Margaret Atwood

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, CC OOnt FRSC (born November 18, 1939) is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, and environmental activist. She is a winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and Prince of Asturias Award for Literature, has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize five times, winning once, and has been a finalist for the Governor General's Award several times, winning twice. In 2001 she was inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame. She is also a founder of the Writers' Trust of Canada, a non-profit literary organization that seeks to encourage Canada's writing community. Among innumerable contributions to Canadian literature, she was a founding trustee of the Griffin Poetry Prize.

Atwood is also the inventor, and developer, of the LongPen and associated technologies that facilitate the remote robotic writing of documents. She is the Co-Founder and a Director of Syngrafii Inc. (formerly Unotchit Inc.), a company that she started in 2004 to develop, produce and distribute the LongPen technology. She holds various patents related to the LongPen technologies.

While she is best known for her work as a novelist, she has also published fifteen books of poetry. Many of her poems have been inspired by myths and fairy tales, which have been interests of hers from an early age. Atwood has published short stories in Tamarack Review, Alphabet, Harper’s, CBC Anthology, Ms., Saturday Night, and many other magazines. She has also published four collections of stories and three collections of unclassifiable short prose works.

1 Early life

Born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, Atwood was the second of three children of Margaret Dorothy (née Killam), a former dietitian and nutritionist from Woodville, Nova Scotia, and Carl Edmund Atwood, an entomologist. Due to her father’s ongoing research in forest entomology, Atwood spent much of her childhood in the backwoods of northern Quebec and traveling back and forth between Ottawa, Sault Ste. Marie, and Toronto. She did not attend school full-time until she was eight years old. She became a voracious reader of literature, Dell pocketbook mysteries, Grimm’s Fairy Tales, Canadian animal stories, and comic books. She attended Leaside High School in Leaside, Toronto, and graduated in 1957. Atwood began writing at the age of six.

2 Education

She realized she wanted to write professionally when she was 16. In 1957, she began studying at Victoria College in the University of Toronto, where she published poems and articles in Acta Victoriana, the college literary journal. Her professors included Jay Macpherson and Northrop Frye. She graduated in 1961 with a Bachelor of Arts in English (honours) and a minor in philosophy and French.

In late 1961, after winning the E.J. Pratt Medal for her privately printed book of poems, Double Persephone, she began graduate studies at Harvard’s Radcliffe College with a Woodrow Wilson fellowship. She obtained a master’s degree (MA) from Radcliffe in 1962 and pursued further graduate studies at Harvard University for two years but did not finish her dissertation, “The English Metaphysical Romance.” She has taught at the University of British Columbia (1965), Sir George Williams University in Montreal (1967–68), the University of Alberta (1969–70), York University in Toronto (1971–72), the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa (1985), where she was visiting M.F.A. Chair, and New York University, where she was Berg Professor of English.

In June 2011, Atwood was conferred with an honorary degree of Doctor of Literature (honoris causa) from the National University of Ireland, Galway. On November 16, 2012, Atwood received an honorary degree from the Royal Military College of Canada. She also holds honorary degrees from several other Canadian universities, as well as Oxford University, Cambridge University, and the Sorbonne.

3 Personal life

In 1968, Atwood married Jim Polk; they were divorced in 1973. She formed a relationship with fellow novelist Graeme Gibson soon after and moved to a farm near Alliston, Ontario, north of Toronto, where their daughter Eleanor Jess Atwood Gibson was born in 1976. The family returned to Toronto in 1980.

Regarding her religion, Atwood was a noted humanist, and in 1987 she was named Humanist of the Year by the American Humanist Association.
4  Inventor of the LongPen

At 4am on a spring morning in Denver in 2004, whilst on the paperback tour for her novel *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood conceived the concept of a remote robotic writing technology, the LongPen, that would allow her to conduct her book tours without being physically present. She quickly founded a company, Unotchit Inc., to develop, produce and distribute her new technologies. By 2011 Unotchit Inc. shifted its market focus into business and legal transactions and was producing a range of products, for a variety of remote writing applications, based on the LongPen technologies and renamed itself to Syngrafi Inc. As of September 2014, Atwood is still Co-Founder and a Director of Syngrafi Inc. and holder of various patents related to the LongPen technology.[5][6][7][18][19][20] *Breakfast* she explained that science fiction, as opposed to what she herself wrote, was “talking squids in outer space.” The latter phrase particularly rankled advocates of science fiction and frequently recurs when her writing is discussed.[24]

