

Kiss of the Spider-Lady

An Interview with Aritha van Herk

by Hilda Kirkwood

Aritha van Herk, now an associate professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Calgary, was the winner of the Seal First Novel Award in 1978 (she was twenty-four years old). Ten years later she had published two more novels, of which *No Fixed Address* (McClelland and Stewart, 1986) is the most accomplished. At the time of its publication Ms. van Herk visited Toronto and it was my privilege to interview her. She is a very attractive personality, unassuming and friendly, and it was a great pleasure to talk to her. The interview recorded here is as close to the original tape as possible; I have made some deletions of matter which tended at times to become side-tracked. We tried to bring the writer's point of view about this particular novel to the fore — bearing in mind that what a writer wants us to know about herself will be found in the work itself; I therefore avoided the rather too frequent personal queries and the "colour of eyes and hair and pantsuit while seated in such and such a hotel room" type of information which is of little interest to readers who are intelligently concerned with the novels.

First I would like to say how much I liked the Biblical and classical allusions in your three novels to date. This element seems integral to your stories, a sort of foundation, or perhaps signposts to the characters — Ja-el in The Tent Peg, Gabriel in No Fixed Address and especially Arachne in No Fixed Address, and Thena, the warning figure whom I take to be a re-incarnation of Athena in Ovid. But especially Arachne, who in Horace Gregory's translation is said to have "parents of poor estate," a manner that is "cool and fixed," and "is ready to show her skills and raced to her fate." Also she is "not too attractive

and full of stubborn pride." Is it fair to say that you have built your modern Arachne on these characteristics to a large extent?

Well, you've captured her so well I feel anything I add is superfluous. Of course I wanted to create a contemporary picaresque character. And when reading picaresque literature (I did go back and read every picaresque novel I could find, some of them very difficult for I had to struggle through in Italian and French; although I read French, Italian isn't my language), I did discover that there is an intimate connection between those Greek mythological characters and what I perceive to be picaresque characters. It almost seems to me that some of the stories of gods and mortals are a kind of picaresque tale. That's where the first connection comes in. The second was the whole connection between spiders and rogues where the picaresque character is a rogue, then a spider. You see it in *Gúzman*, when he sees the corners of the room of his father's hut and the ceiling all cobwebs, and he thinks "if the ceiling were made of more than cobwebs would my life have been different?" That's one reason I wanted to use the image of Arachne, the woman who challenges Athena to a duel and loses.

I thought 'Thena in your book was the crone who warns Arachne of trouble ahead. She corresponds since the crone is one of Athena's disguises in the legend.

That's right. The fact that Athena turns Arachne into a spider is because you can't challenge the gods and win. She doesn't let her die either. There is a kind of compassion about Athena not present in Zeus, for instance.

Arachne says somewhere in your story "I will go in disguise." That was the clue to your Arachne because, although she is a contemporary girl, very much so, she changes so often, not her form actually, her "role" or disguise.

Well she is running really from that person she was just before, and of course she doesn't realize she can't run away from herself completely. You can tell that, to me, the Greek stories, Homer and also Ovid, are the greatest literature. The present assumption that they don't have anything to do with contemporary literature is very wrong, I think. All we are doing is retelling old stories.

I suppose the reason we can still enjoy the ancient dramas is because we follow the same psychological patterns, if not writ so large.

So I don't apologize for using such a "funny" name as Arachne — although some people think it is overstated to use such a name.

I do not think the name's a mistake. They matter to people who are going to get more out of the story that way and they do not lessen the enjoyment of others. Is that right?

Yes. I don't think a novel should be impenetrable, that the literary novel should be impossible for the average reader.

You weren't trying to write a novel the professors could spend the next three decades on?

I wanted to tell a good story, of course. Every writer wants to do that. It doesn't

mean to me that many readers are not interested in a character like Arachne and where her name comes from.

It just gives the book more dimension, more depth. Do you think perhaps you were influenced by Joyce, who metamorphosed Ulysses into Leopold Bloom in a sense, that being the great modern example?

I don't know: I am not a Joyce scholar. Faulkner is someone who influenced me for the same reason that he is always using biblical and classical or mythological characters: *Absolom, Absolom* is an example.

I read most of Faulkner at one time and I think Absolom shakes me more than anything else in American literature. And The Bear — the bear is a great symbol of nature in Faulkner, and in your work too.

