

Title: Margaret (Eleanor) Atwood

Known As: Atwood, Margaret Eleanor; Atwood, Margaret  
Canadian Writer ( 1939 - )

Author(s): Lee Briscoe Thompson (University of Vermont)

Source: *Canadian Fantasy and Science-Fiction Writers*. Ed. Douglas Ivison. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 251*. Detroit: Gale Group, 2002. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Biography, Critical essay

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2002 Gale Group, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Table of Contents:Biographical and Critical Essay"When It Happens""Simmering"The Handmaid's Tale"Freeforall"Good Bones"Homelanding""Hardball""Cold-Blooded""My Life as a Bat""Unpopular Gals"The Blind AssassinWritings by the AuthorFurther Readings about the Author

WORKS:

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

### BOOKS

- *Double Persephone* (Toronto: Hawkshead, 1961).
- *The Circle Game* (Toronto: Contact, 1966).
- *The Animals in That Country* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968; Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).
- *The Edible Woman* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969; London: Deutsch, 1969; Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).
- *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- *Procedures for Underground* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970; Boston: Little, Brown, 1970).
- *Power Politics* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971; New York: Harper & Row, 1973).
- *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972; London: Deutsch, 1973; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).
- *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).
- *You Are Happy* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974; New York: Harper & Row, 1974).
- *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976; London: Deutsch, 1977).
- *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978).
- *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982; London: Cape, 1982).
- *Days of the Rebels: 1815-1840* (Toronto: Natural Science of Canada, 1977).
- *Two-Headed Poems* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980).
- *Up in the Tree* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978).
- *Life Before Man* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979; London: Cape, 1980).
- *Anna's Pet*, with Joyce Barkhouse (Toronto: Lorimer, 1980).
- *True Stories* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1981; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981; London: Cape, 1982).
- *Bodily Harm* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1981; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982; London: Cape, 1982).
- *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982; Boston: Beacon, 1984).

- *Bluebeard's Egg* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983); republished as *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986; London: Cape, 1987).
- *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems* (Toronto: Coach House, 1983; London: Cape, 1984).
- *Interlunar* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1984; London: Cape, 1988).
- *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986; London: Cape, 1986).
- *Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New, 1976-1986* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1986; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987; London: Virago, 1992).
- *Selected Poems 1965-1975* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987; London: Virago, 1991).
- *Cat's Eye* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988; New York: Doubleday, 1989; London: Bloomsbury, 1989).
- *Selected Poems: 1966-1984* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- *For the Birds* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990).
- *Wilderness Tips* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991; New York: Doubleday, 1991; London: Bloomsbury, 1991).
- *Good Bones* (Toronto: Coach House, 1992; London: Bloomsbury, 1992); republished as *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); republished as *Bones and Murder* (London: Virago, 1995).
- *The Robber Bride* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993; New York: Doubleday, 1993; London: Bloomsbury, 1993).
- *Morning in the Burned House* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995; London: Virago, 1995).
- *Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1995; Bristol, U.K.: Barefoot, 1995).
- *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press / New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- *Alias Grace* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996; New York: Doubleday, 1996; London: Bloomsbury, 1996).
- *Deux sollicitudes: Entretiens*, by Atwood and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu (Trois Pistoles, Quebec: Editions Trois Pistoles, 1996); translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott as *Two Sollicitudes: Conversations* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1998).
- *In Search of 'Alias Grace': On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1997).
- *A Quiet Game and Other Early Works*, edited and annotated by Kathy Chung and Sherrill Grace (Edmonton, Alberta: Juvenilia Press, 1997).
- *Eating Fire: Selected Poems, 1965-1995* (London: Virago, 1998).
- *The Blind Assassin* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2000; New York: Doubleday, 2000; London: Bloomsbury, 2000).

## OTHER

- "Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction," in *The Canadian Literary Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture*, edited by David Staines (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 97- 122; reprinted in *Other Canadas: An Anthology of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by John Robert Colombo (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1979), pp. 333-351.
- *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, edited by Atwood (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*, edited by Atwood and Robert Weaver

(Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1986); revised as *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1995).

