

## LADY ORACLE'S SECRET: ATWOOD'S COMIC NOVELS

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When Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* appeared, I wrote that it seemed to be a reworking of her first novel, *The Edible Woman*.<sup>1</sup> "In each a young woman of some sensitivity finds herself alone among predominantly form-asserting and exploitative people," I said.

In each the young woman's body realizes the threat which these people and their way of life constitute to her integrity well before her mind can gain a corresponding insight. Their bodies both attempt to take over leadership of the whole woman in order to bring her to knowledge and safety. They attempt flight, they refuse food, they prohibit certain activities. A kind of madness thus seizes the young woman, a madness in which her new pre-conscious and body-dominated perspective makes everyday events become frighteningly surrealistic. Her images of reality here are prelogical, discontinuous, yet carry an uncannily convincing symbolic truth. In *The Edible Woman*, the girl's fiancé attempts to photograph her:

That dark intent marksman with his aiming eye had been there all the time, hidden by the other layers, waiting for her at the dead centre: a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands.

In *Surfacing* a group of friends and acquaintances attempts to "rescue" her from her apparent insanity and return her to "normal" city life:

They're hulking out of the boat now, four or five of them. I can't see them clearly, their faces, the stems and leaves are in the way; but I can smell them and the scent bring [sic] nausea,

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<sup>1</sup>References are to *The Edible Woman* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), hereafter *EW*; *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), hereafter *S*; and *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), hereafter *LO*.

it's stale air, bus stations, and nicotine smoke, mouths lined with soiled plush, acid taste of copper wiring or money. Their skins are red, green in squares, blue in lines, and it's a minute before I remember that these are fake skins, flags.

In each case the onset of the madness results in the narrative switching from first person viewpoint to third person in relating her story. In both cases when the young woman does achieve some conscious insight into her self and its situation, the body can relinquish its usurped powers to a somewhat reintegrated being. Finally, at the moment of insight each young woman comes to view her problem symbolically as a dissociation of body from head.<sup>2</sup>

In 1976, on reading Atwood's third novel, *Lady Oracle*, I was again aware immediately of resemblance to the earlier fiction. Another young woman so detached and alienated that she experiences friends, parents, husband, as utter strangers. Another narrator who, overwhelmed by the dangers and complications she perceives around her, escapes, if not into madness at least into a "mad" act of feigned suicide and uncomfortable exile. Another narrator who learns enough during her "exile" to drop her paranoia and attempt again some contact with the human world she has fled.

In both her 1972 interview with Graeme Gibson<sup>3</sup> and her 1976 interview with Linda Sandler,<sup>4</sup> Atwood took pains to classify both *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* as "anti-comedies." She explained to Gibson,

... in your standard 18th-century comedy you have a young couple who is faced with difficulty in the form of somebody who embodies the restrictive forces of society and they trick or overcome this difficulty and end up getting married. The same thing happens in *The Edible Woman* except the wrong person gets married. And the person who embodies the restrictive forces in society is in fact the person Marian gets engaged to. In a standard comedy, he would be the defiant hero. As it is, he and the restrictive society are blended into one, and the comedy situation would be a tragic solution for Marian. (21)

<sup>2</sup>"Atwood Walking Backwards," *Open Letter*, Second Series, No. 5 (Summer 1973), 75-76.

<sup>3</sup>In Graeme Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1973), pp. 5-31.

<sup>4</sup>*The Malahat Review* 41 (January 1977), 7-27.