To go back, I think I am very influenced by Joyce.

I think we all are. People who think magic realism and fantasy are a new invention should have a look at Joyce — in his work there is also wonderful realism, as well as the dream elements.

The separation between "magic" and "realism" is artificial.

Are we back to "What is Real?" ... The guardian or benefactor of each of the girls in your novels, the dead father in Judith, the boss of the geology team in The Tent Peg and Gabriel in No Fixed Address, are older male figures. Have you any comment on this, given the strong feminist element in your work?

I think I wanted to show these women in relation to older men because I suspect it is a very real part of the contemporary world that we are saved or damned, or cornered or rescued by men. Often where we are is largely a function of our position in relation to men. That isn't always a positive thing and I wasn't trying to undercut the Jungian notion. I mean Thena is the other side. She is there. And I've always tried to have a balancing woman, so that the man was not dominant. In *Judith* there is Deborah the singer.

In those two novels I felt that the male was the stronger influence. Not so?

Well, I think in the novels the males are stronger influences, but for the characters

the females are the balance. You see part of it is the point of view that one adopts. And the shifts that affect certain things in a novel. And here you think that Gabriel is less strong than Thena?

Yes.

He never really enters the novel; he's all in the past.

He does enter her childhood and rescues her from the courts, but I am telling you about your novel?

He is in the past, but she is looking for a centre.

I like the reversal of roles in the travelling saleslady episodes — a great put-down of the tired old male fantasy. A well-known book reviewer has asked why Arachne should be compared to a spider: "she's not the kind of woman who traps others in the web," he wrote. I guess he and I weren't reading the same book. Her web is so obviously a part of her. The road jockeys she meets as a saleswoman seem like flies to me. She uses them, devours them and leaves them. At the geographical level, the web of roads that constitutes Thomas's maps (his contribution to the myth) are the various leads she followed in her quest. Am I interpreting this correctly?

It's interesting that you talk about road jockeys as flies, because although some of them have interesting distinctive characteristics they are, more or less, flies. They are insects. You know the whole seventeenth century idea that flies simply encounter and then die. They are nothing but that. And her devouring of them — it's not only a sexual devouring in the sense that you know how spiders sew their prey into little cocoons, but they are immobilized and can't extricate themselves. And in a certain way Arachne does that to all these men and they get sewn up in little cocoons. And she leaves, and you know that whatever effect she's had on them is something they can't change. And I did want to deliberately undercut that travelling salesman story, the old joke.

I can't believe anybody could miss the significance of the flies and the web.

The web of Thomas's maps is another thing I'd like to talk about for a minute. I look at maps as a kind of beautiful labyrinth. They are a way of telling us where we are in relation to other things in the

world. So if you're driving or if you're moving, you can find yourself on a map. That's what you do, literally. Finding yourself on a flat two-dimensional surface, a replica of the world, is so interesting. It hasn't been dealt with very much or very well, although Canadians (of all people in the world), are the most affected by maps. They use maps more: Canadian maps, in world terms, are some of the most superlative and beautiful maps made.

I find that men all know maps, they can read and fold them. I can never understand them at all.

We get them up-side-down. But they're not made for us (women). It's what I was saying to someone the other day about our centres, right? We think of things in terms of centres. Not where we are in relation to other things. Finding yourself on a map is like finding yourself anywhere. We're always holding them up and saying "where are we now?"

Is that why Arachne finds towns on the maps that aren't there, or there are towns there she can't find? Is this part of the way she perceives the world?

Yes, she can never find herself on the map.

As a long-time reviewer of women's fiction, that is, fiction by women, it is amazing to me that you have been able to write three novels by the time you were thirty! And I am going to ask — did the Seal Award which you won for your first novel influence your decision to keep on writing? I guess I am asking — do you think you'd have progressed as fast without it?

The Seal Award is a very strange combination of things. It was a wonderful thing to happen to a young writer because it was my first novel: I had never written any books before. It gave me the confidence to believe that I could write, that I really could write and people would read what I wrote. On the other hand, the Seal Award is like nothing so much as an albatross because, for ever after people insist on weighing you in the light of that award, and depending on whether they think of it as something you got by skullduggery, or as a commercial prize or something picked by lottery, you get incredibly strange reactions. Often, I think, it's prevented people from reading my books in an objective way. I've had serious readers, but objectivity is, you know —

I suppose some high-brow types would say, oh well The Seal Award and snub the book because the award was intended to do some commercial good, but I feel that if it helped you, gave you confidence to go on writing, then Jack McClelland was right and deserves a big vote of thanks because I am sure people wondered about this kind of prize.

