Margaret Atwood

Teaches Creative Writing

MASTERCLASS

Hello Writers,

Welcome to my MasterClass, and thank you for joining.

By writing, you are following a very long tradition – setting spoken words down on a surface that allows other people to read them, thus translating them back into spoken words. But you are also part of a much longer tradition – that of storytelling.

Storytelling may be one of the oldest things humans do. We do it all the time, in so many ways – even the answers to 'How was your day?' and 'When did you first notice the symptoms?' are stories. A novel is simply a long story told in a way that – we hope – inspires the desire in the reader or listener to hear more. More about the characters. More about the secret. More about how it comes out.

Your desire to write probably began with reading; usually writers start that way. Now you have a novel you want to write – a story you want to tell. What's stopping you? What are your fears? You'll never know what you might say until you try, and to try you have to begin. Fear not: every famous novelist has been on the same path. We all began with that first blank page, that first challenge on the obstacle course; that first sentence made of words.

Your words are your voice, and your voice is like your fingerprints. Everyone's fingerprints are human, but no two sets of fingerprints are identical. No one else has a voice exactly like yours.

Tell the page your story. Set your voice down on it. The page is very discreet: it won't pass your story on until you allow it to, so you can tell it anything, without fear.

Let's begin.

All the best,

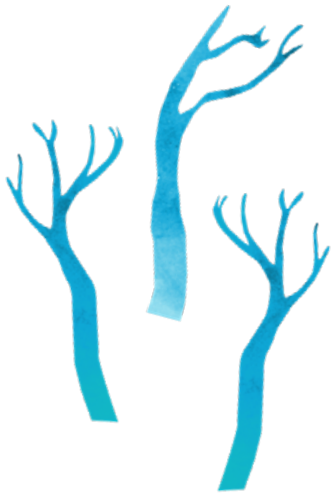
BIOGRAPHY

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than 40 books of fiction, poetry and critical essays. Her latest book of short stories is *Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales* (2014). Her MaddAddam trilogy – the Giller and Booker prize–nominated *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013) – is currently being adapted for Anonymous Content and Paramount Television. *Dearly* (2020) and *The Door* (2007) are her latest volumes of poetry. Her most recent non-fiction books are *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2007) and *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011). Her novels include *The Blind Assassin (2000)*, winner of the Booker Prize; *Alias Grace* (1996), which won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy; *The Robber Bride* (1993): *Cat's Eye* (1988); *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), now a TV series with MGM and Hulu; and *The Penelopiad* (2005). Her newest novels are *The Heart Goes Last* (2015); *Hag-Seed* (2016), a revisitation of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* for the Hogarth Shakespeare project; *Angel Catbird* (2016), a graphic novel with co-creator Johnnie Christmas; and *The Testaments* (2019), joint winner of the Booker Prize. Margaret lives in Toronto. Her long-time partner Graeme Gibson died in 2019.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction



'Creativity is one of the essential things about being human. So you don't have to apologise for it. It's something human beings do.'

INTRODUCTION

Chapter Review

In this class, Margaret will focus on the novel: what it can do, aspects and possibilities in its form and lessons she's learned through writing her own novels. You will learn ways to structure a novel, how to develop characters, how to get readers interested with a compelling beginning and how to keep them interested through to the last page. Margaret will also share some tips to help you keep going and stay motivated during the drafting and revision process.

Whether you're just starting to write fiction and looking to generate pages, or have a draft of a story or novel that you hope to revise and refine, the exercises in this workbook will offer you generative prompts, new craft moves and revision tactics. Each is designed to encourage you to experiment with and test out a range of craft techniques as you find the most compelling way to tell your story.

No matter what your experience level, by the end of the class, you'll have built a versatile toolkit of writing techniques, strategies for how to begin and finish your novel and a store of resources to assist you in moving your completed manuscript into the world.

Learn More

- At points throughout the course, Margaret turns to her own novels as case studies, so being familiar with these books will help you get the most out of the course. If you're able, read (or re-read):

- *The Handmaid's Tale*
- *The Blind Assassin*
- *Alias Grace*
- *Oryx and Crake*
- Margaret's book *On Writers and Writing* (formerly titled *Negotiating With the Dead*, originally published in 2002) offers a wide-angle look at the writing profession, why writers write and her thoughts on the publishing industry. Both books are a great supplement to this course.

Assignment

Obtain a notebook reserved for this class. This class contains a number of sequential writing prompts designed for you to complete longhand, so whether or not you already keep a notebook or journal, using a separate one will allow you sufficient room to experiment and draft the way Margaret does.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER TWO

Getting Started as a Writer

'If you really do want to write, and you're struggling to get started, you're afraid of something. What is that fear?'

GETTING STARTED AS A WRITER

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Margaret became a writer because she was an avid and early reader. She grew up in the North Woods, where there were few other forms of entertainment (and no running water). As a child, she wrote comics and little stories, and founded a puppet troupe in junior high school. She began writing seriously when she was 16 years old. Though Margaret wanted to go to journalism school, some people told her that, as a woman, the only newspaper assignments she'd be offered would be the obituaries or fashion pages. Since that wasn't the kind of writing she wanted to do, Margaret revised her dream about how to become a writer: she would move to Paris and live in an attic. But in reality she made the more practical decision to pursue a graduate degree and was accepted to Harvard (where, she jokes, she had more time to write than she would have had in her imagined Parisian garret).

Margaret's first book of poetry, *The Circle Game*, won the Governor General's Award, a major Canadian literature prize, in 1966. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, was published three years later by McClelland & Stewart. Since then, she has gone on to publish more than 15 novels, in additional to other volumes of poetry, drama and non-fiction.

Margaret never writes from ideas – she believes that ideas are discovered later by readers, once a book has been written. She writes from characters, voices she's heard, scenes, even objects.

Margaret starts by handwriting because she finds it generates a flow from her brain to her hand to the page. Then she transcribes these pages to typed ones, editing as she goes in a 'rolling barrage' method that allows her to keep what she's just written fresh in her mind. She waits until she has about 50 or 60 pages before she begins to think about structure. Margaret describes her own process as 'downhill skiing': she writes as fast as she can, and then goes back later to revise (to literally re-'vision') what she's got down.

Every writer works in a different way. Some writers work straight through from beginning to end. Others work in pieces they arrange later, while others work from sentence to sentence. 'The wastepaper basket is your friend,' as Margaret likes to say, so don't be afraid to try out different techniques, voices and styles. Keep what works for you and discard the rest. Your material and process will guide you to your own set of rules.

The main thing that keeps people from writing is fear. If you have felt fear about writing, try to identify it. Are you worried it won't be good? That a family member might read it? That you won't be able to finish your book? If you name your fear and then deal with it, Margaret says, the door will open for you.

Learn More

- Margaret encourages you to find your own process and stresses that a fruitful writing process will be different for each person. Look up writing books by writers to get more ideas you can test out during this class.

- Check out the writing prompts at 'The Time Is Now' from *Poets & Writers* magazine. The magazine posts a new poetry prompt on Tuesdays, a fiction prompt on Wednesdays and a creative non-fiction prompt on Thursdays to help you turn a blank page into a potential draft.

- *Writer's Digest* posts regular creative writing prompts and is a trove of other resources for both new and experienced writers.

- Awesome Writing Prompts is an ongoing list of just that. Scroll through and bookmark ones you'd like to try out.

- If you're data-oriented or have set word count goals, you may want to check out 750words.com, which tracks your daily writing, distraction and other metrics.

Assignment

- In your notebook, take inventory of your current writing process. Do you have an established writing routine? A certain time of day or place you are most productive? Conversely, are there conditions that make it hard for you to write? If you haven't written in a while, think back to a past writing experience: What methods or conditions worked for you then?

- Next, based on this inventory, write down a specific process or method goal you'd like to accomplish during this class. It can be related to time ('Write 30 minutes every day') or word count ('Write 1000 words a day'), or it can be something less quantitative ('Sit down at my writing desk and open my notebook each morning'). Feel free to borrow one of Margaret's methods: try writing longhand if you tend to use a word processor, or if you find yourself editing as you go, try out the 'downhill skiing' method. Though Margaret doesn't always follow a routine, setting routine-based goals for yourself can build your writing practise into a habit and help you complete a novel-length work.

- Finally, write about any fears you have about writing. Be as specific as you can. Then, on a new page, write about how you might face that fear – whether it's as specific as finding a trusted reader or writing under a pen name to offer you artistic freedom.

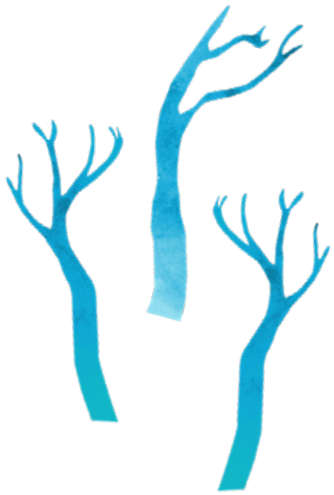
NOTE

The cover of *The Edible Woman* shown on screen is used by permission of McClelland & Stewart, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER THREE

Story and Plot



'A story needs a break in a pattern to get it going.'

STORY AND PLOT

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Every story is made up of both events and characters. A story happens because a pattern is interrupted. If you are writing about a day that is like any other day, it is most likely a routine, not a story.

In order to be a story, something has to happen. We call what happens in a novel the plot. Your plot might involve a threat from outside or a threat from within, or, as Margaret demonstrates with her permutations of John and Mary, you might combine those.

- John and Mary are living happily in their split-level with two cars. And then one day, a strange green light is seen in the sky, and a canister descends to Earth right behind their house, and out of it comes a tentacled monster.

- John and Mary are living in their split-level bungalow, but then Mary discovers that John is cheating on her.

- John and Mary are living in their split-level bungalow. Then John discovers that Mary is mysteriously absent during parts of the night and has developed an alarming tendency to sleep in the bath with all the curtains drawn. What has happened? What are those strange white fangs that have appeared? Could it be that Mary is a vampire? What is John going to do?

  And what about the children? Have they inherited this tendency or not?

- John and Mary live in their split-level bungalow with their dog called Samuel and their cat called Charlotte, and their three wonderful children, but they're running out of money. What are they going to do? 'I know,' says John. 'Let's rob a bank.'

No matter what combination of events you knit together to make the plot, each should be compelling and significant enough to pull your reader into the story and make them wonder what will happen next.

Each story is made up of 'building blocks' from other stories that have come before it, so part of your job as a writer is to know those building blocks so you can construct your own stories. Every culture has its own set of story building blocks. Margaret invites you to think of a giant Lego set you can break apart to build your own.

In Western anglophone culture, those building blocks include Greek and Roman mythology, indigenous stories, the Brothers Grimm fairy tales and the Bible. Much of English literature, especially that published before 1940, is in conversation with the Bible, and if you're writing in English, Margaret encourages you to familiarise yourself with these narrative building blocks.

Literature is a long and contiguous conversation, each story linked to hundreds of others that came before it and those that will follow it. To 'get the joke,' as Margaret says – to understand an update or retelling – you need to be familiar with the original story. Margaret offers the film *Maleficent (2014)* as an example of such a retelling. In this update of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale, the prince is a dud, and the true love's kiss required to break the sleeping spell comes instead from Sleeping Beauty's surrogate mother, Maleficent.

Learn More

- Review the extensive list of folk tales and legends (and their cultural origins) compiled by folklore scholar D.L. Ashliman. How many were you familiar with? In your notebook, write down several that interest you as possible building blocks for a retelling of your own.

- Watch the 'Talking Volumes' conversation with Margaret on YouTube, in which she discusses women's roles in the Grimm fairy tales and how these tales have been appropriated at different cultural moments throughout history.

- The Bible is a huge collection of many different kinds of writing and stories. Some of it is poetry, some sayings or proverbs, some narratives. Margaret recommends Jack Miles's book *God: A Biography* as one of the best and most accessible books about the Bible as literature for general readers, but which stories you may wish to draw upon will depend on the story you yourself are telling.

For *Alias Grace*, which is about a woman who either was or was not guilty of murder, but was accused and convicted, Margaret used Susannah and the Elders, an early mystery solved by Daniel, (this story is in the Roman Catholic Bible and in the Apocrypha for Protestants. Daniel is perhaps the earliest Sherlock Holmes, having also solved the mystery of the talking statue). Margaret also used Matthew 23:27, one of the pithier sayings of Jesus: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.'

For *The Year of the Flood*, which has to do with a green religion and thus animals and plants, Margaret used the Creation story, Noah and the Flood, Psalm 104 and various references to birds, whales, plants, and so forth. She referenced *The Green Bible* (HarperCollins 2011), which is a compilation of the 1,000+ references to the Earth in the Bible.

Here are some of the stories Margaret considers essential: Creation, Cain and Abel, the Flood, the Exodus from Egypt, Joseph and his Brethren and the aftermath, Samson and Delilah, the Book of Job, David and Bathsheba, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the Babylonian Captivity, Jonah and the Whale.

From the Christian cycle, she recommends that you read the birth, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Many writers are also now drawing on less prominent stories, especially those about women: the story of Dinah, for instance, and Jephthah's Daughter, and David's daughter Tamar, raped by her half-brother.

Assignment

In your notebook, make three lists:

- Ten events that might spark a story. They don't have to be big: these could be things that happened to you or someone you know, or items you read about in the news.

- Ten characters. These might be characters you've already worked with, people you've seen but never spoken to, or perhaps historical figures that fascinate you.

- Ten story 'Legos': folk tales, fairy tales, myths or maybe family stories that were passed down to you. No need to detail them; just list a few words that sum up the story.

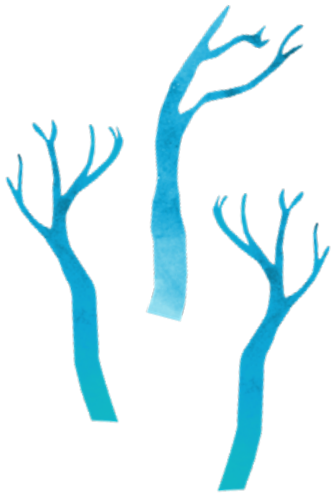
- Now take one item from each list – one event, one character and one existing story shell – and begin a new story. What happens when you drop a character of your own invention into a very old folk tale? How does your personal event permit you to play with the foundational folk tale?

If you have an existing novel or story you're working on, keep these lists at hand for when you're feeling stuck. Sometimes an uninvited character or outside narrative 'Lego' can illumine or clear a path in your story that's worth following.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER FOUR

Structuring Your Novel: Layered Narratives and Other Variations



'It's not just a story within a story – it's a story within a story within a story within a story. So it's fancy footwork, granted, and some people follow the clues, and others don't.'

STRUCTURING YOUR NOVEL: LAYERED NARRATIVES AND OTHER VARIATIONS

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

The structure is how you choose to order the story. You might tell a story in a straight chronological manner, from beginning to end, or you might begin from a moment in the future and jump back in time to fill a reader in. Margaret demonstrates structural possibilities by telling 'Little Red Riding Hood' from several different starting points.

- STARTING IN THE MIDDLE: 'It was dark inside the wolf. The grandmother who had been gobbled whole couldn't say a word, because it was quite stifling and full of old chicken parts and plastic bags that the wolf had eaten by mistake.'

- STARTING WITH A FLASHBACK: 'Every time the grandmother remembered what an awful time she had had inside the wolf.'

- USING A DETECTIVE NOVEL STRUCTURE: 'There on the floor lay either one corpse, that of the wolf, or two, because in some versions the grandmother doesn't come out of it so well. What had caused this double murder?'

