



THREE INTERVIEWS WITH MARGARET DRABBLE

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Les deux premières interviews de Margaret Drabble ont été effectuées à trois ans d'intervalle, chez elle dans le Somerset, en août 1989 puis à Londres en octobre 1992. Dans ce laps de temps, elle a publié *A Natural Curiosity*, suivi de *The Gates of Ivory* et a également démarré une longue recherche qui aboutira à une biographie d'Angus Wilson.

L'idée de l'interview a surgi après le constat du nombre grandissant de recueils fondés sur le principe même de l'interview, de femmes de lettres essentiellement. Une œuvre de nos jours n'est plus un ensemble de mots avec une signature, il faut tenir compte de l'image publique de leur auteur qui, en se montrant, en parlant de son travail, en donnant son opinion sur la société, met la littérature encore plus à la portée du public. Tous les écrivains ne rompent pas le silence, certains préfèrent l'isolement par pudeur ou pour tout autre motif légitime. L'accueil de Margaret Drabble vis-à-vis de cette idée fut incontestablement positif et stimulant.

L'objectif de la première interview était de déterminer, avec plus de précisions que ce qu'offraient les ouvrages sur la littérature, les aspirations et soucis d'une écrivaine contemporaine mais également de la confronter avec sa propre image, celle qu'elle donne à travers l'éventail de ses travaux, preuve irréfutable d'une ouverture d'esprit, d'un esprit critique et d'une grande culture.

En outre, il était tentant de mieux connaître les méandres de la créativité de la romancière: en effet, la lecture de ses romans ressemble à une promenade familière avec des dominantes stylistiques qui permettent au lecteur entraîné dans un monde nouveau, d'avoir déjà des repères. La question de fond implicite de cette première interview était de définir les modalités de l'acte d'écriture: s'agit-il d'un exercice de style délibéré ou d'un acte spontané et sans contraintes? La lecture de *The Gates of Ivory* publié en 1991 fut une surprise, les nouvelles orientations littéraires suggérées par la structure et le contenu même du roman méritaient certains éclaircissements et la tentation d'une nouvelle rencontre s'imposa comme une nécessité. Il s'agissait cette fois de définir la nouvelle voie vers laquelle la romancière se dirigeait et les motivations qui l'animaient.

Il est important de souligner que la première rencontre privilégiée avec Margaret Drabble a, sans nul doute, modifié l'opinion qu'on peut avoir de l'auteur et induit une lecture beaucoup moins neutre de ses écrits.

La troisième interview a été réalisée après un intervalle de vingt ans riche en événements: avec cinq romans de plus à son actif, de nombreuses préfaces, un ouvrage qui mêle biographie, autobiographie et histoire des puzzles, des articles très documentés, ainsi que de nombreuses interviews et conférences.

Somerset, August 1989

CP: What projects have you got for the next few years?

MD: I've got a novel coming out in September this year and another two novels, one definitely coming out, the other one I'm in the middle of it.¹

CP: What about odd things like short stories or *The Oxford Companion*?²

MD: No, nothing. *The Oxford Companion* goes on and on. My assistant who was working on it, is doing a *20th Century Oxford Guide* with some of the material taken out of *The Companion* and some new material added, so that's still on-going. It takes much of my time because we've got to keep it up-to-date, every reprint, we try to put any new material and we can't alter the format, we put anything like death dates and corrections obviously.

CP: Is it more fulfilling or rewarding to publish *The Oxford Companion* than to write a novel?

MD: *The Oxford Companion* is something one can feel objectively proud of, you know what you've done. I feel I had a very good team of people working with me and I feel that it's a sort of permanent landmark, but writing novels is much more difficult, for when you get it very well, it's more exciting, it's much more "hit and miss". *The Oxford Companion*, if you work hard, then you will do it right.

CP: Have you ever had a "miss"?

MD: Yes, I think bits of every novel are a "miss" but I certainly thought that when I was writing *The Middle Ground* that this was not a good novel, I was not happy with the shape of it at all and I'm still not happy with the shape of it.

CP: When I read *The Middle Ground*, I thought "It's got to be her last novel" because it combined the style of the first six novels and the style of the last ones, I thought you had reached a summit so I don't know why you don't see it as a good novel.

MD: I have had a lot of difficulties with it, I mean I felt dissatisfied with it. I worked hard on it and I didn't really feel like I had resolved all the problems at all and when I started writing *The Radiant Way*, I felt happier: I thought there was more energy going into it. I felt *The Middle Ground* is slightly running out of energy in certain points.

CP: Did you leave a gap on purpose between *The Middle Ground* and *The Radiant Way*?

¹ Il s'agit de *A Natural Curiosity* (1989), *The Gates of Ivory* (1991) et *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996).

² *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985).