Well it's an example of Jack's faith in young writers that he could come up with such an idea and that he could persuade people to do it. That man has incredible faith in young writers and in Canadian writing. No other publisher would have gone out on a limb and dared something like that.

He's almost the only one who has.

That's probably why he is in trouble sometimes. It's really true that he's done marvellous things for young writers and he was a very good publisher. He respected the writer's integrity [McClelland is now retired]. But in a sense the Seal Award was a mixed blessing. At times I felt that I would explode if I ever heard of it again. Other times I knew very well that it was a wonderful beginning for my career.

I hoped that that would be so when I first read about this award and, from what you say, it seems to me that in your case it gave you time and confidence, a great chance to keep on working and developing. This present novel is in a different category from the first two: in some ways it is much more complex — in fact, in many ways.

Yes, I think it is much better; if I'm not growing and developing, I should quit. The funny thing about Seal — it was a baptism of fire and it taught me to be serious and to be professional very quickly.

Such as the actual technique of getting the attention of editors to your manuscript?

Oh no, I mean treating writing as a serious business — that is, as something you did not play around with.

Well, of course, I feel that writers are so important. I've spent all the time I had to spare for all my life thinking and writing about artists and writers — particularly women, for they have special hazards to overcome sometimes; I think artists are undervalued seriously in our society — with the possible exception of some in the

visual arts, which are perhaps more accessible. But I consider the imaginative writers more important than their critics, not a popular view, but true I think.

I think so too! You are right, they should make you a member of the Council.

Back to No Fixed Address. One of the strong impressions left in my mind by that novel is the wonderful evocation of the country itself as Arachne drives through British Columbia. The country becomes one of the chief "characters" or elements of the story, rather as Dublin is in Ulysses. It seems to me you convey the mystery of place — especially going north into the Yukon, where you feel that crossing the mountains is like going into another part of the world. On her trip out of Alberta, I felt the presence of the land to be as strong as the characters in the story. Did you see it that way?

I've always been particularly influenced by the place where I was when I was doing particular things, then I think that my characters have the same reaction and they have the same sensation that when they enter a particular kind of landscape, the landscape changes them. Arachne is very different when she goes through, for instance, the Crow's Nest Pass which is the old string of mining towns on her way from the West Coast. When she goes up north into the Yukon the effect of the landscape becomes overwhelming. The moment when she sees the glacier outside of Stewart and she falls on her knees: the experience is one of ecstasy. I think one of the things that has happened to much of our landscape is that we've "touristized" it to the point where we only look at it through a camera lens. We are always taking pictures of what we perceive to be famous sites. Often it is not even a famous site — it's a famous picture right? It's as though the connection between man and the human apprehension of what he sees actually becomes filtered and loses a great deal, and that's one reason why I wanted to have her driving and driving in that part of the story and circling and circling all those dusty little prairie towns and what it does to you or to Arachne is that it grinds into your soul. It is something very profound.

That's the way I feel about a sense of place, too. You feel alien in certain places. I tend to resist such places, but sometimes you have to be where you are — whether you like it or not.

It's natural sometimes to resist: Canada has some pretty overwhelming locales. Geologically, some places are incredible.

The first time I saw the mountains west of Calgary was from the observation car of a train, and I couldn't believe my eyes. So beautiful, breathtaking; on a summer day they were like a mirage. When I go to Victoria and look across at the mountains I still feel the same way, so I know what you mean and what it does to you. And some people who go north to the Yukon don't want to come home again.

Tell me about it! I could live up there. And Arachne feels the same way when she sees the prairies for the first time — the first moment is really important. She is driving towards Calgary with Thomas and she suddenly sees the prairie and she thinks: a person can actually live right here! Her reaction is totally positive, as is mine.

I don't find the prairie depressing, as some people do. I love the big skies, though I've never been there in winter.

It's not as bad as people say it is in winter. It's largely a mythological construction that the prairie is unlivable.