To Sandler she added, again about *The Edible Woman*,

In traditional comedy, boy meets girl, there are complications, the complications are resolved, and the couple is united. In my book the couple is not united, and the wrong couple gets married. The complications are resolved, but not in a way that reaffirms the social order. (13)

Yet the structural similarities observed above between the *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle* — alienation followed by desperation, escape, and reintegration — are in their bare outline the actual structure of comedy, as in the Shakespearean sequence of social disorder, exile into the green world, reintegration, and return to “natural” order.<sup>5</sup> I believe Atwood unintentionally misleads us when she uses the term “anti-comedy.”<sup>6</sup> For while these three novels do not result in the healing of society, they do result in the healing of the individual — even minimally — to survive in that society. And while her green world is not the Forest of Arden or the Indian home of Congreve's Sir Oliver Surface, it is an equally valid one for twentieth-century writing — the personal unconscious. The “right couple” may not get married, the social order may not be affirmed, but by the end of all three novels the principal character has achieved self-insight every bit as significant to the contemporary reader as Prospero's regaining of Milan and Miranda's marriage to Ferdinand were to Shakespeare's first audiences.

Atwood's denouements leave her narrators — like Shakespeare's Miranda — in a deeply-flawed world about which they still hold some illusions. *Lady Oracle's* Joan Foster is, in fact, a parody-Miranda — naive, sentimental even as a mature woman, and at the end of the book seemingly on the verge of repeating her characteristic excessive-trust/excessive-mistrust cycle with yet another man. She surpasses Miranda in having fantasies of evil about the world as well as fantasies of the brave and new. Her story is her discovery of how she has projected Gothic malevolence and glamour onto ordinary people — of how she has made her tweedy husband into the Brontean lover she imagines at the heart of her fictional

<sup>5</sup>Atwood's sequence could be described as personal disorder, exile into the individual unconscious, reintegration, and a “surfacing” to increased personal wholeness.

<sup>6</sup>An instance of being misled is Sherrill Grace's unquestioning and largely borrowed statement that *The Edible Woman* “is a witty, sarcastic, urbane anti-comedy which does not offer the traditional comic reaffirmation of the social order” (*Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* [Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1980], p. 87).

maze. She discovers also that this projection has prevented her from experiencing her friends and husband as real people, and from identifying the *actual* threats which some of them (often through their own fantasies) constitute to her. Yet at the end of the book, as she impulsively rushes off to treat as a helpless young man the journalist she so recently perceived as a hired killer, she is about to throw away this discovery and embark on a further illusion. The killer/nice young man dichotomy is, after all, the basic distortion in her image of the world — her view of her father as both possible murderer and a healing doctor, of the “daffodil man” of her childhood as both molester and rescuer, of her husband Arthur as both “furtive” (LO 4) and “idealistic” (LO 165). Here and throughout the book she is portrayed by Atwood as a bright but limited person — naive in her insights into other people, shallow in her expectations of life, passive in doing little to direct the course of her life, and particularly limited in her literary tastes.

Marian MacAlpin is the closest to Miranda — the ingenue whose limitations are those of youth and who may grow through experience. She is a willing initiate into the world of big business and bourgeois rationality, not because she believes in this world (as Joan Foster does) but because she has never had cause to disbelieve it. Her story is her discovery not of a personal fantasy of violence but of a very real, predatory, and entrapping violence in the external world. This is a stage beyond the discovery Joan makes and steps back from.

The narrator of *Surfacing* is yet a stage further. She is a cynic, having long ago realized that most of her fellow men have become as brutal and power-hungry as the machinery which a technological society serves, and has learned to protect herself with a mechanical kind of efficiency of her own. Her story is the discovery of the predatory and mechanical within herself — the discovery that in her “adjustive” coping with the debased humanity around her (through abortion, repression, hypocrisy, etc.) she has become one of them.

Viewed this way, Joan, Marian, and the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* appear as various incarnations of similar women. Joan struggles to clear away her delusions of romantic violence so she can see the actual world. Marian, in touch with the actual and by the end of the novel aware of its real violence, takes defensive measures which may eventually make her as much in need of reclamation as the narrator of *Surfacing*. And the latter has had a Marian MacAlpin

breakdown in her past (a disillusioning affair with a married man) which has apparently made her the efficiently repressed person who greets us at the book's beginning. All together they reveal three stages of illusion — fantasy, convention, and cynicism — each concealing the routine pain and hurt of life.