- USING TIME JUMPS: 'Little was Little Red Riding Hood to know that in two weeks' time, she would be looking back on one of the most definitive events of her life.'

These are different structural choices, but underneath them, the plot – that is, what happens – remains the same. A structure that cloaks the plot itself in mystery is the 'Rashomon' approach, in which a narrative that toggles among multiple viewpoints leads the reader to question what really happened. Your story will teach you what structure it requires, so be open to trying out multiple structures before finding the right one.

A frame tale structure allows you to tell many other stories within the frame story. Margaret suggests reading *One Thousand and One Nights*, a set of originally uncollected tales that were brought together in the frame tale of Scheherazade, who decides to end the vengeful king's practise of murdering a new bride each night by telling him a chain of cliffhangers, stories for which he needed to wait until morning to find out what happened.

Margaret's novel *The Blind Assassin* is also a complex frame tale. A 'prickly' old lady narrates the present and the past, and underneath that layer runs a novel called *The Blind Assassin*. Within that novel, we encounter a story being told by one character to another, and a set of fictionalised newspaper articles offers a counterpoint to these private threads, a public account of the events unspooling in the other three layers of narrative.

Margaret encourages you to start with a simple chronological structure and work your way up to more complex variations. Discovering the best structure for your story is a hands-on process, she says. You learn by seeing what others have done – through reading and by doing, trying things out for yourself.

Learn More

- For an in-depth study of narrative structure and plot, read Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* (1984).
- Search online for the video of novelist Kurt Vonnegut discussing and graphing the shapes of some universal stories.
- Watch Akira Kurosawa's Rashomon (1950), a film known for its use of multiple perspectives to unravel a mystery.
- Read the first several tales in *One Thousand and One Nights*, reproduced on the following pages. Notice how quickly the transition between each story within a story happens. What is the effect of the 'nested' quality of these stories on your reading? How does each story keep you aware of the other layers? What benefits might an author achieve with such a sleight of hand?

Assignment

- Think about some of your favourite books and spend a few minutes writing in your notebook about how they are structured. What choices did the author make that fit the story they told? Were there perceivable narrative layers that complicated or illumined your sense of the plot?

AN EXCERPT FROM

ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

Hereupon the Wazir being weary of lamenting and contending, persuading and dissuading her, all to no purpose, went up to King Shahryar and, after blessing him and kissing the ground before him, told him all about his dispute with his daughter from first to last and how he designed to bring her to him that night. The King wondered with exceeding wonder; for he had made an especial exception of the Wazir's daughter, and said to him, 'O most faithful of Counsellors, how is this? Thou wottest that I have sworn by the Raiser of the Heavens that after I have gone into her this night I shall say to thee on the morrow's morning:—Take her and slay her! and, if thou slay her not, I will slay thee in her stead without fail.' 'Allah guide thee to glory and lengthen thy life, O King of the age,' answered the Wazir, 'it is she that hath so determined: all this have I told her and more; but she will not hearken to me and she persisteth in passing this coming night with the King's Majesty.' So Shahryar rejoiced greatly and said, ''Tis well; go get her ready and this night bring her to me.' The Wazir returned to his daughter and reported to her the command saying,' Allah make not thy father desolate by thy loss!' But Shahrazed rejoiced with exceeding joy and gat ready all she required and said to her younger sister, Dunyazad,' Note well what directions I entrust to thee! When I have gone into the King I will send for thee and when thou comest to me and seest that he hath had his carnal will of me, do thou say to me:—O my sister, an thou be not sleepy, relate to me some new story, delectable and delightsome, the better to speed our waking hours;' and I will tell thee a tale which shall be our deliverance, if so Allah please, and which shall turn the King from his blood-thirsty custom.' Dunyazad answered ' With love and gladness.' So when it was night their father the Wazir carried Shahrazad to the King who was gladdened at the sight and asked, 'Hast thou brought me my need?' and he answered, 'I have.' But when the King took her to his bed and fell to toying with her and wished to go in to her she wept; which made him ask, 'What aileth thee?' She replied, 'O King of the age, I have a younger sister and lief would I take leave of her this night before I see the dawn.' So he sent at once for Dunyazad and she came and kissed the ground between his hands, when he permitted her to take her seat near the foot of the couch. Then the King arose and did away with his bride's maidenhead and the three fell asleep. But when it was midnight Shahrazad awoke and signalled to her sister Dunyazad who sat up and said, 'Allah upon thee, O my sister, recite to us some new story, delightsome and delectable, wherewith to while away the waking hours of our latter night.'[1]'With joy and goodly gree,' answered Shahrazad, 'if this pious and auspicious King permit me.' 'Tell on,' quoth the King who chanced to be sleepless and restless and therefore was pleased with the prospect of hearing her story. So Shahrazad rejoiced; and thus, on the first night of the Thousand Nights and a Night, she began with the

TALE OF THE TRADER AND THE JINNI.

It is related, O auspicious King, that there was a merchant of the merchants who had much wealth, and business in various cities. Now on a day he mounted horse and went forth to recover monies in certain towns, and the heat sore oppressed him; so he sat beneath a tree and, putting his hand into his saddle-bags, took thence some broken bread and dry dates and began to break his fast. When he had ended eating the dates he threw away the stones with force and lo! an Ifrit appeared, huge of stature and brandishing a drawn sword, wherewith he approached the merchant and said, 'Stand up that I may slay thee, even as thou slewest my son!' Asked the merchant, 'How have I slain thy son?' and he answered, 'When thou atest dates and threwest away the stones they struck my son full in the breast as he was walking by, so that he died forthwith.'[2]Quoth

1. i.e. between the last sleep and dawn, when they would rise to wash and pray.

2. Travellers tell of a peculiar knack of jerking the date-stone, which makes it strike with great force: I never saw this 'Inwá' practised, but it reminds me of the water splashing with one hand in the German baths.

the merchant, 'Verily from Allah we proceeded and unto Allah are we returning. There is no Majesty, and there is no Might save in Allah, the Glorious, the Great! If I slew thy son, I slew him by chance medley. I pray thee now pardon me.' Rejoined the Jinni, 'There is no help but I must slay thee.' Then he seized him and dragged him along and, casting him to the earth, raised the sword to strike him; whereupon the merchant wept, and said, 'I commit my case to Allah,' and began repeating these couplets:—

Containeth Time a twain of days, this of blessing that of bane And holdeth O
Life a twain of halves, this of pleasure that of pain.
See'st not when blows the hurricane, sweeping stark and striking strong O
None save the forest giant feels the suffering of the strain?
How many trees earth nourisheth of the dry and of the green Yet none but O
those which bear the fruits for cast of stone complain.
See'st not how corpses rise and float on the surface of the tide While pearls O
O' price lie hidden in the deepest of the main!
In Heaven are unnumbered the many of the stars Yet ne'er a star but Sun O
and Moon by eclipse is overta'en.
Well judgedst thou the days that saw thy faring sound and well And countedst O
not the pangs and pain whereof Fate is ever fain.
The nights have kept thee safe and the safety brought thee pride But bliss O
and blessings of the night are 'genderers of bane!

When the merchant ceased repeating his verses the Jinni said to him, 'Cut thy words short, by Allah! needs must I slay thee.' But the merchant spake him thus,' Know, O thou Ifrit, that I have debts due to me and much wealth and children and a wife and many pledges in hand; so permit me to go home and discharge to every claimant his claim; and I will come back to thee at the head of the new year. Allah be my testimony and surety that I will return to thee; and then thou mayest do with me as thou wilt and Allah is witness to what I say.' The Jinni took sure promise of him and let him go; so he returned to his own city and transacted his business and rendered to all men their dues and after informing his wife and children of what had betided him, he appointed a guardian and dwelt with them for a full year. Then he arose, and made the Wuzu-ablution to purify himself before death and took his shroud under his arm and bade farewell to his people, his neighbours and all his kith and kin, and went forth despite his own nose.[3] They then began weeping and wailing and beating their breasts over him; but he travelled until he arrived at the same garden, and the day of his arrival was the head of the New Year. As he sat weeping over what had befallen him, behold, a Shaykh,[4] a very ancient man, drew near leading a chained gazelle; and he saluted that merchant and wishing him long life said, 'What is the cause of thy sitting in this place and thou alone and this be a resort of evil spirits?' The merchant related to him what had come to pass with the Ifrit, and the old man, the owner of the gazelle, wondered and said, 'By Allah, O brother, thy faith is none other than exceeding faith and thy story right strange; were it graven with gravers on the eye corners, it were a warner to whoso would be warned.' Then seating himself near the merchant he said, 'By Allah, O my brother, I will not leave thee until I see what may come to pass with thee and this Ifrit.' And presently as he sat and the two were at talk the merchant began to feel fear and terror and exceeding grief and sorrow beyond relief and ever-growing care and extreme despair. And the owner of the gazelle was hard by his side; when behold, a second Shaykh approached them, and with him were two dogs both of greyhound breed and both black. The second old man after saluting them with the salam, also asked them of their tidings and said 'What causeth you to sit in this place, a dwelling of the Jánn?'[5] So they told him the tale from beginning to end, and their stay there had not lasted long before there came up a third Shaykh, and with him a she-mule of bright bay coat; and he saluted them and asked them why they were seated in that place. So they told him the story from first to last: and of no avail, O my master, is a twice-told tale! There he sat down with them, and lo! a dust cloud advanced and a mighty sand-devil appeared amidmost of the waste. Presently the cloud

3. i.e., sorely against his will.

4. Arab. 'Shaykh' = an old man (primarily), an elder, a chief (of the tribe, guild, etc.); and honourably addressed to any man. Comp. among the neo-Latins 'Sieur,' 'Signore.' 'Señor,' 'Senhor,' etc. from Lat. 'Senior,' which gave our 'Sire' and 'Sir.' Like many in Arabic, the word has a host of different meanings and most of them will occur in the course of The Nights. Ibrahim (Abraham) was the first Shaykh or man who became grey. Seeing his hairs whiten, he cried, 'O Allah what is this?' and the answer came that it was a sign of dignified gravity. Hereupon he exclaimed, 'O Lord increase this to me!' and so it happened till his locks waxed snowy white at the age of one hundred and fifty. He was the first who parted his hair, trimmed his mustachios, cleaned his teeth with the Miswák (tooth-stick), pared his nails, shaved his pecten, snuffed up water, used ablution after stool and wore a shirt (Tabari).

5. The word is mostly plural = Jinnís: it is also singular = a demon; and Ján bin Ján has been noticed.

opened and behold, within it was that Jinni hending in hand a drawn sword, while his eyes were shooting fire-sparks of rage. He came up to them and, haling away the merchant from among them, cried to him, 'Arise that I may slay thee, as thou slewest my son, the life-stuff of my liver.'[6]The merchant wailed and wept, and the three old men began sighing and crying and weeping and wailing with their companion. Presently the first old man (the owner of the gazelle) came out from among them and kissed the hand of the Ifrit and said, 'O Jinni, thou Crown of the Kings of the Jann! were I to tell thee the story of me and this gazelle and thou shouldst consider it wondrous wouldst thou give me a third part of this merchant's blood?' Then quoth the Jinni 'Even so, O Shaykh! if thou tell me this tale, and I hold it a marvellous, then will I give thee a third of his blood.' Thereupon the old man began to tell

THE FIRST SHAYKH'S STORY

Know O Jinni! that this gazelle is the daughter of my paternal uncle, my own flesh and blood, and I married her when she was a young maid, and I lived with her well-nigh thirty years, yet was I not blessed with issue by her. So I took me a concubine[7]who brought to me the boon of a male child fair as the full moon, with eyes of lovely shine and eyebrows which formed one line, and limbs of perfect design. Little by little he grew in stature and waxed tall; and when he was a lad fifteen years old, it became needful I should journey to certain cities and I travelled with great store of goods. But the daughter of my uncle (this gazelle) had learned gramarye and egromancy and clerkly craft[8]from her childhood; so she bewitched that son of mine to a calf, and my handmaid (his mother) to a heifer, and made them over to the herdsman's care. Now when I returned after a long time from my journey and asked for my son and his mother, she answered me, saying 'Thy slave girl is dead, and thy son hath fled and I know not whither he is sped.' So I remained for a whole year with grieving heart, and streaming eyes until the time came for the Great Festival of Allah.[9]Then sent I to my herdsman bidding him choose for me a fat heifer; and he brought me one which was the damsel, my handmaid, whom this gazelle had ensorcelled. I tucked up my sleeves and skirt and, taking a knife, proceeded to cut her throat, but she lowed aloud and wept bitter tears. Thereat I marvelled and pity seized me and I held my hand, saying to the herd, 'Bring me other than this.' Then cried my cousin, 'Slay her, for I have not a fatter nor a fairer!' Once more I went forward to sacrifice her, but she again lowed aloud, upon which in ruth I refrained and commanded the herdsmen to slay her and flay her. He killed her and skinned her but found in her neither fat nor flesh, only hide and bone; and I repented when penitence availed me naught. I gave her to the herdsman and said to him, 'Fetch me a fat calf;' so he brought my son ensorcelled. When the calf saw me, he brake his tether and ran to me, and fawned upon me and wailed and shed tears; so that I took pity on him and said to the herdsman, 'Bring me a heifer and let this calf go!' Thereupon my cousin (this gazelle) called aloud at me, saying, 'Needs mast thou kill this calf; this is a holy day and a blessed, whereon naught is slain save what be perfect-pure; and we have not amongst our calves any fatter or fairer than this!' Quoth I, 'Look thou upon the condition of the heifer which I slaughtered at thy bidding and how we turn from her in disappointment and she profited us on no wise; and I

6. With us moderns, 'liver' suggests nothing but malady: in Arabic and Persian as in the classic literature of Europe it is the seat of passion, the heart being that of affection. Of this more presently.

7. Originally in Al-Islam the concubine (Surriyat, etc.) was a captive taken in war and the Koran says nothing about buying slave-girls, but if the captives were true believers, the Moslem was ordered to marry not to keep them. In modern days, concubinage has become an extensive subject. Practically the disadvantage is that the slave-girls, knowing themselves to be the master's property, consider him bound to sleep with them; which is by no means the mistress's view. Some wives, however, when old and childless, insist, after the fashion of Sarah, upon the husband taking a young concubine and treating her like a daughter – which is rare. The Nights abound in tales of concubines, but these are chiefly owned by the Caliphs and high officials who did much as they pleased. The only redeeming point in the system is that it obviates the necessity of prostitution, which is, perhaps, the greatest evil known to modern society.

8. Arab. 'Al-Kahánah' = the craft of a 'Káhin' (Heb. Cohen) a diviner, sooth-sayer, etc.

9. Arab. 'Id al-kahír' = The Great Festival; the Turkish Bayrám and Indian Bakar-eed (Kine-fête), the pilgrimage-time, also termed 'Festival of the Kurbán' (sacrifice) because victims are slain; Al-Zuha (of Undurn or forenoon), Al-Azahá (of serene night) and Al-Nahr (of throat-cutting). For full details I must refer readers to my 'Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah' (3 vols. 8vo. London, Longmans, 1855). I shall have often to refer to it.

repent with an exceeding repentance of having killed her: so this time I will not obey thy bidding for the sacrifice of this calf.' Quoth she, 'By Allah the Most Great, the Compassionating, the Compassionate! there is no help for it; thou must kill him on this holy day, and if thou kill him not to me thou art no man and I to thee am no wife.' Now when I heard those hard words, not knowing her object I went up to the calf, knife in hand—And Shahrazad perceived the dawn of day and ceased to say her permitted say.[10]Then quoth her sister to her, 'How fair is thy tale, and how grateful, and how sweet and how tasteful!' And Shahrazad answered her, 'What is this to that I could tell thee on the coming night, were I to live and the King would spare me?' Then said the King in himself, 'By Allah, I will not slay her, until I shall have heard the rest of her tale.' So they slept the rest of that night in mutual embrace till day fully brake. Then the King went forth to his audience-hall[11]and the Wazir went up with his daughter's shroud under his arm. The King issued his orders, and promoted this and deposed that, until the end of the day; and he told the Wazir no whit of what had happened. But the Minister wondered thereat with exceeding wonder; and when the Court broke up King Shahryar entered his palace.