- *The Canlit Foodbook*, edited by Atwood (Toronto: Totem, 1987).
- "Freeforall," in *Tesseract<sup>2</sup>*, edited by Phyllis Gotlieb and Douglas Barbour (Victoria, British Columbia: Press Porcépic, 1987), pp. 130-138; reprinted in *Northern Suns: The New Anthology of Canadian Science Fiction*, edited by David G. Hartwell and Glenn Grant (New York: Tor, 1999), pp. 17-24.
- *The Best American Short Stories 1989*, edited by Atwood and Shannon Ravenel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).
- Gwendolyn MacEwen, *The Poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen*, 2 volumes, edited by Atwood and Barry Callaghan (Toronto: Exile, 1993, 1994).

## BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:

Margaret Atwood is arguably the most prominent contemporary Canadian writer. Best known for her novels, Atwood is also admired for her accomplishments as a poet, critic, essayist, and short-story writer, and she has contributed as well to children's fiction, Canadian history, and the editing of volumes ranging from prestigious anthologies to a literary cookbook. The quantity of her output since publishing her first book in 1961 has been impressive, with more than forty books published so far, as well as book reviews and occasional writing of all sorts. In addition, she has worked in other media, including motion pictures, television, theater, cartoons, librettos, and visual art.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born on 18 November 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario to Margaret Dorothy (Killam) and Carl Edmund Atwood; she was the second of three children. Until her teens Atwood and her family spent much of each year in the bush country of Quebec and Ontario, where her entomologist father conducted his research, returning to Toronto for the school year. She began to write seriously at the age of sixteen. She attended Victoria College at the University of Toronto from 1957 to 1961, receiving a B.A. with honors in English. She then completed a master's degree in English at Radcliffe College, Harvard University in 1962, and later returned to begin her doctoral studies, which she never completed. Her employment has included a stint as a market researcher in Toronto and teaching positions or writer-in-residence positions at the University of British Columbia, Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal, the University of Alberta, York University in Toronto, the University of Toronto, the University of Alabama, and Macquarie University in Australia. She married James Polk, an American she met at Harvard, on 9 June 1967 in Boston, but they separated in the summer of 1972 and divorced in 1977. Since 1972 her companion has been novelist Graeme Gibson, with whom she has one child, Eleanor Jess, born on 17 May 1976.

Atwood's books, many of them translated into a variety of languages, are frequent selections for high school and university syllabi, and she and her writing have been the subjects of interviews, scholarly and popular articles, reviews, and graduate theses around the world. Further, her involvement with the Writers' Union of Canada and the anglophone Canadian division of PEN International (in both cases culminating in her service as president), in addition to her roles as a member of the Canadian Civil Liberties Union and the editorial board of the influential Toronto-based House of Anansi Press, and as an outspoken critic of Canadian foreign policy in matters of trade and culture, has also contributed to making her a voice of considerable importance in her native land.

The vast majority of Atwood's fictions have situated themselves firmly in the present--a highly detailed, socially recognizable, North American present day, the second half of the twentieth century--or in the historical past, a painstakingly re-created nineteenth-century Canada, usually in some stage of the Victorian era. Readers of her fiction tend to associate her with realism rather than science fiction, with

telling commentary on the ways things were and are rather than the ways they might be. Her most widely known novel, however, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), is an obvious and striking exception; it has been described by David Ketterer in the July 1989 issue of *Science-Fiction Studies* as "the best and most successful SF novel written by a Canadian," and it won the first Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987 for the best science-fiction novel published in a United Kingdom edition the previous year (having also won the Governor-General's Literary Award, the premier Canadian literary award, in 1985). A handful of short stories, the occasional poem, and her later novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000) supplement *The Handmaid's Tale* in demonstrating Atwood's occasional interest in fabulations of future times and in the fantastic.

Atwood herself considers technological gadgetry indispensable to her definition of science fiction, and therefore dismisses the classification of her own work as science fiction because it lacks futuristic hardware. She is more comfortable with the term speculative fiction, which allows the sort of technological regression featured in all of her futuristic works. The term social science fiction also seems applicable to her work, in its pushing of familiar social structures into new configurations, usually dire ones.

Just as Atwood is seen more as a realist than as a science-fiction writer, so too she is not particularly widely viewed as a writer of fantastic fiction. Yet, in her poetry the blurring of the line between the imaginary and the tangible is frequent and often escalates to the point that the "real" is intimated to be an illusion, the unseen more potent and authentic than the seen. (Her poem "Daphne and Laura and So Forth," from her 1995 collection *Morning in the Burned House*, was included in Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling's ninth annual *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* in 1996.) In her fiction, too, there are many surreal scenes, and characters sometimes move in and out of complex fantasy worlds and lives, parallel universes just a membrane apart. Atwood's inclination to the supernatural arises from her fairytale obsessions and the backwoods animism of her childhood, later compounded by her adult readings of Victorian fantasy and Canadian nature fiction. But ultimately, the reader is almost always presented with confirmations of the ascendancy of consensual reality.

