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978-0-521-69463-6 - The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson

Excerpt

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Chapter 1

Life

‘If you write a book on me,’ Margaret Atwood claims, ‘you have to have a chapter on hair.’ In an interview with me in Toronto in the summer of 2007, Atwood claimed, ‘I have the hair criticism. I get criticism of the book, criticism of the ascribed personality and then criticism of the hair. That’s why you have to have a chapter on hair.’¹ Early photographs of Atwood do indeed focus on her remarkably curly hair – and underscore the unsurprising truth that female authors battle against a link between their appearance and their critical reception (indeed, several of the critical books on Atwood use her photograph as the front cover). If Atwood’s reputation now firmly rests on her output and not her appearance, nevertheless the effects of this early focus on her looks are apparent in her critical and creative output, and show in one small way how biography necessarily has an impact upon a writer’s life and her work.

Atwood’s famous humour is apparent in this little vignette, as well as a number of important themes in relation to Atwood herself and her place in Canadian and world literature. A literary author’s relationship to her texts (and her readers) is a matter of some critical debate, from claims that the author is the font of all knowledge to claims that readers determine meanings and from everything in between, yet fascination with details of an author’s life do not seem to abate. Atwood has been the subject of two sustained biographies, both of which were published in 1998, and neither of which were authorized. Nathalie Cooke’s biography, entitled simply, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, explores her life in detail, outlining, for example, where Atwood lived as a child and what she read, whereas Rosemary Sullivan’s book, *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out*, is, in her own words, a ‘not-biography’, focusing instead on Atwood’s ‘creative life’ (Sullivan 2).

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada, on 18 November 1939 and had an unusual early childhood, spending summers in the Canadian ‘bush’ because her father Carl, an entomologist, brought the family with him on his scientific explorations. She was the second of three children, and along with her older brother Harold, learned from an early age to live an alternative lifestyle, with several months of every year spent learning by doing and out of

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contact with most other people. Away from formal schooling for much of the time, she learned through literature, reading far above her age level, and this eclectic reading has certainly had an influence on her work, from fairy tales (in their original and harsher versions), to myth and legends from a variety of cultures. She was, as a child, also fond of comic books and pocketbook mysteries (Cooke 1998, 25). As Atwood recalls, '[N]o one ever told me I couldn't read a book. My mother liked quietness in children, and a child who is reading is very quiet' (ND 7). However, she also noted that '[s]tories were for twilight, and when it was raining; the rest of the time, life was brisk and practical' and included lessons on 'avoiding lethal stupidity' (ND 8). Atwood was a child during the Second World War, though much of it was spent in the bush; it was not until Atwood was five that she began to live primarily in cities.

Her younger sister Ruth was born in 1951, the same year that Atwood began to attend school regularly. Atwood once joked that she didn't write anything in the dark period between eight and sixteen, a flippant comment that was recycled by another interviewer who asked her why this was so (Ingersoll 66), but by sixteen, she was clear she wanted to be a writer. At the time, there was little sense of a body of work called Canadian literature, making her decision to embrace the writing life not only unusual, but improbable (doubly improbable given that she was female, too). By 1957 Atwood was at Victoria College, University of Toronto, where she obtained her Bachelor's degree, followed by a Master's degree from Radcliffe College in the USA. She began doctoral work at Harvard in 1961 but never completed her studies; her planned Ph.D. was on 'Nature and Power in the English Metaphysical Romance of the 19th and 20th Century'. She has held a number of diverse jobs – market research, waitressing, teaching – but her passion has always been creative, whether writing, illustrating comic books or painting.

In 1967 Atwood married James Polk, though by 1973 they were divorced and she began living with the writer Graeme Gibson, with whom she had worked at the House of Anansi Press, a publishing company set up specifically to publish Canadian writers. In 1976 their daughter Eleanor Jess Gibson was born. Atwood has travelled widely, living for times in the USA, France, England, Scotland, Germany and Australia. One measure of her critical and commercial appeal is that she has won a diverse range of honours, from *Ms. Magazine's* Woman of the Year to the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit. Atwood has also won a number of prestigious literary prizes, including, amongst others, The Booker Prize, The Giller Prize and The Governor General's Award, and holds honorary doctorates from several universities including, fittingly, Harvard, as well as Cambridge, Toronto, and the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris. She became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1987. With

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this impressive list of achievements, it is clear that Atwood is a key figure in creating – as well as disseminating – Canadian culture.

