

Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

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Sidelights

As a poet, novelist, story writer, and essayist, Margaret Atwood holds a unique position in contemporary Canadian literature. Her books have received critical acclaim in the United States, Europe, and her native Canada, and she has been the recipient of numerous literary awards. Atwood's critical popularity is matched by her popularity with readers. She is a frequent guest on Canadian television and radio and her books are often bestsellers.

Atwood first came to public attention as a poet in the 1960s with her collections *Double Persephone*, winner of the E.J. Pratt Medal, and *The Circle Game*, winner of a Governor General's award. These two books marked out the terrain her subsequent poetry has explored. *Double Persephone* concerns "the contrast between the flux of life or nature and the fixity of man's artificial creations," as explained by a Dictionary of Literary Biography contributor. *The Circle Game* takes this opposition further, setting such human constructs as games, literature, and love against the instability of nature. Human constructs are presented as both traps and shelters; the fluidity of nature as both dangerous and liberating. Sherill Grace, writing in *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood*, identified the central tension in all of Atwood's work as "the pull towards art on one hand and towards life on the other." This tension is expressed in a series of "violent dualities," as Grace termed it. Atwood "is constantly aware of opposites--self/other, subject/ object, male/female, nature/man--and of the need to accept and work within them," Grace explained. "To create, Atwood chooses violent dualities, and her art re-works, probes, and dramatizes the ability to see double."

Linda W. Wagner, writing in *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, asserted that in Atwood's poetry "duality [is] presented as separation." This separation leads her characters to be isolated from one another and from the natural world, resulting in their inability to communicate, to break free of exploitative social relationships, or to understand their place in the natural order. "In her early poetry," Gloria Onley wrote in the *West Coast Review*, Atwood "is acutely aware of the problem of alienation, the need for real human communication and the establishment of genuine human community--real as opposed to mechanical or manipulative; genuine as opposed to the counterfeit community of the body politic."

Wagner, commenting on the *The Circle Game*, noted that "the personae of those poems never did make contact, never did anything but lament the human condition." Wagner added, "Relationships in these poems are sterile if not destructive." In a review of *True Stories* Robert Sward of Quill and Quire explained that many reviewers of the book have exaggerated the violence and given "the false impression that all thirty-eight poems ... are about torture."

Suffering is common for the female characters in Atwood's poems, although they are never passive

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victims. In her later works, her characters take active measures to improve their situations. Atwood's poems, *West Coast Review* contributor Onley maintained, concern "modern woman's anguish at finding herself isolated and exploited (although also exploiting) by the imposition of a sex role power structure." Atwood explained to Judy Klemesrud in the *New York Times* that her suffering characters come from real life: "My women suffer because most of the women I talk to seem to have suffered." Although she became a favorite of feminists, Atwood's popularity in the feminist community was unsought. "I began as a profoundly apolitical writer," she told Lindsay Van Gelder of *Ms.*, "but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me."

Atwood's 1995 book of poetry, *Morning in the Burned House*, "reflects a period in Atwood's life when time seems to be running out," observed John Bemrose in *Maclean's*. Noting that many of the poems address grief and loss, particularly in relationship to her father's death and a realization of her own mortality, Bemrose added that the book "moves even more deeply into survival territory." Bemrose further suggested that in this book, Atwood allows the readers greater latitude in interpretation than in her earlier verse: "Atwood uses grief ... to break away from that airless poetry and into a new freedom."

Atwood's feminist concerns also emerge clearly in her novels, particularly in *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *Life before Man*, *Bodily Harm*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. These novels feature female characters who are, as Klemesrud reported, "intelligent, self-absorbed modern women searching for identity [They] hunt, split logs, make campfires and become successful in their careers, while men often cook and take care of their households."

The Edible Woman tells the story of Marian McAlpin, a young woman engaged to be married, who rebels against her upcoming nuptials. Her fiancé seems too stable, too ordinary, and the role of wife too fixed and limiting. Her rejection of marriage is accompanied by her body's rejection of food; she cannot tolerate even a spare vegetarian diet. Eventually Marian bakes a sponge cake in the shape of a woman and feeds it to her fiancé because, she explains, "You've been trying to assimilate me." After the engagement is broken off, she is able to eat some of the cake herself.