When it was the Second Night,

said Dunyazad to her sister Shahrazad, 'O my sister, finish for us that story of the Merchant and the Jinni;' and she answered, 'With joy and goodly gree, if the King permit me.' Then quoth the King, 'Tell thy tale;' and Shahrazad began in these words[…]

10. Arab. 'Kalám al-mubáh,' i.e., that allowed or permitted to her by the King, her husband.

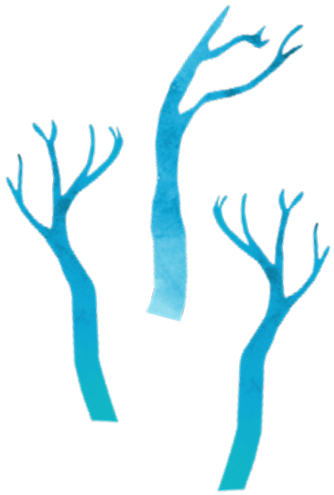
11. Moslem Kings are expected, like the old Guebre Monarchs, to hold 'Darbar' (i.e., give public audience) at least twice a day, morning and evening. Neglect of this practise caused the ruin of the Caliphate and the Persian and Moghul Empires: the great lords were left uncontrolled and the lieges revolted to obtain justice. The Guebre Kings had two levée places, the Rozistan (day station) and the Shabistan (night-station – istán or stán being a nominal form of istádan, to stand, as Hindo-stán). Moreover, one day in the week, the sovereign acted as 'Mufti' or Supreme Judge.

From *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night: A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments*. Translated and annotated by Richard F. Burton. Reproduced courtesy of Project Gutenberg. Full text available at gutenberg.org

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER FIVE

Who Tells the Story: Narrative Point of View



'Writing is a way of recording the human voice.'

WHO TELLS THE STORY: NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

One way to determine what point of view strategy to use in your novel is to ask: Whose voice is telling the story? To whom are they telling it, and why? Common point of view strategies include first person, third person limited, third person omniscient (in which a narrator who is not a character and who knows more than the characters relays the events to the reader) and second person (which is structured around the 'you' pronoun, and is less common in novel-length work). You don't have to be tied to one point of view throughout your novel; some novels move from first to third or first to second. Let your material guide your decision.

The only way to decide the best point of view strategy for your novel is to try different ones. Likely, you'll know the right one for your story because the writing will begin to move more quickly, and you'll feel momentum.

Many novels written in the 19th century are told from an omniscient point of view. When a reader knows more than the character, as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula (1897)*, you generate suspense because your reader waits for the character to learn what they already know, but you might want to invert that balance of knowledge and make the narrator a character in the story that knows more than the reader. Agatha Christie used this first person strategy to create narrative irony.

Point of view strategy is deeply bound up with what story you want to tell and will guide how that story unspools. So no matter where you are in the drafting process, devote some time to thinking through the risks and rewards of different POV strategies and consider who in your story may be best suited to hold the narrative reins.

Learn More

- Margaret points to *Dracula* as an example of how using multiple points of view in one book can create suspense for the reader. Read it with an eye towards the effects of these narrative choices.

- Read the opening to *The Blind Assassin* reproduced on the following pages. What do you learn about the 'I' narrator (Iris) from this brief passage? How does her account of Laura's actions, versus the news reports that follow, shape how you understand what has happened? Does Iris seem to be withholding anything?

- Here are some of Margaret's reading recommendations, with notes as to what you should look out for:

First Person

- *Treasure Island (1882)* by Robert Louis Stevenson: A model of clean, clear narration by Jim Hawkins.
- *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift: A plain-spoken narrator telling whoppers with a straight face.
- *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë: Narratives within narratives, but all related by first persons. You can learn a lot from seeing how she does it.
- *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë: The first in-depth first person account of female childhood and youth.
- *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys. The mad wife from *Jane Eyre* has her say.
- *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson. A succession of first person narratives brings us closer and closer to the central horror.
- *Lolita* (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov: A tricky, devious snake of a narrator.
- *The Untouchable* (1997) by John Banville: Another narrating villain, but so enjoyable! An embedded spy lets fling.
- *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) by J. M. Coetzee: Guilt and compunction do not save him…
- *Rebecca* (1938) by Daphne du Maurier: A journey inside the mind of a timid wife who is being lied to by many.
- *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) by Agatha Christie: The first person point of view creates narrative irony.
- *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James: You figure it out!

Third Person

- Any of Jane Austen's works: So loaded and mischievous!
- *Madame Bovary* (1856) by Gustave Flaubert: Third person allows you to see the character in ways that she or he cannot see him or herself.
- *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by Virginia Woolf: These show stream of consciousness at its most supple.
- *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) by Henry James and *The House of Mirth* (1905) by Edith Wharton are very good in-depth studies, as well as gripping narratives – if you have the ability to stick with the longer 19th century sentence.
- *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974) by John Le Carré: Excellent third person narration. He learned a lot from the 19th century many-charactered novel.
- *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by William Faulkner: A quartet of narrative styles that move us increasingly back from the scene. The first section is right up close. The second is further back, but still first person; stream of consciousness. The third section is narrated by Jason and in a linear story. The fourth section is third person, and yet removed once more – we move back to see this crumbling white family from the point of view of the black servants.

- *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) by Michael Ondaatje: This is a very complex plot, but the narrative gets you from A to B to Z, and you can follow the dots.
- *The Enchanted by Rene Denfeld* (2014): This is not for the squeamish, as it takes place in a prison, but it is very convincing – and compassionate.

Assignment

- Think of an event that involves at least three characters, (they don't all have to be human, as Margaret reminds us). Then, on three different pages or documents, write about this event from these three different points of view, trying both first person and third person (or second person, if you're feeling bold!) How did the point of view change the story? Which felt most natural? Most compelling?
- If you're at work on a novel or longer project, apply this exercise to your work in progress. Choose a major event in the book that you're working on. From whose point of view did you write it originally? On a blank page or document, try writing about that same event from a different character's point of view; push yourself to write the entire event from this different vantage point. What differences did you discover in how this character experienced or recounted the event? Did retelling the event through their eyes change the way you understood it? Don't worry if this point of view doesn't find its way into a final draft; as Margaret says, make your own rules and discard the rest, but try to stay open to the way handing the narration to a different character deepens and complicates your understanding of the events of your story.

AN EXCERPT FROM

THE BLIND ASSASSIN

Margaret Atwood

• • •

THE BRIDGE

Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge. The bridge was being repaired: she went right through the Danger sign. The car fell a hundred feet into the ravine, smashing through the treetops feathery with new leaves, then burst into flames and rolled down into the shallow creek at the bottom. Chunks of the bridge fell on top of it. Nothing much was left of her but charred smithereens.

I was informed of the accident by a policeman: the car was mine, and they'd traced the licence. His tone was respectful: no doubt he recognised Richard's name. He said the tires may have caught on a streetcar track or the brakes may have failed, but he also felt bound to inform me that two witnesses—a retired lawyer and a bank teller, dependable people—had claimed to have seen the whole thing. They'd said Laura had turned the car sharply and deliberately, and had plunged off the bridge with no more fuss than stepping off a curb. They'd noticed her hands on the wheel because of the white gloves she'd been wearing.

It wasn't the brakes, I thought. She had her reasons. Not that they were ever the same as anybody else's reasons. She was completely ruthless in that way.

'I suppose you want someone to identify her,' I said.

'I'll come down as soon as I can.' I could hear the calmness of my own voice, as if from a distance. In reality I could barely get the words out; my mouth was numb, my entire face was rigid with pain. I felt as if I'd been to the dentist. I was furious with Laura for what she'd done, but also with the policeman for implying that she'd done it. A hot wind was blowing around my head, the strands of my hair lifting and swirling in it, like ink spilled in water.

'I'm afraid there will be an inquest, Mrs. Griffen,' he said.

'Naturally,' I said. 'But it was an accident. My sister was never a good driver.'

I could picture the smooth oval of Laura's face, her neatly pinned chignon, the dress she would have been wearing: a shirtwaist with a small rounded collar, in a sober colour—navy blue or steel grey or hospital-corridor green. Penitential colours—less like something she'd chosen to put on than like something she'd been locked up in. Her solemn half-smile; the amazed lift of her eyebrows, as if she were admiring the view.

The white gloves: a Pontius Pilate gesture. She was washing her hands of me. Of all of us.

What had she been thinking of as the car sailed off the bridge, then hung suspended in the afternoon sunlight, glinting like a dragonfly for that one instant of held breath before the plummet? Of Alex, of Richard, of bad faith, of our father and his wreckage; of God, perhaps, and her fatal, triangular bargain. Or of the stack of cheap school exercise books that she must have hidden that very morning, in the bureau drawer where I kept my stockings, knowing I would be the one to find them.

When the policeman had gone I went upstairs to change. To visit the morgue I would need gloves, and a hat with a veil. Something to cover the eyes. There might be reporters. I would have to call a taxi. Also I ought to warn Richard, at his office: he would wish to have a statement of grief prepared. I went into my dressing room: I would need black, and a handkerchief.

I opened the drawer, I saw the notebooks. I undid the crisscross of kitchen string that tied them together. I noticed that my teeth were chattering, and that I was cold all over. I must be in shock, I decided.

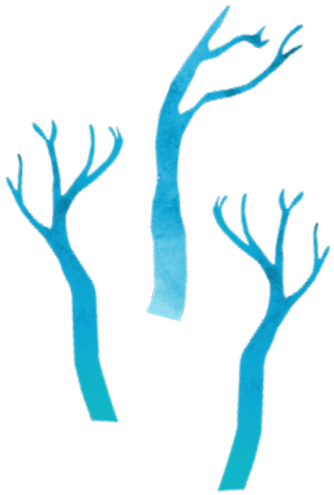
What I remembered then was Reenie, from when we were little. It was Reenie who'd done the bandaging, of scrapes and cuts and minor injuries: Mother might be resting, or doing good deeds elsewhere, but Reenie was always there. She'd scoop us up and sit us on the white enamel kitchen table, alongside the pie dough she was rolling out or the chicken she was cutting up or the fish she was gutting, and give us a lump of brown sugar to get us to close our mouths. Tell me where it hurts, she'd say. Stop howling. Just calm down and show me where.

But some people can't tell where it hurts. They can't calm down. They can't ever stop howling.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER SIX

Point of View Case Studies



'The wastepaper basket is your friend.
It was invented for you, by God.'

POINT OF VIEW CASE STUDIES

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Margaret's novel *Alias Grace* is based on a historical event: a double murder that occurred in 1843 in which a manservant was tried and hanged for the murder of his employer. Grace Marks, a maid, was tried and imprisoned as his accessory. The published novel is told in first person through Grace's point of view as she speaks to the doctor hired by the Reformists to exonerate her.

Margaret wrote 100 pages of *Alias Grace* in the third person. Then, on a train near Paris, she recalls getting a headache and a flash of clarity about the book: it needed to be told in the first person instead. Third person was 'the wrong person' for the story. She threw those first 100 pages out.

Like *Alias Grace*, *The Handmaid's Tale* is told almost entirely in first person, but unlike her lightning-bolt experience while writing *Alias Grace*, Margaret knew earlier that first was the right point of view strategy for *The Handmaid's Tale* because it belongs to a set of narratives Margaret calls 'witness literature,' in which a first person narrator tells their story in hope that someone might later find it and learn what happened. *The Handmaid's Tale* is fictionalised witness literature.

Often, changing point of view strategy – from first to third, or third to first – can unlock the story for you. Changing the narration from past to present can have a similar jump-start effect on your story. Margaret encourages you to experiment with these different modes and find the one that feels most organic to the story you're telling.

Learn More

Read the published opening of *Alias Grace*, reproduced on the following pages. Then read Margaret's original version of the opening, which she says was written in 'the wrong person.' What's different? What do you lose?

AN EXCERPT FROM

ALIAS GRACE

Margaret Atwood

• • •

Out of the gravel there are peonies growing. They come up through the loose grey pebbles, their buds testing the air like snails' eyes, then swelling and opening, huge dark-red flowers all shining and glossy like satin. Then they burst and fall to the ground.

In the one instant before they come apart they are like the peonies in the front garden at Mr. Kinnear's, that first day, only those were white. Nancy was cutting them. She wore a pale dress with pink rosebuds and a triple-flounced skirt, and a straw bonnet that hid her face. She carried a flat basket, to put the flowers in; she bent from the hips like a lady, holding her waist straight. When she heard us and turned to look, she put her hand up to her throat as if startled.

I tuck my head down while I walk, keeping step with the rest, eyes lowered, silently two by two around the yard, inside the square made by the high stone walls. My hands are clasped in front of me; they're chapped, the knuckles reddened. I can't remember a time when they were not like that. The toes of my shoes go in and out under the hem of my skirt, blue and white, blue and white, crunching on the pathway. These shoes fit me better than any I've ever had before.

It's 1851. I'll be twenty-four years old next birthday. I've been shut up in here since the age of sixteen. I am a model prisoner, and give no trouble. That's what the Governor's wife says, I have overheard her saying it.

I'm skilled at overhearing. If I am good enough and quiet enough, perhaps after all they will let me go; but it's not easy being quiet and good, it's like hanging on to the edge of a bridge when you've already fallen over; you don't seem to be moving, just dangling there, and yet it is taking all your strength.

I watch the peonies out of the corners of my eyes. I know they shouldn't be here: it's April, and peonies don't bloom in April. There are three more now, right in front of me, growing out of the path itself. Furtively I reach out my hand to touch one. It has a dry feel, and I realize it's made of cloth.

Then up ahead I see Nancy, on her knees, with her hair fallen over and the blood running down into her eyes. Around her neck is a white cotton kerchief printed with blue flowers, love-in-a-mist, it's mine. She's lifting up her face, she's holding out her hands to me for mercy; in her ears are the little gold earrings I used to envy, but I no longer begrudge them, Nancy can keep them, because this time it will all be different, this time I will run to help, I will lift her up and wipe away the blood with my skirt, I will tear a bandage from my petticoat and none of it will have happened. Mr. Kinnear will come home in the afternoon, he will ride up the driveway and McDermott will take the horse, and Mr. Kinnear will go into the parlour and I will make him some coffee, and Nancy will take it in to him on a tray the way she likes to do, and he will make good coffee; and at night the fireflies will come out in the orchard, and there will be music, by lamplight. Jamie Walsh. The boy with the flute.

I am almost up to Nancy, to where she's kneeling. But I do not break step, I do not run, I keep on walking two by two; and then Nancy smiles, only the mouth, her eyes are hidden by the blood and hair, and then she scatters into patches of colour, a drift of red cloth petals across the stones.

I put my hands over my eyes because it's dark suddenly, and a man is standing there with a candle, blocking the stairs that go up; and the cellar walls are all around me, and I know I will never get out.

This is what I told Dr. Jordan, when we came to that part of the story.

