

MARGARET ATWOOD: OLD BABES IN THE WOODS. STORIES  
(2023)

THE DEAD INTERVIEW

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MARGARET ATWOOD: *Good evening, Mr. Orwell. It's very kind of you to appear—or not exactly appear, since I can't see you. To manifest, or . . . It's very kind of you to have shown up for this interview.*

GEORGE ORWELL: Not at all. The kindness is yours. I so seldom have the opportunity to talk with someone still in their meat envelope.

*My what?*

I do beg your pardon. I didn't intend to shock. It's a local colloquialism. Let us say "still among what I once called 'the living.'"

*You don't use that expression anymore? The living?*

There are different ways of being alive.

True. Well, you've always been very much alive to me, even after you . . . after you were no longer in your meat envelope. (Nervous

laugh) *It's such an honour to encounter you. You've been a huge influence on my own work!*

(Indeterminate snorting sound: exasperation?) You're a writer? Selfish, lazy, and egotistical, like all writers, I suppose?

*Well . . . lazy, certainly.*

I do not exempt myself from these criticisms. On the contrary. But I'm sorry—I haven't had the pleasure.

*The pleasure of what?*

Of reading your "own work." In fact, I don't have much idea of who you are. I can't see you.

*Because Mrs. Verity has her eyes closed?*

Correct. It would be more useful to me if these mediums could operate with their eyes open. As it is, this is like the telephone, with an undependable line at that. You're a female colonial, I understand from the voice?

*Good guess!*

Have they started writing?

*Females, or colonials?*

Ah, er . . . both.

*Oh, they're writing up a storm these days! Though some colonials, and even some women, were writing when you were still . . . I guess you didn't read the women much.*

(Coughs) I was very busy. Those were tumultuous times. Revolutions, dictatorships, wars . . . perhaps you've read about them. I did dip in a little, into the . . . how shall I put it . . . cheaper sensational and romantic products.

*Like the mass-produced trash in Nineteen Eighty-Four? (Dryly) "Women's books," they were called. But some women were writing serious literature, even then.*

(Clears throat) My dear girl, I hope I haven't offended you. Women do sometimes get their backs up over trifles.

*Saying that kind of thing could get you in quite a lot of trouble these days. It would be called "trivializing." Women don't put up with so much anymore.*

A thousand pardons. We men spoke that way without even thinking about it, I do realize that now. I was a man of my time. One can hardly be otherwise. (Pause) I take it you are not of my generation.

*Not exactly, though we did overlap a little. I was ten when you shed the meat envelope. So by the time I actually wrote anything, there wasn't exactly any way I could get the publisher to send you some review copies.*

Was that an attempt at humour?

(Feeble laugh) *In poor taste, I'm afraid.*

(Silence)

*Please don't fade out! Am I losing you?*

The connection comes and goes. It's like being on the BBC during the war. Almost everything was poor quality then, radios included. *The wireless* was the term. I seem to recall being on the wireless a fair bit.

*Yes, you were. You presented some of your best short essays that way.*  
(Pause) *I've attempted to contact you before, Mr. Orwell, but with no success. Possibly because I called you Mr. Blair. I got your father.*

Oh? I expect he was a fat lot of help.

*He said he wished you'd been a diplomat, or else a lawyer. Made better use of the brains God gave you.*

By God he meant himself, no doubt.

*He said you'd thrown away your advantages.*

Class advantages, he meant. The family silver. Schools for junior snobs and so forth. I did not consider those things advantages. Bundle of prejudices based on falsehoods. A muddying of the truth.

*He said he was sorry you'd turned out such a damned Communist, and a sloppy dresser into the bargain.*

I did not have the money to spend on tailors, and in any case a nice warm knitted waistcoat was of better use to me, considering the inadequate heating.

*Is that the one in your picture? With the moustache and the haircut that looks done with a lawnmower, and the bemused expression? Under the tweed jacket? It seems to have a kind of smudge on it. Ink?*

Yes. Possibly I did not wash it often enough. Or Eileen didn't. It would have taken too long to dry, especially in winter.

*Eileen? Your wife?*

My first wife. We accomplished so much together! I was smashed up when she died, and so suddenly. But she's fine now. She takes a great interest in gardening. Even at this distance.

