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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The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood

HEIDI SLETTEDAHL MACPHERSON
For Allan
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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 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