An Excerpt From The Original Manuscript

ALIAS GRACE, MARGARET ATWOOD

1. GRACE

Out of the gravel there are peonies growing. They come up through the loose grey pebbles, their shining leaves unfurling like ferns, the knobs of their buds moving out from the stems as if testing the air, then swelling and bursting into flower, huge dark-red flowers with petals as glossy and wet-looking as black satin or licked skin. Then they splatter in the wind and fall and lie on the ground, the light caught on them like Rain.

In the one instant before they come apart they're like the peonies in the front garden at Mr. Kinnear's, that first day; only those were white. Nancy was cutting the last of them. She wore a pale dress with pink dots and a triple flounced skirt, and a straw bonnet that hid her face. She carried a long flat basket, to put the flowers in; she bent from the hips, like a lady, holding her waist straight. When she heard them at last and turned to look, she put her hand up to her throat, as if startled.

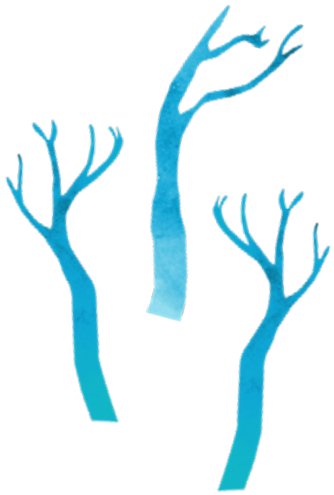
Grace tucks her head down while she walks, keeping step with the rest, two by two around the yard, inside the square made by the high limestone walls. Her hands are clasped in front of her; they're chapped, the knuckles reddened. The toes of her shoes go in and out under the hem of her heavy woollen skirt, crunching on the stones; they fit her better than any shoes she's ever had before.

She is twenty-four. She's been in here for nine years. She is a model prisoner, and gives no trouble.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bringing Characters to Life Through Detail



'How will your character behave,
given any set of circumstances?'

BRINGING CHARACTERS TO LIFE THROUGH DETAIL

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Character and event are inseparable because a person *is* what happens to them. You might think of this as a distinction from films, where actors are cast into pre-existing roles, but a novel is a character interacting with events over time.

Your job as a writer is to learn about your character by observing how they interact with the world around them. Characters – like real people – have hobbies, pets, histories, ruminations and obsessions. It's essential to your novel that you understand these aspects of your character so that you are equipped to understand how they may react under the pressures of events they encounter.

Margaret offers a strategy from her own work: she makes a character chart on which she writes each character, their birthday and world events that might be relevant to them. In this way, she keeps track of how old characters are in relation to one another, and also how old they are when certain fictional or historical events occurred.

Have you included enough detail about your character on the page to put the reader on the right track? Though readers will always draw their own conclusions, they may draw conclusions far from your intent if you don't offer enough clues through detail work. Different writers focus on different details to evoke character, whether deliberately or not. Dashiell Hammett never fed his characters, while Charles Dickens fed his extravagantly. Some writers are interested in revealing character via clothing, as Flaubert did, while others attend to furniture. Whatever details you choose, it's important for you to know your characters' physical world intimately, and how they relate to it. This will develop your knowledge of how they will react to the unexpected events that occur in the course of your story.

If you are writing from the point of view of a character who is unlike you in some way – identifies as a different gender, for instance – Margaret recommends you run your story by someone who shares your character's traits for accuracy. She shares an example from *Oryx*

and Crake, in which a male reader caught small details that she had gotten wrong in her draft. Even though you're writing fiction, you are working to make your reader believe in this world you've created, and accuracy in detail is one way to make them believe.

Learn More

- Read Charles Dickens's novella *A Christmas Carol (1843)*. Note every description of meals or food. How do these reveal character in the story?

Assignments

On the following pages are two printable worksheets to help you develop your characters.

1. The character chart, modelled after Margaret's, will help you understand characters' relationship to one another and to historical moments relevant to them. Therefore, it will likely be most useful once you have at least a few chapters of a novel draft, and a sense of who populates the world of your book.

   If you are just beginning a longer story or novel project, permit yourself not to know the full cast of characters yet, or even what era your story unfolds in. At this stage, you may want to keep the chart nearby as you draft, filling it out as you go with the characters you know best, and adding as you learn more about your fictional world.

2. The questionnaire is a tool Margaret uses to learn more about her characters. If you are just beginning to write fiction and only know a character from a short writing exercise or an idea you've had, you can use these questions to develop that character, and learn how they behave.

For those who have a work in progress, you can use this questionnaire with your protagonist or any secondary character to learn more about their present state, enrich their backstory and add to their repertoire of unique gestures and habits.

Margaret Atwood's Character Questionnaire

- What is their gender (at the moment)?
- When is their birthday? What is their age at the beginning of the novel?
- What do they look like?
- What is their general disposition? Are they frowny? Or are they smiley?
- Where do they live?
- What do they eat?
- How do they dress?
- Do they dress to impress?
- Do they dress in a way that is appropriate for their age, or do they dress to look younger or older than they are?
- What major experiences have they had in their lives?
- Have they had any traumatic experiences?
- Did they have a bad childhood?
- Or did they have a good childhood suddenly destroyed by a traumatic event?
- What are their ruminations?
- Do they have any obsessions?
- Are they in love?
- Do they have any pets?
- Do they have any medical conditions?
- What do they like to do in their spare time? (Do they have any spare time?)
- What are their friends like?
- What are their hobbies?

Margaret Atwood's Character Chart

YEARS

(Fill in character's years below)

MONTHS

♑ Capricorn

JANUARY

♒ Aquarius

FEBRUARY

♓ Pisces

MARCH

♈ Aries

APRIL

♉ Taurus

MAY

♊ Gemini

JUNE

♋ Cancer

JULY

♌ Leo

AUGUST

♍ Virgo

SEPTEMBER

♎ Libra

OCTOBER

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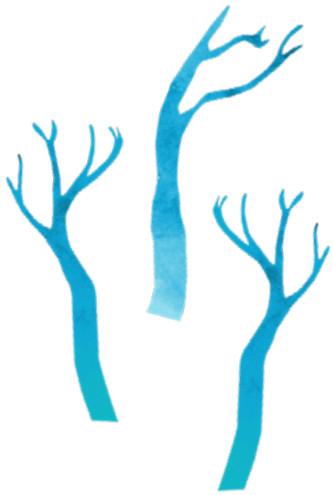
MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER EIGHT

Creating Compelling Characters



'If you're surprising me,
you're engaging me.'

CREATING COMPELLING CHARACTERS

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Characters, like people, are imperfect. They don't need to be likeable, but they must be interesting. Margaret has sometimes been criticised for writing women characters that are imperfect or unlikeable, but she finds the implicit expectation – that women in novels must be perfect – to be gendered and 'Victorian.' For example, *Moby-Dick*'s Captain Ahab was certainly not likeable, but he was compelling, and that is Margaret's bar for writing characters. She has worked to write compelling female characters that can behave badly. For instance, she wrote *The Robber Bride*, a retelling of the Grimms' tale *The Robber Bridegroom*, after someone told her there were no female con artists in fiction.

Whether you meet certain readers' expectations about how your character behaves will depend on what kind of book you're writing, but Margaret wants characters that surprise her and her readers. She connects this to humans' evolutionary history: we don't have to pay attention to things that are stable, but when something unexpected happens – the wolf comes out of the woods – we pay attention. We remain alert.

Learn More

- In light of Margaret's discussion about why she decided to write *The Robber Bride*, read Lorrie Moore's review of the book in the *New York Times* and think about the way gender expectations influenced Moore's review.

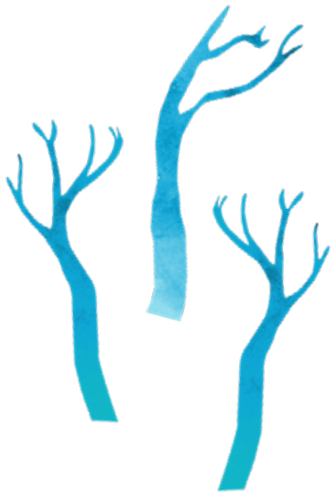
Assignments

- Dig into the deeper layers of your characters' personal histories. What are they most embarrassed by? Where did they go on their first date? (And with whom?) Add questions of your own to Margaret's list of character questions provided in the previous chapter.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER NINE

Writing Through Roadblocks



'You become a writer by writing.
There is no other way.'

WRITING THROUGH ROADBLOCKS

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

As a writer, being able to improvise with your time is really important, since few writers have the luxury of unlimited time or space in which to write. Likely, you are making time in between other work, family, commitments and interruptions. Your ability to fit writing into the spaces between – and to be flexible about what that looks like – is key to building a sustainable writing practise.

Writing fiction is a form of problem-solving. You are writing towards what you don't know, and in this way, working to answer a series of questions your story poses to you. In each book she writes, Margaret still 'paints [herself] into corners,' and then has to work out how to get out of them.

As she was preparing the lectures that comprise her book *On Writers and Writing*, Margaret wanted to arrive at some understanding about why writers, from the ancients to her contemporaries, write, but she received so many varied answers that she decided to change the question to: 'What is it like going into a book?' And to this question, the answers she gathered shared a common thread: going into a book, most agreed, is like going into darkness and bringing some form of light.

Keeping your hand in the writing process, no matter how the work feels like it's going, is really important. Even if the words or pages you generate don't make it into a final draft, they will teach you, and generate the momentum that will help you complete each project and start new ones.

Remember to be kind to yourself. Keyboarding can be bad for your neck and posture, so be sure to take some breaks. Walk around. Ideas may come to you while you are walking that don't come while you're hunched over the computer. Take some time off and be sure to give yourself both physical and mental breaks to recharge. Taking a walk or sleeping on it are two methods of solving a writing problem that work for Margaret.

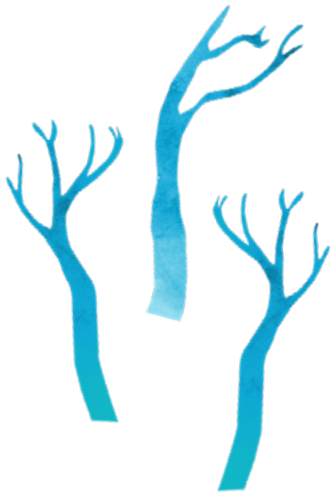
Learn More

- Read *On Writers and Writing*, Margaret's book on writing that contains the meditation on light and darkness she mentions in the chapter. Based on a series of lectures Margaret delivered, the book is an intimate and searching look at the relationship of the writer to her work, to herself and her process, and to the hoped-for reader.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER TEN

Crafting Dialogue



'If you're going to have your characters talking to one another, it should be for some reason, not just to have them chattering away.'

CRAFTING DIALOGUE

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

In real life, speech has lots of padding or 'stuffing': words like *umms* and *yeahs*, but dialogue in fiction must be both more incisive and selective. It is shorn down to reveal what people want from one another, reveal character and dramatise power struggles.

When your characters are speaking, they should be trying to get something from one another, or make a power play, (seduction, Margaret says, is one form of power play). As you draft each scene, ask yourself what your characters are trying to get. What are they trying to avoid? How do these wants inflect their speech and guide what they say – or don't say?

There are often wide gaps between what people say and what they are thinking, between what one understands and what one refuses to hear. These gaps can collectively be referred to as *subtext*, and they are valuable territory for the fiction writer. Stay alert to them, and let them generate drama in the scenes you write.
To get dialogue right, you must understand how your characters speak. This is likely influenced by where they come from, their social class, upbringing and myriad other factors. Speech and tone are always bound up in what has happened and is happening to a character.

Shakespeare was exceptionally deft at encoding his characters' speech with these social markers, and for blending these idioms within a single play. Beyond his poetic prowess, such layered speech allowed his plays to resonate with socially variegated audiences of Elizabethan England.

If you are setting your story in the past, your dialogue should accurately reflect idioms and speech patterns of the period. Words, like clothes, go in and out of style. Conversations need to be specific to the time you're writing in without seeming contrived.

Learn More

- Watch the 'Shakespeare Original Pronunciation' video Margaret recommends. What surprised you most?

- For a deeper investigation of the relationship between dialogue, subtext and plot, read Charles Baxter's craft book, *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot* (2007).

- Margaret considers great dialogue to be dialogue that rings true and is appropriate to the speaker, and is what that person would say in those circumstances, while also furthering either the plot or your knowledge of the characters, or both; while at the same time not being tedious, (if you write down exactly what people say most of the time, it will probably be dull, as it will be full of 'um' and 'ah' and 'you know' and 'like' and so forth. Rambling, repetitious and not very sparky).

- Charles Dickens. While the heroes and heroines tend to be a bit wooden, the lesser (usually rural or Cockney) figures reflect the way people really talked. He was the first after Shakespeare to do this.
- Any of Elmore Leonard's thrillers.
- *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce
- *Chicken* (2018) by Lynn Crosbie
- *Get in Trouble* (2015) by Kelly Link
- *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) by Alice Munro

Assignment

- Go to a public place where people tend to talk to one another – like a cafe, bar or public transport – and spend 10 minutes eavesdropping on a conversation. Record everything they say and how they say it as specifically as you can.

- Later, transcribe this conversation into a word processing document as faithfully as you can. What conclusions can you draw from what you heard? Who has more power? Who wants what? Who was listening more closely? Did someone interrupt the other or ignore them?

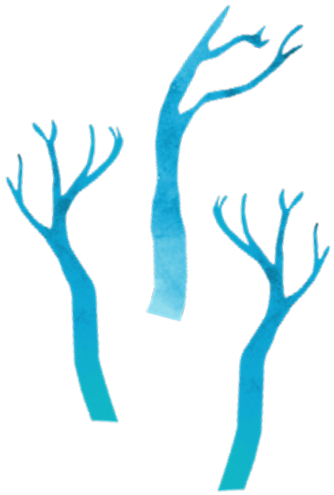
- In a new document, select the part of the conversation that most interested you – whether it was a few lines, or a particularly charged interruption – and use it as the seed of a fictional scene. Here, you are free to cut filler; condense meaning and change the words; and add gesture, silence and subtext to reveal these characters and what they want to the reader.

- After answering these questions, did a story about these strangers begin to form in your imagination? If so, write it!

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Revealing the World Through Sensory Imagery



'We're very fond of labelling and abstracting, but that doesn't work very well in fiction.'

REVEALING THE WORLD THROUGH SENSORY IMAGERY

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Observe the particular qualities of the things around you. The rest of the world deals in abstractions, but for fiction writers, truth is found in the particular, in the telling detail. In fiction, meaning accrues in the layering of sensory texture, so you want to infuse your narrative not just with visual detail, but smell, sound, taste and touch.

One way of honing your sensory perceptions, Margaret says, is to limit one, requiring the others to become more alert. If you close your eyes, what do you hear and smell? If you plug your ears, what other senses do you notice? Does the fabric of a curtain feel different?

Readers will assume that everything on the page is a choice you made, and deliberate – even if you aren't aware of the meanings that accrued while you wrote. This is a wonderful feature of writing fiction, so be open to hearing from your readers about patterns and repeating imagery you didn't even intend.

Learn More

- 'Fiction tries to reproduce the emotional impact of experience,' Janet Burroway writes in her excellent craft book *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (1982), and because fiction trades in the felt experience of its characters, it is most effective when underpinned by sensory details. These sensory details are what convey the reader into the somatic experience of the book, and they must be both vivid and significant. Here is a test Burroway offers that you can apply to each detail you select: it is *concrete* if it appeals to one of the five senses, and it is *significant* if it carries an idea or judgement or reveals something about a character.

- If you find yourself relying on abstraction and judgement to describe your characters, remember that these are the tools of the essayist. One reason a fiction writer deals in significant concrete detail is to permit a reader the pleasure of arriving at her own judgements and conclusions through the perceptual clues you, the writer, have offered.

