

And you can also see what the real nature of literature is—it is a matter of one's attention being removed from the real world and regarding nature and the world verbally: it is a messy mathematics in its way; it is a kind of science dealing in images and language, and it has to be right in the things it says; it has to be right about things.

I learned very early that when you were infatuated with someone, you read the same books the other person read or you read the books that had shaped the other person or you committed an infidelity and read for yourself and it was the beginning of trouble. I think reading and writing are the most dangerous human things because they operate on and from that part of the mind in which judgments of reality are made; and because of the authority language has from when we learn to speak and use its power as a family matter, as an immediate matter, and from when we learn to read and see its modern, middle-class power as a public matter establishing our rank in the world.

When a book is technically uninteresting, when such a book is not a kind of comically enraged protest against the pretensions of false technique and ludicrously misconceived subject matter, it is bound to be a phony. The democratic subversion of objects, of techniques, can never without real dishonesty stray far from its ostensible purpose, which is the democratic necessity of making our lives interesting to us. Folk art is, inevitably, a kind of baby talk in relation to high art—and this is shaming, but so is much in life, including one's odor giving one's secrets away (showing one's nervousness or one's lechery), but it is better to do that than live messageless and without nerves or desire. The moral extravagance of reading—its spiritual element and its class element—is bound to reflect both an absence of humility and a new kind of humility and both in odd ways. Two of our most conceited writers, Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway, overtly wrote baby talk. Nowadays the young like financial reporting as a window on the world, and television and the interview. They are pursuing fact in the plethora of baby talk, and they are trying to exercise judgment in the middle of the over-enthusiastic marketing of trash.

American colleges have taught our intellectuals to read politically in order to enter and stay in a group or on a track. One reads skimingly then, and one keeps placing the authority for what one reads outside oneself. But actually people cannot read in a two-souled way, shrewdly, and with a capacity to feel and learn. Learning involves fear and sometimes awe and just plain factually is not shrewd—it is supershrewd if you like, it is a very grand speculation indeed; and graduate school stuff won't open out into awe and discovery or recognition or personal knowledge of events but only onto academic hustling. I mean when you stop theorizing and think about what is really there. Do I need to go on? One of the primary rules of language is that there must be a good reason for the listener to attend to a second

sentence after the first one; to supply a good reason is called “being interesting.” Not to attend to the second sentence is called “not listening.” The reasons to listen are always selfish, but that does not mean they are only selfish.

It is hard to listen. It is also hard to write well and to think. These ought not to be unfamiliar statements. This ought not to be news.

See you in the bookstore soon.

Suggestions for Discussion

1. Discuss the significance of Brodkey's title.
2. Explain Brodkey's belief that the United States is organized by “fashions in making money and spending money.”
3. Discuss the difficulties a reader encounters in Brodkey's lengthy, complex, and energetic sentences.

Suggestions for Writing

1. Analyze the reading that you do on a regular basis.
2. Discuss Brodkey's observation that “shrewdness without good sense is hell unleashed.”



M A R G A R E T A T W O O D

Fiction: Happy Endings

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) has lived in both the United States and Europe, but her home is in Toronto. Her novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000) earned a Booker Prize. Among her other books are *The Edible Woman* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1980), *Surfacing* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), *Cat's Eye* (1989), *The Robber Bride* (1993), and *Morning in a Burned House* (1995). A collection of Atwood's essays, *Writing with Intent*, was published in 2005. She has also written short stories, television plays, children's books, criticism, and poetry. This selection is from *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1983).

John and Mary meet. What happens next? If you want a happy ending, try A.