

REVIEWS

Margaret Atwood. *Early Writings*. Edited by Nora Stovel and Donna Couto with Conrad Scott, Juvenilia Press, 2020.

viii + 70 pages. Paperback, AUD 15.00.
ISBN: 978-0-7334-3916-2.

This is not the first book of Margaret Atwood's early writing that the Juvenilia Press has been fortunate enough to publish. Like its earlier title by her (*A Quiet Game*, 1997), it raises most of the fascinating, insoluble questions that arise in the course of scholarly presentation and evaluation of literary work by children. Is this treatment too solemn, heavy-handed even, for two-page stories by kids? Do we wish to gaze at decorations in schoolbooks drawn by future artists, or listen to the first tune picked out with two fingers by a budding composer?

These Juvenilia Press editors, latest in a line that has included students and recent students of several generations as well as established scholars, have done a fine job both in providing enjoyment for their readers and in showing why such enjoyment is valuable. They never treat their child-author with condescension, but have aligned themselves with her own attitudes: a palpable delight in mastering her craft, and a self-mocking irony in, for instance, the inscription reproduced on the volume's cover: "Copyrighted P.A. 1955 (Ahem!)"

This volume makes its readers grateful: to Atwood's mother, for keeping these souvenirs of childhood and packing them safely away; to Atwood herself for generously allowing them to sally forth onto the public stage; to the university structure which underpins such institutions as the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. These verses, stories, and dramas were kept for discovery, for loving and scrupulous transcription, and for explication with care and a light touch. The editors have hunted up all kinds of sources—printed books, manuscripts, material from the internet and from the CBC—besides providing information on such recondite topics as Camp

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Hurontario and the muskie or muskellunge (a predatory fish). All this mediates for the reader the child and young person's delight in the gritty detail of her world.

It was love at first sight between me and this book. Since my appreciation of and gratitude to Atwood are chiefly for her later works, I expected to concentrate on the potential relationship of these early ones to those. Do *Rhyming Cats* prefigure her *Angel Catbird*? Does her interest in Nylon, Orlon, and Dacron foretell her interest in later scientific inventions, like synthetic meat and genetic modifying? That kind of thing.

The way these writings prefigure the future is indeed fascinating. But I was soon seduced by the child Peggy's writing for its own sake. Juvenile it may be, as its author says in her preface, but always quirky, always fun. I love the audible delight in words and wordplay, the mimicry, the agile shifting between one genre or model and another, and the voice-shifting that goes with it. The preface also says, "when I ran out of plagiarized material, I made up the rest," and Atwood adds that she cannot see anything in her early work that connects to the later. But the grown-up author here seems unfair to the child. The young writer had never heard of plagiarism, but was just tuning up, and the skills she was acquiring here were to be put to good use later on.

The happy meaninglessness of nursery rhymes picked up somewhere in her environment ("ABC / Fallen down D, / The cats in the cupboard / And cant see me") leads on to mastery of more self-important modes of meaninglessness ("Oh come, sweet death! ... Farewell, cruel world.") Here the meaning lies in the incongruity of context: what is borrowed is reshaped by irony, and what is foreshadowed is the mature Atwood's virtuoso handling of names, slogans, and catch-phrases.

As the book moves from verse to prose, we see Peggy mastering another mode. "Annie the Ant" is a story that has everything (including a happy ending, a rare event in the adult Atwood). Annie's individual exploits (hunting down the bug, impossibly saving the bunny from the eagle) take place against a plausible, almost naturalistic background of scurrying hordes of ants: driving off the enemy Flicker, performing underground rescue. A world in a grain of sand, indeed.

Some of the tiniest details in this book are telling enough to be worthy of the mature artist—like the word "customary" in "The Lone Figure." In this nightmare vision written for a friend with appendicitis, the old man who's waited twenty years in hospital to have his appendix out is imprisoned in a room with a small barred window and "the customary pile of moth-eaten straw." With that one word "customary," the teenage writer both aligns herself with and distances herself from a whole genealogy of fictional prisoners, horror stories of the tortured and the lunatic.

But of course the whole setting of "The Lone Figure" is comedic. And comic inventiveness breaks in again in the dramatic works that close the volume, with the non-human characters Orlon, Nylon, and Dacron, and the parody songs in "Synthesis" ("the only Home Economics opera ever performed") and in the summer

camp operetta “Moonblossom Smith” (“it was nothing if not demented”). The Gilbert and Sullivan spoofs are among the best in a crowded field, but the prize surely goes to “I’m just a girl who can’t say yes.” This has all the brio and catchiness of Rogers and Hammerstein’s original, and to the daring of the original’s cheeky endorsement of female desire, it opposes the daring of feminist defiance.