The first of Atwood's occasional stories to speculate on the future or utilize the fantastic is "When It Happens," from her 1977 collection, *Dancing Girls and Other Stories*; it had previously been published in the Canadian women's magazine *Chatelaine* in 1975 and has since been anthologized in the *Penguin Book of Modern Fantasy by Women* (1995). It anticipated *The Handmaid's Tale* in its near-future, familiar setting, in its detailed attention to the gradualness of societal breakdown and yet the rapidity of its impact, and in the paradoxical combination of fearful passivity and resourcefulness with which the protagonist faces change. Mrs. Burridge moves back and forth among her present (the reader's potential near future), her near future (as this present begins to collapse), and her slightly further future (as she travels and encounters her first enemies). While virtually all of the events in the story are clearly expressed as Mrs. Burridge's worried speculations, their foundation is a social upheaval of the near future that has already begun for her (as confirmed by the new need to supplement food stocks by relearning the old art of canning). Further, disastrous developments are so fully realized, both in their vivid descriptions and in the skillful manipulation of verb tenses, that they achieve a reality and certainty of their own; as the title emphasizes, it is not a matter of "if" it happens, but "when."

"Simmering," from the 1983 collection *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems*, plays with a future marked by gender role reversal, in an entirely familiar context of barbecues, briefcases, cocktail parties, and kitchen utensils. The story, anticipating Offred's tale-telling in *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a covert narration by a woman who has been officially silenced, who dreams a decidedly female and inclusive dream (one involving both Eden and apples) of freedom, and who seeks to preserve this story by word of mouth and/ or manuscript. For once with Atwood, this future is a distant one, many centuries from the present. The tyranny of gender expectations continues, but now men's way of having the upper hand is to be the guardians and repositories of cooking; and since men now do it, the baking of bread has

become a profound and sacred rite. The story has considerable fun with all aspects of this rewriting of male dominance, including the transference of their stereotypical preoccupations to applications in what was once the undervalued domestic domain of females and to the sexualization of objects (such as turkey basters and carving knives) that had no such cachet in the hands of women. This future society has finally gotten women out of the kitchen, but in this recast universe that means they are still excluded from the sites of power.

*The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985, was on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list for fifteen weeks at first release, and again for eight weeks when released as a paperback in 1987, with a further four weeks in 1990 after the movie version appeared. It was a crucial crossover book for Atwood. Before that, she had been the darling of Canadian poetry lovers, fans of contemporary fiction, and women's studies specialists. But with *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood acquired a huge popular readership and also attracted the attention of scholars in many fields outside literature. The novel began appearing in courses and articles on political science, history, sociology, philosophy, theology, environmental studies, and human biology. A large component of its initial appeal had to do with the compelling--to many readers, terrifying--vision it offered of a society of the near future, an exaggeration for (a little) better and for (the most part) worse of the reader's own, recognizable contemporary scene.

*The Handmaid's Tale* envisions a white, right-wing, theocratic coup having taken place in the northeast United States of the early twenty-first century. An autocratic elite, alarmed by a precipitous decline in Caucasian birth rates and by the degeneration of a "traditional" American society, has masterminded the murder of the president and a massacre in Congress, then played on public fear, ignorance, and restricted access to information and money to suspend all civil rights. A frightened, confused citizenry has hunkered down to ride out the crisis, and most have submitted meekly to the rapid imposition of many restrictions and a rigid codification of status and role in the new, dystopian state of Gilead.

Most dramatically and visibly, women are stripped of jobs and financial independence and pressed into one of eight color-coded categories: Wives of the elite (blue), young Daughters of the elite (white), Widows (black), Aunts (khaki), Handmaids (red), Marthas (dull green), Econowives (red/blue/green stripes), and Unwomen (grey). Jezebels, an unofficial group of women coerced into prostitution, are assigned a ragbag of frazzled, flashy outfits once associated with eroticism. Although virtually powerless, the group at the center of this structure is the Handmaids, fertile women forcibly recruited to try to bear children for the older, all too often sterile Commanders. All other positions, male and female in the society revolve around the core mission of reproduction, and the myriad aspects of repression considered necessary to enforce compliance and rebuild the white population (people of color having been "relocated").