It would seem that women, perhaps women writers in particular, have a strong sense of place: I think of Alice Munro's small town, Margaret Laurence's mystique of the river in The Diviners — but you do not confine yourself. Your heroines tend to move. I was especially interested in your description of air travel and Arachne's sense of landscape from a balloon. It is my observation that much current art and literature has been influenced by the fact that so many of us travel by air now and some of us like the look of the world from above. Do you think this is altering our perception of ourselves in relation to the earth in both fact and fiction? The question runs through my mind a lot.

That is a wonderful question, because people have said to me, Arachne is a traveller, why doesn't she ever fly? And the only way I could get her up in the air was in a balloon because frankly, flying eliminates the landscape underneath it, often completely, for if you are flying above the clouds you see nothing. Time and space become confused or stretched in a way that is totally strange. I very deliberately had her drive and then take that one tiny trip where she gets in a

balloon just to see from above. I was interested in the whole notion of the aerial maps because mapping now occurs from above. No one has mapped Canada from above. So that is why, and it was deliberate, that I made Arachne one who drove and I think you are right, when we start flying over the landscape we are not even a part of it any more.

I know a man who flew in the worst of conditions for four or five years, a pilot. He has the opposite attitude to place to mine. I feel a part of where I live and disoriented sometimes in strange places. He seems to belong everywhere and nowhere.

I think the latter is a very masculine approach. Women need to know where things are and that trees have roots (if you'll forgive me for dividing the world up into feminine and masculine), and I suspect that to men, passing over the landscape and subsequently what they do to it, is where you get the whole negative approach to nature as something to be exploited. An extremely masculine approach, and it comes partly I think from conditioning. And you know I think women want to believe that they only have the horizon. But Arachne is looking for a centre. That is exactly it.

I felt that Thomas was the centre of her map, her one fixed point because she kept coming back to him — but he was not the centre of her psyche.

No, I don't know.

Your comic scenes of the feminist conference Arachne attends at Banff are the funniest thing I've read in years. I really enjoyed them... Early in this book you talk about the little street urchins in Vancouver and one thing I questioned was, would a waifish little girl have the strength to dominate a street gang of boys?

I watched kids in East End Vancouver for quite a while before I wrote that, and there were very few girls that were associated with this scene but the ones that were were tougher than the boys. It's the old story: you have to be tougher or you are not going to survive. They were fierce little devils, they were really much worse than the boys with them and they were like boys. They were adamantly determined not to be *feminine* — you wouldn't have got one of those kids into a ballerina's

dress for love or money [laughter]. The curious thing is, the world has made us fight so hard for the small gains we make that some women have gone overboard and they can get very vicious.

I notice that women of my daughter's generation and yours are sometimes very bitter and do not conceal it as older women did.

Well, bitterness is hard to hide. I've had my moments when I am very bitter.

Sometimes only a sense of humour can correct the balance. In your Banff conference scenes you scored some real points. Have you had any reaction from the feminist press on this?

No, I haven't had any yet, the book has not been out long enough [1986] but I am curious. You see, I think the real mark of a strong movement is when it can laugh at itself. I am not laughing just at the feminists but at the Christian women's meeting that's going on at the same time and the two groups clashing head on which is actually what happened and here I must make a confession. The woman who says she is going to carve a statue of Isis out of Mount Lougheed and paint Nellie McClung on a granite rock is representing the artist. I wanted to visit my own novel and she is the means of the author coming in and saying "allright you guys, look out, I'm here somewhere too" because that conference was a real one, an enormous conference on Women and the Law in Banff and I went to it. Well, it was very successful, people said it was wonderful. I couldn't resist, I mean here was this marvellous conference and all these really bright intelligent successful women together and they were having such a good time and I thought "that's really what it's all about, the ability to have a good time and to laugh."

What about the pink pants suit ladies?

Well, I mean some of these women were partly having a good time, having a party, and the other part was that at the same time, in the same place there was a very religious conference going on and the conflict of the two groups was, well... I thought, there's a way to handle this, and that is we need more comedy — we've treated the women's movement very seriously.

To go back to the beginning. I wondered

whether your openings were ploys to get our attention, as in The Tent Peg where the girl goes into the men's washroom: it sort of jolted me though I was brought up with brothers and have reviewed many modern books —

Was there anything in the beginning of this one that really hit you? The panties?

