW Oh, yeah. Not the least for its ... for its ?? female poet.

AM Yeah. Yeah.

AW She was going through. Anyway, we can talk about that later.

AM Anyway, anyway ....

AW Okay, if not Canadian in terms of its subject matter, that is that mattering, what about region? It's not Canadian region. I mean, you're a writer who was at that time obviously investigating the region ...

AM Yup. Yup.

AW ... in which you were born and (inaudible)

AM Yeah, I like ?? ??

AW Yeah.

AM Yeah, yeah.

AW You felt that had an integrity to it.

AM Oh, yeah. Well, I ... all her writing had an integrity. She was a very good writer. I think just outside of things about region or women or any of it. Just so ... she wasn't the first Canadian I thought this of, but a Canadian writer who was very seriously committed. To writing as well as she can. To writing ... to not drawing back. And I did think ... I did ... I like the feel of Manitoba a lot. A lot. I felt she was really getting that. But there again, I thought there were regional writers. I mean, before that I had read Sheila Watson. You know, people who were doing things with different parts of the country. And it's ... what was happening as a movement seems to have sort of escaped me altogether because I never thought that this was .... I guess I didn't realize that this was new. The fact that Canadian writing took a kind of leap around 1960. I suppose it did.

AW But when you look back on her now, and her place in the culture of this country. Do you see that as ...?

AM Yes.

AW And her as obviously having contributed to ...

AM Yes, yes, yes.

AW ... those changes?

AM It's hard to know exactly how it happened. But you think of her as being .... *I* think of her as probably being the first Canadian ... well, the first of this renaissance, or whatever it was, or birth of Canadian writing. And I know there were other ... probably Robertson Davies was writing at the same time. And Hugh McLennan was writing

earlier. And Mordecai Richler was writing at the same time. So all of those, to me, were kind of ... even though the work of some of them I like much better than others, it was a sign that things were possible here.

AW What about the moral/Christian aspects of her writing. I mean, she saw herself as a moral writer. And indeed as a Christian writer, but not as the fundamentalists saw her.

AM Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AW But did you see her strongly in that way?

AM Never. I mean, I would never had made that judgement. She made it of herself. I just think ... I think every writer who is any good at all is a moral writer. I don't think you can escape that. I don't understand these terms as applied to writing. But then what she would mean by Christian I don't quite know. I can understand Graham Green is a Catholic writer. But it's much harder to see the Christian writer of ... what does it mean? Does it mean one believes in salvation? I think generally it just means that one hopes for a better world and being good to people. And that isn't specifically Christian.

AW It's all being Christian.

AM Yeah. Yeah. So, no, I don't see .... Though anyone who's writing about Canada, anybody who's writing about Scottish or Wasp Canada for a few generations back or, you know, even back to the beginning of the 20th century, is certainly tangling with the church in our lives. The Presbyterian force in Canadian life has been very strong so you've always got that. But just the fact that you deal with that, does that mean you're a Christian writer? I don't know. I don't know what the Protestant Christian mindset could be said to be. And Margaret Lawrence was a member of the United Church, which is, to me, an extremely *humanist* organization; not particularly religious. So those terms have to be ... they'd have to be investigated. I'd like to ask her what she meant by that but I can't. But ... what is to be a moral writer? You see things ... how? Is there anybody you can think of who is not a moral writer? I've been reading today some stories by Melun Kundera and they're extremely cynical stories. They're all about how people use each other. I think he's a very moral writer. But many people would not agree.

AW No, I understand. You're ... you know, I think creativity comes out of a strong sense of morality and ....

AM Probably. At least a sense of ... I don't know. I can't say that it comes out of a sense of right and wrong ...

AW No.

AM ... or just an injustice because it's not always ....

AW Well, it's a sense, but at least consideration of those things. Whether one has or has not a code, a strict code by which one lives, one knows that the rest of the world does.

AM Um hum.

AW This leads us into that whole censorship struggle. I mean, there it was in '76 and '85.

AM Yeah. I guess I saw then how Margaret thought of herself. Because when this started, I thought it was a huge joke. And I wrote her a funny letter about it because I wanted .... I just thought it was so funny. But she and I, who were both verging on — at least into middle age — were suddenly seen — and were both rather, I thought, cautious writers who had difficulty with some scenes — and suddenly we were thought of as being dirty. And I thought this was hilarious. It gave me a new lease on life. Like being thought a scarlet woman.