Atwood has written everything from children's books to literary and cultural criticism. Her work has been translated into over twenty-two languages and forms the basis of course syllabi from A Level to postgraduate work, and an entire academic society – The Margaret Atwood Society, with whom she has an uneasy relationship – is devoted to the study of her creative outputs. A recent Annotated Bibliography on Atwood (compiled by the Society) listed 133 scholarly works published on the author in one year alone,² and there are currently over 35 specialized, academic monographs or edited collections that take her as their principal or sole focus (not including books focused primarily on the teaching of Atwood's individual texts or those which explore her work in a comparative context). The annual Modern Language Association (MLA) convention reserves space for two sessions on Atwood scholarship each year. But she is more than just an author, too. Atwood invented the LongPen in 2006, a device that allows her to sign autographs remotely, fully fitting in with her green credentials and her preference to reduce her carbon footprint. Though some have worried that this might signal the demise of the book tour, these fears, so far, have been unfounded, and video-conferencing allows autograph-seekers to see and converse with the writer even when she is signing remotely.

Another measure of Margaret Atwood's influence and success resides in the Atwood Archives in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto that number some 369 boxes, while a description of the contents runs to 220 pages. The materials included range from juvenilia and unpublished manuscripts to early rejection letters and discussions of filmic projects based on her work. Though a number of critics have traced autobiographical resonances in her work (particularly in her 1988 novel *Cat's Eye*), Atwood herself generally insists on the distance between herself and her creations. In fact, as early as 1978 she noted how the media created images of Atwood-as-writer that may or may not have anything to do with the 'real' Margaret Atwood (citing 'Margaret the Medusa,' 'Margaret the Magician' and 'Margaret the Man-eater' stereotypes in her article 'The Curse of Eve – Or, What I Learned in School'). Atwood distances herself from these creations and carefully manages her public persona, but her celebrity is a facet of life that she must continually negotiate.

If celebrity is intimately linked to biography (and autobiography), then it is no wonder that readers wish to hear Atwood's 'real' voice and are willing to purchase a collection of her writing on reading; for example, in 2005 she published a collection of 'occasional writing' entitled *Curious Pursuits*, a text that

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combines interviews, newspaper columns, reviews, and miscellaneous musings on everything from the act of writing to responses to world politics. Such a collection speaks to the range of writing that Atwood undertakes, as well as the scope of her reach into both academic and popular fora. As Ray Robertson notes, “Any author whose work ... can be found in both airport newspaper shops *and* on graduate school syllabi all over the world must be doing something right” (quoted in Pache in Nischik 120, ellipses in original).

In purchasing or perusing such a text, the reader knows that Atwood has read the books she is commenting on within it. In this way, perhaps they feel they know her a bit more, too. Atwood claims that she is an ‘addicted’ reader, but also admits that she only reviews books she likes:

As soon as I’m doing a book review ... I’m reading with the little stickies that you place on to reference a page, so that you can find it again when you’re doing your review. What I like to do before I say I’m going to do a review is to read the book to see whether I enjoy it enough to want to read it again, and possibly again. If the answer is no then ... I can’t do this. It may be a good book but I have, personally, nothing to say about it.

Thus, by reading what Atwood *does* like, it is as if the reader can ascertain what she *is* like, though in true Atwoodian form, the author resists any reading of herself at all. Indeed, during interviews, Atwood seeks to wrest control of the narrative, often in a charming, self-deprecating way. In seeking to expand on readings of her work during the interview I undertook with her, I acknowledged my own role as a reader of her work, an acknowledgement that she sought to take further. Calling me an ‘instigated reader,’ Atwood suggested:

Well a reader-reader is just reading and they want all the things that one does when one reads a book, including the incentive for reading the next page. You, poor creature, are shackled to the Margaret Atwood desk; you’ve got to turn the next page whether you want to or not.

