

MOSTLY ON MOTHER COUNTRY

Eileen Bartos and Carolyn Jacobson

TIR: We thought we'd begin with *Mother Country*. Do you want to talk about Sellafield in general?

MR: Well, Sellafield is a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant and nuclear waste dump on the west coast of England. It's near where Wordsworth lived . . . very near. The nearest landmark for Americans would be the Lake Country. It's an old weapons production plant that the British made a nuclear site at the end of the Second World War when they were in competition with the United States and the Soviet Union toward developing nuclear weapons, atomic weapons. It was built to extract plutonium and uranium 235, which is the bomb-grade uranium isotope from the nuclear fuels that are removed from nuclear reactors after they are, as they say, spent—after they're too fissile to be used any longer as fuel for reactors. It's just plain nuclear waste is what it is. That's what we normally call it. They use a very very old process that was also developed at the end of the Second World War. They break down the nuclear waste with nitric acid and extract the isotopes that they want; and what the British have done is dump the rest of the waste into the Irish Sea through a pipeline that's about two miles long. They've done this at a significant rate since the mid-fifties. And the rate has been increasing constantly, especially in the seventies and eighties. They import spent nuclear fuel from Japan, and Germany, and Swizerland, and Sweden, and Italy, and other countries, and they store what they can't use. They extract plutonium and uranium from what is appropriate to be used in that way, and they continue to dump the rest of the material into the Irish Sea.

This is obviously a disaster. According to the British government there is one-quarter ton of plutonium silt on the floor of the Irish Sea off the coast of Britain in a sort of elliptical lake that is thirty miles long. Friends of the Earth has said there's three-quarters of a ton of plutonium, but when you're dealing with figures as large as that, it really doesn't matter which one is correct, because either one is a very great disaster. What they do with the plutonium when they have extracted it—they're not very forthcoming about it—but they sell it, and a great deal of it goes back to Japan. It goes back either by ship or by airplane, and obviously the potential for

disaster in either case is very great.

Everybody in the world knows about this but us; I mean, the information is very available, and why we don't pick up on these things I can't imagine. There are big protests in Japan about the arrival of plutonium shipments, and so on. It's never reported here—I have no idea why. But it's necessary to understand really basic issues about the situation of the modern world: for example, What is the real state of the environment? or What is the real likelihood of Third World countries or other unstable countries acquiring nuclear weapons? If plutonium is for sale, people can buy it—this goes without saying—and whether they buy it directly or indirectly really doesn't matter in terms of its ultimate use. The stuff is around and that means the likelihood of terrorists or deranged little governments acquiring nuclear weapons is very, very high. It's just an enormous phenomenon from the point of view of understanding the world in our moment of time, and it's something that we absolutely don't know and haven't come to terms with. It makes fools of us.

TIR: How did you get interested in this?

MR: I was living in England, and this information was in the newspapers and on television all the time, because there was—there is—a great deal of cancer around this reprocessing plant—which has to be the world's smallest surprise—and there was a great deal of talk about all this cancer and what its sources were. The government, of course, owns the plant, and manages it and always has, so they are very eager to say, Well, it's just a random phenomenon that there should be all this cancer around our nuclear plant. Then they found big cancer hotspots around all their reactors because they have used the same slovenly methods of dealing with radioactive materials everywhere they've developed nuclear power. Sellafield is just the worst. There's another reprocessing plant on the north coast of Scotland, which is run by the same "company"—basically run by the British government—and it's also very highly contaminated, and there's also a great deal of cancer there. The waste from both of these plants is carried around in the sea, and it shows up in places like Iceland, the coast of Germany, anywhere that you would normally expect, including, of course, places like Denmark, where the fish in the seas are highly radioactive, heavily contaminated.

TIR: Are these countries protesting?

MR: Oh, they protest. You see, Denmark doesn't have nuclear power.

Ireland doesn't have nuclear power. But the others . . . Sweden, for example, has nuclear power *and* sends nuclear waste to Britain to be re-processed, so their government is not really in an excellent position to protest because it's obviously their policy as much as it's a policy of the British. The same with Germany. The protests are not at the government level because all the governments avail themselves of these services. There are popular protests of the kind that we're all used to, that tend to just bubble away. For example, there were people in Cumbria, which is the region where Sellafield is, who took mud from the beach and threw it in the door of the prime minister's house at 10 Downing Street, and men in radiation suits came to clean it away. So obviously they know perfectly well what is being dealt with, what is being done; but if they were to make a real issue of it at this point, I think it would probably cause a major political crisis at the very least. It seems to me that's the sort of thing that would probably happen if people really sat down and thought about what has been done to them.