Assignment

- Conjure a memory from your childhood, one that has stayed with you over the years. Take a few free-form notes about anything you remember. Where did it take place? Who was there? What did it feel like to be you then?

- Now, de-people the scene and describe just the setting using concrete, significant details. Work to include vivid details that rely on every sense: touch, taste, smell, sound and sight.

- For an added challenge, perform the same exercise as above, but this time prohibit yourself from using any visual details. This constraint will focus and sharpen the other sensory images in the memory. If you choose to fold visual imagery back in, the setting will be more richly textured for having invoked all the other, lesser-written senses.

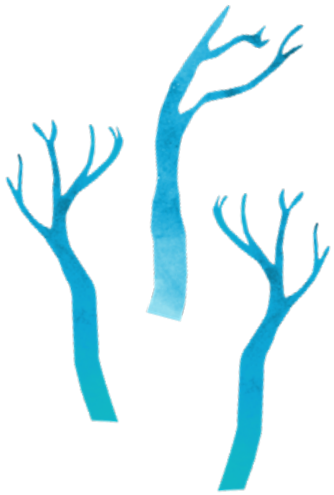
- If you are working on a longer novel or prose project, choose a scene and perform the above exercise, temporarily de-peopling it to focus on building layers of concrete, significant detail.

- What did you notice about the scene or memory when you weren't focusing on what your characters were saying or doing? Did thickening the world this way change your characters' relationship to their environment or to one another?

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER TWELVE

Prose Style and Texture



'A text is a score for a voice.'

PROSE STYLE AND TEXTURE

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SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Honing your prose style depends on what effect you wish to achieve. What tone do you want to set? What feelings or mood do you want to evoke? What kind of language will best deliver the story you want to tell? Reading your work aloud is an excellent way to both hear the sonic effects of your prose and catch awkward repeated sounds or other unintended effects.

Margaret believes most writing falls along a spectrum between two prose styles: 'plainsong,' in which the writing is fairly blunt and straightforward, and 'baroque' writing, which is more ornamented, containing lots of adjectives and adverbs, subordinate clauses and details that pile up. Examples of plainsong writers Margaret mentions are Ernest Hemingway and Jonathan Swift. Examples of writers with a baroque style include Angela Carter and Charles Dickens.

Descriptive detail is different than style. Detail doesn't have to come through adjectives, but can be given through pared down, concrete nouns. Whether you are a more plainsong or baroque writer, always aim to include evocative, meaningful details in your story.

Learn More

- Here are books Margaret recommends that exemplify plainsong prose:

- *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), John Bunyan
- *Collected Stories* (2009), Raymond Carver
- *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Ernest Hemingway
- *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), Alice Munro
- *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Jonathan Swift
  The Collected Stories (1996), Mavis Gallant
- *1984* (1949), George Orwell

- Here are books Margaret recommends that exemplify baroque prose:

- *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Angela Carter
- *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Charles Dickens
- *Moby-Dick* (with Rockwell Kent woodcuts) (1930), Herman Melville
- *The House of Mirth* (1905), Edith Wharton
- *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Virginia Woolf

- Margaret says that style comes down to the sound made by individual words near one another, even the letters within those words. The writer Gary Lutz has thought deeply about the way letters in a sentence function in fiction. Read his essay in *The Believer*, titled 'The Sentence is a Lonely Place.' In it, he offers reasons and recommendations for tuning your prose in every sentence, sometimes down to the letter.

Assignment

Try the exercise Margaret offers in the video lesson.

- Choose a simple event. First describe it in a plainsong way, and then in a baroque way.

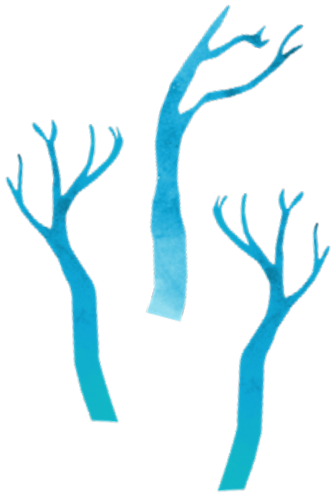
- Try imitating a published writer to see what moves you must make in order to sound like them.

- Rework an existing passage from a story or novel you are working on and focus exclusively on the language. To do this, select two or three paragraphs from an existing manuscript or exercise and, on a new page, rewrite them using at least three of Lutz's recommendations (e.g., ending a sentence with a stressed syllable, or placing the subject at the top of the sentence). Then read the two passages aloud to yourself. How did your style change?

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Working With Time in Fiction



'In a novel, time happens, people change,
the clock hands move.'

WORKING WITH TIME IN FICTION

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Margaret says there are two main ways of viewing time in fiction: circular time and linear time. If things come around to the way they were, that's circular time. Linear time is going from here to there, A to B, but Margaret believes history is circular, subject to the medieval concept of the 'wheel of fortune.'

In your story, it's best to signal to readers how you are moving through time. There are many ways to do this. You can offer a direct time stamp: 'May, 1940.' Or you could offer clues through sensory detail: What kind of clothes are your characters wearing? How do they speak?

Be sure names are distinct, Margaret cautions, so that readers can tell characters apart. And she appreciates maps, especially for historical books that cover a lot of geographic terrain.

Flashbacks help fill in characters' motives and history, but if they are too long or tedious, the reader will get bored. If you use flashbacks, always be aware that time is still moving in the front story, and make sure that your reader can hear the clock in that front story ticking. Tell the reader what they really need to know, and no more than that.

If you are using an omniscient narrative point of view strategy, your narrator may recount a parallel event happening simultaneously in another place using the 'meanwhile' device (e.g., 'Meanwhile, across town…'). Because this device lets the reader in on happenings that one character has no knowledge of, it is a great tool for generating dramatic irony.

If you find your narrative leaping around in time, ask yourself whether the story that you're telling needs to leap. Margaret says there are no universal rules for chronological leaps, but if you sense a leap is a writerly move without cause, err on the side of simplicity, and tell the story in a simpler order.

Learn More

If you're interested in an in-depth exploration of narrative time structures and their effects, read Joan Silber's *The Art of Time in Fiction* (2009). In it, she offers five different modes of shaping narrative time, including 'switchback time' and 'slowed time,' as well as examples from published novels and short stories that illumine each.

Assignment

This exercise allows you to practise narrative time leaps and to explore the consequences of 'long time' (a mode of fictional time that covers a lot of ground – decades or more) on events.

1. Select an event you've written about in a story, exercise or longer work in progress.

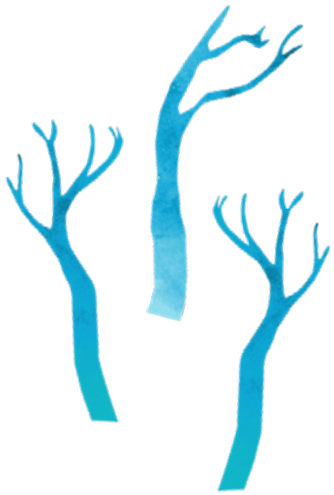
2. Now fast-forward one of the characters involved 30 years into the future and have them recount that event in retrospect.

How did the intervening 30 years alter the event in their mind? How did the event alter their life? What factors changed their perspective over time? Did the fast-forward change your understanding of the event too?

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Door to Your Book: The Importance of the First Five Pages



'What you want on the first page is something that is going to beckon the reader in.'

THE DOOR TO YOUR BOOK: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FIRST FIVE PAGES

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

The first five pages are the doorway into your book. A reader who steps into a bookshop may read the jacket copy, but that first page is your opportunity to pull them in and keep them reading. These first crucial pages should make the reader want to know more, but not overload them with information.

The opening to *Moby-Dick* does all this par excellence. 'Call me Ishmael,' the first sentence, offers an intriguing misdirect (our narrator's name is not Ishmael) and a Biblical intertext to colour the reader's sense of our narrator. Its verb tense – a command in the imperative, delivered in the present tense – generates an immediate and direct relationship with the reader, and offers a kind of promise that the narrator will survive the events that will come to pass.

Your novel's real beginning may not appear right away; in fact, it likely won't since you write your way into the book, learning about characters and events as you go. Margaret encourages drafting to discover – without an outline – the true beginning of her books are often different than the beginning of her first drafts, when she is simply writing to learn more about the people and what happens to them. For example, the published beginning of *The Handmaid's Tale* came to Margaret in a later draft, and she appended it to the beginning. Her original beginning is now part of the second chapter.

Though the true door to your story may take time and several drafts to appear, have patience and work hard: a reader's relationship with your wonderful book hinges on getting them to keep reading!

Learn More

Margaret recommends studying the openings of these classic works:

- *A Christmas Carol*(1843), Charles Dickens
- *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Charles Dickens
- *Moby-Dick* (1930), Herman Melville (with Rockwell Kent woodcuts)
- *Frankenstein* (1823), Mary Shelley

Read the excerpts from each on the pages that follow and think about what makes you want to read on. How does each writer balance the delivery of information and mystery that pulled you further into the book?

Margaret shares an earlier draft of the beginning of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Read the published opening again. What words or images beckon you in? How does Margaret balance information with mystery? What questions does this passage raise for you that the earlier draft didn't?

Assignment

In your notebook, write seven opening lines that might become 'doors' for future stories or novels. Take a few notes about why each would make a good entrance for a reader.

If you're already at work on a novel, do the same exercise as above, but instead write seven new first sentences and paragraphs that might be alternate doors for your existing manuscript. Then test each against Margaret's criteria: Does each create a mystery to pull your reader in? Does it contain significant concrete detail? Does it convey the voice of your narrator? Be open to the possibility that your true opening is yet to be written.

AN EXCERPT FROM

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Charles Dickens

STAVE ONE / MARLEY'S GHOST

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did. How could it be otherwise? Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend, and sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent man of business on the very day of the funeral, and solemnised it with an undoubted bargain.

The mention of Marley's funeral brings me back to the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's Father died before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot—say Saint Paul's Churchyard for instance—literally to astonish his son's weak mind. Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley. The firm was known as Scrooge and Marley. Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but he answered to both names. It was all the same to him.

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

AN EXCERPT FROM

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Charles Dickens

• • •

BOOK THE FIRST — RECALLED TO LIFE

I. THE PERIOD

It was the best of times,
it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom,
it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief,
it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light,
it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope,
it was the winter of despair,

we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way— in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

There were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face, on the throne of England; there were a king with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face, on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes, that things in general were settled for ever.

It was the year of Our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five. Spiritual revelations were conceded to England at that favoured period, as at this. Mrs. Southcott had recently attained her five-and-twentieth blessed birthday, of whom a prophetic private in the Life Guards had heralded the sublime appearance by announcing that arrangements were made for the swallowing up of London and Westminster. Even the Cock-lane ghost had been laid only a round dozen of years, after rapping out its messages, as the spirits of this very year last past (supernaturally deficient in originality) rapped out theirs. Mere messages in the earthly order of events had lately come to the English Crown and People, from a congress of British subjects in America: which, strange to relate, have proved more important to the human race than any communications yet received through any of the chickens of the Cock-lane brood.

France, less favoured on the whole as to matters spiritual than her sister of the shield and trident, rolled with exceeding smoothness down hill, making paper money and spending it. Under the guidance of her Christian pastors, she entertained herself, besides, with such humane achievements as sentencing a youth to have his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not kneeled down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks which passed within his view, at a distance of some fifty or sixty yards. It is likely enough that, rooted in the woods of France and Norway, there were growing trees, when that sufferer was put to death, already marked by the Woodman, Fate, to come down and be sawn into boards, to make a certain moveable framework with a sack and a knife in it, terrible in history. It is likely enough that in the rough outhouses of some tillers of the heavy lands adjacent to Paris, there were sheltered from the weather that very day, rude carts, bespattered with rustic mire, snuffed about by pigs, and roosted in by poultry, which the Farmer, Death, had already set apart to be his tumbrils of the Revolution. But that Woodman and that Farmer, though they work unceasingly, work silently, and no one heard them as they went about with muffled tread: the rather, forasmuch as

to entertain any suspicion that they were awake, was to be atheistical and traitorous.

In England, there was scarcely an amount of order and protection to justify much national boasting. Daring burglaries by armed men, and highway robberies, took place in the capital itself every night; families were publicly cautioned not to go out of town without removing their furniture to upholsterers' warehouses for security; the highwayman in the dark was a City tradesman in the light, and, being recognised and challenged by his fellow-tradesman whom he stopped in his character of 'the Captain,' gallantly shot him through the head and rode away; the mail was waylaid by seven robbers, and the guard shot three dead, and then got shot dead himself by the other four, 'in consequence of the failure of his ammunition:' after which the mail was robbed in peace; that magnificent potentate, the Lord Mayor of London, was made to stand and deliver on Turnham Green, by one highwayman, who despoiled the illustrious creature in sight of all his retinue; prisoners in London gaols fought battles with their turnkeys, and the majesty of the law fired blunderbusses in among them, loaded with rounds of shot and ball; thieves snipped off diamond crosses from the necks of noble lords at Court drawing-rooms; musketeers went into St. Giles's, to search for contraband goods, and the mob fired on the musketeers, and the musketeers fired on the mob, and nobody thought any of these occurrences much out of the common way. In the midst of them, the hangman, ever busy and ever worse than useless, was in constant requisition; now, stringing up long rows of miscellaneous criminals; now, hanging a housebreaker on Saturday who had been taken on Tuesday; now, burning people in the hand at Newgate by the dozen, and now burning pamphlets at the door of Westminster Hall; to-day, taking the life of an atrocious murderer, and to-morrow of a wretched pilferer who had robbed a farmer's boy of sixpence.

All these things, and a thousand like them, came to pass in and close upon the dear old year one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five. Environed by them, while the Woodman and the Farmer worked unheeded, those two of the large jaws, and those other two of the plain and the fair faces, trod with stir enough, and carried their divine rights with a high hand. Thus did the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five conduct their Greatnesses, and myriads of small creatures—the creatures of this chronicle among the rest—along the roads that lay before them.

From *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens.
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AN EXCERPT FROM

MOBY-DICK; OR, THE WHALE

Herman Melville

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CHAPTER 1. LOOMINGS

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.

There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme downtown is the battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there.

Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. Go from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip, and from thence, by Whitehall, northward. What do you see?—Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. Some leaning against the spiles; some seated upon the pier-heads; some looking over the bulwarks of ships from China; some high aloft in the rigging, as if striving to get a still better seaward peep. But these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?

But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land; loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice. No. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand—miles of them—leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues—north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. Tell me, does the magnetic virtue of the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them thither?

Once more. Say you are in the country; in some high land of lakes. Take almost any path you please, and ten to one it carries you down in a dale, and leaves you there by a pool in the stream. There is magic in it. Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries—stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water, if water there be in all that region. Should you ever be a thirst in the great American desert, try this experiment, if your caravan happen to be supplied with a metaphysical professor. Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever.

But here is an artist. He desires to paint you the dreamiest, shadiest, quietest, most enchanting bit of romantic landscape in all the valley of the Saco. What is the chief element he employs? There stand

his trees, each with a hollow trunk, as if a hermit and a crucifix were within; and here sleeps his meadow, and there sleep his cattle; and up from yonder cottage goes a sleepy smoke. Deep into distant woodlands winds a mazy way, reaching to overlapping spurs of mountains bathed in their hill-side blue. But though the picture lies thus tranced, and though this pine-tree shakes down its sighs like leaves upon this shepherd's head, yet all were vain, unless the shepherd's eye were fixed upon the magic stream before him. Go visit the Prairies in June, when for scores on scores of miles you wade knee-deep among Tiger-lilies—what is the one charm wanting?—Water—there is not a drop of water there! Were Niagara but a cataract of sand, would you travel your thousand miles to see it? Why did the poor poet of Tennessee, upon suddenly receiving two handfuls of silver, deliberate whether to buy him a coat, which he sadly needed, or invest his money in a pedestrian trip to Rockaway Beach? Why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea? Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.