No, I thought No Fixed Address started off much more gradually and built up the effect a lot more. Perhaps you felt you had more time to do so in this book. I think when she leans over for the guys in the store I may have cringed a little.

She's just trying to sell panties...

I guess I was afraid she might be called on to sell more than that, but after all you made it plain that she had the upper hand — it's she who says "you could put a paper bag over their heads"! In Judith, the opening where she is shovelling pig shit, made me wonder "what is this going to be about?" and might have tempted me to put the book down.

Well, I'm told I have a very blunt manner — very blunt and direct.

I just want to open my novels in the middle of where they are. I'm not the kind of writer who will introduce everyone and give their name and card number and then go on explain what they are doing: I want to plug the reader in immediately. I admit the *Judith* thing is pretty direct — actually I probably would have changed it, but my editor o.k.'d it. And the other thing is that I do like the narrator/writer as trickster image — the narrator is this novel, for instance who is really making up a story which she doesn't know anything about. I love tricksters. It's the only way we are going to survive... I'm talking about tricks in the old puckish sense, the devil's advocate sense. We like to think of women as being middle class, but what about the women who haven't had the privileges of care and education?

One of the redeeming relationships in Arachne's life is with Josef, the old coppersmith she meets in the graveyard. They have this silent rapport and end up being lovers. One of the questions raised is, why did you, the writer make this "real" love, to whom she shows devotion, so very old? (90)

The assumption that when human beings

are above the age of sixty-five they don't do ordinary human things any more is, I think, absolutely ridiculous. It's one of the big problems we have. She is looking at someone who belongs nowhere. His own daughter finds him a nuisance; she only values him for his financial contribution. Maybe this is an extreme case, but in a real sense I don't think it is. Arachne's fascination with Josef is very much her lack of knowledge. She doesn't know very much about life; she's quite naive.

She's fascinated because he comes from Yugoslavia and has been through the First World War. At the same time she recognizes that he is an outcast (as she is) and that's why she keeps going back to him, talks to him and finally takes him out of the home. And it bothers me not at all that she had a sexual liason with a ninety year-old man. It's perfectly possible... I think that complacency in readers is one of the things that makes lazy readers, so I guess I like to plunge them into something they

are not really sure about.

I am sure you have done so with Arachne's adventures and the rather metaphysical ending (which we haven't time to discuss).

I have enjoyed this interview and thank you for discussing my work. Too often I am asked personal questions.

LOIS WILSON

To Be A Woman

The girls prepared skits to illustrate the questions they had about women's roles in India.

The first was about non-co-operation by husbands in disciplining children... surely a trans-national problem!

The next, a husband wanted a male child desperately, though they already had four daughters.

There was the young woman whose further education could not be financed because the money was needed for her dowry!

And the young couple, living in the extended family arrangement, whose mother-in-law would not allow them to go to the movies.

These fine, middle class Indian girls feel trapped
by dowry
by extended family
by parents
by history
by tradition.

Yet few of them know

how to become free persons.

In fact,

they are not so different from Canadian girls who feel trapped by family

by custom

by male expectations

by history

by their own self image.

Lord, You treated women as full persons.
You dignified the woman taken in adultery
and restored her pride.
You took Mary seriously
and discussed theology with her.
Yet you also appreciated Martha's care
for Your well being.

How can I become a full person?
How can I be free
yet responsible to those I love?
How can I know
what it means
to be a woman?

Freedom

I always thought I was a free person
free to be myself

to innovate
to push my horizons
until I saw beyond
the present limits of my life.

I always called myself a Christian
free to love others
to put the care of another before my own self interest.

But in Delhi, at the Qutb Minar
a fluted tower of red sandstone
built on the site of the first mosque in India
while I was admiring the intricate carving

a woman fingered my cape...
my cape from Wales...
the one I'm so proud of...
and she, a perfect stranger
and poor.

I pulled away, ever so slightly.
The other woman with her laughed...

'If anyone wants your coat
let them have it
and your overcoat as well.'

But there was no way I could give her my cape.
I was too cold.
I needed it.
It means too much to me.

Those are not the real reasons.

I was not free to give the matter a second thought.
There was no real decision to be made.
After all, it is my cape.

I am not free.