AW That's right.

AM And I loved it. You know, the immediate thing was "what a joke." And I wrote to her and she did laugh at the letter, I think, but the letter I got back showed that she had ... she was deeply hurt, deeply concerned. (Take these off, they're making noise.)

AW And why, do you think?

AM Oh, well, because she was a more serious person than I was. She was serious in that ... in the sense of her life in the world. I'm serious about my work. But she was serious about both things. I think ... I guess she was very surprised that people could read her books and think that they were dirty. That they could so misread. It didn't surprise me. But it did surprise her. I think ... maybe she'd have thought people were ... oh, just more discerning than they were. Maybe she was disappointed in the public that was out there. Maybe she was disappointed that people could be so self-serving, because I do think the whole campaign was a career move on the part of certain preachers. I don't think she knew that. I don't think she saw it cynically at all. She saw that she had given them the best that was in her and they were saying, you know, "You dirty minded creature," or something like that.

AW She paid a price for this. I mean, she paid a ... she was deeply wounded by it.

AM She was deeply wounded, yes. And ... of course, she was living in the country then, but so was I. It might have reached her more because right around Peterborough there was a lot of — I suppose — a lot of ill will. But she grew up in a small town. She should have known there's lots of ill will.

AW She took it on herself to fight this publicly, though.

AM Yeah. Yeah.

AW Do you think that was a wise thing?

AM Oh, I don't think you have any choice. I've spoken to Clinton Tal??? (inaudible). And you get ... you don't have fun. When something like this happens, it's not whether you want to or not.

AW But you said it was ... you thought it was a joke.

AM Well, I spoke but I wasn't surprised. No, I thought it was a joke all the way .... I mean, I thought it was ... it was funny but I just couldn't believe that my writing would ... which I ... I had already taken a lot of flack for being old-fashioned. And I thought it was amazing that I should be lumped in with the pornographers. I didn't think what was happening was a joke.

AW No, the issues of censorship is obviously different.

AM It's never ... it's never. But I didn't feel personally wounded. Because I grew up in a very rough part of a small town. I was poor. She was a doctor's daughter. This was different. And there are lessons you learn young that you can't learn later, maybe. I don't know. But I wouldn't ... it wasn't that Mar... no, it was just ... it wasn't that she was overly sensitive. I don't mean that. It was just that she was ... she wanted to do good. She ... it's all different ... a motive for writing could be to do good. I'm not sure I understand that, but maybe that was one of the motives. Maybe particularly as she went on with the writing. That this will ... well, you think, if you've written a serious book, you don't think it's going to do harm, but you don't necessarily think that it will be perceived as doing good. I mean, the Wingham Advanced Times wrote a blistering editorial, criticizing me, calling me a "warped personality." It didn't surprise or hurt me. Because you know what you can expect ... if you try to do anything. You know, if you try to do anything that comes out of your real self, if you've grown up in this kind of community, you should know that you're not going to be rewarded for doing something honest or real. I mean, there's going to be some rewards but there's going to be a hell of a lot of shit as well. And so she must have known that. She must have known that because she did grow up in a small town. Why did the shit surprise her?

AW Well, maybe one of the ... I was just thinking this for the first time. That one of the differences is that this issue hit you when you were living in the same area. So when the Wingham paper writes it, I mean, down the road, that's where you were born and raised. I mean, ?? in that area. Whereas she had left Nepuaw, left and come somewhere else ....

AM Yeah. And it's still there.

AW Still there. Whereas if maybe if she'd been living near her former home, she would ??

AM She would know. "What did I expect?"

AW Yeah.

AM Yeah. Yeah. I think maybe it was that. And I think something else. I think because Margaret was alone, I mean, because her personal life had had to get absorbed into her public life, in a way, that she didn't have this bow work of a relationship and private life, where nobody could get her. And I think that is the sad, sad thing that happened in her life.

AW Well, I do want to talk to you about that, as it related to her writing.

AM But that might have made her more vulnerable, you see. When you don't go home and have someone to laugh about it with.

