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**Elaine Risley**
A successful Canadian painter who was bullied by Cordelia, Grace and Carol as a child. Has a love affair with Josef, marries and divorces Jon and marries Ben. Mother of Sarah and Anne.

**Cordelia**
Torments Elaine but later is a friend; a conflicted relationship

**Stephen Risley**
Elaine's scientist brother, dies in terrorist attack

**Grace Smeath**
Religious girl, supports Cordelia's bullying

**Miss Stuart**
Scottish immigrant, Elaine's favourite teacher

**Dr. Banerji**
Indian immigrant, scientist at University of Toronto

**Carol Campbell**
Vapid friend of Elaine, witnesses bullying

**Mrs. Smeath**
Grace’s mother, approves of the bullying

**Mrs. Finestein**
Elaine's neighbour, a Jewish woman

**Josef Hrbik**
Art teacher, has affairs with Elaine and Susie

**Ben**
Current husband of Elaine, travel agent

**Sarah**
Daughter of Elaine and Jon

**Step-Father/Daughter**
Step-Father/Daughter

**Sarah**
Daughter of Elaine and Jon

**Anne**
Daughter of Elaine and Ben

**Miss Stuart**
Scottish immigrant, Elaine's favourite teacher

**Mother**
Elaine’s mother, free spirited and modern

**Father**
Elaine’s father, professor and scientist

**Sister**
Elaine’s sister, modern

**Stephen Risley**
Elaine’s scientist brother, dies in terrorist attack

**Carol Campbell**
Vapid friend of Elaine, witnesses bullying

**Mother/ Daughter**
Mother/ Daughter

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OVERVIEW

About the author

Margaret Atwood is considered to be one of the most successful Canadian writers alive today. The author of more than 40 books of fiction, poetry, children's literature and non-fiction, she is generally best known for her 1985 dystopian tale, The Handmaid's Tale.

Atwood's awards and honours are numerous, over eighty to date. They include the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction (Canada), the Giller Prize (Canada), the Trillium Book Award (Canada), the Dan David Prize for Literature (Israel), the Los Angeles Times Fiction Award (USA), the Guggenheim Fellowship (USA), the Arthur C Clarke Award (UK) and the Booker Prize (UK). Atwood is one of only three Canadians to have won the prestigious Booker Prize, which she won for her novel The Blind Assassin.

She is also a well-known political and economics commentator. In Canada, she is generally considered to be associated with left-wing (liberal) politics, especially those of the environmental movement, and is a strong proponent of public funding for the arts. She and her partner Graeme Gibson (also a writer) are members of the Green Party of Canada. Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada, in November 1939. Her father was an entomologist and she and her family spent many of the summers during her early life in the bush of North Quebec before moving to Toronto when she was seven. Toronto, where she currently lives, has provided the setting for many of her novels. She has lived in many cities in Canada, the USA and Europe.

In addition to fiction and poetry, Atwood has written several critical texts including Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, which is widely considered to be one of the most important and influential books ever written about Canadian literature. Atwood studied under respected Canadian literary theorist Northrop Frye at the University of Toronto and earned a Master of Arts degree at Radcliffe College, which later became part of Harvard University. Following her MA degree, Atwood began (though did not finish) a PhD at Harvard. She has taught
at various universities and colleges and serves as a mentor for the masters degree in the field of creative writing program at her alma mater, the University of Toronto.

Atwood experienced literary success very early. By the time she was 30, in 1969, she had released her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, and five collections of poetry, the second of which won the prestigious Governor General's Literary Award in Canada. Since then she has remained a highly prolific writer in a number of different genres, even writing an opera libretto in 1964.

**Synopsis of Cat’s Eye**

Elaine Risley is a middle-aged, successful Canadian artist living in Vancouver, in the 1980s. She returns to her hometown, Toronto, to appear at a retrospective exhibition of her paintings. During her trip, she muses on her childhood and young-adult life, in particular her pre-pubescent years and her complicated relationship with her former best friend, Cordelia. The book is virtually a complete and chronological personal history of Elaine, detailing her romantic relationships, her unorthodox family and her entry into the art world. The association with Cordelia is, however, the main narrative subject, and even during the time when Cordelia is not present in Elaine’s life, her influence is strongly felt.

**Character summaries**

**Elaine Risley**

Elaine is the main character and the narrator of *Cat’s Eye*. She was born prior to World War II, and is the daughter of a homemaker and a forest entomologist (a scientist who studies insects). Her early childhood is very unusual, as she and her mother and brother travel around with her father during his research trips in northern Ontario, even during the War, when car travel was restricted due to petrol rationing. Because of this travel, Elaine and her brother are mainly home-schooled by their mother until the family is based in Toronto.

