

CONTINUUM CONTEMPORARIES

MARGARET ATWOOD'S

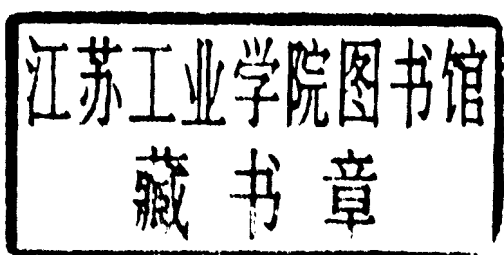
# *Alias Grace*



BY GINA WISKER

A READER'S GUIDE

Margaret Atwood's  
*Alias Grace*



## CONTINUUM CONTEMPORARIES

### *Also available in this series*

Pat Barker's *Regeneration*, by Karin Westman  
Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, by Adam Parkes  
Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*, by Abby Werlock  
J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter Novels*, by Philip Nel  
Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, by Susan Farrell  
Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Linda Wagner-Martin  
Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, by Robert Morace  
Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, by Tracy Hargreaves  
Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, by Kelly Reames  
Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, by John Duvall  
Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*, by Aliki Varvogli  
Graham Swift's *Last Orders*, by Pamela Cooper  
Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, by Matthew Strecher  
Ian Rankin's *Black and Blue*, by Gill Plain  
Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, by John Bolland  
Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, by Julian Murphet  
Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, by Stephen Tatum  
Iain Banks's *Complicity*, by Cairns Craig  
A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, by Catherine Burgess  
David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*, by Jennifer Haytock  
Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, by Imelda Whelehan  
Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong*, by Pat Wheeler  
Kate Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, by Emma Parker  
Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, by Nahem Yousaf  
Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, by Joanne Knowles  
Alan Warner's *Morvern Callar*, by Sophy Dale  
Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, by Claire Squires  
Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, by Angela Atkins

### *Forthcoming in this series:*

Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!*, by Pamela Thurschwell  
Louis De Bernieres's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, by Con Coroneos

▪ **MARGARET ATWOOD'S**

*Alias  
Grace*

A READER'S GUIDE

**GINA WISKER**

CONTINUUM | NEW YORK | LONDON

2002

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc  
370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd  
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

[www.continuumbooks.com](http://www.continuumbooks.com)

Copyright © 2002 by Gina Wisker

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced;  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or  
by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording,  
or otherwise, without the written permission of the publishers.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wisker, Gina, 1951–

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* : a reader's guide / Gina Wisker.

p. cm. — (Continuum contemporaries)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8264-5706-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Atwood, Margaret Eleanor, 1939– *Alias Grace*. 2. Biographical  
fiction—History and criticism. 3. Marks, Grace, b. 1826—In  
literature. 4. Women murderers in literature. 5. Trials (Murder) in  
literature. 6. Canada—In literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PR9199.3.A8 A7939 2002

813'.54—dc21

2002005625

---

## *Contents*

### **1.**

The Novelist 7

### **2.**

The Novel 25

### **3.**

The Novel's Reception 66

### **4.**

The Novel's Performance 80

### **5.**

Further Reading and Discussion Questions 85

*Bibliography* 99



## The Novelist

**M**argaret Atwood is arguably Canada's greatest living writer. She is also a significant contemporary woman writer who has made a distinct contribution to women's writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Primarily a novelist, Atwood also writes poetry and essays, short stories and criticism, and acts as an editor. She was born November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Ontario, the second of three children. Until she was twelve she spent most of her summers in the wilds of the northern Quebec and Ontario bush with her family and entomologist father. Dividing time between the bush and the town helped develop a sense of dual identity and allegiance which has informed both imagery and ideas in her work. In 1946, her family moved to Toronto, where she attended high school (1952–1957). Between 1957 and 1961 she studied Honors English (with critic Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson) at Victoria College, the University of Toronto, graduating in 1961.

