

FIONA MORRISON

INTERVIEW WITH Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood in conversation with Fiona Morrison (with questions from UNSW FASS students)

Venue: UNSW Chancellery with an audience of FASS staff and students elected through ballot

Date: Monday, March 4, 2019

Introduction (Fiona Morrison): Here we are at UNSW Sydney, after a tremendous event yesterday at the Sydney Opera House hosted by the UNSW Centre for Ideas. There was a striking energy and rambunctious affection for our esteemed guest evident yesterday that was positively uplifting. I notice that Margaret's latest tweet was about the inclusiveness and energy of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and it seems clear that Sydney loves Margaret in kind.

Today, I'm going to start with some questions of my own for Margaret, and then we will move to the questions FASS students want to ask. Thank you to everyone who proposed a question. This was great to see, though we won't get to all of them on this occasion.

Margaret Atwood is a writer who is often introduced with the epithet that they "need no introduction". While this is certainly true in this room of keen readers, I think nevertheless that every moment of introduction is an important opportunity to mark her virtuosic accomplishments, especially in this, her eightieth year. Atwood started writing at 6, and her first volume of poetry was published in 1961 – after that, we might turn to Fiona Tolan's concise account of a long list of work over the intervening years: "The author of sixteen novels and eight collections of short fiction, as well as poetry, children's fiction, and nonfiction, she is, today, as established a living writer as one might find." A 'potted highlights' of a long list of significant literary prizes and other forms of literary recognition would include the PEN Pinter Prize in 2016, The Man Booker Prize, The Governor General's Award, The National Book Critics Award, to name but a few.

Already well-known as a preeminent and credentialled Canadian writer and world literary figure, Margaret Atwood has become even more famous since 2016 as the author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, adapted by MGM–Hulu into a tremendously successful television series (about to launch their third season in June 2019). *Alias Grace* was also successfully adapted for television by Sarah Polley in 2017 and it might be that the *Maddadam* trilogy is being prepared for adaptation and production by Paramount television as we speak. As resident counsel or commentator or driving artistic force, Atwood has been involved in finding new shapes and forms of her own work. She is herself a great interlocutor, adaptor and revisor of the works of the past (including the works of Homer and Shakespeare, to name a few minor artists). Her latest project, a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, called *The Testaments*, will be published in September, though I (and we) know better than to try to draw her on this today.

Because of her graduate work, amongst other things, Margaret Atwood is often associated with Victorian literature, but I propose that one way of seeing Margaret Atwood is as a modern-day Jacobean writer with energetically protean interests in tales of criminality and revenge, comedies of sex and money and outlandish speculations about alternative cultures, climates and things. We must venture just a moment later or two later in literary history to Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, to find another writer something of Margaret Atwood's range and daring; her learned, speculative, subversive, lyrical and just outright polymathic literary production.

Welcome to UNSW and to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Fiona Morrison: As a teenager reading your novels, I was very influenced by your nuanced account of power struggles among women and as I've gone on to teach undergraduates, I see the impact and importance of earlier novels such as *The Cat's Eye* and of course *The Handmaid's Tale*. You work with what I think of as a portrait of female sociality that's complex and involves a complex account of power ...

Margaret Atwood: Guess what? Shhh, don't tell. Women are human beings.

Fiona Morrison: In terms of the rounded and robust portraits of women in these works - and as your work progresses ... I wonder, are you optimistic about female sociality in the present?

Margaret Atwood: Okay, let's think about 'I' societies and 'we' societies. 'I' societies are based on competition, so the individual is supposed to "succeed". And that means that some individuals "fail". We think in those terms: somebody's done well, or not, etc. In 'we' societies, people are much more inclusive about the way they distribute power. In fact, individuals seen to have too much power are pulled down so they don't get big ideas, or become tyrannical, because it's seen as that. So when you say optimistic—optimistic about who? Optimistic about where? Possibly, if you spent some time in 'we' societies, you could look at the first Inuit film called 'The First Runner.' The idea is that the group is very important, and the worst thing that could happen to someone is to be expelled from it. It could be a life or death situation

As for prisons, let me put this thought into your head. Prisons are not possible without architecture. Prisons are not possible until people start building buildings that they start putting people into. So in nomadic, hunter/gatherer societies, you don't have prisons. What do you have instead? If someone is really a threat, you have to kill them.

