correspondents abroad

The Handmaid's Tale and *Oryx and Crake* in Context

MARGARET ATWOOD

I'M NOT A SCIENCE FICTION EXPERT. NOR AM I AN ACADEMIC, ALTHOUGH I USED TO BE ONE, SORT OF. ALTHOUGH I'M A writer, I'm not primarily a writer of science fiction. In this genre I'm a dilettante and a dabbler, an amateur—which last word, rightly translated, means "lover." I got into hot water recently on a radio talk show in Britain: the radio person said she'd just been to a sci-fi conference there, and some people were really, really mad at me. Why? said I, mystified. For being mean to science fiction, said she. In what way had I been mean? I asked. For saying you didn't write it, she replied. And I having had the nerve to win the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction.

I said I liked to make a distinction between science fiction proper—for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can't yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can't go—and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth.

I said I made this distinction, not out of meanness, but out of a wish to avoid false advertising: I didn't want to raise people's hopes. I did not wish to promise—for instance—the talking squid of Saturn if I couldn't deliver them. But some people use both terms interchangeably, and some employ one of them as an umbrella term, under which subgenres may cluster. Speculative fiction may be used as the tree, for which science fiction, science fiction fantasy, and fantasy are the branches. The beast has at least nine heads, and the ability to eat all other fictional forms in sight, and to turn them into its own substance. (In this way it's like every other form of literature: genres may look hard and fast from a distance, but up close it's nailing jelly to a wall.)

Long ago—into the time machine we go, and we get off in the cellar of one of the houses I grew up in. That cellar had a lot of books in it, and among them were the collected works of H. G. Wells, a writer who is surely the granddaddy of us all, and who was still much in vogue when my father was a young man. My father was himself a scientist, and also a keen appreciator of far-fetched yarns; furthermore, he was never known

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to discard a book. So in the cellar I read—when I was supposed to be doing my homework—not only all the Wells stories but also many another weird tale: *Gulliver's Travels*, one of the other granddaddies of us all, and Rider Haggard, and Ray Bradbury, and *Frankenstein*, and *Dracula*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, and *R.U.R.* and *The War with the Newts*, and *Penguin Island*, and George Orwell of course, and *Brave New World*, and John Wyndham, AND MORE, as they are in the habit of saying these days when trying to sell you something.

That was in the early fifties. In the late fifties—by which time I was in college—I used to play hooky by going to B movie double bills, and it was thus that I saw at the time of their first release a number of the films that now appear in video guides with little turkeys beside them. *The Creeping Eye*, for instance, which was quite scary until the eye itself made its appearance, waving tentacles but with tractor treads clearly visible beneath it; or *Love Slaves of the Amazon*—the love slaves were male, and the Amazonians were female, clad in fetching potato sacks dyed green and bent on depriving the poor love slaves of every ounce of vital bodily fluid they contained. Or—one of my favorites—*The Head That Wouldn't Die*, which had a pinheaded monster with ill-fitting pyjamas. One odd thing about movie mad scientists is that they can't ever seem to measure their monsters for proper clothing sizes. I also saw . . . but let's just say I developed a certain feel for the genre.

Then, in the early to middle sixties, I found myself in graduate school, studying English literature at Harvard. My field was the Victorian period, and as the time came for me to choose a thesis topic, I found myself drawn toward a dark, weedy little corner, at that time not much explored. I invented a genre—"the English metaphysical romance"—which I took to mean those prose narratives of the period that were not novels in the Jane Austen sense and that contained supernatural or quasi-supernatural beings, especially goddesslike ones. The line went from George Macdonald through Rider Haggard and all the way to C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

These books were not science fiction as such, since they had scant interest in science. But narrative genres of all kinds are enclosed by permeable membranes and tend to combine and recombine, like Al Capp's combination antigravity ray and marshmallow toaster; so I found myself reading everything I could get hold of that might have some bearing on my topic. This is how I came across *A Crystal Age*, by W. H. Hudson, and M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*, and Herbert Read's peculiar *The Green Child*.

I even went on a search through American sci-fi and fantasy of the first half of the twentieth century to see if the phenomena I was observing could be found there too, or were peculiarly English. Someone has suggested that the sort of book that interested me was a result of Anglicanism: the narrative motifs and the ritual forms remain, but the Real Presence—the body and blood of Christ, manifest at the Mass through transubstantiation—has gone elsewhere, leaving us with stand-ins. Certainly America did not have what I was looking for, not at that time; nonetheless I read my way through all the Conan the Barbarian books, which might be seen as a kind of gloss on Henry James.