*The Handmaid's Tale* purports to be the transcript of one Handmaid's description of her life in the early days of the Gilead regime, in the transition generation caught between memories of life in "the time before" (the late twentieth century) and the powerful indoctrination of Gilead. Offred's tale is followed by another transcript, from a convention two hundred years later, in which academics meet to discuss the by-then defunct Gilead from the perspective of the year 2195. One arresting (and by no means reassuring) characteristic of Gilead and of the world of 2195 is that they seem so unfuturistic, in the sense that the artifacts, attitudes, customs, idiom, and actions seem quite familiar and largely unchanged from those of contemporary society. True, there is a long list of compu-items in use in Gilead (such as Compubite, CompuDoc, and Compubank), but society in 1985 had already progressed to nearly that degree, and Atwood's vision of a future cashless society seems not far off. However, Gilead has regressed considerably in the realm of technology, and indeed has done so as a matter of policy, for it blames science for having contributed to the mess that necessitated a coup (artificial insemination and birth control, toxic chemicals and wastes, nuclear accidents, and so on). In consequence, women in Gilead give birth without anesthetics or surgical assistance; written language has shrunk to pictograms



for all but the elite and their enforcers, the Aunts; the sexes are once again segregated and chaperoned, the women often veiled and restricted to lives without mechanical or even cosmetic aids; and televisions and other machines have only the most curtailed place in daily life. Although some phrases from the time before have lost currency, there is no Orwellian Newspeak.

Nor, in the North America of 2195 when the scholarly symposium takes place in Nunavit to study Gilead, does much appear to have changed from the reader's time. There is a little window dressing in the elevation of ethnic and female academics, but a condescending keynote speaker from England makes clear that colonialism and sexism are still firmly in place. Atwood's interest in the future appears most importantly to have to do with affirming the adage that "the more things change, the more they stay the same," and with issuing a warning that humans are not really that far from nightmarish extensions of the current world. By minimizing the number of differences between her two futures (Gilead and Nunavit) and the present, and by emphasizing that everything in Gilead has historical precedent, Atwood produces a speculative fiction that holds readers close to home and intensifies their nervousness that such things could happen. Good utopian and dystopian fiction depends on the reader's consciousness of the connection between reality and fictional future, if the vision is to have power and point. *The Handmaid's Tale* makes that connection and shows how relevant her cautionary tale is.

Like many other dystopian narratives, *The Handmaid's Tale* conjures up a future based on an extreme extrapolation of contemporary conditions. The novel furnishes standard dystopian features: lack of freedom, relentless surveillance, imposed routine, an abortive escape attempt, and an underground resistance. It has often been compared and contrasted with such dystopian classics as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Evgenii Zamiatin's *We* (1924), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), and the majority of assessments have ranked Atwood's novel on a par with and sometimes even superior to those classics.

*The Handmaid's Tale* has been extensively discussed by literary scholars. Some critics have argued that it failed as a dystopia, suggesting that the world of Gilead is utterly improbable and underdeveloped, and complaining that Atwood had sacrificed serious social criticism to romance rhetoric, mere entertainment, and/or costume Gothicism. Some felt that *The Handmaid's Tale* showed a failure of futuristic imagination, evinced in the fact that it modified in the invented future so little of the linguistic, environmental, philosophical, and social framework of the present. Yet, the majority of critics have argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* presents an effective warning against absolutist or despotic systems, using a near-future projection to show the relationship between general power structures or ideologies and the individual. Many critics took the position that Atwood had transformed the genre and produced a feminist dystopia. Ketterer speculated that the difference lay in the fact that Atwood's dystopia moves circularly, rather than linearly as was "traditional," which consequentially blunted the satire and anger with the implication that incarnations of Gilead will keep recurring. He then argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* was successful precisely because of this innovative indirection and understatement, features vilified by impatient critics expecting a more crisply efficient brand of totalitarianism than that of Gilead, a more monstrous oppressor than Commander Fred, and a less tricksterish narrator than Offred. Critics making the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a feminist dystopia often cited as feminist deviations from the male dystopian model the very "subversive" strategies criticized elsewhere as flaws: irrepressible humor, creativity, self-assertion, open-endedness, wordplay, Offred's fluid identity, irony, narrative evasions (including contradictory but equally valorized plot-lines), overthrow of archetypes (such as light for knowledge and darkness for ignorance, disrupted by the Night chapters), and sheer survival.