AW Or trying to (inaudible)

AM She's very vulnerable to the people who are around her and to know that people dislike her and think she's a dirty minded old ?? ?? ?? is going to get to her.

AW That's right. I think that's very accurate. Just from ....

AM It's ... I feel ... I feel so badly that that happened to her. That, you know, that anything like that could come into her life and make it harder. Because her life was hard anyway. And maybe it was just a kind of withdrawal of support. That she thought was around her.

AW But, on the other hand, there was a tremendous amount of support. I mean, I know what you're saying, but from her fellow writers, from readers, and so on ....

AM Yeah. But then, why didn't that make up for it?

AW I don't know. And also ... I mean, the struggle itself was an extremely important one in this country. In terms of getting those books put back on the list, and so on. Do you not think? I mean, that that was .... Yes? No?

AM Oh, you have to do it. I don't know if ... I think what happened in this area was that the career ?? ?? making here ... mark and that way suddenly glommed onto abortion as the thing they would make their mark on.

AW And left the books alone for a while.

AM Left the books alone for a while. Yeah. Yeah. Things do get slightly better over the time. If enough people .... I think it was terribly important that everybody fought as hard as they could ?? ??. And in this area, it was almost impossible to get any support from professional classes, the people who have been to university, the people who should have been on her side. They thought it was a joke. Or they were afraid of losing any kind of business. So, it was ... that was disillusioning. To see how little support you could actually get in the area. But then ... ?? ?? some nice things happened too. I think what you have to do with anything like that is just keep on. Keep hitting them. The teachers were quite good. They had to take some books off. We didn't win here. But the next year they just put more of the same on. They just kept hitting them with more and more. And ....

AW Yeah. And how were the students?

AM Half and half. There were students who got upset. They were grateful to their parents for protecting them. And there were students who got up and were in favour of the books. Mostly the students of more outsider parents. And a lot of students didn't make ... they didn't care. It's one of those symbolic things that you just have to do.

AW Yeah. Did you talk to her about this ...

AM Yeah.

AW ... in your meetings ?? ??

AM Yeah, yeah. And I remember writing letters and talking about it. I remember ... I remember when ... oh, when the feminists, a year or two later — not very long afterwards, there was already a veering away from this stand. Because people were getting upset about kiddy-porn and snuff movies and there was suddenly a huge feminist pro-censorship building sentiment and this bothered me a lot. Because I don't think you're principles are ever tested until it attacks ... you know, until you can see something that *you* dislike. I mean, the fact that I'll fight for <u>The Diviners</u> is nothing. But that is no test of principles. I like it. But if I have to stand up for someone who's doing a kiddy-porn video, then I'll have to think about what I believe. So we did talk about this. And there again I think she agonized over things. She became intensely serious this way, about what is the right way to think about these complicated things, which are very difficult. Because you don't come down with the right answer. You just say, "Okay. I'm against censorship. Never mind what kind of censorship. I hope this doesn't mean that I'm contributing to violence against women." That's all you can say.

AW Yeah. That's what Jim Crawley?? ends up saying a lot of the time.

AM Yeah. Yeah. So we would talk about that. And sometimes she would get upset about political things. I remember she was on the Board at McLullen & Stewart and she took it seriously. And they were going to publish a book, a real ?? book on Iran, I think, at the time when Iran was still a ... you know, when the Shaw was still in power. And she was very upset at that. You know. Just about whether she should make a political statement. Whether it would do any good if she did or not, which of course it wouldn't. She was on the Board, I think probably as a decoration.

AW She got into a great cafuffel with Jack McLullen about that.

AM Did she?

AW Yeah. It was in her correspondence, yeah.

AM Did she? Good. Well, she was very upset. And I remember ... I remember respecting this a lot about her. And thinking, well, you know, what I would do. I'd stay off the Board so I wouldn't have to get into this kind of mess. You know, in other words, you make decisions ... she was making a decision to take things on. And I thought, "Does this help her writing? Does it help her get back to writing?" But still, it seemed ... it seemed that she had taken on, in a way, a lot of public responsibility. And didn't know quite where this came from. Because when I met her in Vancouver, I wouldn't have predicted that.

AW Let me try and frame this, 'cause I want to talk to you about this. I mean, she wrote four and a half of those Manawaka books when she was in England. She worked on The Diviners in Canada when she came back to the Otonobie in summers, but when she wrote nearly all of the Manawaka books, she wrote them in relative anonymity.