Anyone who spends much time contemplating this kind of literature will realize pretty soon that such books do not exist within the world of the novel proper. By "the novel proper," I mean the prose-fiction form that traces its lineage from *Moll Flanders* through Joseph Addison's sketches through Fanny Burney through Jane Austen through Charles Dickens through George Eliot through Thomas Hardy through George Gissing—just to mention some English practitioners—and on into our times. The setting is Middle Earth, and the middle of Middle Earth is the middle class, and the hero and heroine are usually the desirable norms, or could have been in—for instance—Thomas Hardy, if fate and society hadn't been so contrary. Grotesque variations on the desirable norms appear, of course, but they take the form, not of monsters or vampires or space aliens, but of people with character defects or strange noses. Ideas about new forms of social organization are introduced through conversations among the characters, or in the form of thought or reverie, rather than being dramatized, as in the utopia and the dystopia. The central characters are placed in social space by being given parents and other relatives, however unsatisfactory or dead these may be at the outset of the story. These central characters don't just appear as fully grown adults but are provided with a past, a history. We, the readers, expect them to be psychologically plausible—"well rounded," we are fond of saying, as in the citations for citizenship awards at high school graduations; and we expect their surroundings to be what we think of as realistic. This is fiction about the waking state.

We have shambled into the bad habit of labeling all prose fictions as novels and of judging them accordingly—by comparing them with novels or with "realistic" fiction generally. But a book can be a prose fiction without being a novel. Nathaniel Hawthorne called his fictions "romances," to distinguish them from novels. The French have two words for the short story, *conte* and *nouvelle*—"tale" and "news"—and this is a useful distinction. The tale can be set anywhere, and can move into realms that are off-limits to the novel—into the cellars and attics of the mind, where figures that can appear in novels only as dreams and nightmares and fantasies take actual shape, and walk. The news, however, is news of us; it's the daily news, as in "daily life." There can be car crashes and shipwrecks in the news, but there are not likely to be any Frankenstein monsters; not, that is, until someone in daily life manages to create one. But there's more to the news than "the news." Speculative fiction can bring us that other kind of news; it can speak of what is past and passing, but especially of what's to come.

The Pilgrim's Progress, although a prose narrative and a fiction, was not intended as a novel; when it was written, such a thing did not yet exist. It's a romance, a story about the adventures of a hero, coupled with an allegory—the stages of the Christian life. (It's also one of the precursors of science fiction, although not often recognized as such.) Here are some other prose-fiction forms that are not novels proper: the confession; the symposium; the Menippean satire, or anatomy; the utopia and its evil twin, the dystopia; and more.

Before the term *science fiction* appeared, in America in the thirties, stories such as H. G. Wells's *Time Machine* were called *scientific romances*. In both terms, the science element is a qualifier. The nouns are *romance* and *fiction*, and as we have seen, the word *fiction* covers a lot of ground.

These kinds of narratives can do some things that novels, as defined above, cannot do. I'll run through them, even though I know I'm preaching to the converted:

1. Explore the consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways, by showing them fully up and running.
2. Explore the nature and limits of what it means to be human in graphic ways, by pushing the envelope as far as it will go—see, for instance, Ursula Le Guin.
3. Explore the relation of humanity to the universe in graphic ways, an exploration that often takes us in the direction of religion and can meld easily with mythology—again, an exploration that can take place within the conventions of realism only through conversations and soliloquies.
4. Explore proposed changes in social organization in graphic ways, by showing what they might be like for those living under them. Thus the utopia and the dystopia.
5. Explore the realms of the imagination in graphic ways, by taking us boldly and daringly where no one has gone before. Thus

> the spaceship, the inner space of *Fantastic Voyage*, the cyberspace trips of William Gibson, and *The Matrix*—the last, by the way, an adventure romance with strong overtones of Christian allegory, and thus more closely related to *The Pilgrim's Progress* than to *Pride and Prejudice*.

You'll notice that all my examples begin with the word *explore*, which should tip us off to the fact that a work of science fiction or speculative fiction or scientific romance is more likely to find its points of reference in the romance than in the socially realistic novel. But in all kinds of fiction, the business of the author is not so much factual truth as plausibility. Not that a thing did happen or even that it could happen but that the reader believes it while reading (within the terms set by the convention, that is, whatever that convention may be).

