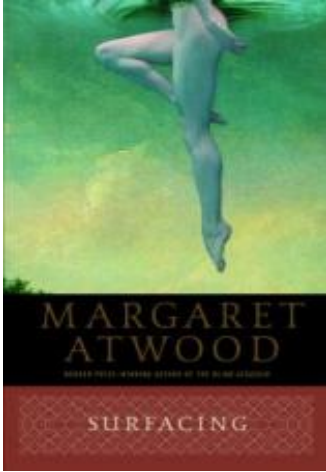


Surfacing

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, pregnancies 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 suppress 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, whose work has been published in 35 countries, is the author of more than 40 books of fiction, poetry and critical essays. In addition to *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*, her novels include *CAT'S EYE*, short-listed for the 1989 Booker Prize; *ALIAS GRACE*, which won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy; *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*, winner of the 2000 Booker Prize; *ORYX AND CRAKE*, short-listed for the 2003 Man Booker Prize; *THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD*; and *MADDADDAM*. She is the recipient of the *Los Angeles Times* Innovator's Award, and lives in Toronto with the writer Graeme Gibson.

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