When they settle in Toronto, eight-year-old Elaine has trouble adjusting socially, feeling far more comfortable with the outdoor, unstructured
environment of her early childhood. Elaine’s difficulty in feeling as if she
belongs is a problem that follows her throughout her life.

The defining experience in Elaine’s life is the relationship she has
with Cordelia, a neighbour and schoolmate. Cordelia bullies Elaine in
a subtle, psychological way, eroding Elaine’s self-esteem and causing
her to become extremely anxious. Elaine turns to self-harm to manage
her anxiety, peeling skin off her feet to the point of bleeding. Elaine’s
relationship with her parents, particularly with her mother, suffers during
the period of Cordelia’s bullying; Elaine is disappointed by her mother’s
inability to protect her.

Elaine is intelligent and does well in school. She attends the University of
Toronto and takes classes in Art and Archaeology because she is interested
in art but unsure how to pursue it practically. She does enrol in night classes
at the Toronto College of Art (now known as the Ontario College of Art and
Design), an important event that launches her career as a painter.

Elaine has an affair with her art teacher, Josef Hrbik, but eventually
marries a fellow art student, Jon, after an unexpected pregnancy that
results in the birth of their daughter, Sarah. Following a period of
conflict and unhappiness in their marriage, Elaine slashes her wrist (after
believing she hears the voice of Cordelia, urging her to do so). Shortly
after this, Elaine leaves Jon, taking their daughter with her to Vancouver.
Here she begins a period of recovery, not only from her marriage but
also presumably from all the negative experiences she had in Toronto,
including her torment at the hands of Cordelia and their mutual friends.
It is during this time in Vancouver that Elaine’s art career, which seemed
mildly promising in Toronto, really picks up. Later, she marries again (a
travel agent named Ben) and has a second child.

As an adult, Elaine has no close female friends.

Cordelia
Cordelia is the last girl to join the social group made up of Carol, Grace
and Elaine, all of whom attend the same school. She is the youngest of
three daughters, and moves with her family to Toronto one summer when
Elaine and her family are away on one of Professor Risley’s research trips.

Cordelia’s body changes often through the narrative, but she is
originally described as tall and thin with dark blonde hair and a crooked
upper lip. While compelling, unlike her two sisters she is not traditionally beautiful. She is one year older than Elaine and, at first, is a year ahead in school. It is clear through details of her home and activities that Cordelia’s family is more affluent than those of the other girls.

As a pre-pubescent girl, Cordelia is at first very friendly to Elaine. Soon though, she begins to bully Elaine in subtle ways, becoming more and more abusive and controlling until Elaine is suffering severe anxiety.

Cordelia is not presented as entirely negative – she is inventive and creative, and also ambitious in many ways. She has much more imagination than Elaine’s other friends and is a natural leader among her peers.

Cordelia is not seen in a coherent, continual way throughout the narrative. Instead she appears after long absences, usually in a dramatically changed form, both physically and socially. This pattern may be the reason that the adult Elaine seems to constantly expect Cordelia to appear from nowhere.

**Grace Smeath**

Grace is, like Cordelia, a year older than Elaine and a year ahead in school. Grace is a very literal person, even as a child, and dislikes games involving imaginary elements – she prefers to play ‘school’ in the basement (with herself as teacher and Carol and Elaine as students) or to cut photos out of the Eaton’s Catalogue.

Grace’s family is considerably less affluent than the other girls’, although this is not clear to them when they are young. The Smeath family is very religious and rigid, and these characteristics are dominant in Grace. Grace eventually leaves the group to go to a high school specialising in maths, causing Elaine to remark disparagingly, ‘She’s good at adding things up in neat little rows’ (p.238). She and Elaine never see one another again.

Grace’s role in the bullying of Elaine is less active than Cordelia’s; she does not initiate the torment, but she aligns herself with Cordelia and participates in the bullying once it has begun. Grace is presented as seeming entirely unemotional, and as being indifferent to Elaine’s pain, rather than interested in it as Cordelia appears to be. Despite these characteristics, Elaine, Carol and even Cordelia crave Grace’s approval,
especially early in their friendship. It is often said by Elaine that Grace held power because ‘we want to play with her more than she wants to play with us’ (p.61).

Grace is described as pale and freckled with frizzy brown hair that she wears in braids.

