"People confuse personal relations with legal structures." An Interview with Margaret Atwood

by Susanne Gruss, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario in 1939, and grew up in northern Quebec, Ontario, and Toronto. After living and working in many different cities and travelling extensively she now lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson. Her posts include Lecturer in English at the University of British Columbia, Assistant Professor of English at York University, Toronto, M.F.A. Honorary Chair at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Berg Chair at New York University, and Writer-In-Residence at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas. Atwood is the critically acclaimed author of more than 30 books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays and the editor of various anthologies. Her work has been translated into more than fifteen different languages. Prizes for her fiction include the Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin*, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Canadian Authors' Association Novel of the Year (both for *The Robber Bride*), the Giller Award for *Alias Grace*, and many more. Other books by Margaret Atwood shortlisted for the Booker Prize include The *Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *Alias Grace* and *Oryx and Crake*. She has been inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. She has been awarded the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit, the French Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and is a Foreign Honorary Member for Literature of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Follow this link for a more extensive list of Margaret Atwood's works.

Atwood's most recent novel, the speculative fiction *Oryx and Crake*, depicts a world in which the human interest in genetic engineering has gone horribly wrong - in a post-apocalyptic scenery, first-person-narrator and survivor Jimmy/Snowman tells us in flashbacks how the catastrophe could happen - and how the "Children of Crake," the new, genetically "improved" race of men came into being. *Oryx and Crake* was shortlisted for the 2003 Booker Prize and longlisted for the 2003 WH Smith Fiction Award. For more information, see http://www.oryxandcrake.co.uk or http://www.randomhouse.com/features/atwood/index.html.

For further information on Margaret Atwood see Atwood's homepage http://www.owtoad.com

Susanne Gruss: I'll start with a question you've probably heard a hundred times by now ... . Why is *Oryx and Crake* your first novel with a man as its main protagonist?

Margaret Atwood: Why not? (*laughs*)

Q: That's the obvious answer of course, but I guess people still ask you.

MA: They do. You couldn't write that story from a female point of view, quite simply. Why not? How many girls do you know who spend their adolescent years hunched over their computers, playing interactive video games on the net, and interactive net games and, watching porn shows?

Q: You're absolutely right of course - I don't know any.

MA: They actually did a study of this. They were trying to see whether playing these games increased your visual abilities, and they found that the answer was yes when it came to aiming and things like that. But they could only find one girl who had done the requisite number of hours per week to be able to participate in the study. So it doesn't seem to be the kind of thing that girls do a lot - they would rather play relational games of various kinds. Nor are they very big on huge plans to redesign the world.

Q: That comes close to what I wanted to ask you next: There is a new human race that is created in *Oryx and Crake* - the Children of Crake. When Crake designs them trying to improve humankind, he also wants to remove the "G-spot" from their brains, which is to say the neurons that are capable of belief or faith, but *he* is not very successful because he becomes their God-figure, their creator-god in their own creation-myth. So why does he fail?

MA: We don't know… There are several other things he tried to remove as well. He tried to get rid of music. He tried to get rid of dreams. So, we don't know, but some of the things seem to be built in at such a level that you can't fool with them without creating zombies. Now, we haven't tested this proposition experimentally yet, but we do know for instance that animals dream and that quite a few life forms other than us communicate with musical tones, so it's not just a human thing. We don't know about the G-spot. We know that there are people who don't have it or claim that they don't. We also know that there are people who are tone deaf and colour blind.

Q: There are also many allusions to current natural sciences and of course the internet which plays a very important role in *Oryx and Crake*. Did you perhaps intend *Oryx and Crake* to be a political novel?

MA: Political novel for me has to do with who you vote for in an election or what party platform you support. In that sense it's not a political novel. If what you mean is, does it have to do with how people relate to one another and the kind of world they find themselves in -

sure. But all novels are political in that sense. What we usually mean by that, probably what you meant, was, how come it's not like Jane Austen, which is what we think of as the mainstream novel, as a finite set of people who exist in relation to one another and fall in love or have fights, and through their reaction to these things we discover their characters. It's not that kind of novel, that's true.

We have fallen into the habit of thinking that that's what all prose fictions either are or should be. But in fact, for hundreds of years before the emergence of that kind of novel at the end of the eighteenth century in essentially a bourgeois milieu, there were many other kinds of prose fictions. There were knights on adventure quests, or there were rogues, there were the picaresque novels, so you went from one event to another, but you certainly didn't stay with a small group of people and interact with them in a country-house somewhere or even in an apartment in New York. So there are many prose fiction traditions, including many that go way back, that we would probably say are not really… is *Gulliver's Travels* a novel, for instance? It's a prose narrative. It's a fiction.