Fiona Morrison: As a matter of social good?

Margaret Atwood: Yes, because otherwise they will kill the group. So what are we talking about when we talk about optimism?

Fiona Morrison: Yes, I see. Yet, there was such an energy and enthusiasm, both today in the audience and last night at the Sydney Opera House, which is of course generally about you and your work but I think it does relate to your intervention about women and gender.

Margaret Atwood: Well, I wasn't intending to do an intervention.

Fiona Morrison: No, that does sound frightening ... I needed another word?

Margaret Atwood: I was intending to write books. And I was intending to write books that in some way reflected what was there.

Fiona Morrison: To be a bit dogged, the reaction to you and your work (book, film and television) seems to me to be a marked and important one in this generation in the West.

Margaret Atwood: What people get is, first of all, if you put a female character in the centre of a novel, then that is the most important person in the novel. But this is something that's been happening for centuries. 18th century and 19th century novels were both quite heavily female-centric. So that's nothing new, but I think something that did happen, particularly after the fifties, in which there was a concerted effort made to get women back into the home, after the war. And to get them back into the home they were told their true nature and the path toward fulfilment was basically achieved by scooping out their brains. That was when I was a teenager. I wasn't old enough to take that seriously but I was old enough to be exposed to it.

Fiona Morrison: and the model of maternity that went with it?

Margaret Atwood: Well, luckily I had a tomboy mother in her late 20s and 30s, and so I don't think she was interested in any of that, nor housework or gloves.

Fiona Morrison: So does a sense of permission comes from the maternal line?

Margaret Atwood: Well, no. I think both. They were quite ahead of their times in many ways, or they just weren't interested. Certain ways of living being proposed of how to life in the fifties—they weren't interested in that.

Fiona Morrison: There are so many interesting things to explore here but I would like to hand over to the undergraduates who are here with us today.

Margaret Atwood: Well you know what they say on Reddit. AMA. Ask me anything. And they do, so go ahead, ask me anything.

Fiona Morrison: Sabrina? Is Sabrina here? She has an interesting question.

Sabrina: Which dystopian plot line terrified you the most in the novels you've written?

Margaret Atwood: Probably *Oryx and Crake*. But there's something I should've put into it but didn't, because we hadn't quite got there yet. I would've put more plastic in the ocean. I put some plastic trash washing onto beaches, but not enough. I should've put more. The scariest thing facing us should be that if oceans warm and solidify then that's pretty much it for us. Because it is oceans that generate 60-80% of the oxygen we breathe. If the lifeforms in the ocean die, we'll be very oxygen-depleted. And that will make us stupider, and we'll have a lot of traffic accidents. That's the scariest thing, and I haven't written a novel about it, because it wouldn't end well. I like rays of hope, at least one person left alive.

Fiona Morrison: I have to confess to everybody that I have a secret desire to record Margaret saying the word 'stupid'.

Margaret Atwood: Why is that?

Fiona Morrison: the way you deployed it yesterday with such perspicacity and effect ... engaging a sound judgement and profoundly intelligent assessment of certain things without wasting time - we don't chance this much any more.

Margaret Atwood: I don't call people stupid but I do call ideas stupid.

Fiona Morrison: Emma, are you there? Emma has a question.

Emma: What does speculative fiction mean to you? Do you think speculative fiction, over other genres, is a particularly useful genre to explore out social, economic, and ecological issues?