AM Right.

AW The English didn't know who she was. I mean, McMillan published her books and so on, but there was no public demand on her over there, and so on. She came back in '74 and she moved into the public eye dramatically and quickly. It was as if this country was waiting for her.

AM It was.

AW And it swallowed her up.

AM Yes. And she was sort of doing it on behalf of all of us.

AW That's right. And she wrote ... she'd written five novels in ten years, Alice. I mean, many writers would be happy to do that in 20 or 25 years.

AM I know.

AW And then it was if she turned from that to this other part of being a writer — or let's say another possible part of being a writer, that is the giving of your writerly self ...

AM To public causes.

AW ... public service and so on. And, of course, she never wrote another adult fiction.

AM No. No. And I thought this was terrible. But then I have a very definite stance about not being political, so it was hard for me to see. I could see the value of what she was doing. Her name lent to causes was very ... very ?? useful. All her causes were good. But ... there ... she'd fallen in ... I sometimes would think that she'd fallen into some kind of trap. Of when always ... you know, with a writer who's sort of ahead of you in achievement and a little bit in age, you take these things instructively. And ... I thought ... I didn't know what made her become this public person we're talking about. Whether it was that people got hold of her and she couldn't refuse or was it her own Presbyterian heritage, which was very strong. About what is one's obligation in the world. Her United Church. She was a very United Church person. And I thought that it ... that it might, in other words, *not* have been what happened to her in Canada. But when she came back to Canada, she came more deeply into herself, into what she was bound to do. What she was bound to do. She was, in a way, a kind of person who might have become a social force, even a political force if she hadn't been a writer. Because her concern was so deep. Though she was very shy. It was always difficult for her to come out on behalf of things and that she did it. But you're right. It's just that the anonymity ... the way she was living in England was the ... *is* the ideal way for a writer to live. And one of the real problems about being a writer in Canada is that the literature's still new enough to want stars. And to try to make them out of people. And she ... she felt such an easy sense of obligation. And she felt obliged to work hard for the Writers' Union. She felt obliged to do all kinds of things as soon as she came back to Canada. She could be touched by causes like Canadian literature, not just by causes of, like, censorship, nuclear war, and so on, but Canadian culture and things like this, that would absorb so much of her energy.

AW She said once to Mordecai Richler, though, that "You said that you set out to capture your time and place and you did it." And I wonder whether that doesn't enter into this too. That she set out — maybe not consciously, but over a period of years, that's what she was going — to capture Manawaka and Nepuaw ?? ...

AM And she'd done it.

AW ... and she'd done it. She came to the end of that cycle .... And also — and she's expressed this in her letters to you and to many other writers — it was very difficult. Writing wasn't easy for her.

AM No.

AW She was terrified of beginnings ...

AM Yup.

AW ... she had a very difficult time and it took her over and so on. And I just ... I wonder whether, in other words, it wasn't a combination both of the worthy cause, the feelings for her Presbyterian conscience on the one hand, and a turning, an ability to channel whatever energy she had that she knew, for the time being at least, went there as far as writing was concerned.

AM Yeah, I think you're possibly right. And I think it's perhaps a mistake to think that because a writer has written so many books, she has to go on and write so many more. I think it's quite possible to have a different sort of career. If that was really what she wanted. I wasn't always sure ... well, I sup... but then, you're not always sure yourself of anything. Of whether you want to go on with this. Because it doesn't get any easier. And it doesn't get any easier after you're successful. And you, yourself, you can feel — even, I suppose, by the age she was when she quite writing — a certain decline in ... not in energy so much as the drive of early ambition which will make you ... will push you on through things that are a problem. I mean, you're right. She had done it. Now she was faced with the having to do something else.

(tape interrupted for entrance of someone)

AM Yeah. It would have been quite okay for her to have looked for something else.

AW It's almost as if she has ... I mean, if you look back on it now, it ... having written those five novels in ten years and then going on and for the last 13 years of her life doing the public causes, many writers would have written the books in a more extended fashion and done some of that stuff ...

AM In between.

AW ... in between.

AM Sure.

AW But she didn't do it that way.