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"I have to recant, give up the old belief that I'm powerless. . . ." decides *Surfacing's* narrator on its final page. All three of Atwood's narrators are marked by extreme passivity. Marian feels fated to marry, and feels at the mercy of unconscious forces in agreeing to marry Peter, for whom she cares very little.

Of course I'd always assumed through highschool and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does. . . . But although I'm sure it was at the back of my mind I hadn't consciously expected it to happen so soon or quite the way it did. Of course I was more involved with Peter all along than I wanted to admit. (EW 102)

In *Surfacing* the protagonist feels helpless to change her life or to alter the character of her relationship with her lover Joe. *Lady Oracle* brings such passivity into sharp focus. Joan essentially drifts from job to job, relationship to relationship. There is little that she passionately wants from life, and nothing that she has is she passionately attached to. She becomes Paul's mistress because "if you find yourself in a situation you can't get out of gracefully, you might as well pretend you chose it" (LO 149). She meets her husband Arthur by "accident" (134), and agrees to marry him because she "couldn't think of any reasons why not" (197).

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*Lady Oracle* is divided into five parts — Part I concerns Joan's exile in Italy; Part II her childhood in Toronto; Part III her young adulthood in England; Part IV her marriage to Arthur and escape through pretended suicide; Part V her resolution of her exile. This division reflects Atwood's gradual development of a psychoanalytic perspective throughout the three novels. In *Lady Oracle* she gives us a large view of Joan Foster's early life and makes it clear that most of Joan's difficulties with adult relationships are caused by transferences and projections from childhood experiences. A mother who is

narcissistic and isolated and a father who is absent, aloof, and through war duties and his work as an anaesthetist has had the power of life and death over others, together lock Joan into relationships with similarly aloof men to whom she metaphorically gives life and death power over herself. Consequently with both her lover Paul and her husband Arthur she relives her parents' drama of the unfulfilled, isolated, and dependent woman linked to an aloof and undemonstrative man.

In *The Edible Woman* Atwood provided no such psychological perspective. She gave Marian no childhood or adolescence; consequently the threats Marian perceives (and which she often chooses to live in the presence of) seem more actual than projected; her choices to live with them seem unmotivated, almost inevitable. For a perceptive reader, aware that these threats are not actual but are rather projections of Marian's inner life, her character has unsatisfyingly little depth. Why does she see her employer as a heartless parent, her fiancé Peter as a predator, his apartment building as a giant robotized organism? Why has she chosen Peter as her fiancé or Ainsley as her roommate? Why has she chosen Duncan as friend and part-time lover? Marian's own explanations that these seemed like practical and convenient choices do not answer our more fundamental questions of why Marian has so little passion for life, of why she has believed herself satisfied with the practical and the convenient.

The protagonist of *Surfacing* is a literary advance on Marian MacAlpin if only in possessing a fuller psychological life. Marian lives a consciousness unaware of its private motives and dramas; the protagonist of *Surfacing* is searching for these motives in memory, in artifact, and in her fantasies and unconscious associations. The opening page in which she rides back to her childhood home recollecting the family members of thirty years before announces this search. The family as a ground for the adult present is asserted six pages later in the image of the "father moose with a trench-coat and pipe in his mouth, a mother moose in a print dress and flowering hat and a little boy moose in short pants, a striped jersey and baseball cap, waving an American flag." Seen only after is the figure of the fourth member of the family, "a little girl moose in a frilly skirt and a pigtailed blonde wig, holding a red parasol in one hoof" — a figure which both completes the narrator's family and establishes her uneasy relationship with it.

Like Marian MacAlpin and Joan Foster, this woman has only superficial and awkward relationships with others. Her "best woman friend," she tells us, is someone she has known for "two months" (S 10); in the arms of her lover Joe she feels detached, inanimate, and sees herself feeding "him unlimited supplies of nothing" (S 84). The root of these limited relationships seems to lie in a mother whom she remembers mainly as an unemotional "preserver," a photographer who gathered "successive incarnations of me preserved and flattened like flowers pressed in dictionaries" (S 69), and a father who preferred animals to people — "animals, he said, were more consistent, their behavior at least was predictable" (S 59) — and presumably preferred animals to his own daughter. Certainly she is still in search of a father when she becomes the lover of her art teacher and finds in him someone equally uninterested in humanity as was her actual father.

