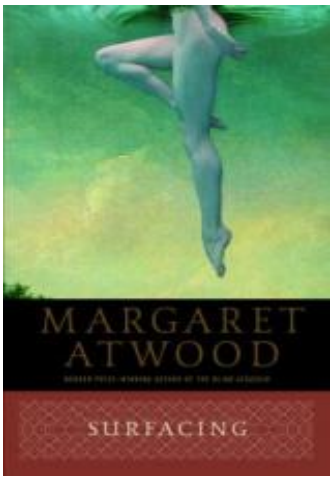
Surfacing

by Margaret Atwood



About the Book

Part detective novel, part psychological thriller, *Surfacing* is the story of a talented woman artist who goes in search of her missing father on a remote island in northern Quebec. Setting out with her lover and another young couple, she soon finds herself captivated by the isolated setting, where a marriage begins to fall apart, violence and death lurk just beneath the surface, and sex becomes a catalyst for conflict and dangerous choices.*Surfacing* is a work permeated with an aura of suspense, complex with layered meanings, and written in brilliant, diamond-sharp prose. Here is a rich mine of ideas from an extraordinary writer about contemporary life and nature, families and marriage, and about women fragmented...and becoming whole.

Discussion Guide

1.Throughout the novel, we never learn the name of our narrator. Why might Atwood choose anonymity for her heroine?

2. This novel is replete with dis- and re-appearances: fathers vanish, babies are lost, marriages erode, long-banished memories return, pregancies occur. Discuss the implications of disappearing and reappearing.

3. Our narrator frequently refers to herself as an "accomplice": to the killing of the fish, to the accruing of "random samples" for the film. Over the course of the novel, she not only ceases her collusion but also becomes an active saboteur. What catalyzes this shift?

4. Early in the novel, the narrator attempts to draw clear battle lines: men versus women, the city versus the country, the Americans versus Canadians. In time, however, many of these opposing camps blur together: supposed Americans are revealed to be Canadians, Anna shifts her allegiance and sides with the men. What is the result of these new alliances?

5. The narrator must literally dive into the lake in order to dredge the swamp of her memory and recover her buried past.

Throughout the novel, the lake serves as both a literal and symbolic centerpiece. Discuss its role and importance.

6. What can we see from the novel's discussion of "truth" or "lies?"

7. What clues in the novel suggest that the narrator is struggling to supress memories of an abortion?

8. What role does the discovery of her father's drawings play in her ability, as a daughter and as a fellow artist, to understand his life better?

9. Each of the two couples employ different strategies for wounding and communicating with one another. Do relationship strategies differ more on gender lines or from couple to couple? What are the distinctive strategies employed by each couple/person?

10. Does the heroine remain a reliable narrator throughout? Do her perceptions ever deviate from reality? At what point, if ever, do you discount her version of reality?

11. Does your opinion of Joe alter as the novel progresses?

12. Our heroine describes her habitual process of observing, memorizing, and copying emotions she has seen in others in lieu of having actual feeling herself. Discuss.

13. What is the role of animals in the novel? The role of technology?

14. In describing childhood games of hide and seek in the forest, the narrator recalls her fear "that what would come out when you called would be someone else". When she later escapes into the forest, she does in fact emerge transformed. What happens on her odyssey?

15. Consider this final manifesto: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim . . . I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless." Does a shift in self-perception have the power to reverse one's destiny? What factors determine who is and is not a victim? What gives her the power to break free?

Author Bio

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than 50 books of fiction, poetry and critical essays. Her novels include CAT'S EYE, THE ROBBER BRIDE, ALIAS GRACE, THE BLIND ASSASSIN and the *MaddAddam* trilogy. Her 1985 classic, THE HANDMAID'S TALE, was followed in 2019 by a sequel, THE TESTAMENTS, which was a global #1 bestseller and won the Booker Prize.

Atwood has won numerous awards, including the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Imagination in Service to Society, the Franz Kafka Prize, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, the PEN America Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. In 2019, she was made a member of the Order of the Companions of Honour for services to litera-ture. She lives in Toronto.

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