AM No. No.

AW Now, you know she tried very hard to write another novel. Between '78 and '82.

AM Yup.

AW Very, very hard. It wasn't to do with Manawaka.

AM No, I didn't know that any of it existed. But I knew she was working on something then.

AW Yeah. Four or five starts. And it had something to do, interestingly enough, at least partly, with the fundamentalists, and her coming ... her trying to understand ...

AM God, that would have been good.

AW ... them. And how they saw it.

AM Yes. Yeah.

AW Life and so on.

AM You see, that's what she would have done. Anything she would have done would have been enormously serious and generous. And she probably ... I'm surprised she didn't do that. I'm surprised. Because it seems to be right up her alley, that kind of thing.

AW But I think part of it ... the reason why not, and it's only part of it, is contained in something she said to you and again she said this to some other people. That she was overly aware of all the commentaries that have been made upon her writing, both positive and negative. And every time she walked around the corner in Lakefield, somebody was waiting to say, "I can hardly wait to read what you're working on now."

AM Yes. Yes.

AW And she said, "And my heart would sink."

AM Yes. That's right. That's right.

AW Star making machinery.

AM I feel that right now. Yes. Yes. That's something you have to be .... I think, again, maybe the not having a private relationship would make her more vulnerable to that. Because you've got to forget all that. I used to tell her to get a pen name. I remember,

we talked about this. This was a joke. Imagine you are so-and-so and imagine that this is so-and-so's first book. And that other stuff that's been written about you, you're not anybody. Nobody knows who you are. Start again. And I think almost in your mind, you have to do that. And then of course you're lucky if you don't get that kind of attention that she was getting. But ....

AW 'Cause it doesn't inhibit you then.

AM But she could have avoided that. There were things she could have done.

AW But she didn't.

AM But she didn't. I mean, living in Toronto would have been better that way.

AW Yeah.

AM I mean, it wouldn't have been so public in some ways. She would have been vulnerable to a certain society of people in Toronto, but she wouldn't be .... I don't know. She was pretty recognizable. I was thinking about that going around the corner and being met by that kind of recognition. Nobody says that to me. They never mentioned I'm a writer. They hardly know it. So, how do you .... You're just lucky if you can stay clear of that. I guess there was just so much publicity at one time.

AW And it did inhibit her. I mean, I'm convinced of that.

AM Of course, it inhibited her. It inhibits everybody. People find different ways of coping with it. But I was ... I just think it's a huge problem.

AW But she wore her heart on her sleeve. I mean, what we talked about. We talked this already in ways and I think that's ... so, therefore, those kinds of remarks hit her very deeply.

AM Yeah.

AW As a result.

AM Yes. That's right. She took it all seriously. And a person might say that ... not rea... maybe not having read her books. Just thinking it was the thing to say. Although in her case, I think they would mean it. Because she did arouse that enormous loyalty. Particularly among women. The sense that this person has spoken for us. So she would get that ... she'd get that kind of ?? personal.

AW She was writing during this period. I mean, she wrote essays and she wrote children's work. Did you read any of the children's books?

AM No, I haven't read the book that's been .... I haven't. I haven't read the book that's been collected since her death.

AW Oh, the Dance on the Earth, the memoir.

AM Right.

AW Oh, I urge you to do it. I think it's a remarkable book. So many people were disappointed in it because it's not the full-blown autobiography. But you have ... it's a memoir and you have to read it like another story.

AM Great.

AW There are gaps in it. It challenges you as a reader. And it becomes, in the end, what she said — fiction more true than fact. And people don't get that. They want the confessions of all of her life.

AM Right. That's interesting. It is, in a fact, a way of doing an autobiography from a kind of slant.

AW Yes.

AM Yeah. I didn't tell you. The book I really like a lot is Bird in the House, but I suppose you could guess that.

AW I like that a lot too.

AM I think it's wonderful. I like it better than any of the novels. But this is my ??.

AW When I read it last — I can tell you a little story about that — I'd read everything else, including The Diviners and taught things and so on. And then I had ... for some reason, I hadn't read it ?? ??, I read it. And I wrote her the only thing I ever wrote to her. Just a little note saying, "I'm going to try and say that what you've done here, for me and it seems the closest I can say is that it's like ... reading this is like fate to me. It hits me like fate hits me. It's something I believe in. That's all I can say."