I worshipped him, non-child-bride, idolater, I kept the scraps of his writing like saints' relics, he never wrote letters, all I had was the criticism in red pencil he paperclipped to my drawings. C's and D's, he was an idealist, he said he didn't want our relationship as he called it to influence his aesthetic judgment. He didn't want our relationship to influence anything; it was to be kept separate from life. (S 148-149)

When this relationship ends in a pragmatic abortion ("like getting a wart removed," S 144), she is unable to talk about it to either parent because of their ignorance ("innocence") of life and of their daughter.

They never knew, about that or why I left. Their own innocence, the reason I couldn't tell them; perilous innocence, closing them in glass, their artificial garden, greenhouse. (S 144)

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... on the sodden trunks are colonies of plants, feeding on disintegration, laurel, sundew the insect eater, its toenail-sized leaves sticky with red hairs. Out of the leaf nests the flowers rise, pure white, flesh of gnats and midges, petals now, metamorphosis. (S 167)

This image of the sundew, perceived by *Surfacing's* narrator just as she begins her therapeutic descent into an "insane" rejection of

civilization and mankind, is the basic image of all three novels: a new order out of disorder; purity and integrity out of disintegration; personal wholeness out of mental collapse. Even more than embodying the structure of comedy, it embodies the structure of psychoanalytical therapy, of the descent into the neurosis to build a new life on the subject's own long-lost but intrinsically healthy roots. In psychoanalysis the subject goes down into his unconscious to explore his fantasies, rationalizations, illusions, the projections and transferences which have distorted his view of both himself and his world. So the narrator of *Surfacing* can eventually tell herself regarding her abortion,

... I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version, I'd pierced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports . . .

The process is reductive, destructive — in *Surfacing* beginning with the destruction of the false biography which the woman has unconsciously adopted for herself and later symbolized in her ritual destruction of dishes, books, and clothing in her parents' house. In *Lady Oracle* it involves Joan's recognizing of her transferences from her "killer/healer" father to all the men of her life — the hero of the Costume-Gothic romances which she writes, her turtle-necked husband Arthur.

Amazingly he began his transformations . . . His face grew a white gauze mask, then a pair of mauve-tinted spectacles, then a red beard and mustache, which faded, giving place to burning eyes and icicle teeth. Then his cloak vanished and he stood looking at her sadly; he was wearing a turtle-neck sweater.

This recognition is explicit, and vividly reductive.

"No," she said. "I know who you are."

The flesh fell away from his face, revealing the skull behind it; he stepped towards her, reaching for her throat. (LO 343)

As in the Freudian theory of catharsis, the exposure of the neurosis, the making of the unconscious force conscious, not only should cause it to lose its power, but should also make room for the long stifled elements of the authentic self to grow. This pattern of increasingly conscious neurosis, reduction and simplification of the



neurotic actions, followed by tentative reconstruction is the pattern of all three novels. Marian MacAlpin's unconscious fear of being devoured "surfaces" as an increasing aversion to food and culminates in a realization that "what she really wanted . . . had been reduced to simple safety" (EW 263). The realization takes place in a snowy ravine which her friend Duncan describes as "close to absolute zero," "as near as possible to nothing." When she returns to her apartment and decides on her first positive action in days, to bake a woman-shaped cake for Peter, it is with a profound sense of personal new beginning.

Her image was taking shape. Eggs. Flour. Lemons for the flavour. Sugar, icing-sugar, vanilla, salt, food-colouring. She wanted everything new, she didn't want to use anything that was already in the house. (EW 267)

In *Surfacing* the narrator experiences a similar domination by "surfacing" unconscious elements — fear of people, enclosures, clothing — which quickly reduces not only the food she can eat but all aspects of life. From the onset, however, she experiences also a promise of new life . . . "nothing has died, everyone's alive, everything is waiting to become alive" (S 159). Her hallucinations bring her dreams and visions of her parents which appear to resolve her old dependences on them.