Atwood has since said that she does at times write social science fiction and that *Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* can be designated as such. She clarified her meaning on the difference between speculative and science fiction, admitting that others use the terms interchangeably: “For me, the science fiction label belongs on books with things in them that we can’t yet do…. speculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to hand and that takes place on Planet Earth.” She said that science fiction narratives give a writer the ability to explore themes in ways that realistic fiction cannot.[25]

5  Critical reception

*The Economist* called her a “scintillating wordsmith” and an “expert literary critic”, but commented that her logic does not match her prose in *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, a book which commences with the conception of debt and its kinship with justice. Atwood claims that this concept is ingrained in the human psyche, that it is apparent in early historical peoples, who associated their understanding of debt with that of justice, ideas that are typically exemplified by a female deity. Atwood holds that, with the rise of Ancient Greece, and especially the installation of the court system detailed in *Aeschylus’ Oresteia*, this deity has been replaced by a more thorough conception of debt.

In 1984, she was the subject of a documentary film by Michael Rubbo, *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*. In 2003, Shaftesbury Films produced an anthology series, *The Atwood Stories*, which dramatized six of Atwood’s short stories.

6  Atwood and science fiction

*The Handmaid’s Tale* received the first Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987. The award is given for the best science fiction novel that was first published in the United Kingdom during the previous year. It was also nominated for the 1986 Nebula Award, and the 1987 Prometheus Award, both science fiction awards.

Atwood has resisted the suggestion that *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* are science fiction, suggesting to *The Guardian* that they are speculative fiction instead: “Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen.”[16] She told the *Book of the Month Club: "Oryx and Crake is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians."[24] On *BBC*

7  Atwood and feminism

Atwood, who was surrounded by the intellectual dialogue of the female faculty members at Victoria College at University of Toronto, often portrays female characters dominated by patriarchy in her novels.[26] Still, Atwood denies that *The Edible Woman*, for example, published in 1969 and coinciding with the early second wave of the feminist movement, is feminist and claims that she wrote it four years before the movement. Atwood believes that the feminist label can only be applied to writers who consciously work within the framework of the feminist movement.[27]

8  Contribution to the theorizing of Canadian identity

Atwood’s contributions to the theorizing of Canadian identity have garnered attention both in Canada and internationally. Her principal work of literary criticism, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, is considered outdated in Canada but remains the standard introduction to Canadian literature in Canadian Studies programs internationally.[28] In *Survival*, Atwood postulates that Canadian literature, and by extension Canadian identity, is characterized by the symbol of survival.[29] This symbol is expressed in the omnipresent use of “victim positions” in Canadian literature. These positions represent a scale of self-consciousness and self-actualization for the victim in the “victor/victim” relationship.[30] The “victor” in these scenarios may be other humans, nature, the wilderness or other external and internal factors which oppress the victim.[30] Atwood’s *Survival* bears the influence of Northrop Frye’s theory of garrison mentality; Atwood instrumentalizes Frye’s concept to a critical tool.[31] More recently, Atwood has continued her exploration of the implications
of Canadian literary themes for Canadian identity in lectures such as *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995).

Atwood’s contribution to the theorizing of Canada is not limited to her non-fiction works. Several of her works, including *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* and *Surfacing*, are examples of what postmodern literary theorist Linda Hutcheon calls “Historiographic Metafiction”. In such works, Atwood explicitly explores the relation of history and narrative and the processes of creating history.

Ultimately, according to her theories in works such as *Survival* and her exploration of similar themes in her fiction, Atwood considers Canadian literature as the expression of Canadian identity. According to this literature, Canadian identity has been defined by a fear of nature, by settler history and by unquestioned adherence to the community.

## 9 Atwood and animals

Margaret Atwood has repeatedly made observations about our relationships to animals in her works. In *Surfacing*, one character remarks about eating animals: “The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people...And we eat them, out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life.” Some characters in her books link sexual oppression to meat-eating and consequently give up meat-eating. In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood’s character Marian identifies with hunted animals and cries after hearing her fiancé’s experience of hunting and eviscerating a rabbit. Marian stops eating meat but then later returns to it.

In *Cat’s Eye*, the narrator recognizes the similarity between a turkey and a baby. She looks at “the turkey, which resembles a trussed, headless baby. It has thrown off its disguise as a meal and has revealed itself to me for what it is, a large dead bird.” In Atwood’s *Surfacing*, a dead heron represents purposeless killing and prompts thoughts about other senseless deaths.

