



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



THE ALPHABET OF HOPE



W R I T E R S F O R L I T E R A C Y

MARGARET ATWOOD



CANADA

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays. Her books include the 2000 Booker Prize winner, *The Blind Assassin*, *Alias Grace*, which also won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy, *The Robber Bride*, *Cat's Eye*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her most recent book, *Curious Pursuits*, a collection of essays, reviews and personal prose, was published in 2005. Margaret Atwood lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson.

A poor woman learns to write

She squats, bare feet
splayed out, not
graceful; skirt tucked around ankles.

Her face is lined and cracked.
She looks old,
older than anything.

She's probably thirty.
Her hands also are lined and cracked
and awkward. Her hair concealed.

She prints with a stick, laboriously
in the wet grey dirt,
frowning with anxiety.

Great big letters.
There. It's finished.
Her first word so far.

She never thought she could do this,
Not her.
This was for others,

She looks up, smiles
as if apologizing,
but she's not. Not this time. She did it right.

What does the mud say?
Her name. We can't read it.
But we can guess. Look at her face:

Joyful Flower? A Radiant One? Sun On Water?

Somebody's daughter

Few remember that to learn to read and write is one of the great victories in life.

- Bryher, *The Heart to Artemis* (p.14)

Akluniq ajuqsarniqangilaq:

In times of scarcity, there is much opportunity for innovative thinking.

- Inuit saying, from Nunavut, Canada.

Some time ago, I received a message from UNESCO asking me to write something to advocate for Literacy. By a great coincidence, I was already involved in a Literacy programme – Somebody's Daughter, a two-week camp that takes place in Nunavut, in the Canadian Arctic. So, as reading and writing are never learned in outer space but under specific local conditions, I will tell you a little about that programme.

Life has never been easy for the people of the far north. For many centuries they lived in one of the most unforgiving climates on earth: no trees, no agriculture, extreme cold and darkness for many months of the year. Using tools made of stone and bone, wearing clothing made of skins, relying largely on fish and on the meat of seal, caribou, polar bear, walrus, and whales, they had a culture finely tuned to their environment. In this culture, men and women were interdependent: hunters provided most of the food, but their clothing was made by the women, and unless it was made very well the hunter could die: a leaky kamik could mean a frozen foot. Each set of skills was known to be necessary to the survival of all, and each was respected.

Then came the Europeans, and the gathering of a nomadic people into settlements, and exposure to many of the more negative aspects of "white" culture, including excessive drinking and violence towards women; there was a break with traditional ways, and a sharp increase in suicides. Children were forced into residential schools in an effort to wrench them into the twentieth century, and two generations have undergone extreme culture shock. One of the worst effects of this has been the fracturing of families. In the old culture, sons were taught their hunting skills by fathers and uncles, daughters their sewing skills by mothers and aunts, but now many younger people are cultural orphans. There are still a number of elders-living treasures who remember the old ways – and Somebody's Daughter aims at a reconnection of the generations.

Somebody's Daughter is run by Bernadette Dean, the Social Development Coordinator for her district of Nunavut. Bernadette's Inuit name, Miqquusaaq – mica, or sparkling

rock – describes her well: scintillating and clear, but tough underneath. Like many who confront similar social problems, Bernadette knows that to improve the overall health of a community and its families you must improve the well-being and confidence of the women.

Somebody's Daughter is a two-week camp for women in their twenties, thirties and forties who never had a chance to learn traditional Inuit sewing. Most of them have experienced tragedy, violence, or separation from their families. Bernadette explained the programme's name to me: "Not everyone is a wife, not everyone is a mother, not everyone is a grandmother; but every woman is somebody's daughter." Immediately the participants are given a sense of belonging.

The "daughters" go out on the land with a group of elders and teachers. They live in tents, and make an article of clothing the old way, scraping, stretching, and softening the animal skin first, then cutting the pattern with a women's curved knife or ulu, and sewing it with sinew – the best thread, as it expands in water and makes a garment watertight. It's hard to describe the joy that learning this skill can give.

But an improvement in literacy is also part of the plan, because Nunavut exists in the same twenty-first century we all do. Computers and office jobs are now common, and for these and the money they can bring, literacy is needed. That is why two writers were invited to join the group: myself and children's writer Sheree Fitch, who had been there the two previous summers. We both felt very lucky to be there.