MD: Yes, I did. I thought I had come to the end of what I was doing with *The Middle Ground* but I did not see where else to move from there and then, the opportunity of doing *The Oxford Companion* came up, which obviously was a long project, and it came at exactly the right moment for me in terms of my own life history: it came exactly when I was wondering whether to write another novel- not particularly wanting to- and I was young enough to take it on without feeling it going to eat up the rest of my life. And that worked in very well. I think I was forty, I worked from the age of forty to forty-five and that was a good patch of time. I was still fairly stationary at home, the children were still at home and I wouldn't want to do that now, I mean I'm much more mobile, I wouldn't want to settle for a job of that length.

CP: It must have been a difficult job with this great amount of entries...

MD: It was a huge job, and physically it was very demanding, it needed a lot of lighter work and a lot of correspondence. I had a full time assistant working in my house on it. We did not really have an office so we worked at home and it was quite demanding on that point of view.

CP: Do you think autobiography is taking more and more place in your novels?

MD: No, I wouldn't say so really. It's a sort of strange mixture and the mixture gets odder and odder. I think my early novels were autobiographical without my knowing it whereas now, I know when I'm using autobiography.

CP: You use names of places like "Somerset" for instance...

MD: Yes, I put in some direct stuff. I do that more but on the other hand, my life is less circumscribed than it was, so when you're being autobiographical, you're not necessarily being so personal but your life isn't so constrained: I mean there was a time when everything I wrote about was immediately around me and now, because I move around a lot more, it's not so identifiable. But I do certainly use quite directly people I met and places as a sort of semi-fictional, a sort of fact and fiction, a bit jumbled up.

CP: Is your vision of society more pessimistic in your latest novels?

MD: Yes, it is, it is more pessimistic and it does not mean I am a pessimistic person, it just means that my view of what society can achieve has become more limited.

CP: *The Radiant Way* can be studied as a political novel...

MD: *The Radiant Way* was reviewed in some of the political columns rather than in the literary columns and some people have said it's a very unfair picture of Thatcher's Britain, it's a very hostile portrait of life today and other people have liked it for exactly that reason, which has

nothing to do with the politic group, it's to do with people's political allegiances. Some of the comment is fair enough, I think, it probably is at times unjust but it is strange that people should expect you to write a novel and praise the way things are going. It's odd to me that they should even think that I ought to.

CP: In your next novel, are you emphasising this political aspect?

MD: The next novel is not a very political novel, it's a more psychological novel, it's a sort of black comedy about Alix Bowen and the murderer and various rather macabre plot lines.

CP: Are you changing your style?

MD: No, it seems to be the right thing for this particular, it's set in a much shorter time perhaps, it has not much political development in it at all. I can never predict what I am going to do next: it happens. I sort of see six months ahead but no further than that really.

CP: Do you think your novels maintain a realist tradition in literature?

MD: Yes, but in a very qualified way as I think, none of us are sort of direct realists now. There is much more self-consciousness on the part of the narrator which dispels the illusion of realism and I think I do that, in common with many of the contemporary writers that are very conscious of telling a story, or making up a story which is directly against the grain of realism, which supposes there isn't a story-teller, which stresses "That is what it is". I am not really into that kind of realism and I don't want people just to believe that these characters are real, it's not as simple as that, that sort of figurative figures, so it's a sort of blend of realism and other techniques.

CP: Would you say your novels are a more social rather than personal vision of life?

MD: I think both are fascinating. As one sees in *The Radiant Way*, on the personal level you can resolve your life quite reasonably but on the social level, it's extremely difficult; that was one of the meanings of the ending in *The Radiant Way*: on a personal level, these three women can maintain their friendship and find a good place to be and carry on their relationships with a certain degree of warmth and honesty but on the social level, they find their social roles more difficult.

CP: Especially Alix, maybe...?

MD: The other two women are not worried about it but that does not mean they are not alienated, it's just that Alix worries about it, she is more conscious of her problems than they are.

CP: Esther seems to be a character out of your imagination...

MD: Esther is not leading what is thought as being a normal sort of life but quite a lot of people aren't and there's quite a large minority of people who lead lives that have no connection with normal society.

CP: Did you feel the urge of describing more familiar places in your latest novels? Northam, for instance?

MD: Northam is a portrait of Sheffield, it's a portrait of my home town Sheffield, it's a sort of portrait of Sheffield but I don't call it Sheffield because then, you get into trouble but it's in South Yorkshire.

A lot of *The Middle Ground* is about places in London, some of which I know very well, some of which I don't know so well. I mean the bit about Kate that comes from the East End, I don't really know it well, I have never lived in that part but I have been to many times.

I do enjoy writing about real places but then, if you are using Northam as a sort of Northern city, you have to alter it slightly, but it's very representative, I mean that the whole unemployment situation which does not exist in the South is very much a phenomenon of the North of England. But I have rather lost touch with the North of England so I had to go and visit it on purpose and talk to people on purpose and do research on that whereas the London stuff comes naturally because I lived with it much longer.