Reaction to *The Edible Woman* was divided. Nevertheless, many critics noted Atwood's at least partial success. Tom Marshall, writing in his *Harsh and Lovely Land: The Major Canadian Poets and the Making of a Canadian Tradition*, called *The Edible Woman* "a largely successful comic novel, even if the mechanics are sometimes a little clumsy, the satirical accounts of consumerism a little drawn out." A *Dictionary of Literary Biography* contributor described *The Edible Woman* as "very much a social novel about the possibilities for personal female identity in a capitalistic consumer society."

In *Life before Man* Atwood dissects the relationships between three characters: Elizabeth, a married woman who mourns the recent suicide of her lover; Elizabeth's husband, Nate, who is unable to choose between his wife and his lover; and Lesje, Nate's lover, who works with Elizabeth at a museum of natural history. All three characters are isolated from one another and unable to experience their own emotions. The fossils and dinosaur bones on display at the museum are compared throughout the novel with the sterility of the characters' lives. As Laurie Stone noted in the *Village Voice*, *Life before Man* "is full of varia-

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tions on the theme of extinction.”

Life before Man is what Rosellen Brown of Saturday Review called an “anatomy of melancholy.” Comparing the novel’s characters to museum pieces and commenting on the analytical examination to which Atwood subjects them, Peter S. Prescott wrote in Newsweek that, “with chilly compassion and an even colder wit, Atwood exposes the interior lives of her specimens.” Writing in the New York Times Book Review, Marilyn French made clear that in *Life before Man*, Atwood “combines several talents--powerful introspection, honesty, satire and a taut, limpid style--to create a splendid, fully integrated work.” The novel’s title, French believed, relates to the characters’ isolation from themselves, their history, and from one another. They have not yet achieved truly human stature. “This novel suggests,” French wrote, “that we are still living life before man, before the human--as we like to define it--has evolved.” Prescott raised the same point. The novel’s characters, he wrote, “do not communicate; each, in the presence of another, is locked into his own thoughts and feelings. Is such isolation and indeterminacy what Atwood means when she calls her story ‘Life before Man’?” This concern is also found in Atwood’s previous novels, French argued, all of which depict “the search for identity ... a search for a better way to be--for a way of life that both satisfies the passionate, needy self and yet is decent, humane and natural.”

Atwood further explores this idea in *Bodily Harm*. In this novel, Rennie Wilford is a Toronto journalist who specializes in light, trivial pieces for magazines. She is, Anne Tyler explained in the *Detroit News*, “a cataloguer of current fads and fancies.” Following a partial mastectomy, which causes her lover to abandon her, Rennie begins to feel dissatisfied with her life. She takes on an assignment to the Caribbean island of St. Antoine in an effort to get away from things for a while. Her planned magazine story, focusing on the island’s beaches, tennis courts, and restaurants, is distinctly facile in comparison to the political violence she finds on St. Antoine. When Rennie is arrested and jailed, the experience brings her to a self-realization about her life. “Death,” Nancy Ramsey remarked in the *San Francisco Review of Books*, “rather than the modern sense of ennui, threatens Rennie and the people around her, and ultimately gives her life a meaning she hadn’t known before.”

Anatole Broyard in the *New York Times*, claimed that “the only way to describe my response to [*Bodily Harm*] is to say that it knocked me out. Atwood seems to be able to do just about everything: people, places, problems, a perfect ear, an exactly right voice and she tosses off terrific scenes with a casualness that leaves you utterly unprepared for the way these scenes seize you.” Tyler called Atwood “an uncommonly skillful and perceptive writer,” and went on to state that, because of its subject matter, *Bodily Harm* “is not always easy to read. There are times when it’s downright unpleasant, but it’s also intelligent, provocative, and in the end--against all expectations--uplifting.”