But back to my father, whom I hardly knew, by the way. I was never a Communist! Democratic Socialism is not Communism. Imprecision in language . . . it's one of the things that preoccupied me, some said to a fault; but change the name of the thing, and in many cases you change the thing. Rewriting history . . . you could see it happening, on both sides of the fence, I might add. The English colonial record was hardly spotless. The Empire—humbug, balderdash, and claptrap, covering up naked greed and the lust for power.

*People are realizing that more now, I think.*

(Snorting sound) About time! When I was saying it, I was accused of disloyalty.

*You'll be interested to know that the rewriting of history is still being attempted, especially in the United States.*

I'm not surprised. The way they tried to paper over slavery, and then the Jim Crow laws . . . you can't have those kinds of inequities in a democracy. If indeed that country is one, or ever was.

*There's a lot of disinformation being spread about.*

You'd be amazed at what people can be manipulated into believing.

*Actually, it may be even worse than in your day. At least Stalin didn't try to push blue bird-shaped aliens from outer space.*

Ha! (Laughs) Taking lessons from that old blowhard, H.G. Wells, have they been?

*Possibly his early fiction. But at least he believed in science. Not like a lot of anti-vaxxers today.*

Anti-what?

*It's complicated.*

Wells was right about some things. But science will never be enough. And the one-world government he had in mind would be a tyranny, however disguised. Aldous Huxley made short work of that idea in *Brave New World*. Perhaps you've heard of it? He was my schoolmaster at Eton; taught me French, not very well.

*Didn't he write you a letter? When Nineteen Eighty-Four came out?*

(Coughs, laughs) Yes, he did. He said, "Whether in actual fact the policy of the boot-on-the-face can go on indefinitely seems doubtful. My own belief is that the ruling oligarchy will find less arduous and wasteful ways of governing and of satisfying its lust for power, and these ways will resemble those which I described in *Brave New World*."

*You've taken turns being right. For instance, the United States came very close to a coup d'état, just recently. Invasion of the Capitol. Attempt to overturn the election results.*

Sounds familiar. I lived in an age of coups, of one kind or another. Different slogans, but same idea. (Coughs)

*And now many of them are trying to pretend it didn't really happen.*

Down the old Memory Hole, eh? At least they have a free press. Independent voices allowed to speak up without being shot.

*More or less. It's not perfect.*

The perfect is the enemy of the good. (Coughs) Mind if I smoke?

*It's very bad for you.*

(Sound between a growl and a laugh) Not anymore. You only die once. Wasn't that the name of some shocking book? Or perhaps a shocking film. No, I'm confusing it with *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Prole fodder, not that I didn't appreciate a good murder. (Sound of a match being struck)

*I don't mind, myself. During my teen years—in the 1950s—people smoked a lot, so I'm used to the idea. But Mrs. Verity has a strict non-smoking policy. Some of her clients have asthma.*

*She won't notice. She's in a jolly old trance, isn't she? (Faint odour of tobacco)*

*May I ask you something? It's a delicate question.*

*Of course. I will try not to give a delicate answer.*

*I'm somewhat surprised to find you making use of the services of a spiritualist. Wouldn't that come under the heading of balderdash, claptrap, and humbug?*

*(Chuckles) A change of state rearranges some of one's preconceptions. Rigidity is the symptom of a limited mind, and was far too typical of many in the so-called intelligentsia of my day. They mistook fixed ideas for thought.*

*That habit has not gone out of fashion. But still, it's quite a leap from—*

*I have always tried to be practical. It's why I became a sort of pamphleteer—needed to pay the rent, and it was a quick way to an immediate readership. (Pause) One must make use of the means to hand. Needs must when the Devil drives. So if Mrs. Verity is the means by which we can speak together, then Mrs. Verity it must be. (Sound of a match being struck. Sound of a second match being struck)*

*You could use a lighter.*

*Snobbish contraptions. Monograms on them. (Sound of inhaling) Mrs. Verity's not her real name, you know. Verity—to inspire trust, I suppose. Better than “Dodge,” her actual surname.*

*I've always been interested in alter egos. Pen names, pseudonyms, things like that. I've wondered about your own choice—“George Orwell.” George: there were four Hanoverian kings named George—*

*Not those Georges! (Laughs) I needed a pen name, so as not to wound my mother unduly. She was horrified by some of my views. And my going about with the deeply and I must say squalidly poor, and then writing about it. So . . .*

