

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



MARGARET ATWOOD

Edited by Coral Ann Howells



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The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood's international celebrity has given a new visibility to Canadian literature in English. This *Companion* provides a comprehensive critical account of Atwood's writing across the wide range of genres within which she has worked for the past forty years, while paying attention to her Canadian cultural context and the multiple dimensions of her celebrity. The main concern is with Atwood the writer, but there is also Atwood the media star and public performer, cultural critic, environmentalist and human rights spokeswoman, social and political satirist, and mythmaker. This immensely varied profile is addressed in a series of chapters which cover biographical, textual, and contextual issues. The contributors consider recurrent topics, for what emerges through the multiplicity of Atwood's voices, personas, and formal experiments are the continuities in her work across decades and across genres. The Introduction contains an analysis of dominant trends in Atwood criticism since the 1970s, while the essays by twelve leading international Atwood critics represent the wide range of different perspectives in current Atwood scholarship.

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BRANKO GORJUP is the chief editor of the Peter Paul Bilingual series of Contemporary Canadian Poetry (English/Italian), which includes a volume on Margaret Atwood (2000). He has also edited several anthologies of short fiction by Canadian authors and a book of essays by Northrop Frye, *Mythologizing Canada* (1997), as well as a special issue of *Nuovi Argomenti* (2003) featuring Canadian contemporary writing in English. His most recent edited collection is *White Gloves of the Doorman: The Works of Leon Rooke* (2004). He has taught Canadian literature at universities in Canada and Italy, and currently lives in Los Angeles and Toronto.

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and co-editor of *Approaches to Teaching Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" and Other Works* (1996). From 1999 to 2001 she was President of the Margaret Atwood Society.

REINGARD M. NISCHIK is Professor of American Literature at the University of Constance, Germany. She has published numerous essays and is the author and editor of twenty books on Canadian, American, and comparative literature. Since 1992 she has been Managing Editor of the interdisciplinary journal *Zeitschrift fuer Kanada-Studien*, and since 1996 editor of the book series *European Studies in American Literature and Culture* for Camden House, New York. Her edited collection *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (2000) received the Best Book Award of the Margaret Atwood Society.

ELEONORA RAO is Associate Professor of English at the University of Salerno. She is the author of *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood* (1994) and *Heart of a Stranger: Contemporary Women Writers and the Metaphor of Exile* (2002). She has published numerous essays on contemporary women writers and has co-edited *Letteratura e femminismi*, an anthology of Anglo-American feminist theories in translation (2000).

PILAR SOMACARRERA teaches English and Canadian literature in the Department of English at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. She has translated Margaret Atwood's *Power Politics* into Spanish (2000) and is the author of a book in Spanish on the topic of power, *Margaret Atwood: Poder y Feminismo* (2000), as well as numerous articles on other Canadian women writers.

DAVID STAINES is Professor of English at the University of Ottawa. He is the editor of the *Journal of Canadian Poetry* and of the New Canadian Library. His books include *The Forty-Ninth and Other Parallels: Contemporary Canadian Perspectives* (1986), *Beyond the Provinces: Literary Canada at Century's End* (1995), *Northrop Frye on Canada* (with Jean O'Grady, 2003), and *Marshall McLuhan: Understanding Me* (with Stephanie McLuhan, 2003). In 1998, he received the Lorne Pierce Medal for distinguished service to Canadian literature from the Royal Society of Canada.

COOMI S. VEVAINA is Professor of English at the University of Mumbai, India. She is the author of *Re/Membering Selves: Alienation and Survival in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and in the Manawaka Novels of Margaret Laurence* (1996). She has written numerous articles on Canadian writing and is co-editor of several essay collections, including *Intersexions: Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian Women's Writing* (1996), and *Margaret*

Atwood: The Shape-Shifter (1998). In 2004, she received the Award of Merit from the Indian Association of Canadian Studies.