AM Yup. Yeah. My daughter wrote the only fan letter. Imagine a daughter of mine writing a fan letter. And not after consulting me or anything. But this was Andrea. After she'd read A Bird in the House. She was just bowled over. And I think it's a wonderful

book. But I do think that short stories can do things in a more powerful way. That is my opinion. But ... anyway ...

AW Yeah. Margaret Atwood aside, right?

AM Yeah. But not always. You know, if you take them seriously .... But ...

AW Do you read any of her other writing? I mean, the essays and her children's books, and so on?

AM I haven't read the children's books. I've read The Prophet's Camel Bells. Which I think is wonderful. Just wonderful.

AW And then there was Heart of a Stranger which was that book of essays that (inaudible)

AM Yeah, I've read some of those. I don't think I've read the book because I've read a lot of them separately. Which I liked a lot too. So, what did we get on to saying? We got onto saying that maybe ....

AW Well, we were talking about her life after writing. So this ... writing adult ?? ??

AM Yeah. But it wasn't after writing really.

AW No. Of course, it wasn't. It was all bound up together. Because there she was, working on behalf of writers in the Writers' Union and, I mean, I think that was important. What she did. And other people, writers who were involved in it at the time, have said to me, "You can't overestimate the importance of her presence at the beginning ...

AM That's right. That's right.

AW ... in that union." Because she was that figure that was necessary.

AM Yeah. Yeah. But people ... I think people used her in that way. She didn't really want to be that kind of ... mother ... I don't know. There was something larger than life about that figure, and that was what other people wanted of her. I would think.

AW Well, I have a question here. But it's ... you've already dealt with it in a way, but I'll ... you've given the answer to the question, so I'll throw the question out again. You know, that in this country, it seems to me, and it might have largely to do with ?? a sense of cultural inferiority, that too much weight is put upon figures like Lawrence, and indeed like yourself, although you've resisted it, other figures, to be the stars. To carry the weight of that insecurity, in a way.

AM Oh, yes. And, you know, it's easier for everyone who comes after. It's easier for me than for her. Because she was the beginning of everything. And she could see that by ... you know, that she was sort of doing this, this visibility was for everybody. And it would have been very, very hard for her to see the consequences of every action. 'Cause I don't think ... I don't think you make one decision and you become this kind of person. It sort of creeps up on you and you're doing things here and there and ... maybe the whole of it doesn't even become clear to you, but you just ... at least some kinds of people, lose themselves gradually. And there's just sort of nobody home after a while. I don't think that ... I'm not suggesting that happened to her. But it becomes harder and harder to keep yourself together if you are playing the required role. And if you're not ... you know, after all she's not an actress, she's not a politician, this isn't what she had decided to do with her life. I think political people manage it quite differently.

AW Well, I think Atwood's an example of that.

AM Yes, I think so. I think she is very clear-sighted about what she does. And everything is worked out ... been worked out from the beginning.

AW And she's a street fighter.

AM Yeah.

AW And you survive that way.

AM Yeah. Yeah.

AW Another type of question. I wanted to ask you. Recently there's been a lot of talk in this country — appropriately so in ways — about appropriation of voice. The Writers' Union went ...

AM Oh, God.

AW ... through a big debate about this, and you know, whether they would pass a motion saying that writers who weren't members of ethnic minorities couldn't write about that ethnic minority, and so on. But the one thing that I got very incensed about was that I ... well, I both saw on television and read in the *Toronto Star*, the comments of a female native writer who was talking about voice appropriation, and cited The Diviners as the chief example of a racist novel in this country because of the way it dealt with the Métis. And nobody ... neither the TV interviewer, who happened to be Danny O. Richler, I know him, or the guy in the *Star*, Philip Marchand, said anything.

AM Said anything.

AW They just ?? ??

AM No, nobody does say anything. Everyone's been working very hard at being perfectly correct. I try to stay out ... I tend to stay away from this as far as possible because it makes me so angry. And when things make you angry, you start writing letters and you get involved and .... It doesn't seem to me like the censorship issue where one had to get involved. This seems to me so crazy that it will blow over.

AW Well, it's changing university curricula.