For some readers the strongest alarm sounded by this novel has been environmental, a concern that links it to many other Atwood pieces. Like many conjurers of the future, Atwood fears for the planet, and her childhood experiences as the daughter of a cheerfully pessimistic entomologist, spending more than half

of each year in the wilds of the Canadian Shield, have given her the ecological documentation to support those fears. In her novel the Gileadeans appear to have pulled back from the environmental abyss in time, but they now err in their extreme tampering with human nature. And, in the appended Historical Notes the dispassionate scholarly observers of Gilead two centuries later are shown to have learned little from Offred's tale. Atwood everywhere asserts humankind's capacity to destroy its surroundings and its species.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is by far Atwood's most influential and best-known contribution to Canadian science fiction, though she has continued to explore speculative or fantastic elements. Her next science-fiction work, the short story "Freeforall," was published in the *Toronto Star* a year after the appearance of *The Handmaid's Tale* and later anthologized in the Canadian science-fiction anthologies *Tesseract*<sup>2</sup> (1987) and *Northern Suns* (1999). It imagines family life a few decades into the early twenty-first century. As in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood envisions some of her audience's worst fears having come to pass, as society has been catastrophically damaged by virulent new forms of sexually transmitted diseases. Like Offred, Sharmayne remembers the time before, with its escalating horrors that provided the impetus for establishing a new order. Just as Gilead was obviously centered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the locale of "Freeforall" is a recognizable one, Toronto. Language has acquired only a few neologisms, and human nature is essentially unaltered.

As in *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is a circularity of cultural experience and a return to gender segregation and chaperoning. The new regime in "Freeforall," like Gilead, requires repression for the putative common good. Similarly, too, the reader is thrust into the middle of the action, presented with references that reveal themselves gradually, so that the reader feels a bit alien and disoriented, then with some dismay catches on. Suicide by hanging in 2026 Toronto mirrors Handmaid suicides in the same era; arranged marriages are a feature of both societies; and the dumping grounds for diseased persons in Freeforall roughly parallel the Colonies in Gilead, a lethal trash heap for the infertile and the rebellious. Sharmayne Pia Veronica Humbolt Grey may be allowed to retain her real name and exercise the power of a First Mother in the new society, but like Offred she is more than half indoctrinated, uncomfortable with her rebel thoughts. Each tale ends unresolved, with the state still in control as the women continue on to their destinies. Where the stories abruptly part company is in the status of the sexes, for Freeforall is a matriarchy, and men are primarily sperm banks to reverse the ravages of disease. The reader's surprise and perhaps amusement at the idea of a future in which husband abuse is rampant and the groom is the orange-blossomed, veiled figure at the marriage altar are as telling an exposure of enduring sexist notions as any of the traditional patriarchal oppressions found in Gilead or in Nunavut two hundred years after.

Atwood's 1992 collection *Good Bones* includes several science-fiction stories. "Homelanding," previously published in *Tesseract*<sup>3</sup> (1990) and included in the *Norton Book of Science Fiction* (1993), also favors the intersection of futurism and feminism. The narrator, who eventually declares herself to be from another planet (Earth, making the Earthling the alien) and is discernibly Canadian, detachedly describes the bodies and sexual distinctions of her species (some have prongs while others have caverns; she is a "cavern person"); her native land, both physically and psychologically; as well as sleep, death, and human funerary customs. In the last of the six sections she names death as the common ground between the residents of her planet and the one she is visiting. She rejects the television science-fiction cliché of asking to be taken to their leader, alluding to the mechanical and technological leaders back home and announcing that she has had quite enough of them. Instead, asserting values considered feminist rather than masculinist, she asks to be taken to the abstract, the diurnal, the deeply basic components of this world: their trees, breakfasts, sunsets, bad dreams, shoes, nouns, fingers, deaths--in other words, the things that are really "worth it" in a society.

"Hardball" announces itself as a speculation on the future and proffers the notion of the future arriving

like a giant, firm ball, a large dome in which living things find shelter from an otherwise sterile and empty Earth. Limited space is the governing issue, requiring a death for every birth, a rationing of food and even air (the rich, as ever, getting the most), and the banishment of cattle and fish. The only aberrations from spatial determination in this bleak scenario are a few stowaway rats. Having presented such a grim vision, the narrator acknowledges the readers' horror but reacts unsympathetically, taunting them to reject this future and order up another, implying that they are stuck with mere variations on an ineluctable future as the consequence of their relentless environmental abuses of the present.