But how to teach writing to women whose experience of it at school may well have been negative? Sheree told me that it could prove very difficult to get these women to set pen to paper: they might be shy, or afraid of writing; or they might not see the use of doing it at all.

The campsite this year was on the shore of Southampton Island, which is situated at the top of Hudson's Bay and is as large as the land mass of Switzerland. It has one settlement, Coral Harbour, with less than a thousand people. It also has two hundred thousand caribou and a lively population of polar bears. We traveled from Coral Harbour to the site on a 30-foot long-liner – a trip of sixty miles that took over five hours because of the large waves.

We set up our tents at a spectacular location – austere and beautiful, with the sea on one side and the land rising up behind us in a series of earlier shores. On the top ridge were some Dorset Culture dwellings many centuries old – rocks set into the ground in a circle,

with a tunnel entrance and some fox traps and graves nearby. The ground at our site was smooth white limestone rocks, so our tents could not be pegged; instead their ropes were tied to large boulders, a good plan in view of the 80-mile-an-hour winds we soon experienced.

We had three expert hunters with us, to help with the site, to provide food, and to defend our camp. They immediately bagged a caribou, which was skinned and cut up immediately; some of it became caribou stew, some was soon to be turned into mittens and kamiks; nothing would be wasted. We weren't the only hungry ones around, however: through the twilight came a large healthy male polar bear, intent on dinner. The hunters chased it off on their Honda ATVs, then took turns standing guard all night – just as well, because the bear came back four times. "Next time it's dinner," said one hunter. The bear must have heard him. "The elders tell us to be alert at all times," we were instructed.

The next day the women met with the elders and teachers in a large round communal tent, where they received the skins they would work on. "What do you want to make?" they were asked by the elders, in Inuktituk. Then, "Who is it for?" (Sizes vary according to age, patterns according to gender.) This question – "Who is it for?" – gave Sheree and myself a thread to follow. During our first writing session, we said that writing, like sewing, took one thing and made it into another; and that writing, like sewing, was always for someone, even if that someone was yourself in a future form. It was a way of putting your voice on paper and sending it – to someone you might know, or else to someone you might never meet, but who would be able to hear you anyway.

Then I explained that I was going to write a piece for UNESCO. Somebody's Daughter, I said, was part of a much larger movement – a movement to improve the lives of women all over the world. Some of these women – unlike themselves – might not even be able to write their own names yet. So for their first writing assignment, I would like them to send a message to these other women. I would be their post-person, I said: I would deliver their message.

Every single woman wrote a message. Every message was positive and encouraging. Here is a sampling: Whoever you are. I am a woman. I am proud of being me. You can be proud of who you are and be proud of yourself. Don't ever think that we're nothing. But we the women are the most pretty inside and out because we are always helpful to our families and other people. Just think of yourself that you can do everything.

This message is coming from the North. To the women all over the world, take good care of yourself because you are the most needed in a family, you are a home to them so

take good care of yourself. We women are all the same and we are as one. Remember, everyone is created equally and that means if he cannot handle abuse neither should you, but please remember that we have to help and love our neighbours.

I'd love to teach when I learn more.

A message to the ladies in the world. Remember that you are loved very much and that you are not alone.

Please let your life be good and don't forget you're strong and a helper.

To all the women in the world from someone in the north – no matter what you look like you are very special. Always keep this in your mind.

And finally:

Learning begins when the learner feels safe and comfortable, provide an atmosphere of safety and comfort. And keep trying!

Writing messages of encouragement was in itself encouraging to the writers. The big round tent became a place of safety and comfort and healing for the women in it, and their writing also became – for most, I think – a place of safety and comfort and healing. In the tent, and also in the writing, the women laughed and joked and told stories, and also grieved: in this culture, grieving should be done – it is said – out loud, and with other people. Grieving in this way leads to healing, it is said.

Each of the women, with the help of her individual elder or teacher, completed the sewing project she had set out to do. Each continued to write – to expand their handling of the written word through daily journals, letters, and small poems. Confidence came through identity and achievement, and on the final day, at the suggestion of one of the women, the “daughters” wrote a communal poem, each of them contributing a line.

I'll use the last line of this poem to show how the sewing, the writing, and the healing all came together through this inspired programme:

After I finished sewing the hard part of the kamik I feel like an eagle, so free and fly wherever I may go.

Margaret Atwood

