Title: Back to the Future
Author(s): Philip Hensher
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[(review date 26 April 2003) *In the following review, Hensher lauds Atwood's powerful vision in* Oryx and Crake *despite the weakness of the subplot involving the character Oryx*.]

It's quite unusual for a novelist to write two entirely separate and different dystopic visions of the future. I suppose it runs the risk of suggesting that the novelist doesn't quite mean one or both of them. It's impressive of Margaret Atwood to have turned away from her habitual commitment to the rich, realist documents of contemporary lives for a second time, and given us another terrifying fantasy [***Oryx and Crake***] about the future to sit next to ***The Handmaid's Tale.*** That novel, published in 1985, has grown steadily in plausibility and authority; and it would seem perverse of Atwood to risk undermining it by writing so entirely different a projection as ***Oryx and Crake.***

Most dystopias are really satirical versions of contemporary society, and not ideas of the future at all. *The Time Machine* is about Edwardian class anxiety; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is about the regimentation and deprivations of Attlee's England. ***The Handmaid's Tale*** is very unusual in that it really does seem like an attempt to imagine the future of America, and an increasingly plausible one. It suggests a fundamentalist revolution will take place, after which racial and social minorities will be expelled or executed. Women will be prevented from working or from owning property, and the whole state will sink into a giant theocracy. It seemed, in 1985, like a wild fantasy, but there are aspects of it which are now quite plausible. The excuse for the suspension of civil liberties in the book are atrocities supposedly committed by Islamic fundamentalists: that was a brilliant insight 20 years ago. And the whole premise appears much less fantastic now: it is unnerving to observe how contemporary America fulfils almost every one of the classic features of pre-revolutionary France or Russia. It's not remotely unlikely that at some time in the next 20 years a violent revolution might take place there, and its face, as Atwood saw, would be a religious one.

Oryx and Crake is an entirely different idea of the future, although it begins from an image at the end of ***The Handmaid's Tale,*** a throwaway line about an artificial virus causing sterility inserted in jars of caviar. It is almost as impressive and just as terrifying, but the focus here is on technology raised to the point of godlike capacities. It is the story of Snowman, who for most of the book seems to be the last human being alive. The novel is the account of the assumption of divine powers of creation which the last men achieved, and, in its shadow, the catastrophe which wiped out the human race.

It's characteristic of Atwood that, returning to the start of the story, she takes care to make it almost humdrum, a recognisable account of two adolescent boys, Snowman and Crake. Although their circumstances are not like ours--they live in closely guarded compounds, islands of professional life, with a wild sea of lawlessness unseen outside the gates--their interests are deliberately banal. Crake is dazzlingly brilliant, and Snowman does his best to keep up; they want to go to a good school, to get good jobs in one of the vast corporations, and they enjoy watching scenes of death and sex over the internet. Atwood insists on this, and somehow she makes us accept that this interest is at once typical and unremarkable in adolescent boys, and at the root of the monstrosities Crake will come to perpetrate.

Snowman and Crake's aspirations and pleasures are familiar ones, but they are exercised in a harsh and unfamiliar society. The vast corporations dominate the landscape, and sinister corps of private militia patrol the many internal borders in the name of security. It is brilliantly plausible; everyone has seen how

even quite small companies these days require their lobbies and borders to be patrolled and secured, and how quickly the minor operatives of the security industry start exercising what power they have. Science has reached a point of effortless virtuosity and can achieve more or less anything. Crake joins the intellectual aristocracy, and goes into bio-engineering; Snowman is condemned to labour in the lower reaches of the vast self-help industry.

Bio-engineering is what the novel is about, and the reader is asked to envisage a world in which science can create any kind of animal it chooses. Atwood's creatures are not, for the most part, Hieronymus Bosch grotesques, but pigs with spare organs for transplants, a dog which looks affectionate but will bite your hand off without warning, a chicken with multiple breasts to supply the fast-food industry. Crake goes into this industry, and devotes his energies to two grand tasks; the first is to create a new and improved race of human-like beings; the second we do not discover until near the end of the book, and it explains why Snowman is left alone, the last of the humans, watching the new beings carry out acts of worship of their creator, Crake. Atwood loves the description of sinister rituals, and the lives of the post-humans consist of little else.

It's a powerful and exuberantly imagined book, and it's characteristic of its author that she exerts her imagination not in creating scientific monsters but in delineating the human world. The adolescent games of Crake and Snowman are meticulously and intricately done, and the whole atmosphere of arrogant irresponsibility within the institutes is a real tour-de-force, summed up by impenetrable jokes on T-shirts and fridge magnets. Brilliantly done, too, is the world after the apocalypse, encapsulated in a conversation in which Snowman tries to explain 'toast' to Crake's grass-eating creations, and quickly finds that they don't understand 'flour', 'electricity', 'butter' or 'bread' either.

The weakness lies in another substantial story, of the girl Oryx; her odyssey, from a poor village in the developing world through the child-pornography industry to being ultimately summoned by Crake to play a role in his project, is extravagant and often powerful, but somehow not in the right book; it doesn't amplify the main concerns of the novel, and Oryx, despite Atwood's best efforts and admirable ambition to portray an individual and not a case-study of abuse, never interests us. The rest of the book has such intellectual life that we only unwillingly go back to quite an ordinary love-story of the *Jules et Jim* variety.

Nevertheless, this is a powerful and impressive fable, more fantastic and less imminent than ***The Handmaid's Tale***--you have to accept a most unlikely premise about science's capabilities--but much less optimistic. The society in that earlier book, the epilogue suggests, collapsed like any other; at the end of ***Oryx and Crake*** humanity is done for.

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