In addition to those two science-fiction stories, there are three stories in *Good Bones* that, atypically for Atwood, do present uncompromised, complete fantasies. "Cold-Blooded" is a letter by a member of a superior insect species back to her sisters on the occasion of her voyage to the planet of Moths, a.k.a. Earth. She observes Earth witheringly through her own understandings and criteria, condescendingly pronouncing its "blood creatures" (human beings) to be primitive, stupidly inclined to prize males over females, not possessed of enough common sense to eat males after mating, unable to pupate, and horribly given to killing Earth's insects. She concludes with the satisfied observation that Earth bugs are nonetheless winning on several fronts (such as crops) and predicts, on the bright side, that when blood creatures have killed themselves through war or overpopulation (a sure thing), insects will prevail on Earth. In its overturning of the traditional order of the Great Chain of Being, "Cold-Blooded" satirically demotes humankind in general and takes an additional satiric shot at male domination. The story, while not futuristic, has premises that are marvelous: an insect letter-writer who is also an interplanetary traveler with full cerebral functioning and a penchant for prediction.

The witty "My Life as a Bat" explores another fantastic transspecies premise, matter-of-factly delivered: that the narrator has been a bat in a previous life. She speculates on the nightmares of a bat, including the mythic reversal (as in *The Handmaid's Tale*) in which dark is life and light/the sun means death. A sense of déjà vu and unusual preferences clue her in to that previous incarnation as a bat, and through bat eyes she mocks the conventions of vampire movies. A pseudo-historical rumination ensues on an alleged World War II plot to use bats to carry bombs to the enemy, a plan rendered unnecessary by the development of the atomic bomb. In the fifth and final segment, titled "Beauty," the narrator entertains the idea that this human life, not her bat life, is the temporary phase, and that she has been sent on a mission for her true species. Longing to return to batdom, she describes its delights and prays for deliverance from evil (that is, humankind). "My Life as a Bat" sustains its fantastical premise, handles it with humor, whimsy, and passion, and incorporates into it an environmental message and implicit appeal to human beings to show compassion to other species.

As Sharon Wilson has demonstrated in *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (1993), allusions to fairy tales and mythic imagery are found throughout Atwood's short and long fiction. Nevertheless, in only one piece is the fairy-tale perspective entirely sustained. In "Unpopular Gals" from *Good Bones* the narrator identifies herself as one of the unpopular stock female figures of fairy-tale notoriety, that sorority of ugly stepsisters, wicked stepmothers, and cruel forest witches. She makes the case, however, for her centrality to the plot--that she actually is the plot, the one who gets things moving and is thus indispensable. Her soliloquy in effect gets to the heart of fairy-tale dynamics, introduces a new angle, and unmasks the core plot of many fairy tales as formulaic and sexist (although neither boring nor allegorically inaccurate). Atwood once again combines fantasy and feminism, as she has combined science fiction and feminism.

Atwood also utilizes science-fiction elements in her novel *The Blind Assassin*, published in 2000 and winner of the prestigious Booker Prize. In *The Blind Assassin* there are three intertwined narratives titled "The Blind Assassin," arranged like Chinese boxes. The outermost of these boxes is Atwood's novel as a whole, the gigantic life narrative of an elderly Ontario resident, Iris Chase Griffen, who is at pains to reveal her secrets in a complex, tantalizingly oblique way. Her deceptively linear, realistic memoir



focuses particularly on her childhood and early adulthood with her sister Laura, who apparently wrote a novel published posthumously by Iris. Laura's novel is the second or middle "Blind Assassin" text, the subject of which is a forbidden romance in Depression-era Canada between a young political agitator on the lam and his upper-crust girlfriend, both unnamed. Apart from sex and wary conversations, their furtive rendezvous produce installments of the third, innermost "Blind Assassin" tale, a science-fiction concoction with which the fugitive seeks to hold his lady love's attention, rather like a male Scheherazade. This interior, incomplete, serialized novel is a study in the evolution of a science-fiction plot. The man is already a published writer of pulp science fiction, and at nearly every tryst he presents his beloved with several narrative elements and possibilities, inviting her participation in the construction of his tale. Repeatedly the woman expresses a preference for less technological and more romantic options: deserts rather than outer space, mythological trappings over science-fiction toys such as ray guns. While she usually defers to her lover's professional experience in the genre, at several critical points she offers a dramatically different version of his scenario, a female rewriting of the male conventions of science fiction and fantasy.