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood turns to speculative fiction, creating the dystopia of Gilead, a future America in which fundamentalist Christians have killed the president and members of Congress and imposed their own dictatorial rule. In this future world, polluted by toxic chemicals and nuclear radiation, few women can bear children; the birthrate has dropped alarmingly. Those women who can bear children are forced to become Handmaids, the official breeders for society. All other women have been reduced to chattel under a repressive religious hierarchy run by men.

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The Handmaid's Tale is a radical departure from Atwood's previous novels. Her strong feminism was evident in earlier books, but The Handmaid's Tale is dominated by the theme. As Barbara Holliday wrote in the Detroit Free Press, Atwood "has been concerned in her fiction with the painful psychic warfare between men and women. In The Handmaid's Tale ... she casts subtlety aside, exposing woman's primal fear of being used and helpless." Atwood's creation of an imaginary world is also new. As Mary Battiata noted in the Washington Post, The Handmaid's Tale is the first of Atwood's novels "not set in a worried corner of contemporary Canada."

Atwood was moved to write her story only after images and scenes from the book had been appearing to her for three years. She eventually became convinced that her vision of Gilead was not far from reality. Some of the anti-female measures she had imagined for the novel actually exist. "A law in Canada," Battiata reported, "[requires] a woman to have her husband's permission before obtaining an abortion." Atwood, speaking to Battiata, pointed to repressive laws in the totalitarian state of Romania as well: "No abortion, no birth control, and compulsory pregnancy testing, once a month." The Handmaid's Tale does not depend upon hypothetical scenarios, omens, or straws in the wind, but upon documented occurrences and public pronouncements; all matters of record." Stephen McCabe of the Humanist called the novel "a chilling vision of the future extrapolated from the present."

Yet, several critics voiced a disbelief in the basic assumptions of The Handmaid's Tale. Mary McCarthy, in her review for the New York Times Book Review, complained that "I just can't see the intolerance of the far right ... as leading to a super-biblical puritanism." And although acknowledging that "the author has carefully drawn her projections from current trends," McCarthy asserted that "perhaps that is the trouble: the projections are too neatly penciled in. The details ... all raise their hands announcing themselves present. At the same time, the Republic of Gilead itself, whatever in it that is not a projection, is insufficiently imagined." Richard Grenier of Insight observed that the Fundamentalist-run Gilead does not seem Christian: "There seems to be no Father, no Son, no Holy Ghost, no apparent belief in redemption, resurrection, eternal life. No one in this excruciatingly hierarchized new clerical state ... appears to believe in God." Grenier also found it improbable that "while the United States has hurtled off into this morbid, feminist nightmare, the rest of the democratic world has been blissfully unaffected."

Despite what he saw as a flaw, French saw The Handmaid's Tale as being "in the honorable tradition of Brave New World and other warnings of dystopia. It's imaginative, even audacious, and conveys a chilling sense of fear and menace." Prescott compared the novel to other dystopian books. It belongs, he wrote, "to that breed of visionary fiction in which a metaphor is extended to elaborate a warning." Prescott went on to note, "Wells, Huxley and Orwell popularized the tradition with books like The Time Machine, Brave New World and 1984--yet Atwood is a better novelist than they." Christopher Lehmann-Haupt identified The Handmaid's Tale as a book that goes far beyond its feminist concerns. Writing in the New York Times, the critic explained that the novel "is a political tract deploring nuclear energy, environmental waste, and anti-feminist attitudes. But it [is] so much more than that--a taut thriller, a psychological study, a play on words." Van Gelder saw the novel in a similar light: "[It] ultimately succeeds on multiple levels: as a page-turning thriller, as a powerful political statement, and as an exquisite piece of writing."

