

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87298-0 - The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*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.

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson is Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Professor of English at De Montfort University, Leicester.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87298-0 - The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

# The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood

---

HEIDI SLETTEDAHL MACPHERSON



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-87298-0 - The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood  
 Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
 São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521694636](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521694636)

© Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson 2010

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
 no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
 permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Macpherson, Heidi Slettedahl.

The Cambridge introduction to Margaret Atwood / Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson.

p. cm. – (Cambridge introductions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-87298-0 – ISBN 978-0-521-69463-6 (pbk.)

1. Atwood, Margaret, 1939 – Criticism and interpretation. I. Title. II. Series.

PR9199.3.A8Z743 2010

818'.5409–dc22

2010026361

ISBN 978-0-521-87298-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-69463-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or  
 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in  
 this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,  
 or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-87298-0 - The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood  
Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

*For Allan*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of abbreviations and note on references</i>	xi
<b>Chapter 1 Life</b>	1
<b>Chapter 2 Contexts</b>	11
English-Canadian literature and the development of the canon	12
Atwood’s criticism: amateur plumbing	16
On being a woman writer, writing about women	22
<b>Chapter 3 Works</b>	25
Novels	25
Short stories	86
Poetry	104
<b>Chapter 4 Critical reception</b>	111
1970s and 1980s	111
1990s	114
Atwood criticism in the twenty-first century	118
<i>Notes</i>	121
<i>Further reading</i>	123
<i>Index</i>	133

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87298-0 - The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *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.

Some of this research has been made possible through the generous assistance of the Canadian Government’s Faculty Research Program. I also want

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87298-0 - The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood

Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

x      *Preface*

to thank Professor Philip Davies for giving me the opportunity to present the 2009 Eccles Lecture on Atwood at the Annual British Association for Canadian Studies Conference held in Oxford. My thanks go to Margaret Atwood for permission to quote from the interview undertaken in Toronto in August 2007 and to Rachael Walters for so faithfully transcribing the interview.

Final thanks go to my colleagues at De Montfort University, and to my family, Judy Clayton, Amy Northrop, Bob Slettedahl, Jill Winter and Allan Macpherson, for love and support.

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	<i>Alias Grace</i>
BA	<i>The Blind Assassin</i>
BE	<i>Bluebeard’s Egg and Other Stories</i>
BH	<i>Bodily Harm</i>
CE	<i>Cat’s Eye</i>
CP	<i>Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing 1970–2005</i>
DG	<i>Dancing Girls and Other Stories</i>
EF	<i>Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965–1995</i>
EW	<i>The Edible Woman</i>
HT	<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i>
LM	<i>Life Before Man</i>
LO	<i>Lady Oracle</i>
MD	<i>Moral Disorder</i>
ND	<i>Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing</i>
OC	<i>Oryx and Crake</i>
PB	<i>Payback: Debt as Metaphor and the Shadow Side of Wealth</i>
RB	<i>The Robber Bride</i>
Surf	<i>Surfacing</i>
Surv	<i>Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature</i>
SW	<i>Second Words: Selected Critical Prose</i>
T	<i>The Tent</i>
WT	<i>Wilderness Tips</i>
YF	<i>The Year of the Flood</i>