CP: Have you chosen Harrow Road on purpose?

MD: Yes. It's not the part where I live but it's the part I know quite well, it's the part I know very well.

It is done on purpose, I mean the point about writing about London is that every district has its own social meaning and the house that Liz lives in, in Harley Street, has a very distinct significance, it's not a place where I've ever lived—it's far too expensive for me—but it's a street that has a particular social significance, whereas Harrow Road is an appalling road and they sort of lead into one another.

What I was trying to write about was the contrast between different neighbourhoods of London which, obviously, I do quite know very well. I would not want to write about them but they are real, they are real places. And one of the things that interests me in London is rather like Zola's writing about Paris, it's how in the same city, you get these extraordinary violent contrasts between the very rich and the very poor within half a mile of one another.

CP: Is your feeling, your vision of time important? Do you feel time-bound? Do you want to sort of stop time?

MD: It's very interesting, time, it's not that I wanted to stop it, it's that I want to record it while it's happening because otherwise you forget. And one of the things about the novel is that you can recall and say that in 1985, it was like that because I know, in ten years' time, people will look back and say: "Well, I wonder if that had happened in 1985 or if it hadn't happened, I wonder if people were interested in acid rain and nuclear waste or if they had not got interested in it yet". If you put it all

in a novel and mark it, then you know you've got it right for history because historians will lie about it, politicians will lie about it; if you get it down there, then you know that's what you had been thinking about then and that's what people were talking about then.

CP: This is History time, I'm also talking about time-markers like adjectives and adverbs: did you know they were plentiful in your writing?

MD: I don't notice it, it is unconscious. I am very conscious of trying to mark things in terms of History but I am not conscious in terms of marking them out in personal time, it must be unconscious, subconscious. It is true that the novel as a form has very much to do with time, it's rooted in time in a way more than other art forms, I mean the drama is rooted in instant time and poetry is more timeless whereas the novel has very much to do with the passage of time.

CP: Like many other novelists, you use a constant feed-back in the past to go further...

MD: I am certainly conscious of that, that people will always look backwards in order to look forwards.

CP: You don't seem to give much importance to the relationship between father and daughter, except in *The Middle Ground*, is it deliberate?

MD: There is a father in *The Middle Ground*, there's quite an interesting relationship with Kate and her father, he is weird, he is eccentric. There's a father in *The Needle's Eye*, Rose has quite an interesting relationship with him, that I recall. I suppose one of the answers would be that, on the whole, people have more direct personal relationships with their mother: the father in British society, tended to be a rather disappearing figure as in *The Radiant Way*, I mean the father isn't there most of the time and that's the sort of image of our society.

CP: The relationships between mother and daughter is different, in fact it is different from what people expect to find in novels, in a way, it's terrible...

MD: If people expect to find conventional relationships, they are not going to find them but I know an awful lot of people have got mothers who are quite dreadful. Quite a few people in America were shocked by that mother and they wrote reviews saying things like "Women should be nice to another" and in these days of feminism when mothers and daughters are very close, it's just ignoring the fact, it's like saying "We ought to be", not what is, and what is, is the fact that mother and daughter hate one another with good reason. I wanted to show a very extreme case of that, I wanted Liz to be an almost self-made person, I wanted her to sort of feel that she sprung out of nowhere and then, after that, afterwards, look back and see what is really behind all that, that interests me.

CP: What's really happening to Liz's father?

MD: There's more about it in volume two. I mean, in volume one, all you're told is that he had to commit suicide and that he had been caught and tried exposing himself to children which is a very minor sexual offence, I mean he had not done anything worse than expose himself and one is given to believe that's the reason why Liz's mother cuts herself off from society because of the shame of her father having been in court and been in trouble.

CP: Have you ever thought of writing about a brother and sister relationship?

MD: I've never used it as a central relationship, I think in *The Realms of Gold*, Frances Wingate has quite a friendly relationship with her brother, she likes her brother a lot and they get on fine, and then, in *The Middle Ground*, Kate and her brother don't like each other. No, I haven't really thought of using it as a central relationship.

CP: Do you find it more difficult to write a first-person narrative than a third-person narrative?

MD: In a way, I used to find it much easier, I think it's more difficult to write in the third person. I write in the third person now because I think that the first person tends to be a little lazy, it's too easy, you can write too easily. I think I'm used to a discipline, trying to objectify more; also, I now like to use a lot of voices in one book, if you use the first person, you can't do that, you're stuck with just one point of view which I find limiting. I used to like it, I do like it, I like books in the first person but I don't particularly want to write one.

CP: There seems to be more characters in your books, will there be even more?

MD: Well, I don't know, I'm quite interested in a sort of diversity of people.

CP: Don't you think that in *The Radiant Way*, the three women could have been one single character?

MD: I suppose they could, except that I wanted them to have different political points of view, I mean it was quite important to me, for them to have discussions in which they represent different points of view.