*Let me guess. Saint George for England? Dragon-slayer?*

*Spare my blushes. I was young and enthusiastic. I didn't realize that dragons always grow new heads.*

*And “Orwell”—it's a river, but let's unpack it a little—*

*Excuse me? Unpack what? It's not a suitcase.*

*Sorry. It's a thing people say these days. Sort of like Lewis Carroll's “portmanteau words.” Take it apart to see what it contains.*

*Oh, I see. (Coughs)*

*So, “Or,” as in “on the other hand.” Also, it's French for “gold.” And “well”—people sometimes make you out to be Mr. Gloomy Pants because of the boot grinding into the human face forever in Nineteen Eighty-Four, but I've never thought that: there's a note on Newspeak*

*at the end, written in the past tense, so the totalitarian world in the book must be over.*

I'm glad you've grasped that. Many did not. I was attacked for pessimism.

*They were wrong. Then there's "well," as in "All shall be well." Julian of Norwich. That's hopeful! And a well is also a well of inspiration, or a holy well . . .*

That's stretching it, my dear. I have no pretensions to holiness. I wanted a river, yes, a natural feature; but an ordinary kind of river. Not a holy river, and not some damned private trout stream, bunch of aristocrats sticking their fishing rods into it.

*I've always remembered something you—something Winston Smith says in Nineteen Eighty-Four, when he begins writing his ill-fated journal on that beautiful cream-coloured paper. "For whom, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder, was he writing this diary? For the future, for the unborn . . . 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."*

However, here I am, in my present but your future, and I believe I do understand Winston Smith's predicament. Or somewhat. Because you conveyed him so well! The horrible living conditions, the ugly clothing, the awful food, the fear of betrayal, the constant surveillance through two-way television—you couldn't possibly have known how close to reality that would become in this age, via the Internet!

The Internet? Is that some kind of political secret society? Like the Masons, or—

*Not exactly. It used to be called the World Wide Web.*

Like spiders?

*No, more like . . . It's a way of communicating through wireless frequencies. Using certain devices. Different from radio, though. It started out with good intentions, as a way of sending rapid messages that were thought to be private, but governments have turned it into a spying device.*

As usual. (Sound of a match being struck) Winston Smith would have used this Internet thing, I expect.

*But he would have got caught, because the effect has been to collapse privacy and erode the notion of the individual. Though he still believed in the individual, somehow. Conscience and desire . . . Thus his attempted rebellion, and then the brainwashing, Room 101 . . . It was gripping! My young self was mesmerized!*

Yes, yes. Not too badly done. I was attacked for that book by the Stalinist Left, of course. They were always attacking me. Capitalist stooge, toady to the status quo, poor little middle-class boy, that kind of thing. You won't believe this, but every time I'd mention Nature in one of my occasional pieces, I'd get hate mail telling me that a liking for Nature was bourgeois.

*I love your praise of the toad. I'm very fond of toads.*

Aha! Common ground! (Chuckles) I got attacked for the toad essay too. The joylessness of some of those on the Left was truly astounding. Any form of pleasure was off limits . . . good food, good sex, sunsets . . . those people were like the flagellants of the Middle Ages.

*So the Junior Anti-Sex League and Winston's rigid, disapproving wife had a basis in reality?*

Oh absolutely. Puritanical, they were. And if you didn't toe their party line, whatever it was at the time, you were banished to outer darkness. Excluded from decent society, namely theirs.

*That's more than familiar. Things have become quite polarized. There are party lines now too, though the targets are different. And social banishments still happen, but they're called "cancellings."*

Ha! Like a stamp, like a concert . . . good word choice! (Coughs) I became quite discouraged at moments, I must admit. What's the point of telling the truth if nobody wants to hear it? The Stalinists were well organized at that time. It was just after the war. Stalin was still good old Uncle Joe to many.

*But your book was a huge success! You have no idea! And then, in 1956, after Stalin was dead, when Khrushchev made his "Secret Speech," revealing the atrocities that Stalin and his accomplices had perpetrated . . .*

I did hear a rumour about that. It's not much of a comfort to have been right.

*I think you'd like a film called The Death of Stalin.*

Films are difficult for me. I have to view them through an intermediary and there's always a running commentary. Pause to get a beer, check their phones, go to the loo, that kind of thing. One doesn't wish to be such an inadvertent voyeur.