AM That's what I hear. I have a friend who's an anthropologist and she can tell absolute horror stories about this. And ....

AW But I think ... I just ... I hesitate to think what Lawrence's response to this would have been. I mean, if she was so hit by ...

AM Oh. Yeah. It would have broken her heart unless she ....

AW ... the censorship ??.

AM Maybe if she'd lived longer, she would have toughened up.

AW I hope so.

AM I mean, she wasn't that old when she died.

AW No, she was 60.

AM Yeah. I mean, the ... the ... the absurdity of this is so ....

AW Well, what she did with the Métis in that novel was remarkable, I think.

AM Of course.

AW And those people in that novel, those figures, have an integrity that goes way beyond most of the (inaudible)

AM Yeah! But ... that's not the only thing that's ... to call it a *racist* novel ... doesn't even say it may be .... It doesn't say, well she didn't understand Métis too well, because often in ... you don't have ... Virginia Wolf didn't understand poor people too well. People don't understand what they haven't known. But to say it's racist means something different. It means an attack.

AW Oh, yes. Yes. And in fact it's an attack on racism, quite clearly.

AM And it is the most *vicious* thing to say. Oh, dear.

AW No.

AM I really ... if I'd seen that I would have had to write a letter.

AW Well, I did write the letter.

AM Did you?

AW Yeah, and the *Star* actually phoned me up — I wrote it to the Star — and they phoned me up and said "We're just checking that you lived here," and so on "and look for your letter. I'll be in in the next couple of days." And then they never published it. And I don't know whether they never published it because they saw me as responding to the politically correct movement and it might ... draw hostile response because of that. I mean, I teach native studies and I've written feminist articles and I ... you know, so I'm coming from the side that's very sympathetic to a lot of the causes, but ....

AM But that isn't going to help you with these gals (inaudible)

AW No, but anyway, the *Star* backed off. They didn't publish ... even when the *Star* publishes letters, like "I didn't like last week's hockey game," so something was going on there.

AM Something happened.

AW So then I sent a copy of the letter to Philip Marchand in the *Star*, who had done the interview with this woman. And I said, "I just want you to know that some people out here are reacting and think maybe you should have at least asked a few questions about this." And I never received a reply from him. So, you know, it just disappears into this void. I don't know wha....

AM What are they scared of?

AW I don't know.

AM Are you scared of your job?

AW No.

AM I mean, supposing you get a student, a student who disagrees with something ... or who just says, "What is this blond, blue-eyed guy doing teaching this course?"

AW Yeah, well, there's that. I mean, I'm waiting for that. But I mean I teach things from a feminist point of view and I haven't yet had anybody stand up and say, "What's a blond, blue-eyed guy like you ...," you know, "Where does he get off teaching things from a woman's point of view?" I mean ... or from a male's view of a woman's point of view.

AM Because some arguments I've heard just about say that.

AW I know. And I ... also, I don't know how I'll respond to that when the time comes. Because I have all the sympathy in the world *but*, you know, it just becomes another kind of extremism in the defense that liberty is no ?? when these people stand up. Remember ~~Gary Gobar?? ?? ??~~. Barry Goldwater

AM Yup, yeah, yeah.

AW I don't know. I don't know, but ....

AM It leaves the way open for only political writers. And this is so frightening, I just .... One of the things that I trust is that, you know, I think the strongest things — stronger than politics, stronger than anything — is fashionable. This is now a "fashionable" stand. Nothing remains fashionable for very long.

AW And unfortunately, it takes away from the legitimacy of the real struggles that are going on.

AM Oh, sure. That's one of the things that makes me so angry.

AW Yeah.

AM But ... I guess you can't do much about that.

AW No. Let's not get ... depress (inaudible)

AM Let's not get worked up.

AW George Bowering once said about Margaret Lawrence ... he called her ... this is a very interesting quote that I'm going to give you. He wrote her a letter and he called her "My dear soul. That is the image your achievement brings forth. As, for instance, Earl Bernie might bring forth mind and Gabrielle Roi might bring heart." And I always thought ... you know, I thought, having read her letters, that that ... and coming from

a guy like Bowering, who in his own way is very macho, and so on, it seemed to me remarkably appropriate somehow.

