

Nora Foster Stovel and Donna Couto (eds), *Early Writings by Margaret Atwood* (Sydney: Juvenilia Press, 2020), 70 pp. Paper. AU\$15. ISBN 978-0-7334-3916-2.

'The CanLit Foodbook (1987) is not exactly a cookbook; on the other hand, it isn't exactly not a cookbook, either' (*The CanLit Foodbook*, 1987, p. 1). Atwood's twisty sentence could, with adaptations, be used to describe this Juvenilia Press book which is not exactly an academic publication, but not exactly not an academic publication either. This is a scholarly edition of selected early writings by Atwood, with a preface by her, a long editorial introduction which contextualises these texts from the Atwood archive at the University of Toronto, plus detailed annotations, a bibliography, and chronology. However, the texts themselves escape from such orderly academic structures into the imaginative world of childhood and the witty exuberance of adolescence. These are the early stages in the life narrative of Becoming Margaret Atwood.

The materials are arranged in two clusters: early childhood (ages 6 to 8) and adolescence (ages 16 and 17). Atwood's first poems in 'Rhyming Cats', her first story 'Annie the Ant', and a birthday card for her mother, are written in pencil in little handmade books with crayon drawings, and her first play, with paper puppets, is a pencilled performance script. Excellent colour reproductions give us a glimpse of her early graphic art. (Atwood would go on to write seven children's books.) The later works in typescript are two operettas *Synthesia* and *The Tragedy of Moonblossom Smith*, written, directed, and acted in by Atwood at high school and summer camp. By the age of 16 Atwood had decided to become a writer: 'Peggy's not-so-secret ambition is to write THE Canadian novel' (p. xxv). This collection offers a fascinating account of development and continuities – Atwood's verbal skills and her talents as a cartoonist, her keen observation of the natural world, and her inventiveness.

The young child's play with words and rhyme is transformed in her teenage years into a distinctly 'Atwoodian' idiom in her Class 12 home economics operetta devised as an alternative to making soft toys, for *Synthesia* is indeed about a home economics topic, the fashionable synthetic fabrics of the 1950s. Atwood personifies them as the King's daughters: 'Nylon, Orlon and Dacron are sweeping the nation' (p. 23). In a wittily comic marriage plot, Orlon (played by Atwood) marries Sir William Wooley (who shrinks from washing), and they produce a hybrid baby, 'DARLIN' Woolerline' (sung to 'My darling Clementine'). With music from Offenbach and Gilbert and Sullivan, the song and dance sequences

prefigure the Handmaid's songs in *The Penelopiad*. *Moonblossom Smith*, performed at Hurontario all-boys summer camp where Atwood worked as a waitress in 1957 is a farcical tragic-comedy combining romance and revenge, animated with song and dance routines and mischievous cross-dressing. Mixing high and low culture, it is filled with references to the campers' daily activities – indeed it is camp in every sense, ending with four suicides onstage and a final chorus sung to the tune of 'South of the Border Down Mexico Way'. As Atwood says, 'Why did I do these things? ... They were fun' (p. xii).

This is a delightful book, showing scholarship at its most entertaining.

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