Q: … or *The Pilgrim's Progress* …

MA: Is *The Pilgrim's Progress* a novel? People keep trying to find proto-novel elements in it. You know, the hero has "a character" (*laughs*). But I see no reason for confining oneself as a writer to just one tradition of prose fiction. Although it does lead some people to say: How come this isn't a small group of people interacting with one another so we can see how their characters are drawn out, etc.

Q: I guess you could say that, nevertheless, *Oryx and Crake* is in a sort of tradition. One could perhaps say it is in a dystopian tradition?

MA: It's not a real dystopia. A real dystopia would examine more fully the structure of the society. It would be more like *1984*, more like *Brave New World*. As it is, *Oryx and Crake* is about an individual person, Jimmy. It is the story of his life. He does go through some cataclysmic events, but unlike a lot of adventure story heroes who have no parents, he does come with a family, a childhood, an adolescence, so you might say it's a kind of very peculiar *Bildungsroman*.

Q: You wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is more clearly dystopian.

MA: It's more like a *real* dystopia. It does go into the structure of the society more, so it's more like *1984*. From the point of view of Julia, the female character in *1984*. So yes, it's more like that.

Q: I thought that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* were quite alike in their approach to a future society. I got the impression that you didn't invent a future, but that it was just a

sort of reaction to what was probably currently going on.

MA: Like *Brave New World*, like *1984*. You can't actually write about the future because you haven't been there. Not any more than Dante could write about the Inferno… He hadn't been there, so he couldn't. We know right away that we're not dealing with a person who thinks he actually met Vergil in the woods and went to hell with him. We know it's a different kind of story. So when you set something in the future, it's setting it in a realm of the imagination. Although, in this case, it's one that's based very firmly on known events, just as Dante put into hell people that he had known, that he felt belonged there (*laughs*). So he didn't make up a bunch of imaginary people and put them in there, he put in some real people. As with *The Handmaid's Tale*, I didn't put in anything that we haven't already done, we're not already doing, we're seriously trying to do, coupled with trends that are already in progress such as the results of global warming, the results of the fragmentation of society into those with and those without - which are accelerating - and the opening of the great big fun-with-the-genome project we seem to be doing right now. So all of those things are real, and therefore the amount of pure invention is close to nil.

Q: There's a collection of headlines on the *Oryx and Crake*-homepage where you can see the process you have just described. [see "Facts Behind the Fiction: A Time Line of Headlines" on the American *Oryx and Crake*-homepage hosted by Random house: http://www.randomhouse.com/features/atwood/index.html, August 2003]

MA: Yes, exactly.

Q: What I always liked about your books was that I always did think you were a feminist writer, but also went beyond that description. Do you have a "feminist agenda?"

MA: Feminism has been used so often and in so many different contexts that it's practically meaningless - unless you can specify. People say, "Are you a Christian?" Now what do they mean by that? Do they mean Catholic, do they mean people dancing with poisonous snakes to prove their faith. Where are we on this spectrum? I'm perfectly in favour of women being human beings, but that comes with risks. It means, for instance, if they're human beings, they're not perfect - no human beings are. Just for starters.

Q: You also have created some women characters that aren't really "popular," one might say…

MA: They're not nice. They're not angelic, they're not good…

Q: …they're not likeable…

MA: Actually some people like them quite well!

Q: I do, too. They just take what they want. You wrote a short story called "Unpopular Gals,"

in which the "unpopular gals" in literary history - like the evil stepmother - get their say, and what she says is, "I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it."

MA: Well, let's say that unpleasant events of one kind or another drive plots. It doesn't have to be a female character, it can be an invasion of werewolves.

Q: Why do think that some people act or react so negatively when a female figure does not behave in a "feminine" way?

MA: I think the number of people who have reacted in that way you could probably count on the fingers of one hand. Most people now are quite a bit more sophisticated than that. When I was first doing it, in the seventies, we were still in a position of, "You shouldn't say those things because it could be used against us." That sort of attitude. The very same kind of attitude that causes any group that feels itself under pressure to cover up crimes committed by its own members. But surely we're past that now, and if you're a woman you've met women you don't like. Women who've been nasty to you…

Q: And I've met men I like - and would still call myself a "feminist."