AM Um hum. Yes. I think that's what I was trying to say. About how she felt about things. About .... I've just been reading George Elliot, so maybe I think of ... I'm thinking of her in terms of descent, ?? that kind of writer. That kind of deeply serious, moral writer, which in a way I can hardly even understand. But there she is. And yet, I don't know this ... I know this from her writing and I know it from her public activity, but I don't know it from my friendship with Margaret herself. But then we're all different people to different friends. And in a way ... this is almost like public perception of her. When I think of Bowering writing that, I think, "Oh, that's more of the legend." Did that do her any good? To be called "My dear soul." How did that make you feel?

AW Well, I think if you trust the person from whom it comes ....

AM Oh, you trust them. You know they're not faking anything, but, my God, it's a dreadful responsibility.

AW I guess.

AM Yeah.

AW Yeah.

AM I mean, couldn't she just be a woman? Couldn't she just be a person? So many people just didn't let ... didn't want her to be. And it must have been (inaudible).

AW No, and I think she wanted to be with ....

AM Well, I thought she wanted to be, but I would bring that side of her out because of a kind of bias against large generalities. And ... so, I don't really know. I don't know what all she thought of herself.

AW When you look back on her now, how do you remember her? As a writer and as a woman, and ....

AM I remember a wonderful night I spent at her place, at the cabin she had on the river. And I went up there and ... I guess it was the summer of '74. And I remember we had dinner and she was still re-writing <u>The Diviners</u>, so it ... was that '74 or '73?

AW It would have been '73.

AM Yeah. And then we put on some records and she had ... of course, we drank a lot of scotch. This goes without saying. And she had Scottish music. Oh, she had pipers and she also had early songs, folk songs. And we got up and danced and we both danced. We had a wonderful time. We were both wearing long dresses, the kind you wore then. And we danced around the cabin for hours to this music, this sort of improvise it. And it was wonderful fun. And we improvised words, too. And that was the greatest memory I have of her. Yeah. That was a wonderful night.

AW Yeah, it sounds it.

AM Yeah. Yeah. And we'd talked a little before that. We talked about writing a little bit and then we talked about our personal lives, rather more. And then we just danced. It was really nice.

AW And, of course, very appropriate ?? that memoir's called Dance on the Earth. Which is ....

AM Yeah.

AW Dancing was very important to her, (inaudible)

AM Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

AW And as a writer?

AM Well, as a writer, it's probably those first stories that I read and Bird in the House that I most .... There's just wonderful ... there's no ... in those stories, there's not just what people have seen, this kind of large soul ??, but there's also wonderful technique, which I think is very important. I'm just thrilled by it, because it's very simple. It's very unobtrusive. But there's a great mastery of what she's doing ... in her stories. *That* feeling of delight that you get sometimes from another writer I get from those.

AW It occurs to me, listening to you, that perhaps one of the ways she might have overcome that difficulty she was having in her later years with writing would have been *not* to think she had to write another novel, but perhaps to try writing some stories. *Not* .... You know, don't misunderstand me. Not that it would have been any easier ...

AM And you've gotta be careful with me.

AW ... I know. I know that.

(loud cacophony. Can't make either of you out)

AM No, but actually a story does leave you much more freedom because it's just a story. And if doesn't work, you might write another story that's better. And then you might write another that's better than that. And then one that doesn't work, and then you put them all together and you shove them at the world. But a novel is all by itself.

AW Yeah.

AM And ?? ... but at the stage she was at in her career, the idea of doing a novel was just terribly, terribly ....

AW Because she could do stories. I mean, you've already said that and she ....

AM She could do them wonderfully. It would have been hard but I don't think she would have felt the intimidating thing. But I ... maybe she was presented with this material that she felt would only do a novel.

AW Yeah. Yeah. Well, I think that the reading public that was waiting around every corner for her, too, would not have had — and I think maybe misguidedly so — would not have had the same expectations of Lawrence the short story writer. In other words, if she had been able to — and I'm saying that's in *their* eyes, not ....

AM No, but what I mean is there would probably have been disappointment that she didn't write another novel, but ...

AW But so what.

AM So what! You've gotta learn to cope with that.

AW Yeah. Yeah.

AM Yeah. And ....

AW I wish we could talk to her about that.

AM I do too. But then, you know, you .....

(end of tape)