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In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood again explores women's issues and feminist concerns, this time concentrating on women's relationships with each other--both positive and negative. Inspired by the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale "The Robber Bridegroom," the novel chronicles the relationships of college friends Tony, Charis, and Roz with their backstabbing classmate Zenia. Now middle-aged women, the women's paths and life choices have diverged, yet Tony, Charis, and Roz have remained friends. Throughout their adulthood, however, Zenia's manipulations have nearly destroyed their lives and cost them husbands and careers. Lorrie Moore, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, called *The Robber Bride* "Atwood's funniest and most companionable book in years," adding that its author "retains her gift for observing, in poetry, the minutiae specific to the physical and emotional lives of her characters." About Zenia, Moore commented, "charming and gorgeous, Zenia is a misogynist's grotesque: relentlessly seductive, brutal, pathologically dishonest," postulating that "perhaps Ms. Atwood intended Zenia, by the end, to be a symbol of all that is inexplicably evil: war, disease, global catastrophe." Judith Timson commented in *Maclean's* that *The Robber Bride* "has as its central theme an idea that feminism was supposed to have shoved under the rug: there are female predators out there, and they will get your man if you are not careful."

Atwood maintained that she had a feminist motivation in creating Zenia. The femme fatale all but disappeared from fiction in the 1950s due to that decade's sanitized ideal of domesticity; and in the late 1960s came the women's movement, which in its early years encouraged the creation of only positive female characters, Atwood asserted in interviews. She commented that "there are a lot of women you have to say are feminists who are getting a big kick out of this book," according to interviewer Sarah Lyall in the *New York Times*. "People read the book with all the wars done by men, and they say, 'So, you're saying that women are crueller than men,'" the novelist added. "In other words, that's normal behavior by men, so we don't notice it. Similarly, we say that Zenia behaves badly, and therefore women are worse than men, but that ignores the helpfulness of the other three women to each other, which of course gives them a power of their own."

Francine Prose, reviewing *The Robber Bride* for the *Washington Post Book World*, recommended the book "to those well-intentioned misguided feminists or benighted sexists who would have us believe that the female of the species is 'naturally' nicer or more nurturing than the male." Prose found the book "smart and entertaining" but not always convincing in its blend of exaggerated and realistic elements. *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani also thought Atwood has not achieved the proper balance in this regard: "Her characters remain exiles from both the earthbound realm of realism and the airier attitudes of allegory, and as a result, their story does not illuminate or entertain: it grates."

Alias Grace represents Atwood's first venture into historical fiction, but the book has much in common with her other works in its contemplation of "the shifting notions of women's moral nature" and "the exercise of power between men and women," wrote *Maclean's* contributor Diane Turbide. Based on a true story Atwood had explored previously in a television script titled *The Servant Girl*, *Alias Grace* centers on Grace Marks, a servant who was found guilty of murdering her employer and his mistress in northern Canada in 1843. Some people doubt Grace's guilt, however, and she serves out her sentence of life in prison, claiming not to remember the murders. Eventually, reformers begin to agitate for clemency for

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Grace. In a quest for evidence to support their position, they assign a young doctor, versed in the new science of psychiatry, to evaluate her soundness of mind. Over many meetings, Grace tells the doctor the harrowing story of her life--a life marked by extreme hardship. Much about Grace, though, remains puzzling; she is haunted by flashbacks of the supposedly forgotten murders and by the presence of a friend who had died from a mishandled abortion. The doctor, Simon Jordan, does not know what to believe in Grace's tales.

Several reviewers found Grace a complicated and compelling character. "Sometimes she is prim, naive, sometimes sardonic; sometimes sardonic because observant; sometimes observant because naive," commented Hilary Mantel in the *New York Review of Books*. Turbide added that Grace is more than an intriguing character: she is also "the lens through which Victorian hypocrisies are mercilessly exposed."

Prose, however, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, thought the historical trivia excessive. "The book provides, in snippets, a crash course in Victorian culture. Prose added, "Rather than enhancing the novel's verisimilitude, these mini-lessons underline the distance between reader and subject." She also noted that some readers "will admire the liveliness with which Ms. Atwood toys with both our expectations and the conventions of the Victorian thriller."