In turning the focus on the interviewer, Atwood retained control of the dynamic; in setting the desk as a proxy for herself, she retained distance. The desk imagery is important for more than one reason, particularly as her original homepage at O. W. Toad (www.owtoad.com) featured the ‘desk of Margaret Atwood,’ an icon that allowed for navigation – to a certain extent. In a clever reading of Atwood’s website, Lorraine York notes that the site offers a sense of intimacy but manages to control access at the same time: ‘As with her Web site desk graphic, Atwood’s persona takes control of her desk, agreeing to open some personal spaces in a controlled atmosphere while resolutely declaring her right to keep other drawers closed’ (York 114). The fact that Atwood’s

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website was called the ‘Margaret Atwood Reference Site’ rather than her homepage also indicates a certain distance here, and even the biographical detail section is incomplete, with Atwood’s awards, jobs and places of residence taking precedence over more intimate details. Her new website is similarly silent on personal details. In an article in Coral Ann Howell’s *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, York suggests that Atwood has ‘intervened as an active, canny agent to shape the discourses surrounding her celebrity’ (Howells 2006, 28). Indeed, one desk drawer reveals comics of Atwood (with wild hair) as if in an interview situation. Discussing *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood’s character makes fun of her interviewer, who thinks she has written a how-to book for writers:

And this is how you write all your books?
Absolutely! Follow these simple instructions and you too can be on talk shows! As a guest, that is.³

The idea of Atwood-as-guest both feeds into an awareness of celebrity and makes fun of the suggestion that such celebrity is easy to attain. Atwood’s awareness of celebrity – and her refusal of it – is revealed in many of the interviews that she has undertaken, including the one with me:

Well, let’s be very frank about celebrity. I’m not a football star. I’m not a film star. I’m not a TV star. I haven’t murdered anyone. I’m not a top model. I am a writer of literary fiction. And the level of fame and celebrity that you get doing that is quite manageable. You’ll notice I have no bodyguards around me. No screaming fans are clambering over my shoelaces. So it’s not the same kind of thing as it would be if you were Jackie Kennedy, Elizabeth Taylor, Mick Jagger, that person who plays football ... David Beckham, a Spice Girl. Any of those kinds of things are at a very much higher level of that phenomenon than a person who writes books ever will be.

Atwood’s list of ‘real’ celebrities is instructive. The fact that she includes murderers in her hierarchy of fame (and has written about the celebrity attached to crime in *Alias Grace*) shows that her sense of celebrity is not one that is confined to those whose *artistic* exploits are exploited by the media. However, the preponderance of such people in her list – football stars (and their wives), pop stars, and television and film stars – reveals the commonplace assumption that the majority of people whose lives are potentially turned upside down by fame are ones whose fame rests at least in part on their visual appeal. Atwood has also struggled with the focus on her looks, and has commented in several essays about the difficulties of being a woman writer, noting back in 1980 that ‘[a] man’s work is reviewed for its style and ideas, but all

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too often a woman's is reviewed for the supposed personality of the author as based on the jacket photograph' (SW 331). Although it would be comforting to think that this has changed dramatically in the nearly thirty years since she wrote these words, the subject of visual impact is still very much on her mind, as noted in the flippant comments about her hair which began this introduction (and our interview).

Such replies suggest that despite her disavowal, Atwood recognizes her celebrity status. At the same time, though, she continues to insist on the distance between herself and other celebrities:

People who read books identify with the book, not so much with you. They only identify with you if someone else writes a book in which you figure as a character like Virginia Woolf and *The Hours*; then you get to be a character in a work of fiction ... So, when you're dead and you get to be a character in somebody else's book, then you can have that kind of identification with yourself, but other than that you're just the medium. People don't go to a seance to talk to the medium; they go to talk to Aunt Bessie!

Atwood's sense of herself as the medium and not the message is at odds with the still pervasive desire for autobiographical resonances that some readers attach to the author, despite the fact that many literary critics have moved away from autobiography as a legitimizing force.⁴ As if to underline her resistance, a documentary which sought to uncover more about Atwood, Michael Rubbo's *Once in August* (National Film Board of Canada, 1984), shows her and her family playfully subverting that project: Atwood donned a paper bag and the amassed people asked, 'Who is this woman?'