CP: So that you can change your opinion? It's true that people are very versatile...

MD: That is indeed absolutely true and of course, that would have been a way of doing it but I quite like the device of having three different careers, three different attitudes.
I suppose it began in a rather schematic way my saying that Liz would represent the sort of psycho-analytic Freudian point of view and Alix

would represent the economic point of view and then Esther would represent the aesthetic point of view. I thought I was quite pleased with that because it meant that you could use them as the plot required and that you could have Alix involved in the political scene and Liz and Esther not really caring about it at all, which is probably about the proportion of people who do care: one third care, two thirds don't.

CP: It seems to be more and more difficult to picture your characters, the physical details are erased and there are deeper psychological details. Is this the line you're going to follow?

MD: Yes.

CP: The portraits of your characters in the first person seem to be more true to life, don't you think?

MD: It's a terribly difficult question! I can't answer that. It certainly matters that women should be true to life, that my characters should be plausible and true to life.

I think the reason why I gave up writing first-person narratives is because I found it limiting, I found that it was self-indulgent in a way; it was fun to write but it meant that you were not going to try to work out people's point of view in life and I suppose I still feel that. But, although writing in the first person is fascinating and fun, it is not ultimately as satisfying as writing in the third person, but I don't know, it certainly gives you a tremendous directness, writing in the first person so the readers actually feel communicating with that first person narrator and they are being spoken to directly, which is a tremendous intimacy. I think I tend to do that now with the narrator, I tend to make the narrator try and speak to the reader.

CP: Do you know that you've got "set words" in your writing and your favourite ones are: "moreover" or "spaghetti Bolognese"?

MD: It's a very profound part of English culture. (*laughs*)

I hadn't realized that but it's true that people do. The other thing they eat a lot, in my novels, is mushroom salad which is odd because I hardly ever make a mushroom salad but my characters eat a lot of it. How funny! I don't notice these things, only occasionally.

The things like "I'm sorry to say", I think I do that very deliberately, that's extremely conscious. I think I know what I'm doing: I'm trying to negotiate with the reader a certain kind of response when I'm saying: "I know what I am doing, I know what my opinion of this is. I know what your opinion of this is" and when, I use: "I'm sorry to say" or "I must admit" or "I must confess now", that sort of slightly self-deprecating things, they are very conscious.

CP: I think it's difficult to write directly to the reader because you commit yourself when you involve the reader.

MD: It is difficult because I think of something you can only do when you've got a lot of experience as a writer, because when you start writing, you don't know there's a reader, you have no idea where the reader is. When I wrote my first novel, when I was in my twenties, I did not know who the reader was and I was very isolated. And now, when I write, I know who the readers are or I know who some of them are. Of course, there is a great variety of people but some of them I know, are waiting to pounce on this particular passage, so I say: "Ah, yes, well you should know now" and then I say: "You should know at this point that ...". It is like speaking to someone like yourself. Now, "moreover" will be put for you.

CP: Do you find more response from the reader now since you started using this inter-relationship or this sort of dialogue?

MD: I don't think I get more, I get accumulatively more, I think, it's simply because the books get round the world more and more. People write to me but I'd be interested to see, I mean, I do occasionally ask the readers a direct question to see if they write back. There's a direct question in *A Natural Curiosity* where there's a passage about Liz's sister Shirley and then, it invites the readers to say if they don't like this bit and what do they think should have been happening which is rather like the end of *The Realms of Gold* where I said: "Invent a better ending if you can"... You didn't approve of that?

CP: I was expecting the end from you, not from me because I am a very classic reader really, I'm not used to that kind of things.

MD: But I did give you an ending, I gave you a conventional happy ending and then I said: "If you don't like it, well, say so, but that's the only one I chose".

CP: The book I felt really ill at ease with was *The Waterfall* with the use of the first and third persons.

MD: I find that very uncomfortable but a lot of people like that best because it's complicated, they like it for that very reason. I agree with you that it makes one feel very uneasy about what the intentions are.

CP: Also, the whole set up was difficult to read with the birth of the child, even for a woman...

MD: It's very physical.

CP: I find the first reading of a book always very disappointing. The second reading is better, I think your books have got to be read twice and slowly, one must stop to make sure...

MD: I think that possibly, one of the things I do, is to require very quick changes of response within a few pages; there's very big shifts but they don't look big because they look smoothed over. I find that fascinating

to do, to sort of have something very unpleasant happening and then something light happening and then something absolutely neutral happening, all in the same space of time. I enjoy doing that very much and I quite enjoyed writing the scene with the siege at the end [of *The Radiant Way*] when the police were outside Esther's flat, and one or two people said: "This is completely implausible: they would have been frightened out of their wits" and other people said it's their favourite scene because it was exactly how people respond in a crisis: they just have another drink and have a laugh and hope for the best. And that's exactly how life really is.

It was very interesting to see how much that scene divided people.