"Dying octogenarian Iris Chasen's narration of the past carefully unravels a haunting story of tragedy, corruption, and cruel manipulation," summarized Beth E. Andersen in a *Library Journal* review of Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. The novel, which earned its author the Booker Prize, involves multiple story lines. It is Iris's memoir, retracing her past with the wealthy and conniving industrialist Richard Griffen and the death of her sister Laura, her husband, and her daughter. Iris "reveals at long last the wrenching truth about herself and Laura amid hilariously acerbic commentary on the inanities of contemporary life," wrote Donna Seaman in *Booklist*. Interspersed with these narrative threads are sections devoted to Laura's novel, *The Blind Assassin*, published after her death. Seaman called the work a "spellbinding novel of avarice, love, and revenge." Andersen noted that some readers may guess how the story will pan out before the conclusion, but argued that "nothing will dampen the pleasure of getting there." Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* called *The Blind Assassin* an "absorbing new novel" that "showcases Ms. Atwood's narrative powers and her ardent love of the Gothic." Kakutani also noted that Atwood writes with "uncommon authority and ease."

Atwood has remained a noted writer of short stories as well as novels. *Wilderness Tips and Other Stories*, published in 1991, is a collection of ten "neatly constructed, present-tense narratives," reported Merle Rubin in the *Christian Science Monitor*. While finding Atwood's writing style drab and unappealing, Rubin nevertheless praised the author for her "ability to evoke the passing of entire decades ... all within the brief compass of a short story." The tales in Atwood's 1992 collection, *Good Bones* --published in 1994 as *Good Bones and Simple Murders* --"occupy that vague, peculiar country between poetry and prose," stated John Bemrose in *Maclean's*. Describing Atwood as "storyteller, poet, fabulist and social commentator rolled into one," Bemrose claimed that "the strongest pieces in *Good Bones* combine a light touch with a hypnotic seriousness of purpose." In the *New York Times Book Review*, Jennifer Howard labeled *Good Bones and Simple Murders* a "sprightly, whimsically feminist collection of miniatures

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and musings, assembled from two volumes published in Canada in 1983 and 1992." A Publishers Weekly reviewer, who characterized the entries as "postmodern fairy tales, caustic fables, inspired parodies, witty monologues," declared each piece to be "clever and sharply honed."

Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature is Atwood's most direct presentation of her strong support of Canadian nationalism. In this work, she discerns a uniquely Canadian literature, distinct from its American and British counterparts, and discusses the dominant themes to be found in it. Canadian literature, she argues, is primarily concerned with victims and with the victim's ability to survive. Atwood, Onley explained, "perceives a strong sado-masochistic patterning in Canadian literature as a whole. She believes that there is a national fictional tendency to participate, usually at some level as Victim, in a Victor/Victim basic pattern." Nevertheless, "despite its stress on victimization," a Dictionary of Literary Biography contributor wrote, "this study is not a revelation of, or a reveling in, [masochism]." What Atwood argues, Onley asserted, that is, "every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core: for America, the Frontier; for England, the Island; for Canada, Survival."

Several critics find that Atwood's own work exemplifies this primary theme of Canadian literature. Her examination of destructive gender roles and her nationalistic concern over the subordinate role Canada plays to the United States are variations on the victor/victim theme. Atwood believes a writer must consciously work within his or her nation's literary tradition, and her own work closely parallels the themes she sees as common to the Canadian literary tradition. Survival "has served as the context in which critics have subsequently discussed [Atwood's] works," stated a Dictionary of Literary Biography contributor.

In her novel *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood returns to themes from *The Handmaid's Tale*. "Once again she conjures up a dystopia, where trends that started way back in the twentieth century have metastasized into deeply sinister phenomena," wrote Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*. The story begins with a character called Snowman, the lone survivor of an Armageddon-like catastrophe. He wanders the streets trying to survive and finds that bioengineered animals are the only living creatures remaining. As the novel progresses, Snowman recalls his days as a boy and his childhood friend named Crake. Eventually, we learn that Crake became a scientist, one who was involved in the secret project that caused the global catastrophe. Kakutani called the novel "at times intriguing." Referring to *Oryx and Crake* as a "scorching new novel," Science contributor Susan M. Squier wrote, "Atwood imagines a drastic revision of the human species that will purge humankind of all of our negative traits." Squier went on to note that "in *Oryx and Crake* readers will find a powerful meditation on how education that separates scientific and aesthetic ways of knowing produces ignorance and a wounded world."

