The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood offers an immensely influential voice in contemporary literature. Her novels have been translated into over twenty-two languages and are widely studied, taught and enjoyed. Her style is defined by her comic wit and willingness to experiment. Her work has ranged across several genres, from poetry to literary and cultural criticism, novels, short stories and art. This Introduction summarizes Atwood's canon, from her earliest poetry and her first novel, The Edible Woman, through The Handmaid’s Tale to The Year of the Flood. Covering the full range of her work, it guides students through multiple readings of her oeuvre. It features chapters on her life and career, her literary, Canadian and feminist contexts, and how her work has been received and debated over the course of her career. With a guide to further reading and a clear, well-organized structure, this book presents an engaging overview for students and readers.

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Margaret Atwood

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For Allan
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Preface

Margaret Atwood has been writing poetry, fiction and criticism for almost fifty years. Her influence on Canadian literature is phenomenal, and her influence on contemporary literature as a whole is immense. Her readings fill theatres and her books win a range of literary and social prizes. She has gone from being ‘world famous in Canada’ (to repeat Mordecai Richler’s famous joke) to being world famous, full stop.

Atwood used to find that the media tried to reinvent her in ways that she didn't recognize, and perhaps some of that reinvention continues. However, Atwood notes:

Once you hit the granny age, people think that you may be okay and that you're handing out cookies to younger writers and waving your benevolent fairy godmother wand over the proceedings, but you're no longer the sort of threat that you were because people kind of know what you are by now. They're not expecting some awful threatening surprise to appear.

Yet Atwood continues to have the power to surprise – from embracing new genres, to developing expertise in the extra-textual side of contemporary publishing, to returning to the poetry that first made her famous. Each Atwood text is a treat, whether it spans only a few lines, or offers up an intricate puzzle in the form of a multilayered novel.

Spanning different genres, as well as crossing over them, Atwood's work appeals to academics and non-academics alike, and this introduction will give you the opportunity to explore not only her own life and work but also the contexts for it and reception of it. It references the work of a number of key Atwood scholars, of which there are many, drawn from across North America, Britain and Europe. Atwood was once told by her high school English teacher, 'This must be a very good poem dear because I can't understand it at all.' The explosion of criticism on Atwood – and this introduction – should help you to find your way through her tricky, intelligent and often comic work.

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Quotations from the poem ‘You Fit Into Me’ reproduced with permission of Curtis Brown Group Ltd, London on behalf of Margaret Atwood; ©Margaret Atwood 1987.
Abbreviations and note on references

Quotations will be cited in parentheses in the text by page number for Atwood’s work, and parenthetically with author’s name for secondary criticism. Full bibliographical information for secondary criticism cited can be found on pp. 124–32.

AG Alias Grace
BA The Blind Assassin
BE Bluebeard’s Egg and Other Stories
BH Bodily Harm
CE Cat’s Eye
CP Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing 1970–2005
DG Dancing Girls and Other Stories
EW The Edible Woman
HT The Handmaid’s Tale
LM Life Before Man
LO Lady Oracle
MD Moral Disorder
ND Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing
OC Oryx and Crake
PB Payback: Debt as Metaphor and the Shadow Side of Wealth
RB The Robber Bride
Surf Surfacing
Surv Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature
SW Second Words: Selected Critical Prose
T The Tent
WT Wilderness Tips
YF The Year of the Flood