

July 1, 110 Thursday 27 Tammuz 3870 12:41 IST  Print

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## Atwood's tale

By AKIN AJAYI

12/05/2010

The Canadian author's portrait as an optimist.

The citation for this year's Dan David Prize describes Margaret Atwood's work as enabling "the emergence of a defined Canadian identity, while exploring... issues such as colonialism, feminism, structures of political power and oppression, and the violation and exploitation of nature."

High praise, I say to Atwood, but doesn't it read perhaps a little like a valedictory?

"You mean as if I were dead?" Atwood makes a face of mock horror. "Anyone who is taught in school is dead, by definition; so yes I am dead, since kids study me in school." She laughs.

Seventy last November, Margaret Atwood was here last week to receive the million-dollar prize endowed by the Dan David Foundation and awarded jointly with Tel Aviv University to recognize human achievement that "cuts across traditional boundaries and paradigms," in three categories: the past, present and future. Atwood's prize was for the category The Present – Rendering the 20th Century.

One of the most respected writers of her generation, Atwood has over the course of half a century created a influential corpus of work – long form fiction, short stories, poetry and, more recently, chamber opera – that as a body succeed in capturing the essence and the tensions of the big questions of our times. Atwood is often described as a "feminist" writer. This, strictly speaking, is not incorrect, given a recurring motif in her work, parsing the frailties of human relationships; but at same time, this taxonomy overlooks the equally important contribution that her work gives to our understanding of other crucial issues – man's relationship with the environment, power relations between rulers and the ruled, questions of identity and, ultimately, where we fit amid all this.

"You know, the only book that doesn't have a relationship between men and women in it is *Moby Dick*, and even so there is a female landlady, and a female whale," she chuckles. "It is very hard not to have a book that doesn't have both men and women in it, partly because everyone has a mother, last time I heard."

Perhaps the suggestion of being first and foremost a feminist writer, of being preoccupied with the issue of gender, reveals as much about the questioner as it does about herself and her work?

"When women write books, the question always comes up, and when men write books, this question sometimes comes up. So it's always there: It is just a question of who's asking, who's looking."

ATWOOD'S MOST recent book, 2009's *The Year of the Flood*, synthesizes many of the issues that have recurred in her fiction. Fitting into the strain of what she describes as "speculative fiction," it is set in the "moderately near" future, on an earth that has been laid to waste by a mysterious plague. Mankind has been

almost entirely been wiped out, save for a few stragglers trying to make sense of what has happened.

The preceding period had been characterized by social and environmental decay: Corporate power has supplanted democratic government, and social divisions enforced through a rigid division between an elite class and the others. These “others” are trapped in the “Pleeblands,” a feral landscape marked by urban decay and nihilistic violence. Genetic modification is rife: “Pigoons” and “Wolvogs” roam the post-plague landscape, animals who have developed some of the intelligence of their creators, but retaining – terrifyingly – their primal instincts. Survival, for those who escaped the plague, is precarious and uncertain.

This book, along with its companion volume, 2003’s *Oryx & Crake*, and further back 1985’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is frequently described by critics as “dystopian.” Dystopia, as the polar opposite to utopia, however suggests an imaginary theoretical state, unlikely to be reached. Atwood argues that describing this book as “speculative” means precisely that: The book is an excursion into real possibilities.

“Let’s make note of the premises on which it is based,” she says. “No. 1, government and corporations have become one. You don’t want that to happen. We just saw a great big step taken toward that with the financial meltdown and the government bailout. It’s very iffy.”

But let’s play devil’s advocate, I suggest. Is there an urgent danger in this? One argument is that this could lead to more effective, efficient government.

“The reason you don’t want this to happen is that you don’t want the guardian in the jurisdictional group to be the same as the commercial group,” she replies. “If they are, first of all enormous corruption takes place; secondly, there is no one you can turn to, supposing...” she refers to a major narrative driving point in *The Year of the Flood* and *Oryx & Crake*, the primary cause of the plague that wipes out mankind. One would want to believe that this is not likely; but at the same time, in the absence of a clear line of accountability to an electorate and the classic separation of powers, one appreciates that this is not implausible either.

“Another premise for the book is one already with us, which is the ability to genetically manipulate organisms,” Atwood continues. “I’m interested in the ability to create a new species, one that can pass on its genetic material to its progeny. And then we’ve got a new thing thrown into the mix, the science of epigenetics.”

Atwood references Jean Baptiste Lamarck, the 19th-century French academic who proposed the idea that an organism can pass on characteristics acquired during its lifetime to its offspring. “It’s not quite Lamarck, but more like his theories than classic Darwinism. Okay, so we’re creating new species... some of the combinations [in the book] are stretching it a bit, but what [scientists] have well within their power is to make a virus or bacterium to which we have no resistance... someone could do that.”