MA: Well, I think people confuse personal relations with legal structures, and they're quite different things…

Q: Yes, I met people who've said things like, "You are a feminist but you have a boyfriend"…

MA: …and that's got nothing to do with it. What I'm in favour of is being able to vote, equal pay for equal work, equality under the law, you know, all of those things that were the bones of contention for years, being able to have an education, being able to own property. Those all come under the law. And if you want an interesting survey of how the laws were changed against women over the years, many many years, you should read Marilyn French's three-volume survey called *From Eve to Dawn*. That doesn't focus on human relationships, it focuses on laws. Laws of course affect human relationships. A law that says that in case of separation the husband gets the children - which was the case in the 19th century - is going to affect your life if you're a woman, and if you have children, and if you separate from your husband.

Q: Another problem seems to be that many people read your books autobiographically, at least to a certain extent. People look at your works and say, "Well, I think, Tony in *The Robber Bride*, that's Margaret Atwood," or, "Iris Chase, that's obviously Margaret Atwood." How do you deal with that?

MA: People do that to all writers. There's never been a writer who has not had that experience. It's a normal thing to do, it's a compliment to your craft because it means people think the story must be real and must therefore be about the person who wrote it. But I would

point out that if it's autobiography, and only autobiography, I would have had to have been an anorexic, a very fat person, and a man.

Q: You do not only have different selves as the writer and the person, but you also have different literary selves, in Germany for example you're probably best known as the author of novels, whereas in Canada you were first known as a poet. How does the approach to your works differ? Which difference is there between being a poet and being a novelist, or being a lecturer, for example?

MA: You're more likely to be able to make a living out of novels.

Q: And how about being a lecturer? Is that also something you also enjoy?

MA: You mean giving these lectures?

Q: And I've met men I like - and would still call myself a "feminist."

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Q: For example.

MA: They were actually quite hard to do, and the hardest part is getting permission for the citations.

Q: Did you manage to get them all?

MA: We did, but a couple of them were dicey, and in one case I simply took one out because the trust fund in charge of this person's work was being ridiculous. And of course, it pushes you in the direction of using only dead people, only very dead people, because after a certain amount of time work goes out of copyright. So you end up using very dead people or your friends. So that part is hard, but I think there's a difference between writing a piece which purports to be attempting to tell the truth, and writing a piece of fiction where your duty is fidelity to the work, internal consistency. I write journalism, too.

Q: I know. Is that something you do because it's *different*?

MA: Oh, I think there are various reasons for doing it. Each reason is specific to the piece.

Q: You also talk about the relationship between the reader, the writer and the book. The writer and the reader never actually meet. Do you think that what you're going to do, tonight, reading to an audience, maybe reading to people who have read your books can help to form an actual triangle?

MA: No, because I'm not that person who wrote the book. They would have had to have been with me, every minute of every day about two years ago; that would be the person who wrote the book. Time moves on.

Q: So there is no possibility to form a triangle…

MA: There is a triangle, but A and B can only encounter each other through C.

Q: Right. So it's more like… I think you described it as a "V" with the book at the top… or the bottom?

MA: Or the bottom, it doesn't much matter. The book is in between, so there's no direct connection between A and C.

Q: What you say about the reader, for example that each reader has his or her own

interpretation of the book when he or she reads it, reminded me of reader-response criticism. Is that something you're interested in?

MA: No. It's of no use. It's of absolutely no use unless you're making a commercial product. If you're writing romance novels, then they can have encounter-groups, you know, they can have little reader groups, they can give the book to a representative number of readers and say, "What do you think about Chapter 6?" "We think that he should be taller." "Okay, make him taller." Now that's if you're tailor-making a commercial product which is pitched to a very well-known niche group of readers, and it's no different from designing cornflakes packages. That's a commercial enterprise. But it's no use to me to know afterwards what people think, it's not gonna influence what I do. The book has already been written. It's out there taking its own chances.

Q: Are you interested in what people *do* with your work? For example turn it into films?

MA: I really have no control over it except for turning it into films I can say no to that. Once you say yes it's out of your hands. You can have the very very best director, actor, screenplay, everything of the best, and it can still be a lousy film. It can be an unknown book, a director nobody has ever heard of, a bunch of new actors, it can be wonderful. There's no way of determining that. A set of lucky circumstances. Or unlucky ones.

Q: Right. But are you *interested* in people writing Ph.D. theses about your works, for example?

MA: Good luck to them, I hope they are enjoying themselves, it keeps them off the streets. Otherwise they might have to work in a chocolate bar factory.