Margaret Atwood: Speculative fiction is like a blueprint. So sci-fi proper, you know the alien planets and spaceships, you can do a certain number of thought experiments with those, but people know that it's not really real. Whereas speculative fiction, this planet, these technologies and things that we already have, or are just about to have. That's a lot closer to us, which is why *1984* scared me more than *The Time Machine*. Those kinds of books are like blueprints. Let's say you're going to build a house and you look at the blueprints, you need to ask: is this the house I'm going to live in? So speculative fiction shows where we can go. Is this where we want to live? And if we don't want to live there, maybe rearrange the blueprint so we're going to be in a different kind of future. So that's one of the functions that it performs. By writing a fiction in which your acting out these ideas, the only other way you can do that in fiction is people having dream visions or conversations or thoughts in realistic fiction. That's not quite the same as taking your character and putting them in the actual situation. Thinking about something is not quite the same as being there. That's how they work, and you can think of them as a quite complicated video game in which the reader is playing one of the characters, or several of them.

Fiona Morrison: Is writing in the register of speculation rather than science-fiction like working with a thinking machine?

Margaret Atwood: No, well it's partly a sort of thinking machine, as every sort of ideas is. But novels always have at their centre a human being, even if it's called a rabbit. It's not really about rabbits, okay? It's not about rabbits, it's always about people. You have to have somebody somewhere doing something. And what they do and how they react is always going to be related to us. If you had a giant

spider as the central character in your work, the desires of the spider and its interests would be quite different from yours. Might do it as a comedy, or Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Fiona Morrison: Thea had a question, if she's here in the audience.

Thea: Out of everything you've written, what was the most fun to write and why?

Margaret Atwood: I get quite a kick out of stupid, really silly birthday songs for my friends and relations. They're really fun, there's no downside, nobody dies. I illustrate them for sheer fun. I had quite a lot of fun writing the only home economics opera in 1956, which was performed. And for years people would turn up at readings who had been in it. They're dying off now but...

Fiona Morrison: You wrote an opera at school?

Margaret Atwood: Well yes, I used other people's music. In fact, the head of the Canadian Opera Company said I had ruined Hoffman's Offenbach role for him forever because I used it as the music for a song about washing.

Fiona Morrison: That's probably feminist revision at it's finest ...

Margaret Atwood: Well I didn't *know* I was doing that—in 1956 we hadn't invented the word.

Fiona Morrison: Building on this a little bit too, if Kelly's in the audience she had a question.

Kelly: You've written in the past a word after a word after a word is power. Do you have a favourite sentence you've written or someone you admire has written that exemplifies this?

Margaret Atwood: It's a very ambiguous statement, because we're not saying what *kind* of power, are we? And to that end I would recommend a book by Naomi Alderman called *The Power*. In it, due to a

failed experiment in WWII, women have developed the ability to electrocute people by pointing at them. This sounds like a good idea at the beginning of the book, but as we know: power is power, and power is in itself neutral. If you plug something into the wall socket that's power, but if you stick your finger in it that's also power. It is true that words are very powerful but they can be used negatively as well as positively. Fake news is words. Donald Trump's tweets are words.

Fiona Morrison: You were talking yesterday about a seminal work for you, and I think you said it was called *Art and Energy*?

Margaret Atwood: by Barry Lorde.

Fiona Morrison: This work advances the idea that to understand the structures of different societies, one must understand the main source of physical energy?

Margaret Atwood: Or for any culture. The kind of culture you get is joined at the hip with the primary energy source. A lot of people have done work on more equality less equality and different kind of society. Among hunter gatherers, there was actually more gender equality and more acknowledgement that the work women were doing was crucial. Agriculture comes in and you can pinpoint the moment when, in the early Bronze Age, analysis of skeletons shows that men were getting meat and wheat, and women were getting wheat only, and bone disease. And why was that? Because if you're basing your economy on wheat, you have to have territory to grow the wheat. You can't just wander around in the woods picking the wheat, that's not how it works. Wheat all ripens at the same time, so once you have hierarchies it was a lot easier to tax. You could tax wheat, you could get a ruler's share of the wheat, and then you would want other people's territory to grow more wheat, and in order to get other people's territory you would want an army which you could only have if you had a surplus food source to feed the army such as wheat. So it becomes kind of circular, you have to have more soldiers and more wheat to feed the soldiers. And then women get less nourishment, they get sicker, but they're expected to produce more babies because you need the more babies to get more soldiers to get the territory to grow the wheat. You feel like saying, 'forget it! Don't do this!'