IT WOULD take a brave – or foolhardy – person to ignore the pointed warnings that *The Year of the Flood* contains about actions and their consequences, unintended or not. Atwood – the second child of an entomologist and a nutritionist – spent much of her childhood in the wilds of northern Quebec following her father’s work, and is a passionate advocate for environmental awareness. Ecological and environmental degradation features largely in *The Year of the Flood*, extremes in climatic conditions bringing about massive geographic – and consequently, population – change.

But despite the bleak message of her fiction, Atwood thinks that there are yet opportunities to reverse the trend. “There is hope. There’s a new book by Bill McKibben called *Eaarth* [*Eaarth: Making A Life On A Tough New Planet*, published earlier this year]. Chapter 4, that’s the one to read. In fact, with all these doom and gloom books, I always read the last chapter first, because otherwise I don’t have the strength to read the chapters about the bad stuff. I want to know ‘what are you suggesting?’ For heaven’s sake, we just had a tornado on Lake Erie, we don’t usually get tornados there. It’s the floods, the droughts.”

It would be easy for a sceptic – and there are lots of those, particularly in the area of environmental

awareness – to dismiss this particular strain of Atwood’s work as imaginative overelaboration. That said, her speculative fiction does explore what she describes as the “doctrine of unintended consequences” with an uncanny prescience.

A case in point is *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a book that even after a quarter of a century retains the capacity to unsettle. Atwood does not ascribe a prophetic quality to the book; it was, she points out, constructed firmly upon the foundations of what was already evident at the time. She references the political and social climate of the 1980s as a clear indicator of the possibilities for the future. “I’m one of those people who believe that people will do what they say what they are going to do, if they get the power to do so.”

But that’s pessimistic, I venture. “No. I was born in 1939, and I’ve read *Mein Kampf*. It’s all spelled out. One can say, ‘Oh, its just rhetoric,’ but actually, people usually do do these things if they have a program for them and if they have the chance.”

I wonder whether she is afraid of technology. “No,” she replies emphatically. “Technology is a tool, like a hammer is a tool. What you do with that tool is a human decision.” She picks up a teaspoon from the table in front of her. “This spoon is not going to do anything, it’s just going to lie there unless I use it for something. Technology, however, does influence the way we think and behave, so you do have to look at each single case, each one good or bad, and the unintended consequences.”

ASIDE FROM her award-winning fiction and poetry – her first book of poetry, self-published when she was 21, won Canada’s E.J. Pratt Medal; she has since won Canada’s Giller Prize and Governor-General’s Award and the United Kingdom’s Booker Prize among other numerous awards – Atwood has published several volumes of essays and nonfiction. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* is widely considered a seminal work, establishing a defined connection between Canadian identity and the development of an indigenous Canadian literature. Canada features prominently in much of her work, both as a location and as a distinct character with a narrative function of its own. This is evident from her earliest work, like 1972’s *Surfacing*, a psychological portrait of a woman negotiating an emotional precipice. The book is set primarily in the Canadian wilds, which adds to both atmosphere and psychological suspense.

Given this, it is perhaps a bit surprising that Atwood’s “dystopian” works – *The Year of the Flood*, *Oryx & Crake*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* – are all set in a very identifiable US. “Not only that, it’s also set in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Cambridge was one of the first towns founded by the Puritans,” she explains. “One is usually told that the Puritans went to America in search of religious freedom... but it’s not true.”

Really? “No, they went to America to set up their own theocracy, which allowed religious freedom to themselves, but not to anyone else.”

This fact, she says, lends a realistic prospect to her speculative incursions into the future. “The ‘what if’ novels are also sometimes ‘how to’ novels,” she notes. The historical traditions of the US, she argues, make the possible path toward totalitarianism more plausible.

“*The Handmaid’s Tale* answers the ‘how to’ question. If you were going to set up a totalitarian state in the United States, you wouldn’t do it by saying, ‘Hi, I’m Bob the Communist. Let’s all be communists!’ Nobody will support you. You might, on the other hand, say, ‘This is a liberal democracy, but in order to protect our liberal democracy, we have to have a totalitarian police state.’”

*Certain values must be given up?*

“Yeah, and we’ve just seen this happen when the towers went down, everybody just rolled over in the most astonishing way.”

She acknowledges that there has been some push back from these limits, but the

potential for the erosion of personal freedoms has been made clear. “So we don’t actually know how it’s going to go, but that’s why it’s not Canada. When *The Handmaid’s Tale* was published, the British said, ‘Jolly good.’ The Canadians in their nervous way said, ‘It could happen here,’ and in the United States they said, ‘How long have we got?’ And I now can tell them the answer to that.”

Despite all this, Atwood insists that she is not a pessimist. “No, no, of course not, not at all. Pessimistic people don’t write books. The books may be pessimistic in their content, but simply to write a book is an optimistic act.”

How so?

“Well, first of all you believe that you are going to finish it. Second, that you’re going to get it published. Third, you believe that someone’s going to read it. Fourth, you believe that the reader will like it. How optimistic can you be?”



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