LORRAINE YORK teaches Canadian literature at McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada. She is the author of a book about photography and Canadian fiction, *The Other Side of Dailiness* (1988) and of *Front Lines: The Fiction of Timothy Findley* (2002). She has also edited *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction and Novels* (1995) and *Rethinking Women's Collaborative Writing* (2002). She is currently writing a book on Canadian literary celebrity.

SHARON R. WILSON is Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Northern Colorado and founding co-President of the Margaret Atwood Society. In addition to articles on Atwood, Doris Lessing, Jean Rhys, Samuel Beckett, and other writers, she is the author of *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (1993), co-editor of *Approaches to Teaching Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" and Other Works* (1996), and editor of *Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction* (2003).

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NOTE ON EDITIONS USED

In quoting from Margaret Atwood's novels, poems, and short stories, contributors to this volume have used a variety of British, Canadian, and American editions, usually paperbacks when available. Details of editions used are included in the endnotes to every chapter.

ABBREVIATIONS

AG	<i>Alias Grace</i>
BA	<i>The Blind Assassin</i>
BE	<i>Bluebeard's Egg</i>
BH	<i>Bodily Harm</i>
CE	<i>Cat's Eye</i>
DG	<i>Dancing Girls</i>
EW	<i>The Edible Woman</i>
GB	<i>Good Bones</i>
HT	<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>
JSM	<i>The Journals of Susanna Moodie</i>
LBM	<i>Life Before Man</i>
LO	<i>Lady Oracle</i>
MBH	<i>Morning in the Burned House</i>
MD	<i>Murder in the Dark</i>
NWD	<i>Negotiating with the Dead</i>
O&C	<i>Oryx and Crake</i>
PP	<i>Power Politics</i>
PU	<i>Procedures for Underground</i>
RB	<i>The Robber Bride</i>
S	<i>Surfacing</i>
SP	<i>Selected Poems</i>
SP11	<i>Selected Poems 11</i>
ST	<i>Strange Things</i>
SW	<i>Second Words</i>
THP	<i>Two-Headed Poems</i>
WT	<i>Wilderness Tips</i>
YAH	<i>You Are Happy</i>

MARGARET ATWOOD CHRONOLOGY

- 1939 Margaret Eleanor Atwood born 18 November, in Ottawa, Canada.
- 1940–45 Family based in Ottawa, but spends long periods every year in the bush of northern Ontario and Quebec, as her father an entomologist; they live in Sault Ste. Marie (1945).
- 1946 Family moves to Toronto, though summers spent up north, and Atwood only begins attending school regularly in 1951.
- 1952–57 Attends Leaside High School, where she writes a column for school newspaper; at 16 she “becomes a poet”; works as summer camp counsellor.
- 1957–61 Attends Victoria College, University of Toronto; publishes stories and poems in college literary journal and designs posters and programmes for college drama society; first poem accepted by *The Canadian Forum* ; begins reading her poems at the Bohemian Embassy Coffeehouse; graduates (1961) with honors degree in English, and wins Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to Radcliffe College (later part of Harvard University).
- 1961 *Double Persephone* (privately published chapbook) wins University of Toronto E. J. Pratt Medal.
- 1961–63 Attends Radcliffe College, where she gains MA and begins doctoral studies at Harvard University.
- 1963–64 Returns to Toronto, where she works at market research company; begins her first novel (unpublished); first trip to England and France in summer, 1964.
- 1964–65 Moves to Vancouver, to lecture in English at the University of British Columbia; drafts *The Edible Woman* and writes fourteen short stories and over fifty poems.
- 1965 Returns to Harvard to continue PhD research (thesis not completed).