All of which is a somewhat too lengthy preamble to my topic, which is the writing of my two works of "science fiction" or "speculative fiction," *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. Although lumped together by commentators who have spotted what they have in common—they are not novels in the Jane Austen sense, and both take place in the future, that never-never land equivalent to the other world visited by shamans—they are in fact dissimilar. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a classic dystopia, which takes at least part of its inspiration from George Orwell's *1984*—particularly the epilogue. In a piece I did for the BBC recently on the occasion of Orwell's anniversary, I said:

> Orwell has been accused of bitterness and pessimism—of leaving us with a vision of the future in which the individual has no chance, and the brutal, totalitarian boot of the all-controlling Party will grind into the human face, forever. But this view of Orwell is contradicted by the last chapter in the book, an essay on Newspeak—the doublethink language concocted by the regime. By expurgating all words that might be troublesome—"bad" is no longer permitted, but becomes "double-plus-ungood"—and by making other words mean the opposite of what they used to mean—the place where people get tortured is the Ministry of Love, the building where the past is destroyed is the Ministry of Information—the rulers of Airstrip One wish to make it literally impossible for people to think straight. However, the essay on Newspeak is written in standard English, in the third person, and in the past tense, which can only mean that the regime has fallen, and that language and individuality have survived. For whoever has written the essay on Newspeak, the world of *1984* is over. Thus it's my view that Orwell had much more faith in the resilience of the human spirit than he's usually been given credit for.
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> Orwell became a direct model for me much later in my life—in the real 1984, the year in which I began writing a somewhat different dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*. . . .
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> The majority of dystopias—Orwell's included—have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime. They've acted as the temptresses of the male protagonists, however welcome this temptation may be to the men themselves. Thus Julia, thus the camiknickers-wearing, orgy-porgy seducer of the Savage in *Brave New World*, thus the subversive femme fatale of Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1924 seminal classic, *We*. I wanted to try a dystopia from the female point of view—the world according to Julia, as it were. However, this does not make *The Handmaid's Tale* a "feminist dystopia," except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered "feminist" by those who think women ought not to have these things.
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> In other respects, the despotism I describe is the same as all real ones and most imagined ones. It has a small powerful group at the top that controls—or tries to control—everyone else, and it gets the lion's share of available goodies. The pigs in *Animal Farm* get the milk and the apples, the élite of *The Handmaid's Tale* get the fertile women. The force that opposes the tyranny in my book is one in which Orwell himself—despite his belief in the need for political

> organization to combat oppression—always put great store: ordinary human decency, of the kind he praised in his essay on Charles Dickens. . . .
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> At the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, there's a section that owes much to *1984*. It's the account of a symposium held several hundred years in the future, in which the repressive government described in the novel is now merely a subject for academic analysis. The parallels with Orwell's essay on Newspeak should be evident.

The Handmaid's Tale, then, is a dystopia. What about *Oryx and Crake*? I would argue that it is not a classic dystopia. Though it has obvious dystopian elements, we don't really get an overview of the structure of the society in it, like the one provided in the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*. We just see its central characters living their lives within small corners of that society, much as we live ours. What they can grasp of the rest of the world comes to them through television and the Internet, and is thus suspect, because edited.

I'd say instead that *Oryx and Crake* is a combination antigravity ray and marshmallow toaster. It's an adventure romance—that is, the hero goes on a quest—coupled with a Menippean satire, the literary form that deals in intellectual obsession. The Laputa or floating island portion of *Gulliver's Travels* is one of these. So are the Watson-Crick Institute chapters of *Oryx and Crake*. The fact that Laputa never did and never could exist—though Jonathan Swift put his finger correctly on the advantage of air superiority, an advantage that in his day he could only imagine—and that the Watson-Crick Institute is very close to being a reality doesn't have much to do with their functions as aspects of a literary form.

None of these things were in my head when I began the book. Mary Shelley started to write *Frankenstein* because of a dream she had, and so it was with Robert Louis Stevenson and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; and most works of fiction begin this way, whether the writer is asleep or awake. There's a Middle English convention called the dream vision, and I'd say most fiction writing has to have an element of dream vision twisted into its roots. I began *Oryx and Crake* when I was in Australia, land of the dreamtime; I "saw" the book as I was looking over a balcony at a rare red-headed crake, during a birding expedition—and birding is a trance-inducing activity if there ever was one. The details of the story got worked out later, but without the vision there would have been no book.

As William Blake noted long ago, the human imagination drives the world. At first it drove only the human world, which was once very small in comparison with the huge and powerful natural world around it. Now we have our hand upon the throttle and our eye upon the rail, and we think we're in control of everything; but it's still the human imagination, in all its diversity, that propels the train. Literature is an uttering, or outering, of the human imagination. It puts the shadowy forms of thought and feeling—heaven, hell, monsters, angels, and all—out into the light, where we can take a good look at them and perhaps come to a better understanding of who we are and what we want, and what our limits may be. Understanding the imagination is no longer a pastime or even a duty but a necessity, because increasingly, if we can imagine something, we'll be able to do it.

Therefore, not farewell, dear reader/voyager, but fare forward.