TIR: So your main purpose in writing the book was to make Americans aware?

MR: Yes, it was mostly for Americans. I mean, it was for Americans in the sense that they needed the information, and it was for British people in the sense that they needed somebody to speak up. It makes me mad that they come to the United States never mentioning that this is happening. They always say, I understand you have terrible environmental problems here. Tell me what that can be like. And Americans are very eager to assume that whatever's going on here is the worst and most luridly exciting in the world. So I think British people are responsible because they don't talk about it outside Britain. They really don't. If you hear a British environmentalist speak, it's always about the rain forests in South America. Or it's about nuclear testing in the United States and Soviet Union, something like that. They never talk about their own incredibly disturbing contribution to all these problems, out of some conception of loyalty, I suppose. But on the other hand, the problems that are being created for them are very horrible, and something has to be done. I mean, the rates of lung cancer and those sorts of things are simply enormously high. Again, if you look at international statistics, like what the British government reports to the United Nations, their cancer rates are almost always within one or two points of ours. It's like they decide respectability

is hovering somewhere around us. But if you look at what's published in their own newspapers—the kind of surveys that *The London Times* reports, for example—these figures are very high indeed. By their estimates they have the highest rate of breast cancer in the world, the highest rate of lung cancer in the world, and so on. All of these things are completely consistent with radiation contamination of the kind that they live with.

TIR: How was the book received in Britain?

MR: Well, it got one good review and lots of horrible nasty ghastly awful reviews. They just couldn't get bad enough. But that certainly didn't surprise me. Obviously I knew I was not going to particularly endear myself. But it just had to be said. Actually I first wrote an essay about it that was published in *Harper's*.^{*} When I was in England, I thought some strange censorship was going on, so I snipped out little newspaper clippings and such, and I squirreled away these little bits of information that I was putting together, and when we left, I smuggled them out of the country. It was pretty funny. I don't know what I was thinking about. I would buy a *London Times* and there would be an article about all this plutonium and cancer and how there were going to be flights of plutonium from Scotland into the center of Europe. What for? There's never any explanation, you know—they just talk about the fact that these things are being done or will be done. Who's getting all this plutonium? And what do they want it for? Those seem to me to be pretty big questions. But anyway, I would read that in *The London Times* and then I would buy an *International Herald Tribune* and the American correspondants in Britain would always be writing about an arts festival, or the decline of a famous pub. That's how it is. And I thought, something weird is going on, there's something subversive or strange here, so I got my little package of stuff together and I came back and went right to my study and didn't do anything else—I didn't even unpack my bags—until I had written this article. Then I sent it to my agent, still with my trenchcoat on and my hat pulled low. I wrote to her and said, Ellen, you don't have to deal with this if you don't want to. Place it if you want, but if you don't want to deal with it, I'll do it myself. And she wrote back and said, What? So she sent it to *Harper's* and they took it—it was accepted within, well, allowing for mailing time, it was accepted immediately. They ran it

^{*} "Bad News from Britain." *Harper's Magazine*. February, 1985, pp. 65–72.

as quickly as they could and put a nuclear power plant on their cover and have always been very supportive of all this, very interested. Anyway, I wrote that, and then it was reprinted in *Granta*, and it was reprinted in Ireland, and it was reprinted in Canada, in a textbook on polemical writing or something like that. It was also reprinted in a library reference book about the problems of nuclear waste disposal. I mean, that was pretty good for one little article—that was a lot of caroming around. It even got an honorable mention in *The Best American Essays* for 1985.

But nothing happened. I've never encountered any obstacles; I have success stories to tell, actually, yet nothing happens, it doesn't matter. The success is not measurably different from failure, in terms of my seeing any practical result at any point. But then given the choice, I'd take the success. At least I thought I had done what I could do. Then a publisher called me from New York and asked if I would consider writing a book that was an elaboration of that article. And I thought, Oh, Fate, you know, you're not done with this yet. So I referred this publisher to my agent to talk about terms because I wanted to have a researcher and an advance. They agreed to all that, but when Farrar Straus, my publisher for *Housekeeping*, was informed of this—out of courtesy and so on—they got in touch with me and said, Why in the world are you writing it for another publisher? Why don't you write it for us, and we'll give you the advance, and we'll give you the researcher. I love Farrar Straus, but it had just seemed to me like something that wouldn't necessarily be on their list. So that's what I did; I wrote it for them, and they were very supportive. Again, I've never encountered any obstacle; I've just also never encountered any sense of accomplishment as far as actually sensitizing people to the issue. I don't know what they think, I've never figured that out. I think they think that I did something I probably deserve credit for, you know, but that wasn't really the point.

