

# MARGARET ATWOOD

## WORKS & IMPACT

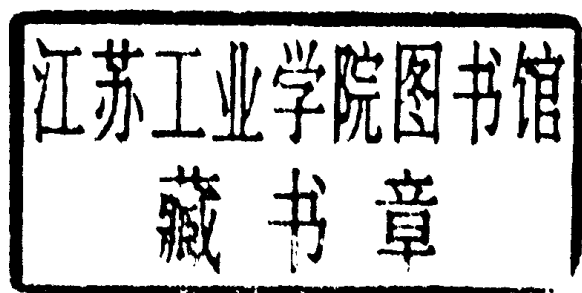


EDITED BY REINGARD M. NISCHIK

Margaret Atwood

Works and Impact

Edited by  
Reingard M. Nischik



CAMDEN HOUSE

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# *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*

*European Studies in American Literature and Culture*

Edited by Reingard M. Nischik  
(Constance)

November is the month of entrance,  
month of descent.

— Margaret Atwood, “Doorway,” from *Interlunar*

To be sixty years young is far more cheerful  
than to be thirty years old.

— anonymous American author

A word after a word  
after a word is power.

— Margaret Atwood,  
“Spelling,” from *True Stories*

## Preface and Acknowledgments

WITH AN UNDERTAKING such as this one, the planning and preparation of which bridged two continents and two years, considerable acknowledgments are in order. First of all, I would like to thank the usually overworked contributors to this volume for meeting my rather stringent deadlines for handing in their articles, and for promptly dealing with queries and suggestions for change. I particularly want to thank the contributors to the “transmitters” section of this book (editors, publishers, translators, literary agents, and assistants) for eventually letting themselves be convinced to supplement their often non-public support work for Margaret Atwood with a short statement about it for this volume. Susanne Becker, Nathalie Cooke, Alice Palumbo, and Ellen Seligman supplied useful information in addition to their own contributions to this volume. Lothar Hönnighausen, after having written his article for this book, organized a fruitful Margaret Atwood Symposium at the University of Bonn in June 1999, at which some of us were given the opportunity to present our contributions to an interested audience before publication.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, I want to thank my efficient “AmCanTeam” at the University of Constance, who proved their stamina when, due to the belatedness of some contributions for another volume, they were suddenly faced with the preparation and production of two (almost) camera-ready book manuscripts. Claudia Becker spent late hours at the computer keying in the corrections and producing the first clean versions. Lisa Roebuck, our Canadian student, took care of language and formal matters for most of the contributions before “Giving Birth” kept her from further contributing to the birth of this book. Stefan Ferguson reliably saw to language and computer problems, helped with the proofreading, produced the index. Mirjam Berle and Lesley Adams

<sup>1</sup> Sadly, Walter Pache’s article, written at the beginning of 1999, was one of the last by this great scholar before his unexpected death from heart failure in January 2000 at the age of 59. Three weeks later, an academic ceremony in his honor was to have been held in Augsburg on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. Professor Walter Pache contributed a tremendous amount to the development of Canadian Literature Studies in Germany, and was a staunch Atwood supporter from the 1970s onwards. He will be sorely missed.

grappled with the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the Works Cited lists. Mirjam Berle also helped with the proofreading, and, together with Stefan Ferguson, acted as troubleshooter. Annette Zerpner spent hours in the library checking quotations. Caroline Rosenthal not only handled and elaborated upon masses of information to produce a fine article for this volume; she also, while staying in Toronto in the summer of 1999, solved some final bibliographical riddles and selected on the spot the Atwood cartoons reprinted here. Margret Jäger-Junge, after having produced one camera-ready book manuscript on the computer, conscientiously surfaced to add the finishing touches to the manuscript for the present volume.

Thirdly, I am grateful to Professor James Hardin, my general editor at Camden House, and to Jim Walker of Camden House's Rochester, New York office for promptly responding to any queries which cropped up during the preparation of this book; to Shelly Rafferty Withers for her careful reading of the final print-out; to Edna Hanjal in Toronto for her helpfulness and advice in guiding us through the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library; to Charles Altman and Isaac Bickerstaff for permission to reproduce the images of Atwood; to the Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries and the Canadian Government for a grant towards the printing costs; and to the *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* for permission to reprint a shortened version of an interview with Margaret Atwood first published in the ZKS.

Fourthly, I am grateful to Margaret Atwood's fellow writers who spontaneously put pen to paper when I asked them what Margaret Atwood means to them.

Last but not least, I thank Margaret Atwood (and her assistant Sarah Cooper) for filling in gaps, for providing private photographs, and for permission to reproduce some of Atwood's hilarious cartoons in this volume.