This innermost "Blind Assassin" tale concerns the fantasy city of Sakiel-Norn, on the planet Zycron, ruled by tyrannical Snilfards and oppressed Ygniroids. Atwood, through her lover-storytellers, imagines backward (a world that predates this one by several millennia), and she draws direct lines between her fantasy world and this one (Zycronites being slated eventually to colonize Earth and be human forebears). Another clandestine love affair takes place: this couple, artfully parallel to the lovers in each of the two surrounding "Blind Assassin" narratives, are a sacrificial virgin, daughter of the elite (her tongue cut out to avoid any protests), and a blind hired killer, one of a cadre of enslaved children who have been blinded by their forced labors on intricate carpets and so driven to lines of work requiring manual but not visual skills: prostitution, thievery, and paid assassination by the deft and silent cutting of throats in the dark. The lovers together escape the doomed city, which is about to be crushed by invading barbarians, and then face other challenges. Finally, two conclusions--female/happy versus male/ tragic--compete, as the lovers in the framing novel disagree on the proper ending for the story born of their assignments.

When the man's grim, "true to life" version of the Sakiel-Norn love affair "trumps" her sentimental one, he comes back with a different story altogether, promising to deliver the happy ending she craves. This other tale, never fleshed out or even titled, is much more standard science-fiction material: a narrative of the planet Xenor and its Lizard Men, of space fleets and star wars, of zorch-ray guns and metallic space suits, of interplanetary travel and alien forms of being, such as the luscious Peach Women. The "happy" ending he cynically offers is a claustrophobic vision of relentless and boring bliss on the Planet Aa'A, but again the woman storyteller resists; she gestures toward deconstructing the man's version by telling him that he has got it all wrong. In the end only a first installment of the innermost "Blind Assassin" is published by the activist on the run, purely to make some quick money. To his sweetheart's disappointment, it is a shoddy hybrid of the Zycron and Xenor stories, in which the pivotal love plot and the admirable blind assassin have been excised in favor of clichéd science-fiction paraphernalia. Although the woman has tried to accord the tale some great significance both as a document of their love and later as proof of her lover's survival, the man rightly dismisses this final version as "tripe," not worth a concluding installment.

Reviewers of *The Blind Assassin* have varied widely in their opinions of the quality of the innermost "Blind Assassin" tale as science fiction, the degree of success in its integration into the larger narratives of the same name, and the usefulness of that strand in Atwood's tapestry as a whole. Some reviewers have paid the science-fiction tale little or no attention, or have given peculiarly muddled and flawed little summaries almost as an aside to the dominant narratives of Iris's life and Laura's novel. The Zycron and Xenor stories, to be sure, comprise less than ten percent of the total narrative; they are included in only six of the fifteen sections of Atwood's novel. However, whether "pulp" or "literature" (it has been called

both "drivel" and "masterful"), the science-fiction segments of *The Blind Assassin* play a crucial role as a structural key to the many-layered fiction into which they are folded. Further, the multidimensional blindness at the heart of the core story joins many other elements--sacrificial females, doomed lovers, vicious exploitations, all sorts of assassinations, silence and secrets, flight and freedom, death, memory, and myth--in reverberating importantly through the two "Blind Assassin" narratives that encase it (and also through Atwood's entire body of work). In *The Blind Assassin*, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood uses and subverts science fiction to play with ideas of authorship, to dissect social and historical realities, and to present readers with a powerfully allegorical and cautionary tale.

Although only a small portion of Atwood's work can be truly classified as science fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* and the scattering of other speculative work that she has published so far have helped to make readers aware of Canadian science fiction. Certainly, science-fiction conventions have influenced her work and provided her with another means of exploring gender politics and environmental issues, which are the two paramount concerns that inform Atwood's futurist and fantasy fiction.

#### Papers:

See also the Atwood entry in *DLB 53: Canadian Writers Since 1960, First Series*.

Margaret Atwood's papers are held by the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto.

#### FURTHER READINGS:

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

#### Interviews:

- Katherine Govier, "Q & Q Interview: Margaret Atwood," *Quill & Quire*, 51 (September 1985): 66-67.
- Sue Matheson, "An Interview with Margaret Atwood," *Herizons* (January/February 1986): 20-22.
- Cathy N. Davidson, "A Feminist '1984': Margaret Atwood Talks About Her Exciting New Novel," *Ms.* (February 1986): 24-26.
- Beryl Donaldson Langer, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," *Australian-Canadian Studies*, 6 (1988): 125-136.
- Geoff Hancock, "Tightrope-Walking over Niagara Falls," in *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, edited by Earl G. Ingersoll (Willowdale, Ontario: Firefly, 1990), pp. 191-220.