- 1966 *The Circle Game* published, which wins Governor-General's Award for Poetry (1967).
- 1967 Marries James Polk, an American postgraduate student at Harvard; they move to Montreal for a year, where Atwood lectures in English at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia).
- 1968 *The Animals in That Country*; moves to Edmonton, Alberta.
- 1969 *The Edible Woman*; teaches creative writing at University of Alberta.
- 1970 *The Journals of Susanna Moodie and Procedures for Underground*; Atwood and Polk spend the year in England and France.
- 1971 *Power Politics*; return to Toronto, where Atwood is Assistant Professor at York University; joins board of directors of House of Anansi Press (1971-73).
- 1972 *Surfacing and Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*; Atwood is writer-in-residence at Massey College, Toronto (1972-73).
- 1973 Atwood and Polk are divorced; Atwood moves with Graeme Gibson to a farm in Alliston, Ontario; receives her first honorary doctoral degree from Trent University, Ontario.
- 1974 *You Are Happy*; TV script "The Servant Girl" for Canadian Broadcasting Commission; cartoon artist for *This Magazine*.
- 1976 *Selected Poems* (Oxford) and *Lady Oracle*; daughter Eleanor Jess is born.
- 1977 *Dancing Girls and Days of the Rebels: 1815-1840*; special Atwood issue of *The Malahat Review*, the first critical survey of her work.
- 1978 *Two-Headed Poems* and *Up in the Tree*; Atwood's first of many world book promotion tours (Paris, Afghanistan, India, Australia); family moves to Scotland, where Gibson is writer-in-residence at University of Edinburgh for three months.
- 1979 *Life Before Man*.
- 1980 *Anna's Pet*; family returns to Toronto; Atwood elected Vice-President of the Writers' Union of Canada.
- 1981 *Bodily Harm* and *True Stories*; wins Molson Prize and Guggenheim Fellowship; becomes a Companion of the Order of Canada; President of the Writers' Union.
- 1982 *Second Words: Collected Critical Prose; The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (co-ed., with William Toye).

- 1983 *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems* and *Bluebeard's Egg*; receives honorary doctorate from University of Toronto; family moves to Norfolk (November 83–March 84), then to West Berlin (March–May 84).
- 1984 *Interlunar*; return to Toronto (summer 84); elected President of PEN International, Canadian Centre (English-speaking) (1984–86).
- 1985 *The Handmaid's Tale*, which wins Governor-General's Award for Fiction (1986), Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction, Toronto Arts Award, *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Award; Atwood is Visiting Chair of Creative Writing at Tuscaloosa, Alabama.
- 1986 *Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New, 1976–1986* (Oxford) and *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (co-ed., with Robert Weaver); Atwood holds Berg (Visiting) Chair at New York University.
- 1987 Edits *The CanLit Foodbook*, in aid of PEN International; elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; writer-in-residence at Macquarie University, Sydney.
- 1988 *Cat's Eye*.
- 1989 *Selected Poems: 1966–1984* (Oxford) and *For the Birds*; wins Canadian Booksellers' Association Award; writer-in-residence at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas.
- 1990 Attends Berlin Film Festival for premiere of Volker Schlöndorff's film of *The Handmaid's Tale*.
- 1991 *Wilderness Tips*; Clarendon Lectures at University of Oxford; family spends winter in France (1991–92).
- 1992 *Good Bones*.
- 1993 *The Robber Bride*; Atwood is named Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts and des Lettres by Government of France.
- 1995 *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, *Morning in the Burned House*, and *Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut*; *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (co-ed., with Robert Weaver); series of radio interviews in French with Quebec writer Victor-Lévy Beaulieu.
- 1996 *Alias Grace*, which wins Giller Prize.
- 1997 *In Search of Alias Grace*.
- 1998 *Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965–1995* (Virago); receives honorary doctorate from University of Oxford.