The outrageousness of each is inoffensive even to those who think differently, because it is such fun. Yet for a reader interested in prefiguring, Atwood’s stalwart record as a feminist—and the whole #MeToo movement with it—is foreshadowed in “When a caveman says goodnight to me / I always step a coupla paces back.”

From bright child to savvy teenager in forty-two pages. Thank you, Peggy Atwood.

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Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal, vol. 42, 2020.

255 pages. Paperback, USD 30.00. ISSN: 0821–0314.

Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line, Vol. 41, No. 1, Winter 2020. jasna.org/publications-2/persuasions-online/vol-41-no-1/.

Free online publication. ISSN: 1559–7520.

IN HER keynote presentation at the 2020 JASNA (Jane Austen Society of North America) AGM, reproduced as an essay in *Persuasions On-Line* 41.1, Juliet McMaster prescribes a dose of the juvenilia for non-Janeites, who have eschewed Jane Austen’s novels in the past. Such readers considered Austen to be too straightlaced. Beginning with “The Beautifull Cassandra,” McMaster points out that Austen clearly breaks many social mores of her culture through her juvenile writing. Dedicated readers of Austen’s juvenilia know the delights that await them each time they turn to her juvenilia – whether as a dose of relief from the pandemic, or as a wonderful treasure trove that reveals the developing skills of the teenage writer.

I have selected for this review six essays about literary juvenilia, all based on papers presented at the 2020 JASNA AGM, found in one or the other of JASNA’s

two peer-reviewed journals: *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 41, no. 1; and *Persuasions*, vol. 42. (The former is a digital publication available online free of charge; the latter is a print publication that was mailed in Spring 2021 to members of JASNA but can also be purchased from JASNA for \$30 plus shipping.) I review four essays from *Persuasions On-Line* 41.1, including two keynote presentations, as well as two essays from *Persuasions* 42 that I suggest are essential reading for two kinds of readers: those who are pursuing studies in literary juvenilia and those who find themselves drawn to juvenile writing because they enjoy seeing the world through the viewpoint of a child who is learning to express herself, spelling mistakes and all.

Editor Susan Allen Ford begins *Persuasions On-Line* 41.1 with thoughtful memorials for two long-time members of the Jane Austen community: founding member Lorraine Hathaway and preeminent Austen scholar Deirdre Le Faye, followed by two main sections and a shorter, miscellany section. The first section, “AGM: 2020: A Virtual Event,” includes nine essays on the JASNA AGM 2020 theme of “Jane Austen’s Juvenilia: Reason, Romanticism, and Revolution.” Readers of the *Journal of Juvenilia Studies (JJS)* will be delighted by these informative and engaging essays that look at history, art, music, fashion, and film in relation to the juvenilia. The second section, “‘Staying at Home’ with Jane Austen: Reading and Writing during a Pandemic,” adds dimension to the volume by encouraging readers who are experiencing a pandemic to consider the restricted social world of Jane Austen. “Miscellany” follows, offering a variety of essays that include Deirdre Le Faye’s perspectives on the authenticity of the Rice portrait, which some claim shows Jane Austen in her childhood.

Two keynote presentations on juvenilia at the conference, both published in *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 41, no. 1, complement each other. “Here’s Looking at You, Kid! The Visual in Jane Austen’s Juvenilia” invites readers to view Jane Austen’s juvenile stories through the visual lens of Juliet McMaster. We learn that McMaster takes her cue from the limited supply of words regarding appearances in Austen’s stories. She reveals her creative process, recounting how she develops the satirical illustrations we have come to enjoy in many Juvenilia Press volumes. The on-line format of McMaster’s paper offers readers the opportunity to enjoy her illustrations via large, brightly coloured screen images—a nice treat. She provides a fascinating account of how her interest in illustrating a picture book for children culminated in the founding of the Juvenilia Press, which has published nineteen scholarly editions of Austen’s juvenilia since 1994.

In “Juvenile Songs and Lessons: Music Culture in Jane Austen’s Teenage Years,” Gillian Dooley enhances readers’ sensory experience of Jane Austen’s juvenilia, by providing excerpts of musical pieces that the young author copied out in her own handwriting and played. Dooley discusses musical aspects of the culture surrounding the young Jane Austen and shows how Austen incorporates music into specific juvenile stories. Both McMaster and Dooley discuss a range of Austen’s early writings from her three volumes of juvenilia: “The Beautifull Cassandra,” “Frederic and

Elfrida,” “Jack and Alice,” “Lesley Castle,” “Henry and Eliza,” and “The Three Sisters,” as well as “Lady Susan.” A theme common to both keynote presentations is that of the teenage Austen using her writing to send up the restrictions of her culture’s prescribed social behaviours for women, beginning with the exploits of her first character: the beautiful Cassandra.