CP: Have you ever thought of writing thrillers?

MD: No, I haven't but I mean, I verge more and more towards an interest in that kind of extreme situation. I wrote elements of thriller in *A Natural Curiosity* and in the one I am doing now: there's a big disappearance scene in the one I'm doing now, it's quite interesting plotting why he disappeared and when and how to get him back again in the plot. It's interesting.

CP: Don't you think you are much inspired by what's happening in society? The murders, the insecurity...?

MD: Yes I am, absolutely!

CP: It's probably also because of the role of the press in this country...

MD: The press is so dreadful! It is so bad and it's very much what *The Radiant Way* is about really: it's about this climate of urban hysteria which I find fascinating, and in plot terms, it does not mean that anything you invent is not as real as what you will see in the next day's newspaper and I find that fascinating, I mean that I invent things and I think I've gone too far and the next day, you'll see the same sort of things. In fact, I've got a little bit in *A Natural Curiosity* where I list ten atrocities that have happened, really appalling and bizarre murders and incidents, and then, I invent one and I say to the reader: "Guess which is the invented incident". It's impossible to guess, nobody can guess, but the one I invented is just like all the other ones, it's impossible!

London, October 1992

CP: What are you going to publish soon?

MD: Nothing at all. I am working on an Angus Wilson biography.³ I have been working on that ever since I finished *The Gates of Ivory* and I haven't written anything. I am just doing research; it's an enormous

³ *Angus Wilson : A Biography* (1995).

amount of work I've done: I have three rooms up here full of papers, so that's all I'm working on at the moment and I'm not going to publish any fiction.

CP: Have you decided to move towards another kind of writing? Writing biography is totally different...

MD: It's totally different but the decision was entirely to do with the fact that Angus Wilson was very ill when I was asked to do it. I was asked, I was invited to do it and it seems something that I wanted to do and it was the right time to do it, simply in terms of time. So I said that I would do it. But I will never do such a thing again, I mean it's just a particular drop of work that happened to come my way.

CP: So you don't fancy experimenting with other genres?

MD: No, I will go back to fiction I think, I just don't know, I imagine I will go back to fiction. This is a peculiar invitation to do a particular piece of work which I accepted.

CP: Is *The Gates of Ivory* the last part of what I call the trilogy?⁴

MD: I think so, I felt when I finished that I wanted to do some non-fiction because I needed a change of pace and rhythm and the invitation to do the Angus Wilson book came up while I was in the middle of *The Gates of Ivory* so I accepted it but I couldn't start working on it until I had finished *The Gates of Ivory* and that's how it went.

CP: What kinds of book do you like reading at the moment?

MD: At the moment everything I'm reading is connected with Angus Wilson. I'm reading all the material surrounding his work. He, himself, wrote about Dickens, Dostoevsky, Rudyard Kipling, Henry James, so I'm reading all the material which Angus himself wrote about; so nearly all my reading has been dictated by him. But I'm also reading books by friends of his like Stephen Spender, that whole period of people who are either just recently dead or in their eighties. So I'm really reading a lot of material.

CP: What was your main purpose in writing *The Gates of Ivory*—if you had a purpose?

MD: Yes, I had several purposes. I never have only one purpose, I have several at once. I wanted to write a book that contrasted with what was happening in Britain. In the West we complain all the time about how dreadful are the times we're having and how poor we are, how wretched Europe is. I wanted to write a book which indicated that things were even worse in other parts of the world. But I also wanted to write a book which was partly about communication and about the

⁴ *The Radiant Way, A Natural Curiosity, The Gates of Ivory*

speed with which we would travel around and the very quick awareness we have now of tragedies in other parts of the world. And I wanted to move out of England, yes. I wanted to have a contrast with England, I wanted to do a sort of Europe-versus-the-rest-of-the-world book, the third world, the deprived world.

CP: So it's no longer a "state of the nation" novel?

MD: Exactly, except that it is partly about how Britain is affected by, or responds to, or fails to respond to...

CP: In the article you wrote in *Caliban*⁵, you mentioned being a post-modernist. What is your own definition of post-modernism?

MD: Well, it's a term that simply means anything that comes after modernism. It's a very large term but to me, it means some of the things that I do in *The Gates of Ivory* such as using an intrusive narrator, using things like bibliography and lists to break up the illusion of writing a conventional narrative, a lot of references to people like Conrad, it's a referential material. And also post-modernist is the inclusion of some real characters and some fictional, I mean in a sort of sense that it's happening in a real setting but there's a slight blur between fact and fiction really. I think that the post-modernist device is: "Is this fiction? Why is it fiction? Why is it not something else?"

CP: Your last novel is both rooted in reality and at times very far from it so it's very difficult to tell the difference. Have you ever been to Kampuchea?

MD: I have been to the border. I never got into the country. I have been to the border and the border camps. That young man on the photo [*showing a photograph*] is one of the characters in the book, he is a real young man and there is one letter from him quoted verbatim so there is a lot of material that is from that part of the world. I went to Vietnam, I went to Thailand.