MARGARET ATWOOD CHRONOLOGY

- 2000 *The Blind Assassin*, which wins Booker Prize; Empson Lectures at University of Cambridge; attends premiere in Copenhagen of Poul Ruders's opera *The Handmaid's Tale*.
- 2001 Receives honorary doctorate from University of Cambridge.
- 2002 *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*.
- 2003 *Oryx and Crake* and *Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes*; attends London premiere of *The Handmaid's Tale* opera.
- 2004 *Bottle* (Hay Festival Press) and *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent, 1982–2004*; "Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye" international symposium, University of Ottawa; Toronto premiere of *The Handmaid's Tale* opera; receives honorary doctorate from Harvard University.
- 2005 *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing, 1970–2005*; receives honorary doctorate from Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris; *The Penelopiad*.
- 2006 *The Tent*.

This chronology shows only a selection of Atwood's numerous national and international literary awards and of her many honorary doctoral degrees.

INTRODUCTION

CORAL ANN HOWELLS

Introducing Margaret Atwood

In November 2004 Margaret Atwood and Dame Gillian Beer engaged in a public conversation about her writing at the British Academy in London, a very “Establishment” literary event, where they discussed the image of the labyrinth as an appropriate description of the processes of writing novels and reading them. Two months later, Atwood appeared on a popular Canadian television show, rigged out in full ice hockey gear, showing the host, Richard Mercer, how to deflect a puck in Canada’s favorite national sport. These two images of Atwood, as internationally famous writer talking seriously with a Cambridge professor about the mysteries of her craft, and the other as Canadian celebrity advertising her national identity in a playful masquerade, illustrates the combination of high seriousness and witty ironic vision which is the hallmark of Atwood’s literary production. In this book, our primary concern is with Margaret Atwood the writer, but there is also Atwood the literary celebrity, media star, and public performer, Atwood the cultural critic, social historian, environmentalist, and human rights spokeswoman, and Atwood the political satirist and cartoonist. The chapters in this volume address all these features in the Atwood profile, as they consider her career from a variety of perspectives and with very different emphases, though it is her Canadianness and her international appeal as an imaginative writer which are the two *leitmotifs*.

Atwood is a popular writer; as she has often said, “I write for people who like to read books,”¹ and her novels are bestsellers all over the world. They are also taught in schools and colleges all over the world on a wide range of courses: English literature, Canadian and postcolonial literature, American literature (in the United States, where Atwood is a “North American” or sometimes an “American” writer), as well as women’s studies, gender studies, and science fiction courses. Our aim in this book is to encourage students

to see more – not only in individual Atwood novels, short stories or poems which they happen to be studying, but also to place any single Atwood text or selection of texts in context, in relation to her other work and in a broader framework of contemporary issues and critical approaches. Appropriately for Atwood, we have assembled an international array of contributors here – there are critics from Canada, Britain, Australia, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, South Asia, and Spain – all of us Atwoodians who are engaged in this collaborative project which illustrates the variety of emphases in current Atwood scholarship.

This book does not follow a chronological design, but is arranged round a set of recurrent themes, for what emerges overwhelmingly through the multiplicity of Atwood's voices and personas and her formal experiments with language and literary conventions are the continuities across four decades of her writing. Most of the topics here have been visited before. After all, there is a huge international Atwood academic critical industry, and the Margaret Atwood Society Newsletter publishes annual updates of scholarly works on Atwood – articles and books – which average over fifty per year. However, revisiting these same topics from different critical and theoretical angles (e.g. recent emphases on postmodernism, postcolonialism, and environmentalism) and in the light of Atwood's own continuous production, may help to re-evaluate the major dynamics in her work.

The *Companion* and its chapters

To give a brief overview of this book: the first two chapters are biographical and literary, setting Atwood in her Canadian context and analyzing her role as international literary celebrity. The next five chapters are concerned with important topics with which Atwood engaged at the beginning of her career and to which she has returned again and again, exploring, expanding, and explaining these in her fiction, poetry, and essays. Chapter 8 is devoted to Atwood's language as it analyzes her distinctively Canadian brand of ironic humor; this is followed by three chapters which take an explicitly generic approach, looking at her poetry, short stories, and dystopian narratives, and highlighting her experiments across genre boundaries. The [final chapter](#) is the other "bookend" which balances the [first chapter](#) by offering a retrospective view of Atwood's whole career as a novelist. It extrapolates her Canadian themes of wilderness and survival and resituates them in relation to that other key motif in her "I" witness/eyewitness narratives, that of blindness and vision. The chapter ends with a provocative question which turns readers back with renewed attention to Atwood as writer, trickster, entertainer, moralist, and satirist.