This book deals with Atwood's works published up to May 2000. *The Blind Assassin*, her latest novel, is included in the bibliography at the end of the book, but, since it will not be published until autumn 2000, is outside the range of the articles contained in this study.

R.N.

Constance, Germany

May 2000



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## “Flagpoles and Entrance Doors”: Introduction

*Reingard M. Nischik (University of Constance)*

THIS VOLUME WAS prepared for the occasion of Margaret Atwood's sixtieth birthday in November 1999. With Atwood at the height of her creative powers, its first aim is to take stock of the full breadth of her works and international impact. Secondly, the book has been conceived to serve as a wide-ranging introduction to the writer and her works. Last but not least, it should be seen as a tribute to a writer who, for more than thirty years now, has enthralled a steadily growing international audience with her remarkable creative wizardry and productivity.

A writer of fiction and poetry, as well as literary and cultural criticism, Margaret Atwood is one of the most fascinating, versatile, and prolific authors of our time, a superb writer in every genre she has chosen to tackle. Her extraordinary intellectual and imaginative powers and gift of language, the uncanny topicality of her themes, her never-failing humor, as well as her exceptional talent for combining intellectually challenging writing with a high readability, have made her a favorite with readers, critics, and scholars alike. A spokeswoman for human rights — of which her acute awareness of gender differences forms an integral part — a Canadian nationalist, a brilliant observer of contemporary Western culture who in her works questions conventional modes of perception and evaluation, Atwood is one of the most important literary chroniclers of our time.

Not surprisingly, in the year the author turns sixty, the Atwood industry is booming. Since publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, her books, translated into some thirty languages, have become international bestsellers. In a work published in 1997 by two Canadian historians, Rawlinson's and Granatstein's *The Canadian 100: The 100 Most Influential Canadians of the Twentieth Century*, Margaret Atwood is ranked in fifth place, a gratifyingly high position for someone who is neither a politician nor an industrial magnate, but a writer by profession. She ranks above Pierre Elliott Trudeau or René Lévesque, and is well ahead of the next writer on the list, Robertson Davies. Although the authors

of *The Canadian 100* are as aware as everyone else of the problems involved in such a variegated ranking, their high placing of Margaret Atwood certainly seems convincing:

Atwood has been *the* public voice of Canadian letters for the past quarter century. No living, critically acclaimed woman author [and I would add: male author, RN] can claim such consistent attention. Few Canadians have had such impact. (32)<sup>1</sup>

There is a flourishing "Margaret Atwood Society," an Allied Organization of the MLA, which publishes the biannual *Newsletter of the Margaret Atwood Society* and has established the Atwood-Discussion-List, an Internet bulletin board. 1998 saw the publication of *two* biographical books on Margaret Atwood, one by Nathalie Cooke and one by Rosemary Sullivan, which attracted a surprising amount of general and critical attention (cf. Cooke). In academic quarters, Atwood is the most frequently studied Canadian writer at the university level (cf. Rosenthal). The production of critical studies of Atwood's works — monographs and essay collections on her writing — has increased steadily in recent years (cf. "Bibliography: Books on Margaret Atwood"), demonstrating the high status Atwood has attained in the world of literary studies.

By 1999, the year Margaret Atwood turned sixty, it seemed time to take stock. This volume, then, sets out to provide a survey of Atwood's achievements thus far and to assess her national and international impact. The following fifteen articles were written specifically for this book by international contributors from Germany, Canada, the USA, Britain, and France. The articles try to present as wide-ranging a treatment of their respective topics as is possible within the confines of some fifteen pages each. The contributions also pay attention, where appropriate, to the developments concerning their topic over the years. In accordance with the title of this volume and our intention to study the writer, her works, and their reception, the book is divided into four main sections: "Life and Status," "Works," "Approaches," and "Creativity — Transmission — Reception." A concluding two-part bibliography lists Atwood's book publications according to genre and critical studies of Atwood in book form published so far.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a similar survey, cf. the beginning of the Rosenthal article in the present volume. In the following, references to names in brackets without further qualifications refer to the respective articles in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> A lot of the important research on Atwood, of course, is documented in critical articles; for this, check the *MLA Bibliography* and, even more compre-

