Margaret Atwood
Prize-winning novelist

Compiled by GRIZÉLL AZAR-LUXTON

'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 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.

A twood'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 Norththropp 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. 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...

'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. Under extreme British 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.

Bibliography

*Double Persephone.*- Hawkshead Press (Canada), 1961.

*The circle game.*- Cranbrook Academy of Art (USA), 1964.

*Kaleidoscopes baroque: a poem.*- Cranbrook Academy of Art (USA), 1965.

*Marsh hawk.*- Dreadnaught (Canada), 1977.


*Two-headed poems.*- Oxford University Press (Canada), 1978.

*Up in the tree.*- McClelland and Stewart (Canada), 1978.

*Anna’s pet.*- Lorimer (Canada), 1980.

*Snake poems.*- Salamander Press (Canada), 1983.

*Notes towards a poem that can never be written.*- Salamander Press, 1981.

*Bodily harm.*- Cape, 1982.


*Encounters with the Element Man.*- William B Ewert (USA), 1982.

*Second words: selected critical prose.*- House of Anansi Press (Canada), 1982.

*True stories.*- Cape, 1982.


*Procedures for underground.*- Oxford University Press (Canada), 1970.


*You are happy.*- Oxford University Press (Canada), 1974.

*Days of the rebels: 1815-1840.*- Natural Science of Canada (Canada), 1977.


*The circle game.*- Virago, 1977.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Virago, 1986.

*Cat’s eye.*- Virago, 1987.

*The blind assassin.*- Virago, 1999.


*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 2004.

*The circle game.*- Cape, 2007.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Virago, 2008.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 2008.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 2008.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 2008.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 2008.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 2008.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 2008.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 2008.

Prizes and awards

1966 Governor General’s Literary Award for Poetry (Canada) The circle game.
1977 Canadian Booksellers’ Association Award Lady Oracle.
1977 Toronto Book Award Lady Oracle.
1978 St Lawrence Award for Fiction (Canada) Lady Oracle.
1982 Arts Council of Wales International Writers’ Prize Bodily harm.
1986 Governor General’s Literary Award for Fiction (Canada) The handmaid’s tale.
1987 Arthur C Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction The handmaid’s tale.
1987 Booker Prize for Fiction (shortlist) The handmaid’s tale.
1987 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize Caribbean and Canada Region, Best Book) The handmaid’s tale.
1987 Los Angeles Times Book Prize (Fiction) The handmaid’s tale.
1987 Ritz Hemingway Prize (France) (shortlist) The handmaid’s tale.
1989 Booker Prize for Fiction (shortlist) Cat’s eye.
1989 Canadian Booksellers’ Association Award Cat’s eye.
1989 Toronto Book Award Cat’s eye.
1993 Canadian Authors’ Association Novel of the Year The robber bride.
1994 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize (Caribbean and Canada Region, Best Book) The robber bride.
1994 Sunday Times Award for Literary Excellence The robber bride.
1996 Booker Prize for Fiction (shortlist) Alias Grace.
1996 Giller Prize (Canada) Alias Grace.
1997 Canadian Booksellers’ Association Author of the Year The handmaid’s tale.
1997 National Arts Club Medal of Honour for Literature (USA)
1997 Premio Mondello (Italy) Alias Grace.
1998 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (shortlist) Alias Grace.
2000 Booker Prize for Fiction The blind assassin.
2001 Crime Writers’ Association Dashiell Hammett Award The blind assassin.
2001 Orange Prize for Fiction (shortlist) The blind assassin.
2002 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (shortlist) The blind assassin.
2003 Man Booker Prize for Fiction (shortlist) Oryx and Crake.
2004 Orange Prize for Fiction (shortlist) Oryx and Crake.
2005 Man Booker International Prize (shortlist).


*The circle game.*- Oxford University Press (Canada), 1983.

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 1987 (1990 printing).

*The handmaid’s tale.*- Cape, 1987.

*Bluebeard’s egg, and other stories.*- Eurographica (Iceland), 1987.

*The Canlit foodbook: from pen to palate - a collection of tasty literary fare / compiled
and illustrated by Margaret Atwood.- Totem Books (Canada), 1987.
Cat’s eye.- Virago, 1990.
*Barbed lyres: Canadian venomous verse.- Key Porter (Canada), 1990.
•For the birds.- Douglas & McIntyre (Canada), 1990.
Good bones.- Virago, 1993.
The robber bride.- Bloomsbury, 1993.
*Beyond the map: poems by Diane Ackerman, Margaret Atwood, et alia.- The Elm Press (USA), 1994.

*“The Labrador fiasco”.- Bloomsbury, 1996.
Alias Grace.- Bloomsbury, 1996.
*The selected poetry of Gwendolyn MacEwen / selected and introduced by Margaret Atwood.- Virago, 1996.
•Rude Ramsay and the roaring radishes.- Bloomsbury, 2005.

*Curious pursuits.- Virago, 2005.
The penelopiad; the myth of Penelope and Odysseus.- Canongate, 2005.

Note:
*Titles not in Provincial Library Service stock.
•Titles may still be on order.

Web site sources
http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/atwood/write.htm
http://www.encyclopedia.com/html.a/atwood-mi.asp
http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/…….