Atwood also writes for children, and while much of her writing for adults is known to be quite dark, her books for juveniles are far more whimsical. For example, *Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes* features a text of "alliterative 'R' sounds, making it a challenging read-aloud," noted Denise Parrott in Resource Links. The story, illustrated by Dusan Petricic, revolves around Rude Ramsay, a red-nosed rat named Ralph, and their new friend Rilla. A Kirkus Reviews contributor noted that "Atwood's prose is both amusing and enlightening in its use of rich vocabulary." Atwood and Petricic also worked together on *Bashful Bob and Doleful Dorinda*, a takeoff on the Cinderella tale. "Atwood's hilarious tale will amuse



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listeners of almost any age with its alliteration and clever wordplay," wrote Patricia Morley in the Canadian Book Review Annual. Bill Richardson, writing in the Toronto Globe & Mail, concluded: "I think the virtue in this cascade of consonants is the joy that lives in the sound of the words, the merely phonetic exuberance that's at least as important, at a certain age, as meaning."

Atwood has also continued to write about writing. Her lectures *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* were published under the same title in 2002. She has also released several collections. These include the 2004 publication *Moving targets: Writing with Intent, 1982-2004* and the 2005 collection *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing, 1970-2005*. Each collection is representative of Atwood's oeuvre. Although the author has been labeled a Canadian nationalist, a feminist, and even a gothic writer, it seems reasonable to say that, given the range and volume of her work, Atwood incorporates and transcends these categories.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born November 18, 1939, in Ottawa Ontario, Canada; daughter of Carl Edmund (an entomologist) and Margaret Dorothy (Killam) Atwood; married Graeme Gibson (a writer); children: Jess (daughter). Education: University of Toronto, B.A., 1961; Radcliffe College, A.M., 1962; Harvard University, graduate study, 1962-63 and 1965-67. Politics: "William Morrisite." Religion: "Immanent Transcendentalist." Memberships: PEN International, Amnesty International, Writers' Union of Canada (vice chair, 1980-81), Royal Society of Canada (fellow), Canadian Civil Liberties Association (member of board, 1973-75), Canadian Centre, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (honorary member), Anglophone (president, 1984-85). Addresses: Home: Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Agent: c/o Random House, 1745 Broadway New York, NY 10019.

AWARDS

E.J. Pratt Medal, 1961, for *Double Persephone*; President's Medal, University of Western Ontario, 1965; YWCA Women of Distinction Award, 1966 and 1988; Governor General's Award, 1966, for *The Circle Game*, and 1986, for *The Handmaid's Tale*; first prize in Canadian Centennial Commission Poetry Competition, 1967; Union Prize for poetry, 1969; Bess Hoskins Prize for poetry, 1969 and 1974; City of Toronto Book Award, Canadian Booksellers' Association Award, and Periodical Distributors of Canada Short Fiction Award, all 1977, all for *Dancing Girls and Other Stories*; St. Lawrence Award for fiction, 1978; Radcliffe Medal, 1980; *Life before Man* selected a notable book of 1980, American Library Association; Molson Award, 1981; Guggenheim fellowship, 1981; named Companion of the Order of Canada, 1981; International Writer's Prize, Welsh Arts Council, 1982; Book of the Year Award, Periodical Distributors of Canada/Foundation for the Advancement of Canadian Letters, 1983, for *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories*; Ida Nudel Humanitarian Award, 1986; named Woman of the Year, Ms. magazine, 1986; Toronto Arts Award for writing and editing, 1986; Los Angeles Times Book Award, 1986, and Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction, and Commonwealth Literature Prize, both 1987, all for *The Handmaid's Tale*; Canadian Council for the Advancement and Support of Education silver medal, 1987; Humanist of the Year award, 1987; Royal Society of Canada fellow, 1987; named *Chatelaine* magazine's Woman of the Year; City of Toronto Book Award, Coles Book of the Year Award, Canadian Booksellers' Association Author of the Year Award, Book of the Year Award, Foundation for Advancement of Canadian Letters citation, Periodical Marketers of Canada Award, and Torgi Talking Book Award, all 1989, all for *Cat's Eye*; Harvard University Centennial Medal, 1990; Order of Ontario, 1990; Trillium Award for Excellence in Ontario Writing, and Periodical Marketers of Canada Book of the Year Award, both 1992, both for *Wilderness Tips and Other Stories*; Commemorative Medal for 125th Anniversary of Canadian Confederation;

