

FEMINISTS ASSAULT MARGARET ATWOOD

Camille Peri

While Atwood defines herself as a feminist—"If by feminist we mean someone who's interested in seeing women included in the human race"--many Canadian feminists do not. Her fiction is often attacked for what critic Barbara Godard calls a "failure to envision a world where women are not downtrodden." But others praise Atwood's refusal to supply simple solutions to complex problems.

Atwood is the most successful--and perhaps the most visible--member of a generation of writers that put Canadian literature on the map... "She is the most famous voice from Canada," sighs one critic, "but some might wish it were a different voice"...A Toronto talk-show host who has interviewed her several times: "She's smarter than most of those who interview her and she lets them know it." He adds that one can admire her without necessarily liking her...Though widely praised as a master storyteller, she is probably most often criticized for portraying men as unsympathetic. Even an obvious fan like Anne Tyler noted in an otherwise glowing review of the short-story collection *Dancing Girls* that the less successful stories were "those that exhibit a narrow-eyed bitterness about the relations between men and women. In these, men are generally infantile, demanding, self-centered; women are either purely wronged or they have retaliated with their own kind of meanness."

Atwood's 17th century ancestors were American Puritans. Cambridge, Massachusetts, was the setting of her last novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, an eerie vision of the United States under a totalitarian theocracy, in which women are reduced to sexual breeders or good Christian wives, prohibited from earning wages, owning property, reading and writing. [The paranoid Atwood's invented Puritans are much more totalitarian than the real Puritans were, as in prohibiting women from reading, writing, or earning wages--witness the Puritan poet and housewife Anne Bradstreet, for example. Atwood demeans housewives, whereas Edward Taylor glorifies them by *casting God as a housewife* and himself as a spinning wheel, in his poem "Huswifery" (c.1682)] Atwood dedicated the novel in part to her favorite ancestor, Mary Webster, who was hanged for being a witch..."I've been called a Medusa," she once said. "The attack being: here is a woman who doesn't use words in a soft compliant way; therefore, she is a witch."

Atwood is a contrary woman: a nationalist who rankles nationalists, a feminist who rankles feminists. She is a master at exposing hypocrisy among the powerful...Atwood's Canadianism filters into novels such as *Surfacing*, in which the United States is symbolized in the first sentence by a forest disease "spreading up from the south." As with most of her work, however, the pervading theme is sexual politics. Atwood's protagonists are generally neurotic, sardonic, and rather aimless women, "escape artists" who must eventually confront the realities they have carefully constructed for themselves...Neither women nor men are heroes in Atwood's fiction: men victimize and women comply in their own victimization.

But her female characters usually manage to come through for each other in ways that her men do not--except in *Cat's Eye*...Surprisingly, in *Cat's Eye* it's the female characters who are most unlikable. When her protagonist, Risly, reflects on lesbianism, which some in her '60s women's groups insist is the "only genuine equal relationship," she delves into the darkness in her own heart: "The truth is that I would be terrified to get into bed with a woman. Women collect grievances, hold grudges, and change shape. They pass hard, legitimate judgments, unlike the purblind guesses of men, fogged with romanticism and ignorance and bias and wish. Women know too much, they can neither be deceived nor trusted. I can understand why men are afraid of them, as they are frequently accused of being." Trust does not come easy to women whose worst experiences have been with women, not men, says Atwood.

Atwood's discerning eye, in examining the power games of little girls, has also observed the evolution of those games in contemporary feminism. The goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, according to Atwood, and part of the failure has come from within the movement itself..."I think what you're seeing now is women who felt marginalized by the women's movement--women of color, of different ethnic groups--organizing their own groups and saying, 'Our problems are somewhat different than your problems and some of our problems are you'."

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is book burnings initiated by radical feminists that lead to the iron-heel censorship of Gilead, the Christian dictatorship. "In those kinds of alliances, once the objective is achieved, there's always a power struggle in which one faction is eliminated, and there isn't a lot of doubt in my mind as to which faction it would be," she argues. "If you unite to eliminate the opposition, and the opposition, in this case liberal feminists, is eliminated, then there's not going to be anyone around to defend you when you're abandoned. Two years ago Atwood unleashed her indignation on an antipornography bill, supported by some feminist groups, that was so stringent it could have barred kissing and hand-holding on film, required loincloths on male statues, and, ironically, banned *The Handmaid's Tale* in Canada. Atwood delivered speeches to librarians and campaigned to protect the cherished freedoms that her novel was about. [So, in real life, Feminists are the fascists, not Christians. M.H.]

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