#### Biographies:

- Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography* (Toronto: ECW, 1998).
- Rosemary Sullivan, *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998).

#### References:

- Raffaella Baccolini, "Breaking the Boundaries: Gender, Genre, and Dystopia," in *Par una definizione dell'utopia: Metodologie e discipline a confronto*, edited by Nadia Minerva (Ravenna,

- Italy: Longo, 1992), pp. 137-146.
- Chinmoy Banerjee, "Alice in Disneyland: Criticism as Commodity in *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 41 (Summer 1990): 74-92.
  - Frances Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).
  - Nancy Topping Bazin, "Women and Revolution in Dystopian Fiction: Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Selected Essays: International Conference on Representing Revolution 1989*, edited by John Michael Crafton (Carrollton: West Georgia College, 1991), pp. 115-127.
  - Larry W. Caldwell, "Wells, Orwell, and Atwood: (EPI)Logic and Eu/Utopia," *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 33 (Winter 1992): 333-345.
  - Glenn Deer, *Postmodern Canadian Fiction and the Rhetoric of Authority* (Montreal & Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), pp. 110- 129.
  - Chris Ferns, "The Value/s of Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Anti-Utopian Tradition," *Dalhousie Review*, 69 (Fall 1989): 373-382.
  - Peter Fitting, "The Turn from Utopia in Recent Feminist Fiction," in *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, edited by Libby Falk and Sarah Webster Goodwin, *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 32 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), pp. 141- 158.
  - John Fitzsimmons, "'No Fate but What We Make': Complicity and Termination in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Perspectives on the Canadian Fantastic*, edited by Allan Weiss (Toronto: ACCSFF, 1998), pp. 25-34.
  - Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).
  - Dorothy Jones, "Not Much Balm in Gilead," *Commonwealth*, 11 (Spring 1989): 31-43.
  - Patricia Kane, "A Woman's Dystopia: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 185 (November 1988): 9- 10.
  - David Ketterer, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A Contextual Dystopia," *Science-Fiction Studies*, 16 (July 1989): 209-217.
  - Martin Kuester, *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 124-152.
  - Amin Malak, "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition," *Canadian Literature*, 112 (Spring 1987): 9-16.
  - Patrick D. Murphy, "Reducing the Dystopian Distance: Pseudo-Documentary Framing in Near-Future Fiction," *Science-Fiction Studies*, 17 (March 1990): 25-40.
  - Reingard M. Nischik, "Back to the Future: Margaret Atwood's Anti-Utopian Vision in *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Englische-Amerikanische Studien*, 9 (1987): 139-148.
  - Ken Norris, "'The University of Denay, Nunavit': The 'Historical Notes' in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 20 (Autumn 1990): 357-364.
  - Roberta Rubenstein, "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, edited by Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 101-112.
  - Karen F. Stein, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Scheherazade in Dystopia," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 61 (Winter 1991): 269-279.
  - Catharine R. Stimpson, "Atwood Woman," *Nation* (31 May 1986): 764-767.
  - Ruud Teeuwen, "Dystopia's Point of No Return," in *Approaches to Teaching Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Other Works* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1996), pp. 114- 121.
  - Lee Briscoe Thompson, *Scarlet Letters: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: ECW, 1997).
  - John Updike, "Expeditions to Gilead and Seegard," *New Yorker*, 135 (12 May 1986): 118-123.
  - Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993).
  - Diane S. Wood, "Bradbury and Atwood: Exile as Rational Decision," in *The Literature of*

*Emigration and Exile*, edited by James Whitlark and Wendell Aycock, *Studies in Comparative Literature* 23 (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1992), pp. 131-142.

## RELATED INFORMATION

See also:

- "Canadian Writers Since 1960,First Series"

## Source Citation

Thompson, Lee Briscoe. "Margaret (Eleanor) Atwood." *Canadian Fantasy and Science-Fiction Writers*. Ed. Douglas Ivison. Detroit: Gale Group, 2002. *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 251. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 27 July 2010.

Document URL

[http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.middlebury.edu/ps/i.do?  
&id=GALE%7CH1200010390&v=2.1&u=vol\\_m58c&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w](http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.middlebury.edu/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CH1200010390&v=2.1&u=vol_m58c&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w)

**Gale Document Number:** GALEIH1200010390

---