CP: How about Mrs Savret Akrun...?

MD: She is based on somebody I met in a camp but it was one meeting.

CP: Did you go to that part of the world by chance?

MD: No, I went on purpose. I think I was going to Australia for my publishers and I spent a fortnight on the way. And then I went back the following year; I decided I needed to try again. So I made two visits to that part of the world for research. But I had been interested in the story of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge for a long time.

⁵ « Some Thoughts about the Novel » *Caliban XXVII*, Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1990, 12

CP: Why did you use another narrator? I mean Hattie.

MD: Partly because I was getting a bit bored with the others. I needed somebody to say: "They've got a little bit smug and pleased with themselves and middle-aged". They were sort of living a very settled life, a more settled life and I wanted somebody injected who didn't like them very much and would think from outside: "They're terrible old people". So that's why she came along.

CP: It's quite shocking in a way when you've been used to a character like Liz—she is quite a nice person—and all of a sudden, Hattie says: "Oh, I didn't like Liz very much".

MD: I know, I quite like that effect, it is quite shocking but it's also very realistic. But it does give one a shock when you hear somebody speak ill of somebody that you've always liked. So I wanted to give that to the reader, the feeling that they've become quite friends with these people in the earlier two books and then, suddenly, they have to think: "Oh, perhaps they are not so nice after all."

CP: *The Gates of Ivory* seems to have three voices and yours is very important so when you address the reader, do you actually do it while you're writing or after the first draft? Is it after reading your work that you inject your little notes?

MD: No, I do it as I write it, I do it absolutely as I write it. But the narrative voice tends to intrude when I get quite worried about the material and I think: "Why on earth am I doing this?", and that is when I intrude in, speak to the reader or say: "Why are we doing this?" So it's part of the process of writing.

CP: Even when you start with: "This is a novel-if novel it be..."?

MD: That's the first bit I wrote, I think and I rewrote it because I realised that what I had got was a slightly Homeric feeling, a sort of going into the underworld and that passage is taken from Homer in a way, this crossing of the river into the underworld. So I rewrote it to make it more conscious, close to home I suppose, but I'd always wanted to start off with a sort of intro like that from the narrator.

CP: Do you think some characters take over? Do you get carried away because of the way they are, because they are strong characters?

MD: A bit, yes. That does tend to happen and in a way that's why Hattie came in, in order to put the others back in their place again. Characters do take on a sort of independent life of their own. In *A Natural Curiosity*, Liz's sister, Shirley, took on quite a lot of life of her own and in *The Gates of Ivory*, I couldn't decide what would have happened to her so I set her off to Canada, far out of the way because I just couldn't decide what she would have done. So, she stepped out of the book altogether.

CP: What is the role of a writer nowadays compared with what it was a few years ago? According to the way you write and the topics of your books, have you decided that you had a specific role?

Three years ago you said to me that historians were lying about facts and that you wanted to put them in your books so that people knew what was reality, what had happened. Do you still think it's the same thing nowadays?

MD: I do. I think that writers are there not necessarily to give the answers but to ask questions about the way we perceive the world and about what we're told. I think writers are very useful about giving a sense of reality that isn't the reality of the textbook or the newspaper or the historian; it's just daily reality and the reader can actually say: "Yes, that is what I saw, that is how it is every day", whereas if you read the newspaper, you can't sometimes tell if you're living in a tremendously wealthy, successful period of history, or whether everything is gloom and doom and disaster. And the truth is that both coexist, and very much in *The Gates of Ivory* I wanted to give that sense of how in one day, you can go through in your daily life: good news, bad news, personal happiness, world tragedy, followed by learning you've got a terrible illness, so all this is part of the texture of life, but it's not the texture of history which reduces everything to simplicity. And I think the writer is there to give that living sense, what it's like to be a human being.

CP: Would you make a distinction between women writers and men writers?

MD: I think women are particularly good at catching the day-to-day. I think some men are very good at it as well but I think that women are perhaps less tempted towards ideology. I don't like very heavily ideological work which thinks there's only one way of looking at the world, I find that depressing. Of course, that's not true of some doctrinaire feminists. Some doctrinaire feminists have an even more strictly political view of reality than some men. But I think that traditionally, women have been more concerned with the living details.

CP: Somebody said that you were piling up facts which I thought was a bit rough because that's not the way I see things: I do think you analyse facts.

MD: I do both but I do pile up quite a lot.

CP: Yes, of course, there are also some piles of facts. We are really shocked by the way you've been piling up all these tragedies, for instance in *A Natural Curiosity*, it's difficult to find the fact which was untrue.

MD: The only one was about the men who threw the man on the back of a lorry. That wasn't true, but I saw once some men larking around, they very nearly did it, I mean they were at work, playing with one of them and then backed off. That so easily could have been a terrible tragedy. So I invented that but all the others were out of the newspapers, all of

them, but some of them were local newspapers. I mean, they were all factual.