Now, when I say that I am in the habit of going to sea whenever I begin to grow hazy about the eyes, and begin to be over conscious of my lungs, I do not mean to have it inferred that I ever go to sea as a passenger. For to go as a passenger you must needs have a purse, and a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it. Besides, passengers get sea-sick—grow quarrelsome—don't sleep of nights—do not enjoy themselves much, as a general thing;—no, I never go as a passenger; nor, though I am something of a salt, do I ever go to sea as a Commodore, or a Captain, or a Cook. I abandon the glory and distinction of such offices to those who like them. For my part, I abominate all honourable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever. It is quite as much as I can do to take care of myself, without taking care of ships, barques, brigs, schooners, and what not. And as for going as cook,—though I confess there is considerable glory in that, a cook being a sort of officer on ship-board—yet, somehow, I never fancied broiling fowls;—though once broiled, judiciously buttered, and judgmatically salted and peppered, there is no one who will speak more respectfully, not to say reverentially, of a grilled fowl than I will. It is out of the idolatrous dotings of the old Egyptians upon grilled ibis and roasted river horse, that you see the mummies of those creatures in their huge bake-houses the pyramids.

No, when I go to sea, I go as a simple sailor, right before the mast, plumb down into the forecastle, aloft there to the royal mast-head. True, they rather order me about some, and make me jump from spar to spar, like a grasshopper in a May meadow. And at first, this sort of thing is unpleasant enough. It touches one's sense of honor, particularly if you come of an old established family in the land, the Van Rensselaers, or Randolphs, or Hardicanutes. And more than all, if just previous to putting your hand into the tar-pot, you have been lording it as a country schoolmaster, making the tallest boys stand in awe of you. The transition is a keen one, I assure you, from a schoolmaster to a sailor, and requires a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable you to grin and bear it. But even this wears off in time.

What of it, if some old hunks of a sea-captain orders me to get a broom and sweep down the decks? What does that indignity amount to, weighed, I mean, in the scales of the New Testament? Do you think the archangel Gabriel thinks anything the less of me, because I promptly and respectfully obey that old hunks in that particular instance? Who ain't a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about—however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other's shoulder-blades, and be content.

Again, I always go to sea as a sailor, because they make a point of paying me for my trouble, whereas they never pay passengers a single penny that I ever heard of. On the contrary, passengers themselves must pay. And there is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid. The act of paying is perhaps the most uncomfortable infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us. But being paid,—what will compare with it? The urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvellous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven. Ah! how cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition!

Finally, I always go to sea as a sailor, because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the fore-castle deck. For as in this world, head winds are far more prevalent than winds from astern (that is, if you never violate the Pythagorean maxim), so for the most part the Commodore on the quarter-deck gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecastle. He thinks he breathes it first; but not so. In much the same way do the commonalty lead their leaders in many other things, at the same time that the leaders little suspect it. But wherefore it was that after having repeatedly smelt the sea as a merchant sailor, I should now take it into my head to go on a whaling voyage; this the invisible police officer of the Fates, who has the constant surveillance of me, and secretly dogs me, and influences me in some unaccountable way—he can better answer than any one else. And, doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago. It came in as a sort of brief interlude and solo between more extensive performances. I take it that this part of the bill must have run something like this:

'Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States.' 'WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL.' 'BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN.'

Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces—though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment.

Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity. Then the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale; these, with all the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds, helped to sway me to my wish. With other men, perhaps, such things would not have been inducements; but as for me, I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts. Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it—would they let me—since it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in.

By reason of these things, then, the whaling voyage was welcome; the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air.

From *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* by Herman Melville.
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AN EXCERPT FROM

FRANKENSTEIN

Mary Shelley

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LETTER ONE

To Mrs. Saville, England.
St. Petersburgh, Dec. 11th, 17—.

You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings. I arrived here yesterday, and my first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare and increasing confidence in the success of my undertaking.

I am already far north of London, and as I walk in the streets of Petersburgh, I feel a cold northern breeze play upon my cheeks, which braces my nerves and fills me with delight. Do you understand this feeling? This breeze, which has travelled from the regions towards which I am advancing, gives me a foretaste of those icy climes. Inspirited by this wind of promise, my daydreams become more fervent and vivid. I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. There, Margaret, the sun is for ever visible, its broad disk just skirting the horizon and diffusing a perpetual splendour. There—for with your leave, my sister, I will put some trust in preceding navigators—there snow and frost are banished; and, sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe. Its productions and features may be without example, as the phenomena of the heavenly bodies undoubtedly are in those undiscovered solitudes. What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? I may there discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle and may regulate a thousand celestial observations that require only this voyage to render their seeming eccentricities consistent for ever. I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man. These are my enticements, and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death and to induce me to commence this laborious voyage with the joy a child feels when he embarks in a little boat, with his holiday mates, on an expedition of discovery up his native river. But supposing all these conjectures to be false, you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind, to the last generation, by discovering a passage near the pole to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite; or by ascertaining the secret of the magnet, which, if at all possible, can only be effected by an undertaking such as mine.

These reflections have dispelled the agitation with which I began my letter, and I feel my heart glow with an enthusiasm which elevates me to heaven, for nothing contributes so much to tranquillise the mind as a steady purpose—a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye. This expedition has been the favourite dream of my early years. I have read with ardour the accounts of the various voyages which have been made in the prospect of arriving at the North Pacific Ocean through the seas which surround the pole. You may remember that a history of all the voyages made for purposes of discovery composed the whole of our good Uncle Thomas' library. My education was neglected, yet I was passionately fond of reading. These volumes were my study day and night, and my familiarity with them increased that regret which I had felt, as a child, on learning that my father's dying injunction had forbidden my uncle to allow me to embark in a seafaring life.

These visions faded when I perused, for the first time, those poets whose effusions entranced my soul and lifted it to heaven. I also became a poet and for

one year lived in a paradise of my own creation; I imagined that I also might obtain a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated. You are well acquainted with my failure and how heavily I bore the disappointment. But just at that time I inherited the fortune of my cousin, and my thoughts were turned into the channel of their earlier bent.

Six years have passed since I resolved on my present undertaking. I can, even now, remember the hour from which I dedicated myself to this great enterprise. I commenced by inuring my body to hardship. I accompanied the whale-fishers on several expeditions to the North Sea; I voluntarily endured cold, famine, thirst, and want of sleep; I often worked harder than the common sailors during the day and devoted my nights to the study of mathematics, the theory of medicine, and those branches of physical science from which a naval adventurer might derive the greatest practical advantage. Twice I actually hired myself as an under-mate in a Greenland whaler, and acquitted myself to admiration. I must own I felt a little proud when my captain offered me the second dignity in the vessel and entreated me to remain with the greatest earnestness, so valuable did he consider my services.

And now, dear Margaret, do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose? My life might have been passed in ease and luxury, but I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path. Oh, that some encouraging voice would answer in the affirmative! My courage and my resolution is firm; but my hopes fluctuate, and my spirits are often depressed. I am about to proceed on a long and difficult voyage, the emergencies of which will demand all my fortitude: I am required not only to raise the spirits of others, but sometimes to sustain my own, when theirs are failing.

This is the most favourable period for travelling in Russia. They fly quickly over the snow in their sledges; the motion is pleasant, and, in my opinion, far more agreeable than that of an English stagecoach. The cold is not excessive, if you are wrapped in furs—a dress which I have already adopted, for there is a great difference between walking the deck and remaining seated motionless for hours, when no exercise prevents the blood from actually freezing in your veins. I have no ambition to lose my life on the post-road between St. Petersburgh and Archangel.
I shall depart for the latter town in a fortnight or three weeks; and my intention is to hire a ship there, which can easily be done by paying the insurance for the owner, and to engage as many sailors as I think necessary among those who are accustomed to the whale-fishing. I do not intend to sail until the month of June; and when shall I return? Ah, dear sister, how can I answer this question? If I succeed, many, many months, perhaps years, will pass before you and I may meet. If I fail, you will see me again soon, or never.

Farewell, my dear, excellent Margaret. Heaven shower down blessings on you, and save me, that I may again and again testify my gratitude for all your love and kindness.

Your affectionate brother,
R. Walton

LETTER 2

To Mrs. Saville, England.
Archangel, 28th March, 17—.

How slowly the time passes here, encompassed as I am by frost and snow! Yet a second step is taken towards my enterprise. I have hired a vessel and am occupied in collecting my sailors; those whom I have already engaged appear to be men on whom I can depend and are certainly possessed of dauntless courage.

But I have one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy, and the absence of the object of which I now feel as a most severe evil, I have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate my joy; if I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection. I shall commit my thoughts to paper, it is true; but that is a poor medium for the communication of feeling. I desire the company of a man who could sympathise with me, whose eyes would reply to mine. You may deem me romantic, my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend. I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own,

to approve or amend my plans. How would such a friend repair the faults of your poor brother! I am too ardent in execution and too impatient of difficulties. But it is a still greater evil to me that I am self-educated: for the first fourteen years of my life I ran wild on a common and read nothing but our Uncle Thomas' books of voyages. At that age I became acquainted with the celebrated poets of our own country; but it was only when it had ceased to be in my power to derive its most important benefits from such a conviction that I perceived the necessity of becoming acquainted with more languages than that of my native country. Now I am twenty-eight and am in reality more illiterate than many schoolboys of fifteen. It is true that I have thought more and that my daydreams are more extended and magnificent, but they want (as the painters call it) keeping;and I greatly need a friend who would have sense enough not to despise me as romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind.

Well, these are useless complaints; I shall certainly find no friend on the wide ocean, nor even here in Archangel, among merchants and seamen. Yet some feelings, unallied to the dross of human nature, beat even in these rugged bosoms. My lieutenant, for instance, is a man of wonderful courage and enterprise; he is madly desirous of glory, or rather, to word my phrase more characteristically, of advancement in his profession. He is an Englishman, and in the midst of national and professional prejudices, unsoftened by cultivation, retains some of the noblest endowments of humanity. I first became acquainted with him on board a whale vessel; finding that he was unemployed in this city, I easily engaged him to assist in my enterprise.

The master is a person of an excellent disposition and is remarkable in the ship for his gentleness and the mildness of his discipline. This circumstance, added to his well-known integrity and dauntless courage, made me very desirous to engage him. A youth passed in solitude, my best years spent under your gentle and feminine fosterage, has so refined the groundwork of my character that I cannot overcome an intense distaste to the usual brutality exercised on board ship: I have never believed it to be necessary, and when I heard of a mariner equally noted for his kindliness of heart and the respect and obedience paid to him by his crew, I felt myself peculiarly fortunate in being able to secure his services. I heard of him first in rather a romantic manner, from a lady who owes to him the happiness of her life. This, briefly, is his story. Some years ago he loved a young Russian lady of moderate fortune, and having amassed a considerable sum in prize-money, the father of the girl consented to the match. He saw his mistress once before the destined ceremony; but she was bathed in tears, and throwing herself at his feet, entreated him to spare her, confessing at the same time that she loved another, but that he was poor, and that her father would never consent to the union. My generous friend reassured the suppliant, and on being informed of the name of her lover, instantly abandoned his pursuit. He had already bought a farm with his money, on which he had designed to pass the remainder of his life; but he bestowed the whole on his rival, together with the remains of his prize-money to purchase stock, and then himself solicited the young woman's father to consent to her marriage with her lover. But the old man decidedly refused, thinking himself bound in honour to my friend, who, when he found the father inexorable, quitted his country, nor returned until he heard that his former mistress was married according to her inclinations. 'What a noble fellow!' you will exclaim. He is so; but then he is wholly uneducated: he is as silent as a Turk, and a kind of ignorant carelessness attends him, which, while it renders his conduct the more astonishing, detracts from the interest and sympathy which otherwise he would command.

Yet do not suppose, because I complain a little or because I can conceive a consolation for my toils which I may never know, that I am wavering in my resolutions. Those are as fixed as fate, and my voyage is only now delayed until the weather shall permit my embarkation. The winter has been dreadfully severe, but the spring promises well, and it is considered as a remarkably early season, so that perhaps I may sail sooner than I expected. I shall do nothing rashly: you know me sufficiently to confide in my prudence and considerateness whenever the safety of others is committed to my care.
I cannot describe to you my sensations on the near

prospect of my undertaking. It is impossible to communicate to you a conception of the trembling sensation, half pleasurable and half fearful, with which I am preparing to depart. I am going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow,' but I shall kill no albatross; therefore do not be alarmed for my safety or if I should come back to you as worn and woeful as the 'Ancient Mariner.' You will smile at my allusion, but I will disclose a secret. I have often attributed my attachment to, my passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of ocean to that production of the most imaginative of modern poets. There is something at work in my soul which I do not understand. I am practically industrious—painstaking, a workman to execute with perseverance and labour—but besides this there is a love for the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous, intertwined in all my projects, which hurries me out of the common pathways of men, even to the wild sea and unvisited regions I am about to explore.
But to return to dearer considerations. Shall I meet you again, after having traversed immense seas, and returned by the most southern cape of Africa or America? I dare not expect such success, yet I cannot bear to look on the reverse of the picture. Continue for the present to write to me by every opportunity: I may receive your letters on some occasions when I need them most to support my spirits. I love you very tenderly. Remember me with affection, should you never hear from me again.

Your affectionate brother,
Robert Walton

LETTER 3

To Mrs. Saville, England.
July 7th, 17—.

My dear Sister,
I write a few lines in haste to say that I am safe—and well advanced on my voyage. This letter will reach England by a merchantman now on its homeward voyage from Archangel; more fortunate than I, who may not see my native land, perhaps, for many years. I am, however, in good spirits: my men are bold and apparently firm of purpose, nor do the floating sheets of ice that continually pass us, indicating the dangers of the region towards which we are advancing, appear to dismay them. We have already reached a very high latitude; but it is the height of summer, and although not so warm as in England, the southern gales, which blow us speedily towards those shores which I so ardently desire to attain, breathe a degree of renovating warmth which I had not expected.

No incidents have hitherto befallen us that would make a figure in a letter. One or two stiff gales and the springing of a leak are accidents which experienced navigators scarcely remember to record, and I shall be well content if nothing worse happen to us during our voyage.

Adieu, my dear Margaret. Be assured that for my own sake, as well as yours, I will not rashly encounter danger. I will be cool, persevering, and prudent.

But success shall crown my endeavours. Wherefore not? Thus far I have gone, tracing a secure way over the pathless seas, the very stars themselves being witnesses and testimonies of my triumph. Why not still proceed over the untamed yet obedient element? What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?

My swelling heart involuntarily pours itself out thus. But I must finish. Heaven bless my beloved sister!

R.W.

LETTER 4

To Mrs. Saville, England.
August 5th, 17—.

So strange an accident has happened to us that I cannot forbear recording it, although it is very probable that you will see me before these papers can come into your possession.