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Trillium Award, Canadian Authors' Association Novel of the Year Award, Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Canadian and Caribbean Region, and Sunday Times Award for Literary Excellence, all 1994, and Swedish Humour Association's International Humorous Writer Award, 1995, all for *The Robber Bride*; Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (France), 1994; named best local author, NOW magazine readers' poll, 1995 and 1996; Trillium Award, 1995, for *Morning in the Burned House*; Norwegian Order of Literary Merit, 1996; Booker Prize shortlist, and Giller Prize, both 1996, both for *Alias Grace*; International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award shortlist, Dublin City Library, 1998; Booker Prize, 2000, International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award nomination, and Dashiell Hammett Prize, International Association of Crime Writers (North American branch), 2001, all for *The Blind Assassin*; Booker prize shortlist and Governor General's literary award nominee, both 2003, both for *Oryx and Crake*; Enlightenment Award, Edinburgh International Book Festival, 2005; recipient of numerous honorary degrees, including Trent University, 1973, Concordia University, 1980, Smith College, 1982, University of Toronto, 1983, Mount Holyoke College, 1985, University of Waterloo, 1985, University of Guelph, 1985, Victoria College, 1987, University of Montreal, 1991, University of Leeds, 1994, Queen's University, 1974, Oxford University, 1998, and Cambridge University, 2001; Enlightenment Award, Edinburgh International Book Festival, 2005.

CAREER

Writer. University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, lecturer in English literature, 1964-65; Sir George Williams University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, lecturer in English literature, 1967-68; York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, assistant professor of English literature, 1971-72; House of Anansi Press, Toronto, editor and member of board of directors, 1971-73; University of Toronto, writer-in-residence, 1972-73; University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, writer-in-residence, 1985; New York University, New York, NY, Berg Visiting Professor of English, 1986; Macquarie University, North Ryde, Australia, writer-in-residence, 1987. Worked variously as a camp counselor and waitress.

WRITINGS

POETRY

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- *The Circle Game*, Cranbrook Academy of Art (Bloomfield Hills, MI), 1964, revised edition, House of Anansi Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1978.
- *Kaleidoscopes Baroque: A Poem*, Cranbrook Academy of Art (Bloomfield Hills, MI), 1965.
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 - Snake Poems, Salamander Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1983.
 - Interlunar, Oxford University Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1984.
 - Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New, 1976-1986, Oxford University Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1986.
 - Morning in the Burned House, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1995.
 - Eating Fire: Selected Poetry, 1965-1995, Virago Press (London, England), 1998.
- Also author of Expeditions, 1966, and What Was in the Garden, 1969.

NOVELS

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- Surfacing, McClelland & Stewart (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1972, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1973, reprinted, Anchor Press (New York, NY), 1998.
- Lady Oracle, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1976, reprinted, Anchor Press (New York, NY), 1998
- Life before Man, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1979, reprinted, Anchor Press (New York, NY), 1998.
- Bodily Harm, McClelland & Stewart (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1981, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1982, reprinted, Anchor Press (New York, NY), 1998.
- Encounters with the Element Man, William B. Ewert (Concord, NH), 1982.
- Unearthing Suite, Grand Union Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1983.
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