TIR: I think it's easy to be paralyzed by this sort of information. Maybe that's why people seem not to react. Do you have ideas about what people can do?

MR: Well, the first thing people have to do, on a very practical level, is really to come to terms with the fact that this stuff is real and has real consequences. Sometimes people get into a role-playing game, where they take sides and adopt issues, and maybe they have forgotten the real content of what they're talking about. I mean, I go to the New Pioneer Co-op and

I see a bin full of English cheese and it just appalls me, because there is absolutely no way in the world that stuff can be appropriate food, especially for people who are pregnant, or who are immune-compromised because of cancer treatment or AIDS or something like that, or who are elderly, or who are children, because all of them have patchy immune systems. If you are exposed to radiation, it lowers your immune response, so that even if there aren't any overt or unmistakable signs of radiation exposure, like cancer, there is a depression of immune response. You can see that over quite a long period of time there's been a resurgence of all kinds of illnesses that really ought not to be resurgent. There's also been a rise in what they consider new illnesses that are basically immune-failure illnesses, like chronic fatigue syndrome. There are all kinds of diseases that people used to have immunity to but don't anymore—that they used to have an effective resistance to and don't anymore—and that's exactly what you would expect to see in a radiation-affected population. Of course, it's much more characteristic of other countries than it is here. Then there are all the more notorious effects of radiation. What it does is enhance every health problem. That's one thing.

Then if people simply knew what the issues were, and thought about them, immediate economic consequences would set in. For example, if people knew that the part of the world where they often go for their spring break is a radioactive environment—radioactive at the same level as testing sites—maybe they wouldn't go there. On the one hand they wouldn't expose themselves to this, and on the other hand there would be an economic disincentive to creating a situation where a place is too dangerous for people to visit.

TIR: Which seems to be the language we respond to.

MR: Yes, exactly. You hate to talk about economic determinism, but when it seems to have possibly benign effects, it seems as if you ought to put it into play. . . . You know, Americans have strange little gift-shop sort of affections for certain parts of the world. If you say, Well, yes, England is green and pleasant, but it's also radioactive—that hurts their feelings. It's very strange; it's sort of like, Well, we've survived the disillusionment with Marie Osmond, but we're not going to give up on Britain. There are countries that you can think well of, and there are countries you can think badly of. You can think badly of Mexico if you like, you know, but you're supposed to think very well of Western Europe, and particularly

England. And people do take their little mission very seriously. I don't have a great respect for this, I really don't. I mean we are, to a terrifying degree, the custodians of the world. We are. We're seven percent of the world population, but because we're richer, and because we're more literate, and because we're more influential in many, many ways, we have an overwhelming responsibility for what actually happens to this planet. And we don't have enough courage to take the responsibility. I think one of the reasons that we're so eager to defer to other countries is that we don't want the responsibility of saying that maybe we have to make our own decisions, maybe we have to make our own judgments.

TIR: In your introduction to *Mother Country* you say you wrote it "in a state of mind and spirit that [you] could not have imagined before Sellafield presented itself to [you]." How does that affect your opinion of your past work, or what you're writing now?

MR: Oh, it certainly does affect what I'm writing now; there's no question about it. I always think about Henry Adams with his horrible education metaphor, which is horrible and appropriate. It's always a problem of enlarging the synthesis. You want to have a basic conception of the world that's spacious enough or resilient enough to absorb what you have to absorb in order to take on what you encounter. And you want to be human enough to have a model of reality in your mind, not a fantasy or an error or a prejudice. I have had to completely revise my sense of history and human psychology in order to absorb the fact that this is true: that people have actually done something not only this destructive, but destructive within such a short limit of time. It makes war look like a respectable enterprise, it really does. War has a certain tendency to be self-limiting, you know, because after a while all the young men are dead. But if you're poisoning the water and poisoning the air and poisoning the earth, then that's the end of everything.

TIR: At the end of *Housekeeping* you said that "Fact explains nothing. On the contrary it is fact that requires explanation," which is an interesting foreshadowing of *Mother Country* where you often cite statistics that are acknowledged, yet explained in a way that excuses them, or makes them seem very harmless while in actuality they're deadly. Were you aware of this?