Last Monday (July 31st) we were nearly surrounded by ice, which closed in the ship on all sides, scarcely leaving her the sea-room in which she floated. Our situation was somewhat dangerous, especially as we were compassed round by a very thick fog. We accordingly lay to, hoping that some change would take place in the atmosphere and weather.
About two o'clock the mist cleared away, and we beheld, stretched out in every direction, vast and

irregular plains of ice, which seemed to have no end. Some of my comrades groaned, and my own mind began to grow watchful with anxious thoughts, when a strange sight suddenly attracted our attention and diverted our solicitude from our own situation. We perceived a low carriage, fixed on a sledge and drawn by dogs, pass on towards the north, at the distance of half a mile; a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature, sat in the sledge and guided the dogs. We watched the rapid progress of the traveller with our telescopes until he was lost among the distant inequalities of the ice.

This appearance excited our unqualified wonder. We were, as we believed, many hundred miles from any land; but this apparition seemed to denote that it was not, in reality, so distant as we had supposed. Shut in, however, by ice, it was impossible to follow his track, which we had observed with the greatest attention.

About two hours after this occurrence we heard the ground sea, and before night the ice broke and freed our ship. We, however, lay to until the morning, fearing to encounter in the dark those large loose masses which float about after the breaking up of the ice. I profited of this time to rest for a few hours.

In the morning, however, as soon as it was light, I went upon deck and found all the sailors busy on one side of the vessel, apparently talking to someone in the sea. It was, in fact, a sledge, like that we had seen before, which had drifted towards us in the night on a large fragment of ice. Only one dog remained alive; but there was a human being within it whom the sailors were persuading to enter the vessel. He was not, as the other traveller seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but a European. When I appeared on deck the master said, 'Here is our captain, and he will not allow you to perish on the open sea.'

On perceiving me, the stranger addressed me in English, although with a foreign accent. 'Before I come on board your vessel,' said he, 'will you have the kindness to inform me whither you are bound?' You may conceive my astonishment on hearing such a question addressed to me from a man on the brink of destruction and to whom I should have supposed that my vessel would have been a resource which he would not have exchanged for the most precious wealth the earth can afford. I replied, however, that we were on a voyage of discovery towards the northern pole.

Upon hearing this he appeared satisfied and consented to come on board. Good God! Margaret, if you had seen the man who thus capitulated for his safety, your surprise would have been boundless. His limbs were nearly frozen, and his body dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering. I never saw a man in so wretched a condition. We attempted to carry him into the cabin, but as soon as he had quitted the fresh air he fainted. We accordingly brought him back to the deck and restored him to animation by rubbing him with brandy and forcing him to swallow a small quantity. As soon as he showed signs of life we wrapped him up in blankets and placed him near the chimney of the kitchen stove. By slow degrees he recovered and ate a little soup, which restored him wonderfully.

Two days passed in this manner before he was able to speak, and I often feared that his sufferings had deprived him of understanding. When he had in some measure recovered, I removed him to my own cabin and attended on him as much as my duty would permit. I never saw a more interesting creature: his eyes have generally an expression of wildness, and even madness, but there are moments when, if anyone performs an act of kindness towards him or does him any the most trifling service, his whole countenance is lighted up, as it were, with a beam of benevolence and sweetness that I never saw equalled. But he is generally melancholy and despairing, and sometimes he gnashes his teeth, as if impatient of the weight of woes that oppresses him.

When my guest was a little recovered I had great trouble to keep off the men, who wished to ask him a thousand questions; but I would not allow him to be tormented by their idle curiosity, in a state of body and mind whose restoration evidently depended upon entire repose. Once, however, the lieutenant asked why he had come so far upon the ice in so strange a vehicle.

His countenance instantly assumed an aspect of the deepest gloom, and he replied, 'To seek one who fled from me.'

'And did the man whom you pursued travel in the same fashion?'

'Yes.'

'Then I fancy we have seen him, for the day before we picked you up we saw some dogs drawing a sledge, with a man in it, across the ice.'

This aroused the stranger's attention, and he asked a multitude of questions concerning the route which the dæmon, as he called him, had pursued. Soon after, when he was alone with me, he said, 'I have, doubtless, excited your curiosity, as well as that of these good people; but you are too considerate to make inquiries.'

'Certainly; it would indeed be very impertinent and inhuman in me to trouble you with any inquisitiveness of mine.'

'And yet you rescued me from a strange and perilous situation; you have benevolently restored me to life.'

Soon after this he enquired if I thought that the breaking up of the ice had destroyed the other sledge. I replied that I could not answer with any degree of certainty, for the ice had not broken until near midnight, and the traveller might have arrived at a place of safety before that time; but of this I could not judge.

From this time a new spirit of life animated the decaying frame of the stranger. He manifested the greatest eagerness to be upon deck to watch for the sledge which had before appeared; but I have persuaded him to remain in the cabin, for he is far too weak to sustain the rawness of the atmosphere. I have promised that someone should watch for him and give him instant notice if any new object should appear in sight.

Such is my journal of what relates to this strange occurrence up to the present day. The stranger has gradually improved in health but is very silent and appears uneasy when anyone except myself enters his cabin. Yet his manners are so conciliating and gentle that the sailors are all interested in him, although they have had very little communication with him.

For my own part, I begin to love him as a brother, and his constant and deep grief fills me with sympathy and compassion. He must have been a noble creature in his better days, being even now in wreck so attractive and amiable.

I said in one of my letters, my dear Margaret, that I should find no friend on the wide ocean; yet I have found a man who, before his spirit had been broken by misery, I should have been happy to have possessed as the brother of my heart.

I shall continue my journal concerning the stranger at intervals, should I have any fresh incidents to record.

From *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley.
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AN EXCERPT FROM

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Margaret Atwood

• • •

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then trousers, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back, or out back, in the car park, or in the television room with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over lifting flesh.

We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air; and it was still in the air, an afterthought, as we tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had flannelette sheets, like children's, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S. We folded our clothes neatly and laid them on the stools at the ends of the beds. The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts.

No guns though, even they could not be trusted with guns. Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren't allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren't allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy.

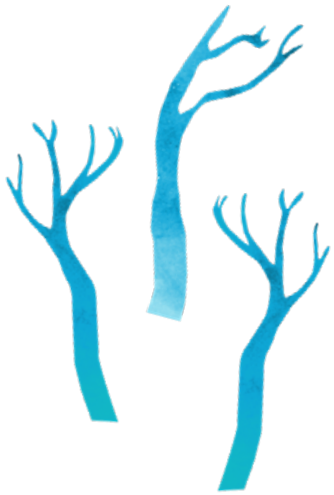
We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semidarkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lipread, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:

Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Writing the Middle and Ending



'There's no shame in backtracking,
there's no shame in revision.'

WRITING THE MIDDLE AND ENDING

• • •

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

The middle of a book is the most difficult part for Margaret. Once you have the beginning and a sense of your ending, the question becomes: How will you get the reader through the middle?

Inserting small cliffhangers along the way is one tactic to keep the reader engaged. This was the technique Scheherazade used: *something is about to happen*. You should always be working to make the reader wonder: What will happen to these people?

Margaret stands behind the old maxim that writing is one part inspiration, nine parts perspiration. In the process of writing, you'll likely come to a moment when something you thought about your character isn't true, and you learn something new about them that requires you to go back and account for that.

The first ending you write may not be your true ending. That's normal, and if this happens to you, Margaret encourages you not to worry too much about it. Just finish the book; your trusted reader or editor will suggest changing the ending or adding to the middle.

In life, there is no tidy 'the end,' but every book does have an arbitrary ending, a call for a kind of closure or open-endedness. If you're a writer interested in writing a book that finds a public readership, you're always contending with readers' expectations, and deciding at each turn how much your book will fulfil or frustrate those expectations.

Margaret shares the example of the ending of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Though she has had some complaints over the years, she believes that the open-endedness of June's disappearance is true to history and how someone in her position would be able to disappear from official record, if she wanted.

Learn More

- Revisit the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, reproduced on the following pages. Why is this open ending a fitting authorial choice for this novel? If the book doesn't offer a guarantee of what happens to June, what does it offer instead? That is, how does this ending satisfy a reader's desire for both closure and a sense that life continues beyond the last page?

Assignment

- Think about the books, films and TV shows with endings that were especially memorable or moving to you. What about them struck you? Were they twist endings? Did they leave you wondering for weeks? Did they offer resolution (a 'closed' ending) or raise new questions (an 'open' ending)? Did they feel surprising, or inevitable, or both? What can you learn from them and apply to your own work?

AN EXCERPT FROM

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Margaret Atwood

• • •

One in front, one behind, they escort me down the stairs. The pace is leisurely, the lights are on. Despite the fear, how ordinary it is. From here I can see the clock. It's no time in particular.

Nick is no longer with us. He may have gone down the back stairs, not wishing to be seen.

Serena Joy stands in the hallway, under the mirror, looking up, incredulous. The Commander is behind her, the sitting room door is open. His hair is very grey. He looks worried and helpless, but already withdrawing from me, distancing himself. Whatever else I am to him, I am also at this point a disaster. No doubt they've been having a fight, about me; no doubt she's been giving him hell. I still have it in me to feel sorry for him. Moira is right, I am a wimp.

'What has she done?' says Serena Joy. She wasn't the one who called them, then. Whatever she had in store for me, it was more private.

'We can't say, ma'am,' says the one in front of me. 'Sorry.'

'I need to see your authorization,' says the Commander. 'You have a warrant?'

I could scream now, cling to the banister, relinquish dignity. I could stop them, at least for a moment. If they're real they'll stay, if not they'll run away. Leaving me here.

'Not that we need one, sir, but all is in order,' says the first one again. 'Violation of state secrets.'

The Commander puts his hand to his head. What have I been saying, and to whom, and which one of his enemies has found out? Possibly he will be a security risk, now. I am above him, looking down; he is shrinking. There have already been purges among them, there will be more. Serena Joy goes white.

'Bitch,' she says. 'After all he did for you.'

Cora and Rita press through from the kitchen. Cora has begun to cry. I was her hope, I've failed her. Now she will always be childless.

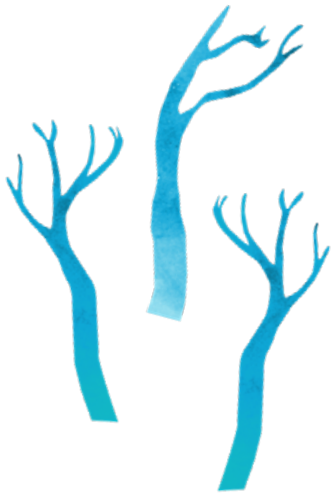
The van waits in the driveway, its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.

And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Revision: Seeing Your Work Anew



'There's only one real question:
Is it alive or is it dead? Anything else can be fixed.'

REVISION: SEEING YOUR WORK ANEW

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Some people have what Margaret calls 'completion fear': a fear of finishing a project and discovering it's not very good. If you have this fear, just work to finish your manuscript; you have nearly endless opportunities to revise. Once you've completed a draft, you have to read it from the perspective of the reader. Does the first page hold your attention?

Once you feel there's nothing else you can do with your manuscript, it is time to hand it to a trusted outside reader. Don't choose a spouse or someone with gatekeeping power in the publishing industry, Margaret warns; there are too many other power issues in such relationships. It may even be best to find a non-writer. The best question you can ask your trusted reader is, 'How quickly did you read it?' If they read it quickly, you're likely in a great position. If possible, try to find more than one dedicated reader so that you look for consensus or common threads in their responses.

As you enter the line editing phase, read your manuscript aloud. Your ear will catch awkward patches and infelicities that your eye often won't.

The final stages are about texture and detail, and so it's imperative to go slowly with a fine-tooth comb. Margaret suggests using a ruler to go down a printed copy of your story. This way you can read each line slowly and in isolation, looking for errors. Avail yourself, too, of your word processor's Find and Replace function, which can be useful to search for a word you may have used too frequently, or to verify where and how many times a character's name appears.

Margaret shares the page proofs from *Oryx and Crake*, which she reviewed simultaneously with a line editor. This editor is focused on details, continuity and catching any anachronisms; for instance, she counted the number of energy bars Jimmy Snowman had and told Margaret she had one less than he ate in the course of the quest. If you don't catch these small details in the line editing phase, a reader will notice!

Learn More

- Read 'Holy Writ' by *New Yorker* copy editor Mary Norris to get a behind-the-scenes look at how a proofreader works.

Assignment

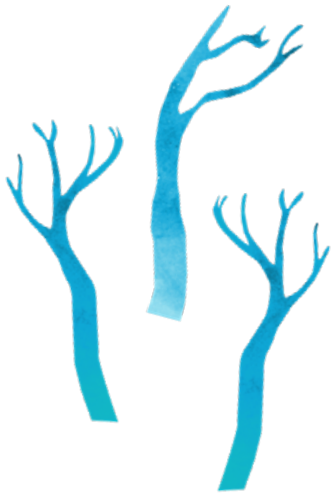
- If you don't already have a dedicated reader, think of someone who you believe would be a trusted and thoughtful reader. Approach them about reading your work, and if they agree, share some pages when you are ready.

- Be sure you indicate to your trusted reader what kind of reading would be most helpful to you at this point in your process; earlier on, you'll want to hear what they were most compelled by or confused by and bigger picture notes; a line edit of the kind Margaret describes will be most helpful at a later stage, once you are nearly ready to send your book out to agents or contests.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Novel and the Shifting Sands of Genre



'The main rule is: Hold my attention.'

THE NOVEL AND THE SHIFTING SANDS OF GENRE

SUBCHAPTERS

Forget Genre, Make Me Believe It

Chapter Review

The novel is a nimble form with a long history. It's highly malleable, and though some critics have fretted about the death of the form, it continues to be reinvented and reinvigorated by writers all the time.

Genre is a concept created by publishers and literary critics, but it's not always a valuable one for the working writer. In fact, Margaret says not knowing or thinking about what genre your book belongs to can be valuable, because it offers you greater freedom to stray from genre expectations, and to play with form and subject.

Your job is to make your book the best, most compelling version of itself, plausible within its own imagined realm and set of rules. Let others worry about what genre it is (or isn't).

Learn More

- Read the *New Yorker* article 'Keeping It Real.' In it, critic James Wood discusses the history of the realist novel, what Margaret calls a 'shape-changer' of a form.
- For those who want a deeper dive into the evolution of the realist novel, Wood's *How Fiction Works* (2008) is a wonderful primer. Wood offers examples of writing techniques from classic novels and a justification of why they became part of the Western novel's DNA.
- Many consider Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary (1857)* to mark the start of the realist novel tradition as it's still practised today. Now that you've read Wood's argument about Flaubert's influence on this strain of the modern novel, read (or re-read) *Madame Bovary* (opt for the Lydia Davis translation, Penguin, 2010). Make note of any craft moves that seem contemporary, and remember that Flaubert was breaking wildly from convention.
- Margaret believes that the only real distinction among books is whether they are good or not good. She recommends that you read Ursula K. Le Guin, who is a prime example of a writer of good books that are not realistic fiction.

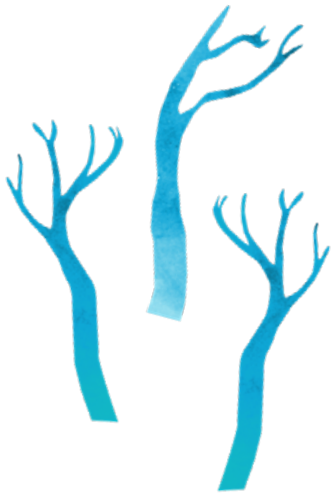
Assignment

- Spend a few minutes writing a list of novels you love or hold close, and another list of ones you grew impatient with. Are there certain tropes or moves in either list that strike you as predictable? What moves might your own novel make to refresh or update the form?
- Take some notes, then test-drive one of these formal innovations in a new document. You may be responsible for the novel's next shape-shifting!