Fiona Morrison: It reminds me of one of the wonderful things that I had to do two years ago in the course of research: I needed to read *Payback* (your Massey lectures in published form), which reads as both a great work of economic history and of literary criticism. I'm going to be selfish and use the right of the microphone to thank you tremendously for that work.

Margaret Atwood: Oh, thank you!

Fiona Morrison: It was very important.

Margaret Atwood: I didn't intend to write it. It's a long story. Nevermind.

Fiona Morrison: Was it one of those occasions where you thought you might just give the Massey lectures and then you suddenly had to write the book?

Margaret Atwood: You have to write the book ahead of giving the lectures, then you have to get the lectures out of that book that you have written and make them smaller, then you have to go around and deliver them in five different cities in Canada. Looking at a map of Canada and knowing that one of those places is always going to be on the East coast and one is always going to be on the West coast you realise that there is a lot of travelling involved. You have to go around and give those lectures. And then they get condensed even smaller and they get made into a radio broadcast. It's a lot of work! So I said for a lot of years I wasn't going to do it. And then the company that I had helped found, a publishing company, which was publishing the Massey lectures and had been bought by another publishing company that had gone broke, this company almost went down the drain and that very moment the Massey lecture committee said they'd take the Massey lectures away from them and give them to another publishing company which would have meant it really would have gone down the drain. In the nick of time through the window comes this guy called Scott Griffin who as a child used to dress up as Superman and jump off the garage roof. Scott Griffin swoops through the window in his Superman suit, having by this time made a fortune in nuts and bolts, buys the House of Anansi. Why?

Because he had a family in which there were six little boys, and as punishment the father used to make them memorise poems. You'd think it would turn him off poetry but it didn't, it made him a convert to poetry and Anansi was a poetry company. So he bought the company and then I get "Help help help help help! they want to take the Massey lectures away from us!" So I said to the Massey lectures, if you take the Massey lectures away from this publishing company I will never ever do the Massey lectures. Now I had been saying for years, "not this year". So you know what happened then: then I had to do them.

Fiona Morrison: What a tremendous venture. I think the superhero in that story is not just Scott Griffin! So many questions still to ask, but just now, in the context of your non-fiction writing like *Payback*, I recall what must have been an introduction that you had written to Lewis Hyde's work on *The Gift*, which showcased Mauss's work [the alternative economic model that Mauss created called the gift exchange or "the gift economy"].

Margaret Atwood: Well it's even better than that, we knew Lewis for years and his book was published in the states, it's the only one I ever recommend to young writers. It's not about writing but it is about the gift economy which art exists in and the money economy which a work of art such as a book has to pass through to turn into a gift. And there's a lot of confusion around money in this area. Like if you make money are you a bad writer? If you don't make money are you a bad writer? it can go either way. That I found myself at the Frankfurt Book Fair with a man called Jamie Bing who runs Canongate and some other publishers for whom I had agreed to do the *Penelopiad*. So I said, "you owe me, and Jamie I want you to swear on this candle (that was in the middle of the table), that you will read this book called *The Gift*". I didn't say he had to publish it, but I did say he had to read it. So he did and then of course he longed to publish it, and that's how I ended up writing the introduction.

Fiona Morrison: That's such a strong story about coming to support a fellow writer ...

Margaret Atwood: Oh well, people trade stuff all the time. That's how human beings go about their lives. But in the gift you will read why if you're having trouble with your family, you shouldn't go

home for Christmas. Because gifts are exchanged, and the difference between gifts and the things you buy, is that if you receive a gift, you owe. Either to the person you received it from, or someone else. And with writers it's usually that you'll receive a gift from previous writers, you incorporate it and then you pass it on.

Fiona Morrison: Yes absolutely. In this vein, I am sure that everyone in the room joins me in thanking you for the 'gift' of your presence here in conversation tonight.