MR: Hadn't a clue, hadn't a clue. Every once in a while when I'm doing a reading from *Housekeeping*, which I still do now and then, I come across

something like that and it just makes me laugh, because I know it's my voice, but at the same time, it's like overhearing myself saying things that are portentous and naive at the same time. Sometimes when I talk to people about *Housekeeping* at this point I've begun to wonder if it's still *Housekeeping* that I'm talking about. Or if I haven't created some sort of idea of what that book was about that has actually evolved a considerable distance from the original book.

TIR: Was it hard making a transition from writing fiction to writing nonfiction?

MR: Well, it was hard in the sense that I really became very aware of how arbitrary the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is. I began to think that the difference between fiction and nonfiction is the same as between fiction and lying. I developed a huge contempt for most nonfiction writing in the course of reading it, because if you actually repeat the research, which any good cynic will do, you find out that the self-delusional or imaginary content of nonfiction writing is typically very very high. I mean, I think the difference between fiction and nonfiction is that the fiction writer knows what she is saying isn't true, and the nonfiction writer *doesn't* know what she's saying isn't true. I think that generally speaking, *that* is the difference. So the problem is to break out of the conventions of nonfiction writing which are hugely burdensome.

TIR: Which is why you chose an essay form and the first-person narrator?

MR: Well, again, that's deferring to the difficulty of writing nonfiction—writing what people could take to be fact. It seems to me that if you declare yourself as the writer, then you're reminding your reader, I'm doing the best I can. Remember my limitations.

TIR: There's definitely a sense of urgency in *Mother Country*. Did you feel a similar sense when you were writing *Housekeeping*?

MR: *Housekeeping* was an utterly different thing to do. When I wrote *Housekeeping*, I thought I was writing an unpublishable book. That's one of the ironies. When I wrote *Mother Country*, or at least when I wrote the essay that led to *Mother Country*, I thought I was writing unpublishable material also. I don't know, maybe that's the assumption I need to work under. But when I was writing *Housekeeping*, I was really writing for the pleasure of it. I had written a lot of things that I thought of basically as metaphors when I was still working on my dissertation. And when I was

done with the dissertation I started looking at them and realized that they cohered very strongly. I had always meant to write a novel anyway, so I wasn't horrified. Then I started writing from that point, and I always felt as if I were writing something that my own family would like. I had the feeling that it would be something that would mean a great deal to my father and my mother and my brother and my aunts, and I never really thought of it as being published, let alone being successfully published. The things that kept it going were the pleasures of writing it, although I worked on it a lot and wrote it quite quickly.

TIR: One of the blurbs on the back of the book says that *Housekeeping* sounds as if the author has been "treasuring it up all her life waiting for it to form itself." That sounds like what you're talking about.

MR: I think in a way that is true. *Housekeeping* is very much about a particular landscape, and the landscape is where my great-grandparents settled and my grandparents grew up and my parents grew up, and it's a very striking place—it's very beautiful. And it was something that we all had in common, intimately in common. Even though the story is very fictional, the landscape is as accurate as I could make it, and the people who live there know what places I'm talking about. It has that quality of being thought about for a long time, I suppose, because one of the things that I was trying to deal with was, What does this mean to us? Why does it mean so much to us?

TIR: You were away from it at the time?

MR: I was in France. I was *really* away from it. But that's good. It stimulates your memory to be in a place where nothing looks familiar.

TIR: There are very few male characters in *Housekeeping*—the sheriff at the end might be the only one. Do you think it's kept men from reading this book?

MR: I really don't think so. I think it's had a lot of male readers—a lot of good, responsive male readers. If I look at reviews and so on, men are very, very responsive to it. It's a funny thing; when I started out I didn't intend to have it without male characters, but then I found that they didn't work. I would write them in, and I'd take them right back out again. It's sort of like when you're working on a painting and you put something in, and you think it doesn't belong to this painting. It was just something about the way it felt. After I'd gotten to a certain point, I said, Well, what I'm actually doing here is writing a book with no male charac-

ters. And I thought, Oh, how wonderfully unpublishable. But I was wrong again. I sent it to Ellen Levine who's still my agent, who was the agent of a friend of mine at that time. She agreed to represent it, but she wrote a very gentle letter saying, "This is a wonderful book, but I hope you understand that it will be very hard to place." So she took it to Farrar Straus & Giroux, and the first editor bought it. Then they wrote me a very gentle letter that said, "We're very happy to publish this book, but I hope you understand that it probably won't do very well." Then I got a lot of reviews saying, "Well, I know nobody else is going to notice this book, but I like it."