CP: In some interviews, you've mentioned people who have influenced you. Could you give more details?

MD: Let's start with the easy one: it's quite obvious that I have been inspired by Conrad and also by Rimbaud.⁶ There's a whole passage straight from Rimbaud... but there's also one or two passages where Stephen is writing in an imitation of Rimbaud's style... Of course Rimbaud and Conrad are quite similar in a way, that was definitely an influence. On page 305 there's a passage about "*The Leper King*", there's quite a bit of Rimbaud in there. It's a sort of updated Rimbaud I suppose. That bit on page 397, that's from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. But what happened was that when I started writing this book I read a lot of the kind of writers that I don't normally read very much, like Conrad. I think I read some Malraux and some Gide, the sort of adventure novelists, and this was partly accidental, simply that Cambodia happened to be a French colony rather than an English colony so I found myself reading these French writers. But I've always been slightly fascinated by Malraux and I read *La Condition Humaine* for the first time, which I'd never read, I think: I can't remember whether I read it or not, it's the kind of book you feel that you've read all your life. But I certainly did read it and found some useful stuff in there. So there were some rather unusual influences in this book compared with earlier books and that was partly the nature of the research, the nature of the subject I'd chosen.

But you're asking for literary influences, not sources. In a way, I think it's quite an original book so I don't think I can point to influences. This very quick cross-cutting, now other people probably do do that nowadays. I don't read very much contemporary fiction so I can't point to people: I just know they're doing it, I just know that that's how people write these days, but I can't point to any particular writer.

CP: Generally speaking, from the beginning, who has influenced you?

MD: To begin with, I was influenced by people like George Eliot and Jane Austen and Henry James. But that is no longer so true, I'm much more likely to be influenced now by something further removed from my own heritage or perhaps their influence has gone so deep that I don't think about it any more. Virginia Woolf has been a great influence, in particular the way she writes about groups of people in a public situation, and in *The Radiant Way*, I began with a New Year's Eve party and *The Gates of Ivory* ends with a memorial service. I mean, that was all intentional: you begin with a party, you end with a party. And that has something of Virginia Woolf about it, I think, the idea of life being a celebration although it's a funeral. So there's quite a lot of Virginia Woolf threaded through. Virginia Woolf also writing about London which I think she does wonderfully, it's somebody I'm often conscious of when I'm writing, bits for instance where Esther is walking around

⁶ Dans *The Gates of Ivory*, London: Viking, 1991.

looking at the shop windows: that's the kind of thing Mrs Dalloway might have done. Esther is very unlike Mrs Dalloway but she is living in the same little bit of London and I'm conscious of that as a sort of heritage, really. And sometimes what I'm doing is, when I refer to writers like Jane Austen or Virginia Woolf, is saying: "We're living in the same world", and sometimes I'm saying: "But look how grotesque it is. Imagine Hattie using this dreadful language being in the same room as any of these three women, would they have been shocked? How shocked would they have been?" So it's a sort of double vision of the past and the present.

Writers whose technique I feel is very similar to mine ... Whenever I read David Lodge I feel I know immediately what he is going to do, I feel an immediate sense of: "Ah, I know what he's gonna do", and I like it very much. I find him very amusing and very deceptive. But I think he's a more conscious writer than I am, he's more deliberate, there's more unconscious going on, on my side, process, but nevertheless, I think some parts are similar.

CP: About Angus Wilson: is he somebody you really like?

MD: Very very much. He really was a big influence on me, I think.

CP: More than Arnold Bennett?

MD: I liked Arnold Bennett very much and Angus Wilson didn't like Bennett at all, so it was interesting. I mean, he didn't like the Bennett tradition at all. Because Angus Wilson was still alive, and that would leave him, whereas Bennett was long dead, he was part of a historic tradition. So I feel differently about Wilson.

Toulouse, June 2011
Miscellaneous questions

CP: In April 2009, *The Guardian* announced that Margaret Drabble "quits fiction over repetition fears". Don't you think that intertextuality, i.e. creating links from one text to the other, or rather in your particular case, intratextuality is part of the narrative process?

MD: Yes, of course, and my texts do respond to one another and pursue arguments and themes from one book to another. I think what I meant was that I didn't want to start writing too easily, in too recognisable a mode. It's quite easy for me to turn out stories that are almost like a parody of my earlier work, not taking on any new thoughts or moving onwards, and I didn't want to do that. Publishers like repetition, it's more marketable and easier to brand, but it's not what I want to do. I want to try something difficult, not something familiar.

CP: After so many novels, how did the idea of *The Pattern in the Carpet*—rather difficult to classify from a librarian’s point of view—come up to you?