Our father, Our Mother, I pray, Reach down for me, but it won't work: they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human. Something I never gave them credit for; . . .

I try to think for the first time what it was like to be them. (S 189-190)

When her hallucinations end, she feels free to begin life again, particularly in her relationship to her previously uncommunicative lover Joe — "If I go with him we will have to talk, wooden houses are obsolete, and we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to begin" (S 192).

Of the three novels, *Lady Oracle* has the most convincing ending because there the narrator's commitment to renewal is tentative rather than total, and exists side-by-side with regressive fantasies. Joan's recognition of the unconscious patterns which have dominated her life occurs as she writes the final chapter of her last

Gothic novel, *Stalked by Love*. Particularly clear to her is the pattern of passively waiting for the killer/ healer to take her away, "rescue" her, "a strong arm about her waist" (LO 343). Clear also to her is her tendency to flee from any crisis like a Gothic heroine, "climbing out a window, in my bibbed apron and bun, oblivious to the cries of the children and grandchildren behind me. I might as well face it, I thought, I was an artist, an escape artist" (LO 335). The new for Joan consists of not passively awaiting the next man to walk through her door, but clubbing this rather friendly newspaper reporter with a Cinzano bottle. It consists also of not running from the consequences of this act:

... I could have escaped; he wouldn't have been able to trace me. I'm surprised I didn't do that since I've always been terrified of being found out. But somehow I couldn't just run off and leave him in the hospital with no one to talk to; not after I'd almost killed him by mistake. (LO 334)

Yet this is not a thoroughly new Joan. Her speech is as naive and anxious as it is anywhere in the narrative; her act of assertion with the Cinzano bottle is a patently schizoid instance of transference. Her decision to stay with the reporter seems grounded not only in a new sense of self but in a new fantasy not too dissimilar from the organizing fantasy of the nurse novels of her first lover, Paul — "He's a nice man; he doesn't have a very interesting nose, but I have to admit that there is something about a man in a bandage . . ." (LO 345). While Joan is making significant changes in her life, she does not seem ready to change it totally.

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"Metamorphosis" — so the narrator of *Surfacing* described the growth of new "pure white" flowers of the sundew from the old flesh of gnats and midges, as she began to pursue her own transformation through destruction and simplification. To reach the sundew, she leaves her companions and paddles her canoe deep into a swamp, a "shore maze" (S 167). In *Lady Oracle*, the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly is the ruling metaphor, established both in Joan's failure as an overweight child to qualify as a "butterfly" for a ballet recital (LO 47) and in the spiritualist Mr. Smith's parable about the pessimistic and optimistic caterpillars (LO 106). Metamorphosis

becomes Joan's main hope; "I was hoping for magical transformations" (LO 43) she tells us, as she yearns to dance like a butterfly or "fly up" from Brownies to Girl Guides (LO 52). Her attempts at transformation — from fat girl to thin woman, from high-school dropout to secret author of *Costume Gothics* and celebrity author of *Lady Oracle*, from housewife to mistress of the Royal Porcupine — remain partial and unsatisfying. Each new reality seems merely a trick or an illusion.

When I looked at myself in the mirror, I didn't see what Arthur saw. The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on my own. (LO 216)

Her final attempt to change — from an "escape artist" to one who faces consequences, from a passive accepter of life to an active shaper of it — seems fuller and deeper because it is based not on acts of will which leave the unconscious life unchanged but on unconscious recognitions achieved through cathartic reductions or "breakdown." As in *Surfacing*, these occur in a maze (appropriately symbolic of the unconscious): the ancient garden maze of *Stalked by Love's* Redmond Grange. As in *Surfacing* also, these recognitions are accompanied by yet another symbol of descent into the unconscious: the plunge into water (both Joan's mock suicide in Lake Ontario [LO 303] and Felicia's suicide and return from the dead in *Stalked by Love* [LO 322-223] from within which a new and more authentic self can emerge.