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Speculative Fiction



'If you're interested in writing speculative fiction or even science fiction, look around you at what's happening in the world. Read some newspapers.'

SPECULATIVE FICTION

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Science fiction, sci-fi fantasy and speculative fiction all fall under the umbrella of what Margaret calls 'wonder tales' – they are all 'what-if books.' Speculative fiction, as she defines it, deals with possibilities in a society which have not yet been enacted but are latent.

If you're interested in writing speculative fiction, one way to generate a plot is to take an idea from current society and move it a little further down the road. Even if humans are short-term thinkers, fiction can anticipate and extrapolate into multiple versions of the future.

Margaret cautions that speculative fiction is just like all other fiction: it is not automatically interesting, but rather must be made compelling, plausible and accurate within its own set of rules. She uses Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as an example: once your book has established a rule that this race of horses is virtuous, you can't write an evil horse character without breaking the illusion of a believable and compelling world.

Utopias describe a world better than the one we live in, while dystopias describe a world that's worse than the one we live in, but this can be complex fictional terrain because one person's utopia is another person's dystopia, and each dystopia may contain a smaller utopia, and vice versa.

Margaret describes the race of humanoids Jimmy encounters in *Oryx and Crake*, and some of her interests in shaping that society. She believes that any technology or fantastical element in speculative fiction ought to have roots in what our current species can already do, or is on the road to being able to do.

Learn More

To get a sense of the range of what speculative fiction can do, Margaret recommends reading these novels and novellas:

- *R.U.R.* (1921), Karel Capek
- *Brave New World* (1932), Aldous Huxley
- *War of The Worlds* (1897), H.G. Wells
- *Time Traveller* (1895), H.G. Wells
- *Donovan's Brain* (1942), Curt Siodmak
- *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Jonathan Swift
- *1984* (1949), George Orwell
- *We* (1924), Yevgeny Zamyatin

Assignment

- Begin a list of three societal issues that you're interested in writing about or incorporating into your own fiction. Be as specific as possible: What news story or recent discovery would you like to play out on the canvas of an alternate fictional plane? These need not be global or even heavy in scope; just turning the dial on reality a few notches can raise or change the stakes of your story.

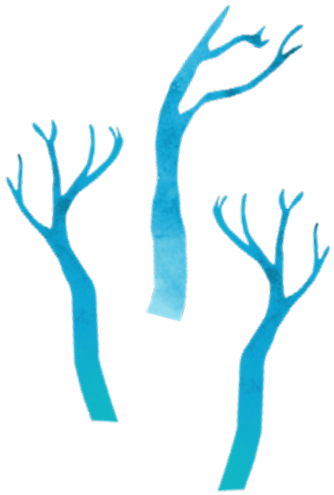
- Next, choose one item from the list and brainstorm a group of characters for whom that issue or event will particularly matter. Not every character will be directly involved with the event you've chosen; in fact, people with an oblique angle to a societal event are often more interesting subjects for fictional exploration. Whichever character you choose though, remember that each of them should feel the reverberations of the event and have to negotiate with its exigencies and consequences.

  Whether or not you've written speculative fiction before, or have a prior interest in the genre, this exercise can help your fiction by strengthening your cause-and-effect muscles. By thinking through the what-ifs that drive speculative fiction and generating characters on whom these events will impinge, you will practise the crucial fictional skill of pressurising your story by shaping events that will cause your characters to act and reveal themselves.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Speculative Fiction Case Study: *The Handmaid's Tale*



'I thought it would be interesting to take one of those dystopic societies and flip it, and see what that felt like from the point of view of a woman.'

SPECULATIVE FICTION CASE STUDY: *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

In Gilead, the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, certain women who have the now-rare ability to have children are deemed 'handmaids,' and are allocated to upper-class families as reproductive slaves.

Margaret got the idea for the book from a conversation she had with a friend in the early 1980s when, in reaction to the advances of feminism during the previous two decades, a strain of cultural conversation worried over how to get women 'back into the home.' Margaret wondered what it would take to do that; what kind of regime might enact such a reversion?

To write *The Handmaid's Tale,* Margaret drew from various bodies of knowledge. The theocratic practises of the Puritans who settled in New England in the 17th century offered Margaret one answer, and having been born in 1939, Margaret says she has maintained a lifelong interest in the what-ifs around fascism and alternate outcomes of World War II.

In writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret made one rule for herself: nothing went in the book that had not happened in real life somewhere at some time. Because of this rule, she conducted assiduous background research on certain religions, Puritan social order, totalitarianism and reproductive freedom. Doing so ensured that all of the societal constraints and oppressions depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* had their origin in history and buttressed the book against criticism that 'that could never happen.' In other words, Margaret used research to ensure people took the plight of her characters seriously.

It may seem paradoxical, but if you are working in either a realist or speculative mode, research will strengthen your project, no matter how far you end up straying from the historical facts, and, depending on your subject, you may wish to create rules for yourself about the world of your book, as Margaret did – such rules may add weight to the material, or change the stakes for your characters or readers.

When creating the totalitarian world of Gilead, Margaret drew on historical references to develop a strong visual language. Her idea for the costumes in Gilead came from the ominous figure on the ad for Old Dutch Cleanser, a bonneted woman whose face cannot be seen. The Eye was inspired by the great seal on American money, which is a Masonic eye.

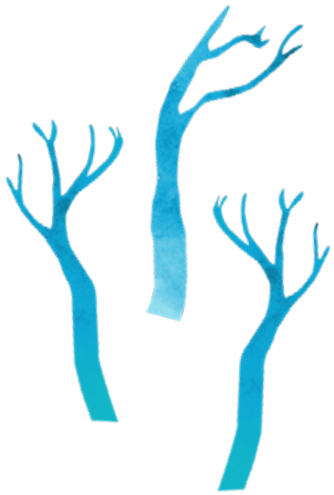
Learn More

- Watch the conversation recorded at the New Yorker Festival in which Margaret Atwood, George Saunders and Jennifer Egan discuss dystopias and speculative fiction.

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER TWENTY

Research and Historical Accuracy



'Leave no stone unturned.'

RESEARCH AND HISTORICAL ACCURACY

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

In her first drafts, Margaret doesn't conduct research but rather goes with the best memory she has. Once she has a draft, she begins research. She uses this method because she believes that conducting research too early in the drafting process can 'clog things up,' sometimes sidetracking or slowing down the plot. You want your details to be accurate and convincing, but you don't want them to *feel* like research to your reader.

Regardless of where in the process it happens, research is critical to keeping your reader immersed in and believing the world you've created. Getting the details wrong can throw off a reader's belief in your story (and they may even write to you, as Margaret warns). Go back and double-check every detail – even ones you're sure you have right. Old diaries, letters, magazines, newspapers and mail order catalogues are all good sources for historical research.

Though diaries are good resources, Margaret points out an interesting paradox: what you most want to learn may not be there, since diarists don't write down the most ordinary things that everyone knows and takes for granted.

When writing about a historical event – such as the double murder in *Alias Grace* – consider the reliability and bias of the sources at your disposal. Seek multiple perspectives to gain a holistic picture of what really happened. Newspaper reports, judges notes, diaries, letters, petitions – Margaret drew from all of these sources (with the help of a qualified researcher) to inform her novel.

Learn More

- If you're conducting historical research for a project involving the United States, the Library of Congress is a wonderful starting place. Learn more about its research centres and how to access its collections online.

- Check out Arizona State University's dedicated research portal for historical fiction.

- You may also want to check out *The Book of Costume* (1948) by Millia Davenport, which Margaret relied on for her clothing research while writing *Alias Grace*.

Assignment

- If you're interested in writing historical fiction, spend 15 minutes writing in your notebook about a period or historical event you're interested in rendering in fiction. Note any assumptions you have about the period, other cultural depictions of it (e.g., books and film), and what specifically interests you about this moment in history.

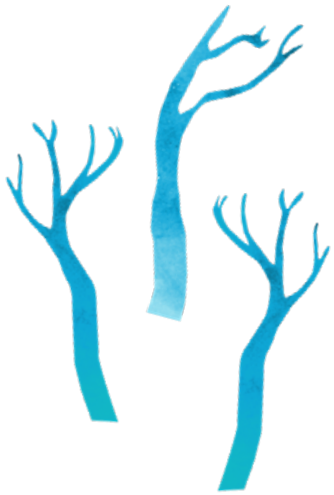
- For those who already have a work of historical fiction in progress, write an inventory of the details in your work that you haven't researched but should check. Likely, these will be small things – the colour of refrigerators, for example – the accuracy of which will confer verisimilitude and credibility on your story.

- Taking Margaret's challenge to heart, spend 15 minutes describing in your notebook an object that everyone takes for granted. Pretend you are writing to a future reader who has never encountered this object, animal or machine before. What's the most specific thing you can say about that object? What's something you never noticed about it until you described it to someone who has never seen one?

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Writer's Path



'There are no guarantees in the world of art.'

THE WRITER'S PATH

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

Becoming a writer is not a vocational choice in the way it is for some other professions. Margaret believes you are on the writer's path before you even recognise it, and she reminds you that a path and a career aren't the same thing. Many well-known writers have had other jobs and careers to earn a living.

The writer's path is an uncertain one, unless you want to write template books (Margaret calls these 'cookie cutter books'). Otherwise, you are always trying to do something new, learn something new, take an artistic risk you haven't taken before.

Lewis Hyde's book, *The Gift (1983),* is the only book Margaret recommends to aspiring writers. In it, Hyde suggests there are two ways of exchanging things in our society: a commodity economy and a gift-giving one. Art begins in the gift economy – a writer sitting at their table, a pianist in the practise room, then moves through the commodity economy – publication, or ticket sales – before becoming a gift again, to the reader or listener who receives the art. As a writer, you must work with the gift by doing the work and putting in the time.

And even if you do, your work may not sell. Many now-beloved books were first rejected by publishers: the Harry Potter series, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano (1947)* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* are just a few examples Margaret mentions. Her own second novel faced similar rejection. There are no guarantees in the world of art. You can do all the work, make a wonderful book or painting or piece of music, and sometimes, Margaret says, it disappears into the void.

Margaret tells the story of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island (1882)* as an illustration that success can come unexpectedly and after much rejection. The book came to

him while he was painting watercolours with his son after a period of great dejection (he had burned his prior three novels). *Treasure Island* went on to be a bestseller and classic. Be open to new forks on the writer's path, even if they're not on the map.

One of the unique aspects of writing as an art form is that there is always a gap in time between when the writer puts a story into the world, and when the reader receives it. As Emily Dickinson put it, 'This is my letter to the world.' One of Margaret's letters to the world is her decision to participate in The Future Library of Norway project. As part of this project, a seedling forest was planted in Norway. Writers from all over the world were invited to send in new stories in sealed boxes. In 100 years, these boxes will be unsealed, and trees from the new forest will be cut and made into these books from the past. The notion of this future forest and future set of readers gives Margaret hope.

Remember: you're only ever writing to a single reader at a time. Your reader is someone who will get your jokes, understand your characters, someone who will be intrigued by the turns of fate and circumstance you have chronicled.

Learn More

- Read Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* and consider how you have participated in the gift economy in your own life.
- Learn more about The Future Library of Norway project and Margaret's part in it.
- Read Carmen Maria Machado's short essay, 'On the Mirror and the Echo,' in which she discusses the act of co-creation between writer and reader, and how a reader's own set of changing experiences and history can help bring a story to life.

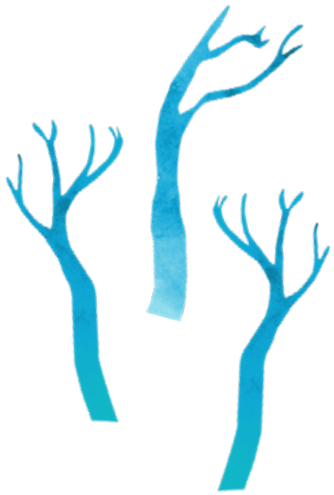
Assignment

- Write in your notebook about a piece of art that was a gift for you when you first encountered it. How did receiving that gift change your writing? How have you passed it on?
- Taking inspiration from The Future Library of Norway project, write a letter to someone in the future: this could be a person you haven't met, your ideal reader, perhaps your own child or grandchild. What do you say to someone who isn't here, but who will be in the future?

MARGARET ATWOOD

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Business of Being a Writer



'Time and place, the moment, luck,
connecting with someone who can see
the worth of what you've done –
these are all variables.'

THE BUSINESS OF BEING A WRITER

SUBCHAPTERS

Chapter Review

There are multiple ways of getting your book into the hands of readers. One route is finding an agent who will represent your work, but getting an agent can be 'chicken and egg,' Margaret says – it is easier to find one once you have published a book, and harder to publish without one. Self-publishing is another option, as is publishing in literary magazines. It's not always easy, and some of it is luck.

Each agent has their own approach, style and types of books they represent, but in looking for an agent, it's most important to find one who loves your work – not one interested in adding you to their stable or in making a quick sale. You don't want to be a commodity to this person, even as you shouldn't expect to be their best friend.

Once your book is in the world, it's likely you will be interviewed about it, whether in person or in a bookshop setting. Always be gracious with interviewers, even if they haven't read your book, (Margaret tells some stories from earlier in her career in which interviewers were less than respectful, but she believes that the landscape has changed). If you want to work on your public presentation skills, there are workshops that can help teach you how to better read and present your work.

Even if you practise giving readings and know how to talk about your book, you'll likely encounter unplanned moments of shame. This is just a part of having a public role, and Margaret recommends reading the anthology *Mortification (2005),* in which other writers discuss their moments of greatest public shame.

Margaret says try not to take your reviews personally, and when you prepare to sell your second novel, you may encounter a particular kind of challenge from people in the publishing industry who want you to write in the same mode or subject as your first novel. Write what you want to write, and do your best to make it as good as the last book, every time.

Learn More

- Once you've revised your novel manuscript and done everything you know to do, you may want to try to share it with a wider readership through publication. As Margaret notes, there are many paths to publication; determining your personal priorities will help you decide which route is best for you. Is the backing of a major publishing house important to you, or are you comfortable getting the word out through your own social media and personal networks? How important is the physical design of your book, or does the e-book format appeal to you?

- If you don't plan to self-publish, literary magazines and university presses offer you chances to get your work before editors without an agent, but if you wish to be published in a more commercial setting, you'll probably need representation. In finding an agent, you should know what your priorities are, and do your homework. Most agents specialise in representing certain genres or kinds of work, so you'll have more success if you tailor your queries to ones who are publishing books in the same family as yours.

Here are some resources that can help you with researching and querying agents (and what to do while they have your manuscript!).

- Poets and Writers is a wonderful print and online resource to research literary magazines, agent queries, contests and more. Check out the 'publish your writing' menu on the homepage for a wealth of information.

- The online literary magazine Entropy offers a comprehensive and ever-expanding list of calls for submissions and book contests from literary magazines, websites and small presses.

- *Writer's Digest* regularly updates its Guide to Literary Agents blog, which includes tips from agents, a spotlight series featuring individual agents and what kinds of books they represent, and interviews with debut authors.

- Writer Courtney Maum has a funny and honest article on 'How to Stay Sane While Querying Literary Agents' up at the *Tin House* blog.

- Margaret recommends reading about other writers' public shame in *Mortification*. Read the review of the book in *The Independent*, or check it out from the library and reassure yourself that public humiliation happens to everyone, even winners of the Man Booker Prize.

Parting Words

'I’m nearing the end of my trajectory. So this is sort of my last shot at, "Here are some things that maybe you, down the line, may find useful." '

—MARGARET ATWOOD