## 10 Chamber opera

In March 2008 Atwood accepted her first chamber opera commission. *Pauline*, a chamber opera in two acts composed by Tobin Stokes to a libretto by Atwood premiered on May 23, 2014 at Vancouver’s York Theatre. Commissioned by City Opera of Vancouver, the opera is set in *Vancouver* in March 1913 during the final days in the life of the Canadian writer and performer Pauline Johnson.

## 11 Political involvement

In her dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* all the horrible developments take place in the United States near Boston, while Canada is portrayed as the only hope for an escape. This reflects her status of being “in the vanguard of Canadian anti-Americanism of the 1960s and 1970s.” Critics have seen Gilead (the U.S.) as a repressive regime and the mistreated Handmaid as Canada. During the debate in 1987 over a free trade agreement between Canada and the United States, Atwood spoke out against the deal, and wrote an essay opposing the agreement.

Although Atwood’s politics are described as being left-wing by those on the right, she has indicated in interviews that she considers herself a Red Tory in the historical sense of the term. Atwood and her partner Graeme Gibson are strong supporters of Green Party of Canada leader Elizabeth May. Atwood has strong views on environmental issues, and she and her partner are the joint honorary presidents of the Rare Bird Club within BirdLife International. She has been chair of the Writers’ Union of Canada and president of PEN Canada, and is currently a vice president of PEN International. In the 2008 federal election she attended a rally for the Bloc Québécois, a Quebec separatist party, because of her support for their position on the arts, and stated that she would vote for the party if she lived in a riding in Quebec in which the choice was between the Bloc and the Conservatives. In a *Globe and Mail* editorial, she urged Canadians to vote for any other party to stop a Conservative majority.

Atwood celebrated her 70th birthday at a gala dinner at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, marking the final stop of her international tour to promote *The Year of the Flood*. She stated that she had chosen to attend the event because the city has been home to one of Canada’s most ambitious environmental reclamation programs: “When people ask if there’s hope (for the environment), I say, if Sudbury can do it, so can you. Having been a symbol of desolation, it’s become a symbol of hope.”

Atwood’s reputed left wing attitudes may have been changing in recent times. Despite calls for a boycott by Gazan students, and a barrage of mail from other quarters, some of it strongly anti-Semitic, Atwood visited Israel and accepted the $1,000,000 Dan David Prize along with Indian author Amitav Ghosh at Tel Aviv University in May 2010. Atwood commented that “we don’t do cultural boycotts.”

In *The Wake of the Flood*, a documentary film by Canadian director Ron Mann released in October 2010, followed Atwood on the unusual book tour for her novel *The Year of the Flood*. During this innovative book tour, Atwood created a theatrical version of her novel, with performers borrowed from the local areas she was visiting. The docu-
mentary is described as “a fly-on-the-wall film vérité.”[45]
Since February 2013, Atwood made it clear via Twitter that she strongly opposed the University of Toronto putting in an artificial turf field and hinted that she might write the university out of her will if it proceeded with the plan. This was not the first time she had openly challenged the university.[46]

12 Future Library Project
Atwood will be the first contributor to the Future Library project. Therefore, she is currently writing a story that will only be read in 2114. She thinks that readers will probably need a paleo-anthropologist to translate some parts of her story.[47]

13 Works

14 Awards and honours
Atwood has won more than 55 awards in Canada and internationally, including:

15 Further reading

16 References
17 External links

- Official website
- Margaret Atwood at British Council: Literature
- Margaret Atwood at the Internet Movie Database
- An interview with Margaret Atwood, Narrative Magazine, (Fall 2010).
- The Power of the Pen by: Margaret Atwood at the 2005 PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature.
- The 48th Congress of International PEN, a conversation with Margaret Atwood, Grace Paley, and Norman Mailer, 1986
- Reading of her poem From an Italian Postcard Factory
- Margaret Atwood: Bio, excerpts, interviews and articles in the archives of the Prague Writers’ Festival
- Margaret Atwood at the Internet Speculative Fiction Database
- The Margaret Atwood Society home page
- Profile from The Guardian
- CBC Digital Archives – Margaret Atwood: Queen of CanLit
- Margaret Atwood Papers at Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto
- Audio: Margaret Atwood in conversationon the BBC World Service discussion show The Forum
- Margaret Atwood at University of Toronto Libraries
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18.2 Images

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