In the first section, Nathalie Cooke, Susanne Becker, and Caroline Rosenthal deal with the — as these articles demonstrate — tricky question of Margaret Atwood's life and status, corroborating Atwood's own, penetratingly simple formulation in *Cat's Eye*, "There is never only one, of anyone." In the opening article, Nathalie Cooke, author of the acclaimed *Margaret Atwood: A Biography* (1998), cunningly starts off her biographical treatment of Atwood by noting various kinds of biographical approaches to Canada's literary superstar. Resorting to feline imagery (there's an Atwood scholar for you!), she bases her study on the images of the "stuffed cat," "lion," "tiger," and "pussycat," each of which has a particular bearing on important aspects of Atwood's life, status, and personality. At first, Cooke supports a reconstruction of Atwood's identity along the lines of the "tiger" and "pussycat" models, but finally opts for the more dynamic biographical metaphor implied in a portrait of Atwood painted by her friend, Toronto artist Charlie Pachter. It is entitled "It Was Fascination I Know" and evokes "the endless possibility of transformation."

Susanne Becker, who has worked for German TV since her student days, devoted parts of her Ph.D. thesis to Atwood, and has interviewed her on several occasions. Appropriately, she writes about Atwood, the media star. Becker, while documenting Atwood's extraordinary talent for public appearances (and anyone who has seen Atwood perform will agree), traces in her article the productive tension between the opportunities and the costs of Atwood's celebrity, between her using the media and being used. This tension has proved fruitful for Atwood's writing, in which she approaches the subject from the wider perspective of her preoccupation with the formation, representation, and reconstruction of identity (see also Müller, Hill Rigney, Irvine). Becker demonstrates how Atwood puts her experience with the printed and electronic media to good use, referring in particular to *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, and *Alias Grace*.

Caroline Rosenthal rounds off the explicit treatment of Atwood's status in the first section by addressing the question of "Canonizing Atwood: Her Impact on Teaching in the US, Canada, and Europe." After presenting the telling results of her international survey, which further substantiate Atwood's exceptional standing, Rosenthal focuses on "academic imperialism" in the United States, which seeks to appropriate Atwood as an international American author, while neglecting her Canadian identity. At the same time, Rosenthal demonstrates that

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hensive, the yearly "Current Atwood Checklist" in the *Newsletter of the Margaret Atwood Society*.

Atwood has nowhere been more controversial than in her own country (cf. Canadian Brian Fawcett's term, "Atwood bashing"). This North American discrepancy in her survey results leads Rosenthal to comment on fundamental differences in American and Canadian culture, with Canada, ironically, ritualizing the deflation of national icons (as Atwood puts it: "Americans worship success; Canadians find it in slightly bad taste," in Atwood 1982, 372). An author who, at the beginning of her writing career, set out as a critic in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) to conceptualize a Canadian literature, is now, some thirty years later, a canonized writer herself and, whether praised or challenged, has become "a mark for new departures."

The first and second sections of this book are linked by photographs of Margaret Atwood. These photographs offer glimpses of Atwood's development from a budding writer (cf. Cooke's biography) to a celebrity: Atwood at age thirteen at Niagara Falls, Ontario (i.e. the Canadian side, yet proving that she has always encompassed the US!); Atwood as family woman, private life being publicized (cf. Becker); Atwood accompanied by other prominent Canadians, from Leonard Cohen to Michael Ondaatje; Atwood in her frequent role as a sought-out interviewee, here in the backyard of her house in Toronto; Atwood dressed up flashily (see the Atwood/Metzler interview) as "covergirl" (Becker) of *Saturday Night* to draw attention to their first printing of the wonderful Atwood short story "Death by Landscape"; and, last but not least, Atwood (before, during, after) reading from her works — at an annual Canadian Studies conference in Europe (Grainau, Germany), or at an annual Writers' Festival in Canada (Eden Mills, near Guelph, Canada, in September 1998).

The second section of the book, "Works," features survey articles on Atwood's writing in the most important genres she has excelled in (cf. "Bibliography: Margaret Atwood's Book Publications"): her novels, her short fiction (and prose poetry), her poetry, and her literary and cultural criticism. These articles, by Alice Palumbo, Charlotte Sturgess, Lothar Hönnighausen, and Walter Pache, deal with all of Atwood's books in these genres published up to 1999. The articles on Atwood's creative writing convey her remarkable thematic and formal variety and discuss the developments in her fiction and poetry. Yet they also demonstrate how these works, spanning almost four decades (1961–1999), share interconnected concerns and techniques, so that a distinct Atwoodian voice is discernible in every genre. In these contributions, as also in those of the next section, "Approaches," Atwood's thematic preoccupations and some of her literary techniques emerge: her nationalistic focus on Canada and her insistence on Canadian cultural auton-

omy in relation to Canada's overpowering southern neighbor; her interest in power structures, gender difference, and gender politics; human rights questions; the formation, reconstruction, and representation of identity; problems of individual subjectivity; her probing of the dimension of time, the relevance of the past, and the functions of memory; her often playful subversion of clichés, conventions, and any fixed categories; her rewriting/revision of received stories such as fairy tales and her revisionist mythmaking; her intertextuality, generic pluralism and hybridity; the multiplicity of perspectives in her works; the constructionist problems of writing and the crucial function of language; and, last but not least, Atwood's stylistic precision and elegance, her flexible diction, her deadpan irony, unfailing humor, and deflationary wit.