**EDUCATION, LOCATION, AWARDS, EARLY WRITING**

Poetry and fiction have both won praise and prizes for Atwood, whose first poetry collection, a privately printed, self-published chapbook, *Double Persephone*, won the E.J. Pratt medal (1961). This was followed by a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship enabling her to become a graduate student at Radcliffe College, Harvard University, Massachusetts. In 1962 she gained her MA and began to read for a Ph.D. at Harvard on "The English Metaphysical Romance." Deciding the academic life (or at least research) was not for her, after all, she interrupted her studies to work for a market-research company in Toronto and to teach English at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (1964–1965). Here she wrote the first draft of *The Edible Woman*, published in 1969. In 1966 she published *The Circle Game*, receiving the Governor General's Award for Poetry. She followed this with *The Animals in that Country* (1968), *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Procedures for Underground* (1970), and *Power Politics* (1971). Atwood established herself as equally important as both poet and novelist. The publication in 1972 of *Surfacing* and *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* consolidated her significance as novelist and cultural critic. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Cat's Eye* (1988) brought Atwood international fame, consistently confirmed and maintained with her novels and poetry.

Margaret Atwood has lived in Canada, the United States, and Europe. Her work has gained her creative writing posts and roles in key associations from Toronto to New York and Australia. She has won numerous prizes including the Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction (1986), and been several times shortlisted for the Booker Prize, which she won with *Blind Assassin* in 2000. Her work as an editor is recognized as having been a major influence on bringing

Canadian literature to an international audience and establishing its specific characteristics and relationships with other bodies of work. In 1982 she edited *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, (but she was criticized for including too many women) and in 1986 *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*. Atwood also edited *The CanLit Foodbook* (an alternative cookbook, 1987) and published her own critical writings in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (1982). She is politically and socially involved through PEN and Amnesty International and continues to be active against social injustice.

Atwood's work is read throughout the world and both *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale* have been made into films. Her writing has had a significant influence on contemporary writing by women, and has brought the re-writing of genre fiction to the fore as a form of cultural critique for postmodernist and other contemporary writing. Many of her works rewrite romantic fictions, and *The Handmaid's Tale* uses science fiction and utopian fiction forms. She articulates and problematizes experiences of women and girls in powerfully moving ways. Her language is beautiful, perceptibly chosen, highlighting ways in which power controls language and shapes people's lives. She depicts history as a partial, often subjectively and politically, shaped construction, and exposes gendered roles as social and cultural constructions, utilizing different forms of expression, different discourses. Atwood exposes constraints, suggesting that behaviors, roles, representations, and versions *could* be different.

#### **ATWOOD AS A CANADIAN WRITER**

Atwood's work began to receive international critical attention in 1972, with the publication of *Surfacing* and her influential critical analysis of Canada's literary tradition, *Survival: A Thematic Guide*

to *Canadian Literature*. Both books consider similar themes, in particular the notion of a victim complex, which Atwood identified as both a woman's and a postcolonial response: "not only the Canadian stance towards the world, but the usual female one." Most Canadian reviewers considered *Surfacing* concerned with nationalism, while Americans treated the book as feminist or ecological (partly, perhaps, because it indicts America as capitalist and imperialist). *Surfacing* concentrates on an exploration of Canadian nationality in relation to the invasive materialism of America. More explicitly, it concentrates on a woman's search for her own identity, in a period when getting in touch with Nature and the self through sloughing off those materialistic constructions was just beginning to dawn, for women at least.

These are continuing issues for her: women's roles, their lives, the ways in which stories are told of, myths constructed about, fictions perpetuated about and by women. While the range of her writing shifts from the wilderness tale, to the comic, the science fictional, the social realist, and the mythic/magical, she continually explores different representations and constructions, emphasizing their fictionality. Atwood also considers ways in which women might use or move beyond these and construct versions of themselves. Her work is a dialogue between popular fictional forms and "high art," that is, the more literary, post-modern work which uses other works intertextually, rewrites and reinterprets history, showing us the everyday and the textual constructedness of versions of our lives.