**Carol Campbell**

Carol Campbell is Elaine’s first female friend. They are thrown together because they are in the same grade at school and live close to one another. It is through Carol that Elaine gains insight into what is considered normal in her new hometown. Carol introduces Elaine to Grace, and later the two of them introduce her to Cordelia.

Carol is a flighty, expressive, emotional child and in this she exhibits many stereotypical female characteristics that Elaine disdains. Her physicality conveniently matches these traits; she is described as blonde and stubby, with curled hair.

When Cordelia begins bullying Elaine, Carol is generally not an active participant, though she does nothing to protect or defend Elaine. She is in fact a target of the bullying herself at times, but unlike Elaine she is easily pushed to tears and exclamations of distress and therefore does not present a challenge to Cordelia.

**Elaine’s father (Mr Risley)**

Elaine’s father is an entomologist, which means he studies insects. Until Elaine is about eight, he works in the field, travelling around northern Ontario and studying bugs in their natural environment. Later he transitions to working as a professor at the University of Toronto.

Elaine has a more open relationship with her father than most girls in her generation; he treats her more or less as an equal, talking to her about scientific and environmental concerns. He is concerned with people’s abilities, not their gender or race, and is quite enlightened in this sense. However, he assumes that other people think the same way he does and is surprised and disappointed on occasions when he realises that other people hold irrational prejudices. For example, when Dr Banerji, his Indian colleague, returns to India after suffering discrimination, Elaine observes: ‘My father’s view of human nature has always been bleak, but
scientists were excluded from it, and now they aren’t. He feels betrayed’ (p.339).

Elaine’s mother (Mrs Risley)
An unorthodox and modern woman, Elaine’s mother is confident and grounded. She likes to wear casual or even men’s clothes for comfort, and is at ease being outside and active, such as during the research excursions for her husband’s job. However, she is also traditional in many ways. She does not work outside the home and she prepares the food and does the housework in the Risley household, albeit in her own slapdash way. Her relationship with her husband however, seems to be that of equals and advanced for the time.

Elaine’s mother suffers a miscarriage when Elaine is a child, after they have moved to Toronto. This incident (though not fully understood by Elaine at the time) is Elaine’s first instance of seeing her mother as anything but invincible.

Stephen Risley
Elaine’s older brother is a brilliant scholar who is a close ally to Elaine in the years during and prior to World War II. As a child, he is bright and well-adjusted; however, he becomes increasingly unreadable to Elaine as he gets older and becomes more and more successful as a scholar, and later, as a scientist.

Stephen leaves Toronto to pursue his academic and scientific career and Elaine loses track of him. He marries and later divorces without explanation, informing Elaine via postcards.

Elaine and Stephen have only one interaction as adults in the book, when she attends a lecture he is giving about the birth of the universe. While they are friendly, it is clear that they have lost the tender connection of their shared childhood.

Stephen is killed during a terrorist attack on a commercial plane, on which he is a passenger. He is executed by the terrorists by being thrown from the plane. This incident has a traumatic effect on Elaine’s parents, who never fully recover from the loss of their child.

A statement by Stephen opens the book, highlighting his importance to Elaine.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Historical setting

Set in Canada during World War II and up to the mid-1980s, Cat’s Eye covers several extremely influential historical events during its narrative. These include World War II; the death of King George VI; the second wave of the feminist movement; Canada’s evolution from a country strongly controlled by British influence to an independent nation (including the adoption of the modern Canadian flag, the Maple Leaf) and several movements in the visual arts. All of these events are presented through the lens of the first-person narrator, artist Elaine Risley. As in several of Atwood’s other novels, there are also brief references to the arrival of American draft dodgers in Toronto during the Vietnam War.

Cat’s Eye examines gender roles without advocating any particular interpretation of how either gender is meant to behave. However, the issue of gender roles was of particular interest in the 1980s, when women began to make up a significant portion of the professional world and achieved high-ranking positions, arguably for the first time in significant numbers. Issues of interest included sexual harassment, hiring quotas (known in Canada as ‘affirmative action’) and the suggestion of a ‘glass ceiling’ for professional women (a term meaning that while there were no official policies preventing qualified women from being promoted, they were discriminated against regardless). Atwood, as a successful woman in what had once been a traditionally male field, has been considered to bring a unique viewpoint to gender-related issues. Some of the personal conflicts in the narrative allude to larger social conflicts regarding different opinions of what men and women’s roles in society ought to be.

Places in Cat’s Eye

Toronto

Toronto, the capital of the province of Ontario in Canada, is where Elaine spends much of her childhood, and where she has returned as an adult at the opening of Cat’s Eye. She has a tormented relationship with the city, remembering it as the place where her childhood friend Cordelia