MD: I was really trying to get away from myself and from fiction when I wrote *The Pattern*. I originally wanted to write a book that would be, quite simply, a history of the jigsaw puzzle, but it kept veering (with a little help from a very helpful new publisher) towards memoir, and I ended up with a strange combination of fact and memoir—but no fiction at all.

CP: Do you ever re-read your own novels and think “I should have done this”, “I should have described that”, in other words how critical are you towards your writing?

MD: I don’t often re-read my novels because there does seem to be so much I would have done differently—but it’s pointless thinking that, because at the age of writing you can write only what you then know. Hindsight isn’t helpful. But, as you suggested in your first question, one can return to the same theme and try to do it better.

CP: In 2000, in *The Oklahoma Review*, you admitted to liking “exploring the area of authorial intention”. Do you, as a reader and/or a writer still find interest in that area?

MD: Yes. I don’t think of books as being free-standing, divorced from their authors and their sources, and I am always looking to see what in “real life” inspired which episode, which character. If you know a lot of writers, as inevitably I do by now, you can’t help asking yourself what the author meant to do, whether he or she achieved it, and what was revealed unwittingly. Also, a writer can achieve a result or an effect that is very different from the one they intended, and it is interesting to unravel how this happens.

CP: I believe you don’t let yourself be influenced by literary critics or readers’ suggestions, however, don’t you think that unconsciously a writer takes into account what is said or suggested about their writing?

MD: It is hard not to be influenced, which is why I don’t read reviews or watch TV programmes about *The Novel* (though I sometimes appear on them.) There are some labels applied to my work which I don’t like, and I sometimes protest when they are lazily repeated in the press. But I have had interesting and useful exchanges with serious critics and fellow writers, and very much enjoy the letters I get from readers, which cover an extraordinary range of subjects and have been of immense value to me. I am wary of critical jargon, which has a sort of life of its own, but the responses and suggestions of real readers, including literary critics, have meant a great deal to me.

CP: Is gender-sensitive language a natural way to express yourself?

MD: Not quite sure what is meant here. I do write more easily about women than about men, and have never felt the need to impersonate a male (or even an androgynous) style of writing.

CP: Is it more productive to stick to a daily routine as a writer?

MD: Yes, probably. Perhaps not daily, that is obsessive, but to have a pattern is good, a time of day, a sense of a good time to work.

CP: What is THE perfect novel?

MD: *Pride and Prejudice*. There are many greater and more profound novels, but none more perfect. And Austen wrote it when she was only twenty-one!

CP: As a person or a citizen, what makes you angry?

MD: Inequality. Bankers. Greed. Hanging on to privilege and kicking other people off the ladder. These are all part of the same thing.

CP: In 1989, I asked you if your vision of society was more pessimistic. Twenty years or so later, I'm asking you the same question.

MD: Yes, my vision is more pessimistic. I wouldn't have believed that global greed would have triumphed as it has. I wouldn't have believed that civil societies would be threatened by religious extremism and violence. We are less egalitarian than we were. The only comfort is that women have better lives in the west, and the condition of women is no longer ignored worldwide. At least it is on the agenda. When I look at Barack and Michelle Obama I can still feel some hope. It may be misplaced, but I do feel it.

CP: In your latest novels, you seem to focus more on scientific subjects than in your earlier writing. Do you have a specific interest in general science and how do you gather accurate material for your writing?

MD: I use scientific concepts both as inspiration and framework. Science writers have made greater efforts to communicate with the general public, and writers of fiction—and not just of science fiction—have become more aware of the metaphorical and actual richness of our expanding knowledge of the cosmos and of the mysteries of DNA. In my novel about genetic inheritance, *The Peppered Moth*, I made use of the story of the peppered moth which has been claimed by entomologists as the only visible proof of evolution in action, of the hypothesis of the survival of the fittest observed in a recorded span of time. This story has fascinated me for many years, partly because it is closely connected to the history of industrialisation, which, as a daughter of the steel and coal belt of the North of England, I feel is part of my own biography. I doubled this recent scientific theory with yet more recent research into the matrilineal nature of mitochondrial DNA, I read many books on moths and mitochondria, I interviewed

geneticists, I talked with a history teacher whose own DNA can be traced directly back to a nine thousand year old skeleton preserved since the end of the last ice age in the limestone caves of the Cheddar Gorge.

The Peppered Moth was a dark and difficult novel to write, *The Sea Lady* was much more fun. It took shape as I was chairing the judges of the Aventis Science Book Prize for the Royal Society in 2003. I found the books dealing with fish, the oceans and marine life particularly entrancing, for they reminded me of all the happy times we had spent as children on our summer holidays, gazing into rock pools, collecting little creatures in buckets, swimming, playing on the beach.

I greatly enjoyed inventing this fictitious work of science, and in reading all the books and papers that enabled me to invent it and I must confess to an appetite for scientific discoveries and hypotheses that I cannot really understand, and I go on reading and searching, perhaps because that is what human beings are programmed to do.