*Must be annoying. You could watch it with me! I'd see it again!*

A kind thought, but it wouldn't work. You wouldn't be able to let me in. You aren't a sensitive, I can tell. You aren't permeable enough. Egotistical writer, as I said.

(Laughs) *Many have told me that. "Not permeable enough." Maybe you could get Mrs. Verity to watch it with you. It's your kind of reality-based satire.*

Satire in extreme times is risky. Choose any excess, think you're wildly exaggerating, and it's most likely to have been true.

(Sympathetic murmur) *I know.*

I'd much have preferred it if the Soviet dream had turned out better. Without the wholesale deaths, the show trials, the murders . . . The original intentions were good. Or the intentions of some people were good. The idealists, who will of course go to any lengths for a cause they believe to be virtuous and in the common interest—they got carried away. Well, well. Successful revolutions are inevitably subject to corruption. Once power has been seized, those who have seized it want to hang on to it, by foul means or fouler. That was certainly what it was like during the years I was attempting to chronicle, in my own small way.

*Many of us, including me, are so grateful that you did. You were very brave, and not only in Spain, during the Civil War. Much of what you said was unpopular at the time. Your work has really been invaluable, and you've been—how can I put this?—such an inspiration.*

(Pleased murmur)

*Though I should mention that when I first read a book by you, I wasn't old enough to understand it. I must have been eight or nine. The book was Animal Farm. I thought it was a children's book, like Charlotte's Web.*

Charlotte's what?

*It's about a pig. A good pig, though. And a message-weaving spider who saves his life.*

Ah. Words matter, it appears. Even to pigs. (Chuckles. Sound of a match being struck)

*I didn't know Animal Farm was about the U.S.S.R. and the demonization of Trotsky. I had no idea who Trotsky was! I thought the animals were animals. The fate of Boxer the horse just destroyed me. I cried and cried!*

Oh dear.

*Then I got angry. It was so unfair!*

It was unfairnesses that drove me on the most, I suppose. The false accusations, the human sacrifices. More than anything, the injustices impelled me to write. Savage indignation, inflamed

by the betrayal of common human decencies. The betrayal of ordinary humanity.

*Like Dickens? In your essay about him?*

Yes. I suppose so. But I sense that Mrs. Verity is beginning to stir. Our time together is drawing to a close.

*There's one more thing I'd like to tell you about. It's a book called Orwell's *Roses*, by Rebecca Solnit. Her book takes as a point of departure your passionate interest in gardening, in growing things. Not many people know that about you. She makes you sound, well, kind of adorable. That photo of you with your adopted son, such a sweet child . . . You weren't Mr. Doom and Gloom at all! Enthusiastic about living, full of plans, until . . .*

Until the end, you mean. Don't worry. There must always be an end. As in novels. But one day at a time, eh? I did love it, the gardening. (Sighs) So wonderful . . . the hard work, the digging and so on, the fresh smells, even the smell of manure . . . then out of the dirt and the sweat, like a miracle, a beautiful thing growing . . . I suppose it's what I miss the most about the Earth. The beauty of it.

*The rose bushes you planted at Wallington, in 1936 . . . You mention them in your journal. They flowered on the Day of the Dead. I thought you'd like to know.*

So much I didn't know, at that date. So much was to come. The Spanish Civil War, the Second World War . . . so much horror and suffering!



*Many of those horrible things ended, finally. Though they left scars, and the wars have a way of coming back.*

**I'm sorry to hear that.**

*Now we're facing a more insidious crisis. The Earth itself—the green planet as we have known it—the living Earth is threatened.*

**It began with the coal, I suppose. The coal furnaces, to drive machines. People don't want to know where their heat and light and luxuries really come from, or what gets crushed in the process. I wrote about that, I seem to remember. (Coughs) But what about the young people? Are they still hopeful?**

*I'm not sure. They're trying, though. Trying to reverse the damage we've done. Many of them are.*

**Mrs. Verity is waking up now. I fear I may have to—**

*Your rose bushes—the ones you planted in 1936—they're still alive! Still blooming, every summer. It seems kind of symbolic.*

**(Silence)**

*Hello? Hello? Oh, come back! Please, just a little longer . . .*

**(Sound of a yawn) Here I am, in the land of the living. Did your friend show up? Seems to me that he must've. I've been out like a light and now I'm dead tired. That's how it is when they're borrowing your head. They burn a lot of energy! Have a good chat, did you? Cup of tea? Anything wrong, dear?**