TIR: How about the ways women responded to the book?

MR: I've had good women critics also. Oddly enough, I think I've encountered more resistance to the figure of Sylvie in women than I have in men. I think women feel criticized by her to some extent, or they think, Oh horrible, how can she be like that?

TIR: Are they threatened by her unconventional sense of housekeeping?

MR: She comes perilously close to lacking a nurturing instinct, you know, and to the great benefit of the world and the species there are lots of women who have a very highly developed nurturing instinct, who tend to be kind of horrified by her. And there are people who think that I'm terribly unfair to Lucille because I am obviously not more sympathetic to her than I am to other characters.

TIR: But Lucille is still sympathetic.

MR: Oh, I don't believe in creating unsympathetic characters, I just don't. It feels horrible to me, it feels like I'm doing something cheap. I figure, if you can't sympathize with a character, get rid of him. When I write fiction—or when I read fiction, too—I always have a very nervous feeling that any character is too thin. And my way of resolving that in *Housekeeping* was to create characters that I considered to be aspects of one character. I used to say it was a cubist portrait. I consider them to be related to each other along a continuum, rather than being opposed or being separate. That's how I intended it, that's what I meant. Sylvie is what Lucille forbids herself, Lucille is what Sylvie can't quite attain. That's how they relate.

TIR: Another of the blurbs said that you "select and sift your perceptions like a poet." Do you ever think of yourself as a poet?

MR: Well, I used to. When I was a child, I wanted to be a poet. I never thought of being anything else. I never thought of publishing anything, but I thought that's what I would do. I've always had this sort of squirreling-things-away approach to reality. But my poetry, I realized when I got old enough, was really bad, really very poor. Every once in a while, I still try to write poetry, and so far as I can tell, the decline has been constant. So I'm pleased when people say that I write as if I were a poet, because I would've written as if I were a poet, God knows, if I had been able to write poetry.

TIR: How *do* you write?

MR: I have a lot of baggy old spiral notebooks, and I write by hand with a black pen—I'm very particular about that. Also, I can't write on white paper. I don't do drafts—I modify things massively, but always word by word on the page as it's being written. Writing takes a lot of time for me, and it's very like going into some kind of fetal state. I have to really withdraw and be undistracted, and it's pretty hard for me to work a lot of the time—it has been for a while, at any rate. It's a strange thing. I can't be systematic about it the way other people are. I can't say, I'm going into my room for four hours. I have to go into my room for four days, that's how it is. The first day I don't write anything I like; the second day I write a sentence I like; and the third day I might write five pages. The fourth day the phone rings.

When I began *Mother Country*, I lost maybe a chapter of it somewhere in Amherst, Massachusetts. I walked all over on the coldest night of the world trying to find what I'd done with it, retracing my steps, going through the library. I don't know what happened to it. It was the only copy, which is another of my eccentricities I've paid for over and over again. Then I rewrote that chapter, and it turned out entirely differently. That's one of the things that's absolutely spooky. I thought, Well, I remember that, I can reconstruct it from my memory. And I wrote a perfectly plausible chapter that just touched the other one at certain points, but somehow or other I could not say again what I had said before. Then after I had written about three-quarters of the manuscript, something bizarre happened to *that* manuscript—which I will not tell you about—and I started over again, since it was essentially ruined. I wrote it again. And again, both of them were perfectly plausible versions, yet they had very little in common with each other. Then I isolated myself for about

three or four months and did the finishing up, and that was *Mother Country*. But I mean, there were all these other things that made me realize that this was just a *tranche*, as the French would say, of the array of things that seemed to me needed to be said.

TIR: Are you conscious of having an audience? Do you have someone in mind when you're writing?

MR: I've always wanted to write, from when I was a very small child, and I think that if you want to write, you somehow assume another person who you want to be your reader, you know? It's very odd, but it's not "the general audience"—it's not anyone you could name. It's sort of like, if you imagine yourself being understood, which of course virtually nobody ever is, then you have to imagine some other entity that would be the one capable of understanding, this creature whose job is never filled. I think that's probably who—that's always who—I've written to all my life, this sense of someone who could understand. There are people who conform more or less to that—I mean, you do have your readers. But from the point of view of motivating myself to write, and pitching my voice, and choosing my words and so on, that's who I write to.

TIR: Did you have any particular influences that affected your desire to write?