Margaret Atwood is engaged with issues and lives of others living in Canada. Canadian literature, or "Can lit," as an established identified location for study has only really emerged since 1980. Canadian culture, a "settler-invader" culture, like the Australian with which it is often compared, is somewhat culturally schizophrenic, split between French and English influences in language

and history, closely affected by the United States, its near neighbor. This influence is often seen as constant, potential, overshadowing power and vulgarity (W.H. New, 1989) dominating Canada's attempts to establish a clearly distinct identity. From an imperial and colonial point of view, Canada attracted international settlers including Irish, Scottish, and latterly, Japanese. In *Alias Grace*, Grace Marks herself is of Irish immigrant stock. Canada imported English institutions, cultural values, and writing traditions, adding Caribbean influences. In relation to other imperial and now postcolonial nations "Canada . . . has tended to see herself as the undervalued orphan in the imperial family" (Brydon and Tiffin, 1993, p. 63), a "Cinderella" country awaiting her moment. Canada was seeking a national identity while also suffering national disputes, beginning with the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, and problems generated by the failure of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords. One of the intentions of those establishing a sense of the nation and identity of Canada was to construct a shared community rather than an oppositional identity. Canada still sees itself as a culturally harmonious, peaceable kingdom, although much of this is cultural myth.

Although Margaret Atwood rarely talks about indigenous peoples and Japanese settlers, she does deal with the tensions of living as a near neighbor of the more abrasive America. First Nations writers represent Canada and their own lives, the loss of lands and identity, marginalization, and reassertion of cultural difference within a nationally harmonious, homogenizing Canadian culture. More recent settlers deal with the racism, appropriation, and settlement, their lived experience in Canada. An increasingly sensitive issue for settler-originated writers in many different countries, including Canada, has been the concern with finding an appropriate language in which to write. Canadian writers often feel they use "alien" words in a "colonial space" (Brydon, 1981):

It was a situation in which the perceived “inauthenticity” of the spoken New World/Word became the site of investigation and expression—not as the preliminary to a possible “adaptation,” but as a continuing dynamic of the use of “alien” words in “colonial space.” (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, 1989, p. 140)

One task for the Canadian writer is to un-write expressions adopted from imperial British, French and American influences.

At one time I considered it to be the task of the Canadian writer to give names to his experience, to be the namer. I now suspect that, on the contrary, it is his task to un-name . . . there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American. (Kroetsch 1974, p. 43)

Finding appropriate language is a crucial step to enabling a national identity, as Margaret Atwood’s own work on Canadian writing and cultural identity testifies. It is an issue concerning Canada’s indigenous writers as well as those of British or French descent who often fail to find their experiences represented in the forms and expressions of English or U.S. literature. Atwood found little real Canadian writing prior to the 1970s, and until the 1980s, Canada almost entirely ignored its indigenous (First Nations) people’s writing. Women, Atwood argues, are no mere footnotes in the pioneering environment:

Canadians never developed the concept of women as mere brainless decoration. Canadian folklore is still full of tales of our grandmothers’ generation when women ran farms, chased off bears, delivered their own babies in remote locations and bit off the umbilical cords. Whatever the reason, if you’re looking at writing in Canada, you can’t just footnote the women. (Pepinster, 1996, p. 9)

This echoes the kind of “battler” motif found in writing by Carol Shields and Australian settler writers’ tales of “the drover’s wife.” Reading earlier writing helps establish a sense of history for national literatures, but it can also often reinforce myths and stereotypes, a common problem in settler cultures. Pioneers are recognizable figures:

*He stood, a point  
on a sheet of green paper  
proclaiming himself the centre*

.....

*For many years  
he fished for a great vision,  
dangling the hooks of sown  
roots under the surface  
of the shallow earth.*

*It was like  
enticing whales with a bent  
pin*

(Atwood, “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer” in Thieme, 1996, p. 356–7)

Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience—the North, the snow-storm, the sinking ship—that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life . . . A preoccupation with one’s survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. (Atwood, 1996, in Thieme, [1972], p. 360)