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Before this point in *Lady Oracle*, before Joan's reaching of some true metamorphosis by "plunging" into the "maze" of the unconscious, she has experienced reality as duplicitous, ambiguous, constantly undergoing metamorphoses of its own. These metamorphoses, like her own from fat girl to thin woman, are false ones also. Out of touch, for example, with her unconscious view of men as simultaneously killers and rescuers like her father, she is plagued by her projection of this view onto the basically unremarkable men she leads her life with. These illusory metamorphoses appear to be resolvable for her when she herself changes.

Every man I'd ever been involved with, I realized, had had two selves: my father healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double, Chuck Brewer; even Paul, whom I'd always believed had a sinister other life I couldn't penetrate. (LO 295)

This illusory doubleness is a characteristic given to men by the narrators of the other novels also. Marian sees Peter as both an "impressive" young lawyer and as a sadistic hunter with "a snarl of teeth" (EW 244). The woman of *Surfacing* can both "worship" her first lover and believe him a murderer. For her, a new beginning also means a resolution of his doubleness: "He was neither of the things I believed, he was only a normal man, middle-aged, second-rate, selfish and kind in the average proportions . . ." (S 189).

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All three of Atwood's novels are comic novels, that is optimistic of human reconciliation and renewal. While their structure in some sense resembles the traditional comic one of order, retreat to the green world, and re-establishment of order (often symbolized in marriage or birth), it is closer to contemporary models such as the psychoanalytic one of neurosis, catharsis, and self-actualization or literary ones such as deconstruction and invention. Certainly there is something specifically contemporary in these books, something that speaks to its own time in a more meaningful way than the mere issues of women's liberation, ecological preservation, or literary nationalism — all of which are invoked by the books and occasionally have been used to explain them. There is something contemporary also about their protagonists who are concerned almost totally with personal salvation; like the protagonists of Heller, Kroetsch, Hawkes, or Barthelme, they imply by their actions that the world can be saved only by each individual taking responsibility for saving himself.

The preoccupation of the novels is with overcoming passivity and transference so as to perceive the present clearly and engage with it. The difficulty which the protagonists encounter in engaging with the present links them firmly to the fearful and detached voice of Atwood's poetry. Atwood's attempt in the novels to resolve this fear implies a critique of the woman of her poetry, invites her to struggle toward a wider ground for relationship than irony and distrust.

In the fiction, wider ground challenges technique. In both the second and third novels there is an increase in narrative complexity over the previous one. The first person narrative in *The Edible Woman* follows one chronology with a significant shift to the third person during Marian's breakdown. The narrative of *Surfacing* indicates three time periods (Marian's childhood, years at arts school, and the present) and makes use of the unreliability of a first-person narrator to provide two levels of reality — the "lies" the narrator has told herself about her experiences and the actual events these lies conceal. The technique of the narrative is to blend these elements into the conventional consciousness flow of psychological realism. *Lady Oracle's* narrative includes four time periods, and two levels of reality — Joan's conscious beliefs about event and her more perceptive unconscious beliefs that are manifested in her gothic fantasies. The technique combines stream of consciousness with collaged chunks of the narrator's Costume Gothics. Since both the narrator and the reader soon learn that the latter contain insights into the anxieties of the former, the overall effect is that of the detective novel in which the crime is known but the resolution, and the way to this resolution, are not.

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"You Are Here" a cryptic sign informed the narrator of Atwood's early poem "A Night in the Royal Ontario Museum." "Where is here?" Atwood herself asked rhetorically in *Survival*, saying "It is what a man asks when he finds himself in unknown territory" (17). For the women of Atwood's novels and poems, their own lives are "unknown territory." "If the man is really lost," Atwood continued in *Survival*, "he may also wonder how he got 'here' to begin with" and "take stock of what 'here' really contains." These are the solutions of the narrators of *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle* and the unconsciously-reached solutions of the more limited Marian MacAlpin. Each time "here" is a better place than we, or they, believe.