Introduction

In chapter 1 David Staines presents a profile of Atwood as the famous writer who is, “above all else, Canadian.” Rich in biographical detail, his account traces Atwood’s career in tandem with her responses to the Canadian cultural context from the 1950s onwards, emphasizing her innovative role as interpreter of her country’s culture, first to Canadians themselves in the 1970s and since the 1980s as an increasingly popular spokesperson for Canada around the world. He sets out the major themes of her writing which are grounded in her Canadian context, like her fascination with Canadian history and landscape, but which over forty years have broadened into topics of international relevance with her scrutiny of cultural myths about women, her concern with human rights and threats to the environment, and her strong sense of moral responsibility in an increasingly globalized context of reference. Chapter 2 is also biographical in its basis, but with a difference. It is about biography and fiction, or perhaps about biography as fiction, for Lorraine York reads Atwood’s biography through the discourse of literary celebrity. Her focus is not so much on the details of Atwood’s life story (which are sketched in the Chronology) but on Atwood herself as a “star text.” York analyzes the ongoing interrelation between media constructions of Atwood and her own active intervention in those constructions through her website, her deprecating self-irony and humor in interviews, and through the negotiations with fame of many of her fictional protagonists like Joan Foster, Elaine Risley, or Grace Marks. Not surprisingly, this chapter shows up the more sinister aspects of celebrity, so helping us to interpret Atwood’s own ironic comments on the star status of the writer in her lectures and essays in *Negotiating with the Dead* and her latest invention, a remote book-signing device which would allow her to autograph copies of her novels from her desk in Toronto “without . . . having to traipse to bookshops across the globe.”²

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the theme of power politics. Pilar Somacarrera analyzes the treatment of national and sexual power politics and their curious intersections, as Atwood continues to investigate the question of “who gets to do what to whom.”³ Reading through a Foucauldian lens, Somacarrera analyzes the sexual power games in the early poems and novels, tracing the topic as it expands into national and international dimensions in her later work. Madeleine Davies also focuses on sexual power politics with a specifically feminist emphasis on Atwood’s representation of female bodies, where social power structures are “written on to female flesh” and into women’s psyches. Adapting the French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous’s famous essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Davies shows Atwood’s ongoing engagement with the concept of *écriture féminine* as her women’s fictive autobiographies trace the emergence of female subjects from a position of

powerlessness and silence to become duplicitous narrators as they struggle to reconnect “body” with “text.”