Such self-conscious recognition of her role(s) – and the critic's desire for her exposure – is also played out in Atwood's critical and creative work. In her collection *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), which came out of the Empson Lectures she gave at Cambridge in 2000, Atwood fleetingly refers to her own life, but more often, deflects attention away from herself and onto other writers, or to a mythical Writer who is somehow different from the person who writes. Atwood suggests, 'The author is the name on the book. I'm the other one' (ND 37), and the collection works hard to ensure that this kind of doubling is highlighted (with, amongst other things, its references to Jekyll and Hyde, as well as its focus on twins and doppelgängers). Atwood explores her own early biography more to dispel notions of the special writer than to reaffirm them, and she even claims:

If I had suspected anything about the role I would be expected to fulfill, not just as a writer, but as a *female* writer – how irrevocably doomed! – I

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would have flung my leaky blue blob-making ballpoint pen across the room ... I would never have done any interviews, nor allowed my photo to appear on book jackets; but I was too young then to know about such ruses, and by now it is far too late. (*ND 15, italics in original*)

Negotiating with the Dead is subtitled 'A Writer on Writing', and the very use of the indefinite article is suggestive of Atwood's simultaneous implied exposure and critical distancing. The A does not fix the writer's identity, but allows a non-specific reading, whilst at the same time, her name across the top of the book – in much larger letters than the title – dispels the non-specificity implied.

In another example, her interview on *The South Bank Show* (1993), which dramatizes aspects of *The Robber Bride*, shows Atwood offering tips about which muffins are the most edible as often as it speaks about her writing. Furthermore, revelations about her private life are strictly rationed, and focus on flippant remarks about previous jobs ('I've been a waitress and a critic, and believe me, it's harder being a waitress'). Emotional outpourings of her biographical secrets do not feature.

This distancing from the autobiographical aspects of writing (apart from the carefully apportioned aspects mentioned above) was somewhat overturned in 2006, when Atwood published *Moral Disorder*, a collection of linked short stories that, on the face of it at least, draws on autobiographical resonances to a larger extent than previously. Thirty years before, in an interview with Linda Sandler, Atwood noted that 'if you write a "serious" book, everybody wants it to be autobiographical' (Sandler in Ingersoll 26), and offered up the quip that Shakespeare was lucky because, since no one knew anything about him, all they had to deal with was his output. Thus, the creative decision to incorporate autobiography within a series of short stories is one that I probed in interview. Atwood suggested that she did not always refuse the autobiographical tag, only those places where it did not apply:

how much is real, how much is not real; the fact is that, sure, you always use stuff that has gone through your head, so in that sense everything's autobiographical. On the other hand, you always alter everything that goes through your head; in that sense, nothing is autobiographical because it's all been made into something else, and we do live in an age in which when you write something called an autobiography people are bound to think you're lying, and if you write something called fiction they're bound to think you're secretly telling the truth, but they're not sure just in what area you're telling the truth. But I, essentially, feel that I don't care which daffodils Wordsworth saw; I'm sure he saw some daffodils. I don't need to know exactly which ones. It's not of interest to

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me, although it might be of interest to a daffodil fancier or somebody who's really wanting to get so thoroughly into the life of William Wordsworth. So I could go through and annotate the whole thing: this is real; this is not real; this happened but not in this order; yes, we had all of these animals, but we had more animals than these, just didn't put them all in; I didn't put in all the vegetables. Any fiction is edited; you can't put everything in, and any fiction is rearranged. As people have often said, you can tell the same story about the same people from a different point of view and it would be quite different.

Thus, even in her reply, Atwood is selective, her 'this is real' is not specified; instead, Atwood suggests that life material is just that: material, to be reworked in fictional ways, and ways that she does not need to reveal. Thus, even in her most explicitly autobiographical mode, Atwood retains control. She does this in part by refusing to engage with or worry about what her readers think.

I can't control what they think, so why would I concern myself with it?
... You as a critic can suggest to them what they might think or you can suggest different ways of looking at things, and I as a novelist can do that with my characters, but you cannot tell them; you cannot reach into their little minds and twist a few knobs and have it come out the way you want.

Moreover, the delay between the point where the writing is finished and when it is published suggests to Atwood that what the readers are reading is different from what she is currently working on. She also lends yet another layer of distance by noting that she does not read current reviews, only older ones (and then, not always), to avoid getting involved in discussions with others over what other reviewers think: 'So it's nice to have wonderful reviews, it's interesting to have nasty, personal attacks, they're always peculiar and weird and you don't know where they come from, but there's nothing you can do about it; you can't control it.'