Walter Pache, rounding off the "Works" section with a rare article on Atwood's literary criticism, describes Atwood as "an academic, a *poeta doctus*, if ever there was one" (cf. also her many honorary degrees). Atwood, known for the unconventional generic plurality of her fiction and poetry, successfully creates a concept of criticism as a creative art, while pointing out that "a writer has to write something before a critic can criticize it" (*Second Words*, 11). Pache deals with Atwood's three books of criticism, *Survival*, *Second Words*, and *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. He sees Atwood as a critic who is playfully at odds with "the obscure ritualized games" professional critics play with each other "instead of applying themselves to the more practical task of elucidating textual and cultural difficulties for the benefit of the public." As Atwood practices it, literary criticism is a "practical, text-centered, and value-oriented craft," helping readers enter into the text through their own imagination.

The third section of the book, "Approaches," is by definition incomplete; with a writer of Atwood's breadth and stature, this subject would require a book of its own. We had to make do without separate articles on such important topics as Margaret Atwood's linguistic and narrative style (see Grace and Weir 1983, Nischik 1991, Staels 1995), Atwood and multiculturalism, Atwood and historiography (see Kuester 1992), and without a summary article on critical/theoretical approaches to Atwood (see McCombs 1988, 1-21; Mycak 1996, 9-29) — reconciling ourselves to necessities with the consolation that these aspects are touched upon in the present articles.

Coral Ann Howells's splendid article on generic hybridity in Margaret Atwood's novels, which opens the "Approaches" section, is a case in point. Howells deals with one of Atwood's hallmarks, her "continuous experimentation across genre boundaries, and the political and ideo-



logical significance of such revisions.” In her treatment of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Cat’s Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, and *Alias Grace*, Howells demonstrates Atwood’s expressive, “slightly postmodern” (Atwood) recreation of genres such as the dystopia, the fictional autobiography, the kunstlerroman, the Gothic romance, and the historical novel. Along the way, this article — by one of the most distinguished Atwood scholars — deals with issues such as the specific role of historiography in Atwood’s writing, the self-consciously postmodern aesthetic inherent in her duplicitous narrators and narrative constructions, and her challenging engagement with questions of femininity, identity, and gender.

The latter issues are taken up in Barbara Hill Rigney’s article on Atwood’s “Narrative Games and Gender Politics,” which, after surveying the construction of female characters in Atwood’s novels, sets out to tackle this problem: “How, then, given such negative portrayals of women, can we construct a feminist ethic for Atwood, how infer a woman-centered poetic?” Hill Rigney shows how complex Atwood’s dealings in gender politics are, how she takes her characters as well as her readers “above and beyond the gendered stereotypes,” and how gender structures are dependent on language and the construction of stories. While Atwood makes us acutely aware of gender issues, “she refuses to be canonized in any area but the literary.”

Paul Goetsch’s article puts Margaret Atwood’s nationalism into the context of Canadian nationalism since the 1950s. Goetsch refers to early influences on her thinking and to the virulent ideas of Canadian nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s (next to Atwood, W. L. Morton, George Grant, Dennis Lee, Northrop Frye). Goetsch, who published his Ph.D. thesis on Hugh MacLennan in 1961, compares Atwood’s nationalism to that of MacLennan, the leading literary nationalist of the 1950s and early 1960s in Canada. Goetsch describes both writers as “typical representatives of the postcolonial drive to project an autonomous national identity by constructing a coherent culture or literature.” One of their differences lies in “their identification of the imperial center,” with Atwood having been in the vanguard of Canadian anti-Americanism of the 1960s and 1970s. Goetsch then concentrates on the impact of *Survival* (cf. also Pache’s assessment of this key work on Canadian literature and culture), and on the development of Atwood’s nationalism “from a sense of crisis to a feeling of self-confidence.”

Ronald B. Hatch also begins his article, “Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology,” with a reference to *Survival*, specifically to Atwood’s thesis that “Canadians are survivalists in the midst of a vast, unknowable land.” Hatch offers a close reading of relevant poems, novels,