The four middle chapters address various facets of how Canada and Canadianness are figured within the textual spaces of Atwood’s writing, from her concern with landscape and environment to her responses to Canadian social attitudes and changing ideologies of nationhood and identity, all of which are marked by the distinctive manner of her storytelling. In her survey of Atwood’s novels, poetry and non-fictional prose in chapter 5, Shannon Hengen explores Atwood’s environmental ethics and the evolution of her ideas about what “being human” means. Her broadly ranging analysis argues for Atwood’s insistence on the symbiotic relation between human and non-human nature, as she spells out the vital connection between science and art in defining the position of human beings as the nexus of nature and culture. In chapter 6 Coomi Vevaina discusses Atwood’s postmodern versions of Canadian history, with her double focus on history as collective public memory and the private psychohistories of female immigrants, witches, criminals, and various trickster figures. These marginalized “her/stories” destabilize the truth claims of historical writing in a postmodern context. A similar skepticism about national and social myths is revealed in Eleonora Rao’s analysis in chapter 7 of Atwood’s discourses of home and nation in her later novels. Focusing on their postcolonial implications, Rao argues that any discourse about “home” is an extension of discourses of nation and national identity and related to concepts of belonging and homelessness, dislocation, and alienation. Rao traces patterns of exile and self-division from *Cat’s Eye* through to *Oryx and Crake*, where Snowman is the ultimate outsider. Here Atwood the Canadian nationalist moves beyond national boundaries in a post-catastrophe world where “home” exists nowhere but in imagination and memory. It would be an oversight, however, to neglect the wit and humor of Atwood’s storytelling, no matter how serious the subject matter, and in chapter 8 Marta Dvorak offers a fascinating rhetorical analysis of her skillful use of irony and satire. Harking back to the deadpan humor of rural Nova Scotia, the home of both Atwood’s parents, Dvorak argues that the manner of Atwood’s storytelling derives from the tall tales and yarns of that oral tradition, though she goes on to situate Atwood’s writing in a broader framework of humorous literary production that includes the burlesque, the grotesque, and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

The first of the three “genre” chapters, Branko Gorjup’s overview in chapter 9 of Atwood’s poetry from the 1960s through to the 1990s, also focuses on language, this time on the distinctively “Atwoodian” idiom and the evolution of her poetic voice. Whereas the early poetry was characterized by irony, emotional detachment, and a lethally precise vocabulary, there are

shifts in her later poetry towards a multiplicity of voices and corresponding changes in tone towards compassion and elegy. Reading though imagery, Gorjup highlights Atwood's "poetics of metamorphosis" in her poetic world of mutations and mirrors and the palimpsestic quality of experience and landscape, filled with unseen presences and memories. "Nothing goes away" in the fluid reality of this created world, where Atwood is presented not as a cultural historian but as a mythographer of the Canadian imagination. In chapter 10, Reingard Nischik surveys Atwood's three short story collections and her three collections of (short) short stories written since the 1980s. Or should they be called prose poems? Dramatic monologues? Flash fictions? As Nischik comments, the critical terminology is as yet unfixed for in these new short text formats Atwood has exploded the boundaries of the short story genre. This scholarly analysis pays attention to the high degree of intertextuality and generic hybridity in these short prose pieces, while at the same time it takes up Atwood's feminist focus on the theme of gender relations, playing variations on the same themes explored in her novels and poetry. Like Dvorak, Nischik draws attention to techniques of irony and humor as she traces Atwood's development as a social and political critic. Coral Ann Howells's chapter on the two dystopian novels also stresses her role as satirist and moralist, with her urgent warning to an international readership to pay attention to the world we live in before it is too late. Howells argues that the two novels represent a synthesis of Atwood's political, social, and environmental concerns, transformed into speculative fiction, where Atwood continues to ask awkward questions. What difference does it make when a dystopian narrative is told from a marginalized feminine perspective, and perhaps more radically, what difference does it make when the tale is told by the Last Man alive? Not only do these questions challenge the limits of the dystopian genre, but they also probe the possible functions and purposes of storytelling.

The final frame is provided by Sharon Wilson in chapter 12, who begins with Atwood's endgame in *Oryx and Crake* where human beings and civilization are on the brink of extinction. Returning to Atwood's fictions as early as the 1970s, Wilson discerns signs of that end-of-the-world theme and perceives a consistent emphasis on the failure of Atwood's protagonists to see clearly – from defective sight to distorted vision and moral blindness. While symbolic blindness may be a necessary beginning for narrative quests, regaining some vision is arguably necessary for survival. But how useful would it be to emerge from moral blindness in a post-apocalyptic world? Wilson is prompted to ask, given the ferocity of Atwood's satiric vision of the future in *Oryx and Crake*, whether her vision is growing more pessimistic. This novel asks the same question as *Survival* over thirty years earlier, but