Atwood rewrites and uses cultural and traditional myths to explore and critique representations and histories of women, of pioneers, and the people (mainly) of Toronto. Her poetry and criticism part-

ner her fictions. One popular myth, overwhelming more radical representations of women in Canadian literature, has traditionally been that of the hardy, pioneering settler woman living a tough life in great hardship—determined to raise her children, provide food, living life in the Canadian bush with grit and zeal, walking through the snow to help sick neighbors, ploughing, suffering from cold and isolation. Some origins of the figure are real, some derive from the fictionalized autobiography of Susanna Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush or Life in Canada* (1988 [1852]). Moodie's and settler women's were harsh lives which fascinated Margaret Atwood, who determined to both rewrite and reimagine them. In 1970, rewriting Susannah Moodie in a poetry sequence as *The Journals of Susannah Moodie* (1970), she challenges the stereotype of the tough settler woman, producing a modern work of consciousness rather than a realistic diary, highlighting themes popularized by Moodie and her followers. Atwood brought Moodie to life for twentieth-century readers, twentieth-century women's consciousness registering the paradox of her situation. Moodie visited Grace Marks in the penitentiary, representing her in a way Atwood first took as the whole truth, later discovering it to be subjective.

In 1972 *Survival* followed, beginning to define the character of Canadian literature in relation to, and apart from, that of the United States and UK. In the same year Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972) was published, a powerful tale using the survival theme, investigating and challenging stereotypes of Canadian womanhood, positioning the U.S. ways as destructive, hypocritical, and superficial. The protagonist returns to an island in the Canadian wilderness where she lived as a child, to search for her father, a lone forest dweller and student of American Indian lore, missing for nearly a month. With her she takes three companions, one woman and two men, Canadian nationalists who loathe the intrusion of the Ameri-

can versions of Canada and wilderness but have themselves lost all contact with the natural wild land. The novel has been seen as a search for Canadian identity, for religious and spiritual vision, testimony to her relationship with nature. The unnamed heroine rejects American men, offspring of popular culture and precursors of tourists seeking a “modified wilderness experience”:

It wasn't the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both. They'd had their chance but they had turned against the gods and it was time for me to choose sides. (Atwood, 1972, p. 154)

In Atwood's writing here, “American” denotes a homogenizing imperialism that cannot tolerate difference, “a tendency that can characterise American feminism as well as American imperialism” (Brydon and Tiffin, 1993, p. 94). She positions herself away from the Americans' technologically adept invasiveness, and toward the native gods of the place. By doing so she aligns herself with the “myth of Canadian identity as an alternative way of being North American” (Brydon and Tiffin, 1993, p. 94). The issue of hunting animals just for the kill is important in this novel. Canadians can be hunters but, Atwood argues, not in the name of overindulgence or fun, seen as superficiality inherent in the American way. Central to this argument in the novel is the image of the heron, beautiful in flight, later crumpled and dead.

The novel is a quest for identity. In denying her name “I no longer have a name. I tried for all these years to be civilised but I'm not and I'm through pretending” (p. 168), the protagonist also rejects the need to name wild creatures and places, a link between naming, language and civilization's limitations. *Surfacing* is an example of second wave feminism, recuperating myths of women's identities which have constrained and misrepresented women as

guilty for the world's ills (Pandora, Eve) sexually dangerous, predatory, and destructive (Medusa, mermaids). The protagonist undergoes various stages of quests similar to those of mythic females. Like Persephone, she descends into a world of the dead, plunging into a glacial lake, the site of her childhood. There she discovers her father's body. She returns to the wilderness, a natural state, sleeps fitfully, prowling on all fours, feeding off roots and berries. The heroine's personal crisis causes a breakdown which is also a breakthrough, a familiar 1970s theme in women's writing. She decides to atone for an earlier abortion, a sacrifice to technology and male invasion, and to conceive and bear a child in a totally natural earth-linked and located manner, just as the child of *herself* starts to resurface.

This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs, the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I would be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words. (p. 162)

She feels totally at one with the natural world, blurring her identity with that of trees, a frog, anything natural: "I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. . . . I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing, in which the trees and animals move and grow" (p. 181). Exiting her trance state, she views with interest her matted hair and wild appearance, deciding to take this new found sense of self as survivor, no victim, and live differently back in the civilized city world. It is a powerful, sensitive, rather "green" novel, visionary, feminist, aligned to reclaimed, rewritten myths and versions of woman as earth mother, at one with nature, and it helped to establish Atwood as both a woman writer and a Canadian writer.