MR: I don't know. I read a lot, but everybody I knew read a lot. It's a funny thing. People in the west do read a lot. There's a study that's been done about that. I think it's probably because it was the most portable kind of culture. When people went over the Rocky Mountains they left behind all the string quartets. But I always did write, and I don't know why I wanted to or why I did. My brother is a painter, and he always painted. It was sort of like these little projects we just slotted into ourselves and we've done them all our lives—that's just what we do. And I always wrote.

TIR: You've mentioned studying with John Hawkes. Are there any particular ways in which he influenced you?

MR: Well, he was a very good writing teacher. I think that—I mean it sounds like a cliché, but it wasn't to me at the time, maybe it wasn't to anybody at the time—he was very good at teaching us, teaching me, to find my own style. When I was writing for him, there was a very heavy influence of Hemingway and Hemingway descendants—that sort of tough talk and simple sentence kind of thing—and I was writing my crazy

old two-paragraph sentences as I always do, and I got a lot of criticism for that from other students. And he said, This is how she writes, this is how she ought to write—and defended me rather fiercely. And I did all kinds of things that were considered really archaic at that time, like using elderly words and formal prose constructions and things like that. At that age I don't know what would have happened to me if he hadn't intervened and said, This is her voice, this is what she does.

TIR: What fiction do you read?

MR: I almost never seek anything out. It's a funny thing, but I'm really not too interested in fiction, because I don't find it as stimulating to read as history, say, which is surprising after all the rotten things I've said about nonfiction. But in a way, nonfiction is more important because we believe it. It's not more important because it's true. It's false and we believe it, which makes it a particularly potent thing. I like to read old histories and original-source materials and things like that. There's always so much to be found out, and there's so much correcting to do. I think that's one of the reasons that I am attracted to it. It's out of a feeling of necessity, really, because I feel as though I have been told so many things that are wrong. If I'm not going to be just another channel for old errors, I have to figure things out over again. It's not as if anyone could be naive enough to think that you would get things right, but you can certainly find big errors, and it's enormously chastening. It smartens you up a lot to realize how inadequate your assumptions are. I had that feeling when I was writing *House-keeping* also, partly because I just didn't believe what people told me. It didn't sound true. I mean, what people tell me in good faith often just doesn't sound to me like truth, and of course they're not saying what they say for any interested motive or anything, they're just passing something along. It's our version of the oral tradition. They're telling me in good faith what someone else told them in good faith, and no one ever went to look it up.

I wrote my dissertation on a Shakespeare history play. Those things are just completely overloaded with criticism based on supposedly authoritative scholarship about this and that and the other thing. But if you go back and read the source material, actually read the chronicle histories and read *The Mirror for Magistrates* and all the rest, you find out that these things they say are very wrong. It's quite amazing. If I find a book that interests me in any way—usually because I think it's suspect—then I look at the

sources, which is a useful thing to do. I did that with a lot of criticism, and it just falls apart in your hands if you do that. Anyway, I had that experience behind me, and then I was living in France, and France is one of those places that we have an enormously elaborate set of assumptions about. I knew that I was not living in a country anyone had ever described to me. It was that same feeling that I had been told wrong. So I started reading about French law and French sociology, and all kinds of things, and again sort of making another model of reality so that I could get rid of the one I had been given that was wrong. Even *Housekeeping* is written, I think, from the point of view of very great agnosticism as far as accepting the importance or the reality of all kinds of things that people take to be important and real.

PORTRAIT OF MARILYNNE ROBINSON

Anne E. Voss

Marilynne Robinson, author of *Housekeeping* and *Mother Country*, is one of the finest writers now living and also one of my favorites. I'm not alone, though, in my certain appraisal. *Housekeeping*, published in 1982 when she was thirty-eight, was nominated for a Pulitzer and won the Hemingway Foundation Award for Best First Novel. *Mother Country*, published in 1988, was nominated for the National Book Award in nonfiction. Still more important is the way I've heard readers talk about these books, particularly *Housekeeping*. Often they remember it as fondly as they remember a first love, their recollection expressed in wistful present tense superlatives and memorized quotations. "It's a book," one told me, "that I not only read but felt."

As soon as I heard that Marilynne had been invited to join Writers' Workshop faculty at the University of Iowa, I knew I wanted to interview her. I first saw her, though, at not one but two screenings of the recent *Hamlet*. Both times, just as the lights dimmed, she rushed down the aisle alone with her hands thrust deeply into the patch pockets of a dark woolen coat. Both times, by coincidence, she assumed the seat directly in front of me, slouching deeply into it, never shrugging off her coat, hardly moving