Among the many noteworthy offerings in *Persuasions On-Line* 41.1, two essays about Austen’s “Catharine, or the Bower,” one by Elaine Bander and one by Ryoko Doi, stand out for me personally. As a graduate student in McMaster’s class at the University of Alberta, I was privileged to be a member of the editing team that produced the 1996 Juvenilia Press edition of Austen’s *Catharine, or the Bower*, and I invite *JJS* readers who are interested in discovering the ongoing benefits of such an experience to access the JP website, at https://bit.ly/JP_Reflections (stable shortened URL).

Bander explores interesting connections between Austen’s “Catharine” and the novels of Charlotte Smith; she presents a detailed account of possible interpretations of Catharine’s bower. Bander also points out that Austen’s “Catharine” is closer to a conventional courtship novel than it is to the burlesque-style novels of Charlotte Smith. (Readers who wish to pursue further connections between Austen and Charlotte Smith will be enlightened by Susan Allen Ford’s contribution to *Persuasions On-Line*, vol. 41, no. 2 entitled “Mrs. Smith, Charlotte Smith, and West Indian Property in *Persuasion*: A Note,” in which Ford references additional work by Bander on this subject.) Doi takes on both “Catharine” and “The History of England” to present an engaging argument that Austen recasts Mary, Queen of Scots as her fictional Catharine. *JJS* readers will enjoy Doi’s complex piece that is filled with references to these two, later juvenile works of Jane Austen.

Persuasions 42 contains essays by Christine Alexander and Lesley Peterson that I recommend as essential reading. Alexander provides an opportunity for those readers already involved in literary juvenilia to better understand the development of this area of research. She also makes it possible for readers to uncover why they are charmed, amused, or astonished by their enjoyment of literary juvenilia—the appeal lies in more than our surprise and amusement at the early spelling mistakes of later famous authors. Alexander defines what literary juvenilia is and what it is not. She makes clear that juvenile writers create literature that contributes to the culture in which they write; they do not simply consume cultural ideas from texts that are written by adults, for them. Equipped with this important clarification, readers are better able to benefit from Alexander’s examples of literary juvenilia. These examples are sometimes endearing and sometimes startling, as they illustrate how cultural restrictions impel young authors, including Jane Austen, to create stories in which characters act out the resentments of their young authors. For instance, seven-year-old Iris Vaughan, who receives a reprimand for speaking too honestly in a social setting, writes down what she thinks. Some of us might have experienced the surprise of finding out that forthright honesty in the wrong social setting can lead to a penalty. More than smiling

at the spelling mistakes of blossoming writers, twenty-first-century readers of Alexander's essay will recognize that their attraction to literary juvenilia may be due to their having some of the same concerns with social constraints today that children and young writers had in the past.

Alexander notes that in recent decades we have seen the development of a literary canon that includes juvenile writing, writing by women, and the emergence of the *Journal of Juvenilia Studies*, of which Lesley Peterson is an editor. Peterson herself lights up *Persuasions* 42 with her in-depth study of the rollicking world of Jane Austen's juvenilia, centred on the exaggerated ravings of characters in both "Love and Freindship" and "Lesley Castle." Peterson presents evidence that Jane Austen adapts Eliza Nugent Bromley's conventional depictions of raves and swoons for her own purposes. Differentiating between sentimental and unsentimental raving, Peterson reveals how young Jane Austen displays her extensive knowledge of the conventions of such influences as sentimental novels and the plays of Sheridan and Shakespeare. This essay allows readers to gain new perspectives on behaviours that seem totally out of control. Peterson shows us that such behaviours are carefully constructed by the young Austen. I particularly enjoy Peterson's dissection of Austen's descriptions of food and its sensual delights, which exposes an amusing and perhaps surprising instance of meaty double entendre. Certainly, rereading "Love and Freindship" and "Lesley Castle" will not be the same after reading this engaging discussion.

As adult readers of literary juvenilia, we have come to appreciate the special qualities of those young, talented writers who are admired by generations of readers beyond their own time. For some of us, our love of Jane Austen has led to our discovery of other young authors who—like many of us—began writing as children, to express how things should be, rather than complying with restrictive cultural conventions. The essays in these two volumes of *Persuasions* demonstrate how meaningful literary juvenilia can be for readers who were booklovers and prolific writers themselves as children. They also assert the consequence of literary juvenilia as a body of literature, as a genre in its own right, and in doing so elevate the importance of this under-recognized category of literature.

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Dara McAnulty. *Diary of a Young Naturalist*. Little Toller Books, 2020.

v + 219 pages. Hardback, GBP 16. ISBN: 9781908213792.