If Atwood herself suggests that celebrity is something apart from herself, her creative work engages with celebrity at several levels, from the early comic novel *Lady Oracle* (1976), which focused on Joan Foster as a reluctant celebrity poet who feels compelled to fake her own death, to the Booker Prize-winning novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000), where celebrity is wrongly attributed to Laura Chase rather than to her sister Iris, the real author of the celebrated text of the same name. In this case, Iris takes perverse pleasure in explicitly manufacturing her dead sister's celebrity and hiding behind it. In these novels, as in *Cat's Eye*, which focuses on the retrospective exhibit of the artist Elaine Risley's work, celebrity is linked figuratively to death; Elaine notes that she has 'a public face, a face worth defacing' (CE 20), but she also worries that

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a retrospective exhibition suggests death, or something like it. York notes the frequency with which Atwood links celebrity and death, and this is something that also came out of the interview I undertook. When I noted to Atwood that I thought most students would think of her primarily as a novelist (and thus sadly missing out her critical work as well as her poetry), Atwood's response was wry: 'I would think most students think of me, primarily, as a dead person ... all the people I read about in high school were dead. Why would they be different? It's rather shocking to discover some of them are still alive.'

Although it is doubtful that students are indeed shocked by Atwood's continued presence, Atwood herself appears to be surprised by the recycling of interviews conducted years before, noting that this phenomenon is

Very peculiar because you thought at the time they were one offs and everything at the time was a one off then. When you did an interview that was the end of it, but now they are pod casting, web streaming, downloading ... you do have a virtual presence that's circulating endlessly whether you like it or not, and there's not just one alter ego out there, there's a whole pack of them.

Atwood's alter egos may follow her around, resurfacing even when the original did not air (as in the archived Hana Gartner interview, posted under the title 'Atwood Brandishes her Caustic Tongue' that was never shown, but is now streamable from the CBC website, and linked to Atwood's own),⁵ but even this is not enough to convince Atwood of her own celebrity, as the following exchange makes clear:

Macpherson: But I wonder if you're not underestimating your own, to use the word again, celebrity, and your own influence –

Atwood: Everything's relative; with six billion people in the world, of those six billion people, how many do you think have heard of me?

Macpherson: I don't know. I guess that puts it into perspective.

Atwood: Millions, but not in the six billions; in fact, there's probably no person on the face of the planet who has been heard of by all six billion.

Macpherson: But your readings are very popular; people flock to them.

Atwood: Oh sure, as *readings*. As football games they would be considered horrible failures because only 500 people were there.

Macpherson: But if that's as big as the theatre is ...

Atwood: Even if there were 3,000 people you couldn't fill it; I could not fill a 3,000 people stadium, sorry.

Macpherson: Don't be sorry, but I wonder again if you're not underestimating –

Atwood: No, I know pretty much how things are. I could do 1,500.

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Macpherson: We should negotiate then. Do you think you could do 2,200?

Atwood: I've done 2,000, but it depends where and when, and you don't want them actually to be really that big, because it's a much more intimate thing; you're not playing a game watched by millions. You're participating in an experience shared by hundreds at a time, that's how it is.

Atwood's humour is clearly much in evidence here, and there is a certain sense as York notes that Atwood herself is participating in her own celebrity even as she refuses it; she allowed herself to be negotiated 'up' to an audience figure of 2,000, though she also suggests in the interview that she is very 'Canadian' in wanting to deny her place in the hierarchy of cultural exports.

Lady Oracle's Joan Foster notes, 'It's no good thinking you're invisible if you aren't' (*LO* 12), and this reminder may well be as appropriate for Atwood as it is for her creations. The very visibility of her protagonists and their complicated relationships to fame suggest that this powerful metaphor is one that will continue to resonate for Atwood, and her readers. It is clear that links between Atwood, celebrity and auto/biography are contestable, culturally informed and likely to be denied by the author herself. If Atwood is the self-confessed 'other one', the doppelgänger of the author, she is nevertheless a recurrent subject of critical debate and conjecture, her writing offering up a narrative of Atwood as writer, cultural export and cultural commentator. In what follows I will explore Atwood's writing – both creative and critical – as well as the contexts and reception of her work.