Q: Or drive a taxi…

MA: Maybe they're happier doing that. But again, I have no control over it, and I shouldn't, really, have anything to do with it. It's an autonomous activity which has its own rules.

Q: You've already talked about romance novels, for example, and romance is of course something that appears in many of your novels. There's a gothic romance authoress, there are detective novel readers, there is a science fiction novel within a novel within a novel… and then of course there's the sort of "official" distinction between highbrow literature and there are other genres which are "not really literature." I guess you probably wouldn't say that this distinction is something that's valid…

MA: It's not valid.

Q: Could you comment on that? Why do people think that a detective novel or a science fiction novel is not "good literature," but a Margaret Atwood-novel with a science fiction novel in it is literature. Where does that distinction come from?

MA: I think you'd probably have to ask them, but if you took a broad survey of a wide group of readers and got them to pick their favourite books of all time, I can guarantee that, if it were in England, Sherlock Holmes would be among them, certainly George Orwell, no question. So it's not really a question of genres, you know genres have become very leaky, by the way. You know, Jane Austen writing today would probably put in some murders or at least some inheritance problems, something like that.

Q: Have you heard about the book *The Eyre Affair*?

[Jasper Fforde, *The Eyre Affair*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001. Followed up by *Lost in a Good Book* (2002) and *The Well of Lost Plots* (2003).]

MA: No.

Q: It's by a Welsh author called Jasper Fforde and he writes about a future, utopian society, where people take books really, really seriously, and there's a sort of book police.

MA: Well, he *is* dreaming. (*laughs*)

Q: Oh yes, he is. His heroine is working for this police office, and she jumps into *Jane Eyre* at one point in the narrative and changes the ending, because in the version the people had in that society, Jane Eyre goes off with the missionary, and doesn't get to marry Rochester, so his heroine jumps into book and she changes the ending. So that the book is also very much about how leaky genres really are.

MA: She changes it back to the original?

Q: Right. But for the people in the book it gets changed completely. So that is also about genres. One of the bad guys is caught in "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe and dies a horrible death.

MA: Oh oh. Well, there's a story by Woody Allen dating from years and years and years back, probably the 60s. It's a short piece, and in it a man has invented a machine that can put you into any novel of your choice - he's the mad scientist. And then he has a friend who is a Jewish businessman from New York who is quite a romantic, and he finds out about this machine and says he longs to be put into *Madame Bovary* just before she meets the first lover. So they try it out, they put him into the machine, they twirl the knobs and bingo, he's in *Madame Bovary* and everybody reading the book thinks, "We don't remember this! Who is this guy?" And Madame Bovary finds him ravishing, and he spins her tales of New York and they have a wonderful affair, but she begs and pleads, "New York sounds so wonderful," she wants to go back with him and see New York. So he gives in and back they go, and people reading the book are surprised that Madame Bovary has vanished from *Madame Bovary*. She has disappeared - just a lot of blank pages. Meanwhile she is in New York, and he is married

with kids and he has to do something with her. So he puts her into a hotel room and gives her his credit card - big mistake! She goes on a shopping spree and starts spending him out of house and home, so he lures her back into the machine and gets her back into *Madame Bovary*, and the readers breathe a sigh of relief. He says to his friend, "Oh, I'll never do that again, I've learned my lesson." But he can't resist. He comes back several months later and says, "I have to be in *Anna Karenina* just before she meets Vronsky." (*laughs*) The guy says, "Well, no, actually I haven't perfected this yet, you know I'm quite a little worried about it all." "No, please, please, I really have to do this." So into the box he goes, they twirl the dial and the box explodes. He's gone.

Q: And does he reappear in *Anna Karenina*?

MA: No, he's certainly not in *Anna Karenina*. Meanwhile, across a rocky, hot desert, he's being pursued. He's gotten into a Spanish grammar by mistake and he's being pursued across the desert by the active and large hairy creature that's the active form of the verb "to seize." (*laughs*)

Q: That's actually quite similar to the novel I just talked about.

MA: Well, I wonder whether he ever read the Woody Allen piece. … It's in a collection of Woody Allen pieces that goes way, way back, short pieces.

Q: It really does sound similar. One very, very last question. Is there anything you're working on at the moment, or are you just busy with the book tour?

MA: Book tour things. I'm thinking… I'm thinking.

Q: Thank you very much for the interview.

MA: Thank you.

The interview with Margaret took place at the Göttinger Literaturherbst in October 2003.