

Margaret Atwood

Prize-winning novelist

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'It is hard to believe it now, but there was a time, and it was not that long ago, when Canadian literature was something of a joke, particularly in the United States, where mocking the Northern neighbours is a national pastime. Few books were published, and fewer still were taken seriously by the English-speaking literary community. Then Margaret Atwood arrived.'

Atwood, Canada's most eminent novelist and poet was born in Ottawa, Ontario, in 1939. She is the daughter of a forest entomologist, and spent part of her early years in the bush of North Quebec. She studied at the University of Toronto, then



Author photo: Laurence Acland

took her masters degree at Radcliffe College, Massachusetts, in 1962.

Atwood also writes short stories, critical studies, screenplays, radio scripts and books for children and her works

have been translated into over 30 languages. Her reviews and critical articles have appeared in various eminent magazines and she has also edited many books, including **The New Oxford book of Canadian verse in English** (1983) and, with Robert Weaver, **The Oxford book of Canadian short stories in English** (1986). She has been a full-time writer since 1972, first teaching English, then holding a variety of academic posts and writer residencies. She was president of the Writers' Union of



Canada from 1981-1982 and president of PEN, Canada from 1984-1986.

It was with her poetry that Atwood first came to attention. Her poetry is marked by a fascination with the natural world and a disdain for the contemporary compulsion to accrue possessions.

Her first publication was a book of poetry, **The circle game** (1964) which received the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry (Canada). Several more poetry collections followed such as **Interlunar** (1988), **Morning in the burned house** (1995) and **Eating fire: selected poetry, 1965-1995** (1998). Her books of short fiction include **Dancing girls and other stories** (1982), **Wilderness tips** (1991) and **Good bones** (1992).

She is, however, perhaps best known for her novels, in which she creates strong, often enigmatic women characters and excels in telling open-ended stories, while dissecting contemporary urban life and sexual politics. Atwood leaves the ends of her stories untied, so that the reader is left with something to do. Her first novel was **The edible woman** (1969), about a woman who cannot eat and feels that she is being eaten. This was followed by: **Surfacing** (1973), which deals with a woman's investigation into her father's disappearance; **Lady Oracle** (1977); **Life before man** (1980); **Bodily harm** (1982), the story of Rennie Wilford, a young journalist recuperating on a Caribbean island; and **The handmaid's tale** (1986), a futuristic

novel describing a woman's struggle to break free from her role. Her later novels are: **Cat's eye** (1989), dealing with the subject of bullying among young girls; **The robber bride** (1993); **Alias Grace** (1996), the tale of a woman who is convicted for her involvement in two murders about which she claims to have no memory; **The blind assassin** (2000), a multi-layered family memoir; and most recently, **Oryx and Crake** (2003), a vision of a scientific dystopia, which was shortlisted for the 2003 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction.

Although **Alias Grace**, **The handmaid's tale** and **Cat's eye** have all been short-listed for the Booker Prize for Fiction, Atwood's

Atwood on poetry...

'Plato said that poets should be excluded from the ideal republic because they are such liars. I am a poet, and I affirm that this is true. About no subject are poets tempted to lie so much as about their own lives; I know one of them who has floated at least five versions of his autobiography, none of them true. I, of course - being also a novelist - am a much more truthful person than that. But since poets lie, how can you believe me?'

Atwood's childhood was divided between the forest in the warmer parts of the year, and various cities in the colder parts. She was therefore able 'to develop the rudiments of the double personality so necessary for a poet'. In the bush there were no theatres, movies, parades, or very functional radios; there were also not many other people around with the result that she had lots of time for meditation. According to her she became a reading addict, and have remained so ever since.

'As the critic Norththorp Frye has said, we learn poetry through the seat of our pants, by being bounced up and down to nursery rhymes as children. Poetry is essentially oral, and is close to song; rhythm precedes meaning. My first experiences with poetry were **Mother Goose**, which contains some of the most surrealistic poems in the English language, and whatever singing commercials could be picked up on the radio, such as: "You'll wonder where the yellow went when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent!"'

Her English teacher from 1955 said that in her class Atwood had showed no particular promise. 'This was true', she says. However, one lunch time she announced to a group of her high school female friends that she was going to be a writer: 'I said "writer" not "poet"; I did have some common sense.

'The one good thing to be said about announcing

yourself as a writer in the colonial Canadian fifties is that nobody told me I couldn't do it because I was a girl. They simply found the entire proposition ridiculous. Writers were dead and English, or else extremely elderly and American; they were not sixteen years old and Canadian.' She did at least at this stage receive a word of encouragement from her wonderful Grade 12 English teacher, Miss Bessie Billings: 'I can't understand a word of this, dear, so it must be good.'

In her graduating year, with the aid of a friend, and another friend's flatbed press, they printed 250 copies of a collection of her poems, and sold them through bookstores, for 50 cents each. They now go in the rare book trade for eighteen hundred dollars a pop. 'Wish I'd kept some,' she once remarked. Atwood's first book of poems **The circle game**; (the cover designed by her) won The Governor General's Award, which in Canada was the big one to win. She has never looked back.

She says: 'Wordsworth was sort of right when he said, "Poets in their youth begin in gladness/ But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness." Except that sometimes poets skip the gladness and go straight to the despondency. Why is that? Part of it is the conditions under which poets work - giving all, receiving little in return from an age that by and large ignores them - and part of it is cultural expectation - "The lunatic, the lover and the poet," says Shakespeare, and notice which comes first.

'My own theory is that poetry is composed with the melancholy side of the brain, and that if you do nothing but, you may find yourself going slowly down a long dark tunnel with no exit. I have avoided this by being ambidextrous: I write novels too. But when I find myself writing poetry again, it always has the surprise of that first unexpected and anonymous gift.'

The blind assassin was awarded this coveted prize in 2000.

Some of Margaret Atwood's books have been adapted for stage and screen. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, has been presented with the Order of Ontario and the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit, and has been awarded sixteen honorary degrees. She has lived in many places including Canada, England, Scotland and France, and currently lives in Toronto.

Genres (in alphabetical order)

Children, Fiction, Literary criticism, Non-fiction, Poetry, Radio drama, Screenplay, Short stories.

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