THIS DEBUT publication by Dara McAnulty, teenage autistic author, naturalist and conservationist, chronicles a period in his life when the family moves from one side of Northern Ireland to another and the beginnings of his now established career. Challenges faced along the way include bullying, a change of school, and the nuances of autism, which though they sharpen his sensitivity to stress and anxiety, also heighten his awareness and engagement with the natural world. His story, which revolves around his connection to wildlife, is nestled in the constant warmth and reassurance of a family unit that has “roots” beyond brick and mortar, binding them “like mycelium networks” (8).

The diary covers one year, from spring equinox to spring equinox, and ends on the cusp of his fifteenth birthday. Dara’s observations on natural history and the ways in which he weaves them into the narrative and relates them to his emotional experience and development are vivid and compelling. The writing is mature and perceptive, and through moments of reflection and a range of original similes drawn from nature itself we gain the sense that the author is completely immersed in the natural world. A goshawk chick in a nest “looks like an autumn forest rolled in the first snows of winter” (71).

More than simply a coming-of-age narrative, the book depicts the anxiety and excitement of a youth finding his voice, not only as a writer but as an environmental campaigner in a modern world that seems either oblivious to the degraded state of nature or complacent about it. We learn how Dara begins to engage others at school through forming an eco-group, and how his participation in a school strike for climate, started by teenager Greta Thunberg, inspires new determination and hope. When he works as a presenter with Chris Packham on BioBlitz, assessing and recording wildlife in nature reserves in the UK, he recognises that his tendency to “work alone” is superseded by his passion for the subject. Although having to cope with comments on social media afterwards elicits “intense feelings of doubt” (97–98), he wisely reasons that “human narcissism and insecurity” must not be allowed to obscure the “urgency of supporting collapsing ecosystems and protecting wildlife” (98).

The book will appeal to adults as much as it will to Dara’s own peer group. He points out that children need a healthy natural world, with “access to the wilder places” (19), and a society that recognises the need to act to protect it. He restates the urgent environmental challenges facing our species that anyone who is familiar with the disastrous trajectory of global warming will understand, and how this crisis affects him personally:

The natural world – which includes us—is facing such enormous challenges that it’s easy to become overwhelmed and depressed. But we must fix them, and if I’m no longer here, alive, I can’t be part of the solution. What is it that’s holding me back? Anxiety? Depression? Autism? These are the shackles. Surely, I can break free. ... The only thing I am really bound to is nature as we all are. (115)

The diary format is particularly well suited to the fragmented, sometimes impulsive, teenage streams of consciousness. It offers a window onto the loneliness and challenges of autistic experience, but also its energetic wonder and brilliance. The neurodiverse mind pays attention to the natural world, in particular to small or microscopic things that are often overlooked, like a woodlouse with her “butter-yellow eggs” (196). Throughout the book the author evokes the tension he experiences between the stress of daily school life and the “unfettered joy” he feels in wild places (25). He describes how ideas and words become “trapped in my chest,” and asks, even if they are heard and read, “will anything change?” (21). When depression and anxiety set in, Dara is adept at seeing the value of small, ordinary moments. On watching two buzzards fly together in courtship he muses, “Some things are so right in this world. I need to hold on to all these moments, to stop myself eroding” (197).

Through meeting like-minded people during conservation work, the author begins to find his feet. During the tagging and monitoring of goshawks, eagles, hen harriers, buzzards, and red kites, which is part of a project designed to protect these birds from persecution, he discovers acceptance and understanding:

Without realising, I start talking to the people around me ... I feel at ease. This is so rare. They aren’t teasing or confusing me. I ask questions which are given detailed, intelligent answers, and it feels as if I’ve been dipped in a golden light. This is what I want to do. This is what I want to be, surrounded by kindred spirits, doing useful things with care, knowledge and clarity. (71)

Yet the book is by no means a rose-tinted view on life. The author’s struggle is real and perilous: “as I lay on the sand, listening to the waves, I promised not to lose myself again. I must stop thinking about taking my own life” (99).

The issues raised in this book extend far beyond the natural world: they convey the crucial importance of being nurtured and heard, rather than bypassed and overlooked. Rathlin Island—one of the author’s favourite places—symbolises well the isolation and beauty of the individual. It reminds us of the need in the writing and publishing professions, and in society more widely, to support and cherish the unique individual voices and perspectives of young, developing writers. In the prose, it is

possible to detect at times the presence of Robert Macfarlane, who is acknowledged at the end of the book as having given literary advice, support, and encouragement—who “championed my words and my voice.”

Diary of a Young Naturalist, which Dara started writing when he was fourteen, has won four literary awards, including the 2020 Wainwright Prize for Nature Writing and the British Book Awards Narrative Non-fiction Book of the Year. Dara is also the youngest ever author to be longlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize, the UK’s most prestigious award for non-fiction.

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