Margaret Atwood: Old Babes in the Wood [C1]

In occasione della traduzione del suo nuovo libro, l'autrice ha parlato con la stampa della sua ammirazione per George Orwell, del perché le utopie sono passate di moda e di cosa possiamo aspettarci dal nuovo presidente degli Stati Uniti.

In his novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) the English author and journalist George Orwell **envisaged** a totalitarian society **kept rigorously in check** through mass **surveillance.** Its protagonist, Winston Smith, a worker at the Ministry of Truth, is one day given a **forbidden** book written by an 'enemy' Emmanuel Goldstein. Goldstein's book describes how three totalitarian states, Eastasia, Eurasia and Oceania, emerged from a global war. It reveals that the seemingly opposing ideologies of each super-state are actually identical, and that the idea of conflict between them is just a way to keep everyone **under the thumb**.

UNCERTAINTY

The Canadian author Margaret Atwood has published multiple **renowned.** novels, short stories, children's books and poetry collections. Among them are Alias Grace (1996), **The Handmaid's Tale** (1985) and its Booker Prize winning sequel The Testaments (2019). Born in 1939, Atwood read Nineteen Eighty-Four as a teenager and was profoundly influenced by it. She was familiar with the real dictatorships that Orwell **drew on**, and understood that one effective method of control was uncertainty. In a world where all information is filtered through the state, how does Winston Smith actually know that Goldstein's book, and its author, are genuine and not fabricated **to trick** him? As Atwood explains, in a world where the government controls everything, you never know what's real.

FIFTEEN STORIES

Orwell makes a posthumous appearance in Margaret Atwood's new collection of short stories Old Babes in the Wood (2023). The fifteen tales, reflections on marriage, mortality and aliens, are told with Atwood's signature **dry wit**. All have an **edge** of darkness about them, but also an **edge** of light. On the collection's translation, Atwood gave a video conference in which she spoke about her influences. She began with the origins of some of the stories. **Margaret Atwood (Canadian accent):** So some of the stories are in response to specific requests from people. In The Dead Interview, living authors were asked to choose a dead author and interview them. So, I chose George Orwell. You will notice in the story he's still smoking in **the afterlife**. The one called Impatient Griselda is obviously a Covid story. Asked to choose a story from The Decameron (c.1353), which was also written during a bad plague, the **Black Death**, I chose the last story in The Decameron, which I never approved of. So I got a chance to rewrite it.

ANIMAL FARM

Atwood **came upon** George Orwell's books at a very young age. At first she did not understand what she was reading. **Margaret Atwood:** I read Animal Farm when I was so young that I did not know it was a political allegory. I thought it was about animals. And then I got more and more horrified... Then I read Nineteen Eighty-Four, I must have been thirteen or fourteen, and this time I understood it was about politics. And since we had just had World War Two with a couple of dictatorships, Stalin and Hitler and of course Mussolini, I was very interested in the question, what would England be like if it were to become a totalitarian dictatorship? And that is the same question I asked myself about the United States when I was writing **The Handmaid's Tale**.

AGE OF OPTIMISM

Some people have noted similarities between the patriarchal state of Gilead of **The Handmaid's Tale** and Donald Trump and his administration's vision for

America. Many people are extremely worried. Atwood was on the panel of judges for the 2024 Ursula K. Le Guin Prize for Fiction. She noted that there are so many younger people writing about dystopias that it has become a genre **of its own**. It wasn't always this way, she points out: in 19th-century Europe and North America people generally believed things would get better and better. **Margaret Atwood:** The 19th century was an age of utopias because they thought it could always be better. They thought they were moving in a direction of **ever-greater improvement**. And they got these **beliefs** from all of the advances that had been made: they discovered germs, they invented trains, they were dreaming about flying around the world in **balloons**, they had installed **sewage** systems. And towards the end of the century, we get bicycles, we get **typewriters**, we get the beginnings of automobiles. And if you look at what people were writing about in the year 1900, they were imagining a future that was much more improved.

... AND OF PESSIMISM

So what happened? **Margaret Atwood:** It changes with World War One. So apparently the future was not going to be so wonderful as they had thought earlier. We also get just before that time, the first real modern science fiction novel: H. G. Wells's War of the Worlds (1898). And that's a very unpleasant future. So people were starting to think that way even before World War One. But after, they really thought that way. And then we get World War Two, which further **demolishes** people's idea of the future as necessarily being wonderful. And right after that, we get the atomic bomb. So in the 50s, kids were growing up thinking at any moment we could be exploded by an atomic bomb. And we have quite a few dystopias coming in the 50s and early 60s. Then it **tapers off**. So, by the time I'm writing **The Handmaid's Tale**, there were neither utopias nor dystopias being written very much. Right now, there's a deluge of them.

Glossary

- **to trick** = ingannare
- **Black Death** = peste nera
- **typewriters** = macchine da scrivere
- **kept rigorously in check** = tenere sotto controllo
- **surveillance.** = sorveglianza
- **under the thumb** = sotto il controllo
- **renowned.** = rinomati
- **The Handmaid's Tale** = Il racconto dell'ancella
- **drew on** = attingere a
- **the afterlife** = l'aldilà
- **ever-greater improvement** = miglioramento costante
- **envisaged** = immaginare
- **forbidden** = proibire
- **of its own** = a sé stante
- **demolishes** = distruggere, demolire
- **balloons** = mongolfiera
- **sewage** = fognature
- **tapers off** = diminuire
- **dry wit** = ironia tagliente
- **edge** = tono
